

## **"IT HITS YOUR NERVES AND ALL KINDS OF HELL BREAK LOOSE". PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS OF THE ERASED OF SLOVENIA**

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*The Erased residents of Slovenia comprise a group of 25,671 individuals, who found themselves without political, economic and social rights soon after Slovenia became independent. The present article discusses a number of aspects of economic and social exclusion of the Erased, as well as the impact of the mentioned exclusion on their bodies and state of mind. Amongst others, the incidence of živci ("upset nerves") and živčnost ("nervousness") as the embodied metaphor of socio-political and economic inequality brought about by the erasure is analyzed through a medical anthropological perspective.*

**Key words:** *Erased, consequences of erasure, health care, mental health, medical anthropology, Slovenia*

After Slovenia's declaration of independence in 1991, the newly formed Slovenian authorities not only set up a new nation state apparatus, but also redefined the nation's civic body. For the large majority of the population, who held the citizenship of the former Yugoslav Socialist Republic of Slovenia, there was no change in status and they automatically received the citizenship of the newly established nation. However for the rest who were citizens of any of the former republics of the former Yugoslavia, a time-frame of six months was set for the submission of citizenship applications.<sup>1</sup> The status of individuals who failed to do so, or of those whose applications were rejected, changed abruptly – equalizing them with non-documented migrants. On the 26<sup>th</sup> of February 1992,

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<sup>1</sup> Approximately 171,000 persons did acquire Slovenian citizenship within the given deadline.

the Slovenian Ministry of Internal Affairs erased these people from the Registry of Permanent Residents of the Republic of Slovenia. Thus, a group of 25,671<sup>2</sup> residents was formed, now known under title the Erased.<sup>3</sup> Previously considered citizens with a full set of rights, when Slovenia declared independence, they lost all their social, economic and political rights in that country soon after the new nation state formation. The erasure represents one of the greatest violations of human rights in Slovenia<sup>4</sup> which was consequently condemned by the Slovenian Constitutional Court and several European institutions, including the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg (see Kurić and others vs. Slovenia 2010). Despite the fact that Slovenian authorities undertook certain measures in various attempts to restore the legal status of the Erased, the rights they had been stripped of have in many cases still not been restored.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the consequences of the erasure cannot be put right with the restoration of an individual's legal status, since they encompass a multitude of violations and heterogeneous forms of discrimination that many of the Erased have been exposed to for almost two decades.

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<sup>2</sup> At first, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia quoted a total of 18,305 Erased persons, but revised and published a higher total of 25,671 persons in 2007. Due to the absence of independent research on the subject matter of the Erased count, the second figure is also not completely reliable.

<sup>3</sup> Usage of the term Erased commenced as a technical/administrative category at administrative units, after being borrowed by various institutions of law (for instance the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Slovenia in Decree U-I-284/94 in 1999). This very category, by which the Slovenian government expressed the eradication of the legal, political, economical and social existence of the Erased in the new nation-state, has been adopted by the Erased, who begun politically organizing and provocatively reinterpreting it - by using the term to name themselves they transformed this category into one of the key landmarks of their fight (More about the transformation of this term see Zorn and Lipovec Čebren 2007).

<sup>4</sup> The erasures, which led to the »administrative death« of many thousands of persons, represent a unique phenomenon within Europe, including the territory of the former Yugoslavia. The nations that sprang up on the territory of the former Yugoslavia namely never – despite the ongoing wars within the period in question and mass violations of human rights – applied this kind of systematic administrative cleansing.

<sup>5</sup> More than half of them, approximately 13,000 Erased are still waiting for the restoration of their status of permanent resident.

In the course of this paper, several of the health-related consequences of the erasure are presented in greater detail, focusing on the psychological distress experienced by the Erased. After an introductory explanation of the course of the erasure, certain aspects of economic and social exclusion, which I consider to be some of the key influences on the development of health issues experienced by the Erased, are analyzed. And lastly, the phenomena of *živci* (upset nerves) and *živčnost* (nervousness) as the embodied (Csordas 1990) metaphor of socio-political and economic inequality is examined.

This article is based on ethnographic material gathered for my doctoral thesis research, which took place from 2006 to 2010, and during the course of which I investigated the health aspects of erasure amongst the Erased people.<sup>6</sup> In addition to data collected by my own fieldwork, the analysis also includes data gathered in interviews with the Erased conducted for a research project headed by the Peace Institute of Ljubljana.<sup>7</sup> In the present paper, the analysis of the psychological distress experienced by the Erased is based on 71 non-structured interviews conducted with the Erased.

## HOW DID THE ERASURE UNFOLD?

The Erased are people who were born in Slovenia or had migrated to this country from one of the republics of the then common state, the former Yugoslavia. In order to understand the erasure, one must be familiar with a specific feature of the Yugoslav administrative regime which allowed for two kinds of citizenship: firstly, the federal or Yugoslav citizenship on the level of the country as a whole, and secondly, citizenship on the level of its constituent republics, which was (quite arbitrarily) determined on the basis of an individual's or individual's parents' place of birth. This double concept

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<sup>6</sup> Beside the interviews with the Erased, I also conducted several (43) interviews with health professionals in various Slovenian health institutions.

