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Silent Witnesses: Micro-Historical Perspectives on Suicide in the Court Records of the First Half of the 20th Century**

IZVLEČEK

NEME PRIČE: MIKROZGODOVINSKI POGLED NA SAMOMOR V SODNIH SPISIH PRVE POLOVICE 20. STOLETJA

Članek na podlagi arhivskega gradiva Okrožnega sodišča v Celju, Okrožnega sodišča v Mariboru in posameznih primerov z Okrajnega sodišča v Trbovljah, ki so imela pristojnost na območjih z najvišjo stopnjo samomorilnosti v okviru Dravske banovine, obravnava primere samomora v prvi polovici 20. stoletja na mikroravni. Na podlagi posameznih primerov iz sodne prakse in časopisnih poročil osvetljuje socialne, ekonomske in regionalne razmere na obravnavanih območjih v prvi polovici 20. stoletja pa tudi položaj žensk v družbi ter razširjenost družinskega in spolnega nasilja. V obdobju, ko so naraščajoče stopnje samomorilnosti pripisovali posledicam prve svetovne vojne, vplivu ekonomske krize in alkoholizma, analizira prisotnost in postopno prevlado psihološkega in psihiatričnega diskurza v zvezi z določanjem vzrokov za posamezne primere samomorov. S pomočjo analize posameznih primerov prikaže odnos do samomora na podeželju ter sramoto in stigo, ki so jo družinski člani še vedno čutili ob samomoru sorodnika. Analizira tudi primere, ko samomorilca bodisi ni bilo mogoče identificirati ali ko truplo pokojnika ni bilo najdeno, ter primere samomorov zaradi strahu in/ali sramote zaradi zagrešenih kaznivih dejanj. Poleg tega posebno pozornost namenja fenomenu samomora žensk in znotraj tega ob primerih umora-samomora ter

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vlogi žensk pri tem analizira takratni medijski diskurz in prikaže potek preiskav takrat, ko ni bilo jasno, ali je smrt nastopila kot posledica samomora ali umora.

Ključne besede: samomor, socialna zgodovina, mikrozgodovina, sodni spisi, samomor žensk, umor-samomor, Dravska banovina

ABSTRACT

Based on the archival materials from the Celje and Maribor District Courts (Kreisgerichte) and the specific cases from the Trbovlje County Court (Bezirksgericht), referring to the areas with the highest suicide rates in the Drava Banate, this article examines suicide in the first half of the 20th century. Based on individual cases from judicial practice, as well as newspaper reports, the article sheds light on the social, economic and regional conditions in the considered areas in the first half of the 20th century, as well as the position of women in society and the prevalence of family and sexual violence. At the time when the increasing suicide rates were attributed to the aftermath of World War I, the effects of the economic crisis, and alcoholism, the article analyses the presence and gradual dominance of psychological and psychiatric discourse in determining the causes of individual suicides. By analysing the individual cases, the author presents the attitude towards suicide in rural areas – the shame and stigma still felt by the family members when a relative of theirs commits suicide. The author analyses cases where either the suicide could not be identified or when the corps of the deceased was not found, as well as cases of suicide due to fear and/or shame due to crimes committed. Furthermore, the article focuses on the phenomenon of female suicide and, in this context, on the examples of murder-suicide and the role of women in them, analyses the contemporaneous media discourse, and describes the course of the investigations in the cases where it was not clear whether the death had resulted from suicide or murder.

Keywords: suicide, social history, microhistory, court files, female suicide, murder-suicide, Drava Banate

Introduction

Suicide is an intriguing subject to study: at the crossroads of the secular and the sacral, the public and the private, the physical and the mental, it has been the subject of various interpretations since Durkheim and Masaryk. It is considered a problem to be solved, a death that can and must be prevented by all means, a stigma and a travesty for

the bereaved family, a sign of societal dysfunction; it has been tabooed, romanticised, and mystified.¹

Since the beginnings of the historiographical study of the phenomenon of suicide, research has often focused on the pivotal periods and historical turning points in the search for evidence of whether social upheavals can be considered causes and generators of increased suicide rates. One such period on which much of recent research has focused is the period following World War I. Robert Penn Warren, who focused on the impact of the Civil War on the American South, referred to the American Civil War as the “Great Alibi”, to which all social problems in the South could be attributed.² Did World War I also become a justification and excuse for poor economic conditions and everything that went wrong in society because it had “aroused the men’s lowest instincts”³ – including the rising levels of violence and suicide rates in society?⁴ It has been frequently stated that a “suicide epidemic”⁵ followed World War I and that this heralded the beginning of a “century of suicide”.⁶ However, with unreliable statistics, the question arises as to whether suicide truly became more frequent or whether such incidents were simply reported more often.⁷ It seems that people *choose* to be alarmed and that, more than suicide itself, what has actually changed was how the phenomenon was perceived and how it was thought and felt about.⁸

The present article, based on the archival materials from the Celje⁹ and Maribor District Courts (*Kreisgerichte*) and the individual cases from the Trbovlje County Court (*Bezirksgericht*), focuses on suicides from the first half of the 20th century on

1 John Weaver and David Wright, ‘Introduction,’ in John Weaver and David Wright (eds.), *Histories of Suicide. International Perspectives on Self-Destruction in the Modern World* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 3.

2 David Silkenat, *Moments of Despair. Suicide, Divorce, & Debt in Civil War era North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 3–5. Robert Penn Warren, *Legacy of the Civil War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press – Bison Books, 1998).

3 SI PAM 1736, Eman Pertl (1907–1987), 34/2, Sodno-izvedenski spomini (dr. Ivan Jurečko). Mateja Ratej, *Vojna po vojni. Štajerske družine v dvajsetih letih 20. stoletja* (Ljubljana: Modrijan, 2016), 8.

4 Meta Remec, ‘Vojak naj bo!’: nastanek in razkroj podobe popolnega vojaka v času prve svetovne vojne, *Zgodovina za vse* 27, No. 2 (2020): 5–24.

5 Hannes Leidinger, ‘Die Selbstmordepidemie. Zur Zunahme von Suizidfällen in der Zwischenkriegszeit,’ Wolfgang Kos (ed.), *Kampf um die Stadt* (Wien: Wien Museum und Czernin Verlags, 2010), 215–19.

6 Grigorij Čartišvili, *Pisatelj in samomor* (Ljubljana: Literarno-umetniško društvo Literatura, 2017), 30–34.

7 Silkenat, *Moments of Despair*, 29.

8 Barbara Gates, *Victorian Suicide. Mad Crimes and Sad Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), xiii.

9 The District Court in Celje was founded in 1849. At first it was called the *Regional Court of Celje* before it was renamed into “District court” in 1854. It had Jurisdiction on the area of the entire Lower Styria and included 22 judicial districts: Maribor, Gornja Radgona, Ljutomer, Lenart, Ormož, Ptuj, Lovrenc, Marenberg (Radlje ob Dravi), Celje, Vransko, Gornji Grad, Šmarje pri Jelšah, Podčetrtek, Slovenj Gradec, Šoštanj, Slovenska Bistrica, Konjice, Rogatec, Brežice, Sevnica, Kozje, Laško. Towards the end of the century, the territorial jurisdiction of the District Court in Celje decreased. The judicial districts of Gornja Radgona, Ljutomer, Marenberg (Radlje ob Drava), Maribor, Ormož, Ptuj, Slovenska Bistrica and Sv. Lenart v Slovenskih goricah has been assigned under the jurisdiction of the Maribor District Court in 1897. In 1919, after the annexation of Prekmurje to the newly formed Kingdom SHS, Maribor District court extended its jurisdiction to the judicial districts of Murska Sobota and Lendava. In the period between the two wars, the jurisdiction of the District Court in Celje included the judicial districts of Brežice, Celje, Gornji Grad, Konjice, Kozje, Laško, Radeče, Rogatec, Sevnica, Slovenj Gradec, Šmarje pri Jelšah, Šoštanj and Vransko. – Jelka Melik, *Kazensko sodstvo na Slovenskem: 1919–1929: s posebnim ozirom na arhivsko gradivo Deželnega sodišča v Ljubljani* (Ljubljana: Arhiv republike Slovenije, 1994), 26. Jelka Melik, *V imenu njegovega veličanstva kralja!: kazensko sodstvo v jugoslovanski Sloveniji v letih 1930–1941* (Ljubljana: Arhiv Republike Slovenije, 2000), 37–44.

the micro level. It also presents an analysis of the media discourse regarding the cases that found their way into the sensationalist daily newspapers. The region under consideration encompasses the entire former Lower Styria with its population of 600,000, representing half of the entire Drava Banate.¹⁰ Most of these people lived in the countryside and fell into the category of agricultural labourers, meaning that they owned between 0 and 5 ha of land at most and had to work as day labourers on larger farms to survive. In particular, the rural areas of Haloze and Slovenske gorice hills, which fell under the jurisdiction of the Maribor District Court, were characterised by extreme poverty, alcoholism, domestic and sexual violence, and disastrous social and hygienic conditions. The areas in question were simultaneously the regions with the highest suicide rates, differing from those in the rest of the Drava Banate.¹¹

Table 1: Suicide rate in the Drava Banate 1937–1939

Drava Banate	Population	Number of suicides	Number of suicides/ 100 000 inhabitants
1931–1935	1 144 298	225	19,4
	(in 1931)		
1937	1 191 000	291	24,4
1938	1 198 000	273	22,9
1939	1 198 000	310	26

Source: *Statistički godišnjak* 9, 1938–1939, No. 1, 111 and 124; *Statistički godišnjak* 10, 1940, No. 1, 95.

10 Drava Banate (*Dravska banovina* in Slovenian) was one of the nine administrative units of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia that existed between 1929 and 1941. It included the territories of the parts of former Austrian lands (Carniola, Lower Styria, Carinthia) and the Prekmurje region (a part of Hungary before 1918) that were incorporated into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes after 1918. Founded after the imposition of the “Six January Dictatorship” by King Alexander of Yugoslavia, was centred in Ljubljana and headed by a “Ban”, who was appointed by the King with the help of the Ban Council. – Cf. Jože Žontar, ‘Splošna okrajna uprava v Sloveniji v letih 1918 do 1941,’ *Arhivi* 26, No. 1 (2003): 133–38.

11 Mateja Ratej, *Rožengrunt. Žensko nasilje v štajerskih kočarskih družinah med svetovnima vojnama* (Ljubljana: Beletrina, 2023), 5, 6, 17, 35. Meta Remec, ‘Epidemija samomorov?: odmevi na naraščanje stopnje samomorilnosti na Slovenskem v 19. in 20. stoletju,’ *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino* 63, No. 1 (2023): 20, 21.

Table 2: Districts and cities in the Drava Banate with the highest suicide rate

District	Suicides 1931–1935	Average number of suicides/year	Population	Number of suicides / 100 000 inhabitants
Celje (surroundings)	65	13	60 383	21,5
Maribor- right shore	91	18,2	56 457	27,6
Maribor- left shore	68	13,6	56 022	24, 3
Ptuj (surroundings)	102	20,4	71 443	28,5
Mesta				
Celje-city	22	4,5	7 568	59,5
Ljubljana- city	106	21,2	61 202	34,6
Maribor-city	80	16	33 700	47,5
Ptuj- city	10	2	4 221	47,4

Source: Pirc and Pirc, *Življenjska bilanca Slovenije v letih 1921–1935*, 62.

