

# In Search of Treasure in Šalek: Creating Local Identity through Narrative Ostension

— Ambrož Kvartič —

People transform concrete real-life events into narratives, but the reverse is also true; folklore and narratives in general can also provoke a creative or active response in people and significantly shape their worldview and way of life. The cases in which this happens (through processes of narrative ostension) are also of interest to folklorists, as they provide crucial contextual information about how (folk) narratives function, spread and acquire meaning. Stories about hidden or buried treasure are among the most important narratives that provoke such ostensive (re)actions. People who live with them sometimes venture out into the symbolically significant but very real elements of local space (e.g. castles) and actively search for the treasure mentioned in a legend. Such is the case of Šalek Castle (in Velenje), where local folklore about buried treasure has prompted several generations of locals to head up to the castle and start digging.

KEYWORDS: treasure folklore, narrative ostension, legend-tripping, spatialisation, Šalek, Ekenštajn

Ljudje ustvarjamo svoje zgodbe iz konkretnih resničnih dogodkov, vendar drži tudi obratna pot – tudi pripovedna folklor (lahko) vzbudi ustvarjalni, tvornostni odziv ter pomembno zaznamuje in sooblikuje naše ukrepanje, pogled na svet in način življenja. Primeri, ko se to zgodi (s procesi, ki jih folkloristika obravnava s skupnim konceptom pripovedne ostenzije), so za folkloristične raziskave prav tako zanimivi kot samo pripovedno gradivo, saj prispevajo pomembne kontekstualne in performančne podatke o tem, kakšno vlogo ima pripovedna folklor za svoje nosilce, kako se širi in kako pridobiva pomene.

Pripovedno gradivo o skritem oziroma zakopanem zakladu je med najvidnejšimi primeri, ki sprožajo takšen tvornostni odziv. Ljudje, ki živijo s temi zgodbami, se tu in tam odpravijo aktivno iskat zaklade iz pripovedi, pri čemer vstopajo v s simbolnim potencialom zaznamovane elemente resničnega izkustvenega prostora – na primer na gradove. Tako je tudi v naselju pod gradom Šalek v Velenju, kjer je lokalna pripovedna folklor o zakopanem bogastvu spodbudila številne generacije domačinov, da so se povzpeli do grajskih ruševin in začeli s kopanjem.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: folklor o zakladih, pripovedna ostenzija, *legend-tripping*, prostorjenje, Šalek, Ekenštajn

*“What are you hiding in your depths, castle of Šalek –  
Among the evil rocks, within the unknown tunnels?”*

(Štefanija Prislán)

## INTRODUCTION

Exploring the narrative folklore of the place where a researcher grew up is not without the hidden bias of nostalgia. I spent my childhood living just below the ruins of Šalek Castle in Velenje and climbed its stairs countless times with my peers. As we got to know and experience the limits of our ever-expanding world, there was one story (legend) connected with “our” castle that proved to be the most persistent. It was the one about a tunnel connecting it to the neighbouring castles of Ekenštejn and/or Velenje, and about the treasure hidden within this tunnel. There were several versions of this story, told to us wide-eyed youngsters by the older inhabitants of Šalek and by our extended families. Not only did we listen to the stories, we followed them up the hill to the castle ruins in search of the coveted riches they promised. Of course, we would be the ones to find the treasure, as we seemed to be the only ones ever to have had the idea of going to look for it. We found nothing of course.

Then decades passed and all this came back to me as I looked at my hometown through the eyes of a folklorist, equipped with concepts, paradigms, methodological tools and piles of comparative material. Two worlds that had shaped me came together in the most fascinating way, resulting in a truly unique research project that is presented here.

I soon realised that the treasure hunts of my youth were merely a continuation of the long-standing practice of many generations of Šalek inhabitants, who had also followed the stories up to the castle, convinced that they would be the ones to find the buried treasure. This confirmed an important folkloristic postulate that, although concrete (historical) events are transformed into narratives through the process of folklorisation, it is just as likely that narratives also elicit a creative or active response in their bearers and shape their world and way of life within their experiential reality. That is why I decided to study the treasure (folk) tales of Šalek in detail through fieldwork and interviews. I wanted to investigate their variability and contextual dimension, their role in building local identity, their ability to convey messages and their potential to express the cultural peculiarities of a place I once called home.

Šalék is a small hamlet, a former village on the eastern edge of the Šaleška valley in the Styria region of Slovenia. In 1979, Šalek ceased to exist as an independent settlement and became a district of the town of Velenje. The old centre of the village lies just below a steep rocky hill on which stand the ruins of Šalek Castle, after which the entire Šaleška valley is named. The first mention of the castle dates back to 1154, when it was known as *Schalac*,<sup>1</sup> making it possibly the oldest castle in the Šaleška valley. Abandoned in 1770 after a series of fires, only the central tower remains with its (rather unique) triangular floor plan. Šalek Castle stands at a strategic position on a cliff at the northernmost point of a larger rocky ridge, on which the ruins of another medieval castle, Ekenštejn (also known as Fire Castle or Zgornji (Upper) Šalek Castle), stand to the south-east and slightly higher than Šalek.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Blaznik 1988: 383.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the hamlet of Šalek and the two castles, see Stopar 1975.

The area encompassing the two castles and the rocky ridge that connects them is the key location of the (folk) stories and accounts that I present in this article. Although the Šaleška valley, like many other areas in Slovenia, is full of folk narratives about treasure and accounts of the search for it, I have limited my research to this particular area. The research process took place between 2006 and 2019. It involved interviewing twenty-seven inhabitants of Šalek and Velenje – the very people who perceive this castle space as an element of their (spatial) identity. They either provided me with memories of their own treasure hunts or shared second-hand accounts of them.<sup>3</sup> The interviews were generally full of joyful reminiscence, with people willingly sharing their own accounts of treasure hunting. I am convinced, however, that me being a *de facto* member of their local community, sharing and comparing my stories with theirs, helped foster this willingness.<sup>4</sup> I conducted a couple of the interviews while wandering around the castle ruins, enabling the informants to point out specific spatial elements as they told their story. In addition to the interviews, I used some older written accounts<sup>5</sup> in my comparative analysis of narrative material.

