

Second world war, communism and post-communism in Albania, an equilateral triangle of a tragic trans-Adriatic story.

The Eftimiadi's Saga

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Abstract

The complicated, troubled and tragic events of a wealthy family from Vlorë, Albania, which a century ago expanded its business to Italy, in Brindisi and Trieste, and whose grand land tenures and financial properties in Albania were nationalized by Communism after the Second World War.

Hence the life-long solitary and hopeless fight of the last heir of the family to reconquer his patrimony that had been nationalized by Communism. Such properties would have been endowed to a planned foundation, which aims at perpetuating the memory of his brother, who was active in the resistance movement during the war and therefore hung by the Germans. His main institutional purpose is to help students from the Vlorë area to attend the University of Trieste.

The paper is a travel in time through history, sociology and the consolidation of a state's fundamentals, by trying to read the past aiming to understand the presence and save the future.

The paper highlights the need to consider past models of social solidarity meanwhile renewing the actual one. This as a re-establishment of rule and understanding, a strategy to cope with pressures to renegotiate the social contract, as a universal need, by considering the past's experiences as a firm base for successful social interaction.

All this, inside a story which in the first look seems to be too personal and narrow, meanwhile it highlights the present and the past in a natural organic connection, dedicated to a nation in continuous struggle for its social reconstruction.

Keywords: Albania; Italia; Italy; Trieste; Vlorë; Valona; Eftimiadi; Ujë Ftohtë; Acquafredda; Krionerò; Trieste University; Second World War; Social Solidarity.

Introduction

Should a foreigner meet a native of Trieste, he would be told that this town is the centre of the world. Should he then visit Trieste, he would realize that this centre is located at Piazza Ponterosso, named after its bridge, which is no longer red¹.

Nowadays the world has become more “normal” and our foreigner would therefore note that in such centre of the world most of the people have oriental features², while some years ago, he would have met all kind of people coming from the former Yugoslavia³.

Besides this population, if we could have some tape recordings by a “friendly camera”⁴ recording this area, three personalities would be detected more often.

The first one would be Riccardo Muner Sr. going at a mountaineer’s pace to his manufacture store, located at the corner between via Roma and via Rossini, between the 1930’s and 80’s. He was however my father, so this victory might be distorted by a sentimental choice.

Another one would be James Joyce⁵, who used to cross the bridge during the first two decades of the twentieth century to reach the Berlitz School⁶ located in Piazza Ponterosso. To face his economic problems in fact, he sometimes taught English there, helping out his brother Stanislaus.

It is highly plausible that Muner and Joyce had actually met more than once, crossing the same bridge from opposite directions, and I am also sure they knew each other in person, as my father was his scholar. Joyce was the first one to pass away, while my father lived almost fifty years more. Today Joyce is back on the bridge, as a statue⁷ has immortalized his walk, as our “friendly camera” would have actually seen him.

The third personality would be “our” personality, i.e Salvatore Eftimiadi, the last surviving person of a family from Vlorë, who went to Italy about a hundred years ago and opened up some a forwarding agency both in Trieste and in Brindisi.

¹ Piazza Ponterosso literally means Red Bridge Square. Such name derives from the colours of the materials (mainly wood and then iron) used to build the former bridges, that were located in the same place to cross the channel (the so-called Canal Grande).

² This place is actually located at the border of Chinatown.

³ In the 1950's/80's this area was frequented only by Yugoslavian buyers. This area was in fact characterized by shops selling jeans, dolls, cheap clothes etc., that were highly appreciated by them.

⁴ "Telecamera amica", literally "friendly camera", is the name sanctimoniously given (maybe to avoid any prohibition arising from the privacy law) to cameras operating in Trieste for safety purposes.

⁵ The greatest Irish writer who lived in Trieste from 1905 to 1915 and between 1919 and 1920, where he wrote some important works.

⁶ One of the oldest and world's most renowned private schools for teaching English, having for decades a branch also in Trieste.

