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Chapter
Disappearing Community and Preserved Identity: Indigenous Gottscheers in Slovenia
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Abstract

The chapter is a case study of the indigenous Gottscheers in contemporary Slovenia. They were one of the eldest German ethnic communities outside of German and Austrian territory and the only agrarian German linguistic island on Slovenian territory after the WW1. However, their settlements and cultural landscape and heritage had been wiped out almost entirely due to the Gottscheers’ wartime and postwar emigration/eviction (mainly to the USA and Canada), the WW2, and post-war decay, marginalization, depopulation as well as village and cultural monument destruction and Slovenianization. According to the UNESCO Atlas of the World’s languages in Danger, the Gottscheer language is defined as “critically endangered”. The number of today’s Gottscheers in Slovenia is small, less than 300, or around 1000 including descendants and sympathizers. However, on the other hand, contemporary Association of Cultural Societies of the German Speaking Ethnic Communities in Slovenia as an umbrella organization of predominantly Styrian Germans aspires to acquire legal minority status for the German-speaking community in Slovenia (including Gottscheers). The aim of the chapter is therefore to detect contemporary perceptions of a marginalized and disappearing Gottscheers’ community and mechanisms to preserve and finally incorporate its identity into the Slovenian (and broader) cultural space and collective memory.

Keywords: Gottscheers, identity, language, emigration, minority

1. Introduction

Indigenous or native Gottscheers, also referred to as Gottscheers or Gottscheer Germans, were one of the eldest German ethnic or national communities outside

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1 While we are aware that the terms “ethnic” and “national” bear different meanings on an analytical level (nation being a politically conscious ethnic group), we use them as synonyms for the purposes of this text. This “arbitrary” use of concepts stems from the names of particular societies, associations, and communities (e.g. the Association of Cultural Societies of the German Speaking Ethnic Communities) and a similar lack of coherence in scientific terminology. The German community in Slovenia in particular is defined through various names. Scientific literature proposes the German-speaking national community or the German national community as the most appropriate terms ([1], Komac in Polzer et al. 2002, [2, 3]).
of German and Austrian territory and the only agrarian German linguistic island on Slovenian territory after WWI. However, these settlements and their cultural landscape and heritage had been wiped out almost entirely due to the Gottscheers’ emigration/eviction (mainly to the USA and Canada), WWII, and post-war decay, depopulation, marginalization, as well as village and cultural monument destruction and Slovenianization. While there is a significant amount of literature available on the topic of the Gottscheer region and its indigenous inhabitants, studies on its contemporary dwellers are relatively scarce. This chapter provides a case study of this indigenous community from the point of view of those individuals, ever fewer today, who belong to this community and are (or were) active in particular Gottscheer societies or engage in Gottscheer-related topics as amateurs and descendants of Gottscheer parents, or whose one or both parents are Gottscheer, and identify themselves as such, but do not necessarily have any connections to the Gottscheer community or any particular interest in the topic. The purpose is to identify how indigenous Gottscheers or their descendants perceive Gottscheer identity on an individual and social level, how (if at all) they identify with it, what is the significance of cultural heritage and the Gottscheer dialect, what mechanisms should preserve them, and finally how Gottscheers and their identity should be incorporated in the Slovenian (and broader) cultural space and collective memory.

Methodologically, the study is mostly based on semi-structured interviews with people whose life stories are directly or indirectly related to the Gottscheer community. The data collection was carried out in two ways: the main representatives of two Gottscheer societies and one institute were interviewed, while the rest of the interlocutors were obtained mostly by the snowball method. Two out of eleven interviewees are not of Gottscheer origin: one is a precious information source about this community, having grown up in a Gottscheer village, having studied Gottscheer issues, and being familiar with the dialect; the second one is a Styrian German and a member of the Association of Cultural Societies of the German Speaking Ethnic Communities in Slovenia, which includes the indigenous Gottscheer society, and, as an umbrella organization, aspires to acquire legal minority status for the German-speaking community in Slovenia (including Gottscheers). The interviews were conducted in various places in the Kočevska region, in Ljubljana, and Maribor and lasted from 30 to 90 minutes. The methodological starting point that framed the choice of interviews was that identity issues and cultural needs of indigenous Gottscheers primarily manifest themselves through the existence of cultural societies of the community. However, fieldwork in which two societies and one institute are studied revealed a discrepancy between the two leading cultural societies as a major backlash. The two societies differed in the ways they were run, in the priorities of their programs, in the amount of funding they received in Slovenia and abroad, as well as in terms of Gottscheer identity and dialect (“German” vs. “Slovenian”), which was the reason many representative members of the society declined participation in this study, either because they were no longer active members or because they were in the process of exiting and/or transferring to another society.

The case study was executed in 2012 by the Center for Cultural and Religious Studies at the Faculty of Social Sciences (University of Ljubljana) with the author of this chapter as the principal researcher and commissioned by the Cultural Diversity and Human Rights Service of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sports of the Republic of Slovenia.

Due to anonymization, all interviewees in the chapter are listed in the feminine grammatical form.
2. The cultural historical context of indigenous Gottscheers

Gottschee is a region in contemporary south-eastern Slovenia; until 1941, Gottscheers had populated this region, for around 600 years, forming a relatively consolidated ethnically mixed island, located on around 800 km² of land in the regions of Dolenjska and Bela krajina. The region changed significantly in the thirteenth century due to internal colonization. Slovenian inhabitants spread to the slopes around the region, which were more accessible and easier to cultivate, while their advances into the heart of Gottschee were much slower, as the forest-covered and rocky Karst terrain was not as accessible. Judging by old Slovenian place names, there had only been around 30 Slovenian settlements in the main valleys and transport routes of the region (Kočevsko polje, the Črmošnjice valley and the Gotenica-Kočevska Reka valley).

2.1 German colonization of Gottschee and the Pre-WWII Period

In the 1340s, the Ortenburg counts started populating this scarcely inhabited region with German colonists from their estates in Carinthia, mostly for economic reasons. But the core of German colonization took place in 1349–1363, involving migrants from Franconia and Thüringen. According to Ferenc ([4], 19; [5]), Gottscheer colonists were the last German agricultural settlers on Slovenian territory. Later, Germans would only move to towns, markets and larger villages as officials, miners, manufacturers, and merchants. It was during this period of German colonization of Gottschee that the center of the region, Kočevje, had first been identified as Gotsche in a document from 1363, later lending the name to the entire region.4

