

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DR-26

TRIESTE:

Too much to Die, Too  
Little to Live.

St. Antony's College,  
Oxford.

6th May, 1960.

Mr. Richard H. Nolte,  
Institute of Current World Affairs,  
366 Madison Avenue,  
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Trieste is the liveliest dying city imaginable. I came to it from a fortnight pleasantly rediscovering Florence, Siena, Ravenna and Venice, and the contrast was striking. There is a sense of vitality and busyness and even prosperity about the crowds on the Corso Italia that I had not felt elsewhere, even in Florence, where the seasonal tourist rush was already underway. By ten o'clock at night other provincial Italian cities have quietly rolled up their sidewalks and gone to sleep - un-Italian of them - but not Trieste. The restaurants, the cafes and the streets are full, the Teatro Verdi has a better and more frequent program than could be found in Florence or Venice, and - although it was a cool April and the Bora was blowing - the open-air jukebox dance pavilions along the waterfront are doing a rush business even on weeknights. There are as many new cars and motorscooters on the Trieste streets as in any other northern Italian city. The Chamber of Commerce, which fills an entire building with efficient secretaries and bustling bureaus, pours out a flood of attractive brochures extolling the incomparable virtues of the port and industrial district of Trieste.

The only jarring note in this idyll of superficial prosperity is the curiously empty harbour: three ships at anchor in what was, in 1913, the eighth ranking port in the world.

For Trieste, one soon discovers, is a mortally sick city. Commercial traffic is little heavier than it was in 1913 and the cargoes less valuable. Unemployment - and the neo-fascist vote - are far above the north Italian average. Two of the three great rail lines serving the port are empty. Millions have been poured into a dozen development schemes since the war - and wasted. And the commercial genius of Trieste busies itself with devising a maze of further plans for turning the tide of decline.

All of these plans shatter on the immovable rocks of an international situation about which Italy can do nothing and of a Roman bureaucratic blindness about which Trieste can do nothing. The city, quite out of world headlines since 1954, dies slowly.

But if the immediate problems are political and bureaucratic, the underlying problem is geography. Trieste lies at the very top of the Adriatic Sea, the nearest blue water to Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Slovenia. It also lies at the entrance to the only significant break in the great Alpine mountain barrier that arches from the French Riviera to the Black Sea, separating southern and western Europe from northern and eastern - and therefore on one of the world's great invasion routes. And it lies where Italian world meets Slav. Of these three elements are compounded its possibilities and its problems, its former prosperity and present decay.

It must be one of the most beautiful major ports in the world, but also the most difficult to reach from the land side. At the head of an open bight at the northeastern corner of the Adriatic - a magnificent natural harbour - the city is squeezed tightly between the sea and the mountains. Behind it looms the Karst, the beginning of the limestone Alps of Yugoslavia, white, barren, sheer. The very suburbs, with their Slovene population, cling precariously to the hillsides. Approaching by road or rail from Italy, one abruptly leaves the dead-flat Venetian plain at Monfalcone, 18 miles before Trieste, and then both highway and railway must be carved out of the cliffs, passing through a series of tunnels between which there are striking views of the sea, of the distant Venetian coast, and finally of the port far below. The other two rail lines and the other major highways depart the city by climbing laboriously up the sheer side of the Karst itself to the high plateau above, where the Yugoslav border now lies.

Across the Karst lies the wide Sava valley, southwesternmost arm of the vast Pannonian plains, Eastern Europe. Interested in the history of Trieste, I went last year to look at the Postumia Saddle, highest point on the road from the sea to the Sava. Significantly, this region (Venezia Giulia to the Italians, the Julian March to the Slavs) was Italian from 1919-1946, and is now Yugoslav. If I had not done my homework ahead of time, I should not have known when I came to it that I was atop one of the world's important passes: I appeared to be on a high plateau, nearly treeless, a wasteland of barren bleached limestone, pockmarked by occasional doline, or sinkholes, where a little red earth deposit might support a peasant or two; to the north and south are a few low hills, which seem scarcely higher than the plateau, and considerable imagination is required to realize that here the Alps are being crossed.

Through these open doors of the Julian region, where the Alps break down for a few miles, have come a hundred of the world's major invasions. The Roman legions passed this way to the conquest of Pannonia and Dacia - Trieste and Ljubljana, at both ends of the Julian March, were both founded by Augustus. In the second century the Marcomanni came in the other direction and Theodosius used Peartree Pass just to the north. Alaric the Goth, Attila the Hun and the Lombards all came this road. So did the Habsburgs. Opened to united and Fascist Italy in the twentieth century, it became a door to Balkan adventures; reached by Tito's Partisans in 1945, it lay on the highroad to Venetia and Austria.

