

Of man and the sea

By Josip Sobin

I never knew my grandfather. He died six years before I was born from a congenital heart disease. All I know of him is what I've heard through stories. He was a tall man, rugged in appearance but fair and gentle. His callous hands revealed the true working class of socialist Yugoslavia: he would spend his mornings working in a manufacturing plant, and tend to his land and grape vines in the afternoon. Most of the blisters and scars, however, came from another passion of his – fishing. But to understand a man's love for land and sea, one needs to know where he came from.

My family draws its roots from a small fishing village called *Kaštel Kambelovac*. It is one of seven coastal settlements sprawling from *Split* and *Solin* in the east, to *Trogir* in the west, and jointly forming the town of *Kaštela*. The name comes from the Italian word *castelli*, or castles, as each of the settlements used to be a castle belonging to one of the seven noble families living in the area. The town became world known during the airing of *Game of Thrones*, with Arya Stark hiding her famous blade *Needle* under a pile of rocks located in front of one of these castles.

I often think about the ancient Romans and the first time they arrived in the area, some 2300 years ago. Coming from the open sea in their *triremes*, they would see the peninsula of today's *Split* on the east side and the island of *Čiovo* on the west, as if they were forming a single landmass. But as they got a bit closer, something just wasn't right around the middle of that landmass. With each row of their oars, it became more and more apparent that this, in fact, was not a single landmass, but an island and a peninsula coming close together. As they passed through the narrow opening, known today as the *Gate of Marjan*, a vast bay extended before them, shielded by mountains in the back and encircled with landmass from all sides facing the sea. And if that wasn't enough to impress any settler, as they reached the mainland, they discovered the mouth of the river *Jadro*, which found its way into the sea right there in that perfectly secluded spot. That is how the ancient Roman city of *Salona* (known today as *Solin*) was formed in 3rd century BC. And since these ancient times, fishing has been one of the most important industries in the region.

As I was growing up, I was exposed to many stories about my grandfather's fishing adventures. The stories changed quite a bit depending on the narrator. I tend to think that my father told them in the most objective way. He was very young when he lost his dad. I could sense the emptiness of this loss following my father wherever he went. He is a strong and cheerful person, but I could always tell that a part of him was somewhere far away, somewhere on the waves, fishing with my grandfather. He was usually a bit stingy with words when telling tales of my grandfather, probably because it was difficult for him to talk about it. But that is also why the stories sounded realistic.

One such story is about a large stingray caught on a longline (or rather a gigantic stingray, depending on who is telling the story). As my father told it, two of them were out on a boat pulling the longline. At one point my grandfather felt the weight of a big fish and asked my father to grab the spear. As he pulled the

fish closer to the boat, he realized it was a large stingray. He quickly grabbed a knife and cut the line, releasing the stingray along with the rest of his longline back into the sea. But as he did that, the ray's deadly tail managed to swing above the sea surface, catching my grandfather along the forearm, cutting deeply into the flesh. Instead of panicking, my father managed to get them back ashore and my grandfather was transported to the hospital before the poison could do any damage.

At the time, my father's cousin from Belgrade was visiting for the summer holidays. Being a continental lad, the story of the stingray must have sounded a lot more impressive to him than it did to the locals. It became even more impressive as he retold it again... and again... and again! By the time I was six or seven and old enough to hear the story, it went something like this:

My father and my grandfather were out on the boat, pulling the longline, when all of a sudden the surface of the sea began to boil. As my grandfather continued to pull the longline in, the surface area of the boiling water became bigger and bigger – it seemed as if they were standing in the middle of a geyser that was about to explode. Then, the beast emerged: a huge, deadly stingray, at least four metres in width. As its eyes rose above the surface of the water, it looked directly in the eyes of my grandfather, furious and bloodthirsty. And then the tail came, a whip some six or seven metres long, lined with deadly spikes. It flew with such speed and strength that it was a sheer miracle that my grandfather managed to jump out of its way in time, pulling my father down onto the floor of the boat. The beast's tail furiously kept hitting against the edge of the boat, leaving marks in its hard wood, at least two fingers wide. My grandfather knew that if the beast continued, the boat would soon start to sink, and that would be the end of them both. He somehow reached for his knife and managed to cut the line in between two swishes of the tail. But as the beast was retreating into the deep, it sent one final swing of its tail straight towards my grandfather, almost cutting his arm off. A few days later, the *Institute for Oceanographic Sciences and Fishery* in Split announced that they had caught the biggest stingray ever seen in the Adriatic. The tail of the beast showed signs of damage, almost as if it had been hitting on wood a few days earlier.

