

Backpack

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A backpack is an item closely associated with travel, used to store primarily personal and essential items during journeys. Its distinct characteristic is the way it is worn on the back. Due to its size and the nature of travel, especially **irregularized migration**, it is primarily used to carry basic travel necessities such as socks, certain food items (e.g., **onions**), sleeping bags, and similar essentials that facilitate easier movement (Cf. Judzińska and Sendyka 2022: 7-16).

A backpack, like many other objects in various contexts, including migration, can serve a dual purpose - as an object of practical and emotional value (Povrzanović Frykman 2010: 47). It can carry material objects primarily for practical use, but, as we learn from other migration contexts, it can also contain items of an intimate nature, such as love letters (compare De León 2015: 10) or bracelets. They can also be aide-mémoires (Marcoux according to Povrzanović Frykman 2010: 49) - "objects that help preserve the consistency and continuity of memory" (Povrzanović Frykman 2010: 49). However, caution is necessary to avoid "slipping" into objectification and dehumanization of the people we are writing about.

In this text, we will discuss a backpack found on the road from Trieste to the hinterland, near the village of Boršt, with the Italian name Sant'Antonio in Bosco, close to the border with Slovenia, right next to a narrow, winding road and a family house. Hidden migrant routes passed through this area throughout the 20th century, as we learned from the locals and lecturers during a student field workshop, during which this text was created. At first glance, the dark blue backpack by the road on dry, yellow leaves near the stairs leading from the **forest** to the road did not seem special in any way. It was a medium-sized backpack, turned upside down, with white letters spelling "Perth College" on the front, featuring two large compartments and a smaller one, as well as mesh pockets for bottles on both sides. Was the backpack truly from the eponymous college in Australia, or was the inscription arbitrary, a sign of another fast fashion industry product? Judging by appearances, it had been discarded, like so many others we had seen in the forest near the border. The backpack had mimetically blended with nature while simultaneously standing out. Abandoned, like roadside **garbage**, it seemed untouched, although it certainly had not been. Animals had touched it, maybe even moved it, and insects and larvae had taken up residence. In our uncertainty, we observed the backpack, wondering if it belonged to a person on the move. The intense smell of human sweat, reminiscent of long and arduous journeys, hiking, and hiding from main roads, was the first clear sign that it was a backpack abandoned after such a journey. We wondered if we would touch it if we were there as tourists or casual passersby (De León and Hameršak 2022: 244), rather than on a student research expedition. We examined, searched, and photographed the backpack and its contents with the idea of contributing to the documentation of irregularized migration, recognizing and recording traces of hidden movements in space - archaeological evidence that someone had indeed passed this way and left a mark behind (Judzińska and Sendyka 2022: 3).



Abandoned backpack by the roadside to Boršt, March 24 2023. Photo: Ivana Budimir

The backpack, as an abandoned artifact with documentary value, symbolizes the arduous migrant journey but also the severed connection between a person and an object. Our initial emotional reaction to the backpack was minimal, but our discomfort and surprise were apparent. We spent some time in silence, standing over the backpack. Our position when examining the backpack was clear - we were individuals who had come to the "scene," and we attributed various meanings to the object we encountered, assuming that "on transnational journeys, objects are not only present but are often of crucial importance" (Povrzanović Frykman 2010: 46).

The movement of people is inevitably linked to the movement of things, and negotiating meanings de facto implies communication with objects and through them (compare Povrzanović Frykman 2010: 43-44). In the abandoned backpack on the Italian-Slovenian border, we found items from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, previous game points. Next to the backpack was a discarded piece of paper wrapping from Puma socks. Based on the contents of the backpack

and the experience gained from "visiting" places where people on the move gathered in Trieste and its surroundings, we easily deduced that the backpack could have belonged to a young man. We assumed it was discarded because it was no longer needed near the end of the journey, close to Trieste, and might even have represented an "identification mark," a potential threat, a sign by which the police could recognize an "illegal" migrant, according to William Walters (2014: 47). Considering that the backpack appeared untouched for a long time, worn down by the influence of weather conditions, we questioned the symbolism of the backpack in that area. Therefore, not only had its owner discarded it, but the local residents had also, paradoxically, abandoned it. They hadn't thrown it away, as one might expect for roadside trash, but left it where it had likely been discarded.



Receipt from the abandoned backpack, March 24, 2023. Photo: Marijana Hameršak

The receipt we found in the abandoned backpack by the roadside might not seem special at first glance. However, it was not only a part of the backpack's contents but also a source of information about items purchased for the journey, some of which were still in the backpack when we found it, at least in traces or parts of the packaging, while others were probably consumed, discarded, or lost. The receipt paints a picture of the backpack's owner, who, like many of us, indulged in minor vices in addition to needing sources of quick energy for the journey. The receipt predominantly lists sweets, along with two different brands of energy drinks, a two-liter bottle of Karlovačko beer, and Marlboro Red cigarettes. It was precisely because beer was listed on the receipt that we questioned whether we had correctly assessed it as a backpack used during the journey. We wondered if there was room for beer on such a trip and realized that consuming alcoholic beverages did not necessarily mean that a person was not on a journey; it only implied certain assumptions about the journey and the people traveling. Some of these assumptions related to our perception of the journey as challenging, as well as to the abstention from alcohol for religious reasons. We found parts of some items from the receipt in the backpack, including Snickers bar wrappers and the paper packaging holding four Red Bull cans.

Out of the ten items, half were sweets: Tops cookies, Snickers bars, Nutella sachets, Jimmy chocolate, and Napolitanke wafers. Only two items on the receipt were non-food items: cigarettes and a bag. What we could conclude was that these were small items that served as a kind of power-up, helping a person endure a long and potentially difficult journey more easily. The place of purchase was Konzum, on Trg Ante Starčevića, in the underpass of the Main Zagreb Railway Station, which was bustling with people in transit due to changes in migration policies at the end of 2022. The store's address on the receipt confirmed our initial assumption that it was a migrant's backpack.

We left the place where we found the discarded backpack with more open questions than answers. We tried to rethink them in subsequent discussions and in this text.

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