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Palčava šiša A Century and a Half of the Čop Family from the Border Village of Plešce¹

By representing the history of the Čop family from the village of Plešce, the author discusses the tourist offer of the region of Gorski Kotar in the period from the middle of the 19th century till today. The house of the Čop family, called 'Palčava šiša', was during the above mentioned period a family house, a pub, a shop and a center of social life of this region. Fortunately, due to historical circumstances, original building from the middle and second half of the 19th century were preserved, together with the parts of interior decorations, furniture, furnaces, rich library and a collection of documents, and because of these reasons the house was suggested for protection as a cultural monument.

Key words: «Palčava šiša», Čop, family, Plešce (Gorski kotar), family history, cultural tourism

The journey to this year's conference on the ethnological heritage and cultural image of Slovenes in Croatia², led us across the border region of Čabar, mostly inhabited by Croatian population,

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² A round table entitled *Etnološka dediščina in kulturna podoba Slovencev na Hrvaškem*/Ethnological heritage and cultural landscape of Slovenes in Croatia was organized on October 7, 2005 in Zagreb, in the premises of the Slovenski dom. Many ethnologists, historians, experts in Slavic languages and other experts from Slovenia and Croatia participated in it. This round table was the last one of a number of similar meetings which were organized by the Slovene ethnological society.

and once forming a part of the ancient parish of Gorski Kotar – the parish of Gerovo. One stop on our journey was also the house of the family Čop, locally named “Palčava šiša”, from Plešče. The region of the north-western part of Gorski Kotar which we visited, and in which the legend of Peter Klepec, who banished the Turk’s from the valley with his supernatural powers and helped to the people in need, still lives, was colonized by the feudal landowners with Slovene population who, in the course of time, became more and more Croatian. Their family names still testify of their origin, customs and dialect, which Croatian philologist, Nikola Majnarič, defined as Slovenian dialect decades ago.

A very important trade route led from the ancient times across this mountain region, connecting the hinterland of Kranjska, across Loška valley with Kvarner. From that road towards Sveta gora, on which throughout south Slovenia, Croatian Primorje (Hrvatsko Primorje) and Gorski Kotar we can find well known pilgrim church Carmel of the Holly Mary, branched away old travelling road towards the valley of Kupa and Osilnica, reaching as far as Brod at Kupa (Brod na Kupi), forward on to Kočevje, Bela Krajina and central Croatia. In spite of the steel plant development in Čabar, which was established in the middle of the 17th century by Croatian nobleman Petar Zrinjski, which gave rise to the need for the peasants and worker’s hinterland, the countryside of Čabranka at the Croatian side was, to the second part of the 18th century, colonized predominantly along the slopes and very rare in the valley, primarily because of the torrential character of Čabranka,.

After the economy standstill and catastrophic flood, which struck the steel plant at the beginning of the 18th century, when the whole valley, according to the preserved reports, was nothing but mud, the new owner started, some decades after, intensive activities for the regulation of the river and setting of the new roads. So, in the second half of the 18th century the wooden bridge was built across Kupa in Gašparci, which enabled a road connection between Kupa on Croatian, and then Slovenian, side to Osilnice and forward again on the Croatian side to the village Plešče. From that place onwards, a bad road led forward to Čabar. Just that fact necessitated the development of the village Plešče, where a number of merchants settled down re-selling goods intended for the provision of Čabar and hinterland, as well as for the provision of Kranjska. The regulation of Čabranka subsequently enabled utilization of more cultivated areas and development of some larger farms in that part of the valley.

The important role in the development of the village of Plešče in the 19th century had, above all, a large number of inhabitants in hinterland. Even today the surrounding countrymen call the valley people “the slopers”, because in the earlier times they mostly lived at the slopes of the valley. The former settlers of the village of Plešče were mostly merchants, innkeepers, tradesmen or landlords, or sometimes, smaller peasants or cottage farmers. The golden age of the village can be linked to the period after the steel plant in Čabar went in ruin, which, by the accounts, happened around the second two thirds of the 19th century. After that, at the end of the First, and especially after the end of the Second World War, because of the intensive emigration

of the people, the country had to share the fate of regression with other regions of Gorski Kotar. Today, only the valley is partly inhabited.

The house of the Čop family, the big ancient stone structure, locally named "Palčava šiša", is standing in the centre of the village, opposite the parish church of the Holly Trinity. It was built in the year 1856 by the house owner, merchant and innkeeper Ivan Čop and his wife Lenka, born Kvaternik, as can be confirmed by three nicely cut stone portals, which, besides the engraved date, also bear their names, and the monogram of the Jesus Christ. The family name Čop was mentioned for the first time in the valley in the 18th century at the nearby village of Gerovo. On the other side of Sveta gora it was recorded as early as the middle of the 16th century; as well as the middle of the 17th century in Čabar.

According to the story, the family Čop came with their children, all together six of them, in the year 1856 from Slovenian Babno polje, a village situated on the ancient trade road, which led from the interior of Kranjska to Kvarner. Babno polje is located at the verge of karst field, at the border between Austria and Hungary, where, at dry summer season, water was short. Just in that year raging epidemic of cholera occurred nearby, on account of which nearly half of the population died in some months.

Upon arrival at Plešče, a cloddy settlement on the terraced soil of the stream of Plešče, along boundary rivulet Čabranka with plenty of pure water, they purchased, from some relatives, the old wooden Palčava house with the house number six, standing away from the road, and immediately, opposite the church entrance, started to build the new house, with house number seven. After the construction was finished, the old house was demolished so that only traces of walls remained, which can be seen even today in the stony pavement of the backyard. Of the old Palčava household remained only a trace of the farmhouse wall, which was built in the wall of the adjoining barn and was among the oldest preserved house remnants in the village. The preserved building permit can still confirm the accurate beginning and the time of construction of the "Palčava šiša".

Palčava house is constructed from large properly cut stones, collected in countryside, with stone portals and window frames, deep cellars and arched ground floor. Beside the traditional tripartite division of the house space on two floors, characteristic for the older houses in Gorski Kotar, which were based on the cellar project, it had one storey added, typical for houses of higher classes. In the beginning the house had a black kitchen with the storage and the inn and the shop were situated on the ground floor next to the "house". On the first floor the bedrooms for the family members were situated; from the very beginning, the parlour was the representative middle-class room for gentlemen, not known until that time at any house nearby. The office of the house lord was separated – "kanclija". One of the bedrooms for the family was on the garret, next to the two smaller rooms, "štiblca". The house had the first and the only built-in toilets in the village. On both floors they are preserved in original form.

Palčava house was built before the great revolutions in everyday lives of our predecessors and before they started to use the new technical achievements that followed in the second half of the 19th century. As all other major structures in surrounding countryside it was built by Italian masters, who travelled with their shifts to all larger construction sites in this part of the country, during intermissions in the construction of the south railway. The ground plan, all other architectural distribution and elements are completed in classicist proportions, which arise from the golden mean. It was still constructed in a classical way, from nicely chiselled and carefully selected stones; according to some stories, the stones were transported from the countryside for whole two years, with two pairs of oxen. The heaviest stone, discovered at the renovation of the northern wall of the house, was estimated at 450 kilograms, for hoisting it, at least the twelve powerful men were necessary.

According to another story, once upon a time the workers heard from the neighbours that Palčavi, in one way or the other, would not have enough money to pay their work on such large construction, so they stopped working. However, Ivan Čop arrived and made arrangements to pay them in gold every week in advance so they agreed to finish the construction in the best possible way.

In the middle of the 19th century the life of our predecessors came to substantial changes. Petroleum was used for lighting, the more progressive ones were using kitchen-ranges, on account of the railway development, trade business was flourishing. The merchandise became more accessible, people started to travel abroad searching for profit and in return bringing the news about living abroad; the catalogue sales allowed to the well being to give a commission for the goods which the former generations in remote places merely only dreamed of. After the business, the people from Plešče travelled to Kočevje, Rijeka, Rakek, Postojna, Ljubljana, Zagreb and even as far as Graz or Vienna.

