

## Isolation and Connectedness in the Bohinj Alps: Experiences of a *Majerca*

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This article explores the experiences of isolation, solitude, and loneliness in the Bohinj mountain pastures or alps. Based on the life story and experiences of a long-term shepherdess (Sln. *majerca*), it reveals the connectedness of people in geographically isolated alps. The analysis, drawing on long-term ethnographic research, challenges the presupposed assumptions of loneliness and solitude, proposing a relational understanding of remoteness.

• **Keywords:** isolation, loneliness, solitude, alps, Bohinj region

V članku so podane izkušnje izolacije, samote in osamljenosti v bohinjskih planinah (Julijske Alpe, Slovenija). Na podlagi življenjske zgodbe in izkušenj dolgoletne majerce se razkriva povezanost ljudi v geografsko izoliranih planinah. Ugotovitve spodbijajo domneve o osamljenosti in samoti ter ponujajo relacijsko razumevanje odročnosti. Članek temelji na dolgoletni etnografiji, ki je vključevala opazovanje z udeležbo, pogovore in intervjuje.

• **Ključne besede:** izolacija, osamljenost, samota, planine, Bohinj

Cilka<sup>1</sup> shares with me her uncertainty about returning to the lower mountain pasture. She has eye problems. Or maybe she will go, but probably without cattle. “*They need to start caring for the cattle themselves,*” she says. Last summer, when I visited her and her sister in the lower alp<sup>2</sup> at

<sup>1</sup> After a joint review of the Slovenian version of the manuscript, Cilka Mlakar decided that anonymization was not necessary, and so her personal name as well as the geographical names of locations are used in the text.

<sup>2</sup> For pieces of land in the mountains consisting of (individual or collective) pastures, hut(s), stall(s), and sometimes even a dairy, which were occupied by animals, herders, and ultimately a dairyman in the summer months (and the lower ones also during spring and autumn), Slovenian uses the term *planina*. A considerable variety of terms are used in other Alpine languages and dialects, with Roderick Peattie (1936: 129) citing more than fifty expressions, but there is no fixed and standard equivalent in English. Some authors use the English expression *mountain pasture* or *Alpine pasture* or, sometimes, also (*vertical*) *transhumance* to refer to the activity. In his interdisciplinary and international bibliography *Alpine Pasture Farming in the Alps* (2021), Werner Bätzing used the phrase *alpine pasture farming* for the activity; however, his interest was broader. To remain concentrated on the piece of land I decided to use the expression *alp*, which is less usual in this context. The American geographer Roderick Peattie defined an alp in this sense (i.e., as a unit of a farm in the mountains) as early as 1936 in the chapter ‘What Is an Alp?’ in his *Mountain Geography*: “Alps are, in the language of those who live amongst them, the grassy slopes above the tree line, the grassy areas in hanging valleys, the pastures on the mountain spurs, and the steppe vegetation of plateaus and about the peaks. The alp is, therefore, not a peak but a mountain pasture. [...] The term alp is perhaps the most universally used. Some American physiographers have selected the term *alb* for use. The writer sees little reason to use other than the widely accepted *alm* or *alp*” (1936: 125, 129). Following the example of some other anthropologists (e.g., Netting, 1981; Viazzo, 1989), I decided to translate the Slovenian word *planina* as *alp*. Hence, in this article the expression *alp*, lowercase, is used in this sense—that is, as a mountain pasture composed of buildings, people, animals, and activities; when capitalized (e.g., the Julian Alps), it refers to a mountain range. The etymological explanations of the name *Alps*, Europe’s highest mountain range, vary; according to one etymology, the entire range was named after the alps in the sense of these pastures.

Zajamniki, they were summering for the first time without dairy cows, tending only suckler cows, non-milking cows, and calves. She seems to be afraid; afraid of losing her strength, of no longer being able “*to pick up the slack around the house,*”<sup>3</sup> as she so vividly put it on various occasions; and probably also afraid of not having those summer months of solitude, when she is responsible only for herself and for the livestock. It seems that she is less alone in the alps than during the rest of the year, when she lives with her sister-in-law and nephews or with her siblings.<sup>4</sup> (Field notes, March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2024)

## Introduction

This article deals with the concepts of isolation, solitude, and loneliness from the perspective of a *majerca* (plural: *majerce*). This is a local term for a woman that resides in an alp during the summer months and takes care of the animals.<sup>5</sup> It discusses isolated people and communities in Slovenia within the pre- and post-pandemic context of the experiences, perceptions, and understandings of a *majerca* from the Bohinj region in Slovenia’s Julian Alps, who spent her summers in isolated and remote mountain pastures. Until the mid-twentieth century—and in fragments and modifications sometimes even up to the present—the Bohinj region, like other parts of the Julian Alps and the Alps in general, largely depended on alpine pasture husbandry.<sup>6</sup> It was based on the cyclic migration of people and their livestock between permanent winter settlements in the valley and temporary summer settlements in the alpine and subalpine zones. Two or more spatially separated sites of agricultural production developed: arable farming and haymaking in the valleys, and mountain pasturing in the highlands—that is, in (high or low) alps (Sln. *planine*) with shelters for animals, people, and milk processing.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> What is meant by *house* (Sln. *hiša*) in this context is not only a house as a physical structure, but especially a household and/or a homestead.

