

SALAMANDER BRANDY: “A PSYCHEDELIC DRINK” BETWEEN MEDIA MYTH AND PRACTICE OF HOME ALCOHOL DISTILLATION IN SLOVENIA

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In 1995 the Slovenian weekly magazine *Mladina* published a very interesting and prominent article, Salamander Brandy – Hallucinogenic Drugs Made in Slovenia, according to which Slovenia is supposed to have its own indigenous hallucinogenic drink (Ogorevc 1995). Before reading the article I had not heard about this drug, but afterwards every chat about drugs necessarily touched upon this subject. Salamander brandy was now known by more and more young people (or those interested in drugs) - some read about it in *Mladina*, others heard about it here or there, some even tried it. My colleague Boris Prinčič¹ and I decided to follow the phenomenon in the anthropological manner. We wanted to try the proper Salamander brandy, made by those who make it traditionally, and as students of anthropology at the same time practice communication with “the Others.” We headed directly towards the region that was, according to the *Mladina* article, the cradle of the beverage.² We asked for it once, twice, and so on, but remained empty handed, without “the psychedelic drink.” What we heard about it was completely different from what we read. The purpose of this article is to mirror the two discourses on the Salamander brandy: the media and the indigenous one. By doing so I hope to introduce a different view of this supposedly hallucinogenic drug.

Working Methods And Dilemmas

My colleague and I had many discussions on anthropological fieldwork, the ideal of participant observation, and staying within the examined community for a longer period of time. However, we handled the fieldwork in a little bit more of an “old-fashioned,” “Slovenian,” ethnographic manner. This means the ethnographer does not live with the locals for a long period of time, trying to observe all the aspects of their lives, but walks from house to house and asks people about this

and that subject. If the considered topic is food, clothing, religion, and similar everyday things, people are usually open and willing to give information. But when they are asked about their sex life, hygienic customs, ways of reducing the birthrate, in short taboo subjects, they behave completely differently. It was just this reaction that followed from our questioning about Salamander brandy and it was soon very clear that finding it might be very difficult.

If we had chosen a better anthropological method, i.e. participant observation, we might have solved the problem. Nonetheless, we chose the method that seemed proper – we travelled through one valley in the region known for Salamander brandy, met and questioned a number of people, made friends with many, and living at my girlfriend’s house, which is situated in the region, I had a good position for deeper observation.

During the fieldwork, Salamander brandy turned out to be an enigma. Our problem was that the idea that we had about it from the article in *Mladina* was something that did not fit into the indigenous discourse. In this article I would like to solve this contradiction. What I will write about the brandy will not be necessarily more true than what was written in *Mladina* – it is just a different explanation and in my opinion a more likely one.³ What I can offer is a viewing of our enigma from different angles, and so I will try to demystify the phenomenon.

Salamander Brandy As Presented By The Media⁴

The main information about Salamander brandy that was given by Ogorevc is the following: “Slovenians have their own indigenous hallucinogenic drug and we have discovered recipes for its brewing” (Ogorevc 1995). The writer added that we are dealing with the witchcraft legacy, which makes the

phenomenon part of tradition. Although we can understand this writing about witches as a literary appendage – as a part of mysticism which is, together with specific humor, the author's way of making the atmosphere of his article⁵ – there is no doubt that we are dealing with a traditional phenomenon.

Although the author of the first media presentation on Salamander brandy is known for his fictional journalism, he achieved his credibility by finding a person who makes this brandy. We can somehow talk about exemplary research journalism.⁶ When he managed to persuade the brandy distiller to sell him some of the mysterious Salamander brandy, and wrote about the psychedelic feelings he experienced after drinking, all the secrets of the phenomenon were revealed.

Even more, he also discovered three recipes for the production of Salamander brandy.

