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**«Those two Latvian exiles...». Dealing with the memory
of Rainis and Aspazija on the other side of Europe**

The paper will focus on the uncommon destiny of a house that hosted both the most famous Italian exile in Switzerland (Carlo Cattaneo, from 1849 to his death in 1869) and the Latvian writer J. Rainis with his wife Aspazija during the first two years of their staying in Castagnola (1906-1908). Now that the City of Lugano Historical Archives had to move to another building, both the memory of Cattaneo and Rainis are facing a crucial moment. How to preserve and pass on knowledge of these two prominent exiles among generations? How to speak to the younger ones? Technology, as always, helps, but it is not the only way...

1. So similar, yet so different

The same house where Rainis and Aspazija lived for a couple of years, after their first arrival in Lugano in 1906, hosted some fifty years before the famous Italian exile Carlo Cattaneo, who spent in Castagnola the last twenty years of his life, and died there, the night between the 5th and the 6th of February 1869, exactly 150 years ago. Indeed, 2019 is a big anniversary for Carlo Cattaneo, as 2015 had been for Rainis. If I compare, from my point of view, the way the City of Lugano (and Switzerland in general) has been dealing with those two anniversaries, I can easily see a gap: to a Swiss Italian audience Cattaneo and Rainis don't look alike, because Cattaneo is still well known, at least as a name. His fame and prestige, or what's left of them, date back to the times when he was still among us: he founded the local high school in 1852, he imagined a way of crossing the Alps by train (the Gotthard tunnel: he was one of the first having that vision of the future), he had many friends in Lugano, the most powerful ones, he spoke our language... Nothing of this sort ever happened to Rainis.

But if we look closer, we see that those two exiles, the Italian one and the Latvian one, the one from 19th century and the other one from the 20th century, have more in common, today, than we could expect. One thing (if there is one) is their love for Switzerland, for its democracy and the history that built it; Rainis even in an emotional way: think of his love for the landscape, the sun, the lake, as

if somehow nature and politics could go together; Cattaneo instead was a much colder person, a positivist thinker (not that he didn't enjoy it, but he would have preferred, at some point, moving to a bigger city: London, Paris...). Rainis and Cattaneo, we could say, are two sides of a foreign look into Switzerland, something that will always be precious for us, because of its reminding us that we are not alone, that there is a whole world out there (some Ticinese people keep on forgetting that). On the other hand, both Rainis and Cattaneo share also some misfortune: let alone few intellectuals, very few, nobody in the actual world reads their books anymore. They are silent authors of the past. The audience of the conferences we organized over the spring, for Cattaneo's anniversary, went from greyhair to whitehair: you will have an hard time finding somebody under the age of 60. Nobody reads Cattaneo anymore even in the school he founded. We are trying to do something against it, for example working with students to create a graphic novel about Cattaneo: we will see where this project goes, but I must say that I am not too confident about it.

If we are facing this sort of issues with an Italian hero, a true champion of the Ottocento such as Carlo Cattaneo, imagine how hard it could be trying to "sell" to a large Swiss-Italian audience the memory of a Latvian writer... At least Cattaneo and the people living in Lugano today share a common language and culture, which is something we could work with. Between Rainis and his potential Swiss-Italian readers there is, on the contrary, plenty of obstacles: language, culture, upbringing, history, geography, even politics... It is hard to say how close (or how distant) Switzerland and Latvia are in the public opinion of my country. I note that one of the main differences is probably the way we look at the European Union, if not at the continent in general. The majority of Swiss people is proudly against it; Latvians, if I am not mistaken, think exactly the opposite, for strong historical reasons. Sometimes I wonder what could have been Rainis' opinion about the white hole which is Switzerland in the middle of the European Union. Would he still be so fond of us? I am telling you this just to stress the cultural distance between two countries who could look similar in many ways (the small dimension, at least) but who also belong to very different worlds.

Recently the City of Saint-Petersburg – it's another example – wanted to give us, as a present to the City of Lugano, a statue of the Luganese architect Domenico Trezzini, one of those who actually built Saint-Petersburg in the 18th century. The City of Lugano refused the gift because the statue was too high (6 meters and counting), much higher than the usual Swiss standards, and also because the Municipality thought that such a celebration of a "minor" architect of our past wouldn't be appropriate. The case reminded me of a similar situation, close to a diplomatic incident, when Janis Plate drew a Soviet-looking project for the Rainis and Aspazija monument to be built in Castagnola in 1968. Compared to the actual monument, much smaller and much simpler, Plate's project looked

definitely not Swiss enough, above all if you think at the small garden where the monument should have been put. When it comes to celebrations, to raising up the memories of its own past, Switzerland shows a very peculiar attitude, even compared to that of close neighbours such as Italy or France.

