

## TERRITORIAL IDENTIFICATIONS OF THE GOTTSCHEE GERMANS: DIASPORA – HOMELAND RELATION

### TERITORIÁLNA IDENTIFIKÁCIA KOČEVSKÝCH NEMCOV: VZŤAH DIASPÓRY A VLASTI

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#### **Klíčové slová**

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### **1. Introduction**

The territory of the Republic of Slovenia has always been ethnically diverse. Besides the Slovenians, Italians, Hungarians, Serbs, Croats, Jews and Roma, it was also home for almost thousand years to a German minority that was strong in number, but that is nowadays present only in fragments in the Kočevska and Styria regions. The reasons for the migrations of Germans away from the territory of Slovenia were primarily of a political and economic nature. Pre-war migrations of Germans out of the Slovenian territory occurred in parallel with the migrations of Slovenians in times of economic crises. Political migrations of Germans started after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy when, due to the systematic pressure exercised by the government authorities on the German population, the German officialdom was leaving Slovenia massively. Political migrations of Germans broke out in the autumn of 1941 and the winter of 1942 when the majority of Germans from Kočevje and Ljubljana regions opted for the German Reich. In May 1945, after the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, there was a mass deportation of Germans who had not already managed to flee across the border, namely to Austria. After the war, the deported Germans of Slovenia settled in Austria, Germany, Canada and the USA and became a diaspora. Only a handful remained in Slovenia.

With the emergence of modern nation-states in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, national histories that nowadays still mainly correspond the majority nation of the nation-state as a unit of study (1), were also nationalised. The nationalisation of history (cf. Štih, 2006) and other social-science-oriented or humanistic disciplines including linguistics (cf. Hladnik, 2009) resulted in the fact that Germans in Slovenia were nearly forgotten in the aftermath of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. Slovenian science dedicated its attention only to what was comprehended as “of a Slovenian ethnic origin”, and its position has largely remained unchanged until today. The existing studies conducted in the field of Slovenian emigration (for example, cf. Čebulj Sajko, 1999, 2000; Drnovšek, 1991, 1998, 2002; Koprivec, 2013; Lukšič-Hacin, 1999, 2006; Mikola, 2005; Repič, 2006, 2010a, 2010b, 2013; Žigon, 1998, 2001, etc.) focused only on Slovenians who emigrated from the Slovenian territory. These and other studies bypassed the (simultaneous) departures of members of other ethnic groups living on the territory of the present-day Slovenia, which included the Germans (as well as Italians, Hungarians, Jews etc.).

In this paper (2), I devote my attention to the German-speaking inhabitants of Slovenia – more precisely to the group of Gottscheers or Gottschee German settlers who lived in a concentrated group in the south-eastern part of Slovenia from the 14<sup>th</sup> century until the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. Based on the study *The Maintenance of the Gottscheer Identity* (3) conducted among Gottscheers living in the USA, Canada, Austria and Germany, I would like to present the social and symbolic significance of places with which the Gottscheers identify and that influence their life as emigrants. These places are:

1. the old homeland – Kočevska (the Gottschee region), with which they developed a nostalgic relationship, and
2. the places that are important for the (re)production of their traditions in their new countries – i.e. clubs (with adjacent buildings and land) that are venues for meetings and celebrations of Gottschee communities and that serve as a substitute for the ancestral homeland.

As has been noted by Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996, p. 206), all aspects of identity are implicated in relation to the place. The formation of personal and group identities, self-awareness and a sense of belonging are inextricably linked to spatial-cultural concepts such as home and homeland (Repič, 2010, p. 124). Places and territories hold a special significance for humans since, in a way, their identity derives from them (White, 2000, p. 4). “‘Territoriality’ describes the protective attitude that humans exhibit toward places” and is similar to a feeling of homesickness “a very emotional and subjective human expression” (ibid.). That is, territoriality plays an important role in the lives of migrants and migrant communities since a change of the place of residence means a simultaneous change in the spatial and social environment, social relations, culture, identity, interactive relationships, norms, values, needs, institutions, etc. (Klinar, 1976, p. 15 – 49). In conjunction with more than one real or symbolic place, emigrants may form split, double or ambivalent identities.

According to the settlement model, the Gottscheers could be classified as a diaspora. If we take a look at the definition of diaspora in the Slovene Literary Language Dictionary (Bajec et al, 1994, p. 136), it is defined as a “national or religious community scattered on the territory of another nationality or religion.” It can be separated from the established common territory in two ways: i.e. it can be scattered by force or migration; however, in its identity, it has retained the memory of the “lost ancestral homeland” as an essential part, or the homeland can also be imagined and vaguely attributed to a certain territory (Južnič, 1987, p. 230). Brubaker (2005, p. 5 – 6) adds a third characteristic to the scattering and orientation to the homeland that defines a diaspora: a long-term preservation of the border or own identity that is distinct from the identity of the “hosting society”. However, the diaspora is not necessarily marked by forced scattering, orientation towards the roots or a desire to return to the original homeland (Agnew, 2005, p. 4, also cf. Brah, 1996, p. 177 – 189), but it is rather defined by its ability to “recreate culture” (ibid.) and traditions through ritual practices in different locations outside the country of origin.