The examined archival materials cover both urban and rural suicides. As with the socio-historical research on other phenomena, the study of suicide in rural areas has proved to be a considerable methodological challenge.¹² In addition to the scarcity of sources, in smaller and more concentrated settings, a clear tendency to conceal suicide cases alongside entrenched habits, beliefs, and poor literacy can be observed. Most interviewees had difficulty expressing themselves, and only a few articulated their pain and the reasons for the fateful step, thus leaving the interpretation of the causes to others. Often, only those who wanted to punish someone by committing suicide usually wrote a few sentences or authorised others to pronounce the causes on their behalf.¹³ Court files often testify to the chaotic nature of the situation: in the countryside, those called upon to adjudicate on the causes of death and examine the deceased were often complete laymen who had nevertheless already adopted the psychiatric discourse that had clearly penetrated the rural areas as well. Indeed, even laymen would use terms such as *mental confusion* to determine the causes of suicide besides social reasons.¹⁴ Apart from the loss of social status, trauma, unhappy love,

12 Dragica Čeč, 'Starostniki na podeželju v 19. stoletju,' *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino* 64, No. 1 (2024): 142–60. Remec, 'Epidemija samomorov?,' 14. Bojan Pirc and Ivo Pirc, *Življenjska bilanca Slovenije* (Ljubljana: Higijenski zavod, 1937), 35, 62. Marjan Drnovšek, 'Vzroki za izseljevanje Slovencev v zadnjih dveh stoletjih,' *Drevesa* 8, No. 3 (2002): 10–13. Masaryk, *Suicide*, 30. Ferenc Moksony, 'Victims of Change or Victims of Backwardness? Suicide in Rural Hungary,' in György Lengyel in Zsolt Rostoványi (eds.), *The Small Transformation. Society, Economy and Politics in Hungary and the New European Architecture* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2001), 366–76.

13 Bailey, 'This Rash act,' 31. Čhartišvili, *Pisatelj in samomor*, 11.

14 Silkenat, *Moments of Despair*, 35. Weaver and Wright, Introduction, 10, 11. Čhartišvili, *Pisatelj in samomor*, 235. Rab Houston, 'The Medicalization of Suicide: Medicine and the Law in Scotland and England, circa 1750–1850,' in Weaver and Wright (eds.), *Histories of Suicide*, 92. Merrick, 'Death and Life in the Archives,' 80.

poverty, economic crisis, and shame,¹⁵ it was thought that men without any financial problems who enjoyed good relationships with their wives could only decide to commit suicide because they had gone mad.¹⁶ In any case, as Jeffrey Merrick vividly wrote, these were not people who killed themselves because they had read *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Montesquieu, Nietzsche, or later Camus.¹⁷

Based on micro-studies of individual suicide cases, the present article sheds light on the social conditions in the areas under consideration in the first half of the 20th century; outlines the gender, social, regional, national, and other relations; analyses the discourse of the media and experts in the fields of psychiatry and psychology; examines the procedures of criminological and forensic research; and considers the fear that prevailed in a society that perceived suicide as a symptom of decadence and social decay.

The micro-study of individual cases is not a matter of digging into the misfortunes of others, who have mostly been anonymised in the present study. Microhistorical studies based on archival materials reveal the patterns of thinking and attitudes towards suicide among ordinary people, the barely literate, who have left little trace of their lives. Forensic materials provide a glimpse into their lives, though most often through the eyes of witnesses and relatives, thus probably revealing more about the mindset of the survivors than about the deceased themselves. As in one court case records in which there are pages upon pages testifying to the pain of a mother who lost her only daughter who had received the “strictest moral upbringing” and seemed happy as she prepared for her marriage, and who was supposed to give her mother grandchildren and help out in her old age – but not a word exists from the girl herself.¹⁸

Women’s suicide, which was highlighted in the newspapers of the time as a particular problem and a phenomenon “adding to the tragedy of difficult situations,” represents a separate study subject.¹⁹ In the relevant materials, women appear as suicide victims who chose suicide mainly because of tarnished honour and unhappy love, while the court materials also portray them as the passive parts of couples in murder-suicide cases. Extremely jealous and controlling men, who resorted to violence even more frequently after World War I, would often end the violent relationships by murdering their partners (and occasionally their children) and then committing suicide themselves as a way of punishing the women for rejecting them or seeking to end the relationships.²⁰ The analysis establishes the role of women in the family and society and highlights the attitudes towards women who broke the moral rules, the prevalence of alcoholism, the impact of the economic crisis, etc.²¹

15 More about the alleged reasons for suicide: Silkenat, *Moments of Despair*, 36–37. Ivan Smiljanić, ‘Konkurzi, samomor, žalosten je pogled na trgovsko polje’: gospodarski polom kot vzrok za samomor na Slovenskem pod Avstro-Ogrsko in prvo Jugoslavijo,’ *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino* 63, No. 1 (2023): 42–66. Hecht, *Stay*, 18.

16 ‘Samomor,’ *Novice*, 53, March 29, 1895, No. 13, 129.

17 Jeffrey Merrick, ‘Death and Life in the Archives: Patterns of and Attitudes to Suicide in Eighteenth-Century,’ in Weaver and Wright (eds.), *Histories of Suicide*, 78.

18 SI PAM 645, 3, 4400, Kzp X 516/37.

19 ‘Črna statistika Maribora,’ *Mariborski večernik Jutra* 2, January 7, 1928, No. 5, 1.

20 Cf. Ratej, *Vojna po vojni*. Remec, “Vojak naj bo!,” 5–24.

21 Ratej, *Rožengrunt*, 7.

Each of the analysed cases allows us to draw multifaceted conclusions. This is particularly true of the court cases relating to the attempts at covering up homicides and murders by suicide, where it is possible to observe when the relevant investigations began, who carried them out, and how the immediate community reacted to the interference of “strangers” from the outside world. The research also takes a look at the customs and rituals surrounding death: who undresses, washes, and dresses the corpses; how much time must elapse between death and burial; how the increasing use of post-mortem examinations of corpses was perceived; and so on. In an environment where witness statements were crucial in deciding whether a death resulted from suicide, accident, or violence, and where it was considered that “a man’s word of honour was quite enough”, inquests were often perceived as an interference and unwarranted intrusion into the people’s way of life.²²

The present analysis thus shows that, despite the efforts of the authorities to standardise and modernise the investigations and introduce new forensic science methods in these areas, the locals tended to remain set in their ways. However, not only the people but also the authorities were problematic in the field. While criminal investigators searched for fingerprints, analysed the murder weapons, examined and photographed the corpses, deaths, and crime scenes, made sketches of the locations where the bodies had been discovered, and addressed the issue of evidence preservation, the local police authorities nevertheless still acted arbitrarily. In the name of compassion for the families of the deceased, they would often deviate from the prescribed protocols, allow for quick burials without examining the bodies, and make judgements based on their own conscience and “common sense”.²³

Suicides Without Bodies and Nameless Suicide Victims

A cursory comparison with the daily newspapers of the time shows that the courts by no means dealt with all the suicide cases that occurred. They were mainly preoccupied with the incidents that, in one way or another, deviated from the average or cast doubt on the actual course of events. For the purposes of my research, I have extracted, from the materials of the abovementioned courts, 53 cases of suicides, attempted suicides, and alleged suicides that occurred during the period when the contemporaneous daily newspapers, particularly in Maribor and its surroundings, reported on the increasing “number of desperate people and their flight from life” and the alleged 80 % increase in the number of suicides. This was not considered surprising: “For years, the World War has beset humanity with the most terrible force – the low, terribly low cost of human life.” After the war, many of those who find everyday life unbearable and are unable to cope with their new situation have been forgotten.²⁴

22 E. g. SI PAM 645, 3, 5117.

23 Merrick, ‘Death and Life in the Archives,’ 75.

24 SI PAM 645, 3, 2616, Kzp IX 1228/31. Cf. Merrick, ‘Death and Life in the Archives,’ 76.

An analysis of the media discourse in the middle of the war shows that the newspapers published articles that added to the sense of anxiety by regularly and precisely reporting about all the suicides and fatal accidents and emphasising the catastrophic nature of the situation.²⁵ According to these statistics, suicide was considered the darkest chapter – the press reported that “the beginning of the suicide season was tragic,” that three suicides happened on the same day, and focused on all the other victims of “despair, or rather, of being tired of a hard life full of torment, struggles, and worries.”²⁶ The related suicides of family members and suicides “in clusters” were particularly concerning. “The suicide column has become a permanent feature, and its variety did not spoil the breakfast and lunch of the satisfied readers.” The authors of the articles hoped to stimulate a deep reflection. It was believed that the suicides were caused by a “terrible combination of misery, hunger, disease, and woe” that underlay the bleak figures.²⁷ The newspapers described every aspect of how the suicides were carried out, the state of the corpses, and even included the goriest details of suicides on railway tracks. Mothers, fathers, wives, and children who were spared the sight of mutilated corpses by the public authorities were then able to read about every single particularity in the newspapers.²⁸ The realisation that writing publicly about the particular cases in fact stimulated new ones like an avalanche was not taken into account: sensationalism and macabre curiosity prevailed.²⁹ The readers were genuinely interested and intrigued about the act itself, the state of the corpses as well as the motives leading to the incidents, but the concerned writers warned that the reasons given in the newspapers were mostly hollow and empty. They often included unhappy love, fear of punishment, mental confusion, anger, quarrelling, etc., when in fact, with very few exceptions, all suicides stemmed from unsustainable material conditions.³⁰

From the archival materials examined, it is evident that the courts dealt with suicides in which the identity of the deceased could not be established and when it was necessary to determine when all attempts at identification had been exhausted, who should bear the burial costs, who should take possession of the body, and what to do with the personal effects of the deceased. The other side of this coin were the alleged suicide victims whose bodies were never found, most often because they had sought their death in the river Drava or while temporarily working abroad. For the family members, this meant years of uncertainty and anxiety because, in the absence of closure, the wound remained open, and mourning never really ended. Economic difficulties were equally painful: since there was no formal inheritance, they were not

25 ‘Velika tragedija onemogočenega življenja,’ *Mariborski večernik Jutra* 3, January 14, 1929, No. 11, 2. Smiljanić, ‘Konkurzi, samomor, žalosten je pogled na trgovsko polje,’ 58.

26 ‘Črna statistika Maribora,’ *Mariborski večernik Jutra* 2, January 7, 1928, No. 5, 1. ‘Številke, ki mnogo govore...,’ *Mariborski večernik Jutra* 1, August 20, 1927, No. 90, 3.

27 ‘Mariborski in dnevni drobiž. Statistika samomorov in smrtnih nesreč v Mariboru,’ *Mariborski večernik Jutra* 3, November 6, 1929, No. 253, 2.

28 ‘Velika tragedija onemogočenega življenja,’ *Mariborski večernik Jutra* 3, January 14, 1929, No. 11, 2.