These events resulted in the first rearrangements of the housing structure around the year 1880, when the house was already managed by Anton Čop, the mayor of community Plešče, afterwards a long lasting representative of the Čabar county in the district assembly, who was Ivan's successor. Both black kitchens were abandoned; the one on the ground floor together with the new built-in stove was moved into the "house". Because of that, the store became twice as big and completely vaulted to insure more space for the shop. On the 'noble' floor the house got new, larger "kanclija" (house lord's office) with barred windows, and even the parlour was reshaped. The walls and ceilings in representative rooms were decorative painted; the decorations followed the latest fashion in interior design of that time, employed by wealthy citizens. The trade and business were flourishing. The Čop family was buying estates, vaulted the ground spaces in the barn, bought the nearby house on the ground floor of which they established municipal office, some other farming structures and opened a fully employed butchery. Old aunties remembered the butcher with gaiety, been working there before the First World War: he was hunchbacked and slept together with other servants on the ground floor, on the big kitchen table for preparing bread dough (*mentrga*), snoring so loud that the children were coming to listen to him.

In the late nineties, Anton's first wife Fani died with the third stillborn child. According to village tales, she was a vivid Kras woman, a noble daughter of the merchant and baker from Postojna. To her last breath, delivering the third stillborn child, she was carried in despair around the church, but there was no hope.

The second larger rearrangement of the house came some years after the second Anton's marriage, at the very beginning of the building of the new valley road between Plešci and Čabar in the year of 1894. The road, after long centuries, finally made possible a safer and faster connection from the small town of Čabar towards Kupa valley, Delnice and Kočevje. At that time they added to a building a new house wing with a big cellar, new kitchen and a parlour on the floor; the latter does not exist any more. The inn was separated into two spaces. At the building of the new house wing, a concrete deck with steel beams was used for the first time in the village of Plešci. The skilled workers made it, working at that same time on the road objects. The living became more comfortable, the house had more than one parlour and even the dining room was separated. It is interesting to point out that during the house restorations, the new furniture arrived to the house for the most part only through the bride's dowry at the marriage, only a little was bought aside. The second-hand-quality furniture and equipment were used at changing or moving to other living spaces. Unlike in other local houses, there was a bed in every representative room, intended for family members as well as for guests. The stoves in cast iron, made by the Courts Foundry, with the motive of Diana – already bought for the parlour in the year 1856 – were placed over the years on as many as the five different places around the house.

At the house, among farming wagons, sledges and carriages and four horses, they still had a carriage with a leather roof, light carriage and a roofed sledges for the conveyance of people. Anton Čop had a white horse, and once a week a stableman took him, on his horse, to supper with the great burgomaster of Čabar. With his second wife Julija, born in a wealthy family in Kočevje and educated at the girls' school in Vienna, he spend a honeymoon in Venice and attended the noble pastimes in Čabar. They had heirs: their seven children were educated in local schools in Čabar and Kočevje, the classical grammar school in Senj, the University of Zagreb and the business school in Zagreb and Graz. Two children had passed away, the younger one in his prime other daughter was taken away by tuberculosis during her education in Kočevje.

After the First World War the economic crisis followed, the real estate and all the property were inherited by their son Zvonimir after he finished his education. At first it went well, after the World crisis it went bad, in that time they gave up the butchery, and it went well again. In 1934 a barn was burnt to the ground by a misfortune; however, the nearby house structures were spared, because just that year a new, more powerful, hand fire pump was bought. The roof was renovated and the orchard was planted with apples and pears. Already before, and particularly during the 1930-ies, they were investing a lot in tourism development, so they equipped a nearby house, where community clerk used to live. Wealthy doctors, lawyers and professors' fami-