<sup>7</sup> The interviews for the project *The Erased of Slovenia – A Challenge for a Young Nation State*, conducted under the auspices of the Peace Institute of Ljubljana, were also carried out by students of the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. At this point, I would like to express my sincere gratitude for some of the priceless ethnographic data provided by them.

of citizenship was based on the idea of unity of citizenship, as every citizen with federal, i.e. Yugoslav citizenship was at the same time also a citizen of one of the republics and vice versa (Dedić 2003:45-46). It seems important to emphasise that being a citizen of one of the republics was merely an administrative category, and as such completely unknown to the majority of the population: for newborns, it was merely entered as an official note in one of the citizenship registers of the relevant republic, but usually did not have any official application in the further course of an individual's life (Pistotnik 2008:9). In everyday life, far greater importance than citizenship of the republic was given to the official notation of permanent residence, which enabled access to the majority of social, civic and political rights (Pistotnik 2008:9; Dedić 2003:11).

In view of the fact that the majority of the population were not familiar with the category of citizenship of the republic, many of the people who were later erased, were not aware of the fact that they held citizenship of another republic of the former Yugoslavia, and therefore required to apply for Slovenian citizenship. In the majority of cases, the responsible authorities (i.e. administrative units) did not disseminate information on this requirement, due to which those in question failed to gather the required documents on time, or failed to do so because of the then ongoing conflicts in other republics of the former Yugoslavia. In the given period, many of these people were either abroad, or didn't see any purpose in applying for Slovenian citizenship as they were convinced (as well as informed by the officials in charge) that they would retain all acquired rights as permanent residents of Slovenia (Dedić et al. 2003; Kogovšek and Petković 2010). Although their reasons for not applying for Slovenian citizenship may have been diverse, the erasure brought about the annulment of permanent residence status for all of the Erased, thus stripping away the legal basis of their existence. Consequently, the documents (passports, personal IDs) of the majority of the Erased were taken away and destroyed<sup>8</sup>, they lost their

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<sup>8</sup> After the erasure took place, erased persons were commonly summoned to municipal offices, where they were asked to present their IDs. Since Erased persons didn't have the documents issued in the new country, only those issued in the former Yugoslavia, authorities commonly – often without any explanation – destroyed their documents in front of them (they were punctured or cut at site).

employment and access to other financial sources (pensions, scholarships, social support, etc), they were disabled from partaking in any financial transactions (ranging from access to their bank accounts to purchasing real estate) and left without the right to legal and judicial protection, while exposed to the arbitrariness of the police (who deported numerous people from Slovenia to war-afflicted areas without valid court sanctions, or detained them in Alien Detention Centres) as well as stripped of the right to reunification with their families and to recognition of fatherhood, as well as to elementary education, free emergency treatment, etc.

The erasure represents a deliberate act by the new Slovenian authorities, who aspired to ethnically homogenize the population and conceptualize the new nation state as a country for and of Slovenes (Bajt 2010). It is evident from the parliamentary debates of the time (Zorn 2007) that parties of the political right employed xenophobic and racist discourse in relation to immigrants from other republics of the former Yugoslavia, and attempted to impede to the highest possible degree their full membership in the new state. Analysis of parliamentary debates and other public political discussions of the period reveal that it was expected of the residents of the former republics of the common federal state to swiftly assimilate to Slovenian culture and to be absolutely 'loyal' to the new nation state. It was maintained that affirmation of such "loyalty" was expressed by submitting the application for Slovenian citizenship in due time, and all persons who failed to do so were consequently perceived as disloyal residents or potential enemies, who lacked belief in the new nation state. In such a nationalistic and xenophobic context, the erasure was a means of punishment for all residents that were presented as "disloyal" to the political project of Slovene nation state. Considering the fact that the state authorities who were responsible for the erasure have to date still not presented an explanation for implementing such sanctions<sup>9</sup>, we cannot be certain in establishing whether or not they were aware of the consequences that the erasure would bring about. Motives behind the erasure remain unclear: did

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<sup>9</sup> None of those responsible for the erasure has been prosecuted or convicted – on the contrary, as is the case in several other European and American countries (Gregorčič 2007), the key culpable individuals still hold distinguished state positions and enjoy social prestige.

those responsible for the erasure expect that this act would help them get rid of a large portion of non-Slovenian residents, who would voluntarily or forcibly (through being exiled or deported) migrate from Slovenia? Or was the aim to provide the new neoliberal model of economy with a rather large, invisible labour-force that could be shamelessly exploited?<sup>10</sup> Whatever the reasons for the erasure, it is an established fact that both views were manifested: numerous Erased had to leave Slovenia and numerous were left without legal status and access to any basic rights, thus becoming one of the first fully precarious and "adaptable" groups of labourers in Slovenia (Gregorčič 2007; Zorn 2010).

