

Milan Lenarčič in Treviso

Milan Lenarčič was head of a Slovenian solidarity organization that operated near the camp. The first to mention it was Cino Boccazzi, doctor and writer in Treviso, but he did not identify him completely, indicating only his last name. We discovered who he was in the real estate registry archives.

Milan was born on 29th March 1884 in Vrhnika, under the Habsburg monarchy. His father Josip (1856-1939), who graduated in Vienna, was an expert in agriculture, president of the Ljubljana Chamber of Commerce and of the Yugoslav Forestry Association, a member of the Progressive National Party (in fact liberal) and of several economic and scientific associations. He also owned many land estates (woods) and industrial enterprises (a granite quarry, a glass factory and a furnace)¹.

Milan, who studied in Vienna, was both a mechanical engineer and a forest expert. He designed a narrow-gauge railway line, which was used to transport timber and granite, respectively from the forest and the Pohorje quarry, and connected it to the Slovenian railway network. He enjoyed prestige and authority, as various pieces of the Official Journal (Uradni List) prove. Moreover, in 1939, when his father died, he inherited his father's property, which also included land estates in Vrhnika².

On the eve of the war, he was the richest man - or one of the wealthiest men- in Slovenia, as his liberal friend Ladislav Bevc, who provides a lot of information about him, wrote.

Lenarčič married Paula Kiepack von Haselburg, from whom he had a son, Miloš³. Then he separated from his wife and passed to the Orthodox Serbian creed, as this religion allowed second marriages. So he married Ninka Ana Stare⁴, daughter of Feliks and Josipina⁵.

Feliks lived in the Kolovec castle, owned by the Stare family since 1870. Like other castles, the building was burnt down by the partisans in 1943.

¹ Biography of Josip Lenarčič: <https://www.slovenska-biografija.si/oseba/sbi323288/> and https://sl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josip_Lenarčič; <https://www.dlib.si/details/URN:NBN:SI:IMG-ATQCUