

# *Anything Can be Endured, Except Loneliness, Loneliness is Killing Me...*

## A Contribution to the Ethnography of Aging in Rural Areas

*The author deals with the problems of isolation and loneliness in rural, sparsely populated parts of Croatia based on the findings of research conducted in the Dalmatian Hinterland. The first part of the article is dedicated to selected theoretical insights on social isolation and loneliness, and then, by presenting the comments of people she met in the field on their own everyday life, the author deals with the diversity or subjective characteristics of the ways in which loneliness and isolation (as well as the related feelings of uselessness, feeling “redundant” and insecurity in existing relationships, to name a few) can manifest themselves in the lives of the elderly.*

**Keywords:** ethnography, loneliness, social isolation, aging, the Dalmatian Hinterland

According to the United Nations<sup>1</sup>, the world's population is rapidly ageing: the population over the age of sixty-five is growing faster than the population under that age, and it is forecast that by 2050 the number of people over the age of sixty-five worldwide will be twice the number

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of children under the age of five and almost equal to the number of children under the age of twelve<sup>2</sup> (United Nations [s.a.]). Consequently, it is predicted that many countries in the world will be exposed to fiscal and political pressures in the coming decades, related to, for example, health care, pension provision and social protection problems for the growing aging population in general (ibid.). Similar problems have been highlighted in the public space in Croatia for years, especially after the last census, according to which the share of people over sixty-five years of age is more than twenty-two percent (Državni zavod za statistiku 2022). Although the increase in the life expectancy of the population is something that – despite the previously mentioned challenges that it brings in ensuring the functioning of various systems – can and should be considered an achievement of humanity, the fact is that a long life does not necessarily mean a healthy and a safe one, as well as a satisfying, fulfilled life. These are probably some of the reasons why the United Nations, i.e. the World Health Organization, launched the Decade of Healthy Aging (2021-2030) initiative<sup>3</sup>, which, among other things, indirectly addresses the issues of social isolation and loneliness, which have so far been insufficiently addressed in public, i.e. their impact on the health and the quality of life of the elderly.<sup>4</sup>

In this article, I am dealing with the problems of social isolation and loneliness of the elderly. The article relies on a survey I conducted between 2021 and 2023 in the area of the Dalmatian Hinterland, a region that is considered one of those that are particularly affected by negative demographic trends (Sveučilište u Splitu).<sup>5</sup> Initially, the research was linked with the interest in non-institutional forms of care for the elderly in sparsely populated parts of Croatia, given the assumption that many elderly people in these areas live alone and that, consequently, there is a risk that they do not have or will soon have no one to provide them with care and assistance within their home (Podgorelec and Klempić 2007: 122). However, the successive conversations with the people I met prompted me to focus on what most of them most often referred to in the very

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- 2 Although population ageing is a global phenomenon, the ageing process is occurring faster in some regions of the world than in others. Different parts of the world record a different rate of aging population in the total; the concept of old age also differs, as well as the criteria by which age is determined (Buch 2015: 278) For example, according to Eurostat data (2020), the EU is, along with Japan, the area with the most evident pace of population ageing, while countries such as Saudi Arabia and South Africa are dominated by the young population (Eurostat 2020).
  - 3 The United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing 2021-2030 aims to address four interrelated areas aimed at protecting the health and well-being of the elderly, their families and communities through co-operation between different sectors and stakeholders: (i) changing the way we think, feel and act towards age and ageing; (ii) ensuring that communities foster the abilities of the elderly; (iii) the provision of integrated care and basic health services adapted to the elderly; and (iv) ensuring access to long-term care for the elderly (Decade of Healthy Ageing [s.a.]). A more detailed analysis of the ways aimed at achieving these goals and their success is beyond the scope of this article.
  - 4 Although there are disagreements about the connection between the feeling of loneliness and age, which will be subsequently discussed, the prevailing opinion is that aging is a significant prerequisite for the development of this feeling. It is interesting to note that research largely coincides when it comes to the influence of the country in which an individual lives as a factor for the development of loneliness. In Europe, according to this information, the inhabitants of Northern Europe feel the least lonely, and those in Eastern Europe the most, followed by the inhabitants of southern European countries (Italy, Portugal) (Svensen 2017: 55-56; Yang and Victor 2011).
  - 5 I conducted the research in Split-Dalmatia County, and it included interviews with people who live in sparsely populated villages and hamlets. Irrespective of the minimal chances of revealing the identities of the people I interviewed, I do not mention the names of places nor the names of these people in the text, not only in order to adhere to the principles of professional ethics, but also because most people agreed to participate in the research, provided that it was anonymous and with a request not to mention “the place where they are from”.

first sentence when talking about their own everyday life: solitude and loneliness, rather than on the originally planned research of non-institutional forms of care for the elderly.<sup>6</sup>

## SOLITUDE, LONELINESS AND AGING

In everyday speech, the terms solitude and loneliness are often used as synonyms, and their understanding is largely determined by the context in which they are used, i.e. the overtones that accompany them. In the words of the Norwegian philosopher Lars Svendsen (2017: 22, 40), the expression “I am alone” without context and overtones says nothing more than that the person who says it is not surrounded by other people. On the other hand, the expression “I’m lonely” is much more semantically charged and – unlike solitude – is mostly associated with negative emotions. This distinction is an almost essential (introductory) part of scientific discussions that approach the topic of loneliness from different perspectives, primarily from the fields of psychology, public health, sociology, philosophy and anthropology. Consequently, in the professional literature it is possible to encounter numerous definitions or theoretical approaches (cf. e.g. Hawkey 2024 s.v. “loneliness”) as well as, conditionally, inherent methodological solutions in addressing this problem, but what most of them have in common is the emphasis on distinguishing social isolation – as an objectively “measurable” fact, that is, a “physical and social reality” marked by the absence of relationships with other people – and loneliness as a subjective experience marked by negative emotions (*feelings* of sadness or even pain) due to the perceived discrepancy between the (quality) of relationships with other people that the individual achieves and what they strive for in this sense, i.e. the lack of closeness with other people (cf. Ozawa and Parsons 2020: 615; Svendsen 2017: 40). Research often implies a connection between loneliness and the degree of social support, but critics of such approaches emphasise that – despite the existence of statistical data confirming this – it is important to determine whether the causes of loneliness are internal or external, i.e. whether loneliness is a consequence of the nature of the individual or the environment in which they live (Svendsen 2017). In other words, in such critical approaches, it is emphasised that “what matters is not the number of social interactions, nor the extent to which persons receive practical support, but the extent to which social interaction satisfies the specific, subjective need of the individual for connection and the extent to which this interaction is perceived by the individual as meaningful” (Cacioppo and Patrick 2008: 94).

In an attempt to understand the diversity of ways in which loneliness can manifest itself, some researchers introduce terms such as positive/negative loneliness, temporary loneliness, chronic loneliness, situational loneliness, existential loneliness, intimate loneliness, relational loneliness and collective loneliness, among others (cf. e.g. Cacioppo and Patrick 2008; de Jong Gierveld et al. 2009; van Tilburg 2021), but in the professional literature, the division into social and emotional loneliness, introduced in 1973 by the American sociologist Robert S. Weiss is the most

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6 Specifically, the subject of my initial interest was the project *Make a Wish (Zaželi)*, which is financed by the European Social Fund, and its goal, on the one hand, is to prevent the institutionalisation of the elderly and, on the other hand, to employ “women in a disadvantaged position in the labor market, with an emphasis on women over 50 years of age, women with at most a high school diploma, women with disabilities, women victims of trafficking in human beings, treated addicts, women victims of domestic violence, homeless women” (Ministarstvo rada, mirovinskog sustava, obitelji i socijalne politike [s.a.]). The project has been implemented since 2016 (Ministarstvo rada, mirovinskog sustava, obitelji i socijalne politike 2016) and more information about it is available at: <https://mrosp.gov.hr/arhiva-3104-10582/novosti-10759/zazeli-program-zaposljavanja-zena-financiran-iz-europskog-socijalnog-fonda-11049/11049> (accessed 08/04/2024).

frequently resorted to: emotional loneliness refers to the absence and/or inability to establish close, intimate relationships with other people, and social isolation refers to the absence of social contacts, i.e. social support networks (cf. e.g. de Jong Gierveld et al. 2009; Ibáñez-del Valle et al. 2022; Bennet and Victor 2012). The two mentioned qualitatively different forms of loneliness can, as pointed out in works focused on detecting types of loneliness, occur both separately and together. In other words, a person can feel both social and emotional loneliness at the same time, and it is certainly possible for a person to be a part of the social world that surrounds them and/or have a close relationship with other people and still feel lonely, as well as not to feel connected to the social world but not to feel lonely (cf. e.g. Svendsen 2017). It is important to emphasise that research on the connection between the feeling of loneliness and age, although the results are sometimes inconsistent, still shows that the level of loneliness in working age is the lowest, i.e. that it is the highest in childhood/early youth and old age. It is believed that young people are more socially lonely, while the elderly are more emotionally lonely (cf. e.g. Svendsen 2017: 30-31; Surkalim et al. 2022; Bandari et al. 2019; WHO 2021). In accordance with this, as mentioned at the beginning of the paper, the efforts of the United Nations, i.e. the World Health Organization to design interventions and strategies to reduce social isolation and loneliness, which largely rely on research that show that loneliness and social isolation pose an extremely significant risk to the health and quality of life of the elderly (e.g. lack of sleep, lack of exercise, lower quality diet, susceptibility to drug and alcohol addiction, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, depression, dementia, but also the risk of violence and abuse of the elderly and higher mortality rates, to name a few) (WHO 2021). In this sense, the loneliness of the elderly in the countries of Eastern Europe is emphasised, which is mainly linked with the thesis of the connection between the feeling of loneliness and demographic characteristics, i.e. the demographic transition in which the number of the elderly is rapidly growing, (low) incomes, the system of health and social care provided by the state and social security in general, etc. (Surkalim et al. 2022), which, according to the claims of some authors, reflects particularly devastating on the elderly living in rural areas (Abshire et al. 2022; cf. also Hussain et al. 2023). Although the results of research on the relationship between loneliness and old age, as already mentioned, are inconsistent, especially in the context of comparing the loneliness of the elderly from the point of view of the environment in which they live (urban/rural),<sup>7</sup> the connection between social isolation and loneliness in rural areas, especially those with extremely small populations, is often emphasised, because the opportunities to make contact with other people are very limited (cf. e.g. Rivero Jiménez et al. 2021; Vukušić and Belaj 2022).<sup>8</sup> The previously mentioned problem of the lack of opportunities to enter into social contacts due to the mere lack of people nearby – as one of the risks that can lead to a feeling of loneliness – is additionally aggravated, as some authors point out, by other limitations in the course of everyday life, such as, for example, difficult to access (due to the lack of maintenance of access roads or their absence) or inaccessible public transport, and, consequently, the inaccessibility of shops, as well as health and social care institutions that are important for the life of everyone, especially the elderly (de Koning et al. 2017).

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7 Irrespective of the fact that there are papers that confirm the importance of places of living and loneliness (cf. e.g. Hussain et al. 2023), the prevailing opinion is that there is a lack of sufficient quality research on this topic (cf. e.g. Burholt and Dobs 2012; Pickering et al. 2023). For a brief critical review of research on the (dis)connection of the environment in which an individual lives with a sense of loneliness, see Burholt and Dobs (2012).

8 In this context, it is interesting to mention two exhibitions from 2016 that addressed the previously mentioned problem of isolation and loneliness in Croatia: “Images of Life” by Rene Pronk (2016) at the Ethnographic Museum Zagreb and “Solitude” at the Ethnographic Museum of Istria in Pazin (Orlić 2017).

In the continuation of the text, I am presenting selected three narrations from the field research that, as previously stated, I carried out intermittently in the area of the Dalmatian Hinterland between 2021 and 2023. The research included multiple interviews with a total of thirty-odd elderly people, through which I gained insight into the characteristics of their everyday lives<sup>9</sup>. It is important to note here that the common feature of all of them is social isolation, i.e. the fact that they live in settlements with a small number of permanent residents, and that, as the people I talked to told me, this number is further decreasing every year. Through the selected way of presentation and in the spirit of the ethnography of the individual (Abu Lughod 1991), I have strived to point out the fact that the “diagnosis” of social isolation and loneliness is not sufficient in itself for a deeper understanding of these problems, that is, for understanding the diversity of ways in which they are imprinted in individual lives, which, among other things, can be a guideline for observing isolation and loneliness as an experience anchored in the social, cultural, political, and emotional underpinnings that are impossible to quantify (Rivero Jiménez et al. 2021).

## ZVONKO

Zvonko lives alone in a hamlet with about ten permanent residents. He is in his early 70s. Two years ago, his wife passed away, and the children live with their families in Split and Zagreb. He spent his working life in Split, and during that part of his life, as he says, he planned to return to the village where he was born and where he spent his childhood and early youth:

“Yes, it was a good idea to earn something. Okay, my old man helped me, he helped me a lot in the beginning. He worked in Germany, and it was a different income than here under socialism. You could save money, and my poor mother lived modestly anyway as she was used to all her life, so they put it aside. And with that, he helped me buy my first apartment, it was small, but still a roof over my head. And now, what are you going to do? That always bothered me... I looked at them (my parents) what they gave up for me, even if at that time they lived much more modestly, but again, when I know that he gave that to me... And I said to myself, I’m going to set aside as much as I can and somehow, I’m going to invest in the village, so that my mother and father will be better off and that I can come back when I retire. And so it was, little by little, I came here whenever I could, I dug, I built, I brought water into the house, and I made a bathroom.”

