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Raising Adria: Vladimir Bartol's Evocation of the Last Years of Habsburg Trieste

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Among the many masterpieces of Slovene literature that the world has yet to discover is Vladimir Bartol's vast and absorbing memoir of growing up in multi-ethnic Trieste during its final two decades under Habsburg rule, from the first years of the twentieth century until 1918 and the end of WW I, when the city, along with the westernmost one-third of all Slovene lands, was occupied by Italy and remained in Italian hands until the end of WW II. In 1919 the Bartol family—Vladimir, then sixteen, his four siblings, and their parents—joined an exodus of Slovenes from their homes in an increasingly inhospitable Trieste, whose streets were soon to be dominated by militant Italian Fascists and their roving squads of black-shirted, Slav-baiting, club- stick- and stone-wielding street toughs, to resettle in the Slovene heartland, in Ljubljana. Bartol would not be able to call Trieste home again for more than a quarter century. It was a loss that proved to be the most impactful psychological trauma of his life, one that would play a major role in giving the world the novel *Alamut*, many dozens of short stories, and quite possibly the most magisterial memoir of pre-1918 Trieste ever produced in any language, *Mladost pri svetem Ivanu* (*A Youth in St. Ivan*).

Written over the course of 1955 and 1956 in more than three hundred separate, chapter-length installments for publication as a serial feature of Trieste's Slovene-language daily newspaper *Primorski dnevnik*, Bartol's *Mladost* became a sensation among Trieste's Slovene population literally overnight, with each new installment of the memoir eagerly awaited and enthusiastically discussed by the newspaper's subscribers. On the strength of its success, Bartol went from an ex-author in many people's eyes to a literary celebrity among Slovenes in Trieste, many of whom, recognizing him on the street, in a café, or at the theater would walk up to thank him effusively for his work or ask about his plans for future installments.

The singular feat of adhering to almost daily deadlines for submitting print-ready copy for publication in the following day's paper, while simultaneously shaping a coherent, thousand-page work that is, far more than a memoir, a meticulously crafted literary masterwork exploring the emergence of individual human consciousness and the great dilemma of man and technology in the twentieth century, proved to be the culmination of Bartol's lifetime efforts as a writer. Bartol had always been a writer who produced his best work during extended states of inspired exhilaration, which came to him unpredictably following relatively fallow hiatuses that sometimes went on for years. The first documented inspiration for *Mladost*

surfaced in 1954 amid the delirium of a fever he suffered while taking the train with his wife from Trieste to Ljubljana. Though he retained no recollection of the event afterward, his wife later described to him how in the train he began recounting vivid scenes from his childhood in Trieste and saying that he had to write them all down or risk losing them forever. Soon afterward, once back in Trieste, Bartol approached the editor of *Primorski dnevnik* to ask if he would like him to double the paper's circulation. The editor laughed, but still asked what Bartol had in mind. They concluded a deal and Bartol set to work. By the end of the eighteen months it took him to produce *Mladost*, Bartol was not only physically and psychologically exhausted, but he felt, as he confided to his diary, that he had at last discharged his life's mission as an artist, leaving no discernible creative resources in reserve. Coincidentally, this was also the time following the end of the Allied occupation of Trieste (1945–54). The city's newly empowered Italian authorities chose not to renew Bartol's residence visa, declaring him persona non grata. Shortly afterward he moved permanently back to Ljubljana.