Before presenting the collected material and the interesting effects that these stories have or had on the inhabitants of Šalek, I must first give the reader a general outline of the narrative folklore about treasures and treasure hunting (in Slovenia), as well as the important folkloristic concept of *narrative ostension*. This should help to explain the very tangible effect that narrative folklore can have on real life, “reaching out” to it and even prompting its bearers to take concrete action.

### “TREASURELORE”: NARRATIVE FOLKLORE ABOUT BURIED RICHES

Legends, tales and other narratives about hidden/buried treasure and treasure hunting are one of the most important constants in the repertoire of narrative folklore in Slovenia, Europe and the world. They are a rich, varied and interesting mix of genres and themes,<sup>6</sup> within which narrative folklore researchers have identified a wide variety of interpretative emphases: “[...] they reflect memory tales, superstition, real-life poverty, but also the desire to suddenly get rich.” (Marks 1987: 61) Viewed as a commentary on, or an illustration of, the social and economic status of the storytellers, it can be assumed that folk narratives about treasures form around traditional and contextual views of the actual and symbolic possibilities for improving one’s economic situation (Kalda 2014). From this perspective, these narratives reflect people’s experiences and their hopes, and point

<sup>3</sup> To preserve their anonymity, only the key contextual information about the informants is given (gender, year of birth, and the year of recording). The only exception is Štefanija Prislan from Šalek, who died several years ago and whose diaries and poetry are also (at least partially) publicly available texts.

<sup>4</sup> The research project was not intended to be an auto-ethnography. However, it turned out that my own “narrative-repertoire” played an important role in shaping the interviews themselves. In some cases, it was the telling of my story that sparked a detailed narrative from my interviewees.

<sup>5</sup> Rare as they proved to be; namely a work of satirical travel writing (see Alešovec 1884) and some diary entries by the aforementioned Štefanija Prislan (see Prislan, no year given).

<sup>6</sup> See also Dolenc 2000: 60–66.

to both the individual's desire for wealth and the values of their broader community. This interpretive emphasis is also present among the people of Šalek, as they repeatedly commented on their treasure-hunting with words to this effect: "[...] no one found the treasure anyway. We, the neighbours, would surely have noticed if someone got rich – but no one did." (Prislan, no year given: 31).

However, the economic paradigm alone – the desire for wealth and prosperity – is not and cannot be enough to understand the meaning(s) treasure narratives carry for the particular community within which they are embedded. These narratives also represent powerful conceptual abstractions, as they are thoroughly connected to a much wider range of narrative folklore and belief systems, that is, to other layers of tradition. Comparative analysis reveals that the treasure narratives revolve around two major cultural concepts: that of space and that of identity.

Narrative folklore about (buried) treasure, as well as narrative folklore in general, is an important element of spatialisation, that is, the process of conceptualising space and its boundaries (see, for example, Mencej and Podjed 2010). Space is "experienced through a process of imaginative reconstruction" (Aitchison et al. 2002: 78), and therefore cannot be reduced to a mere physical reality or a "natural given", but is also and above all a cultural construct. In creating space through narrative, the narrator chooses details from their cultural and experiential reality not for their documentary value, but for their symbolic or signifying potential (Simonsen 1993: 129). This potential is of course relative and may be defined in different ways, sometimes more narrowly and sometimes more broadly. It takes only a superficial examination of folk narratives on buried treasure to see that they emphasise the elements of (experiential) space that are (traditionally) considered to be manifestations of the other world and are therefore magical and (in a symbolic sense) dangerous (Hrobat 2010: 59). These include intersections, sacral buildings, old trees, isolated rock formations, standalone hills and, of course, castles. Through time and repetition, the community and its members determine which spatial elements are important and subsequently become a location-motif onto which folklore material is attached. Quite often it is "the greatest", the most dominant (the most important, the most present, the most exposed) elements of spatial reality that are the ones loaded with the greatest symbolic potential.<sup>7</sup> This potential is then materialised and contextualised through narrative folklore. It is therefore understandable that castles, being a prominent spatial dominant, very frequently become elements of narrative folklore (both fairy tales and legends) as well as their setting (for Slovenian examples, see Krojež and Dapit 2014; Hudales 2013; Zorec 2009).

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<sup>7</sup> Compare this to the folkloristic concept of "the Goliath principle". Originally proposed by Gary Alan Fine (Fine 1985; Fine 1992: 141–143) in the context of contemporary legendry, especially mercantile legends, this principle was set out to describe the tendency of "folk" to attach a corporate (mercantile) legend to the brand that dominates the market. As this "attachment" presupposes the migratory nature of the folk narratives, I find the concept useful when talking about any other example of migratory folklore attaching itself to any other conceptual dominant within a given cultural context. This assertion, however, would require much broader debate.

However, the folkloric role of treasure goes a step further than merely “marking space”. Narratives about it are always about buried or submerged wealth that is removed from immediate real experience. It is frequently guarded by mythical creatures (goblins, talking snakes, dragons)<sup>8</sup> or magic, making it a conceptual taboo.<sup>9</sup> For this reason, the traditional belief systems present it and perceive it as an illustration and a consequence of a community’s contact with the other world, or of a desire for such contact. Therefore, as per folkloristic analysis, a (buried) treasure in folk narratives cannot be considered as real wealth, but as a symbol of all goods, both worldly and other-worldly. Through this prism, the presence of treasure (or, more specifically, the folklore about it) in a particular local community can also be understood as that community’s aspiration to establish contact with the other world. Through narratives and space, the fabled, mythological world becomes part of the domestic environment. Meanwhile, the treasure represents a specific point in the local space that either transcends the boundaries of the terrestrial (Hrobat 2010: 59), or represents a passage between the two worlds.

