

Response for Margaret Brose's presentation, "Italia Irredenta (Italy Unredeemed): On Being Jewish in Trieste," 4 July 2006

Professor Brose's opening invocation of multicultural Trieste, its uncertain political and cultural position at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, was especially helpful for establishing a background for the readings by Svevo and Saba. I picked up on this to emphasize what Italians from other parts of Italy often characterize as Trieste's "strangeness." Part of this evaluation, as she made clear, comes from the city's many constituent parts, its polyglot nature, and its marginal place in both Austria and Italy of the period. But certainly part of the sensation also derives from the fact that neither the Austrian city of then nor the Italian city of today ever had a corresponding national "retrotterra," or hinterland: as soon as one leaves the city and enters the hills above, one enters Slovene villages almost immediately, local signs are often bilingual, and the border with Slovenia itself is very close.

Another aspect of Trieste's unusual status is its relatively recent and deliberate creation, under the Habsburgs, as a modern city. When it was declared a free port in 1713, Trieste only had some 6,000 inhabitants; its very quick and dramatic growth over the next hundred years makes it akin to another deliberate imperial city of the same period, St. Petersburg, which, like Trieste has often been characterized as a strange and foreign place, a non-Russian city. Dostoevsky's *Underground Man* refers to it as "the most abstract and intentional city on earth." Modern Trieste too was a rather sudden and artificial place without a substantial organic basis in the surrounding area.

There was a question from another participant, Katya Sunshine I think, at the end of Professor Brose's talk but before my comments, about the relation of Svevo's writing to Russian authors of the second-half of the nineteenth century, particularly Dostoevsky. This seems a fruitful line of inquiry to me. The Russians (Tolstoy, Turgenev, and Dostoevsky) were then widely read throughout Europe, particularly in English, French, and German translations, and for many modernists they had become the most influential writers of the era. The kinds of paradoxical attitudes expressed by Svevo's narrator in particular seem especially Dostoevsky-like: I was actually tempted to begin my comments by do a mock-dramatic reading of the opening of *Notes from Underground*—"I am a sick man. I am an angry man. I think there is something wrong with my liver"—but refrained in time.

The questions about Jewish culture in Trieste that Prof. Brose raised were open-ended and suggestive. The fact that the majority of the city's Jewish population was not Italian made it different from other Jewish communities in the northeast of Italy and raised a question in my mind to which I have not yet found an adequate answer, namely, "To what extent did the Jews of Trieste take part as a group in the irredentist movement? Did individuals with irredentist sympathies, like Svevo, act only as individuals, or was there something we could refer to as Jewish irredentism in Trieste?"

Finally, the sometime emphasis that Saba placed on his own Jewishness suggested to me the parallel case of another Triestine author, Scipio Slataper, who occasionally

emphasized his Slavicness, though it was relatively distant and he didn't speak Slovene or Croatian. I wonder to what extent this may have been something of a Triestine identity trope, a way of presenting oneself to the outside world that marked one as Triestine, not "purely" Italian (or anything else for that matter). In the same way, Fulvio Tomizza emphasized his own identity not as an Italian writer but as a "scrittore di frontiera," or writer of the border.

This last issue was pressing enough in my mind that, when I had the opportunity to meet Claudio Magris in Trieste a few days after the end of our institute, I asked him (and his son Paulo, who also came to our meeting) whether the Habsburg philosopher-poet Carlo Michelstaedter, in whom we share a common interest, was (1) a Triestine writer (he was from Gorizia); and (2) a Jewish writer. To question one, they answered without hesitation: absolutely, no question about it. To question two, they both hesitated. It was a very good question, they admitted. Magris, Sr. then offered the opinion that, no, he was not a Jewish writer, because he was too influenced by the Greeks. Of course he was also Jewish by heritage, a Luzzato on his mother's side, as well as being Italian speaking, German educated, and a classicist. In short, he was a Triestine writer.

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