It appears that what followed this external colonization was internal colonization, which entailed shrinking and gaining more farmland, and the emergence of new settlements. One hundred and thirty-seven settlements existed in the area in the 1570s, accounting for around 9000 inhabitants. Turkish incursions, dire economic and social circumstances, as well as the resulting riots of the Gottscheer peasants hindered the development of the region in those times. Due to the Turkish attacks on the region from the first Turkish incursion in 1469 to the end of the sixteenth century, the inhabitants of this newly-populated land were at least partially displaced, particularly in regions near the river Kolpa and Kostel, their living space taken up by the Uskoks.5 In 1492, Austrian Caesar Friedrich III wished to aid the impoverished economy, granting the region peddling rights, i.e. the right to trade their woodenware, cattle, and cloth freely in Croatia and other lands. Gottscheer peasants lost this privileged position they had under the Ortenburg nobles (free inheritance, which could be sold or exchanged, privileges related to urbar duties and serf duties) during the rule of the counts of Celje who took over Gottschee after the end of the Ortenburg dynasty in 1418, and never managed to regain it under later noble landlords (the Thurn, Ungnad, and Blagaj dynasties), who had rented Gottschee from the Habsburgs, which had inherited the land. In 1641, the Turjaks,

4 There are two explanations for the Slovenian name, Kočevje: the first one relates the name to the word “hoja” (“fir tree”) (Hočevje), and the second to the word “koča” (“hut”) (Kočevje).
5 The Uskoks is the name given to groups of people who, between the 15th in 17th centuries, retreated from their homes due to the invasions of the Ottomans. Orthodox Serbs were predominated among Uskoks living in the Vojna krajina area, that is the area in today’s Croatia and the southern part of Slovenia, which was formed as a result of defense against Turkish incursions.
who had been promoted to dukes, bought Gottscheer lands from the Khisls. Thus, Gottschee was turned into a duchy. According to Karl-Markus Gauss’s observations ([6], 49) on this period: “The Celje counts were bad, the Thurn counts were bad, the Croatian von Blagaj counts were bad, but the Habsburgs were the worst, robbing Gottschee, until the settlers were completely impoverished, then leaving them on their own in their battles with the Turks, and finally pawning the land to various changing landlords.”

In 1809–1813, the region was occupied by the French, resulting in an exodus of 56 Gottscheer families to Banat. During the reign of Maria Theresa and Joseph II, Gottschee was part of the Novo mesto district and the greater province of Ljubljana. According to ethnographic data collected by the Austrian monarchy in 1857, there were 22,898 German residents in the region in the mid-nineteenth century, the peak being in 1855, right before a breakout of cholera in the area. In 1880, 18,958 out of 21,000 inhabitants of Gottschee were German, 98–109 villages inhabited exclusively by the German population. “In 1921 and 1931, Yugoslav statistics which only took mother tongue into account for censuses, only found 42 and 31 villages with no Slovenian residents, respectively, and the so-called nationality register of 1936 speaks of 47 villages with no Slovenian population” ([4], 23).

In the 1880s, the agrarian crisis forced the inhabitants of Gottschee into seeking profit mainly resorting to seasonal jobs and, particularly after 1880 and at the turn of the century, mass emigration, mainly to the United States of America. This caused a continuous drop in population in the region in 1880–1921 ([7], 15). Peddling was also one of the motives for permanent emigration of numerous Gottscheer families to neighboring regions. Before WWII, it turned out that there were more Gottscheers in the USA than in Gottschee, which is why numerous farms died out and villages were displaced ([4], 27; [8], 104–106). Furthermore, the second half of the nineteenth century saw a nationalist revival among the Gottscheers, mostly due to the activities of German immigrants and the Deutscher Schulverein and Südmark associations. In March 1891, Vienna started publishing the Mitteilungen des Vereines der Deutschen aus Gottschee biweekly, later known as the Gottscheer Mitteilungen, which was followed by Gottscheer Boten. Upon German request, the Austrian parliamentary elections reform of 1907 introduced a special Gottschee electoral district, allowing Gottscheers to elect their representative in the provincial and state councils.

This is one of the reasons the Gottscheers felt at a great disadvantage after the disintegration of Austria–Hungary in 1918, so much that they first wished to join German Austria, and later requested the establishment of their own “Gottschee republic” as a US protectorate. Moreover, Yugoslav authorities disbanded the German national council for Gottschee, as well as almost all of their associations, abolished the German higher gymnasium, woodwork school, the German student dormitory, and gradually also German schools and German departments in Slovenian schools (due to a similar attitude taken by Austrian Germans in relation to Carinthian Slovenians). Furthermore, Slovenian was introduced into German schools as a mandatory subject, public use of the German language was restricted, and German place names were Slovenianized. In 1929, after the dictatorship, the Gottscheer political party (the Gottscheer farmer party) had also been disbanded ([4], 27). All of these measures contributed to a fast and massive affinity towards Nazism, developed by the Gottscheers.

6 Banat is ethnically mixed historic region of eastern Europe, bounded by Transylvania and Walachia in the east, by the Tisza River in the west, by the Mures River in the north, and by the Danube River in the south.
Disappearing Community and Preserved Identity: Indigenous Gottscheers in Slovenia
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in the 1930s. According to INT3 (2012, September 10)\(^7\) and INT6 (2012, October 4)\(^8\), since the disintegration of Austria–Hungary, the pressure of slovenianization had been an important factor that—coupled with strong propaganda, a desire for a better life and a fear of moving to southern Italy—contributed to “voluntary” emigration of such a large number of Gottscheers in 1941 (INT3 (2012, September 10); INT6 (2012 October 4); Makarovič 2008, 23, 25; Gauss 2006, 53). Slovenianization or the aversion of the newly formed Yugoslav state against “everything German”; as well as the loss of privileges that Gottscheers had been accustomed to in Austria–Hungary, is a topic that requires further research, in order to clarify why the emigration of Gottscheers in 1941–1942 took place on such a large scale and only appeared as “voluntary” (INT6 2012, October 4). On the other hand, the Gottsheer Zeitung had been published by Gottscheers in Kočevje from 1918 till 1941.

Allegedly, there had been a high degree of cooperation between the Gottscheers and the Slovenian population until the rise of Nazism. However, after the new Gottscheer authorities expressed a Nazi affinity and organized the Gottscheers according to the Nazi model in 1936, national dissonance had begun to become more and more apparent. Since autumn 1939, Gottsheer authorities had established 25 district groups of the Schwabisch-German Cultural Association (SDKB), which the vast majority of Gottscheers had joined before the occupation that followed two years later. The same number of \(\textit{sturms}\)\(^9\) and the same number of armed departments of \textit{Volksdeutsche Mannschaft} were also formed, as well as seven partly armed units of security services, and 25 groups of the youth organization ([4], 29; [5], 29–112).

2.2 Gottsheer resettlement and the end of the war

Gottscheers were not thrilled about the Italian occupation of Gottschee, having expected Gottschee to become part of the German occupied territories. As early as on 23 April 1941, Gottsheer ambassadors had secured an agreement with Himmler in Bruck on the Mur, about the resettlement of Gottscheers into the German Reich, directly to the new farms by the Sava and Sotla rivers, extending to around 100 km in length and 10–15 km in width, without bridging stops in resettlement camps, unlike other German resettlers ([4], 31). By expelling almost all of the Slovenian population (around 37,000), as well as Croatians and others into around 15 German camps, this would create a German bastion; in the process, around three Slovenian farms would be united to form one German (Gottscheer) resettler’s farm.