However, identity is inseparable from space. People come to know, understand and make sense of it through storytelling (Bird 2002: 521). Identity is an ideology that is always in search of its material existence (Althusser 2000: 91) and finds it, among other things, in narrative folklore. This is why a significant part of the narrative folklore about treasure revolves around the dichotomy of Us vs. the Other – familiar vs. strange, community vs. foreigner/alien, village vs. town, etc. This can also be seen in some common themes or motifs within the Slovenian (European) repertoire of treasure narratives. The first of these is that the treasure was left here by the Turks, the symbolic archetypal representatives of chaos and danger, with the intention of returning to collect it one day (see, for example, Mlakar 2019: 60 and 69–72). The second is the motif of the Hun warlord Attila, an archetypal historical figure of the invasive Other, who is said to have been buried (sometimes in a golden coffin) along with his treasure in various micro-locations across Europe, including Slovenia (see, for example, Hrobat 2010: 57–59; Podbrežnik Vukomir and Kotnik 2009: 156–157; Podpečan 2007: 133). Both migratory motifs presuppose borrowing facts and names from historical memory and adapting (contextualising) them through new variants to the particular communities and their places/spaces. This also creates and perpetuates an emphasis on the long continuity of a particular local identity. Although not related to the treasure under the castle itself, this kind of application of formative Turkish Otherness is also present in Šalek: “*The linden tree that the Turks planted stood there. This Šalek linden tree. They came to Šalek and planted the linden tree there, promising to come and see how it grew. They haven’t been back yet though [laughs].*”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Animal and mythical treasure guardians are a powerful symbol of the world of chaos or the afterlife (see, for example, Hrobat 2003: 131; Hrobat 2010: 71).

<sup>9</sup> In the context of Šalek and its treasure, this notion is further highlighted by older (written) narrative variants, which speak of people being punished or sanctioned for looking for treasure by either supernatural forces or the law. However, the contemporary accounts collected in my research do not tell of any kind of punishment or sanctions for this endeavour – supernatural or otherwise.

<sup>10</sup> Female, 1927, recorded in 2006.

Within the folk narrative and storytelling repertoires, a treasure is therefore both a desired object (a cultural fetish) and a signifier of the sacred – something that attracts and excites people on the one hand, and frightens and repels them on the other. It represents a boundary and it functions as a marker of the contact between the world of people and the world of the supernatural. It also expresses the local community's desire to make this contact within a space that this community recognises as its own. Once the importance of this duality is grasped, one can also begin to understand the undeniable emotional attachment of the storytellers to their narrative material and the real (ritualised) practices of actively entering into the world narratives, i.e. looking for the treasure that the stories put forth.

### FOLKLORE AND NARRATIVE OSTENSION

When collecting folklore material from people by performing fieldwork, a researcher often comes across cases in which informants supplement their narratives by “pinning” them to their own real experiences. Furthermore, they sometimes even use the narrative to justify their concrete behaviour and principled patterns of behaviour. These narrative details point to the important performance-contextual fact that a particular narrative can and does provoke an active creative response that shapes the world and way of life of its bearers.

The fact that concrete events create narratives is widely acknowledged (the narrative genre of the memorate, for instance), but “[...] it is equally as likely that the narratives also create events.” (Ellis 2001: 164) This relationship of mutual creation between stories and the real life of their bearers has already been articulated by several scholars of narrative folklore: “We have to accept that fact can become story and story can become fact.” (Dégh 1995: 261)

Folklorists describe this phenomenon with the concept of (narrative) ostension.<sup>11</sup> The term was originally used to refer to any set of ways in which “[...] the untextual reality itself – a thing, a situation or an event – conveys messages.” (Dégh and Vászonyi 1983: 6) However, in the subsequent debate, folklore scholars linked ostension more concretely to narratives themselves, defining it as the process by which people act out the motifs and events of narrative folklore (Fine 1992: 205). Ostension thus describes the occurrence(s) of everyday events and behaviours as narrative folklore directs them. The concept is also used to describe the way in which people enact the motifs and events of narrative folklore (Fine 1992: 205). Ostension thus represents: “[...] a dramatic extension [of folklore] into real life.” (Ellis 2001: 41). It describes a set of practices through which people enact their (narrative) folklore in one way or another (Fine 1992: 205). Ostensible practices are neither narrative nor organised “drama”, but are the conscious or unconscious recreation of the narrative scripts found in folklore (Meder 2009: 259). This recreation, in turn, is a consequence of the “[...] people's ability to shape their own behaviour on the basis of the story they have been presented with.” (Fine 1992: 207)

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed presentation of the concept of narrative ostension along with examples from Slovenia, see Kvartič 2017: 139-48.

Ostension does not occur in all (folk) narrative genres, but tends to occur in those genres that are both presented and accepted as plausible, that correspond to socially and culturally relevant themes, and that indicate an individual's self-identification with the community (Fine 1992: 207). In other words, ostension and ostensible practices are primarily marked by legends.<sup>12</sup>

The visible (and thus recordable) manifestations of narrative ostension are many and varied. In order to study them, folklorists have grouped them together into three formal categories.<sup>13</sup> The first one describes an internalisation of the narrative, or its transformation into a memorate (a story of personal experience). This happens for instance, when the narrator presents themselves as the central character of the narrative, even though they may have heard (received) it as if it had happened to someone else. The second category involves any kind of (mis)interpretation of real events based on a pre-existing narrative. The third and final category – which is also the best means of understanding and explaining the treasure hunting expeditions inspired by treasure narratives – involves the dramatised enactment of the atmosphere, setting, characters and other elements of the stories in real life (Ellis 2003: 162–163). In the latter case, also called “pseudo-ostension”, there is always a self-reflexive awareness in people that everything that happens is primarily about the story; for instance, all the people who went treasure hunting at Šalek Castle did so with pre-existing knowledge of the stories of buried riches.

