

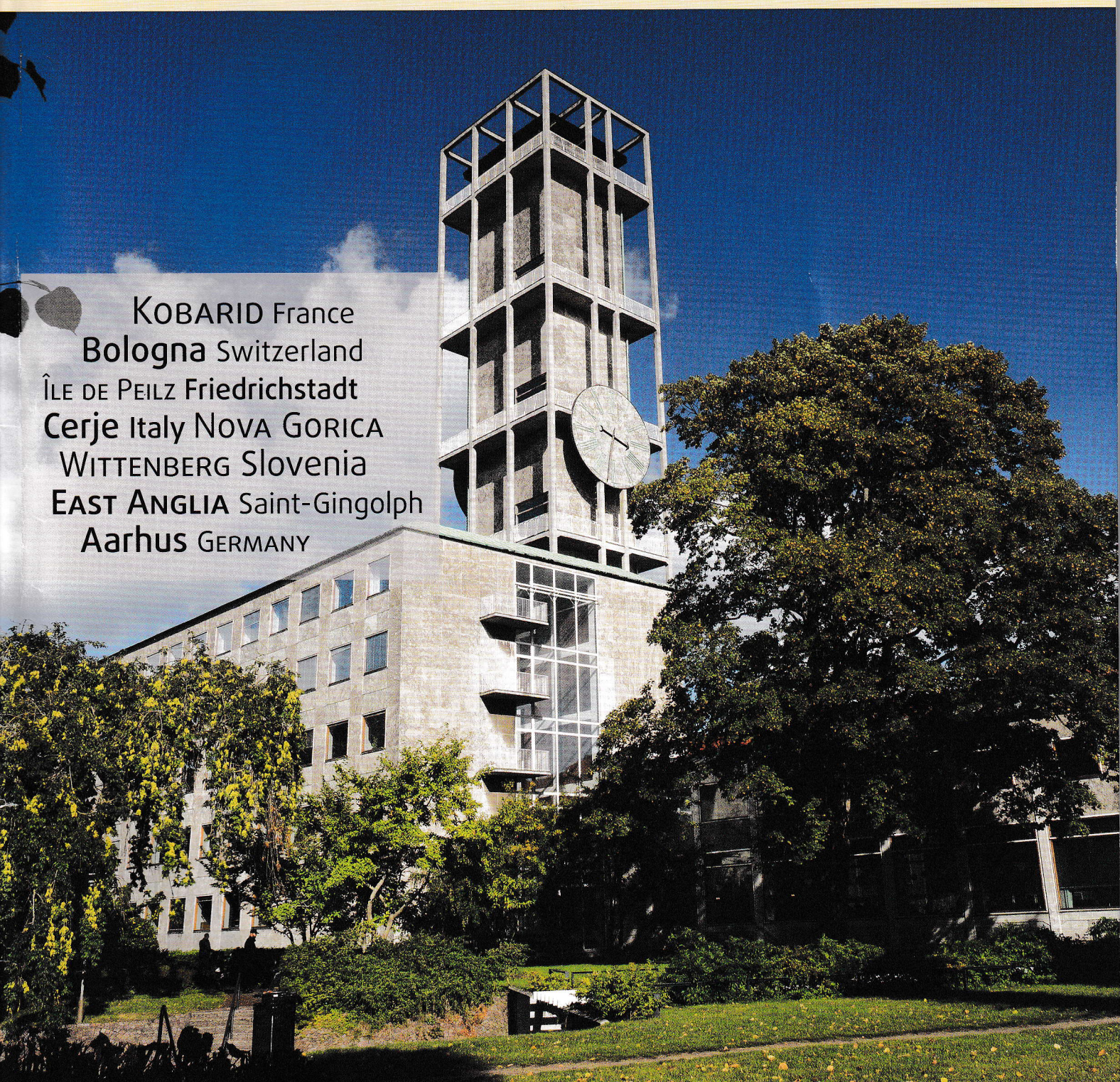
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## FEATURE

# Of Mountains and Memories

— Slovenia's Walk of Peace —



by Rudolf Abraham

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Around six kilometres north-east of the Italian border, on the steeply pitched flanks of Mt Krn in Slovenia, a trail crawls up the stony hillside, the way ahead lost in mist. All is eerily silent save for the crunch, crunch of my boots, the sound of my breath, and the faint clatter of hiking poles. I pick a route between clusters of primroses, carefully avoiding the salamanders which shuffle across the wet path — slow moving in their distinctive, swaggering gait,

Above: Church of the Holy Cross at Sedlo in low cloud, in the Nadiža Valley, west of Kobarid (photo © Rudolf Abraham).

their fragile black-and-yellow bodies glistening in the pale light.

