Aleš Šteger

Slovenia: A Close Encounter with Everything

For Maja and Taras,
and all the things we have discovered
as we've wandered

and for Luka (from the translator)

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PART ONE: GENERALITIES ABOUT THE PARTICULAR

Introduction: The Small, the Big, and the Little

You love mountains? You'd like to head for the high hills? Don't go to Slovenia. Go to Switzerland, where they have mountains to spare, even higher ones than here. You want to go to the sea? Slovenia is not the right place for you. Go to Greece or Croatia, where there's plenty of sea; they even have islands along with their many sandy, sandy beaches. It's religion you're into? Go to Austria, or to Bavaria: there you'll hear *dear God* in every other sentence; or visit the Vatican, but, please, don't go to Slovenia. Are you into metropolises, long shopping streets and boulevards? Do you love everything that is urban and would like to go… wherever it's busy and bustling? In that case, Slovenia is bound to disappoint you. We don't even have a proper skyscraper here. And people? Sorry to say, in Slovenia, crowds are rarer than saffron. There aren't enough people in Slovenia for anyone who likes crowds, for anyone who likes nothing better than to squish their way through the multitudes in Tokyo's Ginza, New York's Fifth Avenue or London's New Oxford Street. Slovenia? you might be asking, Is that even a country?

Isn't it a bit brazen to call a speck the size of Los Angeles a country, a speck that has never produced popes, kings, billionaires, that doesn't even have a Shakespeare history play set here, that has never even instigated a big, fat war? You're absolutely right. Those who love the big, wide world – those who are fascinated by numbers, by long stretches of shops, by really, really tall buildings, by dizzying statistics and by endless reams of steel and concrete, by the inaccessible and the unattainable – should explore this country, at best, from a café at a highway rest stop as you dart through.

Because sooner or later it will happen. You will have to cross this little speck in the middle of Europe. It's unavoidable. Slovenia, after all, is a country that one overlooks but can't quite completely avoid. Because it lies at a European junction, or, as the Slovenians like to say, *we are the nation in the best location*. To be fair, this virtually invisible country has relinquished a smidgen of its invisibility in recent decades. It's still a country that ranks right up top when you Google 'safe country to visit,' 'problem-free travel with kids' or low rates of something frightening, say, rates of mugging, theft, kidnapping, or violence – and that's without any clever advertising ploys by the Slovenian tourist board. That's just how things are here, and hopefully they will remain so for some time yet.

The truth is more like this: nowhere else can you find so much Europe in such a tiny space. All you have to do is turn your head and look *carefully, slowly enough*. The perspective required to understand this country is more that of the Bonsai-trimmer, the stamp- or butterfly-collector, of the poet who deals in the shortest of lines. The small detail stands for a magnitude that is, for the most part, not physically present but dreamed of. For many people, that's not enough. They

traverse Slovenia in twelve, thirty-six hours at most, and believe that they've experienced and explored it all. No, the speck that is *the nation in the best location* is not all that small. But if you want to take up a more metaphorical manner of reading, one that says that travelling through a country is not just about what you've seen but also about what you've missed and what you've dreamed of, then Slovenia is, without a doubt, not the right place. It's a matter of conditioning. You can still see the snow-covered Alps, but suddenly you're at the seaside already. You drive through Tuscany-like, idyllic, hilly vineyards, and twenty minutes later you're ensconced in the monotonous horizon of the Pannonian plains.

Slovenia's dynamic intensity arises from the fact that it contains stark contrasts within the smallest of spaces, and this bewilders anyone who is used to vast expanses back home and therefore assumes they must travel great distances to come across something that looks new. Slovenia is a country conceived for those who know how to appreciate, how to discern, small differences and for those who know how to see not only a meagre beginning but that which is hidden in the details: a land that only patience and attentiveness renders comprehensible.

Slovenia is a country of small but, for Slovenians, vital opposites; it is accumulation of microcosms, more like a honeycomb than an anthill. It can indeed be a land of honey if you take the time to enjoy its sweetness and to let time flow as befits times – as befits time, not us, since we always want more, always want too much.

