

HEMINGWAY IN THE SOČA VALLEY

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Hemingway is a very popular writer in Slovenia. One of my students in Ljubljana pointed out a very well known passage in *A Farewell to Arms* about two refugee girls Frederic Henry and his driver, Aymo, pick up in Gorizia (Gorica) during the retreat from Caporetto (Kobarid). What interested many of my students about the episode was that the two girls seem to speak a dialect that neither Aymo, who is Italian, nor Frederic, who is fluent in Italian, understands. My students believed that these girls are speaking Slovenian. The only Italian they seem to understand are the words in Italian for sexual intercourse,¹ which makes them very upset, and virgin and sister, which calm them down. It is very likely that two Slovenian girls would know a little Italian, particularly if they came from Gorizia, which at the time of the first world war was predominantly Slovene.²

I thought the question interesting enough to warrant a little research. I discovered, surprisingly, that Hemingway did not take part in the retreat from Caporetto.³ At the time of the retreat (October 23—27, 1917), he was a cub reporter on the *Kansas City Star*. He did not arrive on the Italian front as a Red Cross ambulance driver until June of 1918, long after the Caporetto debacle. He was, moreover, stationed west of Gorizia at Schio and Fossalta di Piave, where he indeed was wounded, like his counterpart Frederic Henry in the novel. Lastly, Hemingway never even visited the scene of the retreat, not Caporetto, not Piave, not the Bainsizza plateau, not the Isonzo River (the Soča), not even Gorizia. How then, I thought, could these girls in the novel be modeled on ones Hemingway might have met during the campaign? Much less, how could he know they might be Slovene girls (even if he had met them) since he never came within 100 kilometers of Gorizia either during the war or after it when he visited the Fossalta di Piave to show his wife Hadley where he was wounded?⁴

¹ Max Perkins, Hemingway's editor at Scribners, for proprietary reasons, left a blank space in the text where the word would appear. *A Farewell to Arms*, New York (1929), p. 196.

² In 1915, 62 % of the population of the Gorizia-Gradisca region (or 155,000 people) was Slovene. Stephen Clissold, ed., *A Short History of Yugoslavia*, Cambridge (1966), p. 154.

³ Ironically, Hemingway may have taken his description of Caporetto from a tourist guidebook — »I remember it as a little white town with a campanile in a valley. It was a clean little town and there was a fine fountain in the square« (*A Farewell to Arms*, p. 164). The current edition of *Baedeker's Yugoslavia* (1985) wrongly implies that Hemingway took part in the fighting there.

⁴ Carlos Baker, *Ernest Hemingway, A Life Story*, New York (1969), p. 94.

In the novel Hemingway mentions many eastern europeans — Magyars, Bosnians, Montenegrins, and Croatians — but he does not mention any Slovenians. The supreme commander of the forces on the Soča was an Orthodox Serb long in the service of the Habsburgs.⁵ It was according to Hemingway the fierce fighting Croatians who attacked the Second Army on the Bainsizza in the morning of October 24th. The Croatians were fighting on the Austrian side. Were there Slovenians among these Croatians, and, I wondered, if not, were Slovenians fighting on the Austrian side? These questions seemed relevant to the episode of the two Slovene girls, for what would Slovenian refugees be doing retreating from the advancing Austrian armies if Slovenians were fighting on their side? Perhaps they preferred to be on the Italian side. Even though the Habsburgs held sway in the region before the war, the Italians were assigned the region in the Treaty of London (April 26, 1915). Perhaps the Slovenes had more economic affinities with the Italians than with their Austrian neighbors to the north? In fact I discovered that they very likely preferred not to fight in either army, being caught up in a desire for autonomy and self determination.⁶ So in a very real way it did make sense that Slovenian refugees would be swept up in the retreat from Caporetto out of the Soča Valley and onto the plains of Italy. Where else could they go?

