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ON DOING FIELDWORK IN SITES OF ATROCITIES¹

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During two summer months in 1941, Slana bay, located in the northwestern part of the island of Pag, was the location of a death camp organized by the Ustasha, in which many were forced to suffer extreme conditions and perished, due in large part to their ethnic identity: according to available archival sources and testimonies, the majority of them were Serbs and Jews. In Metajna, the village closest to the camp, there were two villas and an unidentified smaller house that were turned into a camp for women and children during those summer months in 1941. However, when you visit the village of Metajna today, or hike or sail to the Slana bay, you will find no trace of visible signs mentioning the historical use of the sites in either of these places. This article will provide a short overview of the contemporary erasure of the Slana camp from the map of memory and delve into the difficulties and discomforts of doing research in sites of atrocities, with special regard to a specific affective atmosphere surrounding memory of the Second World War.

Keywords: emotions, discomfort, affective atmosphere, Slana concentration camp, Gospić-Jadovno-Pag

INTRODUCTION

When you enter "uvala slana Pag" in a popular internet search engine, the results will contain a mix of idyllic tourist photos of summer activities, photogenic landscapes,

¹ This article was written as part of the project *Tracing Oblivion: The Ustaše Concentration Camps on the Island of Pag, Croatia.* More information on the project: https://www.durham.ac.uk/departments/academic/archaeology/research/archaeology-research-projects/tracing-oblivion/; https://snv.hr/projekt-tragom-zaborava-2022-2024-na-pagu/

and extreme sports, as well as information and articles on what used to be a death camp at this location during the Second World War.

During two summer months in 1941, Slana bay, located in the northwestern part of the island of Pag, was the location of a death camp organized by the Ustasha, in which many suffered extreme conditions and perished, due in large part to their ethnic identity: according to available archival sources and testimonies, the majority of them were Serbs and Jews (see Sobolevski and Ostojić 1985; Zatezalo 2007; Zemljar 1988). In Metajna, the village closest to the camp, there were two villas and an unidentified smaller house that were turned into a camp for women and children during those summer months of 1941 (ibid.). The documented testimonies contain accounts of both camps' locations. However, when you visit the village of Metajna today, or hike or sail to the Slana bay, you will find no trace of visible signs mentioning the historical use of the sites in either of the places.

In 2022 and 2023, an interdisciplinary group of international scholars visited the site as part of a heritage project aimed at tracing and challenging the oblivion of the camp, drawing from work by Sobolevski and Ostojić, Zemljar, and Zatezalo, more contemporary multimedia research conducted by Goran Andlar, Davor Konjikušić and Nika Petković,² (see also Vladimirov 2021) and research into survivors' testimonies (Drača and Drvendžija 2019). The research consisted of an archaeological survey, mapping the sites related to the Slana camp as well as other parts of the Gospić-Jadovno-Pag camp system during WWII, and ethnographic work.

This article will provide a short overview of the contemporary erasure of the Slana camp from the map of memory, before delving more deeply into the difficulties and discomforts of doing research in sites of atrocities, with special regard to a specific affective atmosphere (Anderson 2009; Marković 2024) surrounding the memory of the Second World War.

ON THE OBLIVION OF SLANA

The story of the concentration camp in Slana starts in late June 1941, more precisely June 25, when, according to available testimonies, the first prisoners were brought to the site (Zatezalo 2007:126). The camp in Slana was part of the Gospić-Jadovno-Pag camp system, and all the prisoners of Slana arrived by way of Gospić, first to the coastal town of Karlobag, across the Velebit mountain by trucks or even on foot, and then by boat to

² URL: https://snv.hr/izlozba-slana-radikalni-krajobraz-davora-konjikusica-nike-petkovic-i-gorana-andlara/

the island of Pag. Many perished on the journey (ibid.). There were two camps on Pag, one in the bay, where most prisoners stayed exposed to the elements: scorching sun, harsh wind, razor-sharp stones, and lack of water; and another in the village of Metajna, where women and children prisoners were kept in two villas and another unassuming village house. There is no natural shade at the camp at Slana bay, while the camp was in operation it contained only several provisional structures that could provide cover to a small number of prisoners (not counting the camp's administrative buildings, the remnants of which are still visible on site). There is also no fresh water, only a spring of salt water, inadequate to guench thirst on the hottest days of summer.