<sup>4</sup> Translations of the interviews were made by the author with the aid of AI tools (DeepL Translate and InstaText) and then copyedited.

<sup>5</sup> The term *majerca* for a woman and *majer* (pl. *majerji*) for a man in the sense of ‘keeper of cattle in an alp’ originates from German *Maier*, which comes from Latin *maior domus* ‘steward of a manor house’. The term was used in German and the local Bohinj dialect in the sense of a ‘steward or keeper of a mountain pasture’ (Cevc, 1992b). For detailed explanations of the roles and responsibilities of a *majerca* (and a *majer*), who takes care of the cattle of one or more breeders and helps the cheesemaker in turns, and of the shepherds and cheesemakers in the Bohinj alps, see Novak (2024: 140–174). There are differences between the exact scope of activities of a *majer(ca)* in other local dialects; for the Solčava region, see, for example Vršnik (2022). Today, the roles of a *majer(ca)*, shepherd, and cheesemaker often overlap due to the decline in and transformation of alpine farming, as is also evident from Cilka’s biography.

<sup>6</sup> It is also known as the alpine agro-pastoral system or alpine pasture farming (Bätzing, 2021: 124).

<sup>7</sup> Such agricultural production had many advantages, the most evident being able to supply up to one-third of the farm’s fodder (Kirchengast, 2008), thus making the best possible use of different elevations

There were fifty-four alps in the Bohinj region in the first half of the twentieth century (Novak, 2024: 44), and they formed a vital part of animal husbandry and everyday life. The importance of alps did not change immediately after the postwar<sup>8</sup> nationalization of land, but only after a general decline in agriculture in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and especially after organized collective dairying stopped being practiced due to the concentration of cooperative dairying in the industrial plant in the valley,<sup>9</sup> and probably also due to a lack of sufficient labor force.<sup>10</sup> After that, some alps were abandoned and others began transforming into communities of vacation cottages, with vacationers gradually outnumbering those that earned their living in an alp.<sup>11</sup> The transformation of entire alps into these vacation communities depended on their accessibility by car. It was not until the 1970s, when forest roads were built for forestry purposes, that the lower alps were connected to the valley by roads. In contrast, the high alps remained accessible only by unpaved tracks or on foot<sup>12</sup> until the 1990s and were characterized by their geographical isolation.

What does it mean to summer in a remote and isolated place, inaccessible to traffic, from spring to fall? To depend on yourself and be on your own for more than three months? With poor connections to the rest of the world? And at the same time being responsible for forty head of cattle and the seasonal cheese production for the entire village? And then, as in Cilka's case, having only underaged children to help drive and herd cattle to the daily pastures and to process milk, the eldest being just fourteen years old? How did Cilka experience these cyclical seclusions and isolation, and how did she cope with loneliness and solitude?

Various studies indicate that the personal perception of solitude and loneliness varies greatly depending on their cultural meaning and an individual's background and socialization. Solitude is often a positive, self-sufficient experience, which offers benefits such as freedom, creativity, intimacy, and spirituality (Long, Averill, 2003), whereas loneliness is usually seen as a negative state, a feeling of physical and/or social isolation,

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with their various growing seasons (Bätzing, 2021; Ledinek Lozej, 2022). In the Bohinj region, cattle were usually driven to the lower mountains at the end of May or in June – and to the high mountains in June, by Midsummer Eve (June 24th) at the latest. Unlike the lower mountains, the high mountains had no meadows and no private land, only collective pastures. In the autumn the cattle returned to the lower mountains in stages (Novak, 2024).

<sup>8</sup> Referring to the Second World War.

<sup>9</sup> The industrial dairy in Srednja Vas started processing milk from the entire Bohinj region in 1971. That was also the last year of organized collective dairying in the Bohinj alps (Novak, 2024: 189).

<sup>10</sup> Due to industrialization, people preferred to look for paid work in nearby factories. In addition, industrialization and the decline in agriculture coincided with other social changes, such as fewer extended families and children, from among whom *majerce* and *majerji* could be recruited.

<sup>11</sup> The decrease in agricultural activity was the result of the political and economic policy in force under the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Čepič, 2005). For the Bohinj alps, see the data gathered by Dušan Jovič (2016).

<sup>12</sup> In these cases, all transport to and from the alps was on foot, with cheese and hay being transported on sleds (Novak, 2024: 73–90).

with potentially (negative) psychological and physiological effects. The former is often viewed as a state of being alone without being lonely, as a voluntary condition in which an individual seeks to spend time alone, as beneficial, and a way of achieving personal growth, self-reflection, or spiritual deepening: it is an opportunity for introspection, imagination, and contemplation with yourself. In contrast, loneliness is characterized by a feeling of isolation, nostalgia, sadness, and even depression resulting from being alone; it is an involuntary and negative state in which a person longs for human contact but is unable to find it. “If disconnection from others is solitude, loneliness is a disconnection within a desire for connection” (HadžiMuhamedović, 2021 [2018]: 104).

The same temporal, spatial, and cultural context can be perceived as loneliness or solitude in terms of feelings and emotional implications. However, as pointed out by Safet HadžiMuhamedović in his poetic book *Waiting for Elijah* (2021 [2018]: 104),

if there were to be an anthropology of solitude and loneliness, it would have to be an anthropology of communication. We would have to dive into the worlds of connections, longed for or rejected. We would have to look into what people are struggling to regain or discard. We would have to trace the spatial and the temporal qualities of solitude and loneliness and the techniques of coping with them. Even when to be alone is a matter of choice, it is one predicated on the condition of relationships. Of course, the lines between voluntary and involuntary solitude, much like those of displacement, are blurry.

