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The significance of private World War I collections in Caporetto County, Slovenia

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Keywords Private collections; cultural heritage; Slovenian museology; museum studies

Abstract This text highlights the important public role played by private collectors of artefacts from Caporetto County, Slovenia, where significant World War I battles occurred one hundred years ago. Individuals from the Isonzo Region have amassed substantial private collections that reside within their homes, including objects from the Twelfth Battle, known as the Miracle of Caporetto. These objects contain the memory of turbulent times in that geographic area, and through their collections, the private collectors contribute context to visitors through direct communication and by framing the military events. While these collectors have acquired their artefacts voluntarily and out of personal interest, and do not have professional help, these collections are open to the public, and play an important role in Slovenian museology by maintaining, researching, and promoting the cultural heritage of that area. These collections are not widely known, nor are they actively publicized. They are overshadowed by the Kobarid Museum, a privately founded public institution that presents the history of battles waged on the Isonzo front in a conventional museological manner. This text attempts to analyze the private collections alongside the Kobarid Museum, and highlights the importance of private collections in preserving important recent regional history.

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The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand on June 28, 1914 in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina¹ by Gavrilo Princip, led to the onset of World War I. This war was fought on many fronts throughout Europe, and this paper focuses on battles that occurred along Slovenia's Isonzo² River, notably the Twelfth Battle, known as the Miracle of Caporetto. In Slovenia's Isonzo area, war remnants remain that can teach us about the history of the region during the First World War including the ways in which soldiers fought, which weapons they used, and how they survived on the front.

Some local individuals have been so fascinated by this regional history that they have amassed significant and museum-quality military collections, which now reside in their homes. In addition to different war-based items, these individuals also collect stories of oral tradition that are recounted with great enthusiasm to visitors. This paper discusses the individuals from Slovenia's Isonzo region who have significant museum-quality collections in their private homes that consist of artefacts from World War I. Those objects contain turbulent war-time

memories from the area. Private collectors contribute context through communication and by framing of the events through their collections.



Figure 1. Alcohol and medicine bottles, and other military artefacts. Bizjak, M. (2015).

This paper explores those private collectors located in Caporetto County,³ whose military collections are open to the public. The article will draw parallels with the Kobarid Museum, which specifically engages with World War I, and will attempt to understand the differences between collections. This article will also investigate the importance of private collections and how they help to preserve memory and spread awareness of the War.

For more than two years,⁴ the Italian and Austro-Hungarian army fought on the rugged terrain of the valleys and mountain ridges of the Alpine foothills and Karst, Slovenia. The Isonzo front is marked in history as the biggest armed conflict in a mountainous region, and the largest military battle on Slovenian soil (Nečak and Repe 2005, 123-128). In October 1917, the Austro-Hungarian Army joined forces with German allies and attacked the Italian battalion. With artillery bombardment and the use of gas bombs, they managed to infiltrate deep into Italian-held territory, and they occupied the town of Caporetto. The front was breached, and the Italian Army fled (Catherwood 2014, 209-211), preventing further Italian penetration into Slovenian territory.

What remains of the Isonzo region's heritage represents a chapter of history consisting mainly of caverns, trenches, fortifications, military cemeteries, and memorials. Many of these spaces are now protected and have been restored under the management of various local associations in order to preserve the memory of the events of WWI. Traces of the battle of Isonzo can be seen today in the form of open-air museums, private collections, and public museums. This heritage is particularly rich in the area of Caporetto, where the Twelfth Battle was fought. Yet, the aforementioned sites represent only a part of the heritage as, literally, fragments and remnants of the War continue to decay in the ground.

Decades after the end of the War in 1918, some individuals decided to preserve the memory of the horrors that happened in Caporetto County. It started with a few unexpected finds while out walking, and developed into genuine enthusiasm for collecting WWI artefacts. For some collectors, this activity soon grew from a hobby into a passionate and active conservation of WWI heritage. Many private military collections have resulted from the enthusiasm of individuals in the Isonzo region. These collections are an important element of saving military remains from loss, they serve to preserve the memory of local battles, and provide visibility and identity to Caporetto and its neighboring towns.

