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Lecture

"A Shot in the Heart of Europe - Focal Point Trieste between South Europe, the Balkans and the Northern World

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'Not everybody likes going to Trieste: lamentable, because the most important harbour of the Adriatic Sea shares one unpleasant characteristic with the cities of the Orient, that is giving a vague impression from the distance and then tormenting the traveller staying there with painful disappointment. Trieste is a multilingual mixture of Austrians, Italians, Slavs, Jews and Greeks: The latter have the monopoly on trade. It is an expensive and unhealthy city, extremely windy and with a bad sewerage system. Not without reason one could call it the city of the three winds. One of them, the Bora, so to speak throws people into the sea, with a power coming immediately and sweeping everything away; the second one, the Scirocco, drives the rubbish back to the city; the third one, the Contrasto, results from the two others clashing. And just like the atmosphere in Trieste, it changes from being extremely hot to being extremely cold, just as in politics the principle of independence is always pushed towards the verge of disorder. In Trieste, infertile politics hoard all the intellect and the energies, which should be used for progress. Instead, deeply rooted party thinking is predominant. The citizens are Vandals, and could not be anything else, there opinions conflicting on everything, and simply the unhappy city does not know which side to take.'

These lines, Ladies and Gentlemen, were written in 1877 by a British diplomat, by the great researcher, writer and multilingual genius, Richard Francis Burton, in a letter to Alfred Bates Richard, correspondent for 'The World'.

By the way, during his stay in Trieste – from 1872 to his death in 1890 – Burton was the first to translate two important works of world literature into a European language: The 'Kamasutra' and 'Stories from the Thousand and One Nights'.

For long, his image of the city has been outmoded, and only his remarks on the winds are true these days. In the past few years, the business paper 'Il Sole 24 Ore' has repeatedly declared the city Italy's place of the highest quality of life. Indeed, not only the city's high value as a tourist place has contributed to this, but also aspects of security and wealth, supply and infrastructure.



Triest is a special city, and it occupies a special geopolitical position. It is the junction of Europe, and no other place shows so many borders, contrasts, contradictions, but also bridges between them.

Here there encounter Roman, Slavic and Germanic culture, the Mediterranean meets the world of the North, East meets West, and according to the respective point of view Trieste is called the Gateway to the Balkans or the Gateway to Western Europe. Also the spiritually contradicting formations of sea and mountain encounter each other here, just as culture and commerce are eternally connected and competing with each other. Not only on the stately palaces of the Trieste insurance companies, Generali and Ras, but also at many other, even modest buildings we see the sculptures of two ancient deities together, Mercury and Apollo, in harmonic unity: the god of trade and thieves in unity with the god of poetry - of culture. In the old days, those great founders of enterprises knew that the one of them will not live without the other. And, if we follow the great French historian Fernand Braudel, who lets the world of the Mediterranean begin where the first olive tree grows and end where the last palm tree stands, then in this northernmost city on the Mediterranean Sea we know that also here the world of butter meets the world of oil.

It is a city that has been tossed around by world history. On the castle hill, Colle di San Giusto, there was an Acropolis long before the Roman basilica was erected there under Emperor Augustus. The city's closeness to ancient Greece becomes ever more obvious at the mouth of the mystic, underground River Timavo, at the gates of the city, where according to Robert Ranke-Graves once the Argonauts landed on their hunt for the Golden Fleece, and where according to Virgil Antenor landed before he founded the city of Padua. It was one of the two harbours where amber from the Baltics was shipped to ancient Greece; in return, on this amber road salt was transported to the North of Europe. We know only little about the Roman past of the city, and only a few buildings, such as the Teatro Romano or the Arco di Riccardo give testimony to these times. We can say only little on this older past. But in 1388 there was the necessity to evade Venecia's fiscal blackmail. After Rijeka and the Earldom of Duino in 1852 and 1857 respectively, also Trieste sought for protection by the Habsburgs and was declared an Independent City of the Empire.

But the phenomenon that the name of Trieste became known all over the world started only in 1719, when the city was declared a free port by Emperor Charles VI. In those days it was hardly anything else than a sleepy fishermen's village with only 4,500 inhabitants. But in the following, thanks to various courses set by economy policy as well as to the deathblow Napoleon dealt the anyway decadent Republic of Venecia, most of all the sea route across the Adriatic Sea was open again, and in Trieste there started an economic and population growth which in those days was unique all over Europe – and be careful, Trieste is also a place which at once refutes any cliché and attempts at generalization – thus a unique economic and population growth which was even discussed by Karl Marx in two extended contributions for the 'New York Daily Tribune'.