For the first ten years, the fact of the erasure was completely hidden from the large part of the Slovenian general public. Due to the nationalist attitude in Slovenia towards immigrants from the territory of the former Yugoslavia, the question of erasure was completely ignored over a longer period of time by both the media and civil society organizations, as well as by affiliates from scholarly and cultural circles. The issue was gradually brought to public attention only after 2002, when the Erased started to organize themselves politically. Undeterred by this fact, the parties of the political right continued to carry out a misleading political and media campaign against the restoration of rights for the Erased, portraying them as hostile and disloyal to the new Slovenian nation state. Only from 2008 on, after the government was formed by a centre-left coalition, did the attitude of the Slovenian government towards the Erased change to a certain degree, as some government representatives issued public apologies to the Erased and adopted new legal acts to partly restore the rights previously stripped from them. Accordingly, with the government's changed political discourse, the media started reporting on the erasure in a more correct and balanced manner, which consequently led to a less nationalist attitude of a part of the Slovenian public towards the Erased (Lipovec Čebren et al. 2011b).

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<sup>10</sup> I thank David Napier for sharing considerations of causes that might motivate the act of erasure and for his attentive reading of this text.

## **ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION OF THE ERASED**

The erasure not only "coincided" with the change of political system and instatement of an altered model of citizenship in Slovenia, but also with the establishment of the neoliberal market system (Gregorčič 2007; Kurnik 2007; Pistotnik 2010; Zorn 2007, 2010). For this reason, certain researchers perceive the erasure as a "neoliberal symptom" (Zorn 2007:19), representing a radicalised, condensed version of social and economic exclusions afflicting the majority of the Slovenian population at the time. Services which were provided to all people under socialism became a factor of inequality and exclusion in the new nation state (Zorn 2010:39).

The same applies to the right to health services, which was in practice universally accessible to all citizens of the former Yugoslavia, regardless of their legal status and/or ability to pay. With the transformation of the health insurance system in the independent Slovenia, the scope of health rights became dependant on the extent of the respective contracted health insurance coverage, and health insurance providers began carrying out a stricter supervision of health institutions, as well as yielding more influence over health policies (Lipovec Čebren 2010; Zorn 2010). For many of the Erased, who were without health insurance after the erasure, access to health institutions within Slovenia became greatly hindered or even impossible, a situation which I have described in greater detail in other articles (Lipovec Čebren 2007; 2010; 2011a). Subsequently, the health problems of these people grew, often becoming chronic. On the basis of interviews conducted with 71 Erased persons, a prevalence of problems concerning the spine and limbs (most frequently as a consequence of injuries or accidents), lung disease, coronary and vascular disease, liver function disorder and cancer was detected.

Many of the Erased who participated in the research mention psychological problems. More than a third (28 individuals) report various forms of psychological distress. It is important to emphasise at this point, that high degrees of hindered access to health institutions were observed in these individuals, as only few (4 persons) received medical assistance. However, despite the fact that access to health institutions had an important effect on the general state of health of the Erased, it was not the only cause

of their deteriorating state of mind. A significant role must also be attributed to the economic, political and social exclusion experienced by a large majority of the Erased.

As already evident in many instances (Dedić, Jalušič and Zorn 2003; Lipovec Čebren 2007; Kogovšek 2010; Zorn 2010), for many individuals, consequences of the erasure were connected to poverty. Following their loss of legal status, the majority of the Erased also lost their employment and/or other sources of income (pensions, scholarships, social benefits, child support, etc.). For many of the Erased, who had in the process of erasure lost the possibility of obtaining legal employment, illegal work presented the only remaining option. As was the case with migrant workers, their employment rights were also frequently violated<sup>11</sup>, as they were exposed to the rule of their employers. After several years of exposure to strenuous work under difficult and poorly-paid conditions, the impact began affecting their bodies in various ways.

As mentioned before, many cases included work injuries or other kinds of health issues, such as those which afflicted Ljubo, a 70-year-old resident of Piran, who suffers from chronic lung disease and various psychological problems:

“You see, they push you like a slave. Sometimes you have to work up to 15 hours, all day long, under the sun in the middle of summer. He yells at you repeatedly, the boss. He doesn’t pay anything. No one can endure it, no one indeed” (Ljubo, Erased person, 70).