Over the years, and especially just before his retirement, Zvonko invested a lot of time and money to renovate the house in the countryside so that he and his wife could live in it comfortably

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9 The choice of specific narrations, i.e. gender and marital status of different individuals (noting that the only person that I met during the field research who was not married does not belong to the category of elderly people) as “narrators” that I will be presenting in this paper is linked, on the one hand, with the intention to try to re-examine the assumption that the marital bond is an extremely important link in the family and that the loss of a spouse is one of the most important predictors of (intimate) loneliness (cf. e.g. Cacioppo and Patrick 2008). On the other hand, it is linked with the actual relations on site and the level of interest of the interlocutors in the research and participation in it. I have met the people whose stories I am presenting in the paper several times and we repeatedly revisited (semi-structured interview) some of the topics that had been addressed in the previous conversations. In these conversations, I strived to follow the principles of “reflective interviewing” (Nardon et al., 2021), taking into account the topics that they considered relevant when talking about their own everyday lives, and the choice of how to talk about it, but also their reluctance to talk about certain topics. This implied, among other things, an understanding of the frequent digressions that occurred during the interviews and a careful conceptualisation of a “return” to the main thread of our conversations (cf. Potkonjak 2014: 75).

when they retired: he built a façade, introduced central heating, bought appliances (washing machine and dishwasher, lawn mower, etc.), and in addition, he built a chicken coop near the house, cleared the land and added more soil so that he and his wife could plant vegetables for their needs. A few years before he was about to retire, his wife fell ill, so they postponed their final return to the village:

“Listen, it was safer for us in Split. You have a hospital, you can see a private doctor, it was important for us to do all those tests, and we had to constantly repeat and control something, so it was a little unsafe for us to decide to go back here. Okay, it’s close to everything, I have a car, but then again, we somehow lived here and over there, that’s how it seemed best to us. We would come here when we could, but winter is mandatory (in Split) because it’s warmer. And so... Then came the second illness and I had hopes, but it was clear right from the beginning...”

After his wife passed away, Zvonko, as his words suggest “was lost”:

“Uh, I don’t know anything yet. I don’t know what to do now at all. I don’t know if I’ll ever find a sense in all of it again. Look at all this, we were supposed to be there together until the end. What am I going to do with it now?! Who am I going to plant the garden for? Shall I put a plate and a glass in the dishwasher and pretend life is good, yeah, right! I don’t enjoy anything.”

However, he emphasises that he does not want to give up on life, although he does not explain in detail what ‘giving up’ means to him:

“Yes, that’s hollow existence, I know that. But I’m not going to give up, I must not give up, I must live for the children. I’m glad when they come to visit me, I have two grandchildren. That is my greatest joy when they come to visit me. I forget all my sorrows. But it’s rarely. And I’d like to be with them more, see them more often. It comes down to a couple of times a year and somehow... Their life is different. Both son and daughter have their own ways, they raise children in their own way. And I see some things, I try to tell them, I have seen all kinds of things in life... so that it doesn’t go wrong with the children. They give and allow them all sorts of things. They are my world, but parents need to set boundaries. And I tried to say nice things to them, and they told me: ‘Dad, don’t get involved, the times have changed, don’t worry about anything’. ‘What are you going to do, shut up and beat yourself up.’”

When asked how he spent his days, he answered:

“Listen, I am lucky to have these chickens. I would not like to have much, but I must take care of them, which is easy, three chickens. But then again, I try to clean up, give them food and so on. And I have a small garden and there is some work there. That’s what keeps me going. And it’s also good for my health, to have something to do. To tell you the truth, it’s my most common and my only company: chickens, tomatoes, cucumbers and all that, and myself.”

However, even though, as he himself said, “he does not want to give up”, his life habits, for example in terms of clothing maintenance and meal preparation, show that, in fact, he does not want to get used to single life:

“I don’t know how to wash clothes. I don’t know how to start the washing machine or what to do next. The daughter or daughter-in-law take it away when there is a lot of it, they wash it and bring it back to me.”

“I don’t know how to cook. Well, boiled meat, but I don’t know how to cook soup. I have never learnt that. That’s what (my wife) always did, she took care of everything. And so, boiled meat or I fry an egg and that’s it. Sometimes I go to a restaurant, there is a good one in (the name of the place). I can afford it, and, to tell you the truth, it is not that I care about food, but I want to see people. Then I ask the female chefs how they prepare something, just to talk to them a little. And then I tell them how (my wife) prepared that dish, so they say that they will try just like that next time... And so, I have a little chat with someone, and time passes.”

“What can I tell you”, he added in the end, “when there’s hardly anyone here and you go around to see someone. To have a little chat about sports, politics, grocery shopping, whatever. And sometimes I just think that it’s not good to plan anything in life... I’ve been looking forward all my life to coming back here with my wife, where my roots are and that we’ll live beautifully and harmoniously, and there you go. Never in my life have I actually felt lonelier than I am feeling now.”

