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A Difficult and Silent Return Italian Exiles from Dalmatia and Yugoslav Zadar/Zara after the Second World War

Abstract: The aim of this essay is to offer a brief analysis of the political activity of the Italian exiles from Dalmatia after the Second World War and their relations with their motherland and their hometown of Zadar/Zara. Their activities failed to bring about a change of the Italian-Yugoslav border established by the 1947 Treaty of Peace with Italy, but they displayed great activism and a strong determination to keep their cultural traditions alive not only in Italy but also in Yugoslav Zadar. After much effort the Italian exiles eventually succeeded in setting up a public Italian club in Zadar in 1991, after the end of communist Yugoslavia and the creation of independent Croatia.

Keywords: Dalmatia, Zadar, Italians of Dalmatia, Yugoslavia, Croatia

In the post-Second World War period the town of Zara,¹ renamed Zadar after the Yugoslav annexation, went through a slow and difficult reconstruction process. Repeated air raids in 1943 and 1944 had reduced the town to ruins, leaving eighty percent of its central zone destroyed. After the loss of many lives to the Anglo-American air strikes and many departures to Italy in 1943–44, the town population was reduced to about six thousand inhabitants. In the following years, after the Peace Treaty with Italy of 1947, the terms of which included the cession of Zara to Yugoslavia and the possibility of opting between Italian and Yugoslav citizenship, most of the Italian population from the old part of the town situated on a small promontory enclosed by ancient walls, and quite a few of the inhabitants of the *borghi*, villages at the outskirts of the town, chose

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¹ On the history of Zara/Zadar in the twentieth century see A. De Benvenuti, *Storia di Zara dal 1797 al 1918* (Milan; Rome: Bocca, 1953); L. Monzali, *The Italians of Dalmatia. From Italian Unification to World War I* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2009); L. Monzali, *Italiani di Dalmazia 1914–1924* (Florence: Le Lettere, 2007); L. Monzali, *Gli Italiani di Dalmazia e le relazioni italo-jugoslave nel Novecento* (Venice: Marsilio, 2015); *Zadar 1944–1954*, eds. J. Čogelja, G. Stipičić and V. Zaninović (Zadar: Odbor za proslavu desetogodišnjice oslobođenja Zadra, 1954); A. Seferović Sefi, *Stari Zadar, gospodar zlata i srebra* (Zagreb: AGM, 2012), 262 ff; O. Talpo, S. Brcic, *Vennero dal Cielo – Zara distrutta 1943–1944 – They Came from the Sky – Zara in Ruins 1943–1944 – Dodjose s neba. Razrušeni Zadar 1943.–1944* (Campobasso: Associazione Dalmati italiani nel mondo, 2006); *Zadar i okolica od drugog svjetskog rata do domovinskog rata* (Zadar: Hrvatska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti, Zavod za povijesne znanosti Zadar, 2009).

to leave Zara and Yugoslavia² and to move to Italy or some other country of the West.

The Italian exiles from Zadar and Dalmatia who had resettled in Italy gradually created and set in motion several associations and societies. Their aim was to foster mutual economic solidarity and assistance and to start an organized struggle for the defense of their political rights. Among these associations we can mention the *Associazione Nazionale Dalmata*, founded in Rome and led by Antonio Tacconi³, former Italian senator, and Manlio Cace, a military doctor; the *Associazione Nazionale Venezia Giulia e Dalmazia* (ANVGD), the only Julian-Dalmatian refugees society which had branches all across Italy; the *Jadera* society in Trieste; and the *Circolo Giuliano-Dalmata* in Milan.⁴ Thanks to the arrival of many refugees from Dalmatia, the ancient *Scuola dalmata dei Santi Giorgio e Trifone*, based in Venice since 1451 and after the Second World War led by Giovanni Salghetti Drioni and Tullio Vallery,⁵ saw a strong revitalization.