What Slovenians Think They Are and What They Want to Be: Language and Identity

They will never forgive George W. Bush for, in a 1999 state visit, right in front of the rolling cameras and right next to the Slovenian head of state, mixing up Slovenia and Slovakia. They will also never forgive Sarkozy, Berlusconi and the many others who have imitated or emulated Bush. It doesn't matter that only Slovenians remember these international incidents. It may be true that the two almost-neighbouring countries have names that sound similar to ears unattuned to Slavic languages and have similar flags with similar crests. The two south-Slavic-language-speaking countries are similar also in other aspects: both can play a pretty good game of hockey, beer is not unpopular in either land… but that's where the parallels end. It's a stumbling block that has tripped up many a traveller, which means that you can earn or lose kudos by not mixing things up. When you're young – and Slovenia is a very young country – you want to be taken seriously. In a few centuries' time our descendants will smile smugly at those visiting statesmen who cut geography class

way back when, but for the meantime Slovenians remain keen on self-assertion and on being recognised by others.

Thirty years have passed since the state was founded, so the country is no longer in diapers, although sometimes it does secretly stick a pacifier in its mouth. It doesn't often scream because it's too much of an introverted creature. It prefers to swallow its frustrations and has even found forms and ways of playing with frustration to kill time. Actually, in Slovenia you are a free citizen in a land of borders. Imagine yourself sitting, in a patriotic mood, at a round wooden table under the historic linden, the national tree of the Slovenians, in the geographical centre of the country known as 'Geos.' You finish your coffee, get into your car, and drive in any direction. If you don't have an accident and there's no traffic jam and if the borders haven't been closed because of a pandemic – that is, if everything proceeds with a certain amount of normalcy – after two hours of driving you will almost certainly be somewhere where nobody speaks your language, where nobody knows the name of your president, whether June 25 is a national holiday or not, and how to swear in your native idiom. You can walk or you can take your bike or you can crawl or you can roll; the country is not going to be any bigger than its 20,000 or so square kilometres. Slovenians – many of them proud indeed of the fact that never in their history have they attacked their neighbours, started or waged a war of conquest, that they have survived in a world stitched together by the sins of colonialism only by resisting and fighting back, by trusting their own tenacity, canniness and sheer will – had to devise another means of expanding the country. They expanded internally, into language, into micro-identities, and into the various forms of behaviour that have developed over the

centuries in all of the remote and forlorn tiny valleys and hills of Slovenia.

Linguistically, the Slovenian language is a feast. The circa 2 million speakers converse in so many dialects that Slovenian is said to be the most dialect-rich of all the Slavic languages. Every hamlet has its own way of speaking, and the Slovenian language is divided into eight dialect groups and over thirty main dialects; and if a film is made in an eastern Prekmurje dialect, it is taken for granted that the rest of the country needs subtitles for it. On the other hand, Slovenian – which was first written in the ninth century, that is, well ahead of, for example, Russian – has retained linguistic curiosities that most other languages have shed in the interest of simplicity. First and foremost, the dual, which is a particular grammatical form reserved for twosomes. For that reason, you could easily deem Slovenian a language of love or at least of intimacy, a language whose very grammar caresses its love of two-ness – if it weren't for the fact that you usually need a third person to overhear you using the dual, and three's already a crowd in matters of the heart. So let's leave aside the venerating of the Slovenian dual and the fact that is a rarity among Indo-European languages. After all, Arabic also has a dual, many Pacific languages have, in addition to the dual, further grammatical number forms, and Chinese does just fine without any plurals at all.

But it should be noted that in tougher times, when it was unclear whether Slovenian and the Slovenians would survive, it was the Slovenian language that people took refuge in – be it in prayer or in folk songs, be it as a sign of revolt, be it as a way of declaring one's support for this or that cause. If you juxtapose the situations of the stateless Sorbs and the stateless Slovenians at the end of the seventeenth century, compare their populations, the territory they inhabited,

their literacy and cultural life, you can see many parallels. But not today. Cultures die out, and today Slovenians are raised from the cradle with the idea that they survived as a cultural entity thanks to their language. This belief has led to the development of many special Slovenian features, such as a Romantic cult of poetry, Partisan groups named after poets during the Second World War, laws intended to protect Slovenian in public, especially in schools and universities, and a day off on February 8, the National Culture Holiday, which marks the anniversary of the death of Prešeren, the national poet, and points to what is surely the highest concentration of poets (alas, readers of poetry are fewer and farther between) in Europe. …and just to remind ourselves: the Serbs are a minority Slavic-speaking group in eastern Germany.