There are many private collectors of WWI objects in Caporetto County, although only seven⁵ have opened their collections to the public. All seven collectors are men. However, many of them noted⁶ that their whole families frequently participate in the so-called “treasure hunts” to locate new objects, so women are not excluded from collecting. Nonetheless, these collectors play an important role in Slovenian and world museology by maintaining, researching, and promoting the cultural heritage of the area. In Slovenia, the phenomenon of openly collecting war remains emerged in the 1990s with the country’s independence. The private collectors mentioned above are unified in stating that they expanded their collecting at that time due to heightened awareness, sense of belonging, and recognition of the past. At the same time the Kobarid Museum opened, which gave the private collectors a sense of being “on the right track” with their collecting habits. If these wartime remnants were not collected, memories would fade away. By collecting the military objects, these collectors are helping to preserve the challenging remembrances of the events of Isonzo region.



Figure 2. Gas Mortars. Bizjak, M. (2015)

After the end of World War I was a time of great poverty, and many Slovenians made their living by trading in war materials including precious metals and iron. However, not everything was gathered at that time, and many more objects that are a significant part of Slovenian culture continues to decay in the ground. The multitude of military remains would have deteriorated had a handful of individuals not preserved them. Sheltering war remnants in private collections

represents a type of protection against destruction, and is an effective way to maintain military, cultural, and historical heritage of the Slovenian nation.

These individuals started collecting voluntarily and out of personal interest, thus they do not have professional museum input at their disposal. However, across years of assembling war material they gained a wide knowledge of history and of handling military objects,⁷ as well as an understanding of the restoration and conservation of these objects. Though these artefacts are safely looked after, some individuals feel that the objects should instead be in the care of a public institution. This has caused considerable regional debate. Nevertheless, private collectors have to follow certain rules if they want to put their military collections on display. Dr. Bojan Rustja, a private collector, notes that:

You need to register under the official register of Slovenian Museums; you need to be a member of one of the societies; you need to have the license to handle firearms, including a note from a psychologist that you are fit to do so; and you have to give consent to the police to visit your collection once a year with no warning. (Rustja 2017)

The purpose of the societies⁸ that private collectors must be a part of is to connect collectors with connoisseurs and researchers of WWI remnants. In cooperation with professional institutions, the societies contribute to preserving and protecting the legacy of the Isonzo front. Frequently, the societies have grown from a small group of enthusiasts into well-organized associations that deal with the military finds of the area.

Through the years, the collectors sought out objects directly in the ground where the Twelfth Battle was fought, in the attics of old houses, or in garbage depots. They obtained many objects as gifts or through exchange, or purchased a few of them at military fairs. Territorial affinity is distinctive for all the collections; collectors primarily search in the area of their home villages, which becomes the focus of their collections. The unifying and underlying theme of these collections is WWI, although some collectors also accumulate ethnological items connected to their home villages. Mainly, collectors commenced assembling items without the thought of developing a proper collection, as the process was primarily a hobby with the wish to preserve the memory of their hometowns.

“Collecting is a dialogue between the past and the future, between man and object. Collecting is a challenge and magnet which attracts.” (Gačnik and Gačnik 1992, 43) Generally, individuals collect objects for functional reasons, the pleasure of aesthetics, for intellectual indulgence, religiosity, magic or superstition, for social status, reminiscences, memory, or documentation, for investment, science, education, and most commonly as a hobby and for the pleasure of doing so (Gačnik and Gačnik 1992, 42). In the words of private collectors, gathering war remnants means caring for the events in the history of their region, preserving the memory for future generations, and serving as a warning about the absurdity of war. They have become primarily researchers, many of whom are emotionally attached to the items. Their collecting preferences are varied. Some collectors are curious about the anguish and torment the soldiers faced, who endured severe winters in the Slovenian mountains. From that comes the enthusiasm for collecting personal objects, including items the soldiers made themselves on the battlefield that can tell a different story of the war. Others collectors state

that collecting every object that had been used in the war is suitable, as its entirety affirms the authenticity of the event. For them, each item had its own function and was a part of a bigger picture, which means all objects are carriers of the particular account.

