INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DR-43
The Italians of Yugoslavia:
3. Of a Young Writer and a First Novel

Ivankovačka 19
Belgrade, Yugoslavia
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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Fulvio Tomizza personifies the problem of the intellectual, and more particularly the writer, who finds himself a member of a small ethnic minority. In search of an audience such artists face an agonizing choice: either they must abandon the language and culture in which they were born (and the Joseph Conrad who can do this successfully has been rare), or they must abandon their native land and go where their mother-tongue is understood.

Tomizza is a young Italian of Istria, a writer of peasant stock and of promising talent. For more than two years after graduating from the Italian classical lycee in Koper he hesitated in the face of this problem. As an Italian writer in Yugoslavia, where there are only 50,000 of his co-nationals, his future was not bright. If he wrote in Italian, there would be few his words could reach and limited opportunities for publishing them, while to write in Serbo-Croat would mean the loss of the cultural heritage from which he drew his inspiration and the language which was his natural means of expression. He could escape this limitation by moving to Italy, but like so many Istrian Italians, he feels his roots to be deeply planted in the dry, thin soil of his native land, and it was of this land and its people that he wanted to write. Transplanted, he was sure that he would cease to bear good fruit; remaining, he would have no room to grow.

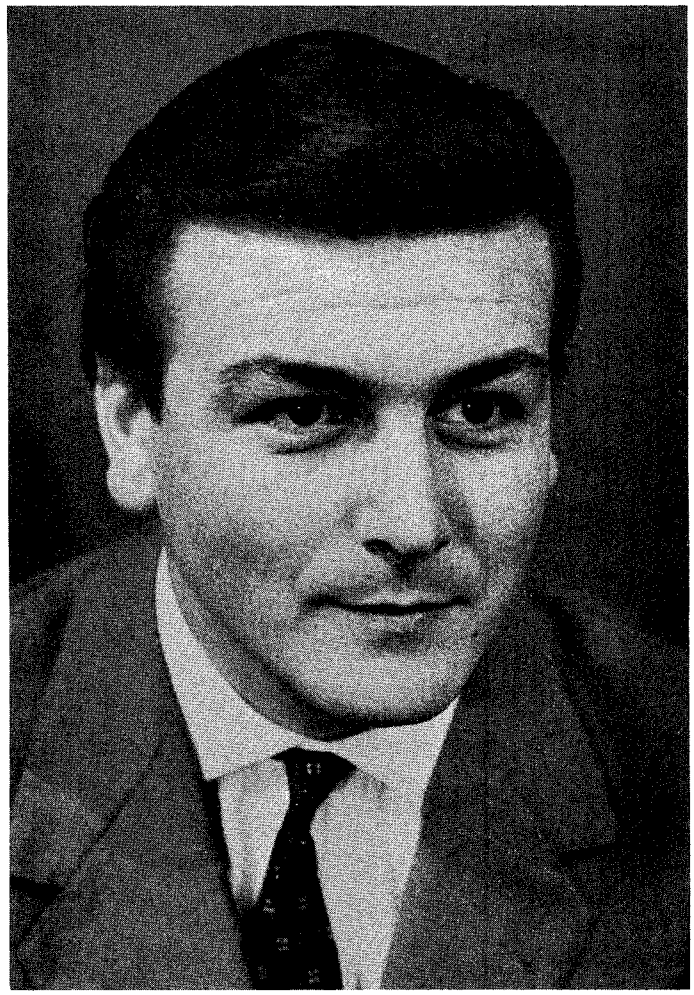
A generation ago, even when Istria was an Austrian province, there was no such problem for his countrymen. There were more of them, and Istrian intellectuals could move to Trieste, their natural center, where they contributed a special Istrian element to the exciting cultural atmosphere of that unique city, which was at once Italian, Slav, Jewish and Austrian, and which has given us an Italo Svevo, a Scipio Slataper, a Silvio Benco and many more. There these Istrians could and did maintain their ties, physically and spiritually, with the land from which they drew sustenance and inspiration and to which they returned at every opportunity.