Infrequent and/or minimal pay received for illegal work drove many of the Erased into poverty, often within a short period of a few months, and often manifesting itself in the deterioration of their daily diet and living conditions. The issue of poor living conditions in the case of the Erased presented itself, on the one hand, as inability to buy publicly owned

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<sup>11</sup> These violations manifested themselves in various aspects, ranging from work overload, the allocation of the most difficult tasks and working in inadequate conditions (in harsh weather, without adequate equipment or diet), to the acceptance of low wages (excluding social and health insurance contributions or vacation bonus) and frequent instances of psychological pressure exerted by their superiors (Lipovec Čebren 2011a)



apartments (with the implementation of the so called *Jazbinšek Act*, the option to buy such apartments was only given to citizens of Slovenia) (Kogovšek 2010; Zorn 2010), and, on the other hand, as inaccessibility to apartments at market prices or to rent-subsidized accommodation (Zorn 2010:34–8).

These, and other forms of inaccessibility to social resources manifested themselves in various ways. Marjana's testimony unveils different aspects of economic and social exclusion which are shared by many of the Erased, and I shall therefore regularly return to Marjana's testimony:

"Immediately after the erasure, while I was still pregnant, we didn't live well, my immunity was low. We didn't have money; we ate lettuce and potato gnocchi all the time – all kinds of potato dishes. He earned very little: we only had 35,000 SIT<sup>12</sup> per month and child support for my daughter. Luckily, our daughter was in kindergarten, and at least had one normal meal a day there. Our diet was bad, my immunity declined; I caught a cold after giving birth when I started working as a window cleaner, and that's when it all began" (Marjana, Erased person, 46).

Evidently, Marjana's experience of poverty, which was exhibited in a poor diet, had an important impact on her health. Marjana was the only Erased person in her four-member family, and her spouse became a sort of "windshield" against factors which otherwise exerted an additional toll on the health of the Erased. Marjana's husband was a Slovenian citizen, and thus her family could keep their apartment, while her spouse's salary became their only source of income and served, at least partially, to hold back a descent into total poverty as experienced by many others of the Erased. However, as a consequence of erasure, conflicts surged in Marjana's family, as they did in so many others in similar situations, and were one of the key factors that contributed to mental health risks among the Erased. The following is Marjana's account of her grave psychological distress:

"I went through periods – I don't want to think about how horrible it felt – when I couldn't sleep. Even now I go through periods of depression [...] But if I had stayed here, just hanging around,

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<sup>12</sup> Approximately EUR 146.

pondering, being afraid and helpless, I would be hurting all over. If I stayed with my family only, my husband and his parents would be putting me down, telling me nothing would become of me. I put these words aside, and the negativity of all others, who were oppressing me" (Marjana, Erased person, 46).

Marjana's experience again discloses a key aspect in the understanding of psychological problems experienced by the Erased: i.e. the response of their reference environment to their vulnerable situation. It is evident from the interviews conducted with the Erased that everything is actually related to this response – the consequences of erasure are highly enhanced in situations of poor support environments, and minimized in the presence of efficient and extensive social networks. Such "examples of good practices" are most evident in cases in which the environment was harmonious, where other family members were prepared to solve not only the issues of living conditions and financial problems, but also of access to all other social resources. Commonly, it was family members who helped the Erased realize their strategies for obtaining access to the health system (by lending them their own health insurance cards, paying for health services and medicines, engaging friends to help them access health care, etc.).

A similar view on how good family relations can be a key factor in health protection is shared by a social worker from the Outpatient Clinic for Persons without Health Insurance:

"The Erased, who – if I may say so – are the most difficult cases, usually don't have families, or are single or divorced. On the other hand, those who come from an orderly family environment are commonly less socially endangered, more self-confident and tend to settle their status and take charge of their life more quickly" (Sonja, social worker, 35).

Nevertheless, it would be erroneous to view this factor in health protection as pertaining to family relationships exclusively. An individual's self-image, their social role, as well as existential problems such as alimentation and housing, are conditioned to a significant extent by numerous other relationships, such as extended family ties, friends, neighbours and relations with other people in their local communities.

The kind of sudden transformation experienced by the Erased in terms of social status (from a citizen with a full set of rights to a person without legal status, from an employed person to an unemployed person, from an economically well-off citizen to a pauper) can lead to a transformation of all past relationships (Lipovec Čebren 2010).

Although it is evident from the testimonies of the Erased that their new situation has in many cases triggered a cultural anaesthesia (Zorn 2003), relating not only to the individual but rather to the environment as a whole, converse experiences must not be overlooked. Many of the Erased talk of "stations of solidarity" which they established in their environments. Gestures of solidarity were numerous and heterogeneous: ranging from free meals and lodging given to the Erased by their neighbours or acquaintances, to free medical check-ups or preparation of legal documents. The experiences mentioned in the stories of the Erased clearly show that their interactions with their respective environment must be regarded from a process and not a static point of view. Moreover, recognition should be given to the presence of the negative consequences of erasure that depict the Erased as victims, as well as to the the positive reactions of their environment and to the Erased persons in the role of protagonists. Precisely the political protagonism of the Erased (Kurnik 2007), which was exhibited from 2002 on with the establishment of two associations of the Erased and the organization of numerous political events (Zdravković 2010), is clearly a key contributor to the protection and care of the physical and psychological health of this population. Here is Marjana's take on the subject:

"The erasure had an effect on all these diseases of mine – infarction, impaired hearing, tumour, tuberculosis – all these diseases arise from anger, helplessness, from a state of mind that is terrible. If your mind doesn't go crazy, it all creeps up on your other organs. All that self-restraint, that isolation, the feeling of not belonging anywhere – it all leaves consequences. Some can be considered lucky – they go crazy for a bit, rave around, and that's that. Others, like me, deal with it on the inside. [...] But now I've got some of my self-confidence back – I don't wait around stuck in a corner any more, these travels around the world as an activist made me pick myself up. I say to myself: I'm not crap, I've travelled, these travels gave me so much. I remember happy, young, unconcerned people, so many images going

through my head – it is this that gives me hope [...] If you can't fight for yourself, you're done for; you can sit at home, at the computer, and go crazy – this activism has given me a great strength and self-confidence that I didn't have before" (Marjana, Erased person, 46).

If in Marjana's case the consequences of the erasure manifested themselves as poverty, family conflict and social isolation, etching themselves into her body as *infarction, hearing impairment, the development of a tumour and tuberculosis*, as well as traces of *anger, helplessness*, and "*a state of mind that was terrible*", her case also stands as an embodied memorial of resistance and political struggle.

### **FROM UPSET NERVES TO RESIGNATION**

Given the already mentioned high prevalence of psychological distress among the Erased persons who have participated in this research, it seems appropriate to dedicate more attention to the issue. As concerns the accounts given by those Erased who have experienced psychological distress, their narrations of psychological problems require an understanding that does not overlap with established psychiatric categories. The reason for this lies partly, as previously mentioned, in the fact that only 4 of 28 persons who shared testimonies about their psychological problems received professional help. Furthermore, these cases include "emic" descriptions of psychological problems that cannot be translated into the language of contemporary psychiatry. When describing the psychological distress they experienced, the Erased commonly use metaphors, which include a series of 'popular' categories that constitute invaluable information for a medical anthropological analysis.

Among these categories, certain terms stand out, e.g. *živci* (upset nerves), *živčnost* (nervousness), *stres* (stress) and *natempiranost* (edginess). These are presented in the following section. Lastly, attention is also given to commonly experienced feelings of desperation, resignation and isolation as a psychological response to the erasure.

## A. UPSET NERVES AS A METAPHOR OF SUFFERING AND RESISTANCE

Among the disorders most commonly emphasised by the Erased are *živci* (upset nerves) or *živčnost* (nervousness) which are among the most widespread 'popular' notions of distress.<sup>13</sup> The experience of *živci* (upset nerves) usually presents problems when attempts are made to translate it linearly into the biomedical term "neurasthenia" or the psychiatric category of "neurosis". The disorder is present in various cultures, but the concept varies greatly and can only be explained within the specific social context in which it appears. The concept of *živci* (upset nerves) commonly comprises physiological, psychological and social experiences (Helman 2007:301–2).

As Setha Low (1994) established in her research of "nervios" amongst the people of Guatemala and Costa Rica, "nervios" comprise a wide range of conditions, feelings, emotions and behaviours (such as fear, loss of appetite, experience of cold or hot flushes and increased heart rate, or even episodes of self-mutilation and violence) (1994:140-5). Although both biomedical and common discourse present "nervios" as being biologically or genetically determined, the author establishes that the experience which provokes this condition is always of an emotional or social nature, due to which "nervios" should be primarily understood as an embodied form of social suffering. This suffering is related to economic, political and social factors, and causes the body to become a mediator between the individual and the society, while also being a space for representation of social forces (Low 1994; Pizza 2007). Similar interpretations are also arrived at in Nancy Scheper Hughes' (2000) ethnographic research of Brazilian favelas in which she analyzes "nervous attacks" or "ataque de nervos". The author establishes that these nervous attacks represent codified metaphors by the means of which workers express their unacceptable position of

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<sup>13</sup> As various researchers have established, this kind of distress is a common phenomena in several parts of the world, especially in Latin America (Low 1994; Scheper-Hughes 2000; Helman 2007). At this stage, I have to add that it is also very present in the area of the former Yugoslavia, including Slovenia, thus nervousness should not be considered a disability which affects only the Erased residents. Although I assume that upset nerves and nervousness are commoner in the Erased than in the remaining population of Slovenia, this assumption has not been successfully confirmed or denied to date.

chronic malnutrition and needs, and also stand for strategies with which to challenge and express disagreement with the given situation (Scheper Hughes 2000:289). Nancy Scheper Hughes thus claims that "nervous attacks" can be interpreted as embodied social criticism, whereby illness represents the embodied resistance, i.e. a means employed by the helpless to demonstrate their unacceptable situation. Giovanni Pizza establishes a similar claim on the basis of Taussig's ideas: "It seems as if the 'nervous system' becomes the embodied metaphor of the 'socio-political system' (Taussig 1992)" (Pizza 2007:44).<sup>14</sup>

The extracts below from interviews with Megajver, Tomislav, Indira, Ismeta and Fadila, all impacted by the erasure, illustrate this point:

"And then, at any rate, it hits your nerves and after that all kinds of hell break loose. Everything influences everything else, you know. Like it or not [...]. You know, these are [sighs] they ... they simply devour you. They devoured me! Really!" (Megajver, Erased person, 39).