Despite the available, albeit sparse (as not many prisoners survived Slana),³ testimonies of the unimaginable cruelty of the place, the commemoration of the victims of Slana still proves to be challenging. In 1975, the local population erected a plaque at the beach beneath the camp site at Slana bay. However, in the early 1990s, the plaque was destroyed, and other two plaques erected in the same location by the Serbian National Council in 2003 and 2010 also met the same fate. Here and there you could find reports in the news which recounted instances of the local population resisting attempts to research the history of the camp (more on that below), including denials of its existence.

Tourists visiting Pag would be hard-pressed to learn that the mesmerizing landscape of the island, marketed as a "moon surface," once contained a concentration camp. The website of the Tourist Board of the town of Novalja (encompassing, administratively, Metajna and Slana), describes Metajna as follows: "In a stone nest in the eastern part of the island lies Metajna. Written documents show that the first tourists visited Metajna in 1928. Follow in their footsteps and discover the beauty of this area. Nature has left an infinite mark here with its unique combination of wind, sea and stone. On hot summer days, look for refreshments at the local beaches, the most prominent of which is the Ručica beach, which can be reached though the picturesque area called Kanjon (the Canyon)." (Visit Novalja, URL: https://visitnovalja.hr/places-localities-in-the-area/?lang=en), and so on. The location of the camp in Slana bay is also the stage of a sporting event called "Life on Mars": an endurance run which has become one of the more recognizable tourist industry "products" of the island. The Tourist Board website markets it as follows:

"One of the most beautiful trails in Croatia 'Life on Mars' has been officially opened in 2019 for all visitors all year round. Follow the trails which lead through Metajna in Novalja to experience an unforgettable spiritual journey

³ The testimonies do not come only from camp survivors, but from observers as well (see Sobolevski and Ostojić 1985; Zatezalo 2007; Zemljar 1988).

⁴ Which also leads to the camp location.

and discover the most beautiful beaches of the island of Pag. Trekking League in cooperation with Continental and the Novalja Tourist Board has marked 4 trekking trails with a total length of 16 km. The cosmic beauty of Ručica, Beritnica, Slana and Seline beaches will take your breath away. Find out more about the marked trails and coordinates below." (Visit Novalja, URL: https://visitnovalja.hr/life-on-mars/?lang=en)

A recent news report/short documentary about the camp and its "status" in the community provides comments from the Metajna community members, the mayor of Novalja, tourist board officials and tour guides from the island. The comments range from denials of the camp's existence, reluctance to talk about it, challenging the number of victims, denial of the fact that trekking trails pass through the camp site, etc. (see URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LloYbkiZgZc).

These examples illustrate the affective atmosphere and the challenges one would face when embarking upon researching the politics of memory and commemoration of the victims of the Slana camp, which I will reflect on in the next chapter.



Figure 1. The landscape of Slana (photo by author, September 11, 2022)

DISCOMFORT IN THE FIELD

Our first fieldwork visit to the island of Pag and the village of Metajna had a self-perceived air of an undercover operation. Between news reports of hostilities the villagers expressed toward a film crew dealing with the topic of the camp (Zadarski.hr 2015), the reported denials of the existence of the camp (ibid.), repeated destruction of the plaque marking the camp site, and what we saw as the "loss of the social frame of memory, or the hierarchy of memory narratives which, according to Aleida Assmann (2011:261), should still be based in antifascism" (Badurina 2023:10), a palpable sense of discomfort enveloped our first (and subsequent) visit(s) to the field, a discomfort which we referred to more or less openly from the start, it was there and there was no denying it. We tried to find different modes of dealing with it, from dark humor to post-fieldwork reflections. This article attempts to further reflect on this discomfort as a symptom of the affective atmosphere the research was conducted in, and affirm it as a constitutive part of fieldwork bearing epistemological effects, since the discomfort, as I will show below, had methodological implications.