It should be noted that only a minority of the Dalmatian refugees took an active part in the activities of these associations. Of some 20,000 Italian refugees from Dalmatia only 2,000 to 3,000 took an active role in the Julian-Dalmatian exiles network operating in Italy. This is hardly surprising: in the postwar period the most urgent need for many refugees was to build a new life in the new environments of exile. Too much indulging in the past was seen by some as an obstacle to integration into postwar Italian society. Integration in Italy, a defeated and depleted country after the war, was a difficult task. Many Italians in the *Penisola*, ignorant of the history and cultural peculiarities of Dalmatia and Istria, were parochial and indifferent to the needs and appeals of the refugees. Besides solidarity and generosity, there were also hostility and distrust. For many refugees the easiest thing to do was to hide their origins and roots and to accept swift assimilation into the different Italian regions where they had resettled.

There was no political and ideological homogeneity among the Dalmatian exiles, but a large majority of them were strongly opposed to communism. There was also diversity in the attitude towards Yugoslavia after the drama of the war and of the exile. Some sought reconciliation with the South Slavs, for instance by returning to Dalmatia for an occasional visit, others reacted to the

² On the conditions of the Italian population of Zadar in those years see G. E. Lovrovich, *Zara. Dai bombardamenti all'esodo (1943–1947)* (Marino: Tipografia Santa Lucia, 1974); T. Vallery, *La "liberazione" di Zara 1944–1948* (Venice: Scuola dalmata dei SS. Giorgio e Trifone, 2011); G. Bedeschi, *Fronte italiano c'ero anch'io* (Milan: Mursia, 1987).

³ For a biography of Tacconi see L. Monzali, *Antonio Tacconi e la Comunità italiana di Spalato* (Venice, Padua: Società dalmata di storia patria, 2008).

⁴ Monzali, *Gli Italiani di Dalmazia*, 459–470.

⁵ T. Vallery, *La Scuola dalmata dei Santi Giorgio e Trifone* (Venice: Scuola dalmata dei SS. Giorgio e Trifone, 2011).

pain and hardships of exile by espousing a strong and extremist Italian nationalism, often fiercely anti-Yugoslav.⁶

There is a peculiarity in the history of the Dalmatian refugees in comparison to those from Rijeka/Fiume and Istria. It saw the development of an association – the *Associazione Nostalgica degli Amici Zaratini* (ANDAZ) [Nostalgic Association of Zadar Friends] – which was active at both national and international levels, and able to reach from time to time not only the militants of the refugees network but also sections of the apolitical exiles. ANDAZ was founded in Ancona by two exiles from Zadar, Nerino “Rime” Rismondo and Antonio “Tonin” Tamino. Rismondo, a physician working for the Ancona town administration, was the Association’s true charismatic leader for many decades.⁷ For him, exile was an indelible and unresolved trauma. Deeply and strongly Dalmatian in terms of mentality, customs and lifestyle, Rismondo suffered very much for having been uprooted from Zadar and found it very difficult to accustom himself to life in Italy. Rismondo’s life in exile was dominated by nostalgia for Zadar and Dalmatia. He was a complicated man, but the other refugees found him fascinating and charismatic: a true Dalmatian and at the same time a strong Italian right-wing nationalist who refused political parties and criticized bureaucratic structures. His passion for Zadar and Dalmatia, at times visionary and mystical, but also highly contagious and mobilizing, made him the leader of a group of Dalmatian exiles, his friends and admirers.