## IVA AND ANTE

Iva and Ante are a married couple living in the centre of a small municipality in Split-Dalmatia County. Iva is in her mid-seventies and Ante in his early eighties. They are relatively active, they take care of themselves on their own, and they point out garden maintenance as the main task:

“Your own produce are the best. To eat something that you have grown yourself. You work in the spring and the summer and then in the autumn, you put it in the chest freezer, and you always have it.”

Iva and Ante are an extremely kind and hospitable couple and at first glance one gets the impression that they are satisfied with their lives. They show pictures of their five grandchildren, recount their adventures with them, and then, with sadness, the reason for which is difficult to know, they suddenly fall silent. They have two daughters, one of whom lives with her family in Zagreb and the other, after a divorce ten years ago, moved abroad where she lives with her new spouse. Iva was a housewife for most of her life and she worked as a maid only a few years before her retirement.

“Look, at that time it was normal. We got married young, I was eighteen and Ante was twenty-four. He worked and it all worked. Yes, we struggled, took out a loan for this house, so it all went on slowly. Modestly and slowly and we succeeded in everything we had planned. I took care of the children and the house.” Ante worked, as he says: “he had what at the time was considered a well-paid job”.

In our conversations, he often pointed out that he was a very good worker, appreciated at the time for the advances he introduced into business.

“But so what,” he continued, “I’ve never boasted about it. I wasn’t too much into socialising, when I finished work, I went home. I did not play cards and I did not hang out in coffee shops. If I had been different, I could have had all sorts of things.”

His pointing out the fact that he went home after work, that he did not play cards and hung out in cafes can be somewhat related to his feeling that his social life is currently non-existent:

“Yes, there were a few people, we were godfathers, and they would come to visit us and we

used to visit them. Everyone is gone, all of them are gone. I don't have anyone to have coffee with and have a little chat with. So, the two of us spend time like this on our own, always together, both in and out of the house. We go grocery shopping together, to the garden together, to the doctor's together, but that's what you do, that's the way it is. It's good as long as we're together, but when one of us is gone..."

Iva, on the other hand, recalls a "gone and lost" relationship with her female neighbours who, like her, were housewives and took care of the children in the 1970s:

"There is no more of that. The children would play, we would have coffee and talk a little bit about everything. They shared with each other propagating materials (seedlings, seeds) for vegetables and flowers and watched how they grew. Nowadays people do not know their neighbours. Everyone has retreated to their home, no one talks to anyone."

From conversations with them, it appears that Iva, as opposed to Ante, had a much wider circle of acquaintances in the past with whom she occasionally spent time. Today, she says, she has only one female friend:

"I see her from time to time, we go for coffee and catch up." "But then again," she goes on "that's not it. The two of us are alone in our misery, I am ashamed to tell others about what hurts the most."

She then recounts to me, crying, her dissatisfaction with her children's life decisions, especially those concerning divorce and going abroad:

„(...) and she doesn't hear, as if she doesn't hear me. I'm a mother, so I know it's no good. He is not for her. As if I am talking to the wind. She is silent or tells me that it is none of my business. The other one (daughter) does not want that either... She interrupts me when I try to explain why it's not right that she did all this (divorced, went abroad). And she also tells me that they are adults, responsible for their own lives, and that I need to take care of mine. What is my life but them, them and their children?"

While she is telling me this, Ante interrupts her, asks her to stop talking about it. However, the way he does so suggests that the reason for this is not "shame" that they do not want to share with others, but an attempt to protect her. Ante and Iva are immensely focused on each other, as had been previously mentioned in Ante's statement: they work together in the garden, cook together, go to the doctor's together and when only one of them is ill, they accompany each other to hospital appointments in the county centre, which is especially challenging given the scarcity of bus lines:

"When there is a bus, there is one at 6 in the morning and it returns at 3 in the afternoon. It's hard, you do the medical check-up in an hour, two at most and where do you go after that? We can no longer walk too much and all that. And we won't even sit at the station. And you have no one to ask, to pay them so they can drive you away. We sometimes take a taxi and then leave, 80 euros one way, but what else can you do when you must do it?"

Their connection during the conversation was manifested not only through emphasising the previously mentioned habit of doing everything together, but also in occasionally presenting the experiences of one of them as if they were common: Iva would interrupt Ante while he was recounting some adventures from work and explaining them, and he would additionally describe some events from her life in which, as could be understood from the context of the overall

conversation with them, he also did not participate. It can be assumed that topics from the past are something they often talk about, irrespective of whether it is work, relationships with the neighbours or family, and that this continuous return to the past and its comparisons with the present creates, to put it mildly, a sense of resignation. This is partially confirmed by the sentence that Ante said at the end of our conversation:

“When you get older, you simply become invisible.”, to which Iva added: “You are no longer important to anyone and no one invites you to some events, even when they are connected with something in which you had a role in the past. The best thing to do is to go six feet under.”

