Triestine Girls: Reflections on the Istrian Exodus

Benedetta Grasso & Eleonora Mazzucchi (April 15, 2010)



The documentary "Le Ragazze di Trieste" will be screened at Calandra Institute on April 29 2010 at 6PM. On this occasion we reflect on this somewhat hidden mass exodus that affected the lives of thousands of Italians.

What is generally called “The Istrian exodus” is a quite recent mass migration from Istria and Dalmatia of hundreds of thousands of Italians that had to flee to various countries in the world but particularly to the United States and Australia.

Between 1943 and 1960, in fact, almost 400.000 people escaped from that area due to ethnic hatred and the International politics triggered by World War II.

While other Italian immigrants came to the United States simply to escape poverty, the people living in these territories - constantly torn between Italy and other states throughout the centuries, being situated exactly at the North-Eastern border and having ethnically mixed citizens, Italian, Slovenian, Croatian, Serbian and more – were involved in some of the most controversial and shameful moments of history. Italians had a very stereotypical image of the Slavs, considering them “barbaric” while the Slavs, under the regime of Tito, saw Italians as fascists. The most tragic events were the Foibe massacres in 1945 after the liberation of Istria, in which more than 5000 Italians were brutally killed and thrown into mass graves.

The reality of the times was far more complex and, even though the hatred was real, the communities were in some cases also very connected. Trieste in particular was a very thriving intellectual city which allowed for a pleasant daily life and “nourished” many writers, artists and political activists.

Although the exodus was anything but a happy experience, there is a very interesting documentary “Triestine Girls” which follows some very lively women who managed to create a new life for themselves in America.

That tragic time is recounted by them almost with irony and a certain nostalgia, obviously not for the war, but for their youth and the familiar memories. As teenagers, Americans appeared to them as “movie stars” with their cigarettes, their chocolate, their blue jeans: handsome soldiers who swept them off their feet and took them to the US to get married and live a safe life together.

This documentary will be screened at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute on April 29 2010 at 6PM.

To remember these events I-Italy would also like to re-propose an article written by Eleonora Mazzucchi for i-Italy (June 24, 2008) which clearly explains the historical background and contextualizes it.

A Painful Piece of Italian History, Overlooked
by Eleonora Mazzucchi
The Second World War is the conflict they say we’ll never forget. Manifold atrocities, subjugations, sufferings and displacements are its legacy, the very exemplary of a brutality we are warned not to repeat, but even as we dutifully recall the war’s effects there remain episodes we speak little of today. Among them are the events that took place between Italy and the former Yugoslavia.

The tension between the two central European giants, that fomented tragedy for one population of Italians in particular, is rather complex and merits some explaining. Sizeable border areas, Istria, Dalmatia, and the Quarnero islands, now part of Croatia, and the cities of Trieste and Gorizia, disputed between Italy and Yugoslavia and at present Italian, contained both Slavs and ethnic Italians in the 1940’s. Italians who had established themselves in these parts for centuries refer to themselves as Giulianians (“Giuliani”), from the influence of the northeastern Venezia-Giulia region. The Association of Giulianians in the World (“Associazione Giuliani nel Mondo”, or AGM) [2] is dedicated to commemorating the Italian presence in those areas and their subsequent, rather grisly diminishment following the Second World War.

Succinctly put, the Yugoslavian partisans of Josip Tito’s Communist government, in 1943 and in the immediate aftermath of the war, engaged in a politically and ethnically motivated campaign to rid Italians from Dalmatia and Istria. Open hostility broke out against Italians, seen as belonging to the

nearby Fascist regime, and anywhere between 10, 000 and 15, 000 of them (numbers are contentious) were killed. Civilians, regardless of age or gender, were gunned down and thrown into mass graves, known as “foibe”.

Approximately 300, 000 Italians left their homes in the territories soon to become Yugoslavia, forming a mass exodus that took them all over the world, including the Americas, Canada, and Australia, but for the most part, Italy. A Giulianian emigration had in fact begun during the First World War, but in far lesser numbers and under less dramatic circumstances. It is in order to amalgamate these dispersed peoples that the AGM was born, to bring light to a chapter of history largely forgotten, officially ignored by the Italian government for decades.