The first, the most vulgar and also the least sophisticated method is, throw a couple of salamanders (one every ten litres) into a barrel with fruit (soaked before distilling), seal everything with a wooden cover and leave it to the will of the gods for a couple of months. These poor, in specific concentration camps captured amphibians, have nothing else to do in this situation, except to creep through the rotting fruit all day long and in their boredom softly excrete slime. Finally, their soft bodies are cut by a shovel with which the peasant is loading fruit into a kettle... (Ogorevc 1995: 30)

During our fieldwork we were told about this method several times. Further on, he writes,

Second, a more precisely controlled method, according to which you soak a sieve, the one which is usually used for seeding flour, in which you throw a few salamanders, let's say five or six every thirty liters, into already made brandy. The salamanders, which can't defend themselves in any other way except by excreting poisonous slime, are, in deadly fear of drowning in alcohol, foaming like bulls during bullfighting. When they croak, the procedure is finished and the dosage is appropriate. (Ogorevc 1995: 30)

During our fieldwork, nobody mentioned this method. The third method listed was the following:

...During the distillation of brandy, when the brandy is dripping out of the kettle, and the expert carefully watches the fire, so that it doesn't drip too much and that the brandy is not burnt, you hang a salamander, tied by its last legs, under a controlled flow of brandy, and the animal, threatened by the waterfall of brandy, is moving back and forth, suffering and of course defending itself by excreting its poisons, which are continuously washed away by brandy and taken away into ...bottles... (Ogorevc 1995: 30)

This method was not confirmed by any of our informants.

Although Ogorevc does not mention the next method, our informants quite often described it. Some of them mentioned that dried salamanders are used in the process of distillation. Salamanders are supposed to be killed, dried and, while the fruit is being cooked, hung on a wire in the part of the cooking equipment where steam accumulates. Accumulated steam is supposed to extract the salamander's poison from the dried skin. Steam then runs through a distillation tube, liquefies in a chilling vessel, and pours out as Salamander brandy.

Another thing is the hallucinogenic experience of the brandy. The *Mladina* journalist wrote:

And then it...started unnaturally, colorfully glittering around the treetops and trees, which were weirdly, hysterically rushing into the depths of gorges... It was as if I were totally unburdened by the biology of extraterrestrial beings from some other planet and watched everything, the grass, the insects or a grazing cow in the vicinity...and absolutely everything seemed new and strange, and I wished to fuck something, anything. And in this almost full absence from this world...I chose the beech tree. Their trunks...seemed horribly erotic to me. ...After this I finally crashed into the wet leaves and maybe even slept for a while. But damn, a few salamanders walked near by. And they said with their mysterious voices: look, look, who's there,

not a salamander for sure... (Ogorevc 1995: 31-2)

Although the narration in this writing is humorous and artistically upgraded, we can understand that Salamander brandy is a hallucinogenic drink⁷ from the author's perception that the edges of things glowed and his perception of things that are not present at the moment of the hallucinogenic experience, as well as his sexual stimulation.

Researchers of hallucinogenic drugs report exactly the same reactions to hallucinogenic drugs as mentioned here (e.g. Grljić 1989: 13, 16) and in a personal interview the writer of these words extracted just these three themes when commenting upon his fictional narration on the experience. Salamander brandy thus became a hallucinogenic drug par excellence to the broader Slovenian public.

Salamander Brandy - Hallucinogenic?

Salamander brandy is, as we have noticed, a traditional Slovenian means of attaining psychedelic feelings and, as we will see in this section, biochemistry can give some information to confirm this. But first, let us introduce *Salamandra salamandra* to have an idea from which animal the supposed hallucinogenic drug comes.

In short we can say that *Salamandra salamandra* is an amphibian, and with its yellow spots on black slimy skin it is quite visible on a wet forest ground. Although a visible being, and so quite easy to attack, it would be quite dangerous for a predator to eat it. If a salamander feels threatened it excretes some corrosive substance from its poison glands.

Having this in mind, we can imagine that the salamander's poison can be gathered somehow with human intervention (action). How salamanders react to alcohol, we do not know, as we also do not know whether they retain poison when dried, and an experiment should be carried out to understand this. As we did not do it, we can only make this conclusion: salamanders contain a certain poison that can be gathered and used in various ways.