## LJUBA

Ljuba is a woman in her seventies who, for the last fifteen years, since her husband passed away, has been living alone in a settlement with, as she says, twelve permanent residents. Four of her children gradually, after completing their secondary education, and in search of work, between the 1990s and the 2000s, moved to larger cities in Croatia and started families there. The children visit her several times a year and help her:

“Someone surely comes for Christmas and Easter, they come and stay for a few days during the summer, and even in other occasions, when work brings them along the way, they drop by for a day or two. I miss them, but what can you do, may they be alive and well. I would like them to be with me, but they are better off there. I’m old, they have to fight for themselves and find ways to do well in life.”

When they visit her, the children help her with cleaning, preparing firewood, they do the repairs around the house and supply her with groceries, to name a few. Ljuba has never been formally employed. She was a housewife, and the family lived off her husband’s work abroad. Today, she lives on her husband’s inherited pension, which, as she says, is enough for what she needs in life:

“I’ve got everything. It’s a good pension, especially compared with the average Croatian one, I can really afford whatever I need. And the children always bring me what I need, and what I don’t need. And I always say to them that what they bring will only go to waste, and they say to me: ‘Mommy, it is better if it goes to waste, we do not want you to lack anything. So share it if you think you don’t need something’. Should I share it? And with whom, I think to myself. There is no one.”

Ljuba’s house is located on the outskirts of the village. No one lives in the surrounding houses, and her isolation is best evidenced by the situation she found herself in a year ago, when she found a dead female neighbour on the path behind the house:

“It was in the morning, maybe around ten. I saw that she did not drop by for a coffee which we usually had together. I called her and she didn’t answer. And then, I reckoned, perhaps she went somewhere, so I went to knock on the door and then on the window. No one answered. And then I saw her, on the path behind the house. It’s not something anyone should experience... I was shocked and didn’t know what to do. I called (gives the names of people from the village) and no one heard me. And then I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t leave her, I didn’t know why, it was hard for me to leave her, and I had to call someone, but how am I going to call them... I didn’t bring my cell phone. So, I ran home, called the doctor and

the municipality and no one answered. And, not knowing what to do, then I called my (daughter) in Zagreb. The poor child called everywhere and then they came, in an hour. And I was with her guarding her.”

This event had a strong impact on Ljuba’s everyday life:

“Since then, I have been all alone. The two of us always got on well together. They would always check up on each other and hang out. She used to at least have someone to talk to, never mind the topic, it didn’t matter.” She does not socialise with the other few people in the village, they are not close: “And it’s not that we’re in a quarrel, but everyone minds their own business. And I know, if I asked for help if something was urgent, they would help me, but even that is not normal, that you have to ask. It’s not the same as before... when there were crowds of people and when you knew what someone needed and helped them spontaneously.”

According to her, children, who call her every day, sometimes several times per day, are usually the only opportunity for her to communicate with someone:

“They are good to me. They take lots of care for me. They call all the time and (she laughs) you don’t know what to talk to them anymore. But ok, if I didn’t have that, I don’t know what I would do... At least you talk to someone... And yet, if something was wrong, if I was ill, who would help me, there is no one, no one would even know or be able to help me, when there is no one.”

The children, as can be concluded from Ljuba’s words, are also worried about that:

“Oh my, they always tell me: ‘Come on, mom, stay with us at least during the winter.’ And yes, I went there for one year. I had a great time with my grandchildren and that. But to tell you the truth, I couldn’t wait to get home. I feel like in I’m being caged in an apartment, in a building. You cannot peacefully go out anywhere. I’m used to the house and the big yard, and I’m fine both in the summer and in the winter. I can go wherever I want to and when I want to, and there you’re squeezed into those four walls and when you go out you don’t know anyone and there is no one you can talk to.”

When asked if she has a habit of socialising with someone, arranging a meeting over coffee, which was prompted by her words “that at home she can go wherever she wants to and when she wants to”, she answered:

“Where would I go? The few relatives I have here in other villages are all the same as me. I see them when the kids come and take me to them by car or bring them to me. And secondly, when I need to go to the doctor’s or to the store, I go. Admittedly, there are no more buses as there used to be, if you miss the one that there is, you’re done! And it’s hard to come back... You do what you have to do and wait 2 or 3 hours. What shall I do? I manage somehow when it’s really necessary. Either by that bus or I call someone from the village to give me a ride along the way if they go. But I don’t like it, I don’t like disturbing (imposing) myself like that. It’s not nice that they did that to us with the bus. I don’t even go to Mass, and I always used to. And how should I go, I cannot fly (laughs)? I watch Mass on TV, but it’s not the same, actually attending it and watching it on TV.”