"I told myself, really, I'm fed up with them, enough, I won't invest any more, I did everything I could, and now I'm fed up with it. I'm sick of it ... I don't know what I'll do. You simply become excited, messed up, and you don't know any more ... a lot of money, a lot of nerves, a lot of everything" (Tomislav, Erased person, 59).

S: "But ... say, was it sometimes a problem for your children, because they were without papers?"

I: "The older one... I worked, the father left and when I'd come home the older one would be so... nervous. I'd come in tired, wanting only to lie down, and he was nervous. He'd say that he was not like other children, that he had nothing and couldn't do anything with his friends, so it really hurt me."

S: "It means there were these psychological..."

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<sup>14</sup> The same author, however, also cautions that the concept of »upset nerves« can also represent one of the forms of social control, which attempts to disguise socio-political factors within this biomedical or »popular« category by converting the socio-political source of deteriorating wellbeing into a biomedical category of disease (Pizza 2007:45)

I: "Yes, yes, for children there were" (Indira, Erased person, 59).

"It was hard to endure. I don't know why my youngest child had to be born into this ... I couldn't control my life any more. [...] My nerves were really ... I still have severe problems with my nerves. I underwent long treatment because of the nerves, actually I am still being treated for it" (Ismeta, Erased person, 49).

U: "What about the rest? Did you tell anyone you were without documents?"

F: "No, I didn't mention it. It wasn't a story I could just tell. I never talked about it. That's why I raged, why I got these attacks. I am nervous all the time, one big neurosis. The doctors told me that these attacks of fury are a consequence of neurosis, of problems. It was the nerves. And I know there were problems: my husband drinks, he beats me, the children are in Bosnia, I'm without documents, without a job. Of course, I have problems" (Fadila, Erased person, 49 years).

The erasure "hit" Megajver's nerves, Tomislav experienced "nerves", Indira's son and Fadila were "nervous" and Ismeta has "problems with nerves". The specific physiological dimension (the nervous system) serves as a metaphor for what is happening on the socio-cultural, political and psychological level. This disturbance involves a change in the psychological state, which is presumed to coincide with increased activity of the "nerves", or a state in which the nerves begin to control a person, as is confirmed by the use of the adjective "nervous". It is a situation in which a person can no longer control his/her behaviour, as Megajver's statement illustrates ("And then at any rate it hits your nerves and all kinds of hell break loose"). At the same time, this changed psychological state is brought into connection with a feeling of general disorientation in life.

When it comes to the analysis of each individual episode of "upset nerves", these very heterogeneous symptoms which are loosely included in the term "upset nerves" could be viewed as individual, psychological, and as such separated from the context in which health problems have evolved. This would represent a sort of convergence with a common biomedical practice – due to unclear and heterogeneous symptoms, many medical

doctors employ a reductionist interpretation of "upset nerves". As Finkler (Finkler in Helman 2007:302) has established, they often make an attempt at objectification and try to separate symptoms from individual experience, while explaining "nerves" as a physiological malfunction.

From the testimonies provided by the Erased, it becomes evident that the phenomenon of "upset nerves" cannot be separated from the erasure and its legal, socio-economic, political and health implications. Megajver and Tomislav describe how their nerves were "hit" due to their prolonged search for a way out of the administrative labyrinths they were forced into. They experience feelings of desperation, and of helplessness when up against the bureaucratic apparatus which keeps confronting them with the inability to settle their status and thus reclaim their civic rights. These feelings increase in the light of frequent identity checks and incidents of maltreatment and persecution by the police (Kogovšek 2010).

If "upset nerves" manifest themselves primarily as an embodied metaphor of conflict and unsuccessful struggle with the state administration and law enforcement authorities in the case of the two men, the "upset nerves" in the case of three women primarily embody the conflict within their families, which are – as in the case of the men – related to the absence of civic rights, loss of employment, poverty, social isolation, etc. The narrations of the Erased could hypothetically be separated into 'masculinised' and 'feminized' discourses: while male Erased persons primarily display suffering as a consequence of exclusion from society as a whole, females primarily display it as a consequence of changed relationships. This difference in female narrations about "upset nerves" can be detected in the recurrent establishment of a connection between a health disorder and certain family members – while Indira and Ismeta mention their children, Fadila relates her problems to conflicts in her marriage: "And I know there were problems: my husband drinks, he beats me, the children are in Bosnia, I am without documents and without a job. Of course, I have problems."