Other examples of narrative (pseudo-)ostension include: visiting cemeteries to experience supernatural events, experimental verification of narrative material, various societal panics based on narratives, etc. People – mostly young people – can and do recreate (enact) the narrative scenarios in one way or another, taking into account the temporal and spatial details known to them, with the implicit or explicit intention of experiencing the narrative directly and at first hand. In this way, instances of concrete behavioural patterns are created. Folklore studies categorise this as *legend-tripping*, a sub-category of narrative ostension. In this concept the local(ised) folk story variants are of the utmost importance, as they often link the narrative with a tangible spatial element, triggering the idea of directly exploring the events in the place where they are said to have taken place. These *legend-tripping* practices are often ritualised, with pre-known rules and roles for the individual participants, and are often accompanied by informal rites of passage (initiations), where, for example, a display of courage is required. Due to the highly dramatised components (“expedition”, confrontation with the story, return), *legend-tripping* can also be understood and explored as a particular form of folk theatre (Ellis 2004: 165–185). The journey is marked by both exciting anticipation and the fear that something extraordinary will happen to the participants. All this is characteristic of the treasure narratives at Šalek Castle.

<sup>12</sup> An example of a general definition of the genre of legend: “A story that [...] takes place in the real world and the unusual event it describes is not impossible or unimaginable; it may even sound plausible. It fits the everyday life of ordinary people and the contemporary value system that surrounds it.” (Dégh 1994: 29)

<sup>13</sup> These categories are in reality always in flux and overlap constantly.

## LOOKING FOR TREASURE AT ŠALEK CASTLE

As noted, the hidden/buried treasure motif is broadly present and relevant to the entire European narrative tradition (and beyond). However, in order to understand the local impact and the specific meaning of this “treasure folklore”, a narrow, local perspective tends to be far more useful. In what follows, I present a collection of narratives and testimonies about treasure and ostensive treasure-hunting (*legend-tripping*) practices localised at the castles Šalek and Ekenštajn. Both the motif of the treasure and the motif of actively looking for it are closely linked in the local narrative folklore. With each new telling, the narrators choose contextual details to bring the events closer to or further away from their own experiential reality. They often portray them as either true or untrue. I shall present a few narrative examples that I did not collect myself in the field, with comparison in mind:

The most powerful castle in the Šaleška valley was Šalek. This castle had underground connections with other castles. The largest underground tunnel led to the Fire Castle,<sup>14</sup> the ruins of which are located a few hundred metres higher. Since the castle is cursed, the tunnel is also cursed. Brave youngsters have tried many times to dig and collect the treasure that is said to be hidden in the tunnel. However, whenever they dug down to the tunnel, they heard a rumbling sound, got scared and ran away (Orožen 1936: 120).

This record contains all three of the main contextual elements that characterise most of the narrative repertoire (including memorates) about the treasure at Šalek Castle: the treasure itself, the underground connection with other castles, and the act of searching (digging) for the treasure. For this reason, it became a kind of canonical source for many later writers (see, for example, Tajinstveno 1974).<sup>15</sup> The example given, however, corresponds to the other examples of treasure narratives from the whole area. This can be deduced from the narrative collections and diary entries that can be reasonably dated to the period before 1936, when Orožen’s monograph was published. In the same work, however, we also find a similar narrative set in Ekenštejn (also called Fire Castle in this work):

People say that under the ruins there are either great treasures of gold or a great multitude of adders and horned vipers. When there are storms with lightning, it always strikes the ruins several times in a row. It is said that the lightning is drawn either by the gold or by the precious crown of the king of the snakes. About a hundred years ago, men gathered and prepared to dig through the ruins and reach the cellar where the treasure was said to be kept. But the cellar had three great stone doors. The men had already

<sup>14</sup> An alternative name for Ekenštajn Castle.

<sup>15</sup> Orožen’s method of collecting narrative material, published in his monograph *Castles and Manor Houses in the National Tradition*, is admittedly controversial. In many of his examples it is not possible to determine whether the material is the invented contribution of his informants – pupils at the Celje grammar school – or actual (traditional) narrative material (for more on this, see Hudaes 2013).



opened two of the doors, but when they came to the third, they abandoned their work and left (Orožen 1936: 123–124).

The story collected and written by Fran Mlinšek about Ekenštajn (around the same time as Orožen) is significantly different, but it mentions both the treasure and the search for it (the act of digging):

At the castle of Upper Šalek, a priest was once digging. [...] He made himself a hut out of branches and twigs and lay down in it. At the time of the consecration, the ground suddenly opened up in front of him. And he saw a large wooden bucket of money, and on each side three barrels of wine. A green man stood there and beckoned to him to take the money. But he threw his hat in, he didn't want to take anything. Then the ground closed again and a voice was heard saying: "Oh, if only you had saved me! The pine tree has not yet sprung up from which the cradle for the man who will save me will be made." (Hudales and Stropnik 1991: 110)

Fran Mlinšek also mentioned the treasure at Šalek Castle in his historical notes: "There are various tales about the castle, that there is a treasure buried there, etc." (Hudales and Stropnik 1991: 251–252)

Reading these records by "collectors of folk material", one can look for strong parallels between the local stories and the diverse and widespread global folk repertoire, as well as their importance for understanding the local ethnographic reality of Šalek and its inhabitants. The fact is that these examples are interwoven with numerous versions of localised treasure narratives shared by local people to this day – narratives in which the narrators incorporate their own experiences and memories, recreating both time and space and their own role (participation or distance) in the events they describe:

*Yeah, well, we actually went digging. Yeah, it just happened – sometimes we found a hole in the ground somewhere and started digging. We also struck the ground and if there was something hollow, like if we heard a hollow sound, then our imagination would go wild. Although there was probably nothing to it. But there was a lot of talk about it, yes. That there was some treasure hidden here, and that there was an underground tunnel leading down to Velenje Castle. But who knows what the truth is, we never got to the end of it.<sup>16</sup>*

Researcher (R): *So you were out looking for a hole in the ground?*

Informant (I): *For a hole and for something to find!*

R: *Like what?*

<sup>16</sup> Male, 1984, recorded in 2008.