Still I had not answered the question of the probability of the refugee girls being Slovene. I thought another approach would be better. How could these girls be Italian? In the novel they cannot make themselves understood either to an Italian or to an American fluent in Italian. It seemed reasonable to assume, I thought, that no Italian dialects are so far apart that the only common words are virgin and sister. In all likelihood, however, foreign girls, that is, Slovene Catholic girls, would know these words in Italian if they knew any at all. Common sense, then, dictates the probability that the girls are not Italian but Slovene.

Of course, the final question is somewhat absurd. If they are Slovene girls, did Hemingway know it? Frederic Henry says, »The girl who looked at me said something in a dialect I could not understand a word of.« Henry, who is fluent, cannot understand her at all. Aymo, who is a native speaker, simply says, »I can't understand them.« Aymo doesn't say that the girls are speaking in dialect. Hemingway, unlike Frederic Henry, was not fluent in Italian. Anyone he might have met who did not speak any recognizable Italian might well have *to him* been speaking in a dialect *or* in a foreign language.

Another point, then, occurred to me. Hemingway's description of the Bainsizza and Gorizia is extremely accurate for one who was not present at the retreat from Caporetto. He is in fact so accurate that many war scholars are surprised to hear that he was not present at the time of the retreat or afterwards. He did, however, do a great deal of research both when he returned home after the war and when he began to write the novel a decade later. He was fascinated by military history, battle accounts, and topographic maps.⁷ His accounts, for example, of the rainy weather during the retreat and of the behavior of the Second Army are uncannily accurate (Reynolds, 112ff). His descriptions of Piave and Gorizia are based in fact upon his careful

⁵ Clissold, p. 161.

⁶ But see John A. Arnež, *Slovenia in European Affairs*, New York (1958), p. 64—65.

⁷ Michael S. Reynolds has made this point abundantly clear in his *Hemingway's First War: The Making of A Farewell to Arms*, Princeton (1976).

reading of contour maps (Reynolds, p. 140). Thus, it is not surprising that his representation of the retreat is convincing from the standpoint of military history and topographic description. Why, then, could it not be accurate in terms of linguistic and ethnic descriptions?

It is quite possible that, in one of the accounts of the retreat from Caporetto that Hemingway read, he found a description of Slovenian refugees among whom we might well believe were the two girls separated from both friends and family. It is, however, a peculiar characteristic of his fiction that he blends events as they actually occurred with events as they might have occurred, that is, with events as he imagined them. In this respect, the two girls, vulnerable, a mixture of fear and trust, function accurately in the imaginative context of the novel. They are refugees, thousands of whom got caught up in the welter of the retreat, along with war weary soldiers, deserters, and looters. It is in reflecting on these girls, on their innocence and vulnerability, that Frederic Henry begins to dream lyrically of his lover, Catherine, imagining her in his arms again.⁸

These girls are beautiful, young, and innocent. They are the victims of a war not of their making. They do not deserve to lose that innocence, as many Slovene girls did in the wake of the war; they deserve to be at peace and in control of their own lives. I began to see why these girls were important to my students, and indeed to many Slovenians, for they represented the age old role of victim that Slovenia and the Slovene people had played for their entire history from the eleventh century onward, forever vulnerable to another country's mercy or cruelty.

Why, then, were these two Slovene girls — for I shall so call them — so important to my students? I now think that the episode of the novel in which they appear pays an unwitting tribute to the bare facts of the reality of war. The girls fear the worst, but Frederic treats them well, feeding them and giving them a ride in his truck for a little while, and later sends them off with a little money to search for friends and family among the refugees. Hemingway may not have known what Slovenes suffered in the debacle of Caporetto, but he did know the rape, pillage, and carnage that unjust victims of war suffered, and it is perhaps for this reason, and for Hemingway's sympathetic understanding of the conditions of war, that Slovenians embrace the two young girls in *A Farewell to Arms* as their own.

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⁸ *A Farewell to Arms*, p. 197.