

Excerpts from AQUA-GREEN (Verde Acqua, Einaudi, 1987) by MARISA MADIERI

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The end of the war and the Yugoslavian occupation represented for my family an initial period of fear, mistrust and searches. OZNA, the feared secret police, whose name alone made my parents blanch, came to our house one morning, peremptorily demanding if we had any weapons to hand over. Mama, seized by panic, denied having any. Surprised by that, I asked her, in front of the agents, how come she didn't remember the pistol that Papa had hidden under the mattress. Fortunately OZNA's ruthlessness that day was tempered by Mama's desperate tears as she fell to her knees, and by the naïve trust of a little girl who did not view those men as enemies. The pistol was requisitioned, but no harm was done to us.

Soon enough relative tranquility ensued. Papa, having been fired in May, 1945, from his position as assistant manager of Fiume's Provincial Union of the Federation of Farmers, found a job shortly afterward as an accountant in some office, most likely thanks to his knowledge of Serbo-Croatian. Mama was no longer forced to cook dried peas every day or stand in long lines, leaving at daybreak to procure a couple of eggs and a little milk on the black market. I soon made friends with the Slavic children who came to live in our area, replacing the Italian families who began leaving en masse. I didn't understand the desolation and silent resentment of my parents, who could not resign themselves to seeing their city perverted by new customs and new faces, by folk dances like the *kolo* (1), danced in the piazzas and on the shores, and by the massive arrival of Serbs, Croatians, Macedonians, Bosnians and Bodolians. "Gypsies" my parents called them, because of their colorful costumes and the fact that some of them had dark skin, not to mention their wild, loud ways added to a victor's arrogance.

In the following three years, I had the feeling that I was living a more peaceful life. No fleeing to the shelters, none of the privations and food shortages experienced during war time: hardships which had given me pulmonary edema, excellently treated later on by Yugoslavian social services in a tuberculosis preventorium near Ljubljana. Moreover, for the first time Mama could allow herself a summer holiday in Rab with her girls.

A half-brother of grandfather Antonio lived in Rab, Uncle Costante, and his grandson Jure offered to put us up at his place. Uncle Jure was a young blacksmith who had his workshop right in the courtyard of the house, where he also kept two beautiful black dogs. It was the month of July and Uncle would work bare-chested. Sometimes, coming home, I studied his tan, sculpted figure and admired his heraldic dogs. I liked tidying up his bachelor's quarters, plain and a little too big for a single man, and I was pleased when he asked me to teach him an Italian song. I had learned a beautiful lyric from grandpa Antonio, about a swallow and a girl who does not return to the nest (2). Uncle learned it diligently and, in return, promised to take me out on his sailboat. One day, walking along the island's small harbor, I recognized his white sail zigzagging on the choppy, wind-tossed sea. I waited a long time for him to return to shore, recalling his promise. But stepping gracefully off his boat was also a beautiful, smiling girl, solicitously helped by Uncle. I hid from sight, with a hollow heart and a vague sense of privation.

As for the rest, the days in Rab were a time of consummate happiness. The town's narrow passages, the polished pebbles on the beach, the pine forest stretching right to the sea, the smell of resin, the music on warm evenings at the café and the beautiful, relaxed face of my young mother marked for me the first awareness that an elsewhere existed, a new paradise that could be lost.

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There are days when I look back willingly, others in which the past becomes opaque, elusive. Contingent concerns prevail. Then, all of a sudden, the secret thread of time that spins out our lives reveals its tenacious continuity. A rift in the clouds, the heart skips a beat. Everything is still present.

Between 1947 and 1948, all Italians who were still in Fiume were given an option: they had to decide whether to adopt Yugoslavian citizenship or leave the country. My family opted for Italy and experienced a year of ostracism and persecution. We were evicted from our apartment and forced to live in one room with our belongings piled up. The furniture was almost all sold in anticipation of our exodus. Papa lost his job and, just before our departure, was imprisoned for having hidden two suitcases belonging to a victim of political persecution who had attempted to leave the country clandestinely and, when captured, had given Papa's name. With his usual ingenuousness, Papa let himself get caught red-handed.