I: *Yeah, maybe some gold or something. Because according to the stories, it was said that someone had buried all that gold. And that they had put it in that cave.*<sup>17</sup>

*I know there is a generation, ten years older than me, that they were looking for treasures. [Lists some names] they were digging there! But that's all I know.*<sup>18</sup>

*I remember, and it's true, my father told me, that once some German guy came after the war. And he had plans of this castle and everything. And he was looking for it somewhere, and he was looking for it, and that's it. And he came to one of the rocks here at Šafer's,<sup>19</sup> and he wanted to find out something. And the old Šafer chased him away. And then he left.*<sup>20</sup>

Although the content of European treasure narratives is often tied (at least implicitly) to real historical events or persons, this could hardly be said of the stories of the treasure at Šalek Castle. The only element in the narratives that can potentially be linked to a real historical context is the reference to lightning striking the castle buildings. Lightning eventually caused a fire at Šalek Castle in 1770, after which the building was completely abandoned (Stopar 1975: 24). It is not, however, possible to determine whether the process of folklorisation has preserved the memory of this particular event within local folk narratives. It is clear, however, that the frequent lightning strikes have been interpreted as evidence that there is a large amount of gold (or other metals) under the castle, as this gold is supposed to attract the lightning:<sup>21</sup>

*And then sometimes the elders said that the lightning strikes the castle up here. Up here in this particular part (points to a part of the castle). They said that there was probably a hiding place for some gold – that it is this gold that attracts the lightning.*<sup>22</sup>

Looking at the very rare written accounts of actual *treasure hunting* at Šalek Castle, the earliest mention I could find was in the autobiographical short story entitled “How I Cultivated Myself” (Kako sem se jaz likal), by the satirical writer and newspaperman of the latter half of the 19th century, Jakob Alešovec (1842–1901). The author describes with ironic humour his years of schooling in a Slovenian-German cultural environment.

<sup>17</sup> Male, 1959, recorded in 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Male, 1965, recorded in 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Šafer is the name of a former farmstead, the closest residential building to Šalek Castle, the home of the former (historical) caretakers of the castle. The name comes up frequently when Šalek residents talk about the castle and its folklore.

<sup>20</sup> Female, 1965, recorded in 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Compare to Orožen's account on Ekenštejn above.

<sup>22</sup> Male, 1938, recorded in 2017.

One of the chapters is dedicated to a long trip he took after an unsuccessful year at the Aloysius School in Ljubljana. On this trip, he visited the Šaleška valley and climbed Šalek Castle, of which he wrote:

[...] I had a beer in Šoštanj, I only passed through Velenje, but in Škalce I entered the parsonage and was stopped there by the parish cook. I did not want to push past her, so I went on and soon saw the ruins of Šalek Castle, which I climbed up to and even climbed into the collapsed window openings of the tower. The farmer I met somewhere under the castle mocked me, saying that if I was looking for ‘šac’<sup>23</sup> there, I would get nothing, as others had already found it. He did not know that I had climbed the tower only to look back across the Šaleška valley and see how far I had come. (Alešovec 1884: 448–449)

Jakob Alešovec attended the Ljubljana (Aloysius) Gymnasium between 1856 and 1863, when he graduated early (see Zajc 2013). This means that 1863 is the latest year in which he could have made the trip described in his book. Even if he had visited Šalek Castle a year earlier, the mention of the implied treasure hunt at Šalek Castle places it firmly in the early 1860s.

One of the most comprehensive written accounts of treasure hunting at Šalek Castle is found in the memoirs and diary entries of Štefanija Prislan (1914–2002), a native of Šalek. These texts are full of interesting and eloquent information about the way of life in the “old” Šalek. They contain information about the material, spiritual and social culture of the Šalek people, genealogical and historical data, and an inventory of continuity and change in the village and the broader area. Although her writings are sometimes tinged with nostalgia and “local-patriotic” pathos, her ethnographic inclination makes the notes mostly very informative and accurate, and therefore a good source for the historiography and ethnography of the village of Šalek in the twentieth century. Among other things, her diaries contain a lengthy account of three separate treasure hunts in which the inhabitants of Šalek participated, together with the names of the participants:

I knew of three groups: it was all secret and clandestine, but people still heard about it.

The first group from Šalek included Ban Milan, a merchant. Oštir Franc the farmer, Mak (?) Pepek the locksmith and the sawmill foreman – we called him “Ajmek”.

How gloomy was the morning when someone reported to the gendarmerie that some villagers from Šalek were digging at the castle at night. They went from house to house to find out more about the matter. People said that they were being punished for disturbing the property (the property of the Counts

<sup>23</sup> ‘Šac’ is an old Slovene colloquialism, derived from German, in which Schatz means treasure, profit or (material) wealth (see, for example, Snoj 2014).

of Thurn), but they had not dug up the treasure anyway. We neighbours would have noticed if anyone got rich – but we saw nothing. Only shards and pebbles from some of the portals were found on the hillside below the castle. Some of it was still worth something, and some of it was rubbish.

The second group, which also hoped to find the treasure, included Povh Tilek, Doblčak Cenek, Pavlov Karluh and Oštir-Vrtaški Anzek or Dolf. This group looked for it from Šalek Castle and as far as Preska. When they had dug quite a lot – about 100 metres from Pucl's hut or under Gorica castle,<sup>24</sup> something moved underground. They were so frightened that they ran in all directions, for there was a terrible shadow behind them.

The third group consisted of Hudovernik, who lived at the Paka station, Gričarjev Tone from Sele, Kovač Pepek (the one who told me all this) and Nedek, the railwayman, who lived in the Pehlhaus. They went to dig several times in terrible fear, but of course without success. No one knows what they were more afraid of – being caught by the authorities or those horrible monsters they thought were guarding the castle treasure. (Prislan, no year given: 30–31)

This account reveals some interesting information. The first one is the approximate period in which these “searches” are supposed to have taken place. A comparative check of the names given in the notes – on the reasonable assumption that these people were still young at the time of the search – suggests that the events described took place at least from the early twentieth century, if not from the end of the nineteenth century onwards. The other two groups are slightly more recent and can be placed in the period around or immediately after World War I. In this account, Prislan jumps between periods and even mixes them up by mentioning some names from the period after World War II, but the overall picture is telling enough. In addition to the timeline found in Prislan's writings, my interviews with some of the oldest inhabitants of Šalek confirmed the practice around the same time; as one informant said, referring to his father:

R: *What about the stories of your elders digging? Did your father also dig?*

I: *Yes, yes, yes. They dug even more than we did! They dug even more. But they also had the same points of interest. Only they went and dug there in the middle of the castle, on the other side, and they dug so much there that you almost couldn't go there anymore! That's where they dug. And they said that it was on that side they assumed it would be. And then they gave up. And they didn't dig anymore. My father, when he was a young man, they were already digging. But it was my – I should say – the generation just before me, well, those who were born there, after the year 1920, they were the ones who dug. And then we did too!*<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Yet another name for Ekenštajn.