As far as Slavic languages go, Slovenian is particularly mellow and melodic, imbued with a breath of Dante's Italian and the angularity of German. (You will, however, hear young people comfortably switch to English and back to Slovenian within a sentence or phrase.) For a long time it was the language with the fewest speakers for whom Microsoft produced its software. The tearing-down of bilingual place-name signs in 1972 in Austrian Carinthia, the smearing of Slovenian signs in ethnically mixed areas on the other side of the border and, finally, the re-emergence forty years later of scuffles over such signs illustrate how language use and regulation have remained crucial instruments in European politics that creep into our daily lives.

For Slovenians, language is like a second skin, and unless you're a snake, it's hard to shed that skin. Language also stands for the border. And for that reason let's conclude this hymn to the not-so-everyday, which some readers may find hyperbolic, by looking at a Slovenian word. Not *hvala* (thank you), which is useful for tourists, and not *živijo* (zhiviyo),

which is neatly deployable as an informal greeting or when you're clinking glasses. No, let's take a look at the Slovenian word for border, *meja*. *Meja* contains an etymological echo of in the middle, and English 'middle' is a distance relative of this word. My eyes were opened a few years ago when I heard a farmer from Vipava say he was going 'into the border.' *How do you go into the border*?, I asked. Into the border, '*v mejo*,' he repeated and pointed to the woods. That border, those woods over there, where the populated area ends, designate an imprecise territory where another, greener and airier, world begins, and this makes everyday life, which is infused with the Slovenian mentality of borders, much more bearable and relaxed.

The Slovenian Man and Woman

The Slovenian – if such a being exists at all – is at best an imposter. Slovenians are usually diligent, especially when it comes to legally outfoxing the system, the law, and the boss. We work and work, and like to boast about how much we work – and part of this working consists of complaining about working. The Slovenian drinks without ever admitting that it's harmful. He likes to have get-togethers and to celebrate in hopes of getting into heated altercations. This is a favourite pastime, especially in the family realm – and there's nothing greater and more important for a Slovenian than the family, even if they will never admit this fact as openly as an Italian or Greek will.

When Slovenians swear, it's mostly in Serbian or English. They hardly know any Slovenian swear words, at least not any that are worth their salt, and this has allowed to internalise a double moral standard that lets them be simultaneously subservient and superior. They feel superior to the Balkans and those to the east, though this feeling is born of prejudice

rather than reality. And they also soon fall silent when the West speaks. Or they docilely repeat what they just heard said. The primary aim is to keep everything in, not to reveal anything bad about oneself to the world, to appear resplendent yet vapid, without justification or effect. This results in a certain stiffness and uptightness when dealing with outsiders. They suffer from the need to always pretend to be better, even though they don't actually know the wherefore or the why of this urge. They possess the urge to be something better and greater than they are – an impossible task that often leaves them standing helpless and forlorn by the side of the road. They are a born strangers in their own land.

That's why they love to travel as often as they can. Abroad, the Slovenian becomes a cheerful being, a globetrotter, inquisitive, innovative and clever. Wherever you travel in the world, you will meet at least one Slovenian (though rarely more than two). I have heard Slovenian being spoken at Machu Picchu, in the fields near Sapporo and in Tunesia. Tourism statistics also support this: on average, Slovenians travel more often and further than other Central Europeans. Slovenians travel because they are on the run. And it is precisely this being-on-the-run that makes existence in their own country not only bearable but here and there often pleasurable. When the cage door opens, they prefer to stay voluntarily locked up at home; they truly recognise the beauty that surrounds them and learn to appreciate it.

We Slovenians are less fond of diminutive forms than our Slavic brothers and sisters are. Russian- and Polish-style linguistic trivialising of brutal reality has never crept into Slovenian. Yet we are forever emphasising our smallness, even when that smallness is clear as day and doesn't require em-

phasising. If you listen in to the tourist guides on the streets of Ljubljana, every second word is small, smaller, smallest. It's as if they want to nip things in the bud – to say, okay, this is no heavyweight nation with an eight-figure population, but please, show a little respect and don't make the whole affair more embarrassing than it already is. So be like us and lay off the diminutives; no additional mini-origami and no linguistic minification. We are too proud for diminutives and we strive to do things the way they are done in genuinely big nations.