According to their own census, there were 12,498 Gottsheers living in Gottschee (around 2754 families) in March 1941, spread across 170 villages in four former Yugoslav districts or twelve municipalities, most of the population being farmers and artisans. The central part of the Gottsheer Island was mostly populated by German families, whereas the edges, the valleys, were nationally mixed. Particularly the younger population followed the propaganda of Nazi Gottsheer authorities, whereas older and wealthier urban residents, as well as several clergymen had their doubts. Intimidation (slovenianization, Italian authorities that would move the Gottscheers to southern Italy, ...) and even concentration camp threats were common [4, 5, 8]. This atmosphere made the vast majority of

\(^7\) Audio recording of the interview, in the form of raw data, is available from the author.

\(^8\) Audio recording of the interview, in the form of raw data, is available from the author.

\(^9\) \textit{Sturm} is a Nazi term, meaning a military unit the size of a troop.
Gottscheers (12,147 or 97%) opt for resettlement. After an agreement was signed between the governments of the German Reich and the Italian Kingdom on 31 August 1941, the optants were checked for their race, political views, and health. Only 66 were not allowed to move. The resettlers’ property and assets were first taken over by a German association, Deutsche Unsiedlungstreuhandgesellschaft, which passed it on to an Italian real estate institution, Emona. 11,509 persons, i.e. 2833 families moved between 14 November 1941, and 22 January 1942. Upon arrival, they were disappointed, as they had to live in provisional winter housing units and on temporary estates. In October 1943, former Slovenian farms near the Sava and Sotla rivers housed 10,666 Gottscheers, Gottscheer authorities had been abolished by the Nazi regime (some individuals were sent to the Russian front (INT6 2012, October 4)), Gottscheers now subordinate directly to the Nazi authorities in Brežice. Displaced Gottscheers were therefore put into the position of defense pawns for the south-eastern border of the German Reich. The number of people wishing to return to Gottschee grew steadily, but this wish was not granted by the Nazi leaders ([4], 39, [8], 142–150).

Different fates awaited the Gottscheers at the end of the war in May 1945. Some, particularly women and children, were taken to Austria by train, others successfully attempted to flee, while others were detained by Yugoslav authorities, placed in gathering camps (Teharje, Strnišče by Ptuj), and deported to Austria. The regions near the Sava and Sotla rivers were once again populated by the surviving Slovenian deportees, while most Gottscheer houses and villages in the Gottschee region were destroyed and burnt down, Yugoslav authorities having no interest in populating this emptied region with “Germans” again. Now definitely homeless Gottscheers were first temporarily placed into the Mürztal, Kapfenberg, and Wagna camps in Styria, and Feffernitz in Carinthia, and then settled in Austria and Germany, while many left to the USA ([4], 39; [5], 113–170).

According to the population and settlement census of 1948, 83 villages were empty, and some consisted of a mere family of two. After the war, the population of Gottschee was almost entirely different, only just over a quarter of people living in their hometowns in 1953. Postwar immigrants (first from nearby and then from all around Slovenia) had begun to renovate old buildings and build new ones, but only a small percentage of them had actually come to the region to stay. After the war, most of Gottscheer land had been nationalized, and real transformations would only become apparent decades later, as the forest would expand further and further into former farmlands. According to some assessments, ([4], 69, 73; [5], 263–672) the forest eventually covered up an entire quarter, i.e. around 200 km² of the former Gottschee region.

3. Cultural heritage, organization, and identity of indigenous Gottscheers

Gottschee cultural heritage that emerged before WWII entailed particular farmer houses, customs, folk beliefs, a dialect and a linguistic geography, folk poetry, art history objects, films and photographs of ecclesiastic books and archive materials. Despite the general readiness of the special German cultural committee that was to take care of the preservation and transportation of these Gottschee cultural items to new settlements from October 1941 to June 1941, few of these plans had been realized successfully.
3.1 Indigenous Gottscheers’ cultural heritage

Tradition and conservativeness appear to be the most characteristic traits of Gottscheer heritage. Ecclesiastic architecture did not differ greatly from the one in Slovenian settlements, and there was almost no secular art on the Gottscheer linguistic island. Church monuments, chapels, and signs of various shapes (such as individuals’ or neighborhood vows, the memory of cholera) were most prominent. Residential architecture also had its specificities (inter alia, the settlements and house types were rather diverse). The houses’ interior design also had its peculiarities, just like Gottscheer songs and, to a certain extent, cuisine (INT7 (2012, September 13)\textsuperscript{10}, INT9 (2012, September 18)\textsuperscript{11}). Several factors have made it difficult to do research on some of Gottscheer cultural heritage (folk dances, food, farming tools): the Gottscheers’ displacement (to the USA and to other countries, as well as to the regions near the Sava and Sotla rivers during the war), villages, abandoned and destroyed during the war (particularly arsons of settlements by the Italian army, carried out as part of a big Italian offensive in the summer of 1942, when the Italians purposefully burnt down abandoned villages to make it impossible for the partisans to use them for accommodation purposes; as well as arsons carried out by the German army and the Home Guard), post-war conditions and inadequate post-1945 settlement, economic and employment policies, as well as the purposeful ideological destruction and removal of secular and sacred remains. In practice, these factors caused the collapse of the Gottscheer cultural landscape, particularly in Kočevski Rog (due to the Italian offensive) and Kočevska Reka (because the territory was closed down in 1953–1954, when almost all sacred objects and cemeteries were destroyed and removed; Ferenc [4], 55). “Today, […] at least from the point of view of art history, we can regret that this minority is no longer with us. It is erroneous to only remember the years when the Slovenians and the Germans opposed each other, when there are also centuries to be remembered, when we not only lived by each other’s side, but lived with each other” ([4], 95).

The life story of one of the interviewees is a telling example of such Gottscheer–Slovenian cohabitation. She was born to Slovenian parents, who had moved to Gottscheer village Verdreng (Podlesje) from Carinthia and were the only Slovenian family in the village. Despite her Slovenian descent, she learnt the Gottscheer dialect before she learnt Slovenian, as she had spent most of her time playing with Gottscheer children. She had also been accepted into the Gottscheer community, according to the local “cheln” (friendship, camaraderie) custom, and actually spoke Gottscheer to her mother, who replied in Slovenian, for quite a while. She only properly learnt Slovenian in school. This Gottscheer–Slovenian cohabitation lasted until the mid-1930s, when individual Gottscheers had picked up on Nazi ideas and begun inciting people against the Slovenians. This was when the interviewee’s family moved to Črni potok, a Slovenian village. As a child, she perceived that move as a great loss, as she had to leave all of her friends behind. She proceeded to study Gottscheer tradition and heritage later and does a lot of translation from the Gottscheer dialect. Knowing the dialect saved her from Auschwitz: the prison commander in Klagenfurt, where she and her mother were stationed before being taken to Auschwitz, noted

\textsuperscript{10} Audio recording of the interview, in the form of raw data, is available from the author.
\textsuperscript{11} Audio recording of the interview, in the form of raw data, is available from the author.
her knowledge of “German” and relocated her to a youth center in Thüringen (INT1 2012, September 19).