I experienced those months of suspended living – no longer home yet not entirely elsewhere – with a profound sense of unreality, not with any particular hardship. On the sidewalk down below our new quarters my sister and I played *porton* (3), bounced a ball or skipped rope, I fraternized with the cats in the neighborhood each of whom I knew individually, I went to see grandfather at the café Sport and my old friends at our real house, and for the first time I ventured father afield by myself, to explore a city that I had not known very well until then. I was older, more reflective and mature. This is how I remember my Fiume – its broad banks, the shrine of Tersatto on the hill, the Verdi theater, the old town with its dark buildings, Cantrida – a city of familiarity and separation, that I had to lose as soon as I got to know it. Nevertheless, those timid, brief overtures, imbued with intensity and absence, left an indelible mark on me. I am still that wind along the shores, the chiaroscuros of the streets, those somewhat putrid odors of the sea and those gray buildings. For many years, after the exodus, I did not see my city again and I almost forgot her, but when I again had occasion to pass by Fiume and the stretch of coast that leads to Brestova, where we generally take the ferry to Cres and Losinj, I had the clear sensation of returning to my verity. And yet I didn't remember anything, consciously at least, about Icici, Mucici, Laurana, Moschiena, and very little about Opatija and Fiume itself. In actuality it was myself I found, looking, as in a mirror, at that inconstant landscape of harshness and enchantment. "I turned and saw my smile on her lips", like Riobaldo, the hero of the *Grande Sertão*, when he sees Diadorim in a sudden epiphany of loving identification. (4)

In the summer of 1949, after obtaining a visa for expatriation and following a brief visit to Papa in prison, we left Fiume – my mother, my sister, me and grandmother Madieri, already quite old and suffering from cancer.

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The first impression I had upon arriving in Trieste, where my Quarantotto grandparents, my Aunt Teresa and my Aunt Nina's family had preceded us a few months earlier, was that of having come to a terrestrial paradise, a promised land. The hustle and bustle in the streets, the availability of white bread, the abundance of daily and weekly newspapers and comics at the newsstands, the goods displayed in the stores, the way people dressed seemed to me an expression of fabulous wealth. Similarly the presence of British and American soldiers, with their spit-shined shoes, whom I saw offer chewing gum to some children, never failed to amaze me. The city in fact was in Zone A of the Free Territory of Trieste, established by the major powers in a difficult post-war period and divided into two parts. Zone A had been placed under Anglo-American jurisdiction, with Zone B administered by the Yugoslavian authorities.

We were immediately taken in as refugees and sent to the refugee reception center at The Silos, where Aunt

Nina with her family and the grandparents had already been housed. Our domestic goods – a few blankets, a table and some chairs, the mattresses that had not been sold and some chests containing household linens, Papa’s books and our clothes – would arrive some time later. For the moment we had literally nothing with us. Uncle Alberto and Uncle Vittorio, one from Venice and the other from Como, came the following day and decided to take their two nieces home with them. My sister left with Uncle Vittorio, I with Uncle Alberto.

If the life of each of us is made up of lengthy seasons in which nothing seems to happen, separated by unexpected, disruptive breaks, my first season ended abruptly that summer day with my family’s diaspora. The little girl who had left Fiume arrived in Venice a teenager.

(1) A Croatian circle dance.

(2) Probably a reference to "Rondine al nido", a beautiful lyrical piece by the Italian composer Vincenzo de Crescenzo. Every year a friendly swallow returns, crossing mountains and sea to come back. But you, my love, the poem’s narrator laments, do not return: you ran away, never to return.

(3) “Porton” appears to be similar to the game of hopscotch. In an article in the *Corriere della Sera* (February 26, 1997, p. 27) Claudio Magris writes: “A porton si salta da una casella all'altra su una gamba sola” (in this game you hop from one box to the other on one leg). The game is called “porton” (portone, door) because when the nine boxes are drawn on the ground or sidewalk (with a stick or some chalk), the design resembles a doorway.

(4) *Grande Sertão: Veredas* is a Portuguese epic novel by João Guimarães Rosa.

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