What all cases have in common, however, is the fact that the incidences of "upset nerves" represent the embodied metaphor of socio-political and economic inequality caused by the erasure. While the metaphor reflects suffering, it also presents detectable traits of resistance. Just as in Nancy Scheper Hughes' discussion (2000) of "ataques de nervos", this



phenomenon can be interpreted as a form of social criticism and resistance, by the means of which the Erased draw attention to their unbearable situation. By being reduced to mere biological life (Agamben 2004), the Erased employ these codified embodied metaphors as a key instrument for drawing attention to and exhibiting the consequences of erasure, and resisting them. This finding points to possible parallels between the so-called organized and spontaneous struggle of the Erased persons. From the beginning of their organized struggle, the Erased (and several other groups of invisible residents of the world, whose rights have been systematically neglected) employed the exposure of their physical body, starvation and auto-destructive behaviour – the physical body, or Agambenian biological life, thus becoming the key instrument they use to draw attention to themselves (Zdravković 2010:261).<sup>15</sup>

#### B. STRESS AND “EDGINESS” AS A MODERNIZED VERSION OF “UPSET NERVES”

While conducting interviews with the Erased, I often noticed that they mentioned stress in addition to the term “upset nerves” when describing the health consequences of the erasure. This is not surprising, given that in the contemporary world this concept has become one of the most frequently used metaphors for individual and collective distress or suffering, while at the same time denoting all kinds of difficulties confronted in everyday life (Helman 2007:288).

When my interviewees talked about stress they commonly used it a synonym for “upset nerves”, as is evident in the following statement by Bobo:

B: “The first Erased that joined the Association (i.e. local Izola branch of the Association of Erased Persons of Slovenia) were miserable, nervous, under stress.”

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<sup>15</sup> I have to indicate that in the political struggle of the Erased, the exposure of the physical body was not the sole means of pressure which the Erased employed. It is true, however, that the exposure of their bodies had a significant symbolic weight in the first years of their political mobilisation, when society at macro and micro level denied the existence of the Erased.

U: "Were there any differences among those who were nervous and those under stress?"

B: "No... to me it's the same, I mean 'nerves', stress... you know what I mean?" (Bobo, Erased person, 57).

Medical anthropologist Cecil Helman (2007) discerns differences between the two categories, and finds that "nerves" are more related to internalised factors that manifest themselves in the changed functioning of the nervous system, while the concept of stress can directly reflect external factors. As with disturbance of the nerves, the concept of stress also comprises a heterogeneous set of psychological and physiological states, combining a number of traditional models. Stress could therefore be viewed as a secularized version of the supernatural concepts employed to explain misfortune and disease, such as sorcery, destiny, divine punishment, or possession by malign spirits (Helman 2007:300).

Even though the two categories do not overlap completely, it is evident from usage of the terms in the narrations of the Erased that the two reflect similar causes or have the same function of embodied metaphor, which discloses a situation of socio-economic suffering. In view of the fact that the term "stress" was more commonly used among interviewees of the younger and middle generation, stress could also be conceptualized as a modernised version of the concept of "nerves". Both terms reside at a crossroad between 'biomedical' and 'popular' categories of health problems. It seems, however, that biomedical discourse, and subsequently also 'popular' health discourse, have been giving increasing weight to the concept of stress in the past few decades at the expense of previously popularized concepts of "neurasthenia", "neurosis" or their 'popular' translation "nerves". The cross-usage of the two concepts seems possible due to their heterogeneous and loosely defined content, and subsequently, their "universalist" usage.

If we adhere to the concept of stress as an explanatory model for the health problems of the Erased people, it would be possible to say that the erasure and its implications were the key stressors in their lives. A person's response to a specific stressor is unpredictable (Seyle and Helman 2007:300–301) because it is determined by a series of internal and external factors. However, it is a fact that all persons that were erased from the

register of permanent residents were exposed to this stressor, i.e. the erasure. Depending on their individual physical and psychological structure, they responded differently, but their specific response is not necessarily visible yet, since it may only become obvious in the future. This assumption applies especially to the younger population among the Erased people. One of them is Tatjana. In addition to "stress", Tatjana used the term *natepiran* ("on edge", "edginess") which could be explained as a state of uncontrollable, increased psychophysical activity that arises from a feeling of threat:

"You are under stress, 'on edge' all the time. For example, in the evening I went out with my friends, to a café, and there was an inspection, a police raid, and then they took us to the station" (Tatjana, Erased person, 34).

### C. RESIGNATION AND ISOLATION

Unlike Tatjana, who responded to the erasure with "edginess" or, put differently, with increased psychophysical activity, some of my interlocutors of both genders entered into states that psychiatry would probably diagnose as depression, while I prefer to stay with their own expressions that include helplessness, desperation, resignation, constant fear, longing for retreat and isolation. In the majority of their testimonies they regard these feelings as a consequence of a prolonged period without legal status, due to which they lived in fear of police identity checks, and consequently fear of deportation. This fear alienated and isolated them from their respective environment, drastically reducing their contact with the outside world and commonly turning their homes into "fortresses" in defense against the potentially "malicious" outside influences.