The different hermeneutics—the one used in my research proposal<sup>13</sup> and the one evident from Cilka’s perceptions and understandings of loneliness—became immediately apparent. When I started to interview her about her experiences of isolation and loneliness, and asked her how she felt about being alone, she explained how it had happened in her life that she had remained alone (i.e., single): “*I wasn’t at home, and time passes before you find a good partner. It was the kind of work and the kind of company I had, I wouldn’t have had a partner there. But then time passes, and when you’re that old, you see how good it is to be alone, on your own.*”<sup>14</sup>

Cilka understood the question about how she felt about being *alone* (Sln. *sama*) as how she felt about being *single* (Sln. *samska*). This initial misunderstanding expanded the original focus on isolation, solitude, and loneliness in mountain pastures and cyclical temporalities to a diachronic perspective, also embracing her experiences of being alone,

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<sup>13</sup> In the research proposal for the project *Isolated People and Communities in Slovenia and Croatia*, loneliness was defined as the result of geographical isolation, remoteness, or the COVID-19 pandemic (see Podjed 2023, 2024).

<sup>14</sup> Various interviews were carried out with Cilka Mlakar. All the interviews were conducted by the author, except for one in 2018 that was conducted together with Saša Roškar.

her feelings of loneliness and solitude at various stages of life, and her perceptions of isolation and remoteness in various contexts and social situations. “Ethnographers begin with a set of questions, revise them throughout the course of inquiry, and at the end emerge with different questions than they started with” (Rosaldo, 1989: 7).

This research is based on numerous conversations with Cilka and long-term ethnographic observations in the high alp at Krstenica and the lower alp at Zajamniki, where she has been summering since 1969: participant observation during the entire 1998 summer season in the Krstenica alp and further targeted or sporadic revisits to both alps.<sup>15</sup> The long-term observation and biographical method (Ramšak, 2000; Rogelja, 2014) were combined with the findings from the other alps as well as from the considerable amount of literature on Bohinj mountain pastures.<sup>16</sup> These diachronic and synchronic extensions made it possible to outline a sense of loneliness, solitude, isolation, and connectivity, or draw a situational<sup>17</sup> “anthropological silhouette” (Zeitlyn, 2008) composed of Cilka’s life story and sporadic zooming out. The detail is used to paint the general picture; the small scales—the intimate, the local, the vernacular, and the idiosyncratic—are given as a substance on which synthesis and abstractions might be built. Or not, because we, ethnographically informed researchers and writers, “are not only critical observers of collective meanings; we are participants in their creation and perpetuation” (HadžiMuhamedović, 2021 [2018]: 38).

### Over fifty summers in the alps

Cilka was born in 1935 and has spent more than fifty summers looking after cattle in the Krstenica and Zajamniki alps in the heart of the Julian Alps. From the end of June (the Saturday around June 29<sup>th</sup>, or the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul) to the beginning of September (the Sunday after September 8<sup>th</sup>, or the Nativity of Mary), she tended the animals of various owners on the communal high alp of Krstenica. Before (from mid-May to the end of June) and after the peak summer season in the Krstenica alp,

<sup>15</sup> I revisited the alps in 1999, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2018, 2019, 2021, 2023, and 2024. The last two visits, conducted as part of the project *Isolated People and Communities in Slovenia and Croatia*, included observations and a narrative interview focused on Cilka’s experiences of loneliness and solitude. All materials are held by the author and some are accessible in the Audiovisual Laboratory Archive and the documentation of the Institute of Slovenian Ethnology at ZRC SAZU.

<sup>16</sup> There is a considerable amount of ethnological literature on the former alpine pasture economy in the Bohinj region (e.g., Novak, 1955, 1969, 1987, 1989, 2024; Cevc, 1984, 1992a, 1992b), as well as on current issues, strategies, and perspectives (Ledinek Lozej, 2002, 2013; Repič, 2014; Ledinek Lozej, Roškar, 2018a, 2018b), its heritagization (Habinc, 2013), and tourism (Bajuk Senčar, 2005). However, alpine pastures and alps have not yet been considered from the perspective of isolation and remoteness, such as, for example, the Trenta Valley (Simonič, 2017) and the Natisone Valley (Kozorog, 2013, 2014) have been.

<sup>17</sup> “The source of light, the positions of observer and the observed, and the reflecting surfaces all change the way a silhouette is perceived” (HadžiMuhamedović, 2021 [2018]: x).