This is in fact the course that Tomizza eventually chose. But to do it today he has had to become a voluntary exile, a citizen of a state that does not include Istria. Nor is Trieste what it once was. Separated from both the Vienna and the Istria that were the twin fountains of its cultural uniqueness, the city is now becoming just another Italian provincial center. Worse, it is a declining one at the far edge of the nation, where native intellectuals feel desperately isolated and usually flee to Milan, Turin or Rome at the earliest opportunity.

Still, for Tomizza it is close to home, the old ties and the recent flood of Istrian exiles temporarily preserve something of the old relationship, and on a clear day, when the Bora blows, the hills of northern Istria where he was born draw magically close so that one can almost touch them. It is characteristic, therefore, that Tomizza says he will not move farther, for he is an Istrian, not an Italian, and life in Milan or Rome would be for him as much an artistic suicide as life in Zagreb or Belgrade. Trieste has been a sad but necessary compromise, accepted reluctantly and with full consciousness of the cost it entails.

Fulvio Tomizza was born in 1935 at Materada, a village of the Buiese district of northwestern Istria. His parents were small landowners, prosperous peasants by local standards, who normally spoke a Slav dialect at home but considered Italian their literary language and culture. When Fulvio had completed the village elementary school, he was sent to the Carlo Combi lycee at Koper (then Capodistria), where many Italian intellectuals of Istria had been trained, to continue his studies.

Istria was at that time already suffering the consequences of twenty years of Fascist misrule. A German Nazi occupation was followed by a Yugoslav Communist one, and in 1946 the Buiese became part of Yugoslav-occupied Zone B of the Free Territory of Trieste. The following years were difficult, especially for Italians. In 1950 the elder Tomizzas moved to Trieste, in Anglo-American Zone A, and Fulvio abandoned his studies to follow them.



Three years later, however, his father died and he returned to Koper to finish his course at the Carlo Combi. Two years in Yugoslavia followed - at the University and the Academy of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade, and at Ljubljana where he worked as assistant director on a film which was later entered in the Venice Festival. In the summer of 1955 he went home to Materada.

Nine months before, the governments of the United States, Britain, Italy and Yugoslavia had agreed at London that the Buiese should become a permanent part of Yugoslavia, and that its peasantry should be given a choice of citizenship, with the obligation to emigrate if they chose Italy. Tomizza found Materada in a state of sad and desperate agitation as his countrymen made their choice. In the end most of those who considered themselves Italian decided to pack their meager household effects, abandon the land they loved as only peasants can, and go. Tomizza went with them. In Trieste he eventually found work at the radio and television station and began writing in earnest.

His biography is thus a specific instance, although early and in some ways uncharacteristic, of the process I described in my last letter: the permanent tendency of a minority like the Italians of Yugoslavia to lose its intelligentsia and its potential leaders, either through emigration or through assimilation into the locally dominant nation.

Tomizza's first full-length novel appeared in 1960 and enjoyed an immediate, modest success in Italy, and a translation into Swedish. Entitled Materada, it tells the story of his native village during that fateful summer of 1955. The subject is so close to his heart that it is quite possible he may never write so convincingly again, but this at least is an excellent book. Personally, I was so impressed by it that I hastened to meet the author, after which I drove down to Materada itself to have a look at the sombre countryside and much-tormented people who live where Latin and Slav worlds overlap, and Communist and Western European worlds meet.

Materada is the intimate and faithful story of villagers living through the events I described in barren historical outline in my first letter about the Italians of Yugoslavia. It is told by a man who has no grudge against the new Yugoslav regime, no involvement in the old dispute between Italians and Slavs in Istria, and who accepts the good intentions of Titoism with regard to minorities and social and agrarian reform. There is much evil and injustice, which eventually drive the protagonist-narrator of the novel to join the exodus, but these appear as the triumph of human weakness and egoism over a system whose worst fault is that it gives relatively free play to these universal failings.

It is cast in the first person, a tale told by the peasant Francesco Kozlović (or Coslovich, which happens to be the name of Tomizza's maternal family and of half the people of Materada), of his search for what he believed to be justice. Kozlović is a natural village leader, who had been the reluctant secretary of the local (Titoist) Liberation Committee at the end of the war, but who had resigned and "passed to the other side" in reaction against the official intimidation and licensed violence which followed. His place was taken by weaklings and former underdogs eager to find their place in the sun under the auspices of a new regime.