⁷ Made by the sculptor Nino Spagnoli in 2004.

Despite he always used a walking stick as he walked with a limp, his pace was as stride as the others'. His itinerary was however different, as from his home (place of his family business) located in Piazza Sant'Antonio (just a few meters away) he went to some of his centres of interest, i.e. The Greek district. In particular, we refer to the San Nicolò Church, to the seat of the Greek Eastern Community of which he had also been Vice President, the recent bar restaurant "Filoxenia" and the "Caffè Tommaseo". Besides these, he was used to go to many printing offices, where he did hundreds, thousands of copies on credit.

We will however deal with this matter later.

Despite his Greek confession and name, Eftimiadi was Albanian. His family in fact went from Vlorë to Trieste at the beginning of the twentieth century.

It's easy to say Vlorë as it was an ordinary place.

Should you speak with an inhabitant of Vlorë, he may try to persuade you that this place is the centre of the the world. However, should you then go there, you would become sure this is not true. Being a bit disappointed, you would then take the South road to reach the sea and, just outside the population centre, you would find a place that justifies such presumption, thanks to his unique beauty and its atmosphere. This place is called Ujë Ftohtë⁸ but, during last century, when in some Albanian frameworks Italian language was even more common than today, this place was also known as Acquafredda⁹, i.e. Krionerò¹⁰, as could be suggested by our personality's surname.

Three names therefore which are indifferently used in our story and that are one the translation of the other.

The full circle comes, at least our circle. From Piazza Ponterosso (Trieste) to Krionerò (Vlorë), as the life of Salvatore Eftimiadi.

On the daily newspaper of Trieste called "Il Piccolo" dated November, 4th 2008 we could read the following:

"On october, 31st Salvatore Eftimiadi ceased to live.

He tenaciously seeked to found with his goods a fundraising foundation for the Vlorë area in Albania in the name of his father LUCA, having moved to Trieste in the 1930's¹¹ and of his brother MARCO, martyr of the resistance movement in 1944.

⁸ Meaning "cold water" in Albanian.

⁹ Meaning "cold water" in Italian.

¹⁰ Meaning "cold water" in Greek.

¹¹ This dating actually seems quite imprecise.

He is remembered by his cousins ASSENNATO and ZACCARIA from Bari and Brindisi, who wish to thank the Greek Eastern Community of Trieste and all the personnel of the Cattinara Hospital in Trieste for the help and care given.

The funeral will be held on Saturday November, 8th at 11.30 at the Apostles' Church at the Cemetery of the Greek Eastern Community of Trieste".

I was very far away those days and I had not been able to be in Trieste, as I would have really wished to, to give him the last goodbye. However, I was able to do it as soon as I came back, at the Greek Eastern Cemetery, where I found a fresh garland that must have been Albanian, having a red and black belt on it.

Now also Salvatore Eftimiadi's full circle came and I feel I can retrace his story (not really, to be honest), a story of an incomplete dream: the dream of Krionerò.

The dream of Krionerò

In 1992, while I was in Trieste for a leave from my first mission in Albania, a common friend introduced us. I will be now informal when referring to him, both for affection and for the sake of brevity, even if we had never been so, perhaps also because I was almost twenty years younger. By the way, on that occasion, Salvatore overvalued my possibilities and thought I could help him, as he had often done with others. In particular, he was fighting against bureaucracy and time to get back, through official channels, the availability of grand land tenures and financial properties¹², that had been nationalized by the Communism. With this regards, he had endowed such properties (as he had no heirs) to a planned foundation, that aimed at perpetuating the memory of his father¹³ and his brother¹⁴, whose main institutional purpose would have been helping students from the Vlorë area to attend the University of Trieste.

As far as I know, I must confess that his claims (Salvatore Eftimiadi still had dual citizenship) actually met more promises than satisfaction, both in Albania and in Italy. In particular, it may be that in Albania there was some opposition, heavily supported, to the recognition of his rights.