Difficulty of access as a modern port, ease of passage as an invasion route - these are the inherent problems of Trieste and of the Karst region of which it is the chief center.

To the geographic problem is added an ethnic one. Sometime about the seventh century the Slavs appeared in Venezia Giulia - Slovenes in the north, Croats in southern Istria and around Rijeka. With the rise of Venice as queen of the Adriatic, the coastal towns and ports remained or became Italian in character and language - if not always in race - and the ethnic patchwork of the present was achieved by the early Middle Ages. The "Slav awakening" of the nineteenth century made this racial mixture potentially dangerous, and the extreme Italian irridentism at the turn of the century transformed the Julian region into an Italo-Yugoslav border problem that is yet to be solved.

To the geographic and ethnic problems the last two centuries have added an economic one, created quite unwittingly in imperial Vienna and left to ripen in a Central Europe shattered by two world wars.

Central Europe came to the Adriatic in the fourteenth century in the form of a sea-seeking wedge of Habsburg power that reached blue water at the Gulf of Trieste. The Triestini invited the Habsburgs in to protect their interests against the jealous power of Venice, queen of the Adriatic, and the Habsburgs made of the city their window to the Mediterranean, the only major seaport for an empire that ultimately numbered sixty million people. To this day there are Italian Triestini who recognize that Trieste's natural rivals are always the Italian ports competing for the same hinterland over the same saltwater routes, and that her natural economic alliance is with the landlocked powers of that hinterland. The conflict born six hundred years ago between national patriotism and economic interest remains unresolved and the most ancient cause of Trieste's present plight.

The Habsburg prosperity which older Triestini remember longingly actually dates from the time of Charles VI and Maria Theresa, who made the city a Free Port and allowed its population to double during the reign of Maria Theresa. The coming of the railroads - the famous Südbahn from Vienna, Europe's oldest mountain line, reached Ljubljana in 1849 and Trieste in 1857 - and the opening of the Suez Canal ushered in a further and greater development. In 1735 the population was 7,000, in 1775 it was 16,000, by 1890 it was 157,000. In the last year of peace, with 3½ million tons unloaded or shipped, it was the eighth port in the world, its only rival for the trade of the Dual Monarchy the sister port of Fiume (now Rijeka), jealously developed by the Hungarians but crippled in the race by its difficult location, limited communications and the undeveloped nature of its natural share of the hinterland.

This prosperous Habsburg Trieste of a century ago, neither Austrian, Italian nor Slav, but "European", is described in Murray's

Handbook for Southern Germany, published in 1853, as

daily advancing in trade, wealth, and population ... The original inhabitants are Italians; the country people, who frequent the market, Slavs of Illyrian origin ... Some of the richest merchants are Greeks, Jews, and English ... The Italian is the prevailing language and is used in the Courts of Justice, but all other tongues are spoken; in the public offices German is used, by the peasants a Slavonic dialect.

However, much of this final spurt to unrivaled prosperity was due to the artificial encouragement given the port by the Vienna court - a fact important for the dilemma of the city today, although understandably this is never mentioned by local interests. For the Austrian trade, Trieste's chief rivals are the north German ports, especially Hamburg. Trieste is closer to industrial Austria and Bohemia (it is 514 kilometers to Vienna via the Südbahn, while Vienna to Hamburg is 1143 kilometers), but the terrain is much more difficult, and the river and canal system of Germany make per-kilometer shipping costs to the north much lower. Jealous of the economic threat from the new German Empire after 1866-70, the Austrians were eager to see Habsburg goods pass through the Habsburg port. Unrealistically low railway tariffs were therefore set: a freight car of cotton at ordinary tariff from Trieste to Vienna would have cost 973 crowns, but the "preferential" Adriatic tariff reduced this to 200 crowns; a carload of Bohemian glass from Prague to Trieste should have cost 1336 crowns, but the preferential rate made this only 195. Further, to bring the Salzburg and even the South German market to Trieste, a fantastically expensive railroad, including three great tunnels under the Tauern and Karawanken and Julian Alps (the so-called Tauernbahn) was completed in 1907 and endowed with similar low tariffs. Significantly, it is virtually unused today, and not entirely because it now crosses Yugoslavia.

At the beginning of this century, few Triestini were conscious of these hard economic facts. For thirty years they had been the targets - and often the creators - of an intense irridentist propaganda. They felt themselves to be Italian, were honestly fearful of a South Slav pressure that grew from year to year and threatened to change the ethnic nature of the coastal cities (and which the Italians believed was being encouraged by the Austrians), and they were resentful of Austrian (German) bureaucratic rule and occasional infringements of their sense of nationality. (A major issue for years had been the creation of an Italian university in Austria for the Italian-speaking Triestini and Trentinesi of the Habsburg monarchy.) Lombardy had been freed from the Austrians in 1860 and Venice in 1866; the work would not be complete until the Trentino and Venezia Giulia were also liberated.