Upon parting, Ljuba offers me baby potatoes, tomatoes and onions:

“Take it, please, take it up (to Zagreb), it will be good for you. And I have more of everything than I need. I plant, dig and water the plants so my days go by faster. I have everything, both

food and firewood, thank God and my health is quite good, everything can be endured, but... sometimes I feel like the black devil is better than a life like this one, just to see and hear someone. Anything can be endured, but loneliness, loneliness is killing me...”

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These examples provide an insight into the outlines of a part of the everyday life of a few elderly people in sparsely populated parts of Croatia. The narrations suggest that social isolation and/or loneliness – irrespective of whether the people I talked to refer to these problems explicitly or if it can be concluded from the content and tone of their words – are one of the prominent links in everyday life that, just like other people I met during my research, they face and cope with in different ways.<sup>10</sup> Zvonko’s account confirms the thesis of numerous authors that the loss of a spouse is one of the most important predictors of (intimate) loneliness (Cacioppo and Patrick 2008), which relies on the views that the marital bond represents an extremely important, if not the strongest, i.e. the most intimate bond in the family, and that overcoming the trauma of losing a spouse is a long-term process that, among other things, is accompanied by a lack of interest in one’s surroundings. This then has a negative impact on the establishment of new relationships (cf. Hussain et al. 2023; de Koning et al. 2016). The importance of a marriage partner is also visible in the example of the stories of Ante and Iva who are completely focused on each other, and their self-centeredness has undoubtedly, at least partially, influenced, if not the loss, then certainly the inactive attitude towards creating new contacts with people from the surroundings. I have recognised a similar relationship, which could most closely be described as constant concern for the spouse (which in some situations functions almost as the meaning of life), in several other elderly couples. For example, one woman, quietly describing her concern about her husband’s health, told me:

“I have told the children that when he dies, they need to immediately buy two coffins. I’m going to go after him right away, I don’t want to be left alone.”<sup>11</sup>

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10 A more detailed analysis of the connection between the feeling of loneliness and the degree of social support (to which professional literature has adopted a two-way approach, cf. Svendsen 2017) goes beyond the scope of this paper, but in a broader study it would be interesting to examine the relationship between the feeling of loneliness and care for/looking after the elderly, especially from the point of view of the ‘traditional patterns’ of aging within the family and the expectations that arise from it or have arisen especially, when it comes to Croatia, in the context of migration processes (cf. Podgorelec and Klempić 2007; Podgorelec 2015). Research shows that today’s understanding of old age (cf. e.g. Rubić 2018) is linked with a series of changes that occurred in the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries (Milosavljević 2014 according to Rubić 2018: 13), which was also reflected in the system of elderly care (cf. e.g. Sokolovsky et al. 1991). Particularly useful in this context is the paper by Azra Hromadžić (2015), who, through a moving story about the life and death of an elderly woman from Bosnia and Herzegovina, speaks critically about aging and the crisis of elderly care, i.e. about the *semi-absenteeism* of both the state and family from these processes. Although the post-war context of Bosnia and Herzegovina is extremely important in this paper and although the author does not directly deal with the problem of loneliness in the elderly, the paper extremely encourages thinking about a wider range of topics linked with aging and elderly care or looking after the elderly, including the part that refers to the phenomenon of solitude/loneliness, especially in the former Yugoslavia.

11 Another example refers to a woman who, while I was talking to her in the yard, was constantly following her husband with her eyes who was watering the vegetables at the time. She complained to me that he walked with difficulty and that she kept an eye on where he was all day long so that he wouldn’t fall somewhere. She did not want him to know about her concerns and so she pretended to be doing something near him. At the same time, she occasionally shouted at him: “Be careful not to be bitten by a wasp”, “Be careful when you put away the water hose so that it doesn’t spray you”, “Come on now, it’s windy, your eyes will turn red again”, etc.