At the beginning of the 1950s, Rismondo and Tamino were activists of the most important Julian-Dalmatian association, the ANVGD, but they grew more and more critical of its leadership. They criticized the ANVGD for being too close to the ruling centrist political parties, especially the Christian Democrats, and too keen on supporting the government so as to obtain financial resources. Rismondo and Tamino argued that the refugees from the Eastern Adriatic should refuse assimilation into Italian society and preserve their own distinctive identity. In July 1953, to keep the language, tradition and culture of the Italian Dalmatians alive, Rismondo and Tamino, together with other refugees residing in Ancona (Andrea Bullo, Giuseppe Candias, Bruno Rolli, Ervino Jarabek), founded ANDAZ. The Association’s statute claimed that it was an

⁶ On nostalgia as an element and instrument in building a political identity see P. Ballinger, *History in Exile. Memory and Identity at the Borders of the Balkans* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); *Nostalgia. Memoria e passaggi tra le sponde dell’Adriatico*, ed. R. Petri (Rome; Venice: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura-Centro tedesco di studi veneziani, 2010).

⁷ For information about Rismondo and ANDAZ see S. Brcic, “Nerino (Rime) Rismondo”, in *Personaggi dalmati vita e opere*, ed. S. Brcic and T. Vallery (Venice: Scuola dalmata dei SS. Giorgio e Trifone, 2013), 150–160; F. Rismondo, “La figura di Nerino Rismondo nel mondo degli esuli zaratini”, in *Mosaico dalmata. Storie di Dalmati italiani*, ed. G. Rumici (Monfalcone; Gorizia: Associazione nazionale Venezia Giulia e Dalmazia, Comitato provinciale di Gorizia, 2011), 282–288; Monzali, *Gli Italiani di Dalmazia*, 515–526.

apolitical and patriotic group whose aim was to “realize in any town in Italy and abroad events which could bring back to life typical aspects of the Zadar life as an instinctive expression of the feeling of strong and deep nostalgia for their own hometown: lost and destroyed Zadar”. Eligible for membership of ANDAZ were “all the ‘true’ people of Zadar, whether by birth or by adoption, who are homesick for Zadar and feel an insuppressible need to experience again local patriotism, the town atmosphere, the cult of the most specific traditions which constitute the holiest spiritual heritage for every Zadar exile”.⁸

The patriotic appeal to nostalgia for the lost hometown was the most important reason for the success of ANDAZ, which was able to merge an old-fashioned Italian nationalism, strongly influenced by D’Annunzio and the irredentist tradition, and Zadar local patriotism, successor of ancient Dalmatian Italian-Slavic liberalism.⁹ Rismondo’s appeal to look positively and proudly at the feeling of nostalgia for Zadar and not to forget one’s own identity, language and culture touched a chord with many exiles and ANDAZ managed very soon to build a network of contacts and collaborators in all of Italy.

ANDAZ saw a resounding success when Rismondo organized the first national meeting of the Zadar exiles in Venice in September 1953. Thousands of *Zaratini* from abroad and from every part of Italy arrived in the capital of Veneto, flooding San Marco Square. Since then the national meeting of ANDAZ became an event that took place every year around Italy. These meetings, and especially regional celebrations of Christmas, Easter and the feast day of the patron saints of Zadar, Saint Simeon (Simeone/Šimun or Šime) and Saint Anastasia (Anastacija), were able to attract many apolitical exiles or people who had no interest in the activity and militancy of the Association.

The same year, 1953, Rismondo and his followers launched a magazine, *Zara*, which became an important place for the Dalmatian diaspora to express ideas, moods and feelings.

In the 1950s, Rismondo began to think of establishing a “Libero Comune di Zara in esilio” [Free Zadar City Council in Exile]. According to Rismondo, the ANVGD and other refugees associations were committed to charitable activities, and not to irredentism and politics, which he believed to be a mistake that should be corrected. The Julian-Dalmatian exiles did not have to assimilate into Italian society and forget their origins and roots. To fight for their rights and avoid the danger of losing their own identity, they should establish a large

⁸ On the statute of ANDAZ see Monzali, *Gli Italiani di Dalmazia*, 518.

⁹ On Dalmatian liberalism see L. Monzali, “Dalmati o Italiani? Appunti su Antonio Bajamonti e il liberalismo autonomista a Spalato nell’Ottocento”, *Clio* 3 (2002); L. Monzali, *Gli Italiani di Dalmazia*; J. Vrandečić, *Dalmatinski autonomistički pokret u XIX stoljeću* (Zagreb: Dom i Svijet, 2002).

irredentist network based on the community of free Julian and Dalmatian city councils.

The *Liberio Comune di Zara in esilio* was founded in 1963 after a long debate among Dalmatian exiles.¹⁰ Its most prominent members were Edmondo Alesani, Italo Benevenia, Guido Fabiani, Maria Perissi, Biagio Rozbowski, Iginio Toth, Tullio Vallery, Ausonio Alacevich, Lidio Cristo, Gianni Fosco, don Luigi Stefani, Italo Trigari, Ferruccio Predolin, Alberto Calbiani, Lorenzo Salvini, Narciso Detoni, Carlo Steinbach and Narciso Detoni.

The purpose of the founding of the *Liberio Comune di Zara in esilio* was to create a political organization of Italian exiles from Dalmatia and to dispute the legitimacy of the Yugoslav annexation of Zadar, demanding the right for the exiles to return to the motherland.

At the tenth meeting of Dalmatian and Zadar exiles organized by AN-DAZ in September 1963, the newly-created *Liberio Comune* elected the engineer Guido Calbiani, managing director of Lancia (born in Zadar in 1904 as Guido Calebich), as its *sindaco* (mayor), while Nerino Rismondo was elected secretary general of the new organization.

Calbiani and Rismondo were men of different personalities and experience. The former was a successful international manager, the latter a provincial doctor with little world experience, but together they were able to transform the *Liberio Comune di Zara* into the most dynamic and efficient Julian-Dalmatian exiles organization. In addition to organizing meetings and conventions, the *Liberio Comune* engaged in cultural activities aimed at keeping the memory of the Italian Dalmatian traditions and culture alive in Italian public opinion. The *Liberio Comune* created an international network of supporters and friends, trying to establish forms of cooperation among the Zadar exiles all around the world. Calbiani and Rismondo succeeded in establishing continuous relations between the *Liberio Comune* and refugees communities in Canada and Australia, such as the *Circolo Giuliano-dalmata* in Toronto, the *Diadora Social and Sports Club* in Sidney led by Giuseppe Paleska, the Dalmatian club *Jadera* in Melbourne led by Tonci Meden.

The leaders of the *Liberio Comune di Zara in esilio* always sought to defend the political independence of their organization from Italian political parties. Most of its leaders had right-wing ideological sympathies, were close to anti-communist parties (the Neo-fascists, the Liberals, the right wing of the Christian Democrats, the Monarchists), and had a clear nationalist program based on the irredentist struggle for making Zadar Italian again. But Calbiani and Rismondo despised political parties, accusing them of betraying the national interest and of dividing the Italian nation. Because of this they sought to keep their initiatives differentiated from those of the right-wing parties such as the Italian

¹⁰ Monzali, *Gli Italiani di Dalmazia*, 535–560.

Social Movement (*Movimento Sociale Italiano*) or the Monarchists. Thanks to its political autonomy, the *Libero Comune* was able to attract sympathies and attention also from apolitical and non-right-wing exiles.

As already said, a very important issue for the Italian Dalmatian exiles was the relationship with the motherland, Dalmatia, and the town of Zadar. In the postwar years, Zadar, having lost most of its inhabitants, was undergoing a slow and difficult process of reconstruction.¹¹ The Yugoslav government sought to repopulate the town by reinstating pre-war economic activities and by creating new ones. The factories of the pre-war period were nationalized: the famous spirits companies (Drioli, Luxardo, Vlahov) were merged into one state-controlled enterprise called Maraska. The tobacco and tinned fish factories, as well as the pasta manufacturers, were also nationalized and put back into service by the Yugoslav state. The Yugoslav government set up some new manufacturing and service companies: Vlado Bagat (mechanics), Boris Kidrič (tinned fish), Jugoslavenska Tankerska Plovidba (marine shipping). To increase the population of Zadar, the communist regime established some army barracks and two aviation and infantry schools. New primary and secondary schools were opened in the town as well as some centers for higher education as a section of the Zagreb-based Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts and the Faculty of Philosophy as a branch of Zagreb University. The communist regime also sought to put an end to the isolation of Zadar from its hinterland by building new roads and a new railway line, completed in 1967, which connected the Dalmatian town with Knin and Zagreb.

Thanks to the Yugoslav government efforts, from the 1960s Zadar saw a strong demographic growth. Its population of 16,146 in 1953 rose to 25,243 in 1961; to 43,187 in 1971; and to 59,568 in 1981. Zadar's new inhabitants mostly came from nearby islands and the hinterland, but many came from various parts of Yugoslavia as well. From being an Italian town of Dalmatia Zadar transformed into the most "Yugoslav" Dalmatian town, with a population made up of 77.8 % of Croats and 13.6 % of Serbs, according to the census of 1961. For several centuries Zadar had had an important Serbian minority, as well as a Serbian Orthodox bishop. The Serbian community, which had survived unfriendly Italian rule, flourished again after the Second World War with the arrival of Serbs

¹¹ On the reconstruction and economic development of Yugoslav Zadar see Z. Begonja, "Formiranje tvornice Maraska neposredno nakon Drugoga svjetskog rata", in *Bogatstvo Zadra i zadarske regije/Maraska Cherry. Treasure of Zadar and Zadar Region*, eds. A. Bralić and J. Faričić (Zadar: Maraska; Zavod za povijesne znanosti Hrvatske akademije znanosti i umjetnosti Zadar, 2010), 185–199; A. Batović, "Povijest i razvoj Filozofskog fakulteta u Zadru od 1956. do 1974. godine", in *Sveučilište u Zadru. O desetoj obljetnici obnove* (Zadar: Sveučilište Zadra, 2012), 499–505; D. Magaš, "Prostorni razvoj Zadra 1945.–1991", in *Zadar i okolica*, 274–291.

from northern Dalmatia and of many Yugoslav Army men who were dispatched to serve there.

A peculiarity of Yugoslav Zadar was its being a town without a historical identity and a sense of community. After the departure of its Italian inhabitants, most of its population had been born somewhere else: in 1961 only about 15 % of its inhabitants were born in Zadar. The autochthonous inhabitants made up a tiny minority in a town repopulated with people coming from all over Yugoslavia, mostly Croats and Serbs. Most of the few autochthonous inhabitants left in Zadar, Croats and Dalmatians of Albanian origin, were concentrated in the old *borghi* of Borgo Erizzo/Arbanasi, Ceraria-Barcagno/Vošarnica, and had a hostile and cold attitude towards the communist authorities because of the harsh repression applied by the partisans after the Yugoslav occupation of the town in 1944. This anticommunist sentiment of the few autochthonous inhabitants explains the presence among the Borgo Erizzo people of pro-Italian sympathies and of nostalgia for the former capitalist and Italian Zadar, which was manifest in the continued use of the Italian Zadar dialect despite the nearly complete disappearance of Italians from the town. The census of 1953 still showed the presence of 5 % of Italians, but the figure dropped to 0.2 % in 1961 and to 0.1 % in the following censuses. Moreover, most of the Italians that remained in Yugoslav Zadar chose to declare themselves as Croats or Yugoslavs by nationality, national assimilation being seen as the best survival and integration strategy in the new communist Yugoslavia. In the 1950s the Zadar authorities, keen on Yugoslav nationalism, suppressed the last remaining Italian schools¹² and made it clear that the existence of Italian circles or societies was not welcome.