29 Silkenat, *Moments of Despair*, 12. SI PAM 645, 3, 4029, Kzp XI 1185/35.

30 Ian Marsh, *Suicide. Foucault, History and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 45, 46. Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Stay. A History of Suicide and the Arguments Against It* (New Haven and London: Yale University press, 2013), 150.

free to dispose of their possessions or get on with their lives. In times of mass emigration and work abroad, many family fathers and husbands would suddenly disappear and not send a word from America, sometimes because they were dead or because they committed suicide. It took years before a person could be declared dead, and the families had to demonstrate that they had made repeated and unsuccessful attempts to contact and locate the missing persons through various acquaintances and prove, either through witnesses or written evidence, that the missing persons had repeatedly expressed feelings of despair and suicidal ideation before their disappearance. The procedure was not particularly kind to the surviving family members: without a corpse, death was not pronounced – even, for example, in the case of Franc W., for whom several accidental witnesses stated that he had deliberately jumped into the river Drava on 5 March 1933, that he had not tried to save himself, and that he had been dragged towards the middle of the stream. He was only declared dead as late as 1940.³¹ Few people left farewell letters, like Johann W., who wrote to his wife:

“Dear wife! Forgive my offence this time. I shall see you on the Day of Judgement, for I shall soon be among the dead. Find someone else for yourself and do not have much to do with your brother. I owe 10 to Novak in Maribor. You have no other debts after me. Do not grieve, and do not think of me anymore. May God’s eternal bless you in everything you do, and I wish you happiness and good health. Do not let anyone read this letter. With a last kiss goodbye.”³²

Without a corpse, even that was not enough.³³ Ivan M., who was considered missing since 1907, i.e. for 12 years, also wrote a letter to his wife in which he stated that he would seek death in the river Sava because of his unemployment and general despair.³⁴ The wife of the missing Albert K., who had been missing since 1927, did not initiate the procedure for declaring him dead or divorcing him until 1940 when she received reliable information that he had jumped under a train years earlier, but the court nevertheless appointed a matrimonial defender who would ultimately decide whether or not the wife was entitled to a divorce. The wife testified that her husband was unemployed, desperate, borrowing money, and mortgaging the joint assets. The authorities were not particularly involved in these cases: the wife obtained information from where the husband had last been seen on her own. Even when she finally presented the court with evidence – a photograph of the body of a suicide victim who had jumped in front of a train years before, kept in the archives of the morgue in Podsused near Zagreb – this did not automatically mean the end of the proceedings. The case was only closed when the missing man’s mother confirmed the identity of the deceased.³⁵ However, most people were unable to obtain such hard evidence. A decade after the disappearance of Mihael R., who had worked as a miner in America for 13 years and

31 ‘Velika tragedija onemogočenega življenja,’ *Mariborski večernik Jutra* 3, January 14, 1929, No. 11, 2.

32 SI PAM 645, 6, 109, T 7/16.

33 SI PAM 645, 6, 2500, Og 47/39.

34 SI PAM 645, 6, 109, T 7/16.

35 SI PAM 645, 6, 267, T 113/19.

then returned home injured, desperate, and without any savings and livelihood, a relative initiated the proceedings. His testimony that Mihael R. had repeatedly mentioned that he was going to take his own life because he could no longer work due to his disability was finally enough for the cause of death to be listed as suicide.³⁶ Mihael F., who had been missing since 1920, was not declared dead until 1937, which certainly made it impossible for his wife to make a new life for herself. Living in constant uncertainty also meant that the family lived as if the missing man could return at any time.³⁷

The procedure for declaring a person dead was occasionally also initiated by the children of the deceased. Barbara H. was missing for 28 years: two months after giving birth to an illegitimate daughter, she disappeared after her parents had forbidden her to marry the child's father. Since her grandparents were already deceased and she could not count on her father's help, Barbara's daughter initiated the procedure to inherit her mother's share of the property and collect enough assets to marry. The daughter was convinced that her mother committed "suicide out of despair caused by her parents."³⁸

"He Punished Himself"

According to the files, many of the suicide victims chose death to avoid the shame of their actions. It is possible to analyse which actions were condemned to such a degree that it was no longer possible for the person who committed them to live with the weight of their guilt once they were revealed. For the 19-year-old hospital attendant Aloysia M., it was the "drastic violation of hospital rules," which the sources do not disclose in detail, that led to her dismissal and removal from the hospital;³⁹ for the accounts clerk Zdravko T., it was the fact that he had been caught misappropriating and misusing municipal funds;⁴⁰ and for the 54-year-old Elizabeta M., it was the fact that she and her daughter had been sentenced to 48 hours in prison for an offence which the sources do not disclose directly.⁴¹ In most of these cases, the experience of shame was personal, and it seems that people punished themselves much more harshly than they would ever be by those around them. Only in the case of the retired police superintendent Franc T., suspected of "desecrating school children," was the suspect's suicide described as an understandable choice, although it cannot be said that he was pre-judged and stigmatised. The newspapers that followed the case stressed on every occasion that the truth of the girls' statements had not yet been proven, that "he had not infected any child (with a venereal disease, [AN]) because he was not sick at all," and he "had not corrupted any child either." It was also repeated time and again that

36 SI PAM 645, 6, 2509, Og 59/39.

37 SI PAM 645, 6, 2349, Og 44/35.

38 SI PAM 645, 6, 2384, Og 21/36.

39 SI PAM 645, 6, 1540.

40 SI PAM 635, 1, 1, 10416, 1594.

41 SI ZAC 98, 23, 2, 1338. Suicides because of guilt for fraud: 'Samomor zaradi defraudacije,' *Novice* 56, November 11, 1898, No. 45, 448. 'Župan-goljuf,' *Novice* 53, March 29, 1895, No. 13, 129.

the alleged perpetrator had been wounded in the head in the course of his duties, which had left him with permanent injuries, and that he could, therefore, definitely not be held responsible for his actions.⁴² The procedure, which forced the underage girls into a direct confrontation with the accused, was aimed both at addressing the man's actions to determine whether the schoolgirls might not also bear their share of the blame and determine the validity of the mitigating circumstances that could to some extent explain and justify his conduct. The family members who had endured the indignity of the investigation procedure, together with the accused, pointed out his suicidal tendencies and even his repeated suicide attempts. According to his daughter's explicit statement, she wished that the authorities would take action and admit him to an institution where he could have been supervised since, despite their best efforts, they had not been able to keep him under constant surveillance. The family pleaded with the local authorities to save him from himself by forcing him into a hospital or, at the very least, a prison where he would be supervised and could not commit suicide. They clearly failed. Franc T. one day disappeared: his body was found only a week later and was labelled a victim of insinuated accusation.⁴³

Contrary to these beliefs, suicides also occurred in institutions that could exercise complete control over individuals and the court also dealt with several problematic deaths of detainees and prisoners, whose deaths were problematic for various reasons. These people had been "entrusted" to the care of the state, which supposedly had the right and duty to exercise complete control over them. It was therefore crucial to establish where supervision had failed – whether some guard had been negligent in his work, and how, for example, a prisoner had gotten hold of the belt he had finally hanged himself with or how a prisoner could acquire the sharp object that he had cut himself with.⁴⁴ In a society where no one had the right to take their life, this applied even more strictly to prisoners: these deaths were a kind of escape, and by the prisoners' voluntary deaths, their victims were deprived of the satisfaction of knowing that they were being fairly punished. Rudolf M., who had been convicted of seven murders, committed suicide while awaiting trial, expecting to be sentenced to death by hanging. He wanted to avoid a public execution, as he did not want others to watch him dying and take pleasure in it. Therefore, he accepted the prospect of death but did not want it to become a public event. By choosing suicide, he took the satisfaction from his victims, and an investigation was launched into whether the guards could really not have prevented his action and whether it was possible to tighten the prison supervision, especially when prisoners in similar circumstances were involved.⁴⁵

Suicide was also common among prisoners who were not sentenced to death. Such was the case of Franc P., who was sentenced to twelve years in prison for felony

42 SI PAM 645, 3, 395, Vr VI 2116/20.

43 'Mariborski in dnevni drobiž. Izginil je,' *Mariborski večernik Jutra* 3, June 19, 1929, No. 137, 2. 'Samomor bivšega policijskega nadzornika,' *Jutro* 10, June 28, 1929, No. 149, 5. 'Prostovoljno v smrt,' *Mariborski večernik Jutra* 3, June 27, 1929, No. 144, 2.

44 SI PAM 645, 3, 1811, Vr IX 505/29.

45 SI PAM 645, 4, 1963, Preds 290/16/31; SI ZAC 609, 1, 27, 339.

robbery, during which he hit a victim three times with a “dung pick,” injuring his skull and fracturing several of his bones. Although he withdrew his initial confession that he had intended to murder the victim, he received several additional punishments, such as fasting, hard labour, and solitary confinement. His sad existence came to an end two years into his sentence: he left behind nothing but a hat, an old suit, trousers, an apron, and an empty wallet. The expenses for his funeral were covered by public funds, and no one attended his funeral.⁴⁶

In their statements, the guards would often describe the state of the prisoners in the days before their deaths. For example, the previously always nervous, restless, and sleepless prisoner, Josip H., had suddenly calmed down as if he had resigned himself to his fate. His decision to commit suicide was attributed more to his broken family relationships than to the length of his sentence and the prison conditions: the families often forgot about the prisoners, abandoned them, and did not assure them they could return to their families, even after the end of their sentence. Allegedly, many chose death because their marriages fell apart while they served their sentences.⁴⁷ During interrogations, guards were often invited to give their opinions on the causes of the suicides, and they used medical terminology for which they were definitely not competent. Without hesitation, the guards would state that a prisoner had committed suicide because of “mental confusion,” and those present did not question the accuracy of such unprofessional judgments.⁴⁸ The prison authorities expected a great deal from the guards, who were supposed to observe the prisoners very closely, note any changes in their behaviour or manner of expression, and talk to the inmates regularly. Prison doctors, however, considered certain prisoners to be more inclined to commit suicide than others. For example, the prisoner Johann L. was observed to have suicidal tendencies, which were said to stem from a skull deformity and alcoholism. Under suspicious circumstances, the guards were therefore entitled to physically restrain him, put him in a straitjacket, and then wait for the doctor who administered bromide, which finally calmed him down.⁴⁹ Suicidal tendencies and documented suicide attempts were grounds for refusing probation.⁵⁰

Female Suicide

Since the beginning of the suicide statistics, it was clear that, compared to men, fewer women resorted to suicide.⁵¹ Although the supposedly mentally and physically weaker women were considered more labile and prone to mental aberrations, they nevertheless proved to be more resistant to suicide than men. How was this possible?

⁴⁶ SI PAM 645, 4, 1963, Preds 290/16/31.

⁴⁷ SI PAM 682, 2, 5859.

⁴⁸ SI PAM 645, 4, 1964, Preds 151/16/32.

⁴⁹ SI ZAC 609, 1, 26, 365.

⁵⁰ SI PAM 645, 4, 1973.

⁵¹ SI PAM 645, 4, 1973, 16/18.

According to the sources, it was female ignobility rather than nobility that saved them from suicide: they lacked the necessary courage to commit such an act, and, furthermore, they were not exposed to such stress and were less likely to be dealing with financial problems as they were confined to their homes and families.⁵²

However, suicide rates also started to increase among women. This fact, seen as a symptom of troubled times, stirred a lot of attention.⁵³ For the purpose of the present analysis, I focused on thirteen cases of suicides or attempted suicides by women, which demonstrate certain specificities compared to male suicides that clearly stemmed from the position of women in society. The conclusion that any death was a suicide was often reached quickly, without an in-depth investigation, even though many female suicides were linked to violence against women and could have also been interpreted in other ways. The tolerance towards violence and indifference to it was also evident in the conduct of the public authorities. When one woman attempted suicide by lying down on the railway tracks after having suffered violence, her attempted suicide was attributed to a nervous breakdown already by the railway station workers and gendarmes present. The woman refused to give any statement about who attacked her and when, and the law enforcement authorities refrained from searching for the unknown perpetrators, as it was obvious that the attack had not been life-threatening and that no one had forced her to attempt suicide.⁵⁴

In the files, women were characterised as unstable, unreliable, superficial beings lacking any depth. Therefore, it was not always possible to deduce what went on in their heads. The explanations that satisfied the investigators are astonishing from today's point of view and show a distinctly condescending attitude towards women who apparently could have committed suicide simply because they burned and ruined lunch and then their husbands reprimanded and/or beat them up for it.⁵⁵ One such example of the typically condescending discourse about the nature of women and their inferiority compared to men can be seen in the testimony of probably the most educated and eminent actor among the archival materials analysed: Mirko Črnič, Maribor Hospital's chief physician, who found himself in court for allegedly publicly defaming and slandering the good name of the high-school classical languages professor Karel Kožuh. In a public letter, the chief physician Črnič accused the professor of brutality, vindictiveness, and ill-treatment of students, including his son who, out of despair at the news that he would be held back a year, apparently attempted suicide that his family luckily prevented. Črnič wrote the following about the cruel professor who did not know how to deal with sensitive adolescents:

52 Remec, 'Epidemija samomorov?', 15.

53 Silkenat, *Moments of Despair*, 31. Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, 125. Matteo Perissinotto, 'Perché le donne si uccidono? Analisi dei suicidi femminili a Trieste nel primo dopoguerra (1918–1922)', *DEP - Deportate, esuli, profughe* 19, No. 50/1 (2023): 1–26.