"Liberation" and the long-awaited bersaglieri came in 1918-9, and with them the end of Trieste's prosperity. National borders sprang up between her and her hinterland, and within the former hinterland. The war had permanently damaged Central European

commercial connections with the Middle East and the Far East (for which trade Trieste's natural advantages are permanent - it is 1251 nautical miles from Trieste to Port Said, 3540 nautical miles from Hamburg to Port Said). For example, the sugar trade, with which Trieste had profitably linked Danubia and the East, never revived, as war and theories of economic autarchy turned Europe to the sugarbeat.

Still, some markets survived the war. Austria continued to use her old seaport, and Hungary, a favorite friend of the Mussolini regime but no friend of Yugoslavia, preferred using Trieste to maintaining or establishing links with Yugoslav ports - or even with her own Fiume, now decaying rapidly under a Fascist neglect more damaging than earlier excessive Fascist interest. Much Czech and some Slovene and Croat trade still came this way. Trieste limped along and attempted to build some local industry, including a major oil refinery between the city and Muggia to the south.

The second world war dealt the final and far more serious blow. Trade was again dislocated, the city itself suffered grave damage, and both Nazi and Yugoslav Partisan occupations. Worst of all, through political changes it found itself a border city (Yugoslavia today begins five filometers from Piazza Unita), tenuously connected to the rest of Italy by a rocky strip of land a few kilometers wide containing one road and one railroad, both carved precariously out of the cliffs. Its own status was in open question, and in some sense remains so today.

Two people attempted to write to me while I was in Trieste this spring. I never received either letter, because, as I later learned, one was addressed to "Trieste, Yugoslavia" and the other to "Trieste, Austria". The Triestini would not find this funny - one of their chief pains is the way the world and even Italy have forgotten them since 1954 - but many of them, too, will hardly remember that "Trieste, Italy", while it works, is legally not quite correct either. This is still technically the Free Territory of Trieste, an independent state created by the Italian Peace Treaty in 1946. It has borders, but it never had a government, or citizens, and therefore presumably the guarantees of its existence by the signatory powers - the U.S., Britain, France and the USSR - never came into force. No one now doubts that the northern half of the Free Territory is permanently a part of Italy, the southern half a part of Yugoslavia - no one, that is, except the Triestini, who protest their permanent nervousness about tomorrow.

All of this came about because the second war ended, like the first, with the head of the Adriatic disputed between Italians and Slavs. Again a German power had been withdrawn and left behind a vacuum (the Nazis had annexed Venezia Giulia and neighboring provinces between 1943-45, renamed the whole "Adriatisches Küstenland", and administered it with a heavy dose of old Habsburg officials and supporters). After the first war the center of the dispute over the vacuum had been Fiume, not Trieste, but the issues were curiously

the same. Here Italian and Yugoslav claims confronted one another inconclusively for years. Here the Allies attempted to maintain a free territory, neither Italian nor Yugoslav, and here, when confronted by violence and the dissatisfaction of all parties, they eventually threw up their hands in peevish abdication. The two interested countries settled the issue between themselves and within two years Italy, heavy-handed, had annexed Fiume.

After the Second World War the point of tension had moved some 45 miles to the west. Fiume, now Rijeka, was no longer an issue; Italianità, in retreat, made a stand at Trieste. If the Trieste question was never as colorful as Fiume - Vidali, the Italian Communist leader in the city (reputed to be Trotsky's assassin), cannot quite match Gabriele D'Annunzio - the ingredients are the same. But Trieste became more complicated than Fiume, because an ideological issue was inserted: not just Latin and Slav, but Catholic western democracy and Titoist Communism stood at odds here.

Trieste was liberated from the Germans by the virtually simultaneous advance of Tito's Partisans from the east and General Alexander's New Zealanders from the west, enjoying in the process a forty-day occupation by the Yugoslavs that probably affected the first Allied decisions. These involved creation of a Free Territory of 300 square miles, under a governor to be selected by the Big Four, and guaranteed by them. Until his confirmation and the holding of elections, an Anglo-American force would occupy Trieste and its suburbs and a coastal strip linking the city to Italy at Monfalcone (Zone A), while the Yugoslavs would occupy the rest of the Free Territory to the south, including the Italian-inhabited port of Capodistria (Zone B). But agreement on a governor was never reached by the Big Four, the treaty never came in force. The Yugoslavs proceeded virtually to incorporate Zone B into their own territory, the British and Americans remained uncomfortably in a Zone A economically incorporated into Italy. (There was passport control at the Italy-Free Territory border, but no customs; no money was issued, but Italian postage stamps were surcharged "F.T.T.") But there was a Free Port and a local and autonomous administration, largely in Anglo-American hands until 1952, when an agreement with Rome admitted more Italians to the Zonal government. With ERP and free-spending occupiers, recovery made an encouraging beginning.