I pointed out I was in Albania for an operational task (i.e. I was Commanding Officer of the 1st Squadron of the Italian Coast Guard) in connection with illegal immigration.

¹² Real estates in Ujë Ftohtë (Krionerò/Acquafredda) and Porto Scala, in Vlorë, amounting to 150.000 square meters and assets amounting to more than ten million liras of 1943, that have never been recovered, as credit for goods shipment against documents. Such amount was remitted by well-known banks of Trieste to Albania, to be collected by the National Bank of Albania during the Italian collapse. The famous gold issue of the National Bank of Albania prevented the fair settlement of such credits, the gold was taken by the Germans from Rome and merged into the joint stock of reparation. After that, it was then allocated to Great Britain as compensation for damages two British warships suffered when, in 1996, they hit an Albanian minefield in the Corfù Channel, where fortyfour British soldiers died. This matter was solved only in 1996.

¹³ Luca Eftimiadi, founder of the family business in Italy.

¹⁴ Marco Eftimiadi, born in Brindisi in 1921, killed by the Germans in 1944 in Trieste, as he was active in the resistance movement.

Besides that, even if our presence was based on a Memorandum of Understanding between the two governments, it was somehow not well “tolerated” by the Albanian authorities. Should someone had come to know I was supporting him in his battle “against” the Albanian government, I would have been at least repatriated within 24 hours.

At the earliest opportunity, I tried to make an unskilled inspection of the properties claimed by the Eftimiadis, just outside Vlorë, along the road going South just before the natural tunnel: Acquafredda, Ujë Ftohtë, Krionerò, depending on the three languages that were used to be spoken there.

That place was amazing, almost a paradise: lush nature and a garden with majestic balconies on the Gulf, showing the richness the family had.

When I came back from my first mission in Albania we intensified our acquaintance and we became sort of friends. He always informed me about his efforts and progresses, though he used to consider the matter optimistically even when the case may not have been so.

After a short period at the Foreign Ministry (when I uselessly tried to do something with this regards), in 2001/2003 I came back to Albania for my last mission before taking leave due to age limitation.

I was Project Leader for the Albanian Coast Guard (Roja Bregdetare Shqiptare) at the DIE (Italian Delegation of Experts) in Tirana, but I actually was a consultant for the Albanian government. Like ten years before, Salvatore thought I could help him, but this time my position was even more awkward.

However, I went again to Krionerò, as the projects I was in charge of often took me to Vlorë. I often stayed in a recent-built big hotel that, at a rough guess, seemed to be located on the Eftimiadis’ properties. As I always went there, I sometimes chatted with the *prionario*¹⁵ but, every time the topic was “land property”, he changed the subject, noticeably annoyed. In the same area, just a bit upline and, according to Eftimiadi, again on his properties, another building had been built, becoming in 2001 the seat of the International Anti-Trafficking Centre¹⁶, fact that annoyed him quite a lot.

Salvatore knew I sometimes went back home during weekends and so he often looked for me to inform me about “great news”. I had not much time during those two half days, as I had to deal with many family issues, however I did not have the heart to deny myself. Once, as I had really not been able to find the time to meet him, he made the following proposal: as I had told him I should have taken a train to Bologna on

¹⁵ Owner, in Albanian.

¹⁶ Qendra Ndërkombëtare e Luftës Kundër Trafikeve.

the following day (where I used to catch the Albanian Airlines flight, an old Tupolev), he proposed to meet at the railway station and he would have then taken my same train until Monfalcone, a small town about thirty minutes away from Trieste, so that we could easily speak. I agreed and, once on the train, he gave me a big file full of photocopies, where maybe only the last two really said something new, that was actually a sailor's promise (expression I am using against the grain, as I was a sailor and I think I actually keep my word). When we reached Monfalcone, I had to convince him to get off, as he in the meantime had decided to continue till Venice. He did not bother me but I was sorry for him, as he already was quite in bad conditions. When he got off, I had a look at his file looking for some news, when I literally jumped on my seat. In one of his memoranda in fact, he was insulting an important Albanian institutional personality. That was no news and it affected both Italians and Albanians, the point however was I was going to Tirana bringing that file with me.

