



A Painful Piece of Italian History, Overlooked

Eleonora Mazzucchi (June 24, 2008)



Italians living in the former Yugoslavia during the Second World War break the silence about the sorrow they endured and the massive flight they were forced to make. It is a chapter in Italian history scraped from textbooks, in no small part because of the Italian government, and brought to the fore with an exhibit at the Italian Consulate. We spoke with celebrity chef Lidia Matticchio



Bastianich, a native of Istria (now Croatia), who like many Istrians, has waited to see this piece of her history recognized

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"](#) [3]. 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](#) [4], 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 General Consul, Francesca 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](#) [5], 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 typically 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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Links

[1] <http://iitaly.org/files/istrian-exodus1214327442jpg>

[2] <http://www.giulianinelmondo.com/>

[3] <http://youtube.com/watch?v=L0Ks8I6Wu98>

[4] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Istrian_exodus

[5] <http://www.lidiasitaly.com/>

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