Over the last several decades, the role of emotions in shaping fieldwork experience and affecting its outcomes has been (re)affirmed in anthropological writing, looking at "how certain emotions evoked during fieldwork can be used to inform how we understand the situations, people, communities, and interactions comprising the lifeworld we enter" (Davies and Spencer 2010:1). Emotions can also affect the methods we use or abandon in the field and "either enable or inhibit the understanding that fieldwork aims to generate" (ibid.). Whereas what Davies and Spencer term "traditional empiricism" operates under the presumption that emotions have no place in fieldwork research, that a clear cut is possible between the subject and object of research, and that therefore "objective science" is possible (ibid.:2), "radical empiricism," on the other hand, is "a position that refuses the epistemological cut between the subject and object, that endows transitive and intransitive experiences with equal status, and that investigates phenomena which the inductive methods of traditional empiricism were never designed to treat" (ibid.:3). Radical empiricism, according to them, produces epistemologically valid knowledge and "some of the most profound and intimate modes of apprehension could be generated through the emotional domain" (ibid.:11). Unlike traditional empiricism, which banishes emotion in the field "into zones of pathology, radical and racial otherness and into the feminine, the outlawed, the exotic, the mad, or the bad" (ibid.:12), radical empiricism affirms the productive nature of emotion-awareness in the process of fieldwork: different emotions, from those deemed unpleasant (discomfort, anxiety) to those deemed pleasant (accomplishment) "can be sources of insight and revelation" (ibid.:12), if we let them. However, they are not based only in the subject of research, they are also intersubjective; indicative of the "structures that surreptitiously shape these intersubjective interactions" (ibid.:16); and produced "through relations that exist between researching subjects and the material environment of the field" (ibid.:20). Therefore, the question is no longer "whether emotions arise (because they invariably will), but rather whether researcher is willing to remain aware of how and to what extent, they influence a project's methodology and results – be it in a limiting and/or a fruitful way" (Levy 2016:42).

The predominant and over-arching affect of my fieldwork experience in researching this site of atrocity and its afterlife in the island was discomfort. It was present in my interactions with people, while trying to arrange or conduct interviews, visiting the archives; it was very palpably embodied at the camp site itself, and stretched all the way to the process of writing.

Reflections on discomfort have recently found their way into social sciences and humanities (c.f. Hoover and García-González, Borderlands, special issue, vol. 21, no. 2, 2022), drawing from an interdisciplinary range of texts dealing with affect and emotion (such as Behar 1996, Berlant 2011, Ahmed 2014, to name just a few). Although affect and emotions have become well established topics of research, "few scholars have paid sustained effort to discomfort" (Hoover and García-González 2022:3). As authors gathered in the special issue of Borderlands (Berná 2022; Forero Angel 2022; Francis 2022; García-González 2022; Hoover 2022; Hoover and García-González 2022; Rush 2022; Slater 2022), as well as others (e.g. Applebaum 2017; Levy 2016; Slater 2017) demonstrate, discomfort, viewed both as method and practice, becomes a tool for challenging accepted western epistemologies, "a feminist decolonial intervention that reveals the onto-epistemic violence that neglects and assimilates knowledges that do not fit into hegemonic conceptualizations of the world we live in" (Hoover and García-González 2022:6). From this perspective, this violence consists in part in dismissing the epistemological productivity of affect and embodied knowledge, and attuning to discomfort in the field, brought about by different actors and forces, is an act of resistance (ibid.). More so, ethnography is better equipped, Forero Angel argues, to fulfill one of its most important missions - the "broadening of a horizon of meaning and the understanding of worldviews" (Hoover and García-González 2022:9) - if the tensions and discomforts inherent in fieldwork are acknowledged (ibid.). Denying or ignoring them, on the other hand, poses "epistemic risks" (ibid.) and makes researchers "complicit in the violence of power structures" (ibid.).

Discomfort in landscape

Part of my research took place on site, at the location of the camp, a barren uninhabited landscape on the northwestern part of the island of Pag, across the sea from the town of Pag. For several days in September 2022 and 2023, I was part of an interdisciplinary international team of researchers, composed of archaeologists, art historians, literary theoreticians, historians, and myself as an anthropologist, working on a heritage project whose aims included challenging the oblivion of this site (and similar ones) and encouraging its transformation into a place of remembrance and commemoration. This on-site work consisted mainly of archaeological surveying, but also occasional conversations with passers-by, mostly tourists exploring the island, the majority of whom were unaware of the history of the locale.