Mazumdar et al (2000, p. 319) found that ethnic enclaves constitute an important aspect of the spatial identity of immigrants and allow them to remain connected with the places they left behind, while at the same time creating important new spatial bonds. With this paper, I want to show that this not only applies to enclaves in terms of concentrated settlements of ethnic groups but also to migrant groups that do not live in a concentrated manner, yet establish bonds with a certain place in a new homeland with which they identify. In the case of Gottscheers living in the USA and Canada, they comprise cultural centres or clubhouses with the adjacent land, while with Austrian Gottscheers, they (also) comprise churches or chapels. More important than the compactness of the settlement are the social ties and feelings of belonging that are forged in these places and are strengthened through various ritual practices: the ancestral homeland is associated with the rituals of return visits or pilgrimage to the Gottschee region, while places in new homelands where traditions are being (re)created offer opportunity for different meetings or events of the Gottschee communities. These rituals are important both for strengthening the sense of belonging to the group within the country of residence and for the transnational interaction of Gottscheers from countries concerned with the ancestral homeland.

Below, following methodological explanations, I will briefly present the historical framework for the establishment of the Gottscheers’ diaspora, and then I will dedicate my attention to the multifaceted territorial identifications and the significance of the places with which the Gottscheers identify to their life in the diaspora, as well as ritual practices associated with these locales that are important for strengthening the sense of belonging to the community.

## **2. Methodology**

The research project “The Maintenance of the Gottscheer Identity”, which I conducted among the Gottscheers living in the USA, Canada, Austria, Germany and Slovenia between the years 2007 and 2015, is based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods. I used a sequential explanatory design method (Lobe, 2006, p. 66). I commenced the study by collecting and analysing quantitative data (a survey questionnaire with 166 Gottschee respondents from Slovenia, Austria, Germany, Canada and the USA), which was followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data, whereby I applied a multi-sited ethnography research method (cf. Marcus, p. 1995; Falzon, p. 2009) due to the worldwide dislocated settlement of Gottscheers. I collected 62 life stories and reflections of Gottscheers from the above-mentioned countries, attended at least 10 events organised by Gottscheer associations in Slovenia, Austria and the USA and visited several Gottscheer associations and individuals all over the world. During the results interpretation stage, I organised the obtained data and interpreted quantitative results using qualitative results (cf. Lobe, 2006, p. 66). Because of great distances and the resulting difficulty arranging frequent personal meetings, some of the respondents documented their own thoughts on the matter with the help of a draft questionnaire. However, when it was necessary, we further clarified any dilemmas that might have arisen during the interviews via regular mail or e-mail. I met some interlocutors on several occasions in different locations. Thus, I met John in 2009 at the Gottscheer Volksfest event in New York, and we later met on several occasions during my visit to the Kulturwoche event in Klagenfurt, as well as several times in Slovenia, i.e. the Kočevska region. I also had the opportunity to get more closely acquainted with the transnational practices of the Gottscheers during their annual visits to the Kočevska region searching for their roots.

## **3. Historical Outline of the Immigration of the Gottscheers and the Establishment of the Diaspora**

The Kočevska (Gottschee) region, a region in the south-eastern part of Slovenia, stands out among the regions of Slovenia because of its special, often tragic, history associated with migrations. In 1330s, the Counts of Ortenburg for economic reasons colonised this sparsely populated area with peasants from their estates in East Tyrol and Upper Carinthia (present-day Austria). Thus, an interesting linguistic area formed in the Gottschee region that lasted for 600 years where the use of the Gottscheer dialect (4) was dominant. Seasonal migrations have been present among the inhabitants of Gottschee since 1492 when the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III bestowed the right of peddling to the inhabitants of Gottschee area (Ferenc, 1993, p. 20 – 21). By the end of the 1930s as much as half Gottschee men earned their livelihood from selling wooden products, fruits, textiles and door-to-door raffle ticket games throughout the Europe. They were away from home for several months or even years (Ferenc, 2005, p. 47). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Gottscheers also started moving to the USA and Canada due to large families, small homesteads and lack of fertile land (Kobetitch, 2000, p. 3), and after the downfall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire also due to the assimilation politics of the Yugoslav authorities. Because of emigration the population of Kočevska region steadily declined during the years 1880 – 1921 (Drnovšek, 2005, p. 15). Before the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War there were more Gottscheers in the USA than in the Kočevska region (Ferenc, 1993, p. 27). In major USA cities (New York, Cleveland) sprouted dense Gottscheer communities. After the downfall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the emergence of the new Yugoslav state, the once privileged position of Germans in Slovenia deteriorated. The German People’s Council for Kočevska region, most Gottscheer Associations, German grammar schools, etc. were disbanded. There was a decline in the number of German schools or departments for German language in Slovene schools, while Slovene was introduced as a mandatory subject in German primary schools (Ferenc, 1993, p. 27). In the 1930s, the encroachment on minority rights encouraged mass support for Nazism among the Gottschee Germans (cf. Biber, 1966). After the annexation of the Kočevska region to Italy in 1941, they were disappointed and most of them succumbed to the propaganda spread by the Nazi Gottscheer leaders and in the years 1941 – 1942 they moved to a new settlement area by the Sava and Sotla rivers (then under German occupation), where the Slovene population had been deported

Oby the occupying forces. In the aftermath of the war, a great mass of Gottscheers fled from the Posavje and Obsotelje regions. Those who were unable to cross the border to Austria were deported, incarcerated in camps or executed (cf. Mikola, 2007) according to the conviction of the collective German guilt for the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War (cf. Judt, 1992). The Gottscheers spent the years after the war in refugee camps in Austria (cf. Stieber, 1999) where families who did not arrange homes in Austria and Germany were waiting for permits for emigration to the USA. Many of them also settled down in Austria and Germany. Before resettlement in 1941/42, 12,498 Gottschee Germans were living in the Kočevska region (Ferenc, 1993, p. 31). After this year, no more than 600 remained in Slovenia (Ferenc, 2005, p. 269). Nowadays, active Gottschee communities exist in the USA (New York, Cleveland), Canada (Kitchener, Toronto), Austria (Graz, Klagenfurt) and Slovenia.

