

A Book of Generations – Writing at the Frontier

Le Quattro ragazze Wieselberger by Fausta Cialente

Trieste, a highly urbanized town, the biggest port of the Habsburg Empire, later of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, was a socially and culturally modern municipality. This is the main scene of Fausta Cialente's novel, *Le quattro ragazze Wieselberger*, [The Four Wieselberger Girls]. An international port, an industrial and commercial centre, Trieste was also socially progressive, with women relatively emancipated for the age. Already at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, there was a generation of women writers, writers of all kinds and of various degrees of excellence. I could mention well-known women journalists and writers like Haydée (Ida Finzi), or Willie Dias (Fortuna Morpurgo) from the next generation. Others were also scholars such as Gemma Volli, a teacher and historian, who did research on the saint of Trento, San Simonino, proving the antisemitic fabrications in the story of the saint's murder.¹ Or intellectuals, like Elody Oblath Stuparich, best known for her letters to Slataper and for her autobiographical essays.² The concept of 'fatal errors' committed by the middle class of Trieste, reaching its peak at the end of Cialente's novel is also present in the memories of Elody when remembering World War I. In 1928, she regrets her and her friends' past fanaticism, their delight in recalling the war. Ten years after her beloved friend, Slataper was killed in the war, she highly condemns it. 'Giorni d'illusioni folli, fede in un'umanità migliore, che ci faceva esultare e chiedere la morte di milioni di uomini!' ³

The search for identity in a multiethnic and multicultural town was quite common with intellectuals; it is not surprising that the genres of memories and of the Bildungsroman were quite popular. We can think of Umberto Saba (*Ernesto*) or Giorgio Voghera ("L'Anonimo Triestino", *Il segreto*, or of the autobiographical novel on the 1st World War by Giani Stuparich, *Ritornarono*, of novels by Pier Antonio Quarantotti Gambini, of historical-autobiographical novels by Fulvio Tomizza or of the essays and essay-novels by Claudio Magris and of many short stories also closely connected with the town or the region.

¹ Volli proved that the people of Trento had accused the Jews of murdering the boy, so that they could confiscate everything that belonged to them. See Gemma Volli, *I 'Processi Tridentini' e il culto di Beato Simone da Trento*, „Il Ponte”, 11 novembre 1963.

² See also in the short essays: Ilona Fried, *L'immagine della donna nella narrativa femminile ebraica: Haydée, Rina Del Prado, Elody Oblath*, in Shalom Trieste, ed. by: Adriano Dugulin, Tullia Catalan, Comune di Trieste, 1998, *Vite di donne ebraiche a Fiume e a Trieste*, in *Le donne delle minoranze*, ed. by: Claire Honess and Verina Jones, Claudiana, Torino, 1999.

Women writers frequently use topics for 'women', in the vein of best sellers, but in other cases they go far beyond easy readings that seek cheap success with the public. Besides, they occasionally formulate ideas about the role of women in society, quite in harmony with the modern mind. Let me refer to Elody Oblath Stuparich describing her ideal for man (in 1928):

"La donna deve rendersi indipendente moralmente e materialmente, e non deve aspettare inerte il 'principe', come se fosse scritto nelle stelle che egli deve venire."⁴

Fausta Cialente, 1898-1994, was born in Cagliari, but her chosen city was Trieste, her mother's birthplace. She was compelled to travel a lot, first because of her father's profession, a military officer and then due to her marriage in Egypt. She wrote novels and short stories where she quite frequently combined autobiographical elements with histories of towns, countries, regions, like in her two novels that take place in Egypt (*Cortile a Cleopatra*, 1936, *Ballata levantina*, 1962), where she lived from 1921 to 1947. (She married the composer Enrico Terni and settled down in Egypt a year before the proclamation of independence. While living in Alessandria she was surrounded by artists and intellectuals and an exciting and very multicultural intellectual atmosphere.) There she organised an antifascist Italian broadcasting station-program during the Second World War. On her return to Italy after the war, she became a journalist and kept on travelling in that capacity.

The novel I am going to analyse in this short essay, *Le quattro ragazze Wieselberger*, *The four Wieselberger Girls*, offers two parallel histories: that of Cialente's family, and the story of her city, Trieste. I consider *Le quattro ragazze Wieselberger* as part of the literature of Trieste, though, as we can see, Cialente herself cannot be claimed exclusively by that city. In any case, her very cosmopolitan background allows us to give her such etiquette. In a way, the novel is a family saga. The family story throws light on the condition of women, presenting both the narrator's mother and herself as protagonist, growing up and entering the world.