According to Ferenc ([4], 79), “[i]t would probably be difficult to find a similar region in Europe, one whose cultural landscape had undergone such dire transformations as Gottschee.” It is the ethnographic museum in Vienna that possesses the biggest collection of items from Gottscheer lives today, and there is a small representational museum in the Občice Gottscheer Cultural Center, established in 1998 and run by the Society of Native Gottschee Settlers. The state is aware of the importance of preserving cultural diversity and has been making efforts to ensure the conditions for the preservation of indigenous Gottscheer cultural heritage, greatly endangered due to the aging and scarcity of the population in their area of origin. In 2006, the Ministry of Culture’s Cultural Diversity and Human Rights Service proposed continuous funding for the preservation of Gottscheer heritage, in the form of annual predetermined sums. This was meant to ensure specialist-oriented and long-term reconstruction of artistic heritage, publication, exhibition, and promotional activities and registration of intangible heritage, particularly language. In 2012, the Ministry of Culture’s Cultural Heritage Directorate also produced an assessment of the state of affairs in the domain of Gottscheer cultural heritage, authored by Gojko Zupan. The assessment concludes that the community is dealing with quite peculiar circumstances: the number of Gottscheers is small (less than 300, or around 1000 including descendants and sympathizers), displacement, depopulation, wartime and postwar emigration, village and cultural monument destruction. However, Zupan [9] believes that, considering the abovementioned circumstances, Gottscheer heritage has been exceptionally well-presented since the mid-1990s. The locations of important abandoned Gottscheer villages are marked with explanation boards, maps, and distinct images, which are under the authority of the owners and tourist organizations. Municipalities took care of installing signs for acknowledged cultural monuments. Moreover, Šeškov dom, housing the regional museum Kočevje and a permanent exhibition on Gottscheer history, everyday life, cultural heritage, etc., is a monument of national significance. The state also financed setting up or reconstruction of certain sacral objects and signs. According to Zupan [9], it is impossible to determine the exact amount of funding that Gottscheer societies are receiving for their community, heritage, language, and culture promotion activities, as they are aided by various sources: ministries, the Slovenian Forest Service, private investors, enterprises, and from abroad.

3.2 The organization and cultural needs of indigenous Gottscheers

In this study, we approached the questions of heritage, identity, and cultural needs of indigenous Gottscheers through the perspective of the activities of two Gottscheer cultural associations (The Society of Native Gottschee Settlers and the Peter Kosler Association). Due to the small size of the community and substantial differences in views expressed by the two societies, the study was supplemented with interviews with Gottscheer descendants, who are not directly involved in society activities, or are not listed as members of these societies, or are professionally involved with Gottscheer heritage and its preservation, and are striving towards connecting cultural activities in the field of Gottscheer heritage and dialect into a more cooperative, synergic and internally coordinated, complementary, but at the same time diverse creative dynamic (Institute for Preservation of Cultural Heritage Nesseltal Koprivnik).

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Disappearing Community and Preserved Identity: Indigenous Gottscheers in Slovenia
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The Society of Native Gottschee Settlers\textsuperscript{13} comprises the abovementioned Cultural Center of Native Gottschee Settlers in Občice which is where all of the society’s activities take place; the Center also houses a small museum in the attic. The society has a special unit responsible for promoting the Center and tourism. The unit organizes visits and meetings of expatriates in Slovenia, prepares programs for visitor groups from Slovenia and abroad, offers guided tours of the Cultural Center, and guided tours around the surrounding region, where Gottscheers used to live and where there are still remains of Gottscheer villages, sacral monuments (churches, cemeteries, and chapels), natural heritage, and developing industries (such as the Podstenice Beekeeping Museum). Special attention is granted to Gottscheer descendants, who, when possible, are the ones guiding tours around the region where their ancestors used to live. INT7, a member of the society, states (2012, September 13) that Gottschee and their Center were first visited by those “who knew where they were going and why they were going there”; these groups were followed by others, who were not personally connected to this place, but were attracted by the Gottscheer story and the story of this space. Over the past years, schools started appearing in the latter group, too. Often, the Gottscheer topic is linked to the umbrella theme of people within the region that speak different languages and live in their own particular way, such as the Uskoks. “We, who have our homeland, do not know what it means not to have one or to have one somewhere but to be unable to reach it, and not to be part of it anymore. We will never be able to feel that. But this is what the Gottscheers are feeling” (INT7 2012, September 13).

The society has explicit demands regarding formal, official recognition of the status of a German minority; it shares these with the Styrian Germans, which it also cooperates with as part of the abovementioned Association of Cultural Societies of the German Speaking Ethnic Communities in Slovenia. According to INT2 (2012, September 18)\textsuperscript{14}, INT4 (2012, September 18)\textsuperscript{15}, and INT5 (2012, September 24)\textsuperscript{16}, only official recognition allows one to ensure legal protection and a dignified attitude of the state and the citizens of the Republic of Slovenia towards the Gottscheers and the Germans left in Slovenia. Namely, among other things, such recognition would be a legal basis to secure legally guaranteed financial means for the societies’ activities.

\textsuperscript{13} The Society of Native Gottschee Settlers (Gottscheer Altsiedler Verein) was established in 1992 by Gottscheers from the Črmošnjica-Poljanska valley and is a full member of Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN), as well as founding member of the Association of Cultural Societies of the German Speaking Ethnic Communities in Slovenia. The aims of the society are: cooperation in order to preserve linguistic, cultural, ethnic and architectural characteristics of indigenous Gottscheers that are an important part of the shared reality of Gottscheer-Slovenian history in 1330–1941 and preserving their identity, Gottscheer culture, and the Gottscheer dialect among Gottscheer natives and expatriates; establishing and reinforcing links with the remaining Gottscheers and their descent dents in Slovenia, as well as expatriates and their descendants; collecting historical and contemporary materials about Gottscheers in the past and present, at home and abroad; carrying out educational activities for its members, organizing cultural and social events; cooperating with related societies in Slovenia and abroad; caring about and restoring monuments and other features reminiscent of the existence, culture, and other characteristics of indigenous Gottscheers’ life, cooperating with state organs, and with the Catholic church in order to preserve Gottscheer heritage in sacral objects; occasionally, the society also publishes the Bakh newspaper in Slovenian and in German.

\textsuperscript{14} Audio recording of the interview, in the form of raw data, is available from the author.

\textsuperscript{15} Audio recording of the interview, in the form of raw data, is available from the author.

\textsuperscript{16} Audio recording of the interview, in the form of raw data, is available from the author.
Today, these means are very limited, forcing societies to seek funding abroad.\textsuperscript{17} The society’s activities are mostly funded by the Republic of Austria and the provincial government of Carinthia, and partly by the Federal Republic of Germany and the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Slovenia.