Cilka herded cattle in the lower alp at Zajamniki. In contrast to the high alp, she took care of fewer cattle there or, over the past two decades, exclusively “her own cattle.”<sup>18</sup>

How did it happen that Cilka spent so many summers in the alps? And how did she come to take this work in the late 1960s, after she had already moved from the village of Bohinjska Češnjica to Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia? How did it happen that among all the opportunities that came her way, from working in a factory to a hospital, she chose to spend summers tending the cattle and combine this with other jobs and occupations for the rest of the year? For example, she has performed various forms of care work, such as looking after children, caring for the elderly, doing housework for her brothers, or working on the family farm. Her answer to these inquiries is simple and straightforward: “*Don’t know, that’s just how it happened.*”

Cilka was already involved in livestock farming and other agricultural activities as a child because it was common for children to help with the various farm chores from an early age.<sup>19</sup> From 1946 onward, she was in the Krstenica alp helping her older sister: “*As a child of eleven, thirteen, I spent a lot of time here with my sister. And I learned everything ... It was normal that you went [to help and work], you accepted the work and did it, it didn’t even occur to you not to do it, you had to be there.*”

During the first decades after the Second World War, despite the political changes and the nationalization of land, the management of the alps remained more or less the same as under previous regimes: livestock owners had to provide the herdsmen, usually a member of the extended family or hired workers, who took care of the livestock and alternately helped the professional cheesemaker provided by the cooperative (Ledinek Lozej, 2002; Novak, 2024). Cilka has fond memories of this part of her life because, as she says, she “was simply there” with her sister and was well received by the other *majerce*. This was not always the case. Some of them also had bad memories of their childhood in the alps, either because they were homesick and missed their families and peers, or because they were teased and tricked into doing more work by older *majerce*. As Anka Novak (2024: 150) documented, not all of them were able to cope with the hard work and life in the alps.

In her early twenties, Cilka found work elsewhere, first as a housewife in Bled, and then she had various jobs in Ljubljana. She said: “*I just had to get away from home.*” Her favorite job was as a nurse. She still regrets that she could not stay at the hospital because her mother fell ill and she had to return home. Her older sister married, and the other sisters had other jobs and commitments or were in school, and so she, as the

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<sup>18</sup> “Her” meaning the cattle of her family farm and close relatives. For more on the rotation of people and livestock between the valley and the low and high mountain pastures in the Bohinj region, see Novak (2024).

<sup>19</sup> Children played an important role not only in the Bohinj region, but also in other Alpine regions until the 1960s and, in some places, even up to the 1970s. In the Bohinj region, some children became independent shepherds as early as age twelve or fourteen (Novak, 1989, 2024). For more on child labor, see Turk Niskač (2021).

youngest, was forced to return home at the peak of farming activities. “*It was just taken for granted; you just had to do it.*” Instead of taking on the housework at the farm, she went to the alp, where she replaced her sister. After a few years of taking turns with her sister, it was just taken for granted both by her and the rest of the family that she would take over the work in the alp during summer. To be able to spend the whole summer in the alp, she also changed her job and worked as a nanny and housewife for the rest of the year. This made it easier for her to combine summer work in the alp with a more flexible winter job; eventually she could even take the children she looked after with her to the alp. Because she had to look after small children, the place had to be accessible by car. As a result, she spent her first five seasons in the lower alp at Zajamniki, which—unlike the Krstenica alp, which remained inaccessible to motorized vehicles until the early 1990s<sup>20</sup>—could already be accessed by car in the 1970s. She was there with her brother-in-law, who had his own animals. But they actually looked after the animals together and made cheese together: “*We did that together. We each had our own cows; I had ours, he had his and maybe a few others [from other owners]. We each milked our own cows. That hundred-liter cauldron was always full of milk, we did that [made cheese] together, and ate together, too. Actually, we did everything together.*”<sup>21</sup>

The Zajamniki alp was not only easily accessible by car for cattle owners and herders but also for tourists and vacation cottage owners, who were slowly transforming the seasonal agricultural settlement into a vacation community. The overcrowding of visitors and vacationers starting in the late 1970s and, at the same time, the fear of losing the collective cheese dairy in the Krstenica alp,<sup>22</sup> prompted the return to the high alp for the peak summer season. First, it was her brother-in-law that returned, but Cilka soon joined him because he was getting old and could no longer be alone. Initially, they only looked after the cattle owned by their families and some relatives, the same as in the Zajamniki alp. Over time, other local cattle owners, who recognized the value of grazing rights, mountain pastures, and dairying, also began to bring their cattle to the alp and asked Cilka to take them over. The circle of owners interested in getting their cattle to the alp gradually expanded to include other farmers that were once members of the grazing association and held a share of the grazing rights. Those paid her a small fee for grazing their cattle, which was subsidized by the state and the EEC, later EU agricultural policy. In addition, they were required to provide Cilka with

<sup>20</sup> In the early 1990s, a makeshift road was built that can be used by off-road vehicles, tractors, motorcycles, and, more recently, quad bikes. At the same time, the alp was connected to phone lines, and since 1998 people have been able to use cell phones there. Previously, the only connection with the rest of the world was on foot; it took at least an hour’s walk to get to the lower mountain pasture, which could be reached by car (Ledinek Lozej, 1999, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> *Majerce* and *majeri* helped each other with the grazing and milking if necessary, but they always cooked for themselves, each on their own hearth (Novak, 2024). The fact that Cilka and her brother-in-law cooked and ate together indicates that they shared the housekeeping and management of activities in the alp.