At the same time, the outline for the soul that the Slovenian carries within itself does not appear to be as logically flat as that of his southern neighbours, or as baroquely ornate as those to the north.

The Portuguese have their saudade, and in Brazil there's even a public holiday in honour of this emotional state. Ever since the Romantic era, the Germans have known and highly praised the sense of *Sehnsucht* (longing), though it took a Swiss doctor to come up with the term nostalgia. Each of these words describes a particular state of the soul, each is a specific form of melancholy, of incompleteness, of insatiability.

It is similar with the Slovenians, who have expanded the inner space of their souls immeasurably through a feeling known as *hrepenenje*. For those who feel *hrepenenje*, hovering before their eyes is something concrete that is difficult or even impossible to attain, but that concrete something is wrapped in an even more enigmatic lacking. To understand this term, it is best to read the Slovenian prose master Ivan Cankar, whose work is teeming with *hrepenenje*, a feeling of

the unattainable. Interpreters and critics have long debated whether *hrepenenje* in Ivan Cankar's novels, plays and sketches indicates more a physical desire, or an emotional state of secretly seeking God, or even a feeling aimed at social liberation. The fact that one cannot pin it down is already the first successful step towards understanding Slovenians' *hrepenenje*, that is, towards understanding that one cannot understand everything. You can't understand it completely, either, because Slovenians, as cunning and dogged as they may be, do not understand themselves. At least not completely. The whole is never spread out before their eyes, and something always remains veiled in their souls, a feeling of their own inadequacy in the world and in the cosmos, drawing them back to his cocoon of *hrepenenje*.

When they escape their cage of *hrepenenje*, Slovenians see a world that doesn't necessarily notice them. Their attempts to change this state of affairs are often clumsy because they do not flaunt what they areand what they can do; they put their own feelings of inadequacy on display.

Take the hayrack. Traditional hayracks that are crafted from wood and furnished with a roof for drying hay are not limited to Slovenia, but nowhere else do they dot the landscape as strikingly as they do in the northwestern part of this country. Slovenians love their hayracks and feel right at home when looking out the car window and seeing the Alps through horizontal hayrack slats. It looks as if those slats were lines meant for writing music on, as if the landscape itself were trying say that Slovenia is nothing less than a symphony. In the early 1990s, as Slovenia was emerging out of Yugoslavia as an independent state and attempts were being made to increase the country's international visibility,

a few our hayracks were sent abroad. As a result, one of them was erected not far from the British Houses of Parliament in Victoria Tower Gardens. Slovenians dressed in traditional garb handed out *potica,* all against the acoustic backdrop of Slovenian folk music – and caused bewilderment among the inhabitants of Westminster and the passing tourists. Today, the structure that was supposed to put the newly-founded country of Slovenia on the world map can be found in the botanical gardens in Cambridge, where it's right at home among the greenery.

We Slovenians are still grappling with our own invisibility. Coming up with the right motto or slogan is supposed to rectify this. The once politically courageous tag-line 'Slovenia, my country,' which was also used as Yugoslavia was disintegrating, was replaced a few years ago by the very popular 'On the sunny side of the Alps,' which was in turn followed by the globalising slogan 'I feel sLOVEnia.' There's a desire to signal love (but not too much) and how one feels about that love. *Hrepenenje* has no place in such slogans. It's too airy, too passive, too sophisticated for billboards and the tourism industry.

Slovenians have always been extraordinary characters, blown to all corners of the world by the bora wind. Take the last century. Slovenians are mostly known as appendages or hangers-on by the side of popular and less popular historical figures. And I don't mean just Melania Trump alongside Donald or the Yugoslavian chief ideologist Edvard Kardelj alongside Tito (whose mother was Slovenian). Slovenians have always been designers, artists, athletes, inventers and builders, people who yoked their imagination and ambition to hard work. A few examples: the architect Viktor