What kind of poison are we talking about? A particular active substance of salamander's poison is tetrodotoxin, from a group of neurotoxins. For these substances it is significant to react on Na⁺ and for some also on K⁺ nerve channels. Tetrodotoxin is a poison with a strong paralyzing effect, which is significant

for *Salamandra salamandra*, some species of frogs, octopi, and one type of fish. It affects the nervous system by blocking Na⁺ nerve channels (Voet 1990:1162-1163).

With some reference to Saksida (1997) I will try to explain the reaction to tetrodotoxin in a few simple words. If we want to move our legs, we have to send signals (electric current) from our central nervous system to a certain motoric surface. The journey of this impulse means a repeating chemical reaction, be it in the transformation of the impulse from one nervous cell to another or in the sliding of the impulse along one nervous cell. This repeating chemical reaction consists of breaking of Na⁺ ions from the exterior of the nervous cell through the cell membrane into the cell (where there are no Na⁺ ions when resting, although with a tendency to break in) and consequently of dislodging of K⁺ ions out of the cell interior (K⁺ ions are, when resting, numerous inside the nervous cell). Tetrodotoxin, when affecting a certain part of the nervous system, blocks Na⁺ nerve channels, which means that Na⁺ ions will not force themselves into the cell any more and consequently the impulse will not be able to travel on. Talking about moving a leg, we can conclude, that we would feel as if our legs are paralyzed.

An expert in biochemistry, a researcher of certain poisons' effects on the nervous system, Igor Križaj mentioned in our personal consultation that he doubts the existence of the same active substance in the poison of all the above mentioned animals: salamander, fish, frogs, octopi. At the same time, it is true that we are talking about similar substances with similar effects. These effects may be a partly and temporary paralysis and also hallucinations. Because the chemical structures of these substances are very small, they can break through the brain membrane and affect certain parts of our brain, which causes hallucinations. As Križaj concluded, a chemical reaction between alcohol and such substances in the process of making Salamander brandy would be impossible and both substances would just mix together. The supposed drink containing both substances would affect human beings by raising blood pressure (alcohol) and so intensifying the effects of the other substance.

The only scientific publishing on Salamander brandy that I know of is the writing of Ivan Valenčič (1996), which can only confirm the

Mladina presentation of Salamander brandy as a hallucinogenic drug. The problem with this writing is that it is too grounded on the experience and conclusions of the *Mladina* journalist (together with the mythological dimensions added to this beverage) – somehow it is a scientific remake of the humorous *Mladina* story, with some additional biological and chemical explanation. Although the author names the active substance of salamander's poison *samandarin*, he writes about the similar effects as the above-mentioned biochemists.

The mucus of the salamander's skin (...) contains many toxic substances that are biogenetically synthesized from cholesterol. The main steroidalkaloid whose action has been also most thoroughly studied is samandarin [Altmann 1980; Habermehl 1987]. It is soluble in most organic solvents, but practically insoluble in water. Samandarin is an agent with strong central nervous system activity: its most important effects include cramps, high blood pressure, and localized anesthesia. (Valenčič 1996:222)

About the supposed hallucinations Valenčič writes:

I have come across only one reference [Grof 1996] that the salamander's skin has some psychoactive properties. It is to be hoped that in the not too distant future, research on the salamander's mucus might reveal some hidden knowledge about an animal that has been endowed with mysterious and marvelous powers by the sages of the past... (Valenčič 1996: 224)

Biochemistry can to a certain degree confirm Ogorevc's presentation of the brandy – as was the case with some of the recipes that got some confirmation during our fieldwork. The problem is that in the indigenous discourse on the topic there is no trace of hallucinations. On the other hand, we have to add the paralyzing effect to the hallucinations. A part of the indigenous discourse can be interpreted in exactly this way – “Salamander brandy cuts off your legs.”

Indigenous Discourse On Salamander Brandy

As it turned out during our fieldwork, local people from the area treated in the *Mladina* article knew about the Salamander brandy. Information about it was not abundant but

sufficient to draw out a firmly structured discourse.

Our initial assumption that people are mysterious about Salamander brandy because it is a hallucinogenic drug (or simply a drug as something people stigmatize) – as Ogorevc presents it - was wrong. Salamander brandy could not have been demonized from the upside down (through media for example), because the phenomenon was publicly unknown before Ogorevc wrote about it, and if it were demonized by the locals themselves, why would they pity the users of the drug and condemn the producers (a usual discourse on drugs is inverted – people condemn the users and overlook the producers). However, both producers and users of the drink play a significant role in the local discourse on this brandy.

Discourse on people connected with Salamander brandy turned out to be extremely negative and we could sum it up in the sentence, “shame on those who cook Salamander brandy and poor are those who accidentally drink it.” The *Mladina* journalist could have recognized this as well, to whom one old woman said, “cooking Salamander brandy is a disgracing act” (Ogorevc 1995: 28); but he presented instead its expected “psychedelic function” and compared it with the abuse of a Mexican toad. There is not a single trace of the usage of Salamander brandy for hallucinogenic purposes in the indigenous discourse; on the contrary, “misfortunate are those who drink it, because Salamander brandy cuts your legs off and you are sick for a few days afterwards.” As was clear from the people's talking, nobody would drink Salamander brandy on purpose and mainly the drinking would be accidental, and the narration about “cutting off the legs” can be understood in the context of the paralyzing effect presented in the preceding part.

Questioning about the brandy distillation and the production of Salamander brandy gave another standardized answer: “we've always been honest brandy distillers; Salamander brandy distillation is a deceitful act.”⁸ If somebody were accused of cooking Salamander brandy, people would not buy brandy there. Those accused of cooking it were publicly stigmatized as cheaters. In this context we can also explain the mystery that surrounds Salamander brandy. The reason for the silence is not a question of psychedelic drugs but a question of fair and unfair brandy distillation.

We can sum up this part of indigenous discourse in this way: “there are fair and good brandy distillers who cook pure and good brandy; there are also those who swindle with brandy and whose brandy is a fake one (and sometimes poisoned) and drinkers or buyers should be careful about this.”

Fortunes And Misfortunes Of Brandy

Distillation

The Škofja Loka and Polhov Gradec regions of Slovenia are both well known for their brandy distillation. As the state of Slovenia does not prohibit home brandy distillation,⁹ home made brandy is quite common in these parts of the country (and elsewhere too).

The most common was brandy made of mixed fruit, less of juniper, plum, cherry and strawberry. Beekeepers made ‘honey schnapps’. They also made ‘schnapps’¹⁰ from broad beans, potatoes and even from bought figs, ‘the green one’ they made from pure alcohol and absinthe. In Ojstri Vrh in the Selška valley they made an excellent brandy made of cherries, which Dr. Rudolf Andrejka enthusiastically named Slovenian ‘Cherry brandy’. (Sterle 1987: 119)

This is a rough description of the brandy distillation in the past in the Škofja Loka region by Slovenian ethnographer Meta Sterle. Concerning the present, the picture of brandy distillation is similar. The most common is brandy made of mixed fruit, mostly apples and pears.

But another description from Sterle gives us some idea that in reality brandy distillation is not as ideal as it may appear. Concerning juniper brandy, it should be made from juniper berries but is in fact often made from fruit brandy in which they soak juniper tree branches, so that the common brandy gets a better aroma (Sterle field notes 1982).

Potatoes and broad beans are not commonly used for brandy distillation any more. This kind of brandy distillation is associated with critical times, mostly times before and during the Second World War, and into the same category people classify brandy made of sugar beets. People also mention the usage of pure alcohol

(‘geist’), which is supposed to compensate the lack of fruit in times of crisis.

With ‘Cherry brandy’ the case is not as ideal as mentioned above. Because of the aroma and easier process of brandy making, people distill it without removing the stones from the cherries. Cherry stones bring a bigger quantity of methanol into the brandy than usual, which causes a different drunkenness as the usual ethanol. These last few passages open another view on home brandy making and many people’s attitude towards it – there is brandy made in a proper way and there is brandy that presents a deviation from this ideal picture and is often associated with crisis times or with cheating.