We would arrive by boat from the town of Pag early in the morning, so as to be able to do as much work as possible before the unforgiving sun starts to make it increasingly difficult. Approaching the beach by boat brought on a mixture of emotions: awe and anxiety, discomfort dressed in the bluish light of the early morning. Usually there was no escaping the thought: this was the same view the prisoners had when arriving at the camp.



Figure 2. Approaching Slana by boat (photo by author, September 11, 2022)

The day's work consisted of walking the landscape, attempting to discern shapes and anomalies in the grey monotony of the rocky terrain, getting used to the pain the light inflicts on the eyes, and finding and documenting objects in the known locations of

the camp itself. It took some getting used to the sameness of the landscape, to orient oneself and find a path from point A to B. The objects we found were mostly metal, such as bullets, pieces of barbed wire, nails, some coins, a pin the Jews were required to wear since the early days of the Independent State of Croatia. The unsettling feeling of holding these vectors of violence from decades ago is difficult to verbalize, and it takes time, and mental and emotional work to process: "time becomes a companion for working with discomfort, another way of expressing the commitment of 'staying with' uneasy feelings" (Hoover and García-González 2022:4).

Being present in a landscape which is simultaneously extremely harsh and beautiful, whose beauty transforms into cruelty with knowledge of its violent history, is where the embodiment of discomfort was most acutely felt: the sheer physical discomfort of being in the sun, and the anxiety induced by the lack of shade as far as the eye can see. ⁵ Vegetation is virtually non-existent, except for some sparsely distributed flowers timidly protruding from among the sharp stones, and a succulent plant, *euphorbia myrsinites*, slightly poisonous when ingested, as some of the prisoners experienced (see Zemljar 1988).



Figure 3. Euphorbia myrsinites (photo by author, September 11, 2022)

⁵ Except for a couple of half-demolished walls remaining of the camp's administrative buildings which offer narrow strips of shade for a couple of hours and a rock tall enough to give a limited number of hours away from the sun.

Apart from physical discomfort, another, more important, unsettling affective layer comes from the total erasure of the memory of the victims from the site. On the beach beneath the camp site, a more careful observer can make out the remains of the stand where the plaque used to be, but without any context it is impossible to deduce anything from it, especially considering that the former location of the plaque is also the starting point of a *via ferrata* used by tourists for leisure.



Figure 4. Location of the destroyed plaque (photo by author, September 11, 2022)

The passers-by we encountered were mostly oblivious to the history of the place, and the sight of people dotting the landscape and carrying archaeological equipment around frequently intrigued them. Upon learning what we were doing, some of them expressed surprise that the place is not marked, and some discomfort. One could not help but be bemused by the chasm between the history of extreme violence of the place and the arguably pleasurable activities people were pursuing there in the present. The team often discussed this among themselves, including what some of its members considered a moral grey area of swimming in the beach beneath the camp site, which was most certainly the place of death of some of the inmates (see Sobolevski and Ostojić 1985; Zemljar 1988; Zatezalo 2007).

The trip back to inhabited land at the end of the work day brought relief, to be away from the sometimes-unbearable heaviness of the place, to take off one's shoes, to be away from the sun. It also brought guilt to be able to do all these things, guilt for complaining, and anxiety in anticipation of tomorrow.

Intersubjective discomfort

The discomfort started to build up prior to our arrival to the field. It was the result of several factors, all of them in one way or another related to the affective atmosphere in Croatian society related to the memory of the Second World War, Drawing from a number of texts dealing with affective atmospheres (Anderson 2009; Michels 2015; Wetherell 2013). Jelena Marković analyzes the affective atmosphere in Croatia, and sees it as the "summary effect of dominant affective politics and interests, dominant and desirable affective behaviors, historical circumstances, and personal and family war and postwar experiences, which have been (re)formed cognitively, emotionally and narratively, backed by historically variable dominant affective politics and memory politics" (Marković 2024:79). In other words, and applied to the case of Slana, the village of Metajna, and the island of Pag, I perceived the affective atmosphere concerning the events in the camp and the period of the Second World War in this region as hostile to the antifascist-based hierarchy of memory narratives of the Second World War I subscribed to (cf. Badurina 2023:10 and Assmann 2011). I was familiar (and affected), through media reports, literature, private conversations with people knowledgeable of the context of Slana, with events that took place in the village of Metajna and the island in general, related to research of the camp. One example is an incident that took place in September 2015 in the village, involving an Israeli film crew working on a documentary about the camp. The crew was, as the news reports stated, chased off from the village when trying to film one of the villas in the village that housed the women's camp in 1941 (presently an elementary school), and escorted from the island by the police (Zadarski.hr 2015). Another example is the repeated destruction of the plaque commemorating the victims of the so-called Serbian and Jewish camps, first erected in 1975 by the veterans' association of the island of Pag⁶ on the beach beneath the camp in Slana bay. The original plague was first destroyed in the early 1990s. It was re-erected by the Serbian National Council in 2010 and again in 2013 and destroyed both times (see https://documenta.hr/koncentracijskilogor-slana-1941/). There are documented instances of villagers denying the existence