"But my dad, I don't know how he managed, in fact he was hiding because policemen frequently came to his door, and thus he de facto lived without going out of his apartment for three years, just like that. Like the Japanese did during the Second World War. He stacked up food, canned food; he had stale bread, unimaginable" (Begeš's son testimony; Begeš, Erased person, 89).

"After I was erased, I stopped mingling with people; I was in hiding and the like. In a way I avoided people, I didn't socialize much with

anyone, and I also didn't talk about this problem" (Ismeta, Erased person, 49).

"I was trembling. If I walked the streets and I saw a policeman, I felt sick. I was afraid because I heard all sorts of stories [...] I was trembling all the time. When my friend mentioned that he noticed that, I started to cross the street differently. I actually paused and waited and went by the book, I confessed that it was out of fear" (Mara, Erased person, 57 years).

"I didn't go anywhere because I was afraid. It wasn't simple. I always only walked, I went out only to clean homes in the neighbourhood. I stayed home all the time. If I had to go out, I did it quickly because I was so afraid, I didn't talk about anything to anyone, I held it all bottled up inside. I couldn't do anything, didn't have any energy left. At night I couldn't sleep, it was hard..." (Fadila, Erased person, 49).

While the erasure rendered these people "legally dead", their withdrawal and apathy frequently meant that they were, temporarily or permanently, socially dead. This compulsion for social withdrawal or isolation, which is accompanied by different forms of psychological distress, can be understood with the help of De Martino's (1995) concept of "crisis of presence" (*crisi della presenza*). De Martino namely transforms certain aspects of existentialist philosophy (Pizza 2007:39) when he speaks of presence as an individual's capacity to join together their memories and experiences and come up with an adequate response to a given situation, which they overcome with self-initiated action. According to the same author, this response capability can vanish in critical moments of existence, which can be connected to economic and social situations as well as disease or death. De Martino calls such loss of response capacity "crisis of presence", which stands for a crisis of existence in a world, where subjective, cultural and socio-political dimensions that determine an individual's life cross each other's paths (De Martino 1995:116-117; Pizza 2007).

If elements of a crisis of presence can be detected in Begeš' withdrawal, Ismeta's hiding, Marija's fear and Fadila's resignation, it must be emphasized that the onset of this crisis was also due to the internalized

feeling of guilt, making the Erased feel responsible for their erasure. The decision to withdraw into social isolation was primarily present among the Erased in the years immediately following 1992, when many internalized the conviction that the responsibility for the erasure lay solely with them. For this reason – as in the case of Ismeta, who “in a way avoided people, didn’t socialize much with anyone, and also didn’t speak about this problem” – they avoided conversations about their loss of legal status. They usually succeeded in overcoming this state of mind only when they obtained a permanent residence permit or Slovenian citizenship, or when the Erased began to self-organize after 2002 and started presenting their problem to the general public with the help of the media.

### **CONCLUSION: BODIES OF THE ERASED AS A MEMORIAL**

“The body holds traces that carve a sort of a memorial and reflect other symbolic logics. The concept of trace relates to the position where this trace is preserved, it stands for a memory, a sign that remains, and means the body which becomes a memorial into which the external story and the internal interpretation are etched” (Pandolfi 1991:163).

If we view the bodies of the Erased as memorials, it becomes evident that political, economic and social exclusion are written into them, and exhibited as unemployment, difficult working conditions, poverty, social isolation, conflict, and discrimination by the environment. These forms of exclusion translate into different health problems, manifesting themselves in various forms of psychological distress, which can be called *živci* (upset nerves), *stres* (stress), *natempiranost* (edginess), resignation and desperation, and several other terms. However, their bodies also hold numerous traces of embodied resistance and political protagonism, employed to surpass the crisis of presence and transform it into an absence of helplessness or an absence of passiveness.

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### “POGODI TI ŽIVCE I PAKAO SE OTVORI”. PSIHIČKE TEGOBE IZBRISANIH U SLOVENIJI

*Izbrisani* u Sloveniji označavaju skupinu od 25 671 ljudi koji su nakon slovenske nezavisnosti izgubili sva politička, ekonomska i socijalna prava. Članak navodi neke od aspekata ekonomskog i društvenog isključivanja izbrisanih te raspravlja o utjecaju koji je navedeno isključivanje imalo na njihovo stanje svijesti. Između ostalih, analizira se i pojavnost *potrošenih živaca* i *živčanosti* kao utjelovljenih metafora društveno-političke i ekonomske nejednakosti kao posljedice brisanja, kroz medicinsko-antropološku perspektivu.

**Ključne riječi:** izbrisani, posljedice brisanja, zdravstveni sustav, mentalno zdravlje, medicinska antropologija, Slovenija