This is not just the case of the Škofja Loka region and of present times. I came across cases of indigenous division between the good and the bad brandy and brandy distillation in other parts of Slovenia as well.¹¹ People use different fake methods for easier, faster, cheaper and greater quantity brandy distillation. Such a brandy may not be the best but it might bring some economic benefits if the producer is able to sell it.

The 19th century pamphlet against alcohol, “The brotherhood of the sober,” presented the deviations in common brandy distillation among Slovenian peasants. The authors wrote they knew many excellent brandy distillers who would plant the whole field with potatoes so that they could make large quantities of brandy from it all year long (Zschokke 1847:22).¹² They also wrote that brandy is very popular because it is cheaper than wine and much easier to make, so that anybody can cook it at home. They say, “People use everything that can be used for brandy distillation and there are many things that can be used” (Zschokke 1847:28). “The Brotherhood” also mentions that cherry stones have their own poison that comes into brandy – although only in small quantities. And besides that, the tricky brandy distillers know many harmful supplements that they use to improve their brandy and in order to sell it easier (Zschokke 1847:80, 81). Brandy distillers use different methods to make more brandy or to make it more pleasant by improving the aroma. I will try to place Salamander brandy in this very context. In the Škofja Loka region Salamander brandy personifies a deviation from the fair, i.e. usual brandy making.¹³

Salamander brandy is mostly associated with times of crisis and in local discourse it

occupies the same position as the brandy made of broad beans, sugar beets, potatoes, pure alcohol and the similar¹⁴ – people say: “when there was a lack of fruit, as for example during the war, some brandy distillers used various tricks to make some extra brandy for sale.”

The most common description of the reason for using salamanders in the process of brandy distillation is, “because then the brandy just flows.” As Ogorevc wrote (but did not try to explain), “the experts assure me that brandy with this amphibian addition ‘flows more.’” What “the experts” want to say is that we can get a larger quantity of brandy from the same quantity of fruit, if we add some salamanders to the process of distillation. The question--“how is this possible?”--remains. As I have not participated in any Salamander brandy distillation and have not done an experiment myself, I can only speculate on this question – salamander’s poison may to a certain degree compensate for the missing alcohol in the drink.

Our Salamander brandy is far from being a means for hallucinations. The context is now far less romantic and media sensational than was at the start of this presentation. What I am presenting here about Salamander brandy is merely cheating (by the producers) and certain negative feelings after drinking the wrong brandy (by the consumers). As one old woman remembers, her husband always blamed Salamander brandy if he felt ill or just not right after drinking some brandy.

Salamander Brandy In Folklore

Slovenian folklorist Marija Stanonik came across an interesting piece of folk tale. While working with school children in Škofja Loka she asked them to write down some folk tales told by their grandparents and she got this story from a village in Poljanska Dolina.

My grandmother still remembers how pleasant it was to rest on the Devil’s rock (which is no longer there), at the place where a seat was made by the devil himself. Here he sat when he was on his way to the village, when he had to frighten somebody there, or on the other hand when he was returning to the farm X.¹⁵ Why right there? Mrs. X was, that is to say, cooking special brandy, which was called Salamander brandy. While cooking brandy she put a salamander into it; its poisons totally drove mad those who drank such brandy. And

how terrible the rumbling down in the valley Brebovnica when the devil was running from X to the village. It doesn’t come as a surprise, drunk as he was.
(Stanonik personal archives, n.d.)

How to interpret such a story? According to Mary Douglas, interpreting “Little Red Riding Hood” (1999), the main problem with such interpretations is the lack of knowledge about the social context in which one story appeared or was changed. According to what we already know about Salamander brandy’s social image, we can explain the story in this way: X is a separated part of the community; using Salamander brandy X cooperates with the devil who makes problems with the villagers; the position of X can be interpreted through its life at the margins of the society due to Salamander brandy distillation.

In fact the story is not a serious one. According to Mary Douglas the license for laughing comes from the social context (1999:17) and together with Yvonne Verdier she agrees that a big part of folk tales can be placed into a genre of little proverbs, games, sarcasms, nonsense and humorous moral lessons (1999:28). In contemporary culture she finds a parallel in slander, comments that occur as pieces of poems, sayings and the like. Should not we understand our tale as village comment, sarcasm, slander, or joking? The story is told from the point of view of the village and in the village the story functions as a teasing story for the only one named – the X. The story in fact stigmatizes one of the farms in their midst.