The new Yugoslav authorities did not like the fact that the Italian exiles from Dalmatia had organized themselves and pursued irredentist and anti-Yugoslav propaganda. The meetings of the Zadar exiles in Italy had a certain echo in Yugoslav Dalmatia as well. The Yugoslav Dalmatian press started attacking publicly these political meetings, describing them as the work of Italian reactionary, imperialist and nationalist groups that did not give up the idea of the Italian re-conquest of Zadar or hopes for the disintegration of Yugoslavia.

One of the consequences of the improvement of Italian-Yugoslav relations after the 1954 London agreement on Trieste and Northern Istria and the partial economic and cultural liberalization of Yugoslav society was the resumption of contacts between the Italian exiles and the motherland.¹³ It also became

¹² G. Bambara and A. Cepich, *La scuola della minoranza italiana a Zara* (Brescia: Tipografia Emmebi, 1990).

¹³ On Italian-Yugoslav relations in the 1950s and 1960s see Monzali, *Gli Italiani di Dalmazia*, 509–575; *Italian Balkan Strategies (19th–20th Century)*, ed. V. G. Pavlović (Belgrade: Institute for Balkan Studies, 2014); *Italy, Tito's Yugoslavia and International Politics in The Age of Dé-tente*, ed. M. Bucarelli et al. (Brussels; London: Peter Lang, 2016).

very easy for the Italians who had left Zadar after Second World War by opting for Italian citizenship to obtain permission and visa to visit Dalmatia. Many Dalmatian exiles decided to go back home for short visits. At first their motivation was a very strong desire and need to visit the local cemetery, to rebury there the relatives who had died abroad, in exile, or to tend to family graves. Some people came back out of nostalgia for the hometown, to spend a holiday there or to meet relatives and friends who had chosen to remain in Yugoslavia; others wanted to go back to reaffirm the existence of an Italian identity and tradition in the hometown.

During the 1960s and 1970s the journeys to Yugoslavia aroused a fierce debate among the Julian-Dalmatian exiles associations, deeply divided between those who approved of such visits, perceiving them as a sort of a patriotic mission to keep the Italian traditions there alive, and those who strongly disapproved, believing that coming back to the lost lands of Istria and Dalmatia was a betrayal of the Italian national cause since it implied the acceptance of the Yugoslav annexation of those regions. One of the most fervent supporters of the duty of the exiles to return to the homeland and of the resumption of contacts between Italian exiles and the so-called *rimasti*, those who had decided to stay and live in Yugoslavia, was the Zadar-born journalist and writer Antonio "Toto" Cattalini.¹⁴ In the 1960s, Cattalini, a journalist of Catholic-liberal leanings living in Gorizia and working for the Trieste-based newspaper *Il Piccolo*, became one of the most prominent intellectuals of the Julian-Dalmatian diaspora. In those years he began visiting Zadar and Dalmatia, and urged other exiles to do the same. According to him, coming back to the hometown would be a response to the exiles' spiritual needs. At first it was very difficult and painful to accept what had happened to Zadar, its subsequent destiny and development, but it all was ineluctable and necessary for re-establishing contact with one's native land and its people, from which one could not escape because it was impossible to abandon one's own roots which were in Dalmatia, and not in Italy. It was not true, in Cattalini's view, that there were no more Italians in Dalmatia. Some Italians had remained in Zadar, by necessity or by choice and acceptance of the new political and national reality of communist Yugoslavia. The remaining Italians in Zadar were dispersed and lost in the town, without a voice and a sense of community. The reason for this was the moral crisis caused by the war, the as yet unresolved mental shock of adapting to a town which had underwent a profound change of population and values.¹⁵

¹⁴ For some information on Cattalini see D. A., "L'immatura scomparsa di Antonio Cattalini", *Difesa Adriatica* XXVIII (25 Nov. 1975); *Antonio Cattalini: una giornata di viaggio nella memoria. Atti del convegno Gorizia 18-10-1995* (Udine: Associazione nazionale Venezia Giulia e Dalmazia Comitato provinciale di Udine, 1996); Monzali, *Gli Italiani di Dalmazia*, 590–593.