It was a series of about-faces on the part of the western Allies that kept the crisis permanently aggravated. The first of these came on March 20, 1948. Italy was facing a critical election in which it was feared that the Communists might win. Seeking ways of winning friends and influencing votes in the country, the Allies struck upon the idea of offering Trieste, and a month before elections Georges Bidault announced an Anglo-American-French decision to support the return of the entire Free Territory to Italy. De Gasperi won the Italian election, but shortly afterward Tito was expelled from the Cominform and also became eligible for Western favors.

A second switch in Allied policy followed in October, 1953, and the motives that inspired it are described by Eden, who was then British Foreign Minister and seems to have taken a lead in bringing the parties together, in the volume of his memoirs published this March. The Allies proposed to turn over their position in Zone A to Italy - in effect, to bring the Free Territory to an end by allowing the Italians de facto (but never de jure) to annex the city as the Yugoslavs long since had de facto annexed Zone B. An immediate furor was raised in Trieste, in Capodistria, and in Belgrade (where, inter alia, the USIS was stormed and its director shaken up). I paid my first visit to Trieste two months later and found almost everyone I talked to - all of them Italians - unhappy about the change, then still unconsumated. A high official of one of the city's great shipping companies even suggested that he would seriously prefer to see Trieste returned to Austria, rather than incorporated in Italy.

It took a year of secret negotiations, largely conducted in London at ambassadorial level, to turn this final Western offer into reality, but on 28 October 1954 the bersaglieri marched into Trieste for the second time in 36 years. Today the term "Free Territory of Trieste" has disappeared from official use; it is Provincia di Trieste, or, occasionally as a geographic expression, "Territorio di Trieste". A letter addressed to "Trieste, Italy" is likely to arrive more promptly than one addressed to "Trieste, F.T.T."

Of even greater longterm importance to the economy of the city were political events after 1945 in the old hinterland. The Iron Curtain was created and the economies of Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Rumania and (for a time) Yugoslavia looked east; their trade through Trieste dwindled to a trickle. Hungary had sent 99.1 thousand tons of her exports by train to Trieste in 1938; in 1959 she sent 10.1 thousand tons. Czechoslovakia had sent 252.8 thousand tons in 1938, 25.4 thousand tons in 1959. Yugoslavia after 1948 no longer faced east, but she had her own ports at Fiume (become Rijeka) and Capodistria (become Koper), both Italian before 1946, to develop. Her shipping through Trieste, however, was almost as high in 1959 (52.5 thousand tons) as before the war (59 thousand tons), when Italo-Yugoslav relations had also not been good. This can be expected to continue only until the railroad to Capodistria is completed.

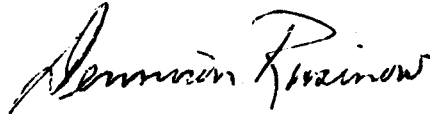
That Trieste survived at all in the first postwar years was due to ERP investment and the expenditures of the occupying forces (10,000 British and Americans), plus the American decision to ship supplies for their occupying forces in Austria and their ERP contributions to that country via Trieste. The end of ERP, the withdrawal of the Anglo-American forces in Trieste after the London Memorandum in 1954, and the ending of the occupation in Austria in 1955 removed these props (as artificial as the Habsburg railway tariffs before 1918), and Trieste's fate was in the hands of the government in Rome.

These hands have so far proved largely unwilling or unable

to help. An apparently increasing number of Triestini look back with nostalgia to the golden days of Habsburg rule - and are branded as un-Italian for doing so. A few wise heads in the days before the first war had foreseen all this. Proclaiming themselves good Italians, they had urged agitation for autonomous status within the Habsburg Monarchy, allowing official status to the city's Italianità, but maintaining the political links with the commercial hinterland. The wiser heads today are seeking some equivalent to this happy status, some form of internationalization for the port. They are generally thinking in terms of autonomy within the Italian Republic and a genuine Free Port, allowing them to recover the Danubian markets as best they can, without political and bureaucratic interference.

Meanwhile the warnings I heard in December, 1953, about the sad economic consequences of reunion have proved quite true. The only question, which the Triestini do not want to face, is: as long as the Iron Curtain and the Alps are unmoved, can the city be saved by any action the Rome government could take?

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Dennison Rusinow". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned centrally below the word "Sincerely,".

Dennison Rusinow

Received New York June 1, 1960