The first Gottschee communities in the USA and Canada were distinct from those in Austria and Germany in the manner of their settlement. In the USA, the immigrants lived in concentrated groups in the same city quarters and streets and thus formed relatively compact communities (e.g. in Cleveland, New York). In Europe, the settlement was not concentrated, but the Gottscheers mostly settled in larger cities (e.g. Klagenfurt, Graz, Vienna, Stuttgart, etc.) and their surroundings, which allowed them relatively frequent contact.

Initially, the communities were organised into associations, mainly in order to provide assistance for their compatriots. Because of the lack of social support for Gottscheer industrial workers from the state, the first Gottscheer Association was formed in Cleveland as early as 1889 – Erster Österreichischer Unterstützungs Verein, the predecessor of the Erster Österreichischer Unterstützungs Verein (E.O.U.V., 2014), which is still active today. Similarly, a range of Gottscheer organisations formed the Gottscheer Relief Association after the war in 1945 in Ridgewood, New York, whose purpose was to provide assistance (including in the form of food rations) for the Gottscheers in Europe who were experiencing hardships because of the war. The association sought to mitigate the stringent immigration regulations that prevented the immigration of people of German nationality and helped immigrants organise their lives in the new homeland. Truman's signing of an amended law in 1950 triggered a mass migration of Gottscheers to the USA (Kren, 1995, p. 5; Petschauer, 1984, p. 148). The associations were also formed because of the needs of their members to socialise with their compatriots, thereby keeping the memory of the ancestral homeland alive. Such is the case of the Alpine Club from Kitchener. Anne who arrived in Canada together with the first post-war migrants in 1984, recalls that the Gottscheers then met at her uncle's and aunt's place: "Our homes were not even completed yet, but they would have their parties in the basement. Always music and dancing..." (Anne, Canada). The Hoegler family house soon became too small, so they established an association in 1953.

In addition to the associations, the communities also established or built (cultural) centres, they published newsletters, newspapers and books and organised social gatherings, public events and celebrations (comp. with Slovenians in Argentina in Repič, 2006 and 2013).

#### **4. (Territorial) Identifications of Gottschee Germans**

The identity of the Gottschee Germans is not associated with the territory of the Republic of Slovenia defined by its borders, but rather with the Kočevska region, where the "essence is instilled" as Ana Kučan put it. However, as Bobi Thomason found, Gottscheers most often identify themselves as Gottscheers (i.e. vernacularly as (former) inhabitants of the Gottschee region, author's comment), and then as Germans or Austrians, whereby the latter two identifications are conceived as broader general category terms of their heritage (Thomason, 2010, p. 27). Although they were not born during the times of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Gottscheers express their affiliation with it, and also with Austria as its successor. The classifications "Austrian" and "German" are often used interchangeably, usually in the sense of synonymous terms (ibid., p. 39 – 41). In particular, younger generations from the American continent that were born after the war (also) identify themselves as Americans or Canadians.

The space is an active part of the formation of identity and represents both continuity and change (Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996, p. 207). Hormuth (in Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996, p. 207)

notes that migration can lead to an alteration in the conception of the self when the old place becomes a symbol of the old self and the new place presents an opportunity for the development of new identities. Lack of space continuity control may trigger feelings of grief for the lost place (Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996, p. 208) or a split identification that may be reflected in multiple identifications. Similarly to Slovenian emigrants, there is also a duality (cf. Čebulj Sajko, 2000; Žigon, 1998) or ambivalence (Repič, 2010a, 2010b) as regards the identity of Gottscheers. They identify themselves with the country of residence, while also with the ancestral homeland, which they perceive differently: as Austria, Germany or the Kočevska region. Namely, the ambivalence of identifications “within the diaspora and the transnational context /.../ signify the complexity of belonging to different social worlds, while it is based on the interaction between the actual spatial experience and the socially constructed experience of the area of origin” (Repič, 2010b, p. 178).

Because of the painful resettlement and the circumstances that led to it, many parents withheld the Gottscheers’ history from their children. Mary is an active member of the Gottscheer Heritage and Genealogy Association (GHGA), where they help Gottschee descendants in their search for information about their ancestors. She said: “Several Gottscheers talk about their parents and grandparents having never mentioned their Gottscheer ethnicity, but clinging to an ‘Austrian’ rather than ‘German’ ancestry. /.../ Several people looking to GHGA for information mention that they discovered their Gottscheer ancestry quite by accident; they say that for years they had been led to believe that they were of ‘Austrian’ descent /.../ I must admit that I always thought that I was ‘Austrian’ because of the manner in which my parents and family talked about our family’s past (Mary, USA). According to her, her brothers claimed that they were Yugoslavs born and educated in that country. However, they agreed that their mother and father were Austrian because they were born when Gottschee was still part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Mary, USA). Indeed, other Gottscheers also point out difficulties in identifying their origin, among them Bertha. When people ask her where she comes from, she never knows how to answer. Most of them do not know Kočevska region. That is why she sometimes replies that she comes from Austria, while on other occasions she explains that she was born in Yugoslavia, but her parents were born in the old Austria, the territory of present-day Slovenia (Bertha, USA).”