⁶ The text read: "In late May 1941, the Slana death camp was established in this place. In the horrible duration of three months, thousands of innocent people – Serbs, Jews, Croats and others – found their death both on land and in the sea in the grip of fascist beasts. Death to fascism – freedom to the people! On the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the victory over fascism and liberation of the country; the people of the island of Pag; September 7, 1975" [1941. godine, koncem svibnja osnovan je ovdje logor smrti Slana. U strašnom trajanju od nepuna tri mjeseca tisuće nedužnih ljudi - Srba, Jevreja, Hrvata i drugih našlo je smrt u kandžama fašističkih zvijeri na kopnu i moru. Smrt fašizmu - sloboda narodu! Povodom 30. godišnjice pobjede nad fašizmom i oslobođenja zemlje; narod otoka Paga; 7. rujna 1975. godine]

of the camp and the presence of women and children prisoners in several houses in the village (see, e.g. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YBMQnfOlOF0; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LloYbkiZgZc). Yet another example is Ante Zemljar's house being destroyed by explosives in Pag in 1993.⁷

These examples speak of an affective atmosphere surrounding the topic of the Second World War, the genocide conducted by the Independent State of Croatia, and the memory thereof in Croatian society and this affective atmosphere, I hold, produced an acute discomfort for me as an anthropologist, whose task in the field was to establish contact with the community. Consequently, it had concrete methodological outcomes: it affected the questions I asked and the manner I asked them in, caused anxiety in approaching the topic of the camp, due to which I often he sitated and did it in a roundabout way. This affective atmosphere also contributed to the fact that I could not approach the community through a gatekeeper, as there wasn't one. This fact, in turn, made it more difficult to approach potential informants with questions regarding the research topic, as the mention of the camp had the effect of building what I perceived a wall between us, a filter, which usually lead the communication to a cul-de-sac. Such circumstances produced the feeling of constantly being stuck in what Michael Jackson calls the "liminal phase" of fieldwork: "after separation from one's familiar lifeworld but before one finds one's feet and feels at home in one's new environment" (Jackson 2010:41). "The stresses of liminality," write Davies and Spencer, "disabling and disorienting, are often unconsciously managed by researchers" (Davies and Spencer 2010:16), and continue:

"One common way to manage the unstructured morass is to precipitously objectify and intellectually systematise the disorienting scene. While that strategy may help to 'magically reorient ourselves in situations that seriously undermine our sense of self,' when used defensively it can impede those insights that often arise when we allow ourselves to experience, slowly and non-defensively, the struggle to adapt." (ibid.)

Put differently, acknowledging and making space for the discomfort of liminality allowed me (and the team I worked in, as we discussed these emotions in the margins of

⁷ "In the night between November 2 and 3, 1941, he put a hawthorn wreath and a band inscribed with the words 'To the victims of Slana" on the central crucifix of the Pag cemetery. This was the first instance of commemorating the victims of this Ustasha camp which, along with Metajna, also on the island of Pag, Jadovno and Gospić, was part of the Ustasha death camp complex. What is more, the wreath commemorating the Serbs and Jews murdered in Slana was also the first public protest against the Ustasha Independent State of Croatia" (URL: https://www.portalnovosti.com/partizan-pjesnik-antifasist-ali-prije-svega-covjek)

fieldwork) to better understand the reach and pervasiveness of the affective atmosphere described above. Therefore, although it had methodological consequences and produced a sense of oppression, it was also productive in that it illuminated some neuralgic spots of the lifeworld we inhabit.