<sup>22</sup> As it happened in the neighboring Jezero mountain pasture.

a week's food supply. At the end of the season, the owners received dairy products in proportion to the milk yield of their cows or the monetary equivalent. Despite the hard work and great responsibility due to the large number of cattle to be taken care of<sup>23</sup> and the enormous quantity of milk to be processed into cheese, ricotta, and butter, she has always enjoyed going to the alp. As she expressively put it: "*I was on my own there.*"

Being on her own in the alp and a cheese maker and a shepherdess in one person was not an easy task. She was able to manage all the chores because her nephews and great-nephews—and later also children from all over the Upper Bohinj Valley and elsewhere—helped her. "*Well, after he [her brother-in-law] passed away, I was left alone. But I couldn't do anything without the assistants, without the children. I must admit that I couldn't have done anything alone.*" During the last weeks of the alpine pasture season in September, when the older children were already in school, she remained only with the preschool children. However, as she said, "*it worked out.*" Through her engagement with children, she raised many of them: she taught them how to milk, handle the cattle, process the milk, and perform other work in the alp. The children gradually proved to be excellent helpers in milking, driving the cattle, churning curd, making butter, and so on. Occasionally, the children of friends, acquaintances, and others from across the Bohinj region came to help. Sometimes, there were fifteen of them, between two and twenty-two years old. The older ones cared for the younger ones and trained them in various skills and tasks. As they grew up, the younger ones took over the tasks. Over the years, some of them became independent in various areas of work. Cilka explained that having children in the alp was a big responsibility, but at the same time it was easier to work with children than with adults. This is because she knew that the children would obey when necessary: "*The children have their tasks, they help when they have to, and then they have free time. And we get on well together.*" At the end of the twentieth century, many alps became the scene of older or unemployed marginalized individuals, but the Krstenica alp was full of young people (Ledinek Lozej, Roškar, 2018a, 2018b).

In addition to the children that helped Cilka, there was always a large inflow of people, especially on the weekends, ranging from the cattle owners that brought the weekly supply of food and checked their cows and heifers, the owners and tenants of the huts that had been converted into vacation cottages, and the parents of the children that helped Cilka to a large number of mountaineers and visitors. Hence, despite the remoteness and supposed geographical isolation, Cilka was never alone in the alp. Due to the high level of responsibility, the volume of work, and the many people coming to the alp, she sometimes even missed the solitude and could hardly wait for the cattle to be taken away at the end of the season. "*There was so much to do!*" So, after the

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<sup>23</sup> The number varied, but there were usually around thirty milking cows and around twenty non-milking cows (heifers and calves).



end of the grazing season in the high alp, when the owners took away the cattle, she stayed an extra week each year to tidy everything up, pick lingonberries, and be by herself for a while before going to the lower alp at Zajamniki.

In the lower alp, where she only had “her own” cattle, there were other duties: in the spring, for example, the cattle had to be kept in the communal pasture, away from the private meadows intended for mowing; in the fall, on the other hand, the cows were allowed to graze all around, but when the days become shorter and winter approaches, they head down into the valley, especially in bad weather. She often had to go to the lower meadows, more than an hour’s walk away, or to the neighboring mountain pastures to drive them back. In addition, she still had to process a hundred liters of milk into cheese every day. Cilka usually stayed at Zajamniki until well into the fall, when the cattle ate all the hay cut in the mountain meadows and stored in the haylofts above the stables. After that, the cattle were driven into the stables of the farm in the valley, but Cilka remained in the alp for a few more weeks without the cattle, resting, reading, and enjoying her solitude.

*Cilka: After the cows went home, I was here for another month or two ... That means that the cows went home sometime in October. [I was here until] November, December, and once it even snowed already ... the first snowfall lasted so long that a firm crust didn't form so that someone would've been able to come [up from the valley]. I had gas, books, and enough to eat. And the radio. I was never bored. After the fuss, the tensions, the children, and getting everything in order ... I needed a vacation, some peace and quiet, and to be alone! Not alone, because they came [to bring her what she needed], I was lucky to be here. I had wood to burn, I lay around and read ...*

*Author: So that means you actually enjoyed this solitude?*

*Cilka: Yes, I did. I needed it. Sometimes, I really extended it a bit too much [laughter] But as long as my mother was still alive, she made sure I had everything, that I wasn't alone, and that they brought me food.*

*Author: So, you weren't lonely, just alone?*

*Cilka: Yes, alone. You need it. Mentally you have to detach yourself from it. Then [after returning from the alp to the valley] there was a different life ...*

And she went on about her work for the rest of the year. When she stopped working as a nanny and housekeeper for a family with two children because they were already grown up, she either looked after older relatives and friends, kept house for her brother, who was a priest among the Slovenian emigrants in Germany, or helped her sister-in-law run the farm. The last was necessary after her brother’s death, who inherited the family farm. She was always, as she says expressively, “*picking up the slack around the house.*”

In 2016, she retired from managing the Krstenica alp, and since then she has only taken care of her family farm's cattle in the Zajamniki alp. When I visited her that year, she seemed somewhat ambivalent about her retirement. On the one hand, she was happy to be relieved of all the work and responsibility and, above all, that her niece, whom she raised herself, was taking over the management of the alp. On the other hand, after more than forty seasons, she could still have a place in the alp as a, so to speak, honorary *majerca*. When I revisited her and her sister in 2023 at Zajamniki, they were summering there without dairy cattle for the first time in over half a century, herding only suckler cows, non-milking cows, and calves. She said it was fine and about time, and she seemed satisfied with the situation. *"I'm just with our cows and resting, and I don't have to make cheese anymore this year. You know how much work that takes all morning, plus milking!"*

In the spring of 2024, after over fifty grazing seasons spent in the alps, she seemed afraid of the coming summer and told me about her uncertainty about whether she should return to the Zajamniki alp and look after the animals. She said it was time for her family to find another solution for the cattle. However, at the same time it seemed she would also like to spend another summer in the lower alp with her sister.