<sup>25</sup> Male, 1938, recorded in 2017. My emphasis.

Prislan's writings also reveal that looking for treasure was (allegedly) a clandestine activity in and around the 1920s. The reason given is the desecration of property. This information may suggest that the treasure stories were also known to the authorities of the time (though no specific form of punishment or sanction is mentioned). Some specific digging locations are also mentioned, as well as "monsters" guarding the castle treasure, which is in keeping with the folklore motif of mythical creatures guarding the riches underground.

The most important and interesting variable one can find when collecting folk narratives and memorates of treasure hunting practices at Šalek Castle are the individual micro-locations on the castle ridge, where either the treasure or the tunnel are located, or where the narrators placed themselves in the act of looking for treasure. The range of these micro-locations is varied, but they are all chosen for their symbolic or signifying potential and are therefore never used randomly during narration. The groups that looked for the treasure or the tunnel determined for themselves, through active entry into the narratives, which elements of the broader castle space were of greater (symbolic) value to them. However, these spatial elements were always the most prominent features of the physical space.

In her diary entries, Štefanija Prislan also describes her own experience of searching for the secret tunnel, pointing out another specific micro-location – the pigsties at Kolavter farm – which, together with the slope to the north-east and east of the castle (where water is said to have once flowed), also appears in the accounts of other informants:

I don't know why, it was all interesting. I was also quite interested in Kolavter's pigsties. We were walking on the heavy rocks behind the pig-gery, and they said that there was a secret tunnel up to Šalek Castle. But nobody ever tried to open it or dig it up to see if there really was a tunnel to the castle. And we children were scared to look in there [...] everything was bewitched. (Prislan, no year given: 16–17)

The treasure of Šaleška was there; I described it in a poem. We said it was in the direction of Kolavter's pigsties – it was supposed to be there according to an old rumour. But no one has explored it. (Verdinek 2002: 154)

One of the digging sites that the informants repeatedly identified was a location beneath the eastern wall of the triangular tower, where there is a (now restored) vertical shaft, the remnant of a former chimney (Stopar 1975: 14). As an architecturally prominent element, it received some very interesting folk narrative interpretations that accompanied the *legend-tripping* visits to the castle at various times:

*Yeah, we dug ours first – there, first there, when they said they were just dropping people down. And they said that that's where they were dropping them in and that's where that cave was supposed to start. That they had to work half in there and dig those – [...] that they were half digging, and*

*they were half out, weren't they. Well, we already started digging there, that's it.*<sup>26</sup>

*That was it. The other site [where we were digging] was one of those exit shafts. Or on the north side there's one extension, it's like a chimney, something protruding and round. And they said that those who were naughty – who deserved to be punished, they were thrown down that shaft. Actually, it's quite steep from that part down to the Košanov graben, but it's overgrown now.*<sup>27</sup>

The area around Šafer's farm was also repeatedly mentioned as a very important potential point of interest, both by informants and in written sources. Some of the prominent rocks and Šafer's outbuildings were pointed out:

*People said that here, just above Šafer, a little further away there from the castle, just above the farm, where there are still some ruins to be found – that there was a stable inside and that there was a tunnel from inside out to Šafer here, you know. We dug there, digging everything up, and we dug deep – to see if there was anything there. We went all the way around, and we went out but we didn't find anything. So we left it. [...] Well, some said that there was supposed to be one of those entrances in the ground. And then the old Šafer, who was a mason, made one of those pigsties, or something like that, right there, right there. A pigsty. And from that time on, there was nothing there. We were no longer interested in it. So now I don't really know whether there would still be something there or not, I don't know.*<sup>28</sup>

We girls were convinced that the treasure was here. There is a flat wall at the Šafer's. And we found an entrance there, and that is where it was supposed to be. But when we started scratching the moss, they chased us away. [...] That's where the entrance to the tunnel leading to the upper castle should have been. That's all for now. (Verdinek 2002: 154)<sup>29</sup>

The flat area at the extreme north-west of the ridge, where the two castles stand, is also mentioned as a digging site. Some (older) informants called this area the “castle gardens”, although this cannot be historically confirmed:

<sup>26</sup> Male, 1938, recorded in 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Male, 1960, recorded in 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Male, 1938, recorded in 2017.

<sup>29</sup> This account is interesting because it is the only one that explicitly states that the treasure was sought only by girls. Other informants spoke of either boys or mixed groups.

*The side towards Kolavter. There were just these steps leading down. There is still one of those walls there now, I should say the old wall; there really were gardens there. It was flat. But, hey, we're digging, we're digging. And only when we had to hide for a while, we went, and we said, "Now we're going to go and dig there". Some of us brought bread, and some of us brought something else. Myself, I stole a sausage from the cellar at home, and I took it up, so we had a little bit of a snack as we dug. So, we're sitting there, and this big snake comes over. We ran away and we didn't dig there anymore. We were so scared.<sup>30</sup>*

The informants also pointed out some other micro-locations that occur sporadically in the context of visits to the castle and are thus not subject to broader (narrative) repetition:

*We were very interested in this particular hole in the ground at the top of the hill where Ekenštajn is located. There, in front of the two walls that are still standing. One little hill in front of that, there is this rather big round hole. And this hole – my imagination was running wild – is something that the witches must have made. And this hole was such a strong point that it pulled the earth right in.<sup>31</sup>*