2. What's left

Another complication (and not a minor one) shows up when you deal today with the memory of Rainis in Castagnola: something that has to do with the disappearance of the past. The picture you see was taken at the beginning of 20th century. The main building on the left side is Casa Cattaneo, close to what it was when Cattaneo used to live there. The three storey house in the middle, right under the church, is the “Pensione Stella d’oro” (the Golden Star Pension), where Rainis and Aspazija spent the years between 1908 and 1920.



In one picture, that's to say, we see both the buildings of their 14 years staying in Castagnola. The problem is that the “Pensione Stella d’oro” has been torn down few years after the taking of this picture, to build a new street, and Casa Cattaneo, for various reasons, is not available anymore.

Bottom line: we have to work with what is left, not much, mostly books, letters, pictures, small memories brought back to Castagnola over the decades by Latvian people sensitive to the cause. Actually, already in the Sixties and Seventies the Municipality of Castagnola had to face this very problem: the first, cute memorial of Rainis was in the City Hall and was not more than a small corner filled with books and pictures. Then the museum grew a bit, moving around in the same building; in the meanwhile, Castagnola became part of the City of Lugano and in 1980 Casa Cattaneo became the new premises of the Historical Archives, directed by Antonio Gili. At that point, a new room, with a very nice view, was devoted to the Rainis memorial. Most of the Latvian people who came to Castagnola over the past years probably remember this room, together with the garden outside.

3. A new beginning

Historians don't get too surprised every time history repeats itself: it is a common law we are used to come to terms with. After 40 years of honourable service, the Historical Archives recently left Casa Cattaneo just to get back where everything started, the former City Hall of the Municipality of Castagnola. The small Latvian museum, once more, had to pack its few things and move into another place, one that it had already known half a century ago. Since there was plenty of time to plan this new chapter – a new beginning of Rainis' memorial in Castagnola – following a suggestion by Vita Matiss in 2016 I came to Riga to meet the former Minister of Culture Dace Melbarde and I was able to fly back to Lugano with a promise that the Republic of Latvia would have covered the expenses of a new exhibition. A few months later, an agreement has been signed between the City of Lugano and the Association of Memorial Museums. We started right away working at the new project, together with the H2E Design Studio who won the public procurement. By May 2018 the new exhibition room was completed, also thanks to the work of well known Latvian researchers and intellectuals such as Gundega Grinuma, Vita Matiss and Janis Silins. The room hosts some of the objects that were already in the previous exhibition, but we wanted to add a touchscreen in order to provide digital content, scanned documents, pictures and above all a timeline meant not just to tell the story of Rainis and Aspazija's staying in Castagnola, but also the history of our museum, with the memory of all the people who have contributed to it over the years.

Once the job was done, we started planning the public opening, which was due on June 15th 2018. I am still quite surprised, and very grateful, whenever I think at that day and at the way everything went smooth: not just for the official part, with delegates both from Latvia and the City of Lugano, with Swiss and Latvian diplomats and so on, but also because of the fun part. Here I really have to

thank the Ramtai Dancing Group and the Choir Balts, who came from Zurich for free just to give as a hint of what a Latvian feast is. Many people in Castagnola still remember that day as a memorable one.

4. Conclusion

And now? What are we going to do with this new exhibition, that has been visited dozens of times over the summer, mainly by Latvian families? It will stay there at least 5 years, possibly ten, as the agreement says. But what is its core, the true meaning of it? As I said before, we don't have the buildings anymore; we have just few objects and documents brought back years after Rainis' staying in Castagnola. But one thing has always been clear to me: it is now matter of what we show to the visitors, it is matter of what they bring to us. I think I am not mistaken if I say that the most precious treasure we have in Castagnola are the visitors' guestbooks, all of them, starting from the very beginning in the Sixties and Seventies, when the memorial was just that small table filled with books and pictures we saw before, not exactly a museum as we would call it. Those guestbooks – signed by Latvian people coming from all over the world (California, Turkey, Sweden) – don't speak directly of Rainis, but they speak of what Rainis has taught to his country and people. It is a matter of thinking and symbols. That's why, sometimes, joking with my friends and relatives about the fact that I am directing a Latvian museum in Switzerland, I tell them that I consider myself as the keeper of a sanctuary, a place of pilgrimage, full of memories and sacred ideas. Not a bad job, after all.