With this story we have luck, because the story is not too old and the names have not lost their social context yet. As the name of the Brebovnica stream, which appears in the tale, is a real topographic name, I became watchful whether the other names in the tale (The Devil’s Rock and X) have some basis in reality as well. It turned out that both names come from the same environment – the rock is gone but the farm X and the neighbors can still tell us something about this tale.

The story about Mrs. X’s Salamander brandy distillation is quite well known in the area among the old people, who can confirm the conclusion on the basis of reading the tale through the testified position of Salamander brandy in the society. In fact people do not tell this as a folk tale, but as a comment on the life of Mrs. X herself, who died soon after the Second

World War and is supposed to have produced and sold Salamander brandy before the war.

Locals interpreted this practice of Mrs. X in two ways. On the one hand, some people say that Mrs. X was a Salamander brandy distiller. The basis for this assumption is the fact that there was always enough brandy at X's farm, even when there was little home made alcohol at other farms. She is supposed to have sold her brandy to drunkards for whom the farm functioned as a kind of illegal tavern. The brandy there was of low quality and could cause many health problems to those who drank it. On the other hand, other people denied the rumors about Mrs. X's Salamander brandy distillation. They say that these stories are/were just gossip of those who want/ed to harm the woman. According to this interpretation, Mrs. X was a poor woman with many children, which forced her to open her farm as a kind of tavern. The place was quite lively and that is what disturbed the people in the vicinity and thus caused the rumors.

An example that speaks to Mrs. X's situation in an appropriate manner occurred in 1939 when a line of bunkers was being built in the area.¹⁶ Mrs. X's place was open to "the masons from the South," men of nationalities other than Slovene, who came to work from other parts of Yugoslavia to build this military complex. As somebody explained, the main problem was the fact that the masons sometimes invited young girls from the area, which caused the offence of some local youngsters, who wanted to punish the host. To harm Mrs. X, who allowed such parties at her home, the locals produced the gossip about her cheating with brandy. As the lady who now lives at the farm X explained, the story about Salamander brandy was a strong stigma, which lasted with the farm far after the death of the old lady.

The tale is a slander story, a village comment. This case seems perfect for the understanding of what Salamander brandy is about. Our conclusion will again be different from the one provided by the media. Salamander brandy was presented as something worthy of condemnation - from those who defended Mrs. X as well as from those who disapproved of her doing - and such discourse was not based on the supposed hallucinations but on a cheating business.¹⁷ At the end, it really does not matter whether X was distilling Salamander brandy or not; the case is interesting because it shows that

talking about Salamander brandy could have been a useful way of stigmatizing those who withdrew from the norms of the society.

Media Discourse And The Birth Of The Salamander Brandy Myth

Ogorevc's discourse on Salamander brandy went like this: we Slovenians have our own traditional hallucinogenic drug. Though the journalist presented his discovery in a funny and fictional way, Salamander brandy was presented as a discovery and not as fiction. The journalist is known for his writing on the basis of the first hand experience and the article was first published in *Mladina*, a weekly known for its freshness, courage, credibility, which helped the success of this inventing of tradition (Hobsbawm 1988). Salamander brandy, as the Slovenian public knows it today, is a media construct and it is a false, on the basis of analogy, simplification of the phenomenon.

This invented tradition has its explanation in Salamander brandy's sensational potential. The discovery of a hallucinogenic drug in the Slovenian traditional society was sensational news and especially among the Slovenian youth got certain feedback.¹⁸ Some people even tried to make it. I met and heard about a few. One of them said to me: "Yes, Z and I made Salamander brandy. We did it just as it was written in *Mladina* and even exaggerated a bit to be sure about the impressions. We drank it but it was nothing. We drank more but we were just getting drunk. We had to smoke some marijuana at least to get stoned." Then I asked him: "What about the journalist's experience?" And the guy answered: "You've heard about the placebo effect - he was expecting too much!"¹⁹

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¹ I started this research together with Prinčič in 1998 and conclusions we made on the topic are both of ours. After our joined work I did some more research on the topic and got more confirmation for our theses. This writing will change the subject from *we* to *I* according to whom a certain part of the research refers.