The primary aim of the second society, \textit{Association Peter Kosler}\textsuperscript{18}, is first and foremost to achieve peaceful coexistence of the Gottscheers and the Slovenians and to ensure the preservation of Gottscheer cultural heritage and Gottscheer cultural identity, which are also Slovenian heritage and identity. According to one of the leaders of the association, the association expects the state to guarantee organized funding for the preservation of the Gottscheer dialect and culture as a unique phenomenon in Europe. This way, it would become a generally known fact in Slovenia that Gottscheer culture is “built into the culture of the entire nation” and that it enriches the latter. INT10 (2012, September 17)\textsuperscript{19} believes that the atmosphere in places where the association’s activities take place has greatly improved lately. She wishes to distance herself from the topic of minority issues and refrains from using the term minority, preferring to speak about a linguistic group. INT10 believes that opening up the minority problem in relation to German speakers in Slovenia would ignite repulsion against everything linked to the Gottscheers (INT10 2012, September 17).

INT9 (2012, September 18) believes that all of the abovementioned circumstances indicate that it would be sensible for the state to grant the Gottscheers some sort of official recognition, but she also feels that minority status is not a necessary must. The state has to decide on the form and way of recognition. As a Gottscheer, she does, however, expect that the association would at least be granted the right of using its German name (e.g. in formal correspondence, …) without being accused of “German agitation”, and using Gottscheer or German location names when referring to places inhabited by Gottscheer descendants, whereby she does not call for official bilingualism. The state’s policy ought to be—publicly—positive about the presence

\textsuperscript{17} In 2006, the association published a “Memorandum for the legal resolution of the status of the German-speaking community in the Republic of Slovenia”, which underscores the “autochthonous” nature of the German-speaking community in Slovenia, the problematic conclusions reached by the census, and calls for collective protection on the level of the Slovenian Constitution and laws, substantial and legislative reinforcement of the legislative branch of power in Slovenia with clear and unambiguous articles about persecuting discrimination and sanctions against hate speech, for taking into account and implementing international agreements signed by the Republic of Slovenia with other states (such as Austria) and for organized (and not merely project-based) funding of the activities of the association and particular societies.

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Slovenian Gottscheer Association Peter Kosler} was established in 1994 and received its current name at the general assembly on 1 September 2012 in Kočevo, which also confirmed the move of the association’s headquarters from Ljubljana to Kočevo. It retained the name of Peter Kosler, a Gottscheer who published a map of Slovenian lands in 1853, and strived for peaceful coexistence of Slovenians and Gottscheers. The aims of the association, apart from the aforementioned ones, are representing and preserving Slovenian and German cultural heritage in Gottschee and abroad, overcoming prejudice, preserving Gottscheers’ and their descendants’ traditions, such as the Gottscheer dialect, respecting human rights and developing democratic principles of the state. Moreover, the association offers Gottscheer dialect and German lessons (including in kindergartens and schools); carries out publishing activities (e.g. publishing CDs of concert and song recordings in the Gottscheer dialect, books, including a textbook for teaching Gottscheer dialect, a Slovenian-Gottscheer dictionary, etc.); organizes exhibitions and lectures (Gottscheer song nights, …), etc. It collaborates with local communities as well as state and educational organizations in Slovenia and abroad, Slovenians in Austria and other states, and other minority groups [10].

\textsuperscript{19} Audio recording of the interview, in the form of raw data, is available from the author.
and activities of Gottscheers and their societies. Gottscheer descendent INT8 (2012, September 27)\textsuperscript{20} who is not a member of any of the two societies has a similar opinion. Anyway one puts it, Gottscheers require some sort of a mechanism of state support: a mechanism allowing to understand historical events linked to Gottschee, a mechanism securing targeted financial support for work in the interests of the Gottscheers, Gottscheer history, and their cultural heritage (museums); Gottscheer dialect lessons—at least in order to keep in touch with the dislocated Gottscheers and their descendants, and Gottscheer societies abroad, as, according to her, these links have been reinforced since 1991; a mechanism for preserving memories (e.g. using announcement boards, monuments, ...) of destroyed Gottscheer villages, which were practically wiped out, a fact that had been exploited by the state for over 60 years. “Today, these are abandoned and devastated places, but also places where one can see daffodils, peonies, semi-dried out apple trees” which are the elements that most strongly indicate that there used to be a village there at some point” says INT8. All of this can be used to attract tourists, but this would require collaboration between societies, the local community, and the state, which “should, even from the point of view of responsibility towards its own history” somehow formally acknowledge the existence of indigenous Gottscheers (INT8 2012, September 27).

\textit{Institute for preservation of cultural heritage Nesseltal Koprivnik}\textsuperscript{21} was established in 2008, as a natural and cultural heritage care and preservation institution, as well as an institution dedicated to promoting the village of Koprivnik, Gottschee, and its inhabitants. According to one of its founders, the basic guidelines of the institute’s activities are professionalism and working towards a greater visibility and acknowledgement of Gottscheer heritage. The institute actively avoids politicization of both its work and the topics it deals with. At first, they concentrated on the region of the extended Gottscheer linguistic island and acted locally, in the municipalities of Dolenjske Toplice, Kočevje, Semič, Črnomelj, Kostanjevica on the Krka, and Novo mesto; lately, they have expanded their activities towards Ribnica and beyond. Furthermore, they have begun to devote special attention to the Kvarner region in Croatia; according to INT11 (2012, December 14)\textsuperscript{22}, there are many traces of Gottscheers in the region, particularly around the islands of Rab and Mali Lošinj, as well as Rijeka and Opatija. Their funding comes from three levels: municipal calls of the aforementioned municipalities, state calls (chiefly those issued by the Ministry of Culture), and European calls. INT11, a Gottscheer descendent, who “has only begun to learn Gottscheer as an older man” (INT11 2012, December 14), believes that while Gottscheer topography is well researched and documented, the most important topic related to Gottscheer heritage, requiring further research today, is Gottscheer customs. Preserving and spreading knowledge about Gottscheer cultural heritage is, according to INT11, a task that should primarily be carried out by societies, institutes, and municipalities, as well as by the state, on a secondary level. She believes that collaboration of particular societies is exceptionally precious in this regard; this is why the institute has already connected with Association Peter Kosler, as well as some younger individuals that it wishes to collaborate with and perhaps formalize the organization of their collaboration.

\textsuperscript{20} Audio recording of the interview, in the form of raw data, is available from the author.

\textsuperscript{21} The institute carries out various programs in the spheres of education, culture (especially painting and photography), cultural tourism, and other related activities with an emphasis on Gottscheer heritage.