I've spent the previous night in Drežnica, a tiny village known for its Shrovetide carnival traditions which sits above one side of Slovenia's Soča Valley, roughly a day's march from Bovec or Tolmin. Now I'm heading up towards the small military chapel at Planica, built by Italian troops during the First World War, and beautifully restored in recent years.

The chapel, when I reach it, emerges quite suddenly from the mist, the simple curve of its barrel-vaulted white roof outlined starkly against



RIGHT: Our map shows the regional setting of the Soča / Isonzo Valley. The Walk of Peace extends from Log pod Mangartom (shown as 'LpM' on our map) to Trieste. The blue square indicates the location of the Monument of Peace at Cerje and the blue cross that of the Memorial Church of the Holy Spirit at Javorca (map scale 1:1.1m).

the slopes beyond, like an inverted ship's hull. Its facade is decorated with relief panels of crossed rifles and ice axes, and framed by short corner towers with columns in the shape of shell cases. Built by Italian troops in 1916 in memory of the fallen, this is just one of many monuments and memorials dotted across these borderlands of Slovenia and Italy, all dating from the First World War and linked by the Walk of Peace.

### ALONG THE ISONZO FRONT

The Walk of Peace (*Pot Miru* in Slovenian) is a long-distance hiking trail in Slovenia and partly in Italy, running some 230 kilometres along the former military line of confrontation known as the Isonzo Front. Named after the River Soča (Isonzo in Italian), the course of which it roughly follows, the Isonzo Front was the front line between Italy and Austria-Hungary during the First World War — when Slovenia formed part of the vast Habsburg domains, and the Kingdom of Italy abandoned its neutrality and entered the war against Austria-Hungary and Germany, with the aim of gaining territory in the north-east.

The Isonzo Front bore witness to a gruelling series of protracted battles, stalemates and freezing temperatures which together claimed a staggering one million lives. Two armies fought over a blood-soaked stretch of landscape which was of no real tactical significance. The Walk of Peace takes in relics from this conflict — chapels, churches, bunkers, ossuaries, trench systems, caves, cemeteries, monuments and museums — running in a scattered line between Log pod Mangartom and Trieste. It is best explored as a multi-day trek through the hauntingly poignant and still profoundly moving footnotes of European history.

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### A FAREWELL TO ARMS

The exact line of the Isonzo Front was a shifting one, which altered with the changing fortunes of the two sides over the course of twelve battles, spread across roughly two-and-a-half years from

May 1915. While the Italians were numerically superior, they were poorly armed and equipped, and were attacking well-defended Austrian positions on the mountains and ridges above the valley (and by default in most cases, advancing uphill), putting them at a disadvantage despite their early successes and the patriotic fervour of their political leaders. Italian soldiers were labelled traitors if captured by the enemy; those perceived to show discontent were of-

ten summarily shot. There are records of Austrian troops stopping firing, and shouting to the Italians to turn back, since it was clear that otherwise they would all end up being slaughtered.

The fighting on the Isonzo Front led to a huge exodus of civilians from the Soča Valley and the surrounding hills. On their return, farmers and villagers found their homeland ravaged, and political borders altered — following the Treaty



of Rapallo, the border was redrawn further east through what is now Slovenia, and many found themselves living in Italy.

This was the setting for Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, published in 1929 and based on the author's experience as an ambulance driver for the Italian forces on the Isonzo Front. The story is a fictional one, but several of the characters are based on real people. Catherine Barkley, the English nurse of the novel with whom its protagonist Frederic Henry falls in love, is thought to be based on Agnes von Kurowsky — an American nurse with whom Hemingway had fallen in love when he, like the fictional Henry, was recovering in hospital after being wounded by an artillery shell.

Russian chapel below Vršič Pass, built in memory of the Russian prisoners of war killed in an avalanche while building the road over the pass in 1916, during the First World War. The road over the Vršič Pass forms one of the approach routes to the trailhead for the Walk of Peace (photo © Rudolf Abraham).



I've walked many of the paths which make up the *Pot Miru*, over more than two decades. I first hiked over the Vršič Pass back in the late nineties, visiting the small Russian Chapel which stands as a memorial to several hundred Russian prisoners of war, swept to their death by an avalanche in 1916 while building the military road over the pass.

Yet for all the weight of its history, the trail is an astonishingly beautiful one — the scenery is sublime, taking in long stretches of the Soča Valley and the mountains on either side, as well as the karst plateau and azure vistas of the Adriatic coast. I like to think of it as a place of reflection and of hope, rather than one of mourning.