I visited the Zajamniki alp again during the summer that year. After a long period of seasonal vivacity, laughter, and occasional arguments between the two sisters, evening masses on the radio, and the sounds of cow bells, mooing, and the electric power generator, the Mlakar cottage and stall were lonely. When I visited her at the end of the summer, which Cilka spent with her sister, taking care of and housekeeping for her retired brothers, she said it was best like this: *"I can do this [housekeeping for her siblings] easily!"*

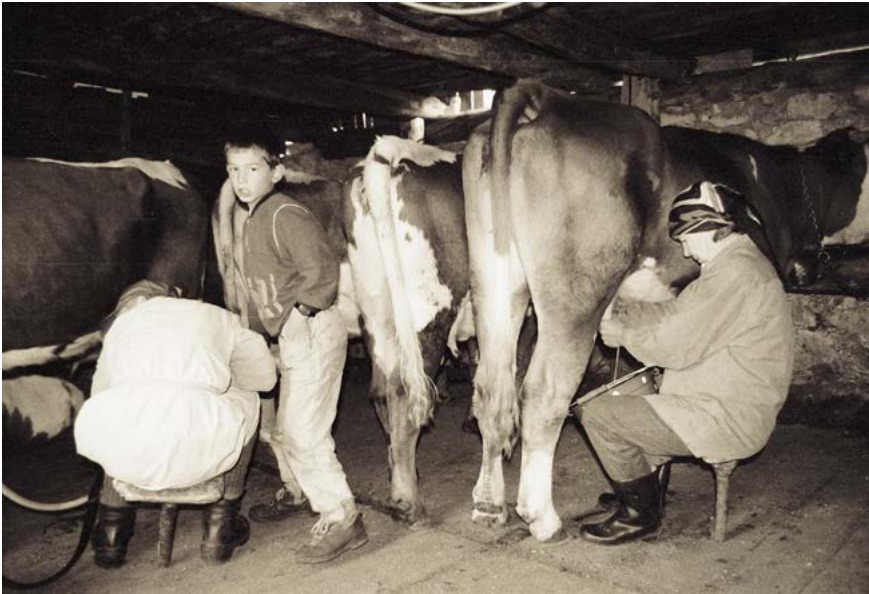


Figure 1: Milking in the Krstenica alp. Photo: Špela Ledinek Lozej, 1998.

**“Being on your own” versus “picking up the slack around the house”**

Two phrases were repeated several times in our conversations. The first one, *to pick up the slack*, referred to Cilka’s role in the household, when necessary, and the second, *to be on your own*, referred to her longing. Their intensity becomes even clearer considering that Cilka has actually survived into the twenty-first century as a representative of a dying social group of unmarried aunts and uncles that were part of the extended or stem family. They were an important part of the family farm economy until the second half of the twentieth century. “*I was expected to do everything around the house, ... pick up all the slack ... and I just figured it out.*” Cilka is aware of the importance of these single members of society for the farms, households, and families: “*A priest once said: ‘My goodness, how much good single people can do and married people cannot!’ ... Even though I don’t have a family [of my own], I’ve never been bored.*” However, it seems that this was not her initial choice because she wanted “*to be on her own,*” to emancipate herself. So she went to Ljubljana, found a steady job, and gradually bought an apartment. Nevertheless, in her later decisions, she prioritized the needs of the family farm, which was first run by her father, then by her brother and, after his death, by her nephew. Although she managed to build up a wide range of relationships, her family remained the decisive authority in structuring her social life and when it came to making decisions.<sup>24</sup> She mentioned several times in our conversation that her family “*would not let her*”—the same family that made her not feel alone by bringing her food and making sure that she had everything after the end of the pasture season. As in other mountain regions, here, too, “winter required a well-organized household and a community to get through your hard times” (HadžiMuhamedović, 2021 [2018]: 86). You were expected to be loyal to the family because outside the family there was emptiness and loneliness. Referring to the various ideologies that structure social life in Alpine communities, as described by John Cole and Eric Wolf in *The Hidden Frontier* (1999 [1974]), Cilka’s disposition is closer to an “exclusive lineage of homesteaders,” which the authors attributed to the German-speaking village of St. Felix in South Tyrol, than to an “open and interlaced network of relations,” attributed to the Italian-speaking village of Trent (Cole, Wolf, 1999 [1974]: 245). The aforementioned “lineage of homesteaders”<sup>25</sup> is linked to the assumed predominance of a stem family household structure in Alpine society (see Burns, 1963). This assumption was questioned by Robert Netting (1981) and Pier Paolo Viazzo (1989, 2014). In the book *Balancing on an Alp*, based on the ethnography of the Alpine village of Törbel in Valais (Switzerland), Netting (1981: 220) emphasizes that the “household extension was frequent, but apparently the

<sup>24</sup> The importance of family and household was also mentioned for the Trenta community (Simonič, 2017: 170).