54 Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, 126. Howard Kushner I., 'Suicide, Gender, and the Fear of Modernity', in Weaver and Wright (eds.), *Histories of Suicide*, 27–29. Kevin Siena, 'Suicide as an Illness Strategy in the Long Eighteenth Century', in Weaver and Wright (eds.), *Histories of Suicide*, 53.

55 SI ZAC 1220/1/705.

"You are no educator. You have failed in your profession and would have killed my son with your actions towards him, as he had no choice but to attempt suicide after you had brought him to the brink of ruin. He would have died had we not saved him at the last moment at home. You do not know the mentality of adolescents, who have the same mentality as women of a certain age, and therefore, you should treat such a boy extremely carefully and proceed like a husband should treat his wife when she reaches a critical age. You have shown that you do not understand the mentality of boys during puberty, and you are killing them."⁵⁶

Unlike men who weighed and pondered the situation, women and teenagers made their decisions on the spur of the moment, recklessly and because of minor problems such as a rejection of an application for admission to their preferred school or a trivial dispute with friends or family members. Durkheim and Masaryk were convinced that less developed individuals, among whom they counted "savage peoples" as well as teenagers and women, were mostly incapable of a sufficiently complex reflection on their own existence for their suicides to count as a consequence of a serious and rational reflection. According to them, in the above quotation, the physician, with his highest authority, formulated a general statement on women as immature beings in need of special understanding and protection. Just like labile adolescents who were "too young and immature to be able to grasp the mysteries of human life with any degree of correctness and direction," women were also considered incapable of controlling their bodily and hormonal impulses.⁵⁷ In the case of Pavla V., found to have died of morphine poisoning, the investigators initially considered both possibilities: that she had been poisoned by her husband because she was "cold towards him" or that she had committed suicide. As her husband "looked desperate and cried a lot during the interrogation," the investigators and the physician did not think it was very likely that he had poisoned her. His explanation was that Pavla was ill and that she suffered constant unbearable and severe pains during her menstrual periods, which made her declare that she was going to take her own life before her next period. Menstruation was thus supposedly a time of diminished capacity, and it was not expected that it was even possible to find a tangible and rational reason for the suicide.⁵⁸

Who is to blame?

Suicides by women often involve the attempts to blame someone for the incident. An overwhelming need to find someone to blame and punish is present: someone who could have prevented the act but did not; someone who knew about the despair but

56 SI PAM 645, 30, 4601, Kzp X742/38.

57 SI PAM 645, 3, 4628, Kzp X 953/38.

58 Ibidem. 'Tri mlada življenja je ubila ljubezen,' *Glas naroda*, October 18, 1935, No. 244, 4. Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (London, New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005), 177. Tomáš G. Masaryk, *Suicide and the Meaning of Civilization* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), 20, 110, 116–21.

did nothing; or someone who even actively contributed to the outcome.⁵⁹ According to Article 169 of the Criminal Code of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, “deceiving and aiding and abetting suicide was a punishable offence,” but it was extremely difficult to prove. The relatives of the deceased often blamed the person who had saddened, abandoned, or insulted the deceased and tried to denounce, for example, an unfaithful fiancé who left his fiancée shortly before the wedding, after she had already prepared her wedding gown and linen and had even bought gold earrings to wear on the day. The accusations were often followed by disappointment, as such behaviour, though considered immoral, was not a crime under the Criminal Code, so the prosecutor’s office dismissed such complaints. Such a “corrupt” person would only be proven guilty if they physically forced or assisted their partners to commit suicide or if they, with clear and proven acts, “solicited” suicide by presenting to them the dangerous situation or difficult circumstances in which they had found themselves in, e.g. that they were in a frenzy, committed a severe crime, had a terminal illness, etc. Additionally, this was only applicable if such statements were false or at least unsubstantiated. The maximum penalty for the offence was ten years in prison, though the penalty for influencing a minor or a person of impaired judgment could be more severe.⁶⁰ This is not an insignificant fact regarding the cases analysed. All the investigations in which the investigators tried to identify the “perpetrators” or persons who had allegedly “caused” someone else’s suicide took place in connection with suicides committed by women. The latter was in accordance with the belief that men decided to end their lives after careful consideration, while women could be induced to commit suicide, especially if someone took advantage of a particularly fragile condition such as pregnancy, the post-natal period, or the menopause period. Most but not all of the “instigators” of suicides among women were men, but not always as it can be observed in the case of death of Frančiška M..⁶¹ Although there were some doubts as to whether it might not have been a homicide, the death of Frančiška M. led to a detailed investigation of the scene of the death, including sketches of the place where the body was found and a thorough questioning of the witnesses who testified that the deceased had been followed by two men shortly before her death. Suspicion was aroused in particular by “a man of large stature, aged 40–45 years, with a long moustache, an elongated dark face, wearing a black worn hat, a black cloth overcoat, brown trousers made from rough home-made canvas, black boots, with a blue apron” who “spoke in the Prlekija dialect.”⁶² However, it turned out that the latter had merely stolen the victim’s wristwatch from the hanging corpse when, in fact, the woman had been driven to her death by her wicked sister-in-law, who had humiliated and ill-treated her. At the time of her death, a neighbour testified:

59 SI PAM 645, 3. 397, Vr VIII 2162/20.

60 Merrick, ‘Death and Life in the Archives,’ 73, 74. SI PAM 645, 30, 4601, Kzp X 742/38.

61 Metod Dolenc, *Tolmač h kazenskemu zakoniku Kraljevine Jugoslavije* (Ljubljana: Tiskovna zadruga, 1929), 283, 284.

62 Prlekija is a region between the Drava and Mura rivers in northeastern Slovenia. It comprises the eastern part of the Slovenske gorice hills, stretching from the border with Austria to the border with Croatia. It is part of the traditional province of Lower Styria.

"I think that Francka M. [abbreviated by the author] told me everything about why she was going to end her life. She had been complaining to me for an entire year that her sister-in-law was so nasty to her that she could not stand it. As her neighbour, I have also seen and heard the sister-in-law treating Francka badly and always telling her how boring and ugly her fiancé was. Francka was supposed to get her dowry through her mother, but her money was kept at the courthouse, and her sister-in-law did not let her husband – Francka's brother – sign the documents that would allow Francka to withdraw her money. She also forbade her from speaking to her sister Anica, and the two sisters were not allowed to see each other again. Francka came to me to complain and cry, quite desperate, and I comforted her. Then she told me that in the case of her death, I should tell everyone everything about the reasons for her despair. She took care of her father, she always looked after him. However, her sister-in-law mistreated her and kept putting her down. She could get away with anything and did not let her brother give her a dowry. Francka had to eat leftovers. Indeed, she came by many times because she was hungry. She would keep saying: 'My sister-in-law is so nasty. She won't let me eat; she won't let my brother sign for my money'. Francka kept quiet about all this because she did not dare say anything. Whenever she said anything, her sister-in-law became enraged, threatening violence and cursing her to hell – I have heard and seen it myself. Francka told me that if she killed herself, she would not leave any letters about the family situation so that her sister-in-law would not curse her even after her death. That is why this unfortunate girl asked me to inform the court in secret what miserable life she had and that she never had enough to eat. I plead with you as an old woman who has never done anything wrong. I have always been honest and will continue to be so, even to my next-door neighbour, M. There must be a way to punish such a woman and prevent others from falling victim to such wicked sisters-in-law as the unfortunate Francka M. She visited us every day, crying about her sister-in-law being at her worst whenever Francka's brother was not home. She told me all this – that she and her father were treated as less than human – and it pains me. She would always complain about things like that. I would always comfort her and tell her to go to one of her sisters, but she said she did not dare go anywhere as, in that case, her sister-in-law would accuse her of slander. I tell you this: as a neighbour, I am afraid that this woman will eat us alive and she will cast a spell on me so that I will have no luck with cattle if she finds out that I talked to you, which is a great wickedness. I have known her for a year, I know what she is like, she came to threaten us before. It would break my heart if my children were ever as helpless as the M. girls, who no longer have their mother."⁶³

The girl who appears in this testimony seems truly worthy of sympathy, but such was the fate of many country girls at that time: she was uneducated, economically completely dependent on family members, and unable to make use of the money she had inherited without the consent of a male relative. Her calculating sister-in-law prevented the dowry from being paid because she wanted Francka's money to "stay home." If Francka did not get married, it would also mean that the farm could count on another free worker and, above all, on someone to care for Francka's elderly and infirm father, whom the daughter-in-law did not want to deal with. However, since

63 SI PAM 645, 3, 2967, Kzp X 333/32.

the girl – who had hoped to leave home soon and had already prepared everything for the wedding, even bought the wedding rings – was finally forced to call off the wedding, she declared that she was “going to show them.” In the investigator’s opinion, this meant that she was going to “disgrace them by committing suicide.”⁶⁴ Thus, it was evident that she had gone to her death knowingly and voluntarily and that the sister-in-law could not be held directly responsible for the girl’s death.⁶⁵ This case counts as a typical case of reverse aggression: Francka supposedly chose suicide to shame and punish those who had abused her and made her life difficult. Suicide was interpreted as a punishment for those who were left behind, not only because of the shame but also because of the condemnation expressed by their immediate surroundings. Public opinion did not need any evidentiary processes to determine who was guilty and who was to blame.⁶⁶

“Fallen women”

Female suicides have often been portrayed as the result of deviations from moral norms. Such was the case of the drowning of Marija F., who found herself in a love triangle between her husband, Jakob F., and her lover, Janez Ž., who was ultimately suspected of being responsible for her suicide. Witness statements reveal an extremely complicated family situation. The husband knew about the affair, which had been going on for almost nine years, and he and his son had beaten up Janez Ž. (and, according to the witnesses, probably also the deceased woman) several times because of it, but the husband nevertheless claimed that he and his wife had gotten on quite well at home. The husband testified that the deceased wife had repeatedly told him that Janez Ž. would be to blame for her death if she died. He wanted to bring an action under Article 169 to formally hold the lover responsible for Marija’s suicide. He claimed that Marija had become pregnant by her lover, for which he first provided her with money to “abort the foetus” (which she had already done once, four years before her death) and then threatened to report her to the authorities. As the deceased woman was buried without any investigation almost immediately after her body was found in the nearby pond, these allegations could not be verified. She was pushed to her death by the fear of the future, a bad conscience due to an illegal abortion, fear of the authorities, domestic violence, and rape, as her husband had alleged? Ultimately, it was not established whether Marija had actually been murdered, as the bruises on her body suggested. The public prosecutor concluded it was a suicide for reasons that were not understood, stressing that the gendarmes had done a very sloppy job and that such mistakes should not be repeated. However, no specific sanctions had been

64 Cf. the complaint of the mother of the deceased Ana S. who tried to file a report against the deceased’s fiancé Rudolf K., who was said to have induced Ana to commit suicide or that he could at least have prevented it, but he didn’t. The authorities already decided from the report that prosecution is not possible. – SI PAM 645, 3, 4400, Kzp X 516/37.