Sulčič, who built 'La Bombonera,' the Buenos Aires stadium where the Boca Juniors play; the architect Jože Plečnik, who renovated the castle complex in Prague for Tomáš Masaryk, the first president of Czechoslovakia; the painter Zoran Mušič, whose works were exhibited at Paris's Grand Palais; the composer Hugo Wolf from Slovenj Gradec; the philosopher Slavoj Žižek, who is said to have typed out his many books and commentaries with just his two index fingers; the painter Jurij Šubic, whose work adorns the mansion of the great archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann; Peter Zobeč, who filmed *Winnetou*; the neo-avant-garde artist Dragan Živadinov, who gave the world its first theatre under zero gravity conditions; the poet Tomaž Šalamun, probably the most translated European poet in the USA in recent decades; the photographer Stojan Kerbler, who danced with Arthur Miller's third wife, photographer Inge Morath; Laibach, the first Western rock band to play in North Korea; the pianist Dubravka Tomšič Srebotnjak, whose playing attracted Arthur Rubinstein; the basketball genius Luka Dončić shooting for the Dallas Mavericks; Tina Maze, a skier-turned-poet; the inventor Peter Florjančič, whose 400 patents include the photographic slide frame, the airbag and the perfume atomiser; UEFA President Aleksander Čeferin, who at least for the time being has prevailed in the dispute with Agnelli over the future of European football; Martin Kušej, a Slovenian from Austria who was director of the Bavarian State Theatre in Munich for eight years and since 2019 has been the director of Vienna's Burgtheater; Tomaž Pandur, who created offbeat performances at the Teatro Español – and the list goes on.

At the same time, Slovenians who have done well abroad are often not really considered part of the Slovenian fold,

and are reluctantly accepted. Slovenians safeguard their territory, even from Slovenians living abroad; they safeguard their own hierarchies, their own preferences. You may do great things, but back home it means little. This safeguarding creates a very peculiar dynamic between the Slovenians abroad and those who stayed. In other countries, emigration is an important stimulus to the nation, but in Slovenia such is not the case.

Mobility: On the Slovenian Sense of Time and How to Travel the Country and Stay Forever

Nobody would expect tiny Slovenia to stretch over more than a single time zone. And yet, even though the whole country falls under Central European Time, in reality it doesn't quite feel as if the whole country is operating on the same clock. You're always a half-day behind the great, progressive Western Europe. The clocks tick the same, strike eleven at the same time as they do in Berlin, Rome or Paris, but you still feel a little behind them, since only after you have watched the evening news or scrolled through your newsfeeds in the evening will you find out what really transpired that day.

Many think that they are, if not timewise, then at least geographically at the centre of Europe; at the same time, however, they feel like they're at an outpost, somewhere on the outer borders of Europe, and can hardly imagine how far outside Europe the Baltics, the Portuguese or even the Greeks must feel. At best, you are enclosed in the first circle around the 'core' of Europe, though it is uncertain whether

this is an allusion to Dante's Hell or to his Heaven. Slovenia has felt like a peripheral land at least since the Turkish invasions in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Slovenia was boondocks existence. It was in the Habsburg empire but lightyears from Vienna, especially until the Vienna-Trieste southern railway link was built in the mid-nineteenth century. Later, it felt like a no man's land in the time of Tito's 'non-aligned states,' which stood between West and East in the Cold War and often played the role of mediator or double agent. More recently, it felt like a pre-European country because it was part of the so-called Balkan refugee route and only a few of the more than one million migrants who travelled north via Slovenia applied for asylum in the country. Not because they didn't like it here, but rather because most refugees simply didn't have Slovenia on their radar. They all wanted to go on to the real Europe: to Germany, France, or England.

But as soon as you spend more than the thirty-six or so hours that the average visitor spent in Slovenia in 2019, as soon as you go beyond Instagram-friendly Ljubljana, Piran, and Bled and instead immerse yourself in everyday Slovenian life, you realise that time passes differently depending where you are in the country. Slovenia always has a distinct nature, a distinctive texture and the most distinct of flavours, all within the smallest of distances. You can feel, smell and savour this distinctiveness, all the more so when it comes to a standstill. And there are many places in Slovenia where time stands still; often all it takes is one wrong turn, a detour, or an unplanned stop. Slovenia was made for slowing down. It is best travelled on foot or by bicycle. The highways have shrunk the country, turned it into a transit area and greatly increased the jumpiness of those traversing the summer traffic jams.

We, however, want to go the other way round, carless – literally, on foot. I did that once, in the summer months of July and August 2007, when I walked around the country, along the outer borders. It was one of the most beautiful journeys of my life, and since then I've always wondered why I haven't done it again. Thirty-four unforgettable days during which I strolled along often unmarked paths on the 1400-kilometre circle around the state territory in which my language is spoken, those edges and no-man's-land, where languages and dialects, experiences and history intermingle. After this experience, the Berlin director Peter Zach made the documentary film *Beyond Boundaries*, a homage to an open and tolerant Europe.