In other respects, Kozlović is a typical Buiese peasant, cousin to all South Slav peasantry: half-educated, conservative and fiercely independent, therefore disdainful of collectives and of the paternalism of the new system and passionately determined to own his own land. At the same time he has an innate sense of social justice, which fundamentally approves the land reform which had stripped his uncle and therefore his family of their surplus acres and given them to their former sharecroppers. These were the same qualities that had got him into trouble with the Fascist Regime before the war, when he would not be forced to speak Italian in public - although, like most Buiese peasants, he was bi-lingual and did not think of himself as more Croat than Italian. The same instincts now make him refuse to accept the arbitrary and willful refusal of his uncle to bequeath to him and his brother the home farm, which the older man technically owns and wants to leave to a son long since emigrated, but which the nephews have always worked.

This provides the novel with its basic conflict: Francesco Kozlović's quest for a justice that will give him the land he regards as his own. He does not find it. A Yugoslav judge, equally dedicated to the search for justice, tries to help him but cannot, because the uncle's "papers are in order" and the law can do nothing. Francesco appeals to the Party, but Socialism is disdainful of private property and its problems. Some of his kinsmen in the Party, however, long "exploited" by the malevolent uncle and also eager to compromise the proudly independent Francesco, offer a way out that serves the interest of personal revenge, a way that the weaker Kozlović brother accepts: the uncle is to be denounced to the People's Authority for his anti-regime attitudes and activities and can thus be sent to prison and deprived of his property, which will be made over to the nephews in return for their denunciation.

This is not the justice that Francesco had sought. He tears up the denunciation, speaks his mind and precipitates a permanent breach with his Communist kinsmen.

Despairing, he then joins the exodus out of this land without justice. In a final, poignant scene, full of Tomizza's own homesickness, those who are about to leave Materada assemble at the village church and walk in silent procession around the graveyard to take their leave of their ancestors.

With this vehicle Tomizza presents us with a portrait, Breughelesque in its complexity and accuracy of detail, of the people and landscapes that are the Buiese, and of the reactions of the former to the situation created by the occupation of 1945 and by the London Memorandum of 1954. This last feature gives the novel importance as a political and social document, too: a peasantry which hardly knows whether it is Italian or Slav finds its ancestral land permanently allocated to a State that is Slav and Communist, under a regime whose virtues and vices it has already experienced for nine years; it is told to decide, quite freely, whether to remain or to depart. The situation, the pressures exerted, the personal tragedies involved in the choice are unique, for "ex-Zone B" is a special case in recent history, but much of the story is relevant to the broader picture of Yugoslavia, or of all of Eastern Europe, during the first decade of "building Socialism."

It is for this reason that I have devoted so much of this letter to Materada. Essential for anyone who wants to understand contemporary Istria and important for students of modern Yugoslavia, it is also of more than ordinary interest to that wider public who would like to know more about life and people in Eastern Europe under Communism.

Here we can discover once again that it is not only at the top of the pyramid of power that revolutionary ideals are compromised or betrayed. Yet withal, as Materada also makes clear, some of the ideas for which men had taken up arms do survive to become part of their reality. By 1955 the worst was over and one could sing Italian songs in the village tavern again, celebrate the First of May as one formerly celebrated Easter, opt out of the kolkhoz, protest injustice without incurring official wrath, look forward to a better material existence. Only for those who joined the exodus it was by then too late, the price already paid too high, and who could say what additional tribute the future in such a land might demand?

This, too, has its wider significance. The exodus was massive, in the last analysis, not because the Regime was at that moment unbearably oppressive, but because its early mistakes and failures had placed it under a pall of popular suspicion that only time and a consistently improved future behavior could dispell. In 1955 many in Eastern Europe would still have opted out if they had been given the opportunity and incentives offered to the Italians of the Buiese. And in 1963?

Cordially,

Dennison Rusinow

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