Following my point we can mention *Le quattro ragazze Wieselberger* in connection with women's literature, although I do not think Cialente was particularly keen on the issue, being possibly more concerned with general social issues like the oppression of Slavs in Trieste during the fascist era. The latter can be seen in her beautiful article written in 1954, a delicate moment for the city, when it was still occupied by the allies but was soon to become part of Italy. The people she meets and describes there are all Slavs, all of whom have suffered a lot in the course of history. The journalist-Cialente is following their fate with great empathy and a thorough knowledge of history.⁵

³ | *Confessioni e lettere*, ed. by G. Criscione, Torino, Fògola, 1979. p. 32-33, see also in Curci Roberto e Ziani Gabriella, *Bianco, rosa e verde*, p. 219.

⁴ *Confessioni e lettere*, cit. p. 27.

⁵ Thanks to Anna Millo I discovered this article: *Termometro a Trieste*, di Fausta Terni Cialente, in „Il Contemporaneo”, giugno, 1954, p. 6.

A born journalist, she writes with great ease and in a very enjoyable manner. Besides portraying people using her personal experience, she takes a strong interest in costumes and in social matters. The importance of memory (through references to oral history and historical documents) is also part of her narrative. She happened to live in melting pots, at crossroads of cultures and in transcultural realities, which she made accessible to the readers with her open minded approach. She portrayed Egypt in the first decades of the 20th century and during World War II, and Trieste at the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century, where *Le quattro ragazze Wieselberger* takes place. (Strega Prize 1976) She uses extensive historical material – perhaps exactly because of the closeness of the subject to her. The novel practically provides a description of the history of Trieste from the last decades of the nineteenth century up to the Second World War. It is the family history of the Wieselbergers, during three generations. It starts with the grandfather, an emblematic figure of the irredentist middle-class intellectual, who, while living the cosmopolitan life of his city, is fighting to make Trieste part of Italy instead of Austria. When this is finally accomplished in 1918, it will cause the decline of the town. The story starts in the typical middle class home of the ‘maestro’, by the Adriatic Sea, and ends in the Persian Gulf, where the elderly narrator, a descendant of the family and the last witness to the past, comes to peace with the ghosts of her past.

Although the narrator focuses mainly on her childhood, and says hardly anything about her adulthood and very little about her husband and daughter, the novel suggests the decadence of the family, side by side with the decadence of a city, and of that region of Europe.

As to the different layers of the narrative, there is a clear distinction between the two aspects of the plot: the history of the town, while focusing on social and political identities viewed through the history of the family, is also clearly distinguished from it. The autobiographical narrator, although internally focalizing on the plot, tends to be impersonal or objective in her political views, expressing them in the course of the narration as moral issues at times. Her observations are those of a person on the left, who condemns the “bourgeoisie” as being greedy for wealth and power, and is convinced of their collective responsibility for the world wars and for the decline of the town. Today perhaps, Cialente would see these problems in a more complex manner.

The grandfather, a musician, is an Italian patriot, like many others in the town. He is an irredentist, he adores Italy without being able to understand that the wealth of his town is due mainly to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the vital “Hinterland”, without which the town will lose its importance. Gustave Wieselberger represents all the positive and negative features of his class, and is characterised as a well-meaning but rather short-sighted person, full of prejudices and not seeing beyond his nose.

‘E già s’impinguava una borghesia rapace e reazionaria ch’egli, ingenuo musicista, non era in grado di giudicare e ancor meno di condannare...’

The word ‘s’impinguava’ is a particularly appropriate illustration of how the nature of the middle class is described but also the concept of the middle class as ‘rapacious’ and ‘reactionary’. In her comments on the events that have taken place before, the narrator uses all the historical experience of the 20th century, thus revealing her moral views on social and political issues. These characteristics of the middle class are present in the image of Trieste, but on the whole not exclusively dominant. The time span is about a century, from the 1880s up to the 1970s. By moving from Trieste to Kuwait – the world of the novel opens up, and becomes universal.

Le quattro ragazze Wieselberger starts, as we mentioned above, with the description of the home of the Wieselbergers in Trieste. ‘Master’ Wieselberger (not only musician and conductor, but also a composer remembered in the musical history of Trieste) is organising a concert, and friends, members of the musical society are expected as guests.

Mr. Wieselberger can be a symbolic character, and music is one of the chief themes in the novel, through which not only the everyday life of a town keen on music can be described, but also the political views, beliefs and disbeliefs of an age. The novel consists of four chapters: the first one is through the narrative voice of the third person (before the birth of the main character) and only in chapter II is the first person narration introduced. The focalisation is from the point of view of the main character, the granddaughter. The beginning shows a peaceful and happy period in the lives of the maestro with his four daughters: Alice, Alba, Adele, Elsa (the latter being the main character’s mother). The granddaughter can make use of the experience of all subsequent events and can judge the previous generations from the point of view of a ‘survivor’, the depository of a culture which has already disappeared at the time of the narration.