In preserving its identity, any distinctive human community is not necessarily linked to territory; however at least symbolic territoriality (Južnič, 1987, p. 292 – 293) is very important. We can imagine the confusion of the younger Gottscheers who are searching for answers about their origins and must satisfy themselves with the answer that they are of German or Austrian origin, and then their surprise when in adulthood they learn that there was once a Gottscheer community, of which they are descendants. Moreover, they (at least those from the USA and Canada) must trace the land of their ancestors in Slovenia, which is mostly unknown to them. Suddenly, their own ideas about their origin and, thus, their identity turned upside-down. They are again looking for answers to the questions: who am I, where do I come from, in what kind of world did my ancestors live? Such questions direct us to territoriality and indicate its importance for the individual's perception of the self. A stable sense of identity that is fixed, and not ambiguous, confused or diffuse requires a stable residential dimension (Južnič, 1987, p. 293).

## **5. The Ancestral Homeland and Rituals of return visits**

In the pre-war time, return migrations were quite common. A number of Gottscheers returned to Kočevska having earned money working abroad. Even those born in the USA came back. Men could have difficulties because, in order to avoid military service in Yugoslavia and not to lose American citizenship, they had to return to the USA before they were seventeen years old (Muschler, 2000, p. 6). The emigrants have also been returning to visit. In 1930, Muschler’s relatives returned from the USA to attend a four-day celebration of the 600th anniversary of Gottschee (Kočevska) (Muschler, 2003b, p. 13).

The global economic crisis and later also the onset of the Second World War made return visits and return migrations impossible for many of the pre-war migrants from Vancouver who were

planning to return to the Kočevska region when they had earned enough money. Consequently, other emigrants, mostly their relatives, joined them (Kobetitch, 2000, p. 3 – 4).

The Gottscheers once again began to visit the Kočevska region in greater numbers after the independence of Slovenia in the 1990s. Those who came to visit before Slovenian independence complain about the hostility of the former regime. A Gottscheer from New York told me about her visit to the Kočevska region. On the border of the formerly closed-off area near Kočevska Reka, a soldier almost shot at her and her fellow travellers. Sad, frightened and with a sentiment of bitterness, she returned to the USA. She has never visited her homeland since, despite having strong patriotic feelings.

An analysis of the questionnaires showed that 86 % of 145 Gottscheers who took the survey and live in Austria, Germany, the USA and Canada have visited their (former) homeland or the homeland of their ancestors at least once in their lifetime. Most of them live in Austria, followed by those from the USA (see Table 1).

Table 1: Visiting Kočevska and the country of residence, N = 145.

VISITING THE OLD HOMELAND	COUNTRY OF RESIDENCE			
	Austria	Germany	U.S.A.	Canada
visits	93 %	75 %	87 %	62 %
never visits	7 %	25 %	13 %	38 %

Source: Moric, 2014, p. 90

Chart 1 and Chart 2 illustrate the visits to Slovenia of Gottscheers born before and after resettlement. The data shows that Gottscheers born after the resettlement who took the survey visit Slovenia or the Kočevska region only slightly less frequently (80.1 %) than those born before the resettlement (90.3 %), which points to the spread of roots tourism among the younger generations of the Gottscheers (Moric, 2014, p. 90).

Chart 1: Visiting Slovenia – born before resettlement, N = 145.

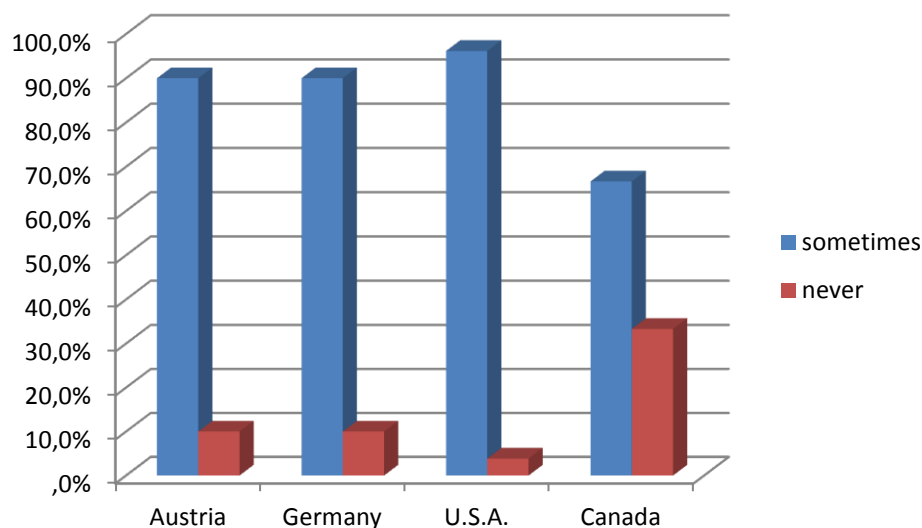
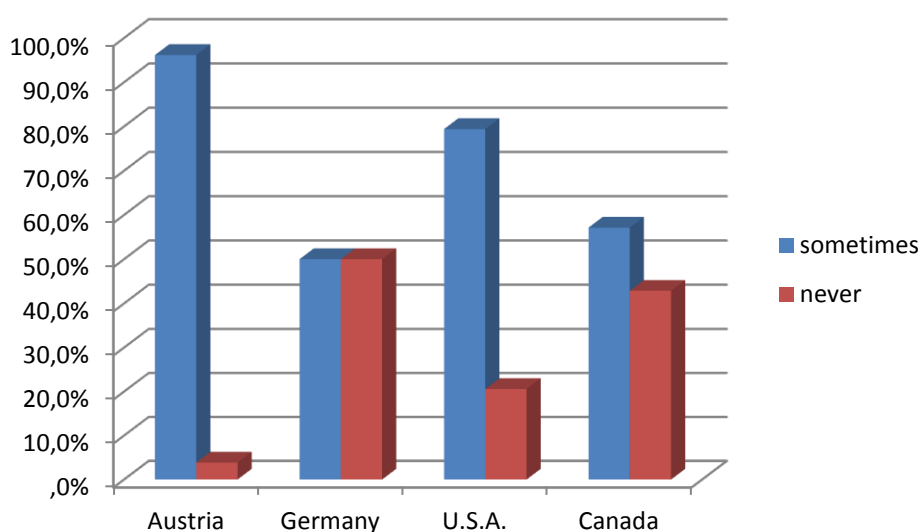