<sup>25</sup> This lineage also resonates in the work by Robert Minnich (1998), dealing with the homesteaders in the Canale Valley.

result of a duty and necessity, rather than preference” (Netting, 1981: 220). This duty and necessity to support the economic structure of the family farm is evident from Cilka’s decision and expressed in the metaphor of “*picking up the slack around the house.*”

Cilka’s biography reveals that, despite the geographical isolation, she was paradoxically less socially isolated in the alps than in other places and at other times (e.g., in the village, with her brother in Germany, or in the apartment in Ljubljana during winter). This could be a site-specific rejection of the representations of upland communities and highlanders as isolated, marginal, inward-looking, and immobile.<sup>26</sup> Her summers in the Krstenica alp with its grassroots management model were indeed quite different from the assumption of isolated and closed collaborative communities. This was instead an open collaborative community composed of several more or less experienced helpers of various age, cattle owners bringing food and other necessities from the valley and carrying back cheese and ricotta, grazing-rights holders, long-term hut renters, all kinds of occasional visitors, tourists, and potential buyers of Cilka’s dairy products, and Cilka at the heart of this complex of relationships. Furthermore, she had an important and responsible role beyond her family farm because she also tended the livestock of farmers from the entire Upper Bohinj Valley. Her availability and dedication proved to be crucial in facilitating the continuity of grazing and milk processing in the communal high alp in the 1980s and 1990s, when there was a major decline in alpine pasture farming in the Bohinj region (Novak, 2024). Due to her availability and zeal, the cattle owners managed to reorganize themselves; first in an unofficial form and, after denationalization, in the form of a restituted agrarian communities. Her inclusion of children as helpers also had a profound influence on the younger generation: by combining childcare with herding, milking, and dairying, she passed on very specific skills and local knowledge. This intergenerational transfer preserved skills and knowledge, and it fostered a strong sense of community and attachment to alpine work and lifestyle. The alp became a vibrant hub for young people, reversing the trend of aging and isolation in rural areas. That was also proved by the fact that, when she retired, the communal high alp was taken over by her great-niece, who was only nineteen at the time. This transition, celebrated by the local and national media, underscored a successful generational passage of traditional knowledge and skills, challenging the narratives of decline often associated with rural youth engagement (Ledinek Lozej, Roškar, 2018a, 2018b).<sup>27</sup>

Cilka has never felt isolated, lonely, or bored in the alp. On the contrary, she even looked forward to the relief and solitude in late autumn, when the cows were brought down into the valley and she remained alone for a few weeks or even longer: “*I needed*

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<sup>26</sup> The rejection of these presumptions was clearly elaborated by Pier Paolo Viazzo in his seminal work *Upland Communities* (1989); see also Bojan Baskar’s accompanying text in the Slovenian edition (Baskar, 2014).

<sup>27</sup> For more on the generational transfer in the Krstenica alp, see Ledinek Lozej (in press).

*a vacation, some peace and quiet, and to be alone!*" The family took care of her, bringing her everything she needed, and by reading, solving crosswords, and listening to the radio, she managed to find her way to a solitary existence without feeling lonely.

Loneliness, as already mentioned above, is not simply the absence of contacts, but a discrepancy between one's desired and achieved levels of social relations. It is not about the quantity but the quality of relations and connections. In this regard, Cilka mentioned several times that she was not feeling lonely because she was alone and that, with only the children there to help her out, there were no relational hierarchies:

*You know what, because I was my own boss, I didn't feel isolated [in the alp]. There was nobody telling me what to do. If there had been more of us, and let's say, some had been more important and had hung out more with one another, and I had just had to stand there and listen ... because I was the one that was in charge ... That would be different if there had been more of them, and some had been more important. Then you wouldn't have felt like you belonged so much.*

Here she pointed to another form of isolation or exclusion from society—the feelings of social marginalization and inferiority in the local community due to various factors, such as the ascribed ideological orientation of the farm, the number of siblings in the household, and personal physiological, social, and psychological dispositions. These feelings of marginalization dissipated in the alp, where she was able to stand “*on her own*,” “*to be the one in charge*,” and to take on an important and responsible role, not only in the alp and the family, but also in the local community as a whole and—due to various tenants, vacationers, and visitors—also beyond. Nevertheless, these feelings of social exclusion also came to the fore when she mentioned that she was never actually thanked by the cattle owners.<sup>28</sup> She was referring to an earlier custom when the farmers invited the *majerca* to lunch and a dance at the village inn, and presented them with gifts on St. Martin's Day (Novak, 2024: 159). This was a type of public and social recognition of the responsibilities of the (sometimes left out and socially marginalized) *majerca*. Cilka was also longing for such recognition of her efforts and work, of her care for the cheese, animals, and land. For the social and symbolic recognition within the local community and by the local cattle owners. On the other hand, she received this symbolic recognition from the outside—the municipality and several other institutions (e.g., the regional museum), professionals, and the media; they all praised her role in preserving alpine husbandry. For example, she received a municipal award for her many years of commitment to the alpine pasture. “*The mayor himself brought me*

<sup>28</sup> “*We had so many cows, so much livestock ... but I can't remember anyone inviting me anywhere ... Wouldn't it be appropriate, if I had so many cows, to be honored somehow and get a meal?*”

*the award because he wanted to get to know me. Because I couldn't attend the event at the end of August, he brought it to me personally here in the alp!"*

Cilka's experiences and perceptions of solitude in the alps challenge conventional assumptions about remoteness and isolation. Remoteness is not topographical but topological; its perception is relational to other places; its experience results from interaction with the outside world (Ardener, 2007; Kozorog, 2013). Connectivity with the outside world, which is based on infrastructure,<sup>29</sup> such as roads or at least trails accessible by motorized vehicles, landline and cell phone connections,<sup>30</sup> and social and economic interdependencies, was decisive for her perception. This dense network of relationships in the alp made it possible to balance between "*picking up the slack around the house*" and "*being on her own.*" She could simultaneously perform productive work for her farm and important paid work for other members of the community, as well as maintaining vital connections beyond her family and the local community. Through "*picking up the slack around the house,*" she has never been lonely; however, she remained *alone*, single. Or was it perhaps the other way around: that she was required to remain *alone* to "*pick up the slack*" as free labor for the farm?