\textsuperscript{22} Audio recording of the interview, in the form of raw data, is available from the author.
3.3 Indigenous Gottscheers’ identity perceptions

Having the preserved and non-preserved cultural heritage, organization, and expressed cultural needs as described above in mind, how can one conceive of Gottscheer identity—today, and in an historical perspective? How did they identify themselves, what was their national identification, and how (if at all) were they recognized in a predominantly Slovenian environment? Demographic censuses in the Austrian state, as well as those carried out in the subsequent Yugoslav state, are not of much help when it comes to Gottscheers. All they allow us to find out is the proportion of the German population in Slovenia, the most numerous non-Slovenian community until WWI (7.2% in 1890, 7.3% in 1900, 8.1% in 1910) ([11], 115), but not the actual share of Gottscheers. Their identity was of explicitly regional or local character, and, as such, difficult to “grasp” using ethnic or national definitions, which was also confirmed by our interviewees. Indigenous Gottscheers would identify themselves (or were forced to identify themselves) during censuses either as Slovenes or as Germans, or avoided national identification altogether, preferring local or undefined.

Therefore, discrepancies in naming the indigenous community arise among Gottscheers themselves, as well as on a broader level (in scientific and local history literature). INT3, of Gottscheer descent, disagrees with the term Gottscheer German, convinced that the term was coined in the times of National Socialism, to underscore the German identity of the Gottscheers. “A Gottscheer is a Gottscheer,” she says, “Gottscheers never considered themselves as Germans, as they never found national identification to be of any relevance.” If anyone identified themselves as Gottscheer Germans, it was Gottscheers in the 1930s and 1940s, who sided with Nazism (INT3 2012, September 10). INT6 (2012, October 4) shares this view: “While Gottscheers are of German descent, they were never Germans”.

On the one hand, it is perfectly understandable that the small number of Gottscheers makes it difficult for them to voice their demands and make them heard if they do not form ties to the broader German community, leading to a loss of their identity. On the other hand, forming such ties bears the danger of dissolving Gottscheer characteristics and particularities in the interests of the more numerous Styrian Germans. “Personally, this bothers me, because Gottscheers are not a German community; these are two distinct phenomena, which is why Gottscheers should receive special attention” (INT8 2012, September 27). INT11 also insists on preserving and maintaining the difference between Gottscheers and the German-speaking community. In terms of history, the former were isolated from Styrian Germans; this isolation led to the formation of important historical, cultural, and ethnological particularities, as well as a distinct attitude towards the environment they inhabited. Therefore, INT11 believes this specificity, as well as the collective memory of it, should be cherished, and promoted on the local, state, and broader level. A broader recognition of the Gottscheer community, its existence on Slovenian territory, its customs, special dialect, important personas, etc., would be a great contribution to this goal (INT11 2012, December 14).

INT9 defines her identity as composite, defining herself as “Gottscheer, but also Slovene” (2012, September 18). She believes that what really distinguishes Gottscheers from Slovenes is their language or dialect, which is why she is focusing her activities on preserving the Gottscheer dialect as much as possible. In the past, certain individuals and media pressured kindergarten and school (including language schools) principals and teachers that offered courses in Gottscheer dialect, by
encouraging an anti-German attitude, creating a feeling of threat due to alleged “Nazi activities” and prejudice, and even hatred among Slovenes. She believes it would be good if the state publicly expresses recognition and support to such activities that are neither forbidden by law nor bad, and do not threaten, but, on the contrary, connect Slovenes. Furthermore, she feels it should be publicly underscored that due to historical circumstances that resulted in the extremely small population of Gottscheers in Slovenia, this population has remained in touch with its relatives or even mere acquaintances and descendants of Gottscheers that had been moving abroad since the nineteenth century. These connections have allowed them to preserve their dialect, history, and heritage. INT9 even says that even expatriate Gottscheers abroad have lately begun to express an interest in learning the Gottscheer dialect. Furthermore, she believes the general atmosphere in places where such activities take place, especially in Kočevje, Semič, and Dolenjske Toplice, has also changed. Over the past decade, people have begun to accept the fact that “history is not just national /history/”, but also history of a certain region, place, or space. People are also willing to learn about these matters, as they no longer feel threatened by the presence of different languages, identities, … Younger generations in particular “are becoming curious”, states INT9 (2012, September 18) about Gottscheer culture, their cuisine (e.g. pobolica, white potato soup, …), attire, rituals and customs, folk songs and dances, which differ from Slovenian ones when it comes to detail (e.g. ancient Germanic mythology as part of Gottscheer folklore, etc.).

Dialect is certainly an important identification indicator of indigenous Gottscheers. However, when it comes to defining the Gottscheer dialect (Göttscheabarisch), a peculiar German dialect with many preserved elements of medieval Alpine languages, and some internalized elements of Slovenian, Gottscheers do not all share the same view. Some define it as archaic German, while others insist it as archaic German with Slovenian and even Croatian, etc., influences. Due to the impact of colonizers that arrived in the region from various areas during the period of colonization (the region of the Lienz basin, the valleys of Mitermöll and of the Drava, and southern regions on the border between South Tyrol and Carinthia), the dialect is also internally differentiated, sharing basic characteristics, but varying in nuances, which differed in various parts of Gottschee (Hornung in Petschauer 1984, 194, cited by [12], 96).

German language certainly played a special role in Slovenian lands. German colonization resulted in the emergence of numerous German linguistic islands in the region, and for a long period of time, German had been the administrative language in Slovenian lands. It started losing this role in the nineteenth century and finally lost it with Slovenians’ political independence within the State of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs in 1918. Later historical circumstances also dictated a particular attitude towards the dialect, which was forbidden in public after WWII, as emphasized by the interviewees (INT5, INT7, INT8). INT8 (2012, September 27) mentions her personal experience with censuses, when censors “did not give you an opportunity to identify yourself as you wanted to: official instructions are one thing, but the person in charge of the census is something different. He comes up to you, and when you say: “I am Gottscheer,” he responds “Why Gottscheer, you are Slovenian.” Of course, older people and rural residents did not resist this type of census, and there are no numbers that would reveal these practices. She believes matters were similar when it came to linguistic affiliation. “Not many censors listened to what they were told […]. People let the censor lead them on […]. And even if people were brave enough to identify as Gottscheers, they were often not heard, and their real identity did not make it to the lists.” Gradually, their traces began to disappear from the collective memory of the
nation, which, according to INT3 (2012, September 10), was a loss for the Slovenian identity as well. Some of the interviewees (INT2, INT4, INT5) believe the current state of affairs is still problematic, marked by the gap in history which occurred in 1941–1942, with the emigration of the vast majority of Gottscheers. This period was followed by post-war anti-German (and anti-Gottscheer) politics (including executions, stalking\(^23\), victimization, a ban on the public use of Gottscheer dialect and on any kind of contact with expatriated Gottscheers until 1972), which had been implemented despite the fact that the Gottscheers who stayed had mostly cooperated with the resistance against the occupier.