Most of the accounts show that the searches for the treasure were generally haphazard – small excavations or simply probing the ground during an occasional visit to the castle. However, there is also information to suggest that searches were at least partially “organised”, especially when the interviewees described advance planning or the tools they carried with them up to the castle:

*[Addressing me] Go on and ask Š. M. about that! You'll find out first hand. Because they used to go up there with hammers and with picks, and they used to punch holes in the rocks. I don't know what else. But they got really serious about it!<sup>32</sup>*

Buried treasure aside, the other goal of these searches was to find the underground connection between Šalek Castle and Ekenštejn, or even between Šalek Castle and Velenje Castle on the other side of the valley. This tunnel has no historical basis (Stopar 1975: 52), but it is an important part of the treasure narratives, although not necessarily narratively linked to the treasure. A comparative reading of these accounts reveals a very interesting pattern: the older generations of informants speak of an underground connection between Šalek Castle and Ekenštejn, while the younger generations speak of a tunnel between Šalek Castle and Velenje Castle. Perhaps I can try to understand

<sup>30</sup> Male, 1954, recorded in 2013.

<sup>31</sup> Male, 1991, recorded in 2014.

<sup>32</sup> Female, 1965, recorded in 2017.

this difference from the historical perspective of the development of the area's identity. When the village of Šalek became part of Velenje in 1979 (and even much earlier), the identity of this area began to shift towards Velenje, and with it the focus of the symbolic articulation of this identity. However, this is a speculation, at least until some more field research is carried out.<sup>33</sup>

I: *Oh, and of course the treasure. The treasure of Šalek is somewhere between Šalek Castle and Ekenštajn. That is one story, but also that Šalek is supposed to be connected to Velenje Castle with a tunnel. That too.*

R: *With Velenje or with Ekenštajn?*

I: *With Velenje.*

R: *So this treasure has nothing to do with the tunnel, actually.*

I: *No, no this treasure is separate because it goes the other way, up towards Ekenštajn, somewhere up there. Or somewhere in between, closer to Šalek Castle. There used to be a well, a spring, and that is where the treasure was supposed to be hidden. However, the tunnel goes towards Velenje Castle, that is what was always said. A secret tunnel.*<sup>34</sup>

The stories about the treasure and the secret tunnel at Šalek Castle have always spanned all generations, and the folk material has mostly been passed on along a vertical axis, from the older to the younger generation. However, judging by both the written sources and the interviews, the participants in the ostential treasure-hunting visits to the castle (*legend-tripping*) are almost exclusively young people (children and teenagers). The informants, regardless of their age, consistently referred to the time of their youth as the time of their active treasure hunting. This pattern is consistent with folklorists' findings that narrative folklore plays a key role in the period of an individual's adolescence. By narrating and actively entering into the events described in narrative folklore, young people test and push the boundaries of their world and shape themselves into adults. These processes therefore constitute a test of an individual's maturity in communicating with peers and adults alike (Dégh 2001: 252). The repertoire of adolescents' narrative folklore is generally dominated by themes that fascinate, attract and repel at the same time. Engaging fully with folklore helps create self-awareness and understand one's own cultural reality. By actively entering into the events described in the story, young people participate in active, experimental learning about their surroundings and search for useful information related to the space where the narratives are set (Ellis 2003: 188).

<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, this pattern is at least partially confirmed by the material collected by Janko Orožen (1936) and Fran Mlinšek (Hudales and Stropnik, eds. 1991), where the connection between Šalek and Velenje castles is never mentioned.

<sup>34</sup> Male 1984, recorded in 2008.



## CONCLUSION

Narrative ostension – with the prominent sub-category of *legend-tripping* – is a less visible but very important part of narrative events because it helps us understand the embeddedness of narrative folklore in the concrete (micro)environments of its bearers. Furthermore, it helps us to understand the texts themselves and, consequently, to extract their meaning. In this respect, the tales of the underground tunnels and the treasure at Šalek and Ekenštejn castles are very compelling, as they have encouraged generations of young Šalek residents – indefinably far into the past – to climb up to the castle ruins, pound the ground and dig, wishing and expecting that the stories had a grain of truth in them. A comparative analysis of the local repertoire of treasure narratives has shown that these stories establish a connection with the fantastic, mythical and transcendental, and that the act of entering into their content implies a desire to make this connection. Hidden or buried treasure therefore has an important impact on local identity and its development, as it points to the inherent connection the local population has to the place where they live.

Since the narratives of the Šalek treasure are closely linked to the identity of Šalek and its inhabitants, one can also observe the transformation of this identity through them. During the conversations with the youngest interviewees (born after 1991), it became evident that the practice of active treasure hunting (*legend-tripping*) is disappearing. Young people still know the stories and their variants, but they do not go to the castle to look for the treasure themselves. This brings about an interesting break in the perception of narrative folklore, place and identity, and represents a different attitude from the one I observed among the older interviewees. On reflection, several circumstances could have influenced this change: 1) In order to enhance security, Šalek Castle was enclosed by a fence two decades ago and the entrance is locked most of the time. The limited access to the castle makes it difficult for visitors to experience the space directly (on a daily basis) and consequently inhibits the symbolic shaping of the castle space (spatialisation) through storytelling. 2) If narratives about the castle have always been a means of (almost) “intimate” inward self-identification among the residents of Šalek in the past, this has changed radically with their application in tourism and other contexts, which also arrived roughly two decades ago. As a result, narratives have become a means of presenting Šalek outwards in supra-local contexts that reach as far as possible. In these contexts, identities are rapidly and repeatedly constructed, dismantled and reconstructed. The existing (traditional) narrative folklore has thus been relativised, resulting in different meanings and functions than previously attributed to it. 3) The narratives themselves are also changing. Decades ago, the organised educational process (schools and associations) participated actively in storytelling events, presenting young people with traditional motifs and some new, original stories (see, for example, Stropnik 2001). These are slowly taking over the role of the main narrative representations of Šalek and the Šaleška region, creating a wide array of invented traditions<sup>35</sup> along the way.