It was also a time without time, a time without borders. Nowadays, it would hardly be possible to stroll along borders like that. Border controls have re-emerged due to migrant hysteria, and border fences have been erected in the centre of Europe. On the southern border between Croatia and Slovenia, where there was no national border for thousands of years and the inhabitants moved freely back and forth along both banks of the border Krka and Kolpa rivers, the Slovenian government erected barbed wire fences imported from Hungary and produced in Germany. And then came COVID and the pandemic, which I had hoped would be relegated to the annals of medical history by the time this book saw print. But, dear reader, I fear for the erstwhile borderlessness that makes being European worthwhile.

Come to think of it, Slovenians aren't always great walkers. In truth, they are a car-obsessed nation. Every second Slovenian has one or more cars (and this statistic includes babies, the blind and those without a driver's licence), and

the number of vehicles does not really do much for the environment. Slovenians not only want to have their car close at hand. They also want to be able to park on their own doorstep, which is becoming increasingly difficult, especially in urban areas. The Ljubljana city architect Janez Koželj, whose great achievement was making Ljubljana's historic city centre car-free, has told me painful anecdotes about the difficult process of persuading owners of property and cars to park their vehicles in multi-storey parking garages rather than on Ljubljana's Three Bridges or directly in front of the town hall. The anger of car owners twenty years ago, when the process of freeing the historic city centre from cars began, was so acute that the city hall hired bodyguards whenever the city architect and the mayor had to come face-to-face with the car-loving city centre residents.

The Slovenian's fanatical love of vehicles cannot be explained by a pure fascination with engineering and technology or by a desire to show off to or one-up their neighbours. It is simply the fact that many people live in remote parts of the country starved of useful public transportation. Slovenians love tinkering, assembling and disassembling technical things almost as much as the Czechs, who, along with the Japanese and Germans, are at the top of the world rankings when it comes to obsession with technology. The country also earns much of its bread from the car industry. The main industry in the city of Maribor –TAM, which produced buses and lorries – may have collapsed when Yugoslavia collapsed, but there is still a Renault plant in Novo Mesto, which builds Clios for the whole of Europe; Cimos in Koper; Novo Mesto's Adriamobil, which produces trailers and motorhomes, and Maribor's TAM Europe, which produces airport buses. Above all, however, Slovenia produces

car parts, screws, filters, turbines and light fittings. Akrapovič manufactures the best exhaust systems in the world, other plants produce leather seats and plastic parts, and so on and so forth. About a tenth of the gross domestic product is generated in the automotive industry, which is twice as much as the tourism sector produces. It may not seem that way to the newcomer, but Slovenia is a manufacturing export country.

I remember going into a specialist tool shop in London years ago to buy a pair of pliers and asking the salesman not to sell me junk but something that would serve me for a long time. He disappeared into the back, then returned triumphantly with a pair of Unior long nose pliers made in Slovenia and said they were the best of the best. I bought three pairs and gave them all away as Christmas presents. This decision would have done Johan Puh, or Janez Puh, or Johann Puch as he is spelt in German, proud. The seventh child of a Slovenian family of small farmers, Puh/Puch was the inventor of the 'safety low wheel,' which was the predecessor of the modern bicycle, and he later produced Puch motorbikes and cars in his own factory.

Fortunately, there are more and more car-sharing options in Slovenia, and everyday life is going properly electric, as it is elsewhere, although it will probably be a lifetime before Slovenians give up fossil fuels altogether and switch to electric or the railway. As far as rail travel is concerned, it is unfortunately true that the bulk of the railway system was created by the Habsburgs, and little has changed since the First World War. A hundred years ago, it took just as long to get from Ljubljana to Koper by train as it does today. The trend went in the wrong direction for a whole century, numerous railway lines were shut down, and it was only after highways had been built

through almost the whole of Slovenia and the people began to have enough of Slovenia's over-saturated main thoroughfares that political fancy swung back to thoughts of railways. The network is being modernised, new passenger trains have been purchased and some abandoned sections have been put back into operation, such as the one from Grosuplje near Ljubljana to Kočevje in 2019, which had not been used for fifty years.