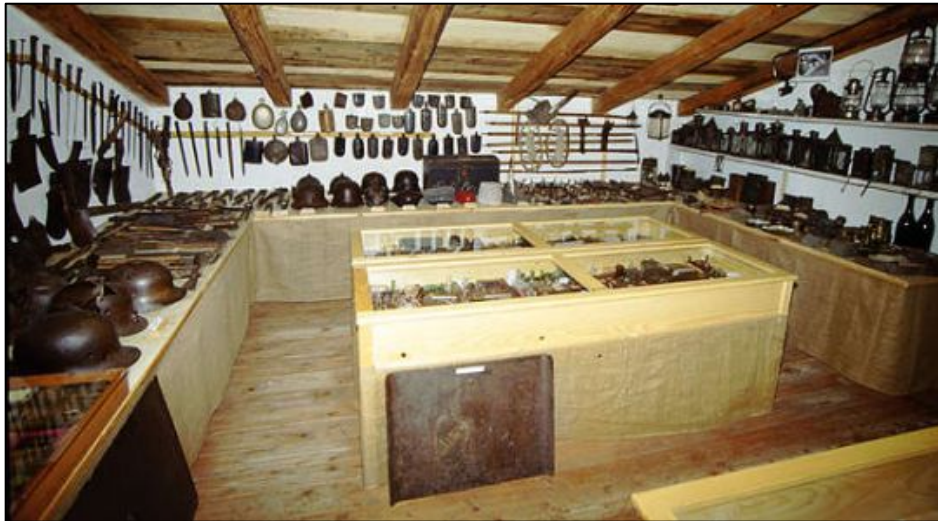


Figure 3. Botognice. Unknown photographer. (2005)

The remains from the Twelfth Battle are exceptional and unique, since opposing sides used distinctive equipment on the different battlefields. However, even for private collectors, too many examples of the same object is not that interesting. Dr. Bojan Rustja reveals:

It doesn't matter if we have duplicates, or five of the same item or even more. The problem is the fact that none of us has space to store these things. So, we like to dispose of them quickly. It's like this: the more samples there are of a given item, the less important they are for the collection, since others usually have such items already. We all try to get rid of them at fairs or gift them to smaller scale collectors, and sometimes we even leave them where we found them or rebury them in the ground. ...Before, you could find a helmet, bayonet, spoon or water flask every day, but today, you need to dig for a week, sometimes a month, to find anything noteworthy. The earth dries up eventually. (Rustja 2017)

Susan Pearce poses a relevant question in *Museums Objects and Collections: A Cultural Study*: "How our possession of objects from the human past influences or informs the way in which we understand the past." (Pearce 1992, 192) In public museums, the historicity of objects can be lifted to mythology, since there is a conscious need to present the finest available artefacts for people to appreciate. War museums should be one of the means through which people can engage with issues and ideas about the past. They are challenged to produce histories that are compelling, accurate and sophisticated. However, there are many contradictory accounts and different narratives, though in the museums we usually see preferred storylines. The fear of censorship is guilty for keeping them away from more honest appraisals of life experiences (Kavanagh 1996, xi-xiv). In public museums, a selection of objects is also due to objective reasons (space, finances, etc.), which means collections cannot

include 'everything.' So-called "poor stuff"⁹ can be refused by public museums, whereas private collectors mostly see the significance of lesser-quality objects in the production of meaning and knowledge (Pearce 1992, 193-241). Private collectors agree that a collection of just individual exhibit pieces does not offer a wide insight into the events.

In Caporetto, the Kobarid Museum presents the history of the battles of the Isonzo front in a conventional museological way. The museum is a privately founded institution that works as a public museum¹⁰ set up by the local population with professional assistance from the Goriška Museum. Nonetheless, the museum's direction is not traditional:

The permanent exhibition is unique in that it does not favour any side in the war; there are just men fighting, losing lives and being mutilated under heavy fire or harsh weather conditions in a war where industry and money make a difference, not man power, courage or effort. It is a museum about war that leaves an impression of deep pacifism. (Culture.si 2017)

Through their exhibitions, the museum strives to share this heritage to local and international visitors in the most efficient way. The Kobarid Museum collaborates a great deal with other museums on the subject of war, and also teams up with private collectors, who temporarily or permanently loan some of their items to the museum. Private collectors and the museum complement one another in many different ways: through exchanging items, assessment, and object identification, and in researching the wartime subject matter. The museum and collectors are connected in a network of transferring experience and mutual recognition (Cimprič 2000a, 36-39). Dr. Bojan Rustja describes this as learning from one another, as each one is a "specialist" on certain objects. Likewise, the collectors and museum collaborate with The Walk of Peace Foundation, which was created in 2007 with the objective of protecting and managing immobile cultural heritage of the Isonzo front. The Foundation also mentions the private collections in their promotional material, and therefore advertises the collections on a small scale (Pot miru 2017).

