

The Eccentrics

By Mira Petrović

It is scorching hot in Split, so we decide to cut short our walking tour. There are only eight of us, mostly in mid-fifties and sixties: two Chinese girls, a couple from France, two Italian women and my husband Tony and me. We are sitting in a small café, close to a house where the father of modern psychology Sigmund Freud sojourned one hundred and twenty two years ago.

Our guide decides to join us after a brief phone call. He is charming and handsome, and very young too. His tour has been replete with fascinating stories about modern life and ancient history, intertwined in this Mediterranean city. Well, more fascinating to me than to my husband Tony, who usually prefers spending time on the beach, sipping cocktails and reading books. I am more of an auditory person – I enjoy listening to stories, whether it is tittle-tattle or serious talk. The fact that we are in the vicinity of the house where Freud spent time with his wife is very exhilarating for me. After all, I am a psychologist.

I have been aware of Freud's sojourn here because he mentioned it in two of his books: *The Interpretation of Dreams* and *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. Freud took great pleasure in travelling. In fact, he hoped that one day he would earn enough money to travel around the world and explore ancient art. I guess Split satisfied his needs, at least temporarily. What I did not know, however, was that Croatian writer Marko Marulić was the first person to use the word psychology, somewhere around 1517. He wrote a thesis on *The Psychology or The Characteristics of The Human Soul*, but unfortunately, his work has never been found.

When you think of it, says our guide, it's quite intriguing that Freud spent time precisely here, close to the house that belonged to Marulić, who had used the term psychology before anyone else, although he couldn't have known that at the time.

The house where Freud stayed was owned by Stevo Perović, an affluent owner of an exchange office. He was an Orthodox Jew and probably a Mason. It is common knowledge that Freud was a Jew and a Mason, and the star of David on the facade of Stevo's lodge suggests that he was also a Freemason. But I don't want to bother you with this anymore. I know that Freud isn't everyone's cup of tea.

No one's actually, my husband says jokingly, except for my lovely wife.

We all giggle and take another sip of coffee.

Is it usually this hot in Split?, one woman asks.

In summer we are often exposed to heat waves, our guide says. But I believe it happens in all Mediterranean cities; I guess it's part of their charm.

Certainly not!, my husband says. There is nothing charming about this weather and global warming. What I do find quite charming, however, are the people. They are rather presumptuous, aren't they?

I give Tony a slight nudge, but he does not believe in political correctness, which has overwhelmed the world, so you no longer know what is appropriate to say and what isn't. Our guide laughs.

You could say that, he says. People do a lot of things out of spite here, and they adore their town. 'Nema Splita do Splita' is the adage we all like to live by. It basically means there is no other town like Split.

Speaking of this 'exclusiveness', one woman says, yesterday I saw a man pushing a trolley across the Riva. He was talking to himself and giggling... he didn't mind anyone, just kept galloping around.

Oh, you'll see a lot of people like that, our guide says. The guy you've described might have been Božo Transporter. We call him that because he looks like Jason Statham from that movie *The Transporter*. Have you seen it?

Some people nod, some shake their heads. My husband says, Yeah, yeah, right, but I am convinced that, not being much of a film buff, he has no idea which movie the guide is talking about.

We've had a long history of eccentrics, the guide says. For example, there was a guy who wasn't able to stop walking once he'd started, so he would seek a tree or a wall to lean on and get some rest. His name was Ive Mušica. When he wanted to move again, he would ask a passer-by to push him a bit because he couldn't decide which leg to start walking with!

What a strange man!, I remark.

Quite so, our guide says. He was rather quirky. There was also a man who would wander around the streets barefoot and dance for a loaf of bread. Even though he was always poorly dressed, he was never sick. People would dress him in a suit, but the next day he would look unkept again. The city council donated shoes on several occasions – they would tie them to his feet with a padlock and take them off in the evening. A few days afterwards, though, he would arrive to work barefoot. Again.

I assume this isn't a contemporary story?, one man asks.

No, no, the guide says, this man, Stipe Ozretić, lived in the nineteenth century. We have different examples of quirkiness nowadays. But what I'm trying to say is that these oddballs have never been subject of scorn or derision. There has never been hate towards their peculiar ways, but rather sympathy and understanding. In a weird way, of course, because you still joke around with them, but people here are fond of the eccentrics. There are so many words in our jargon to describe them. There are books and TV series about them; in short, they are part of our popular culture, our heritage.

For example, there was this man whose nickname was Doctor Picara. Everybody loved him. Once he jumped in the sea on our most famous beach called Bačvice, in front of Italian soldiers. This part of the sea was rather shallow, but Picara was experienced so he was fine. After him, an Italian fascist decided to do the same thing. He rushed into the sea and died. After the war, Picara wanted this event to be acknowledged as his contribution to the military service. When he died in 1971, the whole town gathered on the Riva to say goodbye.

You did the same thing for that singer of yours, didn't you?, one woman asks.

Oliver Dragojević?

Our guide looks flabbergasted.

Yes, we did. How did you know that?

My husband often comes to Split for work, so I was here last summer as well.

Yes, well, Oliver was a star not just here, but anywhere he appeared, a true cultural icon in Croatia. He is one of the few musicians who performed at international venues such as Carnegie Hall, Royal Albert Hall, Sydney Opera House... He was seventy when he died. Lung cancer. 31 July is the National Day of Condolences, declared by the government to honour him. But Oliver wasn't an eccentric like the people I've mentioned before. He was an extremely talented musician, quirky in his own way, but aren't all musicians cut from the same cloth of oddness?

If we go back to our topic, there was a self-proclaimed singer whose nickname was Karužo. He was the most famous street tenor in Split. When he sang, he would strike a pose as if he were on a world stage, so mesmerized by his own voice that he often repeated how he felt sorry that the 'real' Enrico Caruso had died because if he had heard his voice, he would have certainly committed suicide, out of jealousy, of course. His friends once convinced him that he had been asked to perform at the Metropolitan Opera in the States and they prepared a farewell for him on the Riva. One hundred people gathered there and the ship with Karužo harbored in Sjeverna luka (Port of Split), just two hundred metres away.

Oh no! Poor man!

People do a lot of things for laughs here.

But that's cruel!

If you get irked easily, then Split is definitely not the place for you. We are renowned for our tomfoolery, though much less in the last couple of years.

Any other stories like this one?

I can tell you one more and then I have to go. One of the most famous eccentrics in Split is definitely Bačo. He was primarily known for his athleticism, but also for his fashion style and conversations he would have in bars and cafés. In 1916 he appeared in Vienna in his swimming trunks, which is why he got arrested and was sent to hospital for psychiatric evaluation. He was sentenced to eighteen days in prison.

But first and foremost, Bačo was an amazing runner. He would run not just around Split, but from town to town. He ran from Drniš to Knin (24 kilometres) in an hour and a half, and from Drniš to Šibenik (almost 33 kilometers) in two hours and ten minutes. He even competed on horseback. The lore says the horse got weary after an hour and a half, while Bačo ran the whole route twice! He never missed his traditional race on Sudamja, which is our local holiday when we celebrate Saint Domnius, the patron saint of our town. On 7th May in 1929 he ran 520 circles around the Riva.

When he died in 1936, they found him lying on the ground. He didn't have a bed nor a duvet, he was as poor as a church mouse. The anecdotes about his life were repeated again and again for decades, so when somebody ran just for the sake of running, people would start yelling after him: Baćo! Baćo! Baćo!

Your stories are quite captivating, I say. Thank you very much for your time.

I'm pleased to have shared them with you, says the guide. They are not the usual part of the tour, so this has been quite an improvisation.

What would Freud have said to these people, eh?, says Tony. We all laugh and say our goodbyes.

Shall we go for an ice cream?, I ask Tony. We start walking along the narrow streets of Diocletian's Palace. The sea is quite close, so the smell in the air is salty, the atmosphere invigorating and languorous at the same time. I keep thinking about how nice it must be to know a few oddballs in your life. Although it seems pointless to talk about idiosyncracies nowadays, since everybody strives to mould into the globalised machine that is our modern world, it would certainly be a more monotonous place if it weren't for those who are not afraid to be different.