My friend Egbert Pietsch from Leipzig, who travels Europe with hundred-year-old Baedekers in his luggage, always by train, and who experienced a great homage in the novel *Winterberg's Last Journey* by the Czech author Jaroslav Rudiš, also travelled the Slovenian rails and is a fan of the slowness of the Slovenian railways – how exceptional!

In his novel *Repetition*, Austrian Nobel Prize winner Peter Handke describes the journey to the 'Ninth Land,' as he often called the former Yugoslavia. Setting out to search for traces of his brother, the protagonist passes, like a smuggler, through the railway tunnel under the Karawanken and emerges in Jesenice, an industrial town on the Slovenian side of the border. It was on these rails that heavy artillery was shipped to the Eastern Front near Isonzo during the First World War, and it was on these rails that the dead and maimed were shipped back home. These rails were also indispensable for the Nazis when they were transporting people to camps during the Second World War, and later it was just as indispensable for the reconstruction of a devastated Europe. Now it is once again the train that is supposed to unite Europe and make it more environmentally friendly. Switzerland is teeming with train connections that shorten a tricky serpentine journey over mountain peaks. In Slovenia, there is only one short-tunnelled train route of this kind,

which makes it all the more special. You drive from Bled towards Bohinj and load your car onto the train there. Fifteen minutes later, you emerge from the tunnel under the mountain and arrive in one of Slovenia's most magical areas.

Another special route is that of the former narrow-gauge railway Parenzana, which runs from Trieste through present-day Slovenia to Istria in the direction of Croatia's Poreč. Until 1935, it trundled along at a maximum speed of twenty-five kilometres per hour. The tracks were removed before the Second World War and allegedly sent to Abyssinia by the Italian government. The former railway line is now a wonderful 125-kilometre hiking and cycling route that takes you through three countries. And in the coastal town of Izola, there is a small and lesser-known museum dedicated to the Parenzana and its history, which is well worth a visit for the atmosphere alone.

And so we have reached a more fitting speed, one that allows the soul to keep up with the body. Slowly turning the pedals, rambling and strolling around. Slovenia is made for such travel. Not only because of the many cycle paths that have been added in recent decades, but also because of how the settlements are configured. No deserts, few mountain crossings that are difficult to crest, zero possibility of getting lost, because in any case detours are what you want when you're cycling, and they increase your local knowledge. Every ten or twenty kilometres there is a village or town, there are local inns everywhere, and even if you haven't booked anything, you'll somehow find a place to stay.

Tadej Pogačar and Primož Roglič finished one-two in the 2020 Tour de France, each has won the Giro d'Italia, and in 2024 Pogačar became only the third rider in history to take the "Triple Crown" by winning the Giro, the Tour, and

the World Championships, while Rogljič added a fourth Vuelta a España to his résumé. These feats are emblematic of Slovenians' cycling enthusiasm – and that's without calling attention to gravel master and Giro, Vuelta, and Tour stage winner Matej Mohorič. But it's not just roadies who are burning off calories and stress. In the forests and mountains, you see more and more mountain bikers hurtling past and taking air among the treetops, for the most part surviving. If you take a more relaxed approach, travelling by bike – or, as mentioned, preferably on foot – confirms the astonishing fact that time passes very differently even in a small country.

If you ride the Murska Sobota-Hodoš railway line, which was built twenty years ago, in the east of the country, in Prekmurje, or take the train from Pragersko towards Ormož and on to Lendava via Čakovec in Croatia, you truly sense that time is stirring there at one of the lonely little railway stations, but not moving. Sweat-soaked, you enter a Pannonian inn, down a fruit brandy – which is known as *palinka* in Prekmurje, just as it is in Hungary – or a beer and listen to the local radio station playing in the background. The old radio plays music by probably the best-known musician from Prekmurje, Vlado Kreslin, a poet with a black guitar, whose music and lyrics always make the Pannonian melos stir the heart. He sings about a train that winds its way into the wide, foreign world. It's not a train in the Pannonian Plain, it's a train full of job-seekers on their way out, heading for Venice, never to be seen again – a story from between the wars. How good we have it, I find myself thinking. The world may be foundering, but I can drink my *palinka*, observe the innkeeper washing the glasses, and listen to time crackle on as it passes while always remaining the same. This is mysticism sans religion that befits even novices.