The central theme of the trail, which was always intended to be entirely neutral and non-partisan in its recounting of the events of the Great War, is simply this: what can we learn from the horrors of the past? And how can we, through perpetuating their memory, learn not to make the same mistakes again? To which some might assert, against the political backdrop of 2023: we appear to have learnt woefully little.

### MARKING THE VICTIMS

On the opposite side of the valley from Planica lies Kobarid, or Caporetto in Italian — a small town on the right bank of the Soča, at the entrance to the Nadiža Valley. The so-called Napoleon Bridge (it was actually built almost half a century before Napoleon's troops marched across it, but the name has stuck) spans the river here, and the emerald ribbon of the Soča stretches up past the exquisitely beautiful Kozjak waterfall towards the stark peaks around Krasji vrh. The Kobarid Museum is excellent, and in many ways the spiritual heart of the Walk of Peace — well laid out and hugely informative, and filled with maps and photographs, along with uniforms, weapons and other military paraphernalia.

Kobarid also gives its name to the twelfth and final battle on the Isonzo Front, during which the town was largely destroyed, when the Italians (who had occupied Kobarid since 1915) were driven back by Austrian forces bolstered by divisions of German troops — of whom everyone was frankly terrified. The ensuing retreat, the harrowing chaos of which is described in *A Farewell to Arms*



(though Hemingway himself was not actually at Kobarid), was a national disaster for Italy, a mark of catastrophic shame on such a scale that it has yet to be forgotten. The Austrians pushed the border west all the way to the River Piave.

Caporetto — so deeply is this word ingrained into the Italian psyche that it is still used as an expression for unspeakable disaster. When back in 2018, Italy failed to make the World Cup qualifiers, the front pages of Italian newspapers like the Bari-based *La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno* led with the headline: “Caporetto del calcio.”

The Italian Ossuary at Kobarid holds the remains of over 7,000 known and unknown Italian soldiers who died along the Soča Front in the First World War. It stands on a small hill and was built in the shape of an octagon, its three concentric terraces diminishing in size as they lead up to the little 17th-century Church of St Anthony. Built in 1938, the ossuary was designed by Giovanni Greppi and Giannino Castiglioni, whose other works include the huge Military Memorial of Monte Grappa in the mountains above Treviso. The Kobarid Ossuary is a grand and incredibly sobering spot, surrounded by the mountains which line this stretch of the Soča and Nadiža valleys, jagged, snow-streaked and stained red in the evening light.

Kobarid’s Italian Ossuary has a German counterpart, built in the 1930s on the outskirts of Tolmin and containing the remains of around 1,000 German soldiers who died on the Isonzo Front. It stands on a grassy terrace above the banks of the Soča, surrounded by dark stone walls which are entered through gates made from rifle barrels.

Up above Tolmin, across the upper reaches of the Tolminka from the lush pastures at Čadrg, you’ll find what is arguably the most beautiful of all the monuments along the Isonzo Front.



Kozjak waterfall near Kobarid, close to the Walk of Peace (photo © Rudolf Abraham).

*Yet for all the weight of its history, the trail is an astonishingly beautiful one — the scenery is sublime, taking in long stretches of the Soča Valley and the mountains on either side, as well as the karst plateau and azure vistas of the Adriatic coast.*

This is the Memorial Church of the Holy Spirit at Javorca, built in 1916 by members of the Third

Austro-Hungarian Mountain Brigade, which included the Viennese artist Remigius Geyling. The wooden church stands on a terrace carved into a grassy ridge, set against a stupendous backdrop of mountain peaks and accessed by a long flight of stone steps. The interior has slender columns painted in blue and gold, floor-to-ceiling angels frame the altar, and along the walls wooden panels open to reveal the names of the