Chart 2: Visiting Slovenia – generations born after resettlement, N = 145.



The reasons for the return visits to the old homeland differ. Among those born before resettlement, the desire to see their birthplace once again prevails, while nostalgic individuals who were born after resettlement and the younger generation of Gottscheers are looking for their roots and the remnants of the homesteads of their parents.

Those who do not visit the old homeland, state a fear of persecution and a hostile reception as a reason, as well as a fear of what is awaiting them there. Many immigrants feared that they would no longer find places, buildings and the landscape they remembered from the past. Frank from Klagenfurt (Austria) recalls: “My mother never wanted to come back. She said: ‘I want to keep a memory of Kočevje the way it had been.’” It is also necessary to mention age, which prevents many of today’s Gottscheers from (re)visiting the Kočevska region. Long journeys are a great strain for the elderly Gottscheers.

Many choose to visit the former homeland or the homeland of their ancestors in the context of trips that are usually organised annually by the Gottscheer Associations from Austria and the USA. The Klagenfurt association organises such a guided tour in July within the context of the Kulturwoche event, while the American GHGA association organises it every few years. Usually, the participants see the sights of the Kočevska region, focusing on visiting the villages and old cemeteries and finding remnants their ancestors left behind (cf. Mische, 1995). In recent years, a trip to the resettlement area in the Posavje and Obsotelje regions was added to the “exploration” of Kočevska, where they visit the Posavje Museum in Brežice and the villages where they lived for several years. Some of the Gottscheers and former Slovenian exiles from this area have even formed friendly ties.

We could say that by visiting the Kočevska region, the Gottscheers relive their history (see Kučan, 1998, p. 25). From the interviews conducted with them, it is evident that many (especially younger) Gottscheers see this path as a kind of pilgrimage to their identity. Hewison explains that the tendency to preserve the past is part of the tendency of self-preservation. Anyone who does not know where they come from, can hardly understand where they are going. The past is the foundation of personal and collective identity (Harvey in Kučan, 1998, p. 27 – 28).

Gottscheers perceive the first visit to the (ancestral) homeland differently. Some are disappointed by the image of the old homeland. They are saddened by the ruins and remnants of the settlements that they encounter, or the lack of hospitality of the inhabitants. They can feel alienated. Such emotions are the result of unrealised expectations of the image of the old homeland, resulting from the collective experience of the Gottscheer community, which is passed on to the younger generations as a myth. Due to the attribution of meanings to a given locale, the identity relates to a socially created image of place, and not to the place itself (Kučan, 1998, p. 9). The true image of the place can be quite different from the socially constructed one.

Again, others are enthusiastic about the return and talk about the feeling of homeliness. Gerhard from New York said: “What did it feel like when I got to Gottschee? I’ve been thinking often about that. The only answer I have is It felt almost like I was home again especially when I have seen my name on your church and in the cemetery.”

An attachment to a place is an emotional bond that people establish with their place of residence (Lewicka, 2008, p. 211), with specific areas where they want to stay and where they feel comfortable and safe (Hernandez et al, 2007, p. 310), and even with places where they do not live, e.g. places that people visit for recreational purpose (Lewicka, 2010, p. 32). Place identity is an integral part of personal identity, i.e. a process in that, through interactions with spaces, people define themselves in terms of belonging to a particular place (Hernandez et al., 2007, p. 310). It may be that a person is connected to a place but does not identify with it (e.g. one lives and wants to live in a place but does not perceive it as part of their identity), and vice versa; one can identify with the place, but they feel no attachment – they feel, for example, a sense of belonging to a place but they do not want to live there (Hernandez et al, 2007, p. 311). The latter also applies to Gottscheers, who, without exception, respond that they would not return to the Kočevska region permanently (6). The main reason is family and relatives, as migration would greatly reduce the frequency of contact with them. Ludwig Kren said (Rogan and Moric, 2001, p. 54): “Today, I am still convinced that if they had told us in Posavje at that time: “Go home!” then 80 – 90 % of people would return. But now when you have lived in a place for 50 or 60 years and have left your living powers there, it becomes your new home.” Immediately after the war, the Gottscheers could not (dared not) return permanently to the Kočevska region. Those who tried to do so were violently persecuted. Some Gottscheers who moved to the United States after the war later decided to return to Europe. But since it was not possible to return to Kočevska, they moved to Austria or Germany, which were closer to them and Gottscheer communities had already been established there. If we take into account that the Gottscheers understand these two countries as their “original homeland”, we could even talk about post-war return migrations in this case.