Trieste for young Vladimir Bartol was far more than the city center that served as the main locus of James Joyce's haunts when he lived in the city from 1904 to 1915, teaching English and writing *Dubliners*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and early notes for *Ulysses*. Young Vladimir's version of Trieste centered on the neighborhood of St. Ivan (San Giovanni) on its periphery, one of a number of Slovene villages that were annexed to the city in the mid-19th century and, even in Bartol's early years, were rapidly developing into semi-urbanized parts of Trieste proper. The Bartol family home was a spacious villa built by Vladimir's maternal grandparents on nearly an acre of sloping land that had formerly served as a vineyard and evoked St. Ivan's rural past, while just across the street their neighbors lived in four- and five-story apartment buildings newly constructed to house the neighborhood's growing, demographically shifting population. Located a kilometer east of the center of Trieste, St. Ivan extends roughly another kilometer toward the slope that steepens to become Razklani hrib (Cleft Hill / Monte Spaccato), whose footpaths lead the hiker a thousand feet up to the Karst plateau, with its scattering of traditionally Slovene villages overlooking the vast geographical amphitheater that contains Trieste and opens onto the Adriatic Sea beyond. In his introduction to the memoir, Bartol describes how his own personal universe grew year by year, beginning with his birth and infancy in the family house at the corner of San Cilino and Donatello Streets, extending over the next few years of childhood into the large garden, field, and "Earth" (as he and his siblings called the wildest and most overgrown part of the property) with their rich natural and cultivated environments surrounding the house, and then rapidly expanding through adolescence in ever wider concentric circles to encompass all of St. Ivan, other neighborhoods of Trieste, the city center and harbor, and the relative

wilderness of the hillside, plateau, and Karst hinterland. In his earliest years, when Vladi's universe comprised the family's property and immediate neighborhood, he imagined himself the young sovereign prince of his own personal Kingdom of Adria, which he would visit at night, bringing back stories of his adventures and exploits to share with his siblings and parents. For the inquisitive and closely observant adolescent that Vladimir became, fascinated with the life cycles and behavior patterns of species throughout the natural environments of the Littoral, and particularly of the order *lepidoptera*, the diverse human communities of Trieste—urban, suburban and rural, cosmopolitan and Slovene, Italian or German—offered a comparable abundance of something very akin to species diversity that he grew keen to chart on his map of the world. All of these varied habitats with their diverse populations—from childhood fantasy realms to countryside and complex, multi-ethnic urban spaces—figure vividly among the settings of *Mladost*.

But the range of *Mladost* is much broader than the immediate lived, observed and imagined experience of Vladimir Bartol alone. Among its three hundred chapters are many that draw on oral accounts of earlier times, including family stories told to him over the years by his mother Marica Bartol, née Nadlišek, about her own childhood and youth, along with tales of earlier generations of the Nadlišek family living in Trieste and its environs. Indeed, *Mladost* is one of the most important sources we have concerning the life of Marica Nadlišek, who had in her younger years been not just Trieste's, but one of Slovenia's earliest and most productive women writers and feminist activists. The picture that Bartol draws of his mother is not only a poignant account of a burgeoning artistic career suddenly cut short by the then conventional demands of marriage and child-rearing, but it provides insight into the motivations for Bartol's own steadfast bachelorhood during his first two decades as a writer. Another important source that allowed Bartol to deepen the historical roots of *Mladost* was Josip Godina-Verdelski's *Description and History of Trieste and Environs* (1872), one of the few early attempts at a compilation of the history of Slovene Trieste, much of it drawn from still earlier oral accounts. In writing *Mladost*, Bartol was not just fixing his own youth in print, but deliberately making a major contribution toward elevating long centuries—over a millenium, in fact—of Slovene habitation of Trieste and the Karst from folklore to the level of history, and thus in some sense putting it beyond all serious dispute at last.

Bartol clearly takes pride in describing the close-knit communities of Triestine and Littoral Slovenes, their distinctive holidays, celebrations, and customs, their commercial, civic, and cultural achievements, and the particular attention they devoted to creating a network of excellent Slovene-language schools in the course of the nineteenth century, which they sustained well into the era of Fascist rule in the twentieth. But he is no flag-waving chauvinist. Bartol's patriotism is rather of the enlightened, local variety that celebrated the peaceful coexistence of various ethnic groups

within the complex and yet stable, mostly amicable multi-ethnic ecosystem that Trieste for centuries was, where Italians predominated in the cosmopolitan central city and harbor, while the outlying Slovene settlements mediated in both directions between the city and countryside. True, in the course of the 19th century the social and cultural institutions of the Slovene urban and small town middle class encouraged the formation of *zavedni Slovenci*—culturally conscious Slovenes educated in their native language, yet often conversant in both German and Italian and appreciative of the attainments of all three cultures—but they did this primarily as a response to the aggressive assimilative efforts of Italian cultural and political organizations that, driven by an extreme version of Italian *Risorgimento*, sought to colonize and diminish the Slovene presence as part of the long-term expansionist agenda to "redeem" peripheral lands considered to be of strategic importance to a united Italy. In that process, in the course of several generations large numbers of Slovenes in and around Trieste did abandon their Slovene identity and assimilate linguistically and culturally, either because they saw this as an expedient way to a better life, or because it was the path of least resistance. The Bartol family adamantly rejected this option, while steadfastly maintaining a tolerant, even friendly attitude toward their non-Slovene neighbors. *Mladost* is replete with stories of Vladimir's friendships with Slovene, Italian and German children and youths from his neighborhood; *Book Three* in particular details his adolescent embrace of German and classical Greek culture during his years as a student at the prestigious German Classical Gymnasium (secondary school) in downtown Trieste, whose student body was a microcosm of Trieste's ethnically diverse middle class. Almost from the start, however, attentive readers will pick up on a subtle, sometimes even wryly humorous note of disquiet that recurs throughout Bartol's memoir, betraying an incipient interethnic animus that in the opening years of the new century barely smoldered, but would mount over time until it finally burst forth in the first major act of anti-Slavic violence in Trieste, the burning of the Slovene National Home downtown in 1920. What was to follow in Trieste and throughout the Julian March, attaining full force under Fascist rule beginning in 1922 and continuing for two decades, would be the first major, large-scale effort at "ethnic cleansing" in Europe since WW I. Amazingly and quite wonderfully, despite all of this difficult history, there is not a trace of rancor in Bartol's epic memoir of Trieste, whose dominant tones are fascination, to some extent wistfulness and a bit of regret, but most of all love.

The excerpts published here are taken entirely from Book One of *Mladost*, which presents Vladimir's birth and early childhood up until the age six, when he was due to begin school. Book Two details his sudden life-threatening illness (pneumonia) and consequent long convalescence at home, which delayed his progress at school. We get to witness his growing passion for lepidoptery, and the Bartol and Germek clans' social and cultural contacts

with extended family in the Slovene interior. The onset of adolescence launches Book Three, as Vladimir prepares for and enters the German Classical Gymnasium which he attended for six years, witnesses the Austrian mobilization for WW I, discovers the masterpieces of German and Greek classical literature—and, in his free time, the Winnetou novels about American Indians by the German author Karl May, along with the early box office hits out of Hollywood and Berlin that played in the city's profusion of movie theaters—endured the deprivations of wartime, and literally watched, night after night, the not-so-distant terror of the world's first mechanized cataclysm. He also falls in love for the first time, and experiences crushing disappointment when that love remains unrequited.

Over and over again, Bartol the narrator will remind us that his point in these memoirs is not to demonstrate that he was exceptional in any particular way, but rather the opposite—that his story is typical of the stories of hundreds and thousands of other young Slovenes of his generation in the Adriatic Littoral and, by extension and in more general terms, of tens and hundreds of thousands, if not millions of impressionable adolescents all over Europe, particularly in the way the cataclysm of the Great War is shown to have a decisively formative, non-salutary impact on their development into adults. Suddenly, on the verge of adulthood, a whole youthful generation was taught to feel small, vulnerable and expendable in the face of the annihilating firepower that the European great powers, mustering the full might of their burgeoning technology, had trained on each other. This, it may suddenly dawn on us, will be particularly important when we try to understand the psyches and driving forces of the many overreaching characters that populate Bartol's better-known works, *Al Araf* (1935) and *Alamut* (1938), as well as many dozens of short stories, plays and sketches, both published and unpublished, allowing us to see them in an entirely new and, frankly, transfiguring light.