To be honest, it would have not been very risky to do so, as I had a diplomatic passport and the place where I lived was guarded (not because of me, but because of the General of the Delegation, i.e. my Commanding Officer, whom the Albanian Government had to protect with an armed sentinel all night long).

An unforeseen event could always happen and that file would have been really compromising. When I arrived in Bologna, I did not want to throw it away, so I looked for a stationery store to send it back to Trieste, at home. Luckily I had enough time to do so, before taking the shuttle bus to the airport. I was worried until my wife told me on the following Tuesday she received a package and that she was surprised I was the sender, but I told her to do not worry about it.

Since 2003, when I came back to Italy and quit my active service, I have dealt with historical researches on Albanian matters and, in the meantime, Salvatore informed me about his situation. I tried again and again to put him in contact with someone (outside the political world as I have always kept distance from that) who could somehow help him, also at the Foreign Affairs Ministry, as said.

Unfortunately, as years went by, due to the accrued exasperation resulting from decades of solitary fights, his behaviour towards everybody (who could help him or not, even if everyone let him think he had a solution, especially politicians) always proved to be ineffective. This because he always explained the matter starting from the real beginning, often providing irrelevant details that made loose the thread (and patience) to his interlocutors. Moreover, he had no more confidence in his neighbor and he perhaps also suffered from a sort of feeling of persecution (both understandable, all considered) and so he was used to easily insult all people having promised any sort of help, leading to nothing.

I sometimes used my connections at press services, however isolated attempts only led to meager articles on the local press, having a disappointing impact on the public opinion.

I then realized I could really not help him and I decided to propose to him the only thing I could do, i.e. writing an “historical” book about the centuries-old events of his family, ending with the reconstruction of his fight. The main purpose was to leave the mark of this family and its business as it deserved it and to catch the eye both of the public opinion and of the competent authorities on this matter, by presenting and promoting such book appropriately both in Italy and especially in Albania.

I must say, however, that I also aimed at entrusting to history an event profusely documented by pictures and business deeds (even dated at the end of the nineteenth century), statement of a kind of Italian-Albanian (or Albanian-Italian) business, quite common at that time, which trace would have got lost.

Salvatore was uncertain about this idea, maybe it was too far from the achievement of his main aim but, besides that, he also hesitated for another reason he did not want to tell me at the beginning.

At the end he confided to me he feared I would have not been objective enough when dealing with the story if his brother Marco (martyr of the resistance movement) as I had shown my right-wing fondness, even if in the impersonal way distinguishing militaries.

I finally persuaded him, asking him to accept my intellectual honesty, as he had let me share his concern for nearly fifteen years, sometimes asking to help him.

Marco Eftimiadi's short life

After September, 8th 1943 Trieste, together with its surroundings, was occupied by the Germans, who established the DAK (Deutsches Adriatisches Küstenland / German Adriatic Littoral), area that was actually annexed to the Reich.

Further to this occupation, a clandestine resistance movement was established in Trieste and the brother of Salvatore, Marco Eftimiadi, also took part of it. He was an Economics student and was unfortunately identified and incarcerated. These hostages were usually killed by revenge, according to the sad equation “ten Italians for one German”, whenever any German person died of an attack by this movement.

In April 1944, further to a dynamite attack in Via Carlo Ghega where five German soldiers died, fiftysix hostages were taken from the jail (such number was therefore rounded up) and hung on April, 23rd 1944 on the staircase of the Rittmeyer Building, located at the same Via Ghega, which at that time was the seat of the Officers' Club, requisitioned by the Germans (today seat of the Conservatorium of Music “G. Tartini”).

Among them there was also Marco Eftimiadi.