## **6. Clubhouses and Memorial Places and Rituals of Recreating Culture and Traditions**

The social and cultural life of the Gottscheer communities in the diaspora was organised in a certain territory that became the meeting place of these communities. Thus, all associations that are active today have their own place (clubhouse, adjacent land, monument, chapel, etc.), to which members have transferred (at least partially) their patriotic feelings of homeland. Club premises/centres (hereinafter referred to as: “clubs”) are organised so that they resemble the old homeland. They can be part of a forest or surrounded by trees just like the Kočevska region, which is famous for its vast forests. Some communities built churches or chapels on their land that are reminiscent of those that stood in almost every Gottschee village. The names (official and unofficial) (e.g. “Gottscheer Street”) and symbols that can be found in clubs (paintings, photos, coats of arms, flags, memorabilia) bear witness to the symbolic significance these places hold for the community.

The Gottscheer clubs serve as a substitute for the lost homeland. Their members reminisce when they meet their fellow compatriots. The club represents the community and strengthens its self-confidence and self-image. Arnold, who joined the Cleveland Association in 1951 immediately after his arrival in Cleveland, speaks of the club with pride and love: “Then we built the new club. This one is actually the third one. Now we have the nicest club among all the nationalities there. /... / That is the only place I feel like home.” However, his wife Helene tells the following: “My parents never actually joined the club but they did go to the functions whenever they could. It was just a sort of an extended family.” Some associations even declared their land a memorial place. With the help of donations from compatriots worldwide, the Gottscheer Gedenkstätte association from Graz built a small church in 1967 in memory of the departed compatriots. The church is symbolically dedicated to St. Bartholomew, as the oldest church in Kočevska region once was. The names of 1 200 Gottscheer compatriots, victims of the war, are inscribed in it. The chapel is also home to an archive and an exhibition space where you can see traditional Gottscheer attire, old photographs of the Kočevska villages, a relief map of Kočevska, artwork by Gottscheer artists, a farmhouse style room



and a “hunting corner” with a presentation of the wilderness of the Kočevska region. The chapel stands by the street that is officially called “Gottscheer Straße”.

The Gottscheer Landsmannschaft association from Klagenfurt takes care of the St. Ulrich church in Klagenfurt (the town district of Krastowitz), which was renovated and objects (church statues, banners) and equipment from churches in the Kočevska region were installed in it. The church stores a memorial book with the names of Gottscheer victims of war, and a church bell from 1966 hangs in the bell tower that was received from the old homeland – more precisely from the St. Francis church of Kočevska Reka (Petschauer, 1984, p. 175). The church displays a panel with a consecration to all Gottscheers, and on the façade of the church is the Gottscheer coat of arms. In 1962, the Association bought the land around the church and declared it a memorial place. The road leading to the memorial place is officially called “Gottscheer Straße” (Petschauer, 1984, p. 175).

The third Gottscheer monument (outside of Kočevska) is the “Gottscheer fountain”, which was built in 1977 in Schwarzwald near the town of Aichelberg by the now inactive association Landsmannschaft der Deutschen Umsiedler aus der Gottschee from Germany. The monument is made of several tons of heavy stone blocks bearing the coat of arms of the city of Kočevje and a memorial inscription dedicated to all Gottscheers.

At this point, I am primarily interested in the social function (and not so much a detailed analysis) of the rituals of the Gottscheer diaspora in the USA, Canada and Austria, namely major meetings or events organised by Gottscheer communities in all countries once a year. The largest and most visited meetings are the Gottscheer Volksfest in New York and the Gottscheer Kulturwoche in Klagenfurt. Since the places are socially and culturally determined, the same atmosphere is also given to the ritual practices that take place in them. Therefore, different ritual practices take place in the USA and Europe. As was already found by Bobi Thomason (2010, p. 160 – 161), there is a lot of dancing and entertainment at meetings and celebrations in the USA (as well as in Canada), while in Austria, celebrations are mostly religious in nature. The church played a major role in the everyday life of the Gottscheers in the old homeland since almost all the celebrations were related to church life. In addition to the church holidays (Christmas and Easter), they celebrated parish blessings and fairs (Kiertog), while pilgrimages to different churches in the Kočevska region and other remote places, such as Trsat (near Rijeka) and Brezje (Hutter, 2012, p. 3), were also popular. They were mainly Mary's churches. The Austrian Gottscheers, as already mentioned, retained such Christian rituals to a greater extent than their USA counterparts, which is reflected in the implementation of Cultural Week (Kulturwoche), which Gottscheers from Klagenfurt celebrate each year since 1966 at the Krastowitz castle. The main event is Blessing Sunday with a procession with a statue of the Virgin Mary, the patroness of the Gottscheers, wearing a protective coat (Schutzmantelmaddonna).

Communities on both sides of the ocean assign great importance to the Gottscheer choirs, which preserve the Gottschee dialect, at least in song (Thomason, 2010, p. 161). All Gottscheer associations, American, Canadian and Austrian, are striving to preserve old habits, while developing traditions that belong to each of these communities (Thomason, 2010, p. 162). Thus, for example, Gottscheers in the USA and Canada “traditionally” select their Miss Gottschee or “traditionally” celebrate Oktoberfest, which of course is not part of the old Gottscheer culture, but is part of the processes of change in rituals (cf. Pleck, 2000, p. 13) and does not represent Gottscheer assimilation and/or loss of their culture, but rather its transformation. Celebrations organized by associations are the most important element of the social life of the Gottscheers because it is an opportunity for members of the community to meet in large numbers, while the short-lived communities formed during the organization of such an event (e.g. cooks, stall caretakers, etc.) are important as well.