The Italian Consul General Francesc0 Maria Talò, who hosted the AGM a couple of weeks ago, would later say that he “felt a deep sense of shame for what Italy had not done” and had not recognized with respect to the gruesome history of the Giulianians. It is speculated that the Italian government chose not to discuss the 60-some year-old tragedy because of its long-standing sympathies with Communism and, perhaps more likely, because it would be forced to admit to brutalities Italy, on its part, had committed against Slavs during the war.

The AGM inaugurated its traveling exhibit, “Into the New Millennium with Our Roots” (“Con le nostre radici nel nuovo Millennio”), along with a documentary by Chiara Barbo and Andrea Magnani, “Triestine Girls” (“Le ragazze di Trieste”), at the Italian Consulate in New York. The exhibit, which the AGM is planning to permanently install in its headquarters in Trieste, consisted of several large panels outlining the history of the Giulianian diaspora. The black and white pictures, along with photocopied letters and historical documents, had both a deeply intimate feeling to them—many were retrieved from families—and a touch of the didactic. Indeed, the consolidation of this material, affecting because in part it resembles the personal effects lost after a shipwreck, brings to the public eye, for the first time, what AGM’s President Dario Locchi called “a lost page in history”. Locchi went on to explain that only 22 percent of Italians know anything about this piece of history, and among them, only 57 percent know of the consequent Giulianian flight.

The exhibit’s mission is to inform as large an audience as possible (it has been carried across continents), breaking the silence surrounding the suffering of a people and their forced exodus—an Italian emigration, Locchi underlined, vastly different from the Ellis Island variety. We come to know through the display, somewhat surprisingly, that some of our most beloved Italians and Italian Americans were of Giulianian descent, including screen siren Alida Valli, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, influential art-dealer Leo Castelli and racecar driver Mario Andretti. One such notable was present at the event itself, renowned celebrity chef Lidia Matticchio Bastianich [3], who provided the catering for the presentation and for whom the issue of exodus is profoundly, personally significant.

Talò touched on what may be one of the most interesting aspects of the Giulianian population. He had opened his moving, at times apologetic, speech by saying that the exhibit brought an Italian sentiment that was more deeply felt because it was mired in suffering. Throughout, speakers from the Association reminded the audience, a gathering of Italians and Italian-Giulianians, that they had endeavored to never lose their Italian identity, and listening to them, one had the impression that their purpose was not just to reclaim a place in history but to assert their very Italianness.

The screening of “Triestine Girls” mitigated some of the sense of desperate migration. The documentary traces the fate of Triestine women who left Italy for love, marrying American soldiers stationed in their city during WW II and then moving to the U.S. to build entirely different lives. As Chiara Barbo pointed out, the women protagonists, now well into old age, recall their experience of cultural transition with humor and what she called, “a typically Triestian irony”. One sprightly woman spoke of wonderment at skyscrapers, and another of the difficulty of buying a pack of cigarettes when a store clerk couldn’t understand her thick accent—a patchwork of anecdotes that contributed to the work’s buoyant feeling.

i-Italy had the chance to speak about Barbo’s documentary, and more, with Lidia Bastianich. Bastianich has had a successful cooking show on PBS, “Lidia’s Italy”, for many years and owns a number of restaurants in the U.S. in partnership with her son, Joseph. She contributed her talents to

the exhibit with a feast of trypically Triestan specialties.

Her family hails from Pola, Istria, and moved to New York in 1958, when Bastianich was 11 years old.

What did you think of the documentary?

It really captured the soul of these women—their nostalgia, but also the happiness for what they have achieved.

What is some of your personal history of emigration?

My mother was pregnant with me when we wanted to flee [Istria had become part of Communist Yugoslavia]. My father sent us to Italy years later, but for some time he got caught behind the iron curtain.

What do you feel about this “lost page in history”, about what this exhibit will achieve?

History needs to be taught correctly. Who’s right, who was wrong, that’s way behind us now. The anguish needs to be recognized and the submissive tendency to keep this all secret has to end. The outspokenness we’re seeing now is long overdue.

Do you pass this story on to your children?

I take them to Italy as often as possible. It is important they become better human beings when they know where they came from.

Dario Locchi would echo this same sentiment when he said “There can be no future without memory of the past”. This “proud people, who paid the price of a lost war” can take solace in their Association’s efforts. Because there can truly be no future if grief isn’t taken out of the shadows and brought into the light.

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