65 SI PAM 645, 3, 2967, Kzp X 333/32.

66 Hecht, *Stay*, 187.

imposed on them for this. After all, this was a morally fallen woman whose husband did not particularly object to the procedure, and since she was dead, there was no point in determining whether she might have been raped and beaten or whether she had indeed undergone an illegal abortion.⁶⁷

However, not all court proceedings were prevented by the victim's death. The proceedings against the teacher Jožef U., who was charged with "offences against public morals," continued even though his alleged victim, Mina M., had committed suicide. Jožef U. was accused of sexually abusing Mina M. on several occasions until she finally became pregnant. He did not want to take on the responsibility of fatherhood nor break off his engagement to Elsa P., who was much better suited for his coveted ascent up the social ladder than the illegitimate Mina, who had no dowry, family, or property. Jožef tried to persuade the local doctor to "abort the foetus." The doctor refused but was willing to prescribe Mina a harmless powder, which she thought would induce an abortion. In this way, she would remain calm and not cause any scandals shortly before the marriage of the ambitious teacher and his "posh city" fiancée. Once Mina found out she had been tricked, she drank large quantities of wine in several taverns the day before the wedding and then jumped into the river Drava, which was attributed to "the stigma of her own illegitimacy and her illegitimate pregnancy as well as the fear of illegitimate motherhood." The court did not try to determine whether and to what extent the teacher and the doctor were responsible for her suicide but whether he had actually raped her and had sufficient defensive scratches and wounds. In effect, Mina was put on a posthumous trial: the question was whether she had resisted actively enough and how she had behaved before and after the alleged rapes. The persons in whom Mina had confided – including the parish priest to whom she had told about the rape – were allowed to testify at the trial, even though their testimonies were in fact hearsay that would formally need to be excluded. The letters she had written shortly before her death were also taken into account. However, Jožef U. could not be convicted based on this evidence: there were no direct eyewitness who had actually seen the rape; her letters were written in a state of drunkenness and were therefore not completely reliable; the uneducated Mina used the word rape without knowing the true legal meaning of the word; the use of serious force was not proven; and, most importantly, if the defendant had lied to Mina, promised to marry her, and she believed it, the sexual acts could not count as rape. While the court agreed that Jožef U. deserved a "moral disqualification," "criminally, his guilt of rape could not be proved on sufficient grounds." Nevertheless, the court believed Mina because she had always had "the best reputation, particularly regarding sexual morality," was considered hard-working, honest, and modest, and did not believe Jožef's claims that she had not been a virgin at the time of the first sexual intercourse. They also believed her because she was considered to be exceedingly religious, swore to God in her letters, and because she had told everything to a priest. Nevertheless, they could not ignore the legal rules. Therefore, Mina M.'s relatives did not receive any satisfaction after her

67 SI PAM 645, 3, 5117.

death. However, it can be stated that at least her reputation was not tarnished. On the contrary, her decision to kill herself restored her reputation, as she was apparently so honourable and moral that she could not bear living with such a stain.⁶⁸

Women who did not conform to the patriarchal society were often disqualified even after death – even when they were clearly victims of violence. In the case of Julijan H., the former director of the Zagorje coal mine who shot his thirty-three years younger partner Elvira K., their baby daughter, and finally himself, the sources consistently labelled Elvira as a “concubine”. Allegedly, she had agreed to an affair with a man more than thirty years her senior whom she had not married but instead lived with him out of wedlock for pure convenience. Only the deceased, not the perpetrator, was subject to moral condemnation. Julian H., born in Czechoslovakia, who had held managerial posts in the coal mining industry during the German occupation, had fallen out of favour with the new authorities after 1945. He had been imprisoned for five weeks before being released, but a “phone call from Ljubljana” that would restore his former position had never come. The reports state that the family had fallen from prosperity and a “life of luxury” below the poverty line, that the elderly Julian H. felt humiliated by being forced to live with Elvira’s extended family, that he could not bear the wailing of his child, and that he was becoming increasingly jealous of the young Elvira by the day. Although her parents assured him he had no reason to be jealous because it was in fact himself who had cheated on her in the past, the investigators also pointed out the deceased woman’s tarnished reputation. The fact that she had gotten involved with an older man in the first place, apparently because she had initially hoped to benefit from him financially, was one of the reasons for the tragedy. The court pointed out that the procedure was flawed; that the investigators did not seize the weapon with which the crime was committed; nor did they sketch or photograph the crime scene. The investigation therefore relied entirely on the interpretation of the event as offered by Elvira’s relatives. However, everyone involved was dead, so the Judicial Commission of the Trbovlje County Court, in the presence of two members of the People’s Militia’s investigative branch, attributed the double murder and suicide to “unfortunate coincidence and family circumstances,” and the proceedings were concluded quickly. The authorities did not consider it necessary to perform an autopsy on the bodies. They made sure that the woman and child were laid to rest at home while the perpetrator was sent to the morgue of the parish cemetery in Zagorje.⁶⁹

“Bestial women”

Women trapped in the cycle of violence would often flee their violent husbands to save their lives and the lives of their children. However, they also regularly returned to

68 SIPAM 645, 3, 3815, Kzp VII 1328/34. Cf. the opposite case, where the murderer escaped punishment because his victim had a bad reputation, which was analyzed by Mateja Ratej in *Vojna po vojni*, 100–20.

69 SI ZAC 1220, 1, 07040.

the same environment despite the constant threats and brutalities to which they were subjected. They often denied the existence of violence before the authorities to hide their shame and salvage what little reputation the family had left.⁷⁰ The violence was so pervasive that often the only way out was through violence itself: most of the time, the women themselves ended decades-long patterns of abuse, as their surroundings were usually indifferent to what happened in the privacy of one's home.⁷¹ Children usually tried to get out of violent family relationships by leaving their homes, but there are also cases such as that of the 15-year-old Ervin F., who, as a result of his father's repeated violence against his mother and the constant threats that he would kill the wife and children one day, stole his father's gun and allegedly tried to shoot him and commit suicide.⁷²

In addition to women who used violence, often in self-defence, truly "bestial women"⁷³ existed who used extreme violence to achieve their ambitions or take revenge on their spouses or former lovers, thus adopting a masculine *modus operandi* – like, for example, the 23-year-old Zofija L., who was tried for the murder of her daughter and for injuring two other people. The defendant's father had squandered the estate by drinking and quarrelling. Like her siblings, Zofija had no choice but to work for other farmers from her earliest years until she finally found employment in the Sladki vrh paper factory. The court initially treated the case with utmost severity and firmness. Many circumstances spoke against Zofija: she was the mother of a four-year-old illegitimate daughter, whom she did not care for but instead gave her into foster care. She lived out of wedlock with Jožef C., with whom she had no other children, which was deemed suspicious. Moreover, she had a poor work ethic and apparently tried to profit from an injury to her hand sustained in the factory, while several witnesses testified to her strange and rebellious character. Zofija, who was obviously painfully jealous, attacked her lover, Jožef C., with a knife, inflicting serious intestinal injuries. However, he survived and was able to testify against her, causing raucous laughter and ridicule from the large audience when he described how afraid of Zofija he was and how he had fled when she had attacked her co-worker, Notburga P., whom Zofija suspected of being the reason why Jožef had called off the wedding Zofija had hoped and prepared for. The most aggravating circumstance was that she had picked up her daughter and lured her along by saying that she would buy her honey in Maribor until, allegedly, she finally threw the young girl into the river Mura or jumped into the river together with her. At this point, the trial also becomes interesting due to the role of suicide or attempted suicide in proving the mental state of the perpetrator. Much of the evidence revolved around the question of whether Zofija L. had truly intended to drown her child and herself; whether she only survived by chance because "the river deposited her on a stone"; or whether she had only intended to drown her illegitimate daughter, who represented an obstacle to the life she yearned for. While witnesses agreed that she had been sincerely sorry after the act and that the river current had been too strong

70 SI PAM 645, 15, 18

71 Ratej, *Rožengrunt*, 8.

72 SI PAM 645, 15, 18.

73 'Bestijalne ženske,' *Slovenski narod* 52, August 23, 1919, No. 196, 3.

for her to pull the young girl out even if she had changed her mind, they did not believe that Zofija had survived by a lucky chance. She must have intentionally saved herself, which cast doubt on the sincerity of her suicidal intent. Some did not even believe she had jumped into the river, as she could not swim and would have been swept away by the current. The newspapers fuelled these doubts, stating that, had she been seriously determined to die, she could have thrown herself into the waves again because no one would have prevented her. If she merely wanted to get rid of the child so that she would no longer have to worry about her, and if her suicide attempt was only an act, this would constitute a serious aggravating circumstance and a clear indication of intent, which could mean a death sentence for Zofija. Was she a desperate and poor woman or a calculating murderer, prepared to sacrifice her own child in the name of her passion for a man? In this case, the investigative process did not go according to the wishes of the judge and the prosecutor's office: once the river finally deposited the body of the little four-year-old Ernestina, the girl was buried without a medical examination at the place where the body was found. The local inhabitants did not consider it important to establish the identity of the deceased child. The authorities only found out about her through rumours and ordered the body to be exhumed. The villagers wanted to sort things out their own way without any interference. They did not think it was important to find out whether the child had died due to drowning or something else, nor did they know that it was possible and necessary to establish this.

Ultimately, the case was ruled an attempted suicide, which got Zofija a reduced sentence. However, although they had found mitigating circumstances in her family (her father's alcoholism and an aunt who had allegedly died in a psychiatric hospital), this would not have been enough for the court to recognise her diminished capacity. The medical forensic experts Dr Ivan Jurečko and Dr Ivan Zorjan, who were called to testify by the court, also testified to the psychological state of the defendant. They gave a psychiatric history of the family and described Zofija in words that meant nothing to her, her relatives, or her fellow citizens: the definition "mental and physical symptoms of a psychopathic neuropathic constitution" meant very little to people who merely distinguished between insane and not insane. The experts saw proof of her psychopathic nature in the fact that she "always kept to herself, was always quiet and strange," experienced alleged memory gaps, and was apparently obsessively jealous and unable to control her emotions. The court accepted the opinions of both experts that she had not acted after a conscious consideration and that she had committed all her acts in a state of "mental disintegration and fractured consciousness," which was evident from her suicide attempt. The fact that the court believed she wanted to die together with her child was the sole and only reason why it finally recognised her diminished capacity and held her not entirely responsible for her actions. She was only sentenced to a prison sentence of six years and three months.⁷⁴

74 SI PAM 645, 3, 4006, Kzp VI 1008/35. 'Svojo hčerko je vtopila,' *Enakopravnost* 18, December 19, 1935, No. 298, 3. 'Svojo hčerko je vtopila,' *Slovenec* 63, November 23, 1935, No. 270a, 3. 'Žrtev blazne matere,' *Slovenec* 63, September 4, 1935, No. 202a, 4.