The longline is a very common fishing tool in Croatia. As the name suggests, the backbone of the longline is – well, a really long line. It is usually a string, some 1.5 – 2 millimetres in diameter, strong enough to pull several hundred kilos of weight. A nylon fishing line with a large hook is placed every 4-5 metres along the string. The overall length of the longline and the number of hooks varies and is based on personal preference. My grandfather, for example, used 500-hook longlines – imagine the time it took just to bait the 500 hooks, and he used to cast them on a daily basis.

The ideal bait for a longline is sardine, preferably fresh. Sardines are very common in the Adriatic, and it is almost guaranteed that there will be many “floating” fishing boats catching sardines on a calm night. I am not sure why they are called “floating” boats (since every boat floats), but these use high powered LED lights to attract big schools of sardines at night. During my grandfather's time, fishermen would use strong gas lamps instead of LED lights, but the principle is the same. Right before dawn, when masses of sardines gathered underneath the light, fishermen encircle them with nets and bring them in. And every morning between 5am and 7am, in every fishing village, there will be a boat selling fresh sardines for both food and bait. Believe it or not, this is still how my father and I buy our bait today!

I remember another story about my grandfather and a longline. I've heard it many times in the past, but it is not related to the sea. Apparently, my grandfather was sitting on his porch and baiting the longline with sardines, when all of a sudden the string just flew out of his hand. A cat came to feast on the fresh sardines and got caught on the fishing hook. In another story, the cat was a seagull. One can't be sure whether these are two separate stories, or if one animal replaced the other based on the narrator. Or whether either of these animals ever got caught on the longline, although it is quite possible. It takes at least two hours to bait the 500-hook longline and a whole range of animals can become hungry in that time.

My father and I don't have that kind of patience these days. Our longline is only 120-hook, but it still gives us plenty of time to spend with each other. It takes him about 30 minutes to bait it, while I slowly take us to the desired spot while trolling at the same time. Trolling will sometimes catch us some *bonito*, sometimes a *saddled seabream*. Most times nothing... But a longline rarely fails and provides a whole range of fish, depending on the type of terrain where it's cast. If cast in shallow waters on a rocky basin, we will most likely catch some *monkfish* or *gilt-headed seabream*. If we choose deeper waters and mud, we will go home with stingrays (which never even came close in size to the one from the stories about my grandfather), a *hake*, or even an occasional shark. Don't worry, sharks in the Adriatic are not dangerous in any way, not a single species of the 54 that live in our waters.

Fishing has always been an integral part of Croatian culture, but also a very important industry. Unfortunately, the mentality of the locals has not changed much since ancient times even though their tools have become better and deadlier, allowing for the catch to become easy and plentiful. Sustainable fishing is a well-known concept, but the most commonly ignored globally. The Adriatic is facing the same fate as many other world seas, with the majority of our fish being driven to extinction. There are laws, of course, but they are neither respected nor imposed. For example, in 2021 a fisherman was caught with an illegal catch of *Bluefin* tuna, the most protected animal species in Croatia. Despite the 10.000 EUR fine, he was seen the following week at the same spot with more than 15 Bluefins caught in a single day. Even if we assume that most fishing stories are exaggerated, it is still a lot of tuna, despite the hefty fines and the fact that it is protected. I hope that the mentality of our people will change and that they will turn towards sustainable fishing in the near future. Otherwise, our grandchildren will not be able to tell stories of our own fishing adventures, no matter the amount of truth or fiction that lies within them.