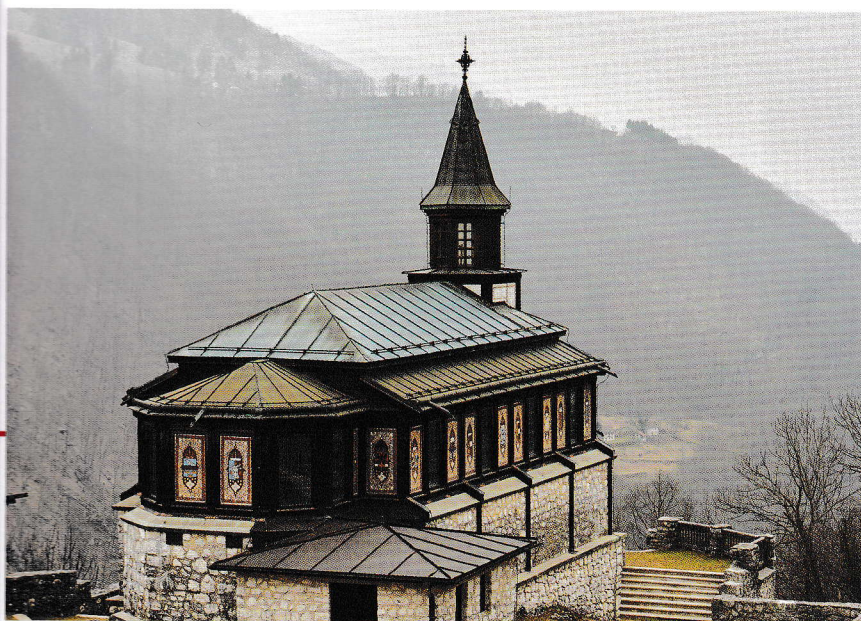
2,565 soldiers who died in the surrounding area, burnt into their surface.

#### AMID THE SNOW

The Italians crossed Kolovrat, a ridge running along the Slovenian-Italian border, early in the campaign and began building an elaborate system of trenches and gun positions, from where they could shell the Austrian supply route to Tolmin.

Tourism brochures show the reconstructed trenches surrounded by verdant slopes under a beautiful blue sky — but the reality up here would





have been very different: 1916 was one of the most savagely cold winters in recorded history. We find the road closed near the top, so we cross into Italy where, close to Rifugio Solarie — hugely popular with hikers in the summer — there's a memorial to Riccardo Giusto, the first Italian soldier to be killed in the First World War. He was just twenty years old.

Spring has come early, and the snow lies in patches on Na Gradu, the highest point on Kolovrat — although in some places we sink up to our knees. As we follow a path up towards Trinjski vrh where a lone tree stands on the ridge, mist sweeps in from the east, engulfing the landscape. The words of Giuseppe Ungaretti, an Italian poet who fought on the Isonzo Front, come to mind: "Snow is truly a sign of mourning; I don't know why westerners chose black... [it] gives me the sense of things ending, the iciness of death."

#### NOVA GORICA

Further south, the Walk of Peace passes through Nova Gorica — a town which did not even exist at the time of the First World War, having only been built following the Second World War when adjacent Gorizia (home to a mixed Italian-Slovenian population) ended up in Italy. Just how close the two towns are only really becomes clear when you're there, on the ground — a plaque indicating the border is almost the first thing you see, and literally step on, when emerging from Nova Gorica's railway station. Nova Gorica and Gorizia will together be a European Capital of Culture in 2025 — a rather fitting gesture for these two towns, separated by conflict but with their history and hopes inextricably entwined.

Memorials and military cemeteries are dotted throughout the surrounding area — Volčja Draga, Bukovica, Renče-Žigoni, to name a few. These often serve as an illustration of the vast sprawl of the Habsburg lands, and the

LEFT (TOP TO BOTTOM): 1. Memorial Church of the Holy Spirit at Javorca, built in 1916 by members of the Third Austro-Hungarian Mountain Brigade; 2. inside the church at Javorca with floor-to-ceiling angels framing the altar; 3. trenches built by the Italian army at Kolovrat (all three photos © Rudolf Abraham).



many constituent nations they encompassed — a memorial at Vinišče to Slovak soldiers who fell and died here; a memorial to Ukrainian troops in Panovec Forest.

### SCARS ETCHED UPON THE LAND

Up on the edge of the *karst*, an arid limestone plateau overlooking Nova Gorica and the vineyards of the Vipava Valley, the Monument of Peace at Cerje is a stone tower with exhibitions covering various periods of Slovenian history. Perhaps the most striking exhibit is the huge painting, 'The Dance of Life and Death' by Slovenian artist Rudi Španzel. For those who remember the *tolar*, Slovenia's currency before the introduction of the euro, Španzel was one of the artists responsible for the engraved portraits on the banknotes. Španzel fills three huge canvases with symbolism and pointed or oblique references, from the military uniforms worn by the seated skeletons to the meticulously painted fruit and musical instruments. Music was a hugely important source of morale and enjoyment to the armies on both sides; it is, some say, what kept them alive.

The landscape surrounding the Monument of Peace is stark, almost brutal. This is perhaps the *karst* as you imagine it, harsh, barren, cruel, rather than the *karst* as it commonly actually is — a place of surprising biodiversity, its wildlife and plants all cleverly and intricately adapted to this world of sharp rocks and bitter summer heat. But here on the edge of the Vipava Valley a great swathe of the landscape was destroyed by forest fires in 2022 — with the result that it now looks more like it might have a hundred years ago, scoured by months of shelling.