The four parts of the novel are clearly separated in time and in space: the first one takes place in Trieste, from about 1880 until 1900, “the belle époque”. It introduces the first and the second generation, that of the grandparents and their four young daughters, and it gives quite a detailed description of their everyday life (an interesting insight into the customs of the age). The second one is the childhood of the narrator – the mother, Elsa is already living in Italy, so the world of Trieste is viewed from a certain distance, and can be compared to the contemporary Italian way of life, actually the one so deeply desired by the irredentists in Trieste. As the family still spends the summer holidays in Trieste, the comparison is set in a realistic manner. Besides, the child’s eyes, (i.e. the narrator’s) can observe without prejudice, so she can see more clearly than the adults, and can soon question ‘certainties’, casting doubt on the identity the adults believe in.

The third part gives a glimpse of the First World War, as seen from the Hinterland, at the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, a reality that struck Trieste much harder than they would have thought earlier.

The fourth part is the period between the two World Wars, when Trieste already belongs to fascist Italy, the Second World War, and the years after. The narrator is living in Egypt (another autobiographical element, as we have pointed out), so her distance from Trieste is getting greater. The short ending is about the post-war life of the protagonist, her daughter and the end of the family story.

Each of the four chapters starts with a quotation showing some connection between politics and everyday life, and always related to the topic to be dealt with. The first one by Cavour, retains Trieste as part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the second one, still before chapter one, by Angelo Vivante, is of the same opinion. The second chapter is introduced by a quotation by Slataper, *Il mio carso* (Slataper considers himself to be a Slav of Trieste, an intellectual belonging to an ethnic minority feeling in a difficult position at the beginning of the 20th century), in which Slataper expresses his strong belief that the Slavs are the race of the future. The quotations before Chapter Three are taken from the book by Giani Stuparich, on the War of 1915, also describing the terrible tragedies caused by the war. The fourth chapter has two quotations from poems about the sufferings of war, and this chapter expands the issue of Trieste into a more general one. It cannot be accidental that this part opens with poems: this is an almost lyrical part.

The emblem of the generation history is, as we have already pointed out, music, which also becomes a metaphor of both the calm and thoughtless middle class life in a wealthy town, and of political short-sightedness. The grandfather is a dedicated musician, composer and director of orchestra, all the daughters learn to play the piano, as was common in middle class families in Central Europe (less so in Italy in those days, according to the narrator⁶), the mother of the narrator becomes a singer – in fact, it was quite unheard of in those days for her family to let her leave Trieste for Northern Italy alone, so she could get a proper education. (Although she sacrificed her career for her marriage, her education in music was to save her from her bad marriage and help her to establish an existence of her own.)

Cultural as well as political life in Trieste according to the plot was centred on music, an important part of social life. (Musical and literary societies were hothouses for patriotic feelings.) This rather distorted identity is reflected through the monologues of the “maestro”: while most of the wealth the town has, is due to Austria, to the “Hinterland” badly needed for its economy, but all the same, people living on the economy closely connected to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, are

⁶ Oscar Mondadori, Milano, 1976, p. 89.

devoted Italian patriots. (The novel depicts a rather homogeneous image of the irredentism of Trieste, without making any real distinction among people as to their ideals.) The irony, present in the novel, helps to expose the blind patriotic feelings. The sense of municipal identity is symbolised for the Italian irredentists by the Italian opera, but the irony in the novel is that the names of Puccini's operas, for instance, are pronounced with a German accent by the maestro – an example of the deeply rooted cosmopolitanism.

The mother's name, Elsa – the only one excluded from the same letter of the alphabet the names of the girls start with – is also symbolic: Gustav Wieselberger gives this name to her daughter as a tribute to Lohengrin by Richard Wagner (first performed in 1850). (Elsa, a tragic heroine in the romantic opera, is a rather tragic heroine in the plot of the novel, as well. Her fate is different from her sister's, as she is the only one of the girls to leave Trieste and to live outside, and also the only rebellious one, who will break away from her marriage. The Italian patriot maestro, on the other hand, adores Wagner to the extent of giving her daughter the name of a heroine from one of his (German) operas – not the only contradiction in such a multicultural and multiethnic town as Trieste. Just as the lyric opera has the legend of the Grail, the family history includes another legend, or more exactly a "myth", that of Trieste seen from the point of view of the irredentists, which becomes the main cause of the tragedy of the town.