Rituals of celebration in diasporic Gottscheer communities reflect the old homeland, serve as a symbolic substitution for it, establish ties between members of the community and ensure the community's continuity. The significance of traditional events as a connecting element that strengthens the Gottscheer identity is highlighted by the fact that most of the Gottscheer respondents (76.5 %) communicate with other Gottscheers during the events organized by the Gottscheer associations. That is, celebrations organized by associations are especially important because they also attract people who are not members of the associations since they also attend major annual meetings. By country, the proportion of non-members who communicate with other

Gottscheers at the events of the associations ranges between 34 % and 65 %. Among persons who are not members of associations that attend traditional events are members of younger generations who have only retained a symbolic ethnic identity or “symbolic ethnicity” (Gans, 1979), so they want to “feel ethnic belonging” (Pleck, 2000, p. 64) but not to have to live in the ethnic community, marry within it or belong to its organizations. Nevertheless, they retain some of the customs, for example, they cook or enjoy traditional dishes and attend traditional events and celebrations (cf. *ibid.*).

Major annual celebrations are also important in terms of establishing and preserving transnational connections between the Gottscheers and their organizations since Gottscheers from all over the world attend them. For example, those from the USA go to meetings in Canada and Austria, and vice versa. In order to connect Gottscheers from as many countries as is possible, particularly those from the USA and Canada, a meeting of all American Gottscheers – i.e. the “Gottscheer Treffen” has been organized in a different place every year since 1963: e.g. Kitchener, Cleveland, Milwaukee, New York or Toronto (Kroisenbrunner, 2012). The meeting lasts several days and merges American cheerfulness with Austrian traditionalism. There is a lot of singing and dancing, and a solemn mass is organized as well.

A relatively new meeting in Bad Aussee in Austria is something special. Since 2005, it has been organized every other year by an ex-hotel owner Karl Ruppe. It is called the Internationales Gottscheer Treffen (International Gottscheer Meeting) and is in essence similar to the North American meeting, since it also lasts several days and merges traditional Christian elements and entertainment. It is a special feature in the European area because it involves the local community and subsequently brings Gottscheer culture to others. In 2013, about 200 Gottscheers and 220 inhabitants from the neighbouring villages took part in the meeting, which is a large number considering that only two Gottscheer families live in Bad Aussee, and there is no larger Gottscheer community there. Owing to the fact that membership in the Gottscheer clubs is decreasing, such an opening of the community is probably the right solution (which is already the case with the Oktoberfest in Kitchener). The meeting in Bad Aussee confirms the thesis set out in the introduction that the existence of a diaspora depends on its ability to “recreate culture” and traditions through ritual practices in various locations outside the home country.

## **7. Virtual Homeland?**

Karl-Markus Gauß (2010, p. 149), who investigated the content of Gottscheer web pages or online forums, writes that the Gottscheers (mostly American) who emigrated found their lost homeland on the Internet. Gauß believes that Gottscheers are distinguished from other American immigrants by the fact that their old Gottschee homeland no longer exists. Furthermore, he notes that the Internet is bringing together people who speak neither the Gottscheer dialect nor German, but still feel like Gottscheers (Gauß, 2010, p. 149 – 154). Gauß rightly highlighted the importance of the Internet for the Gottscheers of today; however, he is mistaken when he says that Gottschee “is no more”. As the old homeland or ancestral homeland, it is still present in the collective memory of the Gottscheer diaspora. However, the Internet, particularly Facebook, has become an important meeting place for Gottscheer communities. Besides profiles of various Gottscheer associations, there are at least three public Facebook pages and several private (family) profiles. On public pages, members exchange information about Gottschee and genealogy, share photos and tips for preparing food, inform each other about events, look up information about visits to the Kočevska region and exchange opinions about Gottscheer history. Facebook has become a place for meeting and connecting Gottscheers from all over the world, but mostly from the USA. In her opening speech at the Gottscheer Volksfest in June 2015, its importance was emphasized by one of the heads of the New York Gottscheer Community, Sonia Juran Kulezsca. With the online or Facebook Gottscheer community, even those Gottscheers who do not keep in touch with their compatriots can stay connected. However, the virtual community does not only connect Gottscheers, it connects Gottscheers and Slovenes, i.e. the present inhabitants of the Kočevska region, and those who are interested in the topic. A transnational space in which people from different countries meet, preserve old and form new friendships has been established. Such “virtual neighbourhoods” (Elkins,

1999) make it possible to connect people based on common interest rather than (ethnic) proximity (ibid., p. 39). To connect people (in our case Gottscheers) from around the world and to maintain/establish a sense of shared identity it is no longer essential, nor is it indispensable to live in concentrated settlements (ibid., p. 38). Of course, this does not mean that the real Kočevska region as a symbolic (ancestral) homeland is no longer important or even existing. After all, it is the pivoting point around and on the basis of which the virtual Gottscheer neighbourhoods are being created.