lies from Zagreb and Belgrade were arriving to spend the summer in the country. The house was advertised in daily papers; even actors were arriving. They gladly went for walks, mountaineering, hunting or fishing and swimming in Čabranka and Kupa. The men debated with the landlord in the parlour. They appreciated also their good cuisine, for new dishes were prepared for every meal, and fresh sweets were always on the table after the meals. They bawled, played cards and danced a lot, some instrument was always at disposal in the inn, and every evening, some distinguished peasants, a teacher, parish priest and others, used to gather in. The Palčava house, in the beginning of the 1930-ies became so famous in the surrounding regions for its dancing parties that even musicians and dancers from all over the region used to arrive. The dancing parties were organised in the inn until the middle of the 1950-ies, when it was closed. In the house there is still preserved a brochure of the climatologic holiday resorts of the Yugoslav Kingdom, where it is possible to find information about Plešće side by side to the information about Plitvice lakes.

Zvonimir Čop, the son of Anton, also the mayor of the community himself, initiator and founder of the fire brigade, an educated man widely well known as extraordinarily good orator, planed the new rearrangement of the building himself. He was planning to expand the inn section, to construct new and modern toilets with bathrooms because of the tourism projects. However a tragic traffic accident prevented the realization of this plan in 1938. On returning home from the business trip, some seven kilometres before his home village, the wooden bridge colapsed under the fully loaded truck and buried him and his friend, a merchant from Rakek.

The widow Berta remained alone at the estate, known to her very end among the village people as "Palčava gaspa", with her two little daughters. Although the economy crisis followed: the World War, nationalizations, cooperatives and other after-wartime troubles, she kept the husbandry as well as the house with her exceptional energy.

During the Second World War, although the Italian barrack was in the nearby house (just so owned by the Čop family) and in the very same house the military doctor and his assistant were established, the widow Berta was all the time in collaboration with the resistance movement. Passing by military posts they transported even wounded partisans for bandaging to the nearby village of Osilnica on the Slovenian side, using Palčavas' carriage. After the first Italian offensives when Italians burnt villages and hamlets at the slopes of the valley and mass-deported people, their friends with families from nearby regions moved to the house and stayed there for several months. They expected deportation or burning of village any minute, but fortunately it did not happen. The Italian military troops with which the last villagers expected to be deported were attacked by partisans and destroyed. Shortly after came the capitulation of Italia. The Germans came and plundered everything of the value that remained in the house: silver, decorations, gramophone, accordion etc. After the Italian capitulation and the return of the deported people from the nearby villages, sometimes over thirty homeless persons stayed in the house. Leaving to their poorly rearranged burnt homes, they were given furniture, clothing and all kinds of old goods, not needed in the house. Granny Berta always gladly helped people, on the

account on her acquaintanceship a great deal of needy children took to schooling after the war, with her friends, she endeavoured to open the first industrial plant in the village. Till the end of the war the Palčava store was closed, around the 1950-ies, after more than a hundred years of working, the inn was closed. The best fields were "bought" at the low price; the second house was nationalized and later returned to the family. In spite of all the troubles, granny Berta was, for all her villagers to the end of her days – she deceased at the age of eighty-nine - the last and only "Palčava gaspa".

The time passed by, the daughters went to studies and left - one of them to Ljubljana, another found her happiness as far as Canada - the family spread around. The successors had started to take interest in the house in different ways. At the reconstruction fifteen years ago they did the first major step. Even during the granny Berta lifetime, they pulled down the part which was added to the house a century ago. Intervention gave to the house almost the same appearance like it was a century and a half before. Larger part of the front, in spite of renovation, is still original, meaning the polished plaster a century and a half old; secession profiles around windows and Biedermeier rosette above the main entrance were renovated. The outbuilding front was renovated too. Five years ago, the nearby barn which stood between the house and the barn, burnt away just a few meters from the house. Only for the unselfish efforts of the Croatian and Slovenian firemen from the home and nearby villages, the house was not badly damaged. Just the part of the barn roof was burnt down, but was restored shortly afterwards.