Karl Marx asked: *'Now, how was it that Trieste, of all, and not Venice became the cradle of newly flourishing shipping on the Adriatic Sea? Venice was a city of memories; Trieste – like the United States – had the advantage of not having any past at all. Built by a colourful band of Italian, German, British, French, Greek and Jewish merchants and speculators, it was not burdened with tradition, as Venice was ... that is why Trieste's flourishing has no limits, except of depending on the development of productive forces and means of transport in the gigantic complex of countries which are currently under Austrian rule.'*



However, already Karl Marx made the mistake to ignore the second autochthonous group of the population, which is the Slovenians who have been rooted in Trieste for centuries, just as the Serbian merchants and workers.

In those days, the city was constantly doubling its population every few years, and with tremendous speed it grew to a size of 300,000 inhabitants, who started enterprises here, which these days count among the most important in Europe, just to mention the Generali Insurance Co., which was founded in Trieste in 1831.

One of the many decrees contributing to the city's growth was an amnesty for rich offenders, who invested the money they had embezzled elsewhere in Trieste – you already recognize why this city is definitely a good place for detective novels. One of these people was Pasquale Revoltella, who came to Trieste as the four years old son of a butcher and made a splendid career. He became something like Trieste's Rockefeller. However, there is malicious gossip that as a high-ranking tax official in Egypt he had taken half of the national treasury with him. But we know for sure that in Trieste he founded a predecessor of the university, as well as a bank, which granted loans to small merchants and craftsmen, and he invested much of 'his' money in the realization of the Suez Canal. He was himself the vice president of the Suez Society. At his death he left his entire wealth to the City of Trieste, however before this, in 1867, he had been made a Baron for his great merits as an entrepreneur. And Barone Pasquale Revoltella was only one out of many.

New Trieste became a city of immigrants, and it was built by more than ninety ethnicities. 'The Prototype of the European City' was the headline of a long article in the French newspaper 'Le Monde', where it said:

'Trieste, the early European. That was one of those rare moments when a remote corner civilization, wealthy and creative, may dream of creating a style of its own, a history which was suitable for exporting itself. It played melting pot, without degenerating to that synthetic uniformity from which "one day boredom is born". It was this city which invented that pan-European Europe from which our people in Brussels are still far away.'

In Trieste in those days it was unimportant from where one had come. Over two centuries, something was displayed which, if we look at the world of today, is hard to believe: that living together peacefully, without regard for ethnic or religious belonging, was possible. All that counted was where one arrived, which social class one reached, was cash. Seven cemeteries in the city are planned as central cemeteries: Sant' Anna, the Catholic one, is the biggest, then there follows the Jewish Cemetery. There is a British Cemetery, a Serbian Orthodox one, a Protestant one, a Greek Orthodox one and a Muslim one. When making a walk over one of these cemeteries, the visitor will soon recognize that in all sections he finds the same names on the gravestones again and again, that there is not a single family descending only from one nation.

Thus, Ladies and Gentlemen, in Trieste in those days we encounter a Europe as most of us probably imagine it.

However, all this changed in the 20th century, with unrelenting force. Already in July, 1920, Fascist gangs burned down the Narodni Dom Balkan, the Slovenian house of culture, as well as a number of business institutions of Slovenian and Croatian merchants. Soon the Fascist state passed laws, which were meant to Italianize anything non-Italian and which did not even stop at family names. These days we are told about this in the work of that Trieste author of the Slovenian language, Boris Pahor, whom I adore very much, and which I would like to recommend warmly. He was born in 1913 and has already been several times nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Personally, I hope that this year he will finally be awarded. By the way, also he counts among those inhabitants of Trieste who in the course of their lives have had passports of seven nations, without ever having changed their place of residence. And the situation is similar with the currencies, which were valid in the city of Trieste and its environment in the course of just one century.

At first there was the Austrian-Hungarian double monarchy, then – after the Treaty of St. Germain in 1919 – the Kingdom of Italy, after September, 1943 there was Nazi occupation, when the only extinction camp on Italian soil was erected, Risiera di San Sabba. (Fig.1). In May 1945, after liberation by Tito's partisans, there were the forty days of Tito's rule over the city, during which there was bloody revenge, and further war crimes were added to those of the 23 years before. After June 10th, 1945, it was the Allied Administration, and from 1947 to 1954 there existed the Territorio Libero di Trieste, a first UN protectorate. Since October 26th, 1954, the city has been a part of Italy once again. And last but not least, later there was also the European passport.

You see, it is a complex city, which is not easily understood, and to explain it completely we would have to mention countless further details.

There was only one man who was able to describe it by one sentence. That was Paul Parin, a psychoanalyst who was born in Polzela in Slovenia in 1916, with Slovenian-Swiss-Jewish-Trieste roots, and in his work 'The Contradiction in the Subject' he wrote:

'It is an Italian city in a Slovenian country, with Austrian history and a culture of its own which is not Slav, Italian, Austrian but Trieste, provincial and uniquely international.'

Under such tensions, Ladies and Gentlemen, literature must be made. Trieste is one of the few true capitals of world literature, where works have been written in more than only one language. It is a long list, but I won't save you from hearing a few prominent names. Let us remember that the murder of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, the founder of modern history of art, in 1768 was the first international literary case, which is connected to the city and has inspired many authors. Or Giacomo Casanova, the great adventurer and libertine, who spent the last two years of his exile in Trieste and nearby Friaul and told about this stay in his 'Histoire de ma vie', written in the French language.

Then there is the author Henry Beyle, better known as Stendhal. He spent the winter of 1830/31 in Trieste, when in France his 'Le Rouge et le Noir' was published, however the Habsburg authorities refused his accreditation as a consul. But anyway he found the city dubious, as we read in his notes:

'Men in pantaloons arrive, without culottes, barefoot, a hat of two feet in diameter and a thick cap. They are skilful, agile and quick. I spoke to five or six of them and bought a round of punch. They were friendly semi-savages, but their boats smelled like resinous oil, and their way of speaking is constant poetry.'

Stendhal feared most of all the Bora, this north-eastern wind, which is typical for Trieste and blows down from the karst with gusts of as much as 180 km/h. In one of his letters he wrote that it was *'better to encounter a gang of Catalonian highwaymen than to be grasped by this wind'*.

The great traveller Johann Gottfried Seume in his book 'Spaziergang nach Syrakus (A Walk to Syracuse)' gives an impressive description of the city from the year 1801:

'The Trieste people have their own special way of sad complaining, complaining about peace. With Christian humanity, they do not care a bit about the rest of the world and its hardships, and all they wish is that Heaven will grant them another ten years of this beneficial war; then, they say, their Trieste will become a city, which may be counted among the best in the world. After all, these good merchant souls have nothing bad on them at all; beat each other to death, but before pay for our anchovies and our Turkish scarves.'

Jules Verne took a long time to cruise on the Mediterranean on his yacht and research, before starting to write his novel 'Mathias Sandorf'. A wonderful adventure novel, reflecting the rising national movements in Europe, on whose traces still today you may walk through the city or explore the Istrian peninsula at the doorsteps.

Then Sigmund Freud, who in 1867 as a young man wrote his first scientific study in this city – and thus just made the first 'Freudian mistake': he analyzed the sexual organs of the eel. And in his letters to Silberstein he told about his great interest in the city's young women, but he was not courageous enough to speak to them.

And also the great Richard Francis Burton, whose impressions I quoted right at the beginning of my lecture, whose work is very voluminous and deals intensively with the last station of his life and its environment, where he died in 1890.

At nearby Duino Castle, Rainer Maria Rilke spent the winter of 1910/11, invited by his patron, Marie von Thurn und Taxis who also counted Mark Twain and Paul Valéry among her guests. Rilke wrote the first, third and sixth of his *Duino Elegies* in his room high above the stormy Adriatic Sea.

Then James Joyce, who from 1904 on was to spend eleven years in the city, whose children were born in Trieste, just as the first chapters of 'Ulysses'. The grave of his brother, Stanislaus, is on the British Cemetery. Trieste's multi-nationality can also be read from a letter James Joyce, obviously with an empty stomach, wrote from Dublin to his beloved Nora:

'Oh, hungry now. When I will arrive, Eva shall prepare a threepenny pudding and some vanilla sauce without wine. I would like to have roastbeef, rice soup, capuzzi garbi, mashed potatoes, pudding and black coffee. No, no, I would like to have Stracotto di maccheroni, a mixed salad, stewed plums, torroni, tea and presnitz. Or, no, I would like to have braised eel and polenta. Forgive me, Love, I am hungry tonight.'

Thomas Mann had his Aschenbach start from Trieste, and he himself came two times to the city, just as another Nobel laureate as a young consul: Ivo Andric.

And of course we should not forget about the ‘real’ Trieste authors: Slovenian-speaking Srečko Kosovel, a Rimbaud of the early 20th century. Or Scipio Slapater, whose work ‘My Karst’ is for sure the most poetic hymn on this limestone plateau, which lies around the city like a stone belt. Then the two merchants, Umberto Saba and Aron Ettore Schmitz, the latter better known under his pen name Italo Svevo. Yes, their original profession was that of merchant, before they became authors of world fame. Again, with these two gentlemen you find the already quoted interaction of Mercury and Apollo. But also the ‘discoverer’ of modern Italian literature, Roberto Bazlen, who writes half Italian, half German, was an inhabitant of Trieste, just as the almost forgotten author in the German language, Theodor Däubler. Also Giorgio Strehler, one of Europe’s most famous stage director, was born and buried here. These days, the already mentioned Boris Pahor and, of course, Claudio Magris are the renowned representatives of Italian literature who were born here. But countless other works by authors who do not come from this city focus on Trieste and its environment.

If a novel is a mirror of a space and an age, the detective novel deals particularly with the neuroses and excesses of both. In, for the time being, seven novels I have set in Trieste, the hero is called Proteo Laurenti. The only feature we share is that both of us have come from the outside and have been connected to the city for more than thirty years. Proteo Laurenti comes from the South of Italy, from Salerno, on the other hand I come from the South of Germany, from the border region between Germany, France and Switzerland. Who has grown up near borders, Ladies and Gentlemen, whose soul is formed differently, which makes him/her different from the people from the interior. Not only that political borders are abstract lines which divide families and friends, estates and regions – I am bold enough to state that there is only one political border in Europe for which this is not true: that is the one around Iceland. No, crossing borders, under any aspect of life, means most of all discovering something, the foreign one has not known previously. Thus it means growth. Of course there are also people who are afraid of this. And there is something more, which is typical for people living near borders: none of them may claim not to have been a smuggler for once in his/her life.

Coming from the outside means most of all making observations and asking questions which he/she who has been grown up with the habits and taboos of his/her place does not necessarily see. Otherwise, this Italian detective and I have not much in common, maybe with the exception that both of us are found at the same bars and restaurants, but when he enters I leave. We work together, that is enough, and I do not like to have to pay for the many glasses of wine he usually drinks.

Salerno-born Proteo Laurenti is a few years older than me, his parents, when choosing his name, had Greek mythology in mind, Proteus, that deity who is able to change into any kind of substance and is thus unassailable for his enemies. But his parents did not think at all that one day he would end up in Trieste and choose a profession in the context of which he would have to arrest people. There is also a small, white animal, an olm, by the name of Proteo. This species is more than 100,000 years old, and it lives only in the underground waters of the karst. Its scientific name is *Proteus Anguinus Laurentii*. When my protagonist introduces himself, he is laughed at, but wrongly, because the both of them share a few common features: one lives in the underground, the other digs there.

There is much underground in Trieste, Ladies and Gentlemen, and its dimensions always go far beyond any local colour. For, also this city has for long arrived in the present, with all its advantages and disadvantages. These days, people live together peacefully again, for long the time of nationalist riots has been over. 95% of the population do not care about the ethnicity to which the other belongs. New immigrants have arrived, many of them from former Yugoslavia, Serbs and Kosovans, crowding when mass is held in San Spiridione, the Serbian-Orthodox church, whereas in the Greek-Orthodox church it is the older members of the congregation who fill the place. Trieste is a port, which is daily connected to the countries of Central Europe and on the Mediterranean. By the way, it is also second-biggest 'Turkish' harbour, after Istanbul: up to four ferry boats a day keep up the connection. A trans-alpine pipeline connects the biggest oil terminal on the Mediterranean to Austria and Germany. The university has 25,000 students, additionally there are renowned international research institutions such as ICTP, the UN-run International Center for Theoretical Physics, as well as a branch of the International Atom Energy Authority, a particle accelerator, and of course SISSA, the International School for Advanced Studies. This is completed by trade, banks, insurance companies, as well as by some world famous enterprises from the food branch, most of all in the coffee trade sector. Trieste is the biggest harbour for coffee on the Mediterranean, it is traded at the forward exchanges of London and New York, and at no other place all enterprises connected to coffee are found together: haulage companies, importers, roasting establishments, even a coffee university. Finally, it shall be mentioned that in Italy this city is second if the amount of savings deposits at banks is concerned.

In 1944 Winston Churchill warned:

'An iron curtain will go down, from Stettin on the Baltic as far as to Trieste on the Mediterranean.'

Unfortunately he was right: Trieste became the southernmost city at this terrible line of ideologic separation.

One of my novels – 'Death casts long shadows' - is preceded by a quotation from 'Diplomatic Courier', a spy film by Henry Hathaway from 1952, with Hildegard Knef and Karl Malden, and the spy tells his agent controller: *'I've seen many cities, but this is my first time to Trieste.'*

His superior answers: *'An interesting city. What where Lisbon and Istanbul in the war, that is Trieste these days. Espionage and counter-espionage, informers, Tito followers and Tito opponents, Stalinists and anti-Stalinists, also tens of thousands of British and American soldiers, a pleasant and enthusiastic population, and sailors from everywhere. All the world in one city.'*

Trieste in the post-war period was a meeting place of international secret services. In the course of the more of seven years of researching on this project, among others I met nine Stasi agents who had been in the city until 1990. They are still here these days, only the GDR's secret service is not. My starting point were two uninvestigated murders in the Seventies, and thanks to access to archives and the readiness of almost one hundred contemporary witnesses soon there developed a picture which was not surprising: You may touch what you like over here, everywhere Europe appears. In this case, the traces led back to the time of Nazi occupation, to collaborators and the murders at the extinction camp of Risiera di San Sabba. And they led to the present, where the international connectedness of politics, business and organized crime becomes obvious.



But don't be afraid to come to Trieste. It is a wonderful port, which is said to have the highest quality of life in Italy, with a wonderfully clean sea at the doorsteps, which makes it possible to have a bath right in the centre of the city. It is a literary city, but also a place of culinary variety as there is no other, for the immigrants have left their marks both with the dialect and the kitchen.

And please don't be afraid that your car might be broken open or your handbag might be stolen. All this happens almost never. In Italy, Trieste brings up the rear of petty crime, and in the past sixty years there have been only ten uninvestigated murders. But not one, which we might understand, such as 'Finally, after Twenty Years: Wife Poisons her Husband'.

Other things happen here. Being a port and border city, there is smuggling of any kind, the usual drug containers and arms, illegal immigrants, of course, but in the past few years, under the auspices of European economic crisis, copyright piracy has been even a bigger problem: a shipload of faked dentures from Turkey for the Dutch market, China-faked nun's habits for Italy, and recently a truck full of cheap coffins from the Ukraine, for Germany.

And then, when visiting our city, soon you will see that it is provided with a denseness of financial institutions, which is bigger than at any other comparable place. A high-ranking policeman commented on this that anybody might interpret this as he/she likes.

Only three elements of society do not care about borders, and even less about political ones: business, organized crime and culture. In Trieste, the biggest crimes are always connected to Europe, to its past and to its present. That is why Proteo Laurenti, quite against his will, has always a lot of work. How did Le Monde have it? *'This is the home of Europe.'* And if we look at the extension of the European Union, we might easily believe that it is an Austrian conspiracy, for soon they will have got everything back what they lost in 1918.

But what do the European Union and the fall of the borders mean for the future?

I am convinced that, already due to constantly rising economic pressure, border regions which are productive and rich in population will have no choice but to cooperate more closely – independently of any political attitude and independently of the interests of their central governments which are far away, after all. Too many sectors of everyday life are of cross-border significance: transport and traffic connections, energy (since Tschernobyl at the latest we know that energy supply is no phenomenon which stops at borders), health system, education and tourism. Trade anyway. Unfortunately also organized crime.

But only the future generation of politicians will be able to really tackle these problems, those people who will not have experienced the ideologic division of Europe and who will thus not use the polemics of the past for solving the problems of the future.

And also literature does not stop at borders. In this corner of the world, here at the heart of Europe, literature will be made also in the future, as the mirror of a space and an age, as giving evidence also to economic and demographic development.

Thank you very much.