Family and "love tragedies"

The newspapers showed a great deal of interest in "family tragedies", where, most often, the husband would murder the wife and children before killing himself. Apart from publishing photographs of the deceased and giving many details of how the murders were carried out, the social conditions that were supposed to have pushed the perpetrator over the edge were also described to the last detail. If a once well-to-do husband, landlord, or innkeeper found himself in such a bad financial situation that he was even threatened with eviction, which would mean that the family would end up in the street, this was already an understandable reason for despair. Apart from the poor economic situation, alcohol abuse, the humiliation of being maintained by the wife, and the husband's painful jealousy were often involved. Tragedies were inevitable and the wives had a lot to do with this: even with the best of intentions, if they worked to help the families economically, they were thus disrupting the patriarchal order and exposing the husbands' helplessness and incompetence, thus aggravating their humiliation.⁷⁵ The theologian Josip Jeraj's observation that "the peasant ethos cannot bear to be commanded by the wife" can, in fact, be extended to the working class in general.⁷⁶

Besides the cases where a man killed his entire family and then himself, the public was especially attracted by the murder-suicide cases which were described by the media, as well as the perpetrators themselves, as examples of "Styrian Romeos and Juliettes" who went to their deaths together in the name of unrequited love. The reality was far less romantic. Slavko F. addressed his farewell letter directly to the Maribor Police Department, stating the following:

"I am sorry to write you this farewell letter. I can tell you frankly that I have been a patriot throughout my life. I was a keen member of the Sokol Society. I loved the King and the Fatherland. Two months ago, I took over the bakery from Mr B. [abbreviated by the author] in Studenci, and from the very beginning, I was on very affectionate terms with his daughter, Anica. She loved me very much and was always there for me. But because of other people as well as himself, her father would have none of it. Today, on Sunday, Anica and I were supposed to go to a raffle. B. knew about it and didn't let her go. Even though he used to let her go to the city at night for the festivities, he has suddenly started prohibiting everything. Therefore, we have decided to go to our death together. As we were already intimate, we could not separate in any other way. Love is stronger than the grave. All the money you will find with me is my property. I ask that you spend it only for a decent funeral. We want to be buried together because we were not allowed to live together. The staff can confirm how much Anica loved me. She was at my house from 11 o'clock one night and we were in love, as all the witnesses in B.'s house can testify, but most of all my servants. A cold grave will be our last greeting."⁷⁷

⁷⁵ SI PAM 645, 3, 2616, Kzp IX 1228/31. 'Velika družinska tragedija v Hočah,' *Mariborski večerni Jutra* 5, April 24, 1931, No. 93, 1. 'Grozna družinska tragedija v Hočah,' *Tedenske slike* 7, April 30, 1931, No. 18, 1. See also Ratej, *Rožengrunt*, 6, 7. For more information about the link between suicide and economic crisis cf. Smiljanić, 'Konkurzi, samomor, žalosten je pogled na trgovsko polje,' 42–66. 'Samomor,' *Novice* 52, November 2, 1894, No. 44, 425. 'Samomor,' *Novice* 52, January 5, 1894, No. 1, 9.

⁷⁶ Josip Jeraj, *Naša vas: oris vede o vasi* (Ljubljana: Slovenska šolska matica, 1933), 72, 73. Ratej, *Rožengrunt*, 28, 29.

⁷⁷ SI PAM, 645, 3, 4256, Kzp X 1091/36.

However, it is clear from the statements and newspaper reports that the 19-year-old Ana B. disliked Slavko ever since he had acquired the gun. When he rented her father's bakery, he initially seemed the ideal groom. However, when her father inquired about him, he learned that Slavko had been violent towards his girlfriends. He had even tried to shoot a girl in Slovenske gorice, for which he had not been punished, and the father was therefore strongly opposed to any contact between the baker and his daughter Ana. They were even more afraid of him when they found out that he had procured a weapon. Ana did not take part in this suicide pact and wanted to save her own life at all costs. This was also clear from the fact that she fled from her alleged lover, first on her bicycle and then on foot. She sought help from the neighbours, but Slavko finally caught her and shot her twice before shooting himself.⁷⁸

A comparison of contemporary research on intimate partner homicide with the situation at the beginning of the 20th century reveals an entrenched pattern of behaviour and ways of dealing with these events. At the time in question, the press was more lenient towards such perpetrators than the others, describing these relationships romantically. These murders and suicides were supposedly "regrettable accidents" occurring between "young lovers", while the murdered girls were labelled as "sweethearts" who were too "close to men". The men were portrayed as victims of their own passion, as they "loved the girl desperately", "passionately and ardently". Men who went so far as to kill themselves were portrayed as tragic romantic figures, blinded by love, while men who only shot their partners but not themselves were seen as too cowardly to kill themselves in the end. Suicide was therefore the expected ending.⁷⁹

The mentality that emerges from the records is clear: the women had no right to change their minds or even think for themselves. From some of the court cases, it is clear that sometimes the women who the perpetrators proclaimed as their fiancées did not even know that they were "engaged". Often, only about a month would pass between the moment they met – the first moment of the "love at first sight", when the young man "fell desperately in love with the pretty young girl" – and the tragic conclusion. The 22-year-old Jožef Ž., who met the 19-year-old Johanna P. on St. Joseph's Day (19 March), was soon upset by all sorts of things, including the fact that the girl visited her parents and talked to other people. The "infatuated", "desperate", and "unhappy" Jožef killed his beloved Johanna with a hammer as soon as on 5 April.⁸⁰ Women were often subject to violence, threats, stalking, and even brutal physical attacks, especially

78 SI PAM 645, 3, 4256, Kzp X 1091/36. SI PAM 645, 3, 5082, Kzp XI 738/40.

79 E. g. Jasna Podreka, *Bila si tisto, kar je molčalo. Intimnopartnerski umori žensk v Sloveniji* (Ljubljana: Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete, 2017). Also Jonathan Richards and John Weaver, 'I may as well die as go to gallows': Murder-Suicide in Queensland, 1890–1940,' in Weaver and Wright (eds.), *Histories of Suicide*, 304–27. 'Nesrečna ljubezen,' *Novice* 52, March 9, 1894, No. 10, 97.

80 'Iz Slovenije. Ustrelil je ljubljenko in sebe,' *Glas naroda* 44, August 17, 1936, No. 192, 2. 'Iz Slovenije. Umor iz ljubosumnosti,' *Glas naroda* 44, August 17, 1936, No. 192, 2. 'Ustrelil ljubljenko in sebe. Ljubavna tragedija mladega pekovskega mojstra,' *Jutro* 17, August 5, 1936, No. 179, 5. 'Ljubavna žaloigra v Rajčevi ulici s smrtjo dveh mladih zaljubljenec,' *Mariborski večernik Jutra* 10, August 4, 1936, No. 76, 3. 'Obžalovanja vredni slučaji. Mladi pek ustrelil hčerko pekovskega mojstra in še sebe,' *Slovenski gospodar* 70, August 12, 1936, No. 33, 7. 'Vesti iz Jugoslavije. Ustrelil ljubljenko in sebe,' *Prosveta* 29, August 20, 1936, No. 165, 3. 'Ustrelil dekle in sebe. Umor in samomor,' *Slovenec*, August 5, 1936, 64, No. 177, 7. 'Krvava ljubavna tragedija v Mariboru,' *Slovenski narod*, August 4, 1936, 69, No. 176, 1.

when they tried breaking off their relationships. If both partners were dead, the investigation was brief and served only to rule out the possibility that a third party had been involved. However, if the perpetrator survived and, as it turned out in some cases, the man had lost his courage when it had been time to kill himself – or, as we can read, “his hand shook when he swung the hammer, and he swung it with much less force and fewer times against himself than he did against the unmarried lover” – the authorities decided to carry out an autopsy. The latter was necessary to determine the extent of the injuries and ascertain whether the case in question was a murder or a brutal murder. If it was concluded that the man attacked “blindly, with great force and numerous and violent blows” or that he had injured or killed other people not involved in the relationship, the court saw this as an aggravating circumstance in determining the sentence, contrary to his “broken heart” and the woman’s possible infidelity, which were mitigating circumstances.⁸¹

Newspapers reported these cases with headlines such as “A love tragedy in the middle of the street,” which initially received considerable attention. However, after the outbreak of World War II, these often became little more than minor news hidden away in the back pages of the newspapers, among the news that “offal, dried meat, raw bacon, lard, grease, and tallow may be sold on meatless days” and that “a course in women’s dressmaking has started.” However, some details can be gleaned from the reports and accounts of the events: for example, when Frančiška R., wounded by three gunshots, ran down a city street asking for help, everyone just stared at her dumbly until a guard finally helped her and called an ambulance. The report also listed the reasons why the 20-year-old Oton C. had “decided to put an end to his unbearable jealous torment.” The reports show that the girl did not take the relationship, which lasted just over a month, as seriously as the “unfortunate” Oton, who very soon became so jealous that the girl became afraid of him. On the eve of the tragedy, they reportedly attended a party together. From there, Oton escorted her home. However, light-hearted as she was, the girl left the house again and returned to the party, where she danced with others. According to the newspaper discourse, Frančiška, considered a “diligent and hard worker,” could have prevented the tragedy had she been just a little more thoughtful.⁸²

The double suicide of two teenagers, Srečko K., 17, and Karel M., 16, who were both in love with the same girl, the 16-year-old Marija P., stirred up a lot of noise as well: unable to decide who would get the girl, the two boys resolved that she should not belong to anyone. As the newspapers stated, a decision was reached: “If she’s not going to be mine, she’s not going to be yours either, so none of us should live!,” and therefore, the two boys shot the girl and then jumped under a train together. In this case, the newspapers highlighted a certain hereditary tendency in at least one of the two boys, as his older brother had already attempted suicide because of unhappy love.

81 ‘Maribor. Ljubavna tragedija v Rušah,’ *Slovenec*, April 6, 1941, 69, No. 80a, 7.

82 The perpetrator committed suicide only after he realized that he made a fatal mistake when, in addition to the alleged lover, he mistakenly shot another, innocent woman instead of his increasingly “cold concubine”. – SI PAM 645, 3, 1205, Vr X 361/25. SI PAM 645, 3, 5267, Kzp IX 422/21. ‘Novičar. Žrtve ljubosumnosti,’ *Novi domoljub*, April 1, 1925, No. 13, 95–96. ‘Ljubezenska drama v Framu,’ *Naša straža* 1, March 27, 1925, No. 16, 3.