From the top of the tower, there's a clear view of the spidery, vein-like web of trenches around Pečinka to the south — a natural cave, with a man-made tunnel leading to an observation point and searchlight on Pečina hill. The 'eye of the *karst*',



Monument of Peace at Cerje, overlooking Nova Gorica and the Vipava Valley on the edge of the *karst*, Slovenia (photo © Rudolf Abraham).

*The landscape surrounding the Monument of Peace is stark, almost brutal. This is perhaps the karst as you imagine it, harsh, barren, cruel.*

they called it. We are met at the cave by affable local guide Konrad Marušič, who stands waiting for us, dressed in the uniform of an Austro-Hungarian soldier, and gives us a tour of the interior. The cave has been fitted with simple wooden bunks, narrow and filled with straw, and stacked three levels high to the ceiling. Outside, long shadows lie across the *karst*, and we follow a track to the so-called 'Throne of Borojević' — a large chunk of limestone shaped rather

like a chair, named after Svetozar Borojević von Bojna, commander of the Fifth Austro-Hungarian Army — before returning through a succession of trenches cut into the rock. Night is falling, and darkness pools in the shallow, meandering trench, framed by the sparse branches of low, blackened trees.

To visit these trenches is a very different experience to visiting those on the Western Front. Here in the *karst*, they were hacked and blasted into the rock; those in northern France and Belgium were dug into soft earth, and have mostly vanished over the ensuing century, merging back into the landscape. In the *karst* they remain like scars etched into the land.



## SABOTIN

Of all the various parts of the Walk of Peace, it was Sabotin where I found myself genuinely lost for words.

A long, sinuous ridge between the Soča Valley and what is now the Goriška Brda wine region, the Austrians created an extensive network of caves on Sabotin. The caves open onto the cliff face on the eastern side of the ridge — protecting their entrances from Italian shells, the trajectory of which took them down into the valley instead — with tunnels leading to a network of deep trenches on the west side, facing the Italian advance. The caves were excavated by hand — long screw shafts were driven into the rock, and hammer blows to these split pieces off the walls and ceilings. A pulley system brought ammunition and food up from the valley far below (and took the wounded, the dead and empty shell cases back down), its gradient as steep as possible to keep it within the arc of shells flying over the ridge. It was the Italians who opened the caves from the west after taking the ridge in the Sixth Battle of the Isonzo, and they converted the eastern entrances into gun positions. Looking across the valley from here, there's a splendid view of Sveta Gora, and the Soča below, which in those days, long before the dams were built, was much lower than today.

Walk of Peace (Pot Miru) at Javorca, Slovenia (photo © Rudolf Abraham).

"What made you open a café up here?" I ask Bogdan Potokar who did just that several years ago, in the former guardhouse of the JNA. With local volunteers, he cleared the rubble from trenches, and built up a small museum collection — and there's now an excellent new interpretation centre which includes moving testaments from soldiers along the front. The caves and trenches form part of the Sabotin Peace Park. Bogdan shrugs and smiles, as if to say why not, while selecting another home-made brandy for me to try, and pours us another glass. "Well, it was a shame that there wasn't a place here."

## BY THE SETTING SUN

It's nearly evening when I reach the ruined shell of St Valentine's Church, at the far, southern end of the Sabotin ridge beside a succession of small concrete border markers. I've raced along the preceding stretch of trail to get here, following a twisting path across shattered rock, swept by gusts of wind, with the Soča Valley below gradually engulfed in shadow. A lone figure stands on the wall beyond the church, silhouetted against the sinking sun. There's that silence, again: just my heartbeat, and the rattling of the wind. And as the long fingers of the evening light reach down, probing across the plains of Friuli and turning the old stones of St Valentine's to gold and then blood-ochre, I recall those lines by Robert Laurence Binyon, which echo what this Walk of Peace is really all about: "At the going down of the sun and in the morning / We will remember them." ■

*If you enjoyed this feature, you may be interested in an article in issue 4 of hidden europe magazine, in which we looked at 100 years in the life of Kobarid.*

London-based travel writer and photographer Rudolf Abraham has been a regular contributor to HIDDEN EUROPE magazine. He is the author of over a dozen travel and hiking guides. Find out more about Rudolf's work at [www.rudolfabraham.com](http://www.rudolfabraham.com) or follow him on Instagram at [@rudolfphoto](https://www.instagram.com/rudolfphoto).