The loss of her spouse as one of the strongest factors for the development of loneliness is somewhat refuted by Ljuba's account, which probably has to do with the time that has passed since the death of her husband, but also the fact that at the time of entering the "status" of widowhood she was relatively young and in some way she was compelled to take very active care of her children (who were minors or young adults at the time), and hence her close relationship with her children can be observed in the light of that, which, among other things, implies the belief that they can make the best decisions for themselves on their own ("... May they be alive and well. I would like them to be with me, but they are better off there. I'm old, they have to fight for themselves and find ways to do well in life"). On the other hand, Zvonko's, as well as Ante and Iva's attitude towards their own children – whom they also talk about with a lot of love – reflects a kind of need to be more intensely involved in their lives and the lives of their families in terms of making certain decisions (in Zvonko's case, it is the upbringing of children, and in Ante and Iva's case, the decision of one of their daughters to divorce, moving away and marrying a foreigner) that they consider important for their future. Moreover, from Iva's sentence: "They are my life, they and their children?!", expressed through tears, it can be concluded that the refusal of children (and we are actually talking about women over fifty years of age) for parents to participate in crucial life decisions for them is understood as rejection which, combined with the feeling of "not acknowledging" some achievements from the past ("You are no longer important to anyone and no one invites you to some events, even when they are connected with something in which you had a role in the past") and the lack of social contacts, reflects extremely unfavourably on their attitude on the meaning of life ("It's best to go six feet under"). Their stories (the relationship with her daughter, but also the forgetting of Ante's business achievements from the past), just like in Zvonko's commentary on raising children, show how important the feeling of "being needed" by another being is for the meaning of life, as well as that the deprivation of what they seem to consider one of the most valuable indicators of respect – listening to life wisdom and advice, based on life experience – it all contributes to their feeling of loneliness (cf. Ozawa-de Silva 2020; Parsons 2020; van der Geest 2004).

Unlike Zvonko, who radiates loneliness from almost every word<sup>12</sup>, Ljuba, who, like him, has lost her spouse, is primarily troubled by what in the professional literature is referred to as social isolation. This is confirmed by her attitude towards the death of her closest (and the only) neighbour, but also by her explicitly expressed desire ("for the black devil to come for me better than this, just to see and hear someone") to interact with people in general, which supports the views that only intimate or emotionally close relationships do not necessarily have to be important for a sense of well-being, but short-term interactions or co-presence with others are also important (Parsons 2022). Iva and Ante and Zvonko, unlike Ljuba, who is really alone in terms of physical distance from other people, have the prerequisites for developing these fragile, weak bonds: Zvonko tries to achieve them by going to lunch in a restaurant by car, but not to satisfy his physical hunger, but his social hunger ("to tell you the truth, it is not that I care about food, but I want to see people"); Ante and Iva, on the other hand, due to their complete focus on their own health and family problems, usually do not even try to do so, although, given the settlement in which they live, they can come into contact with other people on a daily basis without investing significant (physical) effort. The common ground in all these statements is the comparison of the past and the present from the point of view of one's own (dis)connection (with the family,

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12 But also gestures and other features that I noticed during the conversation that are difficult to translate into writing (the way he looks at you, his facial expression, the tone of his voice, etc.)

the spouse, friends, neighbours, work colleagues) with the surroundings and, to some extent in accordance with this, the concept of social isolation and loneliness – irrespective of whether they refer to it directly, as Zvonko and Ljuba, or whether it implicitly follows from their words – as *a state*, i.e. something that they do not believe can be changed to a significant extent. In this regard, their emphasis on the activity of growing vegetables or tending to domestic animals can, in addition to confirming the acceptance of such tasks as something that is good for their physical health and at the same time provides them with quality food, can also be understood as a kind of “strategy” of coping with isolation and loneliness (“so that my days pass faster”) and giving meaning to one’s own life (cf. Akhter-Khan et al. 2022: 255).

These narratives point out the importance of those theoretical views on solitude and loneliness (cf. e.g. Svendsen 2017) that emphasise the fact that when considering these phenomena, it is important to take into account the question of whether the causes of loneliness are internal or external; in other words, whether loneliness is a consequence of the nature of the individual and the characteristics of their individual life trajectory or the environment in which they live. Consequently, in the context of the recently presented narratives, it has been shown that a person, because of their physical isolation from other people, can feel “merely” a yearning for communication with other people because they are extremely rarely able to achieve it (social loneliness, Ljuba), while it is also possible to simultaneously feel social and emotional loneliness (Zvonko, Ante and Iva), which has a significant impact on a person’s self-concept and everyday functioning in the world that surrounds them.

The above examples, I believe, clearly point to the diversity of ways in which loneliness and social isolation are anchored in the individual lives of (elderly) people, which, based on approaches that view loneliness as an inherent subjective experience linked with the expectations of the individual but also with the cultural context in which these expectations are formed, can serve as an argument for the importance of humanistic research on solitude and loneliness (Ozawa-de Silva and Parsons 2020). Moreover, the examples also show that loneliness and social isolation are not the only concepts through which we can approach the problem of a lack of social connection (ibid.): there are, for example, feelings of “being useless” or “being redundant”, insecurity in existing relationships, longing for former practices of social exchange, but also devising strategies for searching for the meaning of life, etc. In addition to its documentary value, recording “life in forgotten regions” can be relevant, at least as a small offshoot, in designing policies to help the elderly in sparsely populated rural areas of Croatia, which, in addition to cleaning, food supply, physical work (procurement of firewood, repairs, etc.) and the like, would also include more active (affective) action in the field of reducing the feeling of loneliness and social isolation.

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