¹⁵ A. Cattalini, *La mia città. Zara oggi* (Gorizia: Tipografia Budin, 1975).

As already said, for some exiles periodic returns to Zadar were not merely a way to spend a vacation or satisfy a spiritual need, but also a patriotic duty. The most interesting form of this patriotic activity of the Italian exiles in Yugoslav Dalmatia was an active commitment to the protection of the Italian graves in Zadar. A fever of political modernization and proletarianization during communist rule often led to the destruction of old cemeteries which were seen as relics of a distant and useless past. In Istria and Dalmatia the presence of Italian graves or of gravestones with Italian inscriptions provided an additional stimulus for destruction. During the 1970s the issue of defending the Italian tombs in Zadar became urgent. With the passage of time and the dispersion of the town's Italian inhabitants all around the world, the preservation of these graves was more and more difficult. In communist Yugoslavia foreigners were not allowed to purchase tombs, only to keep those that they had already owned or inherited. The graves whose owners failed to pay related taxes were nationalized by the cemetery administration or reused.

In 1972 a group of Italian woman exiles, mostly living in Veneto and led by Caterina "Rina" Fradelli Varisco, a teacher and an activist of the ANVGD and the *Liberio Comune di Zara*, took on themselves the care of the Italian graves in Zadar. This group of exiles established regular communication with the cemetery administration, collected money to pay cemetery taxes and saw to the maintenance of the tombs. Connected to all this was the transcription of the inscriptions on the gravestones done by Tommaso Ivanov. In 1982 the group of women led by Fradelli was formally organized into the association *Madrinato dalmatico per la conservazione delle tombe del Cimitero degli italiani di Zara* seated in Padua.¹⁶ The defense of the Italian tombs in Zadar was possible primarily because of the ease with which the Italian exiles, often bilingual and with relatives left in Yugoslav Dalmatia, communicated with the rest of Dalmatian society. But the cooperation of some Italians still living in Zadar was also very important such as, for instance, that of Libero Grubissich, who was to become a founder of the Italian community in Zadar after the end of communist Yugoslavia, as well as the sympathies of some Dalmatian Croats and Serbs for the desire of the Italian exiles to preserve their family graves.

In the 1970s and 1980s the *Liberio Comune di Zara* tried to develop a new approach to the situation in Zadar. After the death of its first mayor, Guido Calbiani, in 1975, the *Liberio Comune* saw a period of political and organizational crisis and stagnation, which ended with the appearance of a new leadership, Tullio Vallery, Franco Luxardo, Giorgio Varisco, Honoré Pitamitz, Ottavio Missoni, who opted for a more modern and pragmatic political approach, less

¹⁶ C. Fradelli Varisco, *Il Madrinato Dalmatico*, in *Zara nel ricordo del suo cimitero* (Padua: 1986), 7–23; T. Ivanov, *Il cimitero di Zara* (Brescia: Edizioni del Moretto, 1986); A. Cuk and T. Vallery, *Lesodo giuliano-dalmata nel Veneto* (Venice: Alcione, 2001), 53; G. Varisco, *Mia madre, Caterina Fradelli Varisco*, available at: <http://arcipelagoadriatico.it/saggdalmadrinato1.htm>.

traditionalist and ideological, more open to political developments in Italian society at large.¹⁷ For instance, the Dalmatian exiles established contacts with some leaders (Antonio Borme and Giovanni Radossi) of the Italian communities in Yugoslavia (organized in the *Unione degli Italiani d'Istria e Fiume*), despite the fact that these were communists, strongly connected with the Yugoslav state and perceived by many Italian exiles as traitors.