<sup>35</sup> The concept of invented tradition was developed by the British historian Eric Hobsbawm (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), who argues that much of the phenomena we now understand as part of tradition were in fact invented, or at least constructed, in some (collectively undefined) historical and social context. For an interesting example in the Šaleška region, see: (Ažber 2020).

In both my research and this subsequent article, I have admittedly only looked back in time and only to a relatively small area of significance where I could have reasonably assumed that I would find something. A comprehensive account would require a thorough survey of the contemporary situation. This would entail a detailed investigation into the realities of contemporary elementary and high school students who are either directly or indirectly engaged with the castle and its associated folklore. In addition, the wider spatial context must be taken into consideration. The Šaleška valley, which is home to many old castles and castle ruins, is replete with narrative folklore pertaining to tunnels and buried treasure. Therefore *my* “treasure hunt” continues.

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## V ISKANJU ŠALEŠKEGA ZAKLADA: OBLIKOVANJE LOKALNE IDENTITETE S PRIPOVEDNO OSTENZIJO

AMBROŽ KVARTIČ



Konkretni resnični dogodki iz naših življenj se s procesom folklorizacije pretvarjajo v zgodbe, vendar drži tudi obratna pot – tudi pripovedna folklor (lahko) vzbudi ustvarjalni, tvornostni odziv ter pomembno zaznamuje in sooblikuje naše ukrepanje, pogled na svet in način življenja.

Te primere folkloristika obravnava s krovnim konceptom pripovedne ostenzije, ki označuje vsakršne oblike (tvornega) udejanjanja pripovednega gradiva v resničnem življenju. Primerov pripovedne ostenzije (sploh v primeru žanra povedk) je veliko: nočni obiski pokopališč z namenom izkusiti nadnaravnih dogodkov, panika, ki jo na primer sprožijo sodobne povedke o satanizmu, izvajanje poskusov, ki bi potrdili ali ovrgli trditve zgodb in tako naprej. Za razumevanje tega, kakšno vlogo ima pripovedna folklor za svoje nosilce, kako se širi in kako pridobiva pomene, pa je njihovo raziskovanje prav tako pomembno kot raziskovanje samega pripovednega gradiva. Gre torej za manj izpostavljen vendar zelo pomemben kontekstualno razsežnost pojavnosti pripovednega gradiva med ljudmi, ki pa lahko raziskovalcem zelo koristi pri razumevanju vpetost folklore v konkretna (mikro)okolja in posledično pri razumevanju njenih spreminjajočih se pomenov.

V Sloveniji in po vsej Evropi je pripovedno gradivo o skritem zakladu med najvidnejšimi primeri, ki sprožajo takšen tvornostni odziv. Te pripovedi se oblikujejo okoli zanimivega vsebinskega nasprotja – v njih je zaklad predstavljen kot nedostopen (skrit, zakopan, celo zaščiten z magijo), v isti sapi pa je umeščen v povsem realna prostor in čas, blizu izkustveni resničnosti nosilcev zgodb. Zato se ljudje, ki z zgodbami o zakladih živijo skozi generacije, tu in tam odpravijo skrito bogastvo iz pripovedi aktivno iskat, pri čemer vstopajo v s simbolnim potencialom zaznamovane elemente svojega resničnega izkustvenega prostora – na primer na gradove. Spoznavanje tega pomembnega dela kontekstualne ravni pripovednega gradiva o zakladih raziskovalcem v folkloristiki pove veliko o tem, kako te zgodbe učinkujejo oziroma kakšno vlogo imajo za njihove nosilce. Pri njih namreč ne gre zgolj za simbolno artikulacijo zemeljskih in nezemeljskih dobrin (bogastva), pač pa z njimi lokalne skupnosti izražajo tudi željo vzpostavljanja stika s presežnim, bajeslovnim svetom. Skozi pripoved in vanjo vpeti prostor bajeslovni svet postaja del resničnega domačega okolja, zaklad pa je pri tem najmočnejši označevalec tistih točk konkretnega lokalnega prostora, kjer se meje med resničnim in bajeslovnim premoščajo. S prostorom, ki ga ljudje spoznavajo, razumevajo, osmišljajo in ustvarjajo (tudi) s pripovedmi o zakladu, je tako tesno povezana tudi (lokalna) identiteta.

Tradicijski pripovedni repertoar v Sloveniji vključuje zgodbe o zakladu, ki so ga v tukajšnjih krajih pustili Turki, ki nosi prekletstvo hudobnih graščakov, ki ga pred 'nevrednimi' varujejo magija in bajeslovna bitja, ki privlači strelo, ki se nahaja v podzemnih sobanah in tako naprej. Ti in drugi pripovedni motivi se s

procesi prenosa lokalizirajo v vsakdanji svet svojih nosilcev tako, da ti v zgodbe vkomponirajo konkretne prostorske elemente, ki lahko zaradi svoje dominantne vloge v nekem konkretnem življenjskem okolju pomenijo simbolno manifestacijo drugega sveta oziroma prehoda vanj. Ti elementi so zato (v pripovednem gradivu) predstavljeni kot magični ter v simbolnem smislu nevarni – gre na primer za križišča, sakralne objekte, stara drevesa, skalne osamelce in, seveda, gradove.

Pripovedi o zakladu močno zaznamujejo tudi prostor in identiteto naselja Šalek – nekdanje vasi, danes pa ene od mestnih četrti Velenje –, katerega prebivalci že stoletja živijo z zgodbami o bogastvu, zakopanem pod ruševinami gradu Šalek, ki se dviga nad starim vaškim jedrom. Iz tamkajšnjih lokalnih folklornih in spominskih pripovedi, dnevniški zapiskov in časopisnih poročil pa je razvidno, da so te zgodbe spodbudile že številne generacije prebivalcev Šaleka, da so vzeli v roke lopate in drugo orodje, se odpravili na grad in začeli s kopanjem. V članku je predstavljenih veliko primerov tako lokalnih folklornih pripovedi o lovu na zaklad kot tudi poročil o dejanskem prizadevanju Šalečanov, da bi pod »svojim« gradom našli skrito bogastvo.

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