

## Trieste, Umberto Saba, and Jewish Identity

Like Venice, Trieste has historically been a cultural crossroads. Unlike Venice, Trieste has historically been a locale where ethnic identity is subject to interpretation, and even in some circumstances, invention. While Venetians had a strong self-identity as Venetians, with long-enduring traditions that separated them from outsiders, Trieste residents found themselves trapped in a spider web of geography. Was it a Slavic locale? Was it Austrian? Was it Italian? Depending upon which nation held sway at the moment, it has been all three. A survey of local surnames confirms that uncertain identity was not merely the product of which nation controlled Trieste at any given time, but that substantial minorities of all the above-named ethnic groups actually resided simultaneously in Trieste, enhancing the multi-national, multi-lingual, multi-cultural feel. Thus, the Jewish minority were in a sense less foreign than they would have ordinarily been in a location that had one firm ethnic identity manifested in a majority of its populace. Admittedly, the Slavs, Austrians, and Italians were united by being more than 95% Roman Catholic, and Jews were definitely in a religious minority. Nonetheless, the shape-shifting nature of Trieste inspired by its ethnic intermingling made it more than ordinarily hospitable to its Jewish minority.

Into this locale, Umberto Saba (i.e., Umberto Poli) was born, son of an Italian surnamed Christian and a Jewish mother (surname of Coen). Though Trieste's Jewish ghetto had been opened for over half a century at the time of his birth, Saba grew up within its confines, raised by his mother since his Christian father ("the assassin") had absconded shortly after his birth. His Italian surname would have sufficed to allow Umberto to inhabit two worlds simultaneously. In this sense, I am well suited to translate the work and mind of Umberto Saba since my Anglo-Saxon surname masks my maternal Jewish ancestry, thereby enabling me to switch on or off a Jewish identity depending on whim and circumstance. There is substantial evidence from Saba's youth and young adulthood that he followed a similar chameleon strategy. Even his ultimate rejection of his Italian surname is open to multiple interpretations. Does the name Saba stem from a Hebrew root, from a corruption of the Slavic surname of his wet nurse, or from some personal Oedipal attempt to slay the father? Saba doesn't offer an explanation, and his chosen name is rich with ethnic ambiguity, a perfect rechristening (or should one say in this case, unchristening) for any Trieste poet. What the name change does clearly establish is Umberto's attempt to recreate and recast himself.

While Saba reached adulthood as a citizen of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, his speaking Italian as a first language, coupled with his original surname, enabled him to see himself unambiguously as an Italian poet, and his two great and obvious role models were Dante and Leopardi, whom he relies upon to unabashedly assert an Italian birthright and to style himself as their literary heir. While most of his successful Italian poet peers attempted to reinvent Italian poetry via the Hermetic Movement, Saba clung passionately to traditional Italian forms and modes of expression. This tendency has been variously interpreted as a manifestation of his conservative taste, his limited education, his Italian nationalism, or

his psychological need to overcompensate by being 'more Italian' than the Italians themselves. Personally, I am inclined more to the conservative taste theory and would analogize Saba to Thomas Hardy and A.E. Housman within the spectrum of early Twentieth Century English poetry.

Like many fellow citizens of Trieste, Umberto Saba managed to resolve the conflicts of multiple cultural loyalties by aligning those loyalties in non-conflicting patterns. Saba is a regional poet in the best sense of regional, in the same way that William Faulkner is a Mississippi writer. Trieste, his city, lives and abides within his poetry from the start to the end of his career, and his special sense of that place is a central component of his poetic achievement. Perhaps another good analogy involves Saba's upstairs tenant, James Joyce. While Joyce could remove himself to Trieste from the confines of Dublin, he could never remove the confines of Dublin from his writing, and that loyal disloyalty to Dublin crystallizes his writing. Someone should really do an extended piece on the resonance between Dubliners, Ulysses and Saba's early volume, Trieste and a Lady, all of which involve extensive trudging about the sometimes lurid, sometimes turgid byways of their home locales. One could even conjecture that some components of Leopold Bloom were based upon Joyce's Trieste landlord (Saba), though admittedly, Joyce's Berlitz pupil in Trieste, Italo Svevo, was probably a more direct inspiration for that seminal character. One can also ponder whether many of Joyce's Dublin recollections were inadvertently 'polluted' by the dockside Trieste so marvelously documented by Saba in Trieste and a Lady and so thoroughly paced through by Joyce in the very same years. That's an avenue of scholarship which I will defer to someone else

By writing in Italian as his native tongue and by echoing the tonalities of his illustrious predecessors in Italian poetry, Saba has claimed his position within the poetic pantheon of that language. At the same time, when Saba chose to address Jewish identity within his poetry, he portrayed himself as an insider, not as an outsider. He alluded to his Jewish identity in his most widely known poem, "The Goat." He celebrated Jewish locations and his attachment to them in poems such as "Old Town" and "Three Streets." He recorded and lamented the events of the Racial Laws and the Holocaust and his personal suffering as a result of these atrocities in his book, 1944. I have translated all these works. Between 1944 and 1947 while finishing the above-named book, Saba resided, off and on, in Jerusalem, though he ultimately repatriated to Italy. Upon his death in 1957, he was immediately honored by Israel with a commemorative postage stamp -- years before his homeland, Italy, extended the same honor. If only Italy had been as quick to claim Umberto Saba, as Umberto Saba was to claim Italy!

As one can see, it is easy to assign Umberto Saba to various categories: Trieste author, Italian author, Jewish author. However, it is also wise to recall that any author worthy of being remembered ultimately transcends categories and forges an opus that endures precisely because of its personal and unique qualities. At its worst, Umberto Saba's poetry is guilty of gross over-sentimentality and familiar cliché, but at his best, which is reasonably often, Umberto Saba achieves a voice that is distinct, memorable, and able to provide continued satisfaction after multiple readings. Though inexorably bound to time,

place and culture, Saba's poems manage to capture, like the bleating of a lonely goat, "every other sadness, every other life" (the final line of "The Goat").