² The Škofja Loka and Polhograjsko regions are supposed to be the regions where from which Salamander brandy comes. Unsystematic questioning in other regions of Slovenia showed that people from other parts of Slovenia do not know the drink, except younger people who read about it in *Mladina*.

³ I would not like to give a functionalistic explanation according to which one thing has just one and only function – in this view I allow the *Mladina* presentation, but cannot confirm it.

⁴ The mass media discourse on Salamander brandy is here abstracted from the writing in *Mladina*, which was the first media (and public) presentation of the phenomenon. This presentation gave to Salamander brandy its public image, which was later re-presented by other media, most stereotypically by commercial television POP TV for which the phenomenon was suitable as a scoop.

⁵ Blaž Ogorevc is a very special and quite famous *Mladina* journalist. What makes him special is his vocabulary, and his rich, humoresque and fictional way of writing and the topics he is writing about – sex, drugs, personal adventures around the world, his associating with Slovenian artists, memories of his “hippy” years and the like. One of his most famous (and remembered) articles is the one on Salamander brandy.

⁶ Beside the journalist’s investigative approach to discovering the phenomenon, there is also the context of *Mladina* as the most famous Slovenian research magazine (although especially in the field of politics) which gives importance to his writing.

⁷ In personal consultation with the author he confirmed his hallucinogenic feelings and did not deny that this was his message to the readers.

⁸ That’s why people say: “*We’d never make such brandy – but in the neighboring village you might find it.*”

⁹ In the last few years there were some law changes in Slovenia according to which home brandy distillation is now limited by quantity.

¹⁰ ‘Schnapps’ is a local word for brandy.

¹¹ In one part of the Tolmin region people talk of 'laibn brandy,' a word meaning 'toilet.' People say that it smelled like feces and was actually made of it.

¹² The usual brandy distillation from fruit is limited to the fruit season.

¹³ Under the name Salamander brandy our informants classified many different methods of fake brandy making, many of them without any relation with salamanders (the animals).

¹⁴ I spoke with one informant who clearly distinguished between the bad brandy and the poisoned one. As the brandy made of potatoes, pure alcohol, sugar and the like was named the bad brandy, he referred to Salamander brandy as the poisoned one. He classified Salamander brandy into the category of quantity and economically beneficial brandy distillation (as brandy made of potatoes etc.), but the problem with this one was that after drinking it you would feel sick.

¹⁵ I am avoiding the use of the name mentioned in the original text because it is a home name of a real farm.

¹⁶ The so-called Rupnik's line of bunkers was built as a borderline military complex for the defense against Italy.

¹⁷ People were saying to me that they would not drink Salamander brandy, which meant unwell, cheap, unsound brandy - some people drank it because they only wanted to get cheaply drunk without being concerned about the usual sickness afterwards, but usually you would get such brandy by accident and without wanting it.

¹⁸ The feedback did not occur only among certain groups of youth who talked about it and were interested in drinking Salamander brandy. Some media found it interesting and POP TV made a scoop out of it last year - again their informant (an older man from the Škofja Loka region) was presenting the economic potential of using salamanders but the TV was rather showing the supposed consumer of the drug (a young guy who literally repeated the Mladina description of the feelings after drinking it). And the same with the story with the scientific response towards the Mladina writing - Valenčič (1996) uncritically repeated the presentation of the media.

¹⁹ Mladina's journalist Ogorevc in his article admitted that it took a long time to persuade one peasant to sell him some Salamander brandy and not just the usual one, he finally got it, but that in fact the brandy sold as Salamander brandy was

probably the same brandy as before. He writes: "...the price was then double, but I think that I drank the same brandy all the time. For ideology we always have to pay extra and the Host is holy even if it's from the same material as cut offs which are for free."