## 8. Conclusion

The Gottscheer communities around the world today face the problem of an ageing population. Changes in the living environment (displacement, change of identifications), way of life (urbanization of the population), religion (more and more people identify as atheists or as other religions, e.g. Lutherans) and intermarriages have led to the abandonment of old customs, habits and ritual practices in families. Therefore, “collectively performed rituals”, which can be solemn, consecrated with tradition and frequently have an established form, are even more important than ever for strengthening identity (Južnič, 1993, p. 218 – 260). As such, they strengthen the sense of belonging and solidarity between members of the community. Membership in a group is also strengthened through myths and legends. Feelings of belonging are also instilled through symbols such as the coat of arms, flag, anthem, paintings (of Gottschee villages, Kočevje, notable individuals), songs and wearing traditional attire at special occasions.

What will happen with future generations of Gottscheers? Will they still maintain (at least on a symbolic level) the connection with the Kočevska region, which many describe as a God-forsaken place, or will its memory fade into oblivion? Perhaps Ludwig Kren is right when he says that only an awareness of the Gottscheer roots will remain of the Gottscheer heritage: “Young people represent hope. Young people are also somewhat in doubt, since they have to decide whether they will live here and be integrated to a certain extent or whether they want to live in the land of their parents, which basically exists in memory /.../ We, the elderly are still travellers between two worlds, on the one side the former homeland and on the other the environment in which we live /.../” (Kren, 2007).

Although territoriality is one of the important factors that connects ethnicities, and although Gottscheers do not live in a concentrated group in a certain area, I believe that the days of their identity are not (yet) numbered. The present and the future are with the Gottscheer communities where they meet, publish newsletters, dance and sing, etc. The clubs and events they organize at different locations outside the home country are some kind of substitute for the old country and the main connecting link. Furthermore, we should not ignore the importance of the Internet and virtual neighbourhoods, which are increasingly becoming agencies distributing knowledge about the old homeland, (cultural) heritage and genealogy and at the same time a meeting and socializing place for Gottscheers from all over the world and for the current inhabitants of the Kočevska region.

The problems that the Gottscheer communities face could be overcome by opening themselves outwards to attract other visitors, not just the Gottscheers – an example of good practice is the International Gottscheer Meeting in Bad Aussee. An international meeting held in the Kočevska region could also contribute to the preservation of the Gottscheer celebrations (or to the establishment of new ritual practices) and identity. So far, the only major meeting in the old homeland took place in 1999. Given the popularity of the visits to the Kočevska region (including by younger generations), reviving this practice would be more than reasonable.

## Notes

- (1) For more information on the so-called methodological nationalism, see for example Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002.
- (2) The article is a partially amended, supplemented and translated version of the article *Domovina globoko v srcu: kočevski Nemci v Diaspori* (Moric, 2014).
- (3) The study was conducted within the framework of doctoral studies at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana (Thesis title: Slovenski Nemci v diaspori, eng. Slovenian Germans

in diaspora (Moric, 2016)). In the article, I focus on territorial identifications and the significance of the areas and amenities for the Gottschee emigrants, although I also researched other aspects of identity: i.e. national identity, language preservation, the preservation of customs and traditions, etc.

- (4) For more information on Gottscheer dialect (Gottscheerisch) see Moric 2010 (Slovene) or Moric 2011 (English).
- (5) For more information on peddling cf. Drnovšek (2007) and Simonič (1971, pp. 28 – 30).
- (6) This was also noted by Katarina Jaklitsch who interviewed Gottscheers who emigrated from Slovenia (Jaklitsch, 1994, p. 22).
- (7) Most of them were demolished due to post-war ideological intolerance and anti-German sentiment (cf. Ferenc, 2005).
- (8) Since 1924 (Muschler, 2003a, p. 15), the main meeting place for Gottscheers from New York was the Gottscheer Hall clubhouse in Ridgewood, which had spaces for various activities, i.e. a large hall for events and dance, and a bar. In the large hall hangs a huge painting of Kočevje. A symbolic sign “Gottscheer Avenue” is mounted on the street lamp next to the entrance to the premises of the association, although this is not the official street name. In addition, the Kitchener Alpine Club is full of Gottscheer symbolism: on the walls hang paintings of Kočevje and the map of the Kočevska region, as well as photographs of the former presidents of the association and former Miss Alpine Club titleholders.
- (9) The rituals of the Gottscheer diaspora can be roughly divided into: calendar and religious celebrations (at home and/or in associations), larger annual meetings or events organized by associations, celebrations with other communities – processions and rituals of homecoming to Slovenia.
- (10) The biggest event, attended by the Alpine Club Association from Kitchener, is Oktoberfest, a party with dance and music that lasts nine days. It was organized in cooperation with other “German” associations from Kitchener. The Alpine Club also organizes other events, especially dances. At the annual dance called “Evening in the Alps”, contributions are collected for the dance club.

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## Summary

Based on research carried out among Gottscheers (Gottschee Germans) living in the USA, Canada, Austria and Germany, the article presents the social and symbolic meaning of the places the Gottscheers identify with and that influence their life as emigrants. These places are: the old country – Gottschee (the Kočevska region) and the places that are important for the (re)production of their traditions in their new countries. The article also describes the meaning of rituals, including pilgrimages to the old homeland and meetings in their new countries for strengthening their feeling of belonging to a group within the country of residence, and for the transnational connections between the Gottscheers from the mentioned countries and with the old homeland. The article concludes that the survival of the diaspora depends largely on its ability to maintain its culture and traditions through ritual practices at various locations outside the home country.

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