Writing (in) discomfort

At the time of writing this, it has been almost three years since my first encounter with the cruel landscape of Slana. The discomfort of being in the field was replaced by the discomfort of writing. The imperatives of academia demand productivity and do not allow for gradual reflection of slow research. However, this was not the primary cause of the article's long and uneasy gestation. Rather, it was partly caused by the affective atmosphere described previously, of a society that is increasingly divided along ethnic lines and entrenched in struggles over memory. Writing about the camp in Slana, a controversial topic by the standards of memory politics in Croatia, felt like an ideological and discursive minefield, riddled by impulses for and against self-censorship, burdened by a responsibility beyond that regularly involved in academic production.

Another layer of discomfort was added by the perceived lack of material resulting from the intersubjective discomfort described above. The few interviews I/we conducted felt strained and awkward, lacking codifiable data, observations were made in a liminal state of sorts, permanently *outside*. There was a lingering feeling that this liminality and its products are the very ethnographic material demanding to be analyzed, but for the longest of times it was elusive; however: "time becomes a companion for working with discomfort" (Hoover and García-González 2022:4).

And, most importantly, the last layer of discomfort, the heaviest of them all: How does one *write* about a place such as this, a place of unimaginable horror? How does one reflect on one's own discomfort without somehow devaluing the suffering of the victims, and without self-centered posturing? This question remains unanswered.

CONCLUSION

The public life of the camps in Slana and Metajna shifts between marginalization and struggles for memory. On the one hand there is reluctance to address them, denial, contesting the number of victims, destroying commemorative symbols; on the other hand there are attempts to salvage them from oblivion. The project from which this article arose aims at contributing to these attempts, continuing in the footsteps of previous authors who tried to do the same, from Sobolevski and Ostojić who presented the topic to a wider readership in the 1980s, writer Ante Zemljar, one of the initiators of the first commemoration of the victims of Slana, historiographic work of Zatezalo, and multimedial work of Andlar, Konjikušić and Petković.

The central postulate of this article is that the discomfort in facing the topic of the Slana camp more narrowly and WWII memory more broadly is the product of a specific affective atmosphere surrounding these issues in Croatian society, which, at least to an extent, is part of a broader and ongoing process of the loss of frame of memory (see Halbwachs 2013; Badurina 2023). This layer of discomfort is intertwined with another one: the responsibility an academic might feel toward appropriately addressing the communities affected by genocidal policies.

If we follow in the vein of researchers addressing discomfort in ethnographic research of contested memories, conflict and post-conflict settings, and other types of difficult fieldwork experiences, attuning to discomforts in the field will allow us to open up spaces "that unsettle established Western ways of producing knowledge" (Hoover and García-González 2022:6), will provide for the "transformative potential" (ibid.) of discomfort. This article aims at opening one such small space, that can, hopefully, start providing emancipation from the frequently oppressive affective atmosphere that envelops certain memory narratives.

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Nelagoda na terenu: o terenskom istraživanju na mjestu obilježenu zločinom

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Tijekom dvaju ljetnih mjeseci 1941. godine u uvali Slana na sjeverozapadnom dijelu otoka Paga smjestio se logor smrti koji su vodili ustaše. U ovom logoru mnogi su ljudi boravili i stradali u ekstremnim uvjetima, najvećim dijelom zbog svojega etničkoga identiteta: prema dostupnim arhivskim izvorima i svjedočenjima, većinom Srbi te Židovi.U Metajni, selu koje je najbliže logoru, nalazile su se dvije vile i jedna seljačka kuća, koje su tih ljetnih mjeseci 1941. bile pretvorene u logor za žene i djecu. Međutim, ako danas posjetite Metajnu, ili prošetate ili otplovite do uvale Slana, nećete pronaći vidljive oznake koje spominju povijest ovih mjesta. Ovaj članak dat će kratki pregled suvremenoga brisanja Slane s karte sjećanja te će se pozabaviti poteškoćama i nelagodom prisutnom kod istraživanja na mjestima zločina, s osvrtom na specifičnu afektivnu atmosferu koja okružuje sjećanje na Drugi svjetski rat.

Ključne riječi: emocije, nelagoda, afektivna atmosfera, koncentracijski logor Slana, Gospić – Jadovno – Pag



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