The genre of the novel is memory – memoirs are present in different aspects. There is a "realistic" aspect, mixing fiction with reality: references are made, quite often by one of the characters, to real people, like to Svevo. Svevo is said to have met the mothers' sisters, all of them having names with the same first letter – and this gave him the idea for the names of the four Malfenti girls, in his novel, *La coscienza di Zeno*, to start with the same letter: Ada, Augusta, Alberta, Anna.

Cialente quite clearly has studied works written on Trieste, and by putting some of the narration on the history of the town into the mouth of the elderly gentleman, the maestro, she creates an almost satirical aspect. There are other historical events or connections referred to by the granddaughter narrator, who is also a spokesperson for the writer. She is an embedded character, whose focalization alternates between internal and external narration. She also portrays members of the family; she is an heiress to the family legends. The narrator mentions Slataper and Vivante as thinkers greatly influencing her. To give an original flavour to the expressions, forms of the Trieste dialect are sometimes used, as well as lines of folk songs, which give a colourful image of everyday life and people. Perhaps it is not by accident that one of the words quite often used is "babe", a dialect form meaning girls, a colloquial and informal way of calling the members of the family, who are, except for the maestro, all girls and women. It is also interesting to see the events from

different angles: the first chapter setting the family events in Trieste, and the second one giving the future prospects of Italy. The mainly impersonal view of the narration is reinforced by present commentaries which accompany past events.

There are models of behaviour – different for men and women. Male characters are authoritarian, the grandfather is still a good father and husband, but this is not so in the case of his sons-in-law. The women are very well educated, but most of them are prevented from having a career of their own; it will be only the narrator who can get away from the social rules discriminating against women, to become really emancipated. Women are victims, although the men of the second generation, like the narrator's father, aren't very happy either. Only the marriage of the grandfather seems to be all right, (although the reader gets to know hardly anything about it), no other marriage is referred to as a good one. Although the narrator recalls the positive characteristics of her father, she is definitely on the side of her mother, feeling solidarity with her and also pitying her. Different colours are used for the two young boys in the family, who both die young: the cousin Fabio, who dies in the First World War, and Fausta's brother Renato, who becomes a famous actor, and then, at the peak of his career, gets killed in a stupid accident during the Second World War, being run over by a German car in occupied Rome after a performance.⁷

The end of the novel proves the strong feelings the narrator has towards her mother: she will be the last character of the family to accompany the narrator. The farewell to her and to her memory marks the end of the family story. As a matter of fact, the end note is a relationship among three generations of women: the narrator's adult daughter is also walking on the same seashore. Despite the 'fatal errors' committed by the first two generations of the family and of the people of the town, (the text uses the collective "we"), Elsa acquired peace and reconciliation in her death and in this last scene her memory transmits these feelings to her daughter. It is this message of tolerance and of the need to forgive past errors that brings the final peace of mind to the heroine. Reconciliation, although expressed only at an emotional and metaphoric level, is the way towards self-realization for the last two generations of women.

"...mi venne improvvisamente un altro pensiero, o forse un presentimento, ch'era pure un angoscioso sospetto: se mi volto, non vedrò forse mia madre camminare dietro di noi, anche lei su questa spiaggia; è possibile che sia lì a seguirci e a volerci ancora bene?"

Non mi volto, naturalmente, non voglio vedere la spiaggia deserta alle mie spalle, né se l'ultima delle triestine Wieselberger ci sta davvero seguendo, piena d'amore anche lei, ne sono certa, e forse di un'affettuosa, indulgente tolleranza, perché siamo vive, noi, e lei invece è morta, dunque riposa per sempre, nulla potrà mai più deluderla né ferirla o recarle offesa. Forse è questo il

⁷ He dies on 25th of November 1943, after the performance at the Teatro Argentina of Gorky's *The Lower Depths*.

suo messaggio, ed è venuta fin sulle rive del Golfo Persico a portarcelo: vi voglio ancora bene, ma lasciatemi in pace, adesso, e pensate a vivere sbagliando il meno possibile. Noi abbiamo tanto sbagliato.

Mi vengono le lagrime agli occhi mentre seguito a camminare verso la pagina aperta che sono questo mare e questo cielo, dietro le mie tre lontane figurine. La nebbia della serra sta lentamente avvolgendole, ma non riuscirà a nascondermele e continuiamo insieme, a distanza, sul filo dell'onda che si ritira con un fruscio sottile. Non penso più al remoto disordine della vita alla quale dovrò pur tornare, per inumana, vergognosa o impossibile che sia; ho in silenzio accettato quella che sembra essere la promessa d'una gioia esigua per quanto anch'essa remota – quindi non è solo un barlume questo che ora dilegua lamentandosi sull'acqua.”

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