The “death wish” was therefore somewhat familial, though this event also represented an example of sinister negative tendencies that were believed not to be present among country youth. However, the once diligent and God-fearing rural youth turned out to be just as “sensitive and highly susceptible to mental shocks” as their urban peers. The more lenient writers argued as follows:

“In light of this sad case, we cannot speak of the moral corruption of our children, though we can say that today’s youth is easily aroused mentally and erotically without being aware of the consequences of their limited experience with the matters of mind and heart. They are too weak and perhaps too ill-instructed to know how to restrain the emotions which are so liable to upset the maturing youth and push it into despair and ruin.”⁸³

Meanwhile, the more critical writers stated that all this was the result of an ungodly upbringing, a lack of Christian role models, as well as licentiousness and widespread moral deviations and delusions. Thus, the case can be interpreted from the viewpoint of the new emerging public discourse about sensitive adolescents. At first, this seemed reserved for the bourgeoisie that “had time” to be sensitive, while the working-class proletariat, preoccupied with the struggle for survival, grew up prematurely. However, the above discourse was now also extended to rural and working-class youth, who suddenly became delicate, sensitive, and labile as well.⁸⁴ What is interesting is also the position and role of the girl in this love triangle, which was no different from that of women in the other cases. The hardworking, responsible, and mature girl, as she was described in the newspapers, was once again relegated to being just a passive subject, a figure in the game of two boys who had barely finished school when they already assumed it was their right to make decisions for her, without paying any attention to her opinions or wishes.⁸⁵

Countryside “Quarrels and Brawling”

Much research conducted in recent decades has shown that suicide statistics for the first half of the 20th century are highly unreliable due to the clear tendency to cover up suicide cases. The number of suicides is believed to have been higher, as many of them were disguised as accidents.⁸⁶ The court materials also include opposite examples: cases where it is unclear whether the incident was a suicide or murder. The medical experts noticed that many murders were being camouflaged as suicides

83 ‘Maribor. Poročilo „Ljubzenska tragedija na cesti”, *Delavska politika* 15, July 4, 1940, No. 75, 3. ‘Žaloigra v Tomšičevem drevoredu,’ *Slovenec*, 68, July 1, 1940, No. 148, 7. ‘Strelji v izdelovalnici papirnih vreč,’ *Slovenski narod* 73, July 2, 1940, No. 148, 3.

84 ‘Tri mlada življenja ubila ljubezen,’ *Jutro* 16, October 3, 1935, No. 229, 3. ‘Tri mlada življenja je ubila ljubezen,’ *Glas naroda* 43, October 18, 1935, No. 244, 4. Cf. Ratej, *Rožengrunt*, 17, 27, 28.

85 Cf. Ratej, *Rožengrunt*, 17–21. ‘Ljubezen ubija otroke,’ *Mariborski večernik Jutra* 9, October 3, 1935, No. 244, 4. ‘Štiri žrtve ljubosumnosti,’ *Mariborski večernik Jutra* 9, October 2, 1935, No. 233, 3. ‘Obžalovanja vredni slučaji. Mladina brez Boga in krščanskih vzorov,’ *Slovenski gospodar* 69, October 9, 1935, No. 41, 6.

86 SI PAM 645, 3, 4029, Kzp XI 1185/35. ‘Tri mlada življenja je ubila ljubezen,’ *Glas naroda* 43, October 18, 1935, No. 244, 4. ‘Strašno dejanje dveh mladoletnikov,’ *Slovenec* 63, October 3, 1935, No. 227, 5.

and were determined to ensure that especially the bodies of those who had allegedly hanged themselves were always subject to forensic examination. The medical experts argued that it was possible to determine with relative certainty whether these were really suicides or “faked suicides by hanging”, as the perpetrators, ignorant of human anatomy and forensic science, were convinced that they could conceal their crime this way. Sometimes, the real perpetrators behind fake suicides were clumsy and clueless, so already a cursory inspection of the scene of death revealed that it was a murder rather than suicide.⁸⁷ However, many investigations were impossible because those present often “took care” of the deceased themselves. They did not wait for the coroner, and the village women would wash the deceased and change their clothes so that the coroner often found the deceased already “nice and neat and ready to be interred.” Such was the case of the abovementioned Marija F., who was found in a nearby pond. The people present judged it to be a suicide, and the gendarmes allowed the corpse to be taken home without a doctor present. While changing the woman’s clothes, the village women noticed unusual bruises on her back, indicating that she had been a victim of violence before her death and that she had therefore not ended up in the lake voluntarily. However, they did not want to get involved. The husband of the deceased even pointed out these bruises to the officers, but they believed that the injuries had been caused by dragging the deceased out of the water with poles and sticks. The doctor was not informed.⁸⁸

In the case of Franc H., the deceased had also been washed, dressed, and ready for burial by the time the police patrol entered the house. The police officers spoke to the relatives, who allegedly forgot to report the suicide to the authorities and only looked at the deceased from a safe distance. When they noticed suspicious blood coming from his ear, they did not ask for a medical opinion or conduct a closer examination of the corpse themselves – the body was not lifted, undressed, or turned over. The burial was allowed without a medical examiner’s opinion. Unaware that relatives were not allowed to interfere with the crime scene, the suicide victims were often moved. As in some other cases, the relatives of Franc H. stated that his body had been taken down from the rope because they tried to resuscitate him, which was an acceptable explanation for the police officers. In their report, the two police officers present stated their opinion that the deceased had committed suicide in a state of mental confusion and that he had given up on life because of a serious illness. The opinion of the two officers without any medical training was deemed valid.⁸⁹

Post-mortem examinations were to be carried out by the local doctors, but in reality, they were not always present when the bodies were examined. Physicians Ivo and Bojan Pirc, one the leader of the newly formed Hygiene Institute in Ljubljana, the other the first Slovenian (Yugoslav) and expert in medical and vital statistics, pointed out that in 56 % of the cases in the Drava Banate, the cause of death was not determined by an “expert

87 Cf. Remec, ‘Epidemija samomorov?’, 11–23.

88 SI PAM 645 3, 337, Vr VIII 1297/19.

89 SI PAM 645, 3, 5117.

doctor". Their role was often taken over by other "qualified" individuals who were not always able to determine whether the incident was a suicide or a crime and who gave unclear causes of death, overlooking various causes and diagnoses.⁹⁰ These "competent, impeccable, and trustworthy non-experts," who were supposed to carry out the examinations of the dead in the absence of medical experts in accordance with pre-war legislation, often prioritised the interests of the family. The coffin lid was often only briefly open, and the body was only glanced over superficially because, obviously, the deceased had brought "shame" on the family by committing suicide.⁹¹ Thus, the best thing to do was to bury the deceased as soon as possible and put an end to a painful ordeal for all the family members, who often had no idea how to behave in the event of a suicide. Some of them (e.g. the relatives of those who had committed suicide in prison or otherwise dishonoured the family) did not even take possession of the body, while others wondered whether they were entitled to public mourning at all and whether a traditional funeral with a procession was even appropriate. Although priests did not refuse to perform such burials, the relatives often buried their loved ones in other cemeteries (e.g. in Maribor) rather than in their smaller local graveyards. Other comparable studies have shown a similar phenomenon: burials were carried out in cemeteries, and the deceased received ordinary headstones like everyone else, but apparently, such burials were less solemn and without any singing – as if everyone was a bit embarrassed.⁹²

Gradually, new actors entered the world of rooted traditions and neighbourly relations: police investigators, prosecutors, and medical experts, whose authority disrupted the established order and confronted the entrenched customs and beliefs. An excellent case study of such a collision between the two worlds and ways of thinking was the death of 81-year-old Ana L. In that case, a plethora of issues emerged: in addition to the phenomenon of suicide in a close-knit village community, the issues involving the deaths of men on the World War I front lines, domestic violence, and the attitudes towards the elderly and their place in society can be observed. In addition, the alleged suicide of Ana L. must also be considered in the context of the pre-history of the case that becomes apparent from both the archival sources and newspaper reports that clearly found the circumstances entertaining. Indeed, the story of the 81-year-old grandmother who burned down her grandson's outbuilding and was sentenced to six months in prison, five years suspended imprisonment, a fine, and compensation for the enormous damage (amounting to 21,700 dinars) was anything but common, and it transcended the borders of her homeland.⁹³ In the newspapers, we find the following description:

90 SI ZAC 1220, 1, 7034.

91 *Deželni zakonik za vojvodino Kranjsko*, 53, No. 25, December 12, 28, 1901, 103–31. Bojan Pirc and Ivo Pirc, *Življenjska bilanca Slovenije v letih 1921–1935*, 6. Peter Borisov and Anton Dolenc, 'Razvoj sodnomedicinskega izvedenstva v Evropi in na nekdanjem Kranjskem,' in *Zbornik za zgodovino naravoslovja in tehnike 11* (Ljubljana: Slovenska matica, 1991), 72–75. Anton Dolenc, 'Mrliško pregledna služba na Slovenskem nekoč in danes,' in *Mrliškopregledna služba v Republiki Sloveniji. Spominsko srečanje akademika Janeza Milčinskega* (8, 1998) (Ljubljana: Inštitut za sodno medicino, 1999), 13, 14. Cf. Remec, 'Epidemija samomorov?,' 19. Bailey, 'This Rash act,' 23.

92 SI PAM 645, 3, 3203, Kzp VII 1521/32.

93 Cf. SI ZAC 65, 1, 24/18. SI ZAC 65, 2, 14, 20. SI ZAC 1220, 1, 0740. SI PAM 645, 4, 1963, Preds 290/16/31. SI PAM 645, 3, 5114. Silkenat, *Moments of Despair*, 13. Smiljanič, "Konkurzi, samomor, žalosten je pogled na trgovsko polje," 52, 53.

"The criminal annals of our countryside do not seem to have recorded a similar case as the one that was recounted today in the small chamber of the Maribor District Court. It was a story of a quarrel between the old and the young – between the ancestors who had secured the property with toil and grit and the young generation that had received this property only to then push the old generation into a corner. While these stories are commonplace in our countryside, the conclusion of the case that is the subject of today's hearing is far from typical."⁹⁴

Ana L. was certainly not a mild-tempered, helpless old woman. She and her daughter-in-law Rozalija had apparently been fighting for dominance over an estate measuring almost ten hectares from the moment when the son and husband had disappeared at the front during World War I. Over the years, the dispute had escalated to physical confrontation, mainly because of the demands of the subsistence and alimony holder Ana L. (a certain amount of grain, milk from one of the five cows in the stables, etc.), which threatened her daughter-in-law economically.⁹⁵ The newspapers stated that the grandson and the grandmother would have found a common language, but the actual "snakes" were the daughter-in-law Rozalija and the grandson's wife Etelka, for whom Ana obviously represented an obstacle. When Ana L. was found hanged, she had apparently been dead in her room for at least two days without her daughter-in-law even noticing. The reason for the suicide given by those present was the family situation and, above all, the impending confiscation of her property, which was intended to cover at least part of the damage she had caused to her grandson with arson. The neighbours took her off the rope, while the local doctor, Dr Rituper, signed the burial permit without performing a thorough examination of the body. The story would have ended there had it not been for the intervention of the nearest neighbour, Karol B., who was willing to expose himself by making a statement to the authorities that he doubted Ana had committed suicide. Karol claimed that instead of being desperate, Ana had been rather optimistic and convinced she could save the estate, declare her son dead, and inherit some of his property. There was also the possibility of challenging the subsistence and alimony contract if Ana L. could prove that her daughter-in-law Rozalija and her grandson had not adhered to the provisions of the contract. He also drew the investigators' attention to the fact that the daughter-in-law Rozalija L. and her son-in-law Janez Ž. – the very same person whose outbuilding Ana L. had burnt down – had insured Ana's life for the sum of 10,000 dinars without her knowledge or consent. Based on Karol's statement, an investigation was launched that involved the exhumation of the body, which was perceived as an interference with the final resting place of the deceased. The delay made more detailed analyses and forensic procedures, which were state-of-the-art at the time, very difficult. The crime scene could no longer be analysed; the rope had apparently disappeared; and the witnesses could not even recall whether or not Ana had been locked in the room when she was found, what had

94 'Vesti iz Jugoslavije,' *Glasilo K. S. K. jednote* 18, February 22, 1932, No. 8, 1. '80-letna starka – požigalka,' *Slovenski gospodar* 66, January 27, 1932, No. 5, 3. '80-letna starka zažge vnuku hišo,' *Slovenec* 60, January 20, 1932, No. 15, 4.