In her late eighties, Cilka still continues to pick up the slack where needed. This summer she was housekeeping for her retired brothers. Because she was not in the



Figure 2: Milking preparations in the Zajamniki alp. Photo: Špela Ledinek Lozej, 2021.

<sup>29</sup> Infrastructure is "material forms that allow for the possibility of exchange over space" (Larkin, 2013: 327).

<sup>30</sup> The poor infrastructure was decisive only when she was simultaneously working as a professional nanny and *majerca*, and then she opted for the more accessible lower alp instead of higher alp.

alp anymore, her past experiences, roles, social relationships, and connections in the alps and beyond have become a “repository of meaning” (Cohen, 1985) and hence a resource for the present day-to-day meaning-making.

## Conclusion

The life story of a long-term *majerca* in the Bohinj alps challenges the conventional notions of isolation, solitude, and loneliness in remote mountain communities. Rather than experiencing the alps as a place of isolation, Cilka’s summers in the high alps were filled with social connection, responsibility, and autonomy. Her life illustrates that remoteness is not simply a matter of geography but that it is shaped by social relationships, infrastructure, and relational ties that connect individuals to their families, communities, and the wider world. Her experiences reveal the ambiguity of solitude in the alps: while physically isolated, she found a profound sense of purpose and connections through her work with the cattle, her engagement with children, and her ongoing interaction with tourists and visitors. For her, solitude was empowering, offering relief from societal pressures and allowing her to manage her responsibilities with independence and authority. At the same time, the dense web of relationships in the alp—whether through family support, work with children, an important role in the community, or occasional visitors—ensured that she was never truly alone.

This article underscores that the perception of remoteness is contextual and relational rather than simply a product of distance. The same applies to the perception of loneliness: it is not necessarily based on the condition of solitude, which was benevolent and welcomed by Cilka; loneliness is not connected with the number of connections but with the quality of relations and with the dynamics of social inclusion and exclusion within the local community. In addition, it also shows the capacity of an individual to reimagine how to be on one’s own in different spaces and times, her resistance to being overwhelmed by family and other dominant structures, and her strategies and tactics of dealing with solitude and loneliness.

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### **Isolacija in povezljivost v bohinskih planinah: izkušnje majerce**

V članku so obravnavane izkušnje izolacije, samote in osamljenosti v bohinskih planinah v Julijskih Alpah (Slovenija). Življenjska zgodba majerce Cilke Mlakar, ki je več kot petdeset poletij preživela v visokogorski planini Krstenici in nižji planini Zajamniki, ponuja pogled v kompleksno dinamiko družbenih odnosov v geografsko odmaknjenih okoljih. Primer razkriva, da v planinah kljub fizični oddaljenosti, nikoli ni bila zares izolirana ali osamljena, mnogo manj kot npr. v zimskih mesecih, ki jih je preživljala s sorojenci v Bohinjski Češnjici, Ljubljani ali Münchnu. Nasprotno, z dolgoletnim delom je v planini stkala gosto mrežo povezav, najprej s člani družinskega kmetijskega gospodarstva in nekaterimi bližnjimi sorodniki oziroma sorodnicami, poročenih na kmetije v sosedstvu, s člani agrarne skupnosti Bohinjska Češnjica, Podjelje, Koprivnik in drugimi lastniki živine iz Zgornje bohinske doline, predvsem pa s (pra)nečaki in (pra)nečakinjami ter otroki rejcev, ki so ji v planini pomagali pri delu, kot tudi z najemniki in lastniki v počitniške hiše preurejenih stanov in drugimi (ne)naključnimi obiskovalci.

Avtorica spodbija domnevo, da življenje na odročnih gorskih območjih vodi v izolacijo in osamljenost. Čeprav je bila planina Krstenica do sredine 90. let 20. stoletja dostopna le peš in brez telefonske in drugih sodobnih komunikacijskih povezav, je bila Cilka tam intenzivneje vpeta v skupnost kakor v dolini, kjer so bili družbeni stiki drugače strukturirani in bolj omejeni. Z dolgoletnim delom in angažmajem je prispevala k ohranjanju planinskega paše in predelave mleka ter skrbela za prenos znanja in veščin mladim, ki so kot pomočniki poletja preživljali v planini. Poleg tega samota ni negativno stanje – po koncu pašne sezone, ko so rejci odpeljali živino, je ostala še nekaj časa sama v planini. Po obdobju odgovornosti in dela je napočil čas težko pričakovane samote, počitka, branja in miru. Kot pravi, v planini ni bila nikoli osamljena; osamljenost namreč ni odvisna od števila stikov, temveč od njihove kakovosti.