On the one hand, the resultant problem is related to the small number of people that actually identify as Gottscheers, which is one of the important reasons for the Society of Native Gottschee Settlers’ decision to form a common association with cultural societies run by the German-speaking community in Slovenia; on the other hand, it reflects the (albeit latently) persistent fear among the people, the split within the cultural battle, and stereotypes, including antagonist associations of Germanism with Nazism. According to one of the interviewees (INT5 2012, September 24), people are still possessed by an old fear that “being German is something negative in Slovenian society and that we should not be heard speaking German aloud.” Therefore, if our criterion in assessing Gottscheer identification is knowledge of the Gottscheer dialect, we are left with several tens of people who still speak it; however, the historical circumstances that we have outlined indicate that this is not the most relevant identity indicator. Judging by origin or descent, there are around 250 Gottscheers left in Slovenia today. However, if we choose this criterion, we encounter the problem of classifying children born in mixed marriages (INT7 2012, September 13). Interestingly enough, three interviewees found out they were of Gottscheer origin very late: INT7 was 28 (her father was Gottscheer, and her mother was Slovenian), and INT5 was 14 (her father was German, and her mother Slovenian) when her teacher at trade school told her she was German because her surname was German, exposing her to repeated stigmatization. INT8 mentions a high school encounter in Črnomelj, when her classmate from Krško found both her and her origins disturbing. In 1941–1942, Krško was part of the region populated by Gottscheer settlers and abandoned by Slovenians, and many people retained a negative attitude towards Gottscheers later on.

There had been reciprocal assimilation between Slovenians and Gottscheers in Gottschee, as noted by Marjan Drnovšek ([7], 10); however, it was not strong enough to make the German linguistic island disappear, probably due to the fact that German settlements were very compact. The island emerged as a result of wartime emigration and primarily of mass Gottscheer emigrations to various parts of the world, mainly to the USA, after the war.

The results of the Preserving Gottscheer Identity Study, which surveyed over 100 indigenous Gottscheers from Slovenia, Austria, Germany, Canada, and the USA in 2007–2010, state that most (64.8%) of those who speak the dialect, only know its basics, which means they are only capable of describing themselves and their life circle ([12], 92). The dialect is most widespread in the USA (in New York, Cleveland, and Milwaukee), where Gottscheers had begun to emigrate to in the 1870s, and where they are most widespread today. Nevertheless, most Gottscheer parents in the USA

\(^{23}\) INT4 and his father, as well as INT6 were all monitored by the UDBA (Yugoslav Secret Police). The UDBA started with the so-called OO Nemčurji action (Nemčurji—a pejorative term used to describe Germans and sympathizers) in 1966 and concluded it in 1986 (INT6 2012, October 4).
and Canada preferred to teach their children, born in these lands, German rather than Gottscheer, because this made it easier for them to communicate and collaborate on an institutional level with members of the wider German national community. Many Gottscheers believed that German would be more useful to their children than a dialect. Another reason for teaching Gottscheer children German was an interest in marrying individuals of Gottscheer or German origin. When the spouse was of German origin, usually, German would be spoken at home. All of this caused a notable decline in dialect speaking skills exhibited by today’s younger generations (in the USA, Canada, Germany, and Austria): they are familiar with it on a passive level, i.e. they understand it but do not speak it. Many are familiar with certain expressions, insults, sayings, swearwords, and songs, but are unable to use Gottscheer to communicate in everyday situations. Starting with the third generation, English replaces Gottscheer and German, as these individuals of 25–55 years of age mostly identify English as their mother tongue. But half of the participants in the survey still speak the dialect at home ([12], 93–96).

Younger generations of Gottscheers in Slovenia also speak the dialect much less frequently than older generations. Thirteen years ago, there were only around five persons under 40 years of age, who were still active speakers of the Gottscheer dialect. There are many reasons for this, ranging from the broader historical and socio-ideological ones described above, to more intimate ones, such as ethnically mixed marriages, a wish for non-discrimination and greater social mobility, and the accompanying voluntary assimilation, as well as a lack of interest (Jaklitsch in [12], 103–104).

INT4, one of the former presidents of the Society of Native Gottshee Settlers believes (2012, September 18) that the dialect is “leaving”, practically wiped out due to historical and politico-ideological reasons; it is impossible to preserve a dialect that is no longer alive among the people. And because younger generations lack knowledge of the dialect, they cannot develop their Gottscheer identity, according to one of the interviewees from the Preserving Gottscheer Identity Survey (in [12], 98). According to some, indigenous Gottscheers should be included into general Slovenian collective memory at least on a declarative level. It would also be very important to secure more detailed thematization of the Gottscheer issue in Slovenian textbooks in order to contribute to a de-tabooization of the topic, which had become taboo particularly after WWII. “This should be everyone’s issue, and not just an issue of a bunch of those engaged in it on a more or less expert level” (INT6 (2012, October 4), INT7 (2012, September 13), and INT8 (2012, September 27)). INT8 (2012, September 27) speaks about historical damage, related to Gottscheer expatriation and post-war stigmatization of everything German. Although the Gottscheers that remained sympathized with and actively took part in the National Liberation Struggle, they emerged from the war as scapegoats, black sheep needed by each epoch, especially a post-war one, when “times were completely mad”, still drenched in wartime events. In these circumstances, Gottscheers did not teach their children the dialect in those times, nor did they mention their Gottscheer origins. Gottscheer was banned in postwar Yugoslavia, as well as in the German Reich; being a Gottscheer was the worst insult imaginable in those times, explains INT3 (2012, September 10). “In postwar times, when those Gottscheers created their families, being a Gottscheer was something so negative that we never talked about it. We had our surnames written in the Slovenian manner, too,” states INT8 (2012, September 27).

Although officially surnames did not undergo slovenianization, the “custom” was widely practiced in those days. Her own surname, for example, had consistently been
slovenianized. Only by leaving for high school, located in a different place, was she able to preserve the original form of her surname. “And no one dared say anything about it, due to the presence of the idea that German was something negative.” The story of INT6, born to Gottscheer parents in Srednja vas near Črmošnjice, whose family stayed in Gottschee during the war, is an illustrative example. According to her father’s words, wartime and post-war life was “marked by constant fear about our survival, as we were treated as the remainder of the German minority, i.e. Schwabs, who were not wanted in these lands.” Partisan violence took the family’s mother in 1945. As for her, she was discriminated against ever since she had entered primary school, where her teacher often called her “German gypsy”. In year eight, her name was changed from German to Slovenian, against her own will; as she refused to respond to that name, her behavior was evaluated as bad. She was renamed to a Slovenian name in her report card, too, and her surname was slovenianized, so she had to later officially change it back into its original form. In 1957, she entered a professional college in Ptuj, where the teacher insulted her on the very first day, saying: “Who allowed this Schwab into the class?” (INT6 2012, October 4) These circumstances forced Gottscheers into dire self-censorship, so-called parental silence, intended not to pass their identity, especially their dialect, onto their children. This created a breach in historical continuity. With no historical continuity or conscience among Gottscheers and their descendants, today, preserving what can still be preserved, is left to societies and several individuals. Therefore, in spite of all of the facts described above, activities of these societies bear “the noble vocation of preserving the last sparks in the field of Gottscheer history and identity”, when they should be encouraging younger generations to take part in their activities in their own ways (INT3 2012, September 10).

4. Conclusion

The identity question of indigenous Gottscheers is an extremely interesting field of research and a challenge to existent ethnic and national identities, as it is a diachronic and synchronic intersection of (micro)local, regional, ethnic and national affiliations. This multi- and intercultural intersection may be at the root of its exceptional “elusiveness”, ambiguity, fluidity, which is at the same time a consequence of the unidentifiability of the indigenous Gottscheer population both in the Slovenian and in the global context. In both cases, the difficulties begin with defining the indigenous Gottscheer population in terms of numbers: numbers of members of particular societies are not reliable data, as not all Gottscheers are enrolled in some sort of a society, and some are members of all of them. Furthermore, sympathizers with the Gottscheer issue who are not necessarily of Gottscheer origin themselves are also members of some of the societies. At least in the past, the Gottscheer dialect used to be the most certain identity indicator, but the dialect is disappearing today. According to the UNESCO Atlas of the World’s languages in Danger, the Gottscheer language is defined as “critically endangered”, which means that the youngest speakers are grandparents and older, who speak the language partially and infrequently. Even society meetings, as noted by Katarina Jaklitsch, mostly use the national tongue of the environment as their language of conversation. Therefore, she feels “the final truth is that once another generation of Gottscheers leaves, the Gottscheer language will have to be added to the list of dead languages” (Jaklitsch in [12], 107).
While indigenous Gottscheers and their descendants have formed autonomous organizations (societies) on the basis of their Gottscheer identity, there are, due to various reasons, notable intersocietal disagreements. The **Society of Native Gottsche Settlers** is explicitly striving to achieve official recognition of Gottscheers/Germans as an ethnic or national minority, believing that this is the only solution that will guarantee the realization of their cultural needs and rights and grant them protection within the majority Slovenian society. Therefore, the society became a member of the **Association of Cultural Societies of the German Speaking Ethnic Communities in Slovenia**. A part of the Gottscheer community perceived this move as an (extreme) politicization of (cultural) societies and distanced itself from this particular society. Another society, **Association Peter Kosler**, has no such explicit demands, although its members agree that the state will have to eventually grant the Gottscheers some sort of recognition if its interest is to preserve Gottscheer tradition, heritage, and history as part of Slovenian general collective memory, which indigenous Gottscheers are an important part of.

The **Institute for preservation of cultural heritage Nesseltal Koprivnik** sympathizes with this view and specifically underscores that in the case of indigenous Gottscheers, which are nearly non-existent in practice, an acknowledgement of minority status is neither a real nor a sensible possibility. However, in the institute they agree with the viewpoint that the indigenous Gottscheer community needs the state’s collective recognition of its existence, significance, and the role it played in Slovenian history. The institute, as well as Gottscheer descendants that participated in the study, and are not members of any of the aforementioned societies, agree in principle that the state should grant some sort of recognition to the existence of indigenous Gottscheers and their descendants. While they understand the purpose of connecting with the wider German-speaking community in Slovenia, they warn that these kind of activities may in fact cause the forgetting of the particularity of the Gottscheer identity, which differs historically and culturally from the Styrian community, and eludes national definitions, being much closer to regional or local affiliations, i.e. an affiliation to the Gottschee region.

The second reason for intersocietal disagreements is therefore the issue of indigenous Gottscheers’ ethnic or national identity. While the **Society of Native Gottsche Settlers** undoubtedly prefers the explanation based on (old)German identity, **Association Peter Kosler**, as well as the **Institute for preservation of cultural heritage Nesseltal Koprivnik**, and certain societally inactive interviewees insist on the particular indigenous Gottscheer identity. They are not denying its archaic German or archaic Austrian roots, but they do emphasize that these roots have been embedded into an ethnically dominantly Slovenian space, which marked Gottscheer identity in an important way. From this point of view, the Gottscheer community appears as a greater contributor to historical and contemporary multiculturalism and interculturality of this space, at the same time constituting a more comprehensive and more plural cultural and linguistic identity of the Republic of Slovenia, which should be its norm, value, and symbolic capital. This would, among other things, imply including indigenous Gottscheer-related issues into primary and secondary school curricula and textbooks, in order to achieve a more comprehensive presentation of cultural variety in the past, as well as in contemporary Slovenia, as well as an implementation of these topics, i.e. in the educational process. Existent and new common projects should encourage connecting existent and potential new societies within the community, as well as with other communities. Furthermore and most importantly, it would be sensible and necessary to consider spreading knowledge about constitutionally unacknowledged communities for the broader, especially majority population. This would not only reinforce popular knowledge about the existence of these communities in the state,
but also contribute towards a gradual deconstruction of historical fears, ethn(ocentr)ic prejudices and stereotypes, and perhaps towards the creation of a conscience about a heterogeneous, plural, and multi-/intercultural space as a value in itself.

Appendix

Semi-structured interview questionnaire

1. How would you assess the position of the Gottscheer community in a certain time frame: what are the main milestones in the development of your community (WWI, WWII, the breakup of Yugoslavia, the independence of Slovenia, EU membership ...)?

2. How do you perceive your community: in what way is it preserved, how does it function, what is the identification of the younger generations with the so-called "minority identity«, is it manifested and if so in what way in a culturally different environment, what are the relations with the majority population…?

3. What are the main problems facing your community (demographic, political, cultural, economic, legal ...)?

4. What are your expectations/demands/needs from the state and how would you structure them: cultural, political, economic, legal ...?

5. Which institutions in the state (government, government office for national minorities, ombudsman ...) or outside (EU, UN ...) have you already turned to with your problems, demands, expectations)

6. How would you like to normatively and formally regulate the status of your community?

7. We are mainly interested in the cultural needs/requirements of your community vis-à-vis the state. In your opinion, what are these and should they be entirely the financial burden of the state?

8. How important do you think is the size of a community when setting conditions, such as e.g. topography in the minority language, program in minority language on national radio and television, education about minorities and in the minority language ...

9. Is there cooperation with other ethnic, national communities (all/constitutionally recognized/constitutionally unrecognized) regarding common problems/ demands that you have towards the state? If so, what are these communities and in what form does the cooperation take place?

10. In your opinion, what is the most appropriate name for your community and is there a consensus in your society about its uniform name, or are you even in favor of the idea that Gottscheers being part of this uniformly named community?
11. Who should be the appropriate representative of the Gottscheer or German-speaking community and thus the official interlocutor with state or government institutions in negotiations regarding the regulation of the community status?

12. As applicants of cultural projects, what do you miss in activities of the Ministry of Culture and its institutions, what improvements are needed and what are the specific cultural needs of your association in the future, that the Ministry should take into account when creating public tenders?
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