The Kobarid Museum is widely known and publicized, yet the regional private collections are not. The private collections are marketed to some extent in different local publications, although visitors primarily learn about them by word of mouth in regional inns and tourist centers. The collections are an extra tourism offering for each village, hence guests rarely visit by accident, but are truly interested in the subject matter, in contrast to the museum-goers, who could be just passing through Caporetto and decide to visit the museum. Each private collector may have a few hundred guests each year, a number that includes fellow collectors, history enthusiasts, and many international visitors, predominantly Italians. The visitors numbers are not important to the private collectors, who do not charge an entrance fee. Unlike the Kobarid Museum that is open with regular visiting hours, the private collectors must be at home to show their collections. This is one of the advantages of visiting a private collection: the owners can dedicate their time and attention to the one guest and can present their knowledge to him/her in its entirety. The private collectors hold the stories of exhibited items, and the intimate nature of the collection allows the collectors to comprehensively introduce each object. Therefore, each visit can take hours, and despite thoroughly knowing each war remnant's story, the guided tour is not word-perfect and repetitious, but intriguing and thought provoking, allowing guests to gladly return.

A large group visit is generally not advised due to spatial limitations. The private collectors keep their collections in their own homes, in garages, attics, outbuildings, or storage units connected to the house. Occasionally they are required to refuse guests because the tour and general communication is not possible due to the restricted size of the space. Problems with the dimensions of corresponding rooms are also responsible for how exhibits are assembled. Frequently, the expansion of a collection is not possible. Some private collectors decided not to collect bigger items at the outset of building their collections, even though larger objects could complement other artefacts. Like the museum, private collectors choose to acquire new military remains that would be most effectively included in the permanent display.



Figure 4. Alberto Picco. Lenarčič, M. (2004)

Having 1,000 to 5,000 items on display in a limited space means the collections may have a tendency to look overcrowded. However, this “crampedness” of materialized memories could give a visitor the feeling of warmth and historical domesticity, connected with the affectionate guided tour that one can seldom get in a public museum. Those emotional historical vibrations may influence the guest through the spatial arrangement of the objects. In such an atmosphere, one can experience the “sanctity” of history from each item of the collection. Professional exhibition makers and curators tend to criticize such displays for the lack of clarity, “but on the other hand they themselves form ‘rigid’ and exclusively rational museums concentrating on the object,” a complete opposite of private collections, filled with individual character and identity. (Gačnik and Gačnik 1992, 52) Dr. Bojan Rustja explains:

Kobarid Museum has its own collection and a particular concept. Most of the objects are the same or very similar. But private collectors build the stories around individual items, people or events, what [the] Museum is not able to do. (Rustja 2017)

Nevertheless, the Kobarid Museum's approach is much more similar to private collectors than to other military museums across the world. In 1917, Sir Martin Conway, the National War Museum's¹¹ first director, identified the museum's purpose:

When peace returns and men are back at home the years will pass and memory of the great days and adventures through which they lived will grow dim. It is the purpose of the [National War] Museum to be a place, which they can visit with their comrades... and there revive the past and behold again the great guns and other weapons with which they fought... (Kavanagh 1994, 129)

This objective may still be true in essence, however the current displays at the Kobarid Museum and in private collections do not merely list historical facts, but they influence visitors' emotions, values, beliefs, and political views (Cimprič 2000b, 108).

By the merit of museums and conscientious individuals, visitors can learn about the history of World War I at the Isonzo front through numerous private collections. Found objects have been rescued from oblivion and certain ruin in the ground. These artefacts are a reminder of the absurdity of war, and now preserve the violent memory for future generations.

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Notes

¹ Then Austro-Hungarian Empire, later a part of Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

² For the purpose of this paper, I will be using adopted English names: Isonzo, it.; Soča, slo.

³ For the purpose of this paper, I will be using adopted English names: Caporetto, it.; Kobarid, slo.; Karfreit, ger.

⁴ May 23, 1915 – October 28, 1917

⁵ Peter Hrast, Ivo Krajnik, Mirko Kurinčič, Zdravko Marcola, Valentin Mazora, Dr. Bojan Rustja, Ivan Šavli

⁶ Their accounts are taken from interviews conducted by Matic Volarič in 2011, and an interview I conducted with Dr. Bojan Rustja.

⁷ Private collectors also collect grenades and weapons used in WWI, for which they need special licences. In this paper, I will not explore the details surrounding the laws for collecting weaponry due to limited space.

⁸ Society Peski 1915-1917; Society 1313; Soška fronta Society.

⁹ 'Poor stuff' meaning: not very interesting, commonplace, or lacking contextual information.

¹⁰ The founders transferred the management to a non-profit limited liability company, which still manages the Museum. In 2011, the Kobarid Museum was added to the official register of Slovenian museums.

¹¹ Opened in 1917 in London, now the Imperial War Museum.