95 Remec, 'Vojak naj bo!,' 5–24. Ratej, *Vojna po vojni*, 2016. '80-letna starka zažge vnuku hišo,' *Slovenec* 60, January 20, 1932, No. 15, 4.

been on the table, or how the furniture had been arranged. Moreover, the furniture had been sold shortly after her death, and although the village teacher had marked the places where the furniture had been placed with chalk just in case, the crime scene could not be reconstructed. The autopsy, which was also carried out by Dr Rituper, who did not raise any suspicions at the time of death, revealed that the woman had almost certainly been strangled first and hanged only after her death. The accused immediately raised doubts about the doctor's competence, while the doctor excused himself on the grounds that he had carried out the first examination "under poor lighting conditions," which meant that he had not been able to see "everything at the time that he later found out as an expert." Therefore, the court asked for an additional expert opinion from Dr Ivan Zorjan. The latter tried to defend the initial investigator Rituper in court by stating that it was sometimes only possible to distinguish between suicide and strangulation "after microscopic examination and autopsy in a forensic medical institute, not when an autopsy was carried out in a country mortuary with the most primitive means." He was also certain that the bruising on the victim's neck did not correspond to a death by hanging. As the investigators noted that the deceased had sustained blunt-force injuries to her head and bruising to her thigh, this suggested that she had been subject to violence. Dr Zorjan also testified that, given the measured room ceiling height, the 81-year-old woman could not have hanged herself. Of the original five suspects, two were eventually tried: the daughter-in-law Rozalija and grandson Mihael. Rozalija's son-in-law Janez Ž. had an alibi. He also stated that he had indeed insured Ana's life but that he was not the only one, as several individuals in the village had speculated on her death and that he had insured at least two other elderly people apart from her. Both of the accused were eventually acquitted, as the court ruled that the investigation had been interfered with too much from the outset and that the results of the autopsy after exhumation were also unreliable and questionable.⁹⁶

Many cases thus remained unsolved, just like the case of the deceased Maria K., who was found drowned at the Fala dam near Maribor. Even though the deceased had drowned, even a superficial glance revealed injuries to her head caused by a sharp object "shortly before drowning," apparently inflicted by a "third party with hostile intent." Witnesses who had seen the victim before her death reported that she had been poorly dressed and desperate and that she had threatened to throw herself into the river because her husband "despised her." However, they had not intervened because they had not believed her. The husband, Valentin K., denied ever being violent towards his wife, which was confirmed by their daughter, who described her mother as "feeble-minded" (a characterisation which was then uncritically reproduced in the newspapers). The daughter denied the possibility that the perpetrator might have been her father. Even when a careful examination of the body revealed a wound under the armpit and some bruising obviously caused by someone pressing on her with considerable force, this was not sufficient evidence to prosecute the husband. It could not be

96 SI PAM 645 3, 3203, Kzp VII 1521/32. 'Tašča in vnuk obsojena umora,' *Murska krajina* 2, September 3, 1933, No. 36, 2.

concluded that the injuries had been inflicted during the suspected murder, as they might have been caused during an earlier family altercation.⁹⁷

There are also cases of men as victims. The sudden death of Ivan S., who lived with his mother-in-law Ana K. and his underage daughter Irena S., was a matter of some confusion from the outset. The man known for “losing his temper when there was no wine in the house” and whose wife knew that “he wants to commit shameless deeds with the daughter and the old mother” died suddenly for no apparent reason. Four days prior to his death, he had been examined by a doctor, who had found Ivan to be an alcoholic but otherwise in good health. Death from natural causes was therefore unlikely. He was nevertheless buried, and only at the insistence of his father and sister-in-law was the body subsequently exhumed and sent for an autopsy. The man’s intestines were sent for analysis to the Institute of Physiology of the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Ljubljana, as were some powders given to the deceased by his mother-in-law shortly before his death. The report from the Institute was that the powders had been tested “on a frog” but that they “had not produced any specific changes.” On the other hand, the analysis of the intestines showed “beyond any doubt that the deceased had died of arsenic poisoning.” Ivan’s mother-in-law and his wife most emphatically denied poisoning him, and his mother-in-law firmly maintained that he had committed suicide, which he had supposedly attempted on several other occasions. Nobody else knew anything about his suicidal tendencies. The question was therefore raised as to where and when the deceased was supposed to have obtained the arsenic. It is clear from the court case that not only the women but also the deceased and his character were all put on trial. As he was a lazy alcoholic with a known history of drug abuse (allegedly cocaine), Ivan did not receive much sympathy, and the court accepted the idea that he was more than capable of obtaining arsenic illegally because he knew the right sort of people. The mother-in-law testified that she had defended herself and her granddaughter against the risk of rape in every possible way on more than one occasion, as he had wanted to have sex with her in a sober as well as drunken state. She admitted threatening to “whack him with a stick until he had enough” but claimed that she had not really meant it. However, she firmly denied poisoning him and did not even know the substance with which he had been poisoned. In the absence of direct evidence against the women, they were eventually acquitted.⁹⁸

Conclusion

Michel Foucault argued that “by studying the past, we can better understand the problems of the present” and that only in this way can “we break with the past and separate it from the present” and break with the patterns of thought and action that have

97 SI PAM 645, 30, 4601, Kzp X742/38. ‘Maribor. Naplavljen truplo identificirano,’ *Slovenec* 66, July 8, 1938, No. 154, 7. ‘Iz Jugoslavije. Naplavljen truplo,’ *Amerikanski Slovenec* 47, July 29, 1938, No. 146, 1.

98 SI PAM 645, 3, 3632, Kzp VII 186/34.

brought us to where we are today. One of the research topics to which his thoughts apply best is suicide research: a multifaceted phenomenon with different connotations in different societies, reflecting the values, fears, and social conditions of a particular place and time. In recent years, it has become clear that this topic should be studied in an interdisciplinary manner since only a methodologically combined approach can capture all its nuances. If suicidology, sociology, and other sciences can offer insights into the dimension of the problem of suicide today, historiography can reveal how the beliefs we hold today have been formed: how we have gotten to where we are and what lies beyond the way we think and act today. Or, as Foucault put it, it is through the past that the present is diagnosed.⁹⁹

By analysing the relevant court cases, the case study focusing on the eastern part of today's Slovenian territories, which were notorious for their considerable suicide rates, shows that at the micro level, the attitude towards suicide was mostly tolerant and benevolent. It is true that suicide was seen as a disgrace and sometimes still a shame, but that there was less and less prejudice towards those who resorted to it. The practice of refusing burials was no longer present, not even by priests.¹⁰⁰ However, the society described in those court files is far from idyllic. The violence against women, domestic violence, alcoholism, extreme poverty, and the surprising indifference of the immediate surroundings that mostly ignored the repeated "cries for help" before people eventually took the final step are as obvious as the fact that suicide was increasingly accepted and, in some cases, even seen and felt as the expected step. Studying the phenomenon of suicide does not only reveal the changing social and gender relations but also the clash between the old traditional society, which could be quite secretive as people preferred to settle scores among themselves and did not want the authorities to interfere with their *modus operandi*, and the authorities, who wanted to implement a monopoly on punishment, maintain clear and transparent statistics, and control, analyse, and re-educate the population. Suicides of everyday people with all their tragedies and personal sorrows serve as a precious resource for a broader socio-historical analysis of the shifts in values, mentality, behaviour, and the dominant public discourse in Slovenia during the period under consideration.

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⁹⁹ Clare O'Farrell, *Michel Foucault* (London: Sage, 2005), 61, 71, 72. Marsh, *Suicide*, 46–51 and 76, 77. Michel Foucault, "Truth, Power, Self: An Interview with Michel Foucault," in Martin L.H., Gutman H. and Hutton P. (eds.), *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

¹⁰⁰ Silkenat, *Moments of Despair*, 11.

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Meta Remec

NEME PRIČE: MIKROZGODOVINSKI POGLED NA SAMOMOR V SODNIH SPISIH PRVE POLOVICE 20. STOLETJA

POVZETEK

Članek na podlagi arhivskega gradiva Okrožnega sodišča v Celju, Okrožnega sodišča v Mariboru in posameznih primerov z Okrajnega sodišča v Trbovljah, ki so imela pristojnost na območjih z najvišjo stopnjo samomorilnosti v okviru Dravske banovine, ter časopisja obravnava primere samomora v prvi polovici 20. stoletja na mikroravni. Obravnavano arhivsko gradivo zajema samomore v mestnem in ruralnem okolju, zaznamovanem s slabimi socialnimi in ekonomskimi razmerami, slabo pismenostjo pa tudi še vedno zelo razširjenimi poskusi prikrivanja samomorov – iz sočutja do družinskih članov pokojnika kot tudi zakoreninjenih navad in prepričanj. S pomočjo analize posameznih primerov avtorica prikaže odnos do samomora, sramoto in stigmo, ki so jo družinski člani še vedno čutili ob samomoru sorodnika, prisotnost in postopno prevlado psihološkega in psihiatričnega diskurza v zvezi z določanjem vzrokov za samomor kot tudi ravnanje vsakokratnih nosilcev oblasti, ki so bili prisotni ob najdbah trupel. Primeri so razvrščeni v več kategorij na podlagi skupnih značilnosti, kot je skupen oziroma soroden povod za samomor, spol ali druge sorodne življenjske okoliščine pokojnika, analiziran pa je tudi diskurz, ki je spremljal vsakega od teh primerov. Članek tako obravnava primere samomorov, pri katerih ni bilo mogoče določiti identitete pokojnega in se je bilo treba odločiti, kdaj so poskusi identifikacije izčrpani, kdo bo kril stroške pokopa, kdo bo prevzel truplo in kaj storiti z osebnimi predmeti pokojnika. Analiza zajema tudi primere domnevnih samomorov, pri katerih trupel pokojnikov niso našli, kar je sorodnikom prinašalo dolgoletne

čustvene in ekonomske stiske. Številčno kategorijo analiziranih primerov predstavljajo samomori, ki so bili domnevno storjeni zato, ker se je pokojnik želel izogniti kazni zaradi zagrešenih kaznivih dejanj: med temi je največ tistih, ki so samomor storili v zaporu ali priporu, nekateri pa zaradi strahu in/ali sramote že med preiskovalnim postopkom. Članek posebno pozornost namenja samomorom žensk in diskurzu, ki je spremljal te smrti, v primerjavi z diskurzom, ki je spremljal samomore moških. Iz analiziranega gradiva je očitno, da so pokojne ženske označevali bodisi kot impulzivne, labilne in čustvene sužnje hormonov ali kot moralno propadle ženske. Ženske se v obravnavanem gradivu pojavljajo tudi kot žrtve intimnega partnerskega nasilja v primerih umora-samomora, v katerih je moški storilec po umoru storil samomor. Tako v sodnih spisih kot v medijskem diskurzu je pogosto mogoče opaziti sočutno obravnavanje teh moških storilcev, ki naj bi dejanja storili v afektu in zaradi razočaranja v ljubezni, obenem pa je mogoče opazovati tudi moralno seciranje ženskih žrtev in ugotavljanje, ali bi se dogodku lahko izognile. Analiza vsebuje tudi primere poskusov iskanja krivca, ki je pokojnika spravil v obup do te mere, da si je sam vzel življenje, kot tudi primere, kjer so storilci umor poskušali prikriti s samomorom. Iz zadnjih je mogoče razbrati, kako je na terenu potekala preiskava teh primerov, katere nove forenzične postopke so uporabljali in kako so se na prihod zunanjih strokovnjakov odzivala tradicionalna okolja, kjer so se še vedno zanašali na dano častno besedo in so ob nejasnih primerih smrti pogosto zamižali na obe očesi.