The charismatic leader of the Zadar exiles, Nerino "Rime" Rismondo, also deemed it necessary to introduce a different political strategy in relations with the motherland. He saw as unavoidable the disappearance of the Italian exiles' distinctive identity, condemned to progressive assimilation into Italian and the western societies which had received them after their departure from Dalmatia. At the same time, the signing of the Italian-Yugoslav treaties of 1975 defining the borders between the two states had convinced Rismondo that no border change was conceivable any longer. So, to him, the preservation of the cultural heritage of the Dalmatian Italians became a matter of paramount importance. In collaboration with Tullio Vallery and many Dalmatian exiles living in Veneto, Rismondo decided to establish an archive and a museum dedicated to Dalmatia at the Confraternita dei Santi Giorgio e Trifone in Venice. Moreover, together with the *Libero Comune di Zara*, he supported Caterina Fradelli and the *Madrinato dalmatico* in their efforts to save the Italian graves in Zadar, and began visiting Dalmatia regularly again.

Coming back to Zadar and Dalmatia had a strong impact on Rismondo. He realized that, despite the war, the communist regime and the near-disappearance of Italian communities, Dalmatia had always been itself, with her typical and centuries-old identity and lifestyle based on a peculiar mixture of Mediterranean Italian civilization and the South-Slavic and Balkan world. By then the current inhabitants of Zadar, Šibenik/Sebenico, Split/Spalato, Dubrovnik/Ragusa spoke only Croatian and Serbian, but they were Dalmatian like him in soul and mentality. Also, the settlers from the Yugoslav hinterland had been assimilated by the Dalmatian culture and lifestyle. According to Rismondo, the irredentist battle should now focus on the return of the exiles to the motherland. The future of the Dalmatian Italians could not be in Italy, where their unavoidable destiny was assimilation, but only in Dalmatia: "We must return", wrote Rismondo in 1980, "and we must do it in the only possible way: as friends and brothers, but always as Italians. In Dalmatia we are not even a minority. Practically we do not exist anymore. And then what? Do we defend the past by staying in Italy? But our future cannot be built in Italy, only in Dalmatia."¹⁸

¹⁷ On the *Libero Comune* of Zadar see L. Monzali, "La fenice che risorge dalle sue ceneri. Gli italiani di Dalmazia nella seconda metà del Novecento", *Nuova Storia Contemporanea* XI (2008), 103–118; Monzali, *Gli Italiani di Dalmazia*, 653–660.

¹⁸ Venice, Scuola dalmata dei Santi Giorgio e Trifone [Dalmatian School of Sts George and Tryphon], Archive, *Zara*, journal, box 1977–1980, Rismondo to Gozzi, 30 March 1980.

It should be said that not all Italian exiles followed Rismondo's advice to go back to Dalmatia. Those who did were often politically far from the right-wing nationalist Rismondo, being rather of Catholic and Liberal beliefs, like for instance Antonio Cepich, Sereno Detoni, Luigi Tomaz, Tommaso Ivanov. These returns of Italian exiles to Zadar, these recurrent visits, either for the summer holidays or for the annual celebrations of the town's patron saints' day and All Souls' Day, served to re-establish family ties destroyed by the exile, to establish new relationships between exiles and autochthonous Zadar inhabitants, and to rebuild a tiny Italian presence in the Dalmatian town. The coming back of Italian exiles to Zadar encouraged some local Italians to come out of silence and isolation. The Italian exiles associations became more and more vocal in their demand that the Yugoslav government allow the founding of an Italian club in Zadar. In the 1970s and 1980s Rismondo and the Dalmatian exiles of the *Libero Comune* got in touch with some Zadar inhabitants of Italian origin, for instance Libero Grubissich and Silvio Duiella, who would be among the founders of the Community of Italians of Zadar in 1991, after the end of communist Yugoslavia and the birth of independent Croatia.

The activity of Italian Dalmatian exiles was instrumental in the rebirth of the Italian minority in Zadar. The return to the Motherland, Zadar, was difficult but not useless.

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