So, if all great *libelli* have their *fata*, what has been the subsequent fate of Bartol's *Mladost pri svetem Ivanu*? Shockingly minimal. Although a Trieste-based Slovene publisher made some noises to Bartol in the 1950s about wanting to publish the complete series in book form, that plan did not come to pass. Confined to the scattered issues of crumbling newsprint held in the storage rooms of libraries, or in the attics of some Slovene households in Trieste, for close to a half century after its serial publication *Mladost* became, for all practical purposes, a phantom work mostly forgotten, and at best preserved imperfectly in the memories of a dwindling number of aging Triestine newspaper readers. It was not until the young and ambitious owner of a new Slovene publishing house, inspired by the memory of his own enthusiastic embrace as an adolescent of both classic works by Bartol, *Alamut* and *Al Araf*, was moved to negotiate with Bartol's heirs for rights to republish those works, that the notion of extending the Bartolian canon by a third, virtually unknown, but equally essential canonical work arose. This is how

all of *Mladost* first found its way into print in Slovenia, this time as a tangible, durable book published in three volumes from 2002 to 2006, after nearly a half century spent in oblivion. Why such persistent neglect of a masterpiece? This takes us into complex and, for now, still largely speculative questions of Bartol's sociocultural and political position vis-à-vis his contemporaries, many of whom may have felt threatened by a colleague with literary gifts that were both considerable and unorthodox—and especially by one who so demonstratively rejected their cherished ideologies, whether of the right or the left. Many of these peers had the wherewithal, whether by means of negative critical reviews or by depriving him of preferment, to influence his fate as a writer. Certainly in post-1945 Yugoslavia, where Bartol could no longer speak his mind openly, his pre-war reputation as a disputatious, non-conformist opponent of "cretinism," as he had often privately referred to communism, did him no good. Thus, for all of these reasons and likely more, for fifty years there was no physical book of *Mladost*, no readily available text, no presence and hence no translations—not into Serbian, Croatian, or even Italian, let alone German or English.

Almost to a book, the published portrayals of Trieste available in Western languages turn a blind, or at best an uninformed eye to the historical fact of Slovenian Trieste, an unfortunate but predictable, perhaps even inevitable by-product of the grip that Latinate Italy has had on the Anglo-American and North European imagination since Henry James, Goethe, Shakespeare and even before. Joseph Cary's literary pilgrimage (1993) in search of relics of James Joyce in Trieste, as its title suggests, holds close to the city center and leads its writer mostly to traces of the great Irish writer and his Italian protégé Italo Svevo. Jan Morris's *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere* (2001), a highly personal cultural travelogue-cum-memoir, devotes some late, intermittent passages to a Karst and Istria inhabited by Slavs, but with a lack of specificity that suggests only the barest familiarity. A recent study by an American historian (Hametz 2005) of the various stages in the Italianization of Trieste in the twentieth century applies an overwhelmingly Italian lens, supplemented with some English and American sources, to a process that had radical impacts on the lives of some 300,000 Slovenes throughout the Littoral. The renowned Triestine Italian author and essayist Claudio Magris, whose work otherwise has been copiously published in English (cf. his *Danube*, *A Different Sea*, *Microcosms*, *Snapshots*, and other book-length works translated from Italian), in 1987 co-authored with Angelo Ara an extensive exploration of the meeting and partial melding of diverse identities in his hometown and its environs under a title that someday will translate to something like "Trieste, a Frontier Identity," if only an Anglo-American translator and publisher can be found and the two of them get busy. And of the twenty-six authors included in a German-language anthology of writers on Trieste (Einsendle 1994), whose subtitle deceptively promises the depiction of "a city between three worlds," exactly *one* is a writer in Slovene:

Srečko Kosovel. Perhaps Bartol's *Youth*, if it succeeds some day in making its way in the world in a complete English translation, will help provide future historians, anthologists, travelers and readers with material to right that imbalance and to begin recreating the truly 360-degree panorama of the cultures and peoples that for over a millennium have defined one of Europe's great cosmopolitan seaports, situated along the geographic seam that stitches east and west, the Slavic and Romance worlds together.

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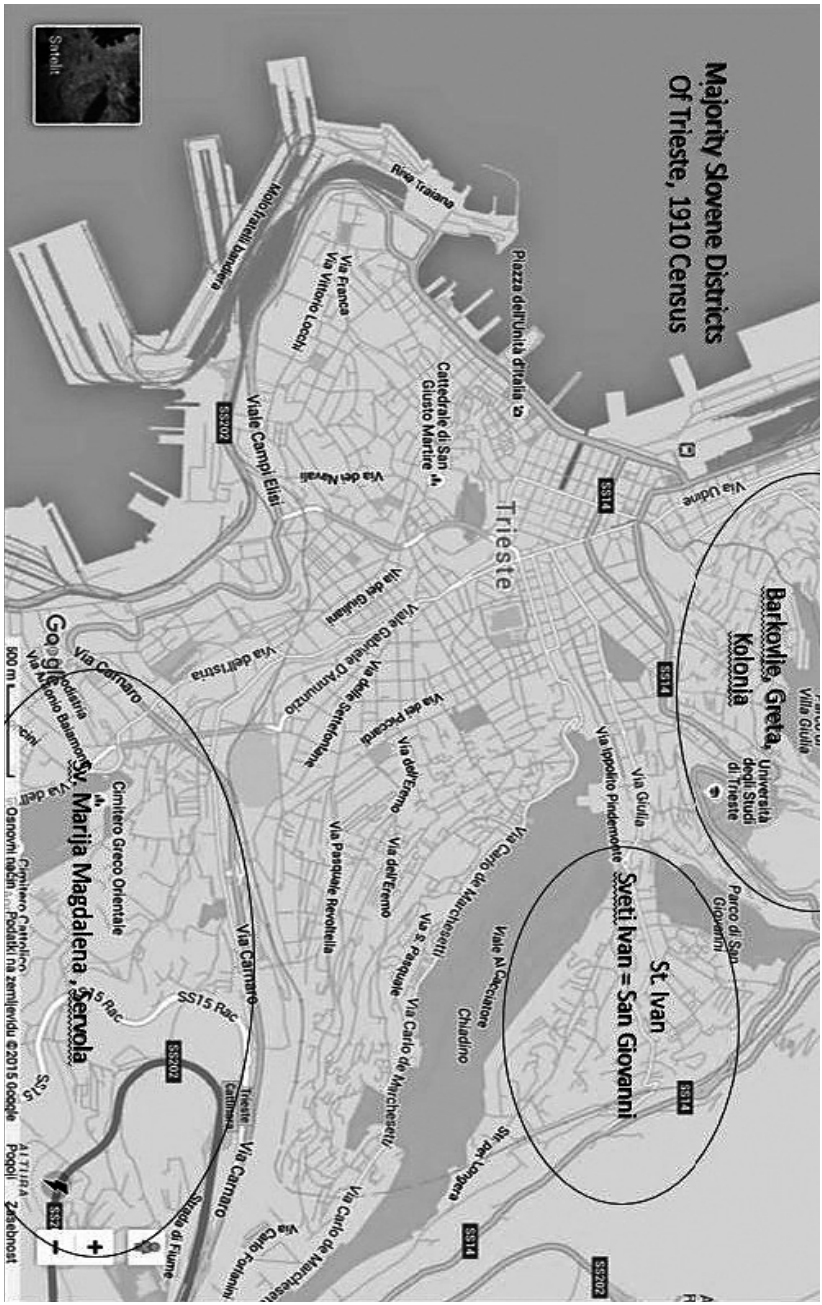
Former Bartol-Nadlišek house and property at the corner of San Cilino and Donatello streets in St. Ivan, Trieste, photographed in the 1920s. Reproduced by permission of Rok Bartol.



Map of Trieste (from Google Maps) showing major Slovene neighborhoods near the city center, based on the 1910 census.