Between isolation and the world: Hvar and the Islands of Dalmatia

Description

Islands are often a metaphor for isolation, distinctiveness, yet their isolation is often more a myth than a reality. Islands can be more integrated into the world and linked to far-away places than remote (and not so remote) towns and villages. The island of Hvar, in the Adriatic Sea, is a very good illustration of this apparent contradiction.



When the well-known Croatian film director Vinka Brešan began his critical journey of movie-making, he did so with two islands. Only later did he go to the mainland, although he himself hails from Zagreb. Two of his critically acclaimed films were thus set in the Adriatic Sea: *The War Started on My Island* (*Kako je počeo rat na mom otoku*, 1996) and *Marshal Tito's Spirit*(*Maršal*, 2000). The first one presents an ironic take on the Yugoslav wars on a microcosmic island. It deals with a sensitive topic without slipping into the patriotism prevailing on the mainland. In the second film, *Maršal*, Tito appears to have risen from the dead and now haunts the island, leading to an unexpected revival of Communism. In both, the distance of the island, its remoteness, give the protagonists and the director a degree of freedom to engage with topics that were too serious for the mainland. For Zoran Ferić, another well-known writer, the islands are more sinister, and their tightly knit social fabric is able to hide crimes and other dark secrets. In his novel *The Death of the Little Match Girl* (*Smrt djevojčice sa žigicama*, 2007), set on Rab, the return of the main protagonist, Fero, to the island, is a return to isolation, but also a place confronted with the outside world.

From Venetian ports to poverty. Dalmatian Islands between two Empires

Proximity and distance to the mainland are not given, but constructed. The centers to which the Dalmatian islands looked for laws, rules and administrators over the past 300 years have been Venice, Rome, Vienna, Paris, Belgrade, Zagreb and Berlin. For Hvar, Brać, Korćula and the hundreds of smaller islands in the area, this centre, for centuries, was a city by the sea: Venice. In a recent history of Venice, Thomas Madden[1], points out that the sea was to Venice what the fields, forests and mountains were to empires and kingdoms. Islands, thus, were not remote outposts of a land power, but places at the core of a maritime power. Throughout the half millennia, during which Venice dominated the Adriatic Sea, its sea routes were more reliable than the roads across the mainland. With Venice not just being one of the largest cities in Europe, but also the trading centre with the rest of the world, the rich merchant ships did not only pass by the ports of the Dalmatian islands: they traded their goods. Already in the early 16th century, the historian Vinko Pribojević noted of Hvar tat "*whatever is produced in the rich East, whatever gives abundance Latium, whatever is offered by courageous Illyricum, whatever sunny Africa bears, what carries bitter Hispania, whatever cruel Schitia gives in exchange, whatever offers joyous Arabia, whatever Greece exports, can be very often bought in this town*"[2]. With the Venetian ships hugging the Adriatic coast and islands, some ports, such as Hvar, became central stopping centers along the trade route.

Hvar and its neighbouring islands thus remained for centuries an important stopover for the Venetian merchant fleet and a cultural centre of the European renaissance. But with the shift in the maritime trade routes, which later hit the Adriatic See, Venice soon lost its might and the islands of Dalmatia accordingly became a backwater. Islanders began to leave the islands, looking for fortune and opportunities across the world. Jakov Buratović, for instance, who was born in a small village on the island of Hvar, first left the island as a young man to help build the Suez canal, like many other Dalmatians. He then moved to Argentina, where he became famous as Santiago Buratovich for laying down the telegraph network and participating in the Argentinean equivalent of "taming the Wild West". Today a small town in

Argentina, Mayor Buratovich, bears his name.

Wine would give Hvar a brief moment of wealth in the late 19th century, as a little bug from North America began destroying most European vineyards. Hvar managed for decades to avoid the arrival of the phylloxera pest and took advantage of Europe's misfortune. The bug, however, eventually made its way to the island in 1909 and destroyed its vineyards. The disease that crisscrossed Europe in the last 19th and 20th century, then, was responsible for the economic revival of Hvar, which reached its highest number of inhabitants around 1900, but also for its decline a few years later.

The rise of the nation states: Hvar in turbulent times

With the decline of the Habsburgs monarchy, many on the Dalmatian coast and islands, supported the idea of a Yugoslav state, as a means to provide a protection against the territorial claims of Italy and to consolidate the generally cordial relations between the Serbian and Croatian politicians and intellectuals of the time. Among them was Ante Tresić-Pavićić, a writer from Hvar, who became an important advocate of Yugoslav unity after the First World War and a member of the diplomatic service of the fledging Kingdom of Yugoslavia. In 1919 crowds in the town of Jelsa, on the island of Hvar, welcomed a British emissary by chanting "Long live England, America, Wilson" next to "Long live Yugoslavia!"[3]. The crowd was quickly beaten by Italian soldiers who occupied the island. These left two years later, after a peace settlement between Yugoslavia and Italy in 1920.