From the very first renovation the family slowly arranged the interior and objects that stayed in the house or were found all around in the village or nearby surroundings. As early as that time, because of the value of the house, the family took into consideration to proclaim the building as cultural monument. The proposal was dispatched to former Regional Institute for the Preservation of Cultural Monuments in Rijeka. The administration mills, because of the state of war in Croatia and cultural monuments service reorganization, milled slowly. Only two years ago, during the visit of the curators from Zagreb Ethnological Museum and the responsible people from the Direction for Culture Heritage Protection, not only the house but also the whole estate with barn, farmyard and artefact collection were suggested for protection. Numerous remnants of the interior mural and ceiling decoration are conserved in the house, together with original building and room furniture, stoves, ample library and extensive document collection. This year the reconstruction of the store was completed with original equipment from the middle and second half of the 19th century. According to accessible information, this is one of the oldest completely preserved stores in this part of Europe in situ. The presentation of the hotel trade and the building history are prepared. The reconstruction of the parlour with original furniture and renovation of the wall and ceiling decoration from the 1880-ies are in preparation for the next year.

The renewal outgrew into the extensive family project in which three generations are included. It is interesting that the most activity from research to the final work

they perform unaided. Only at some more difficult tasks they use the help from the village skilled workers. So the hobby of the present successor, the representative of the fifth generation of the Čop family from Plešče, who plans to study literature, visits to the similar museums throughout Europe and America together with different field expert discussions, developed into a real activity throughout the years.

The family still arranges the interior of the house carefully, with earnest intension to open it to the public in the year of 2006. With all the material to exhibit: beautiful interior from the second half of the 19th century as well as with other heritage artefacts from this surrounding, music and dialectal story telling, it will be, at the very least, a valuable and extraordinary contribution to this locality and, at the same time, an occasion for revival of the fresh tourist trade. The house with its history and collections is in the same time one of the extraordinary memories of the mutual collaboration and cultural interaction of all three ethnic groups from this area: Croats, Slovenians and Germans from Kočevje.

Similar projects scarcely come to life merely with employment of private organisation. For this reason, the family members all the time strive for the fact that renovation of the house, its presentation and incorporation in cultural as well as tourist development of the region, should become the interest of the local community too, as well as of the wider community of Gorski Kotar, the Primorsko-goranska region, and of Croatia and Slovenia themselves.

Some articles about the house and the project were published in Croatian and Slovenian press during the last year, the proprietors took part in some radio and TV broadcasts, even an independent contribution was recorded for HTV (Croatian television). The house was visited by the members of the Croatian Ethnological Society, the European association ECOVAST for the Small Towns and the Countryside Development, KEC – the International Project for Protection of the Kras, also the Slovenian Ethnological Society, while many experts, not only ethnologists, visited the house during this years' conference in Croatia. The house and collections were visited by the mayors and members of community councils, by the representatives of the surrounding tourist associations and many others. The successors of the Čop family were encouraged to register for different public competitions. They spare no pains to collaborate with Croatian and Slovenian experts in projects connected with the region. Moreover, a joint free tourist zone in the upper Kupa and Čabar valley is opening, planed some years ago by the Republics of Croatia and Slovenia, which, in spite of the blunt interruption of the centenarian passable road through the valley between both states and nations, on the account of the border regime in the past few years, will make the major tourist progress possible.

The population in this part of Gorski Kotar will, unfortunately, stay separated from their Slovenian neighbours, in the same manner as Slovenians from their Croatian neighbours, until the return to normality of the frontier cross point in the valley at Zamost and to the reopening of the main road through the valley. After seven centuries or more, the frontier crossing, from which ever since the commercial trails went,

has the status of border crossing, which besides the economic development, powerfully restricts the passage of the people too, who are eager to visit that wonderful part of their homeland. The bridge on the former main road throughout the valley at Gašparci after the centuries is passable only for the personal border traffic.

Despite obstacles, pull yourself together and come to visit "Palčava šiša" and surroundings. You will be welcome and you won't be sorry, for you will visit an extraordinary beautiful as well as an ethnologically interesting part of Croatia and Slovenia.³

Translated by Matea Hotujac

³ The collection in Plešće was opened on September 9, 2006 and until now, according to the author's findings, it was visited by more than 800 people.