Only his dissertation was left to graduate. After the war, in 1952, during a solemn ceremony at the University of Trieste, his father was given to his memory the Bachelor's degree in Economics and Business.

To leave a memory

Salvatore's approval, even if informal and unfortunately oral, was needed as I was going to Albania with the intention of asking to an Italian bank, which I had been client of, to sponsor such book, that would have had a very interesting chapter on banking historical matters (see above note no. 12).

The bank however had been subject to some changes in the meantime and was not available to sponsor cultural activity any more. Going back to Italy, I told Salvatore about this unhappy piece of news, but he actually was not so upset as he had never believed in it. I did not want to abandon this idea however as I liked it both as unskilled Albanian "historian" as well because I was certain that was the only way I could help him.

I was aware of his advanced age and I sometimes tried to timidly face the matter, asking where all documents, photos etc. would have ended up. Such issue was however understandably very awkward and embarrassing, so I never insisted and therefore, I never received promises or obligations by him.

On April, 11th 2008 at the University of Trieste, there was an event dedicated to Albanian poetry and literature I had been invited to by a group of Albanian poets and intellectuals of the Northern-East Italy, head of the association "Ecim së bashku"¹⁷.

Salvatore came to know about it from the local newscast and called me, informing me he would have liked to take part therein as well. He always did that: every time I delivered a lecture on an Albanian topic, he always came, hoping to have the possibility to speak and tell about his vicissitudes, no matter what the topic was.

I tried to point out that such event on Albanian poetry at the University would not have been the proper occasion to speak about such matter, but he objected his brother had got a degree to his memory there. He was actually right and, after having spoken with the president of the organizing association, we decided that at the end we would have introduced him to the audience (mostly Albanian students of the University of Trieste) and we would have presented his project that, amongst other things, aimed at helping young students from the Vlorë area.

¹⁷ Meaning in Albanian "Let's walk together".

In conclusion, I announced I wanted to write a book about that and about old stories of the Eftimiadis. I am pleased I did it on that occasion, as that University was not only Marco's University, but also mine.

Unfortunately that was the last time I saw him.

I did not know he was ill, I was however surprised he did not call me, even if I feared it was because he was not satisfied about his presentation at the University or because I complained about the fact he spoke as usual inconclusively when not asked, spoiling once again a great opportunity.

After his death, I was not worried much about the documents (as I had many photocopies that had been given to me directly by him over the years) but I was about the old photography's, that could have well completed my book. It was all at Salvatore's house, but it was rented and would have therefore been emptied without much care. Even if I felt ashamed, I got in touch with two of his cousins, whose names I had read on the necrology. I also met one of them and he assured me everything in his apartment was kept by law and so there was no need to worry.

Sometimes, when I walked nearby his apartment (as said, such area was familiar to me), I looked up at those windows worrying. Once, and that really made me upset, I noticed the apartment had been freshly painted and illuminated in a modern way, and I thought it must have become an office. I again had to think about all those beautiful pictures.

I immediately called his cousin, who assured me everything had been taken to his house in Brindisi and that I could have gone there to look for them, and so I did a few years later.

For the time being, my book about "The dream of Krionerò" is still in my drawer, but I am in any case pleased that through "Academicus" something about it goes back to Vlorë.

With regards to the initiatives and dreams of Salvatore Eftimiadi only a foundation has left, mainly on paper actually. As far as I know in fact, its people in charge, nominated by him, have not decided yet whether to accept the inheritance or not (made only of his assets), waiting to know about the existence of possible debts.

Concluding this narrative through time and events becomes evident the legacy: antecedents of present and fundamentals for the future come once again on stage.

History is not an amount of readings with messages and conclusions; people understand and use them depending on their point of views. Nations do the same. That's why their present differs nevertheless their past in common. Societies differ

on their concept and attitude toward basic individual rights. This is the basic cell that constitutes the mutual agreement, which is indispensable for modern and developing societies. This is a strong indicator of tolerance and social solidarity, attributes which no any nation or society can afford to miss.

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