In the 1940s, a new wave of Dalmatians left the coast and the islands of Dalmatia in an attempt to escape the German occupation. After Italy capitulated to the Allies in 1943, the coast and many Dalmatian islands came briefly under the control of the Yugoslav Partisans, the anti-Nazi resistance movement in region. Yet, within a few months, by the end of 1943 and in early 1944, German troops took control of the Brač, Šolta, Hvar and other islands. Tens of thousands of islanders fled to Vis and from there to Italy, only to be sent to the camp of El-Shatt on the Sinai peninsula. A city of tents grew there in the desert, run by the Partisans under British control. The city had "*streets, house numbers, schools, hospitals, clinics, post offices, theaters, choirs, football teams and sports clubs, a cemetery and churches*"[4]. The famous Easter procession „under the Cross" (pod križem), which runs for 25 kilometer and eight-hour throughout the island of Hvar on the night from Thursday to Good Friday was transferred to El-Shatt. Villages like Jelsa, Pitve, Vrisnik, Vrbanj, Svirće and Vrboska were recreated in the forbidding heat of the desert as a replica of the island. And the refugees could only return home in 1946.

The Rhythm of Tourism on Hvar

After the war, Hvar and the Dalmatian islands became less connected to the world through emigration than through international visitors. Tourism had already begun in the mid-19th century. A railway, the Südbahn, connected then Vienna to the Adriatic Sea, and steamships already took tourists from Trieste to Hvar, the "Adriatic Madeira", as it became known. Tourism was at first reserved for an elite. They were often advised by their doctors to come in winter to cure their illnesses. The 1905 Baedeker guide to Austria-Hungary recommended staying at the Kurhotel Kaiserin Elisabeth, open all year for visitors. The price for a room was between 6-12 C that year, an amount that was only affordable to the wealthy. Today, every summer Croatian tabloids indulge in celebrity spotting in Hvar that is no longer the Adriatic Maderia, but rather its Cannes, at least in the imagination of those seeking to spot Hollywood stars and Russian tycoons entering the port with James Bond villain style yachts.

Mass tourism only began in the 1960s. Then, Socialist Yugoslavia not only abolished travel restrictions for its own citizens, but also welcomed foreign tourists to visit its coast. Infrastructures were built in large numbers to match this purpose, from the Adriatic coastal road to reach the ports along the coast to regular ferry connections to the islands. For the first time, Yugoslavs also came to the islands as Yugoslavs. Thousands of Belgrade children spend their summers on Hvar close to German and Austrian tourists in hotels, camp sites and private rooms, integrating the island into Yugoslavia and into larger European tourist streams. This transformation gave a new rhythm to island life. As tourism replaced or at least surpassed agriculture as the most important source of income, life on the island was no longer as poor and hard as it had been, but it became denser. For a few months each year, life becomes hectic as nearly every

islander engages in tourism business, renting rooms, cooking meals, selling lavender or taking sunbathers on excursions. Once the brief months of the touristic season end in late August, life slows down.

Today, Hvar has its own superhero. Lavanderman, aka Boris Bunčuga, is the unlikely hero of cartoonists Vančo Rebac and Toni Faver. The story goes as follows. Boris Bunčuga used to be a “seagull” (galeb in Croatian), a Dalmatian man who picked up Western tourists during the golden years of Yugoslav tourism. Falling asleep after an alcohol-rich evening in a disco, he fell asleep in a Lavender oil refinery but an industrial accident transforms him into Lavenderman, a superhero with purple tights and yellow cape. His only, rather modest, superpower is to deter mosquitoes and moths. And his curse is that he cannot leave the island. Forever young(ish), he is a time traveler from the Yugoslav tourist past in the present, yet his curse is unlike the reality most islanders experience. Leaving the island, at least for a short time, has been and continues to be normal. Taking a long boat trip to the mainland to give birth, to study or to shop is what connected the island to the world in the past centuries; just it connects Hvar to the continent today. But that tourism now brings thousands of visitors to the island is life-changing. Today, Hvar and the neighboring islands are not threatened by isolation. It is rather their safe distance to the mainland that shapes the fate and the life of Dalmatian islanders.

Notes :
[1] Madden, Thomas. 2012. *Venice: a New History*. London: Viking Penguin.
[2] Cit. in Milicic, Bojka. 1993. “Exchange and Social Stratification in the Eastern Adriatic: A Graph-Theoretic Model”. *Ethnology*. Vol.32(4), pp. 375–395.
[3] Captain J.G.L. Pommerol. Report on Lesina, Lissa and Curzola, Croatia, 5-12 June 1919. Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library Online Archive.
[4] Mataušević, Nataša. 2007. *El Shatt. Zbjeg iz Hrvatske u pustinji Sinaja, Egipat (1944-1946)* . Zagreb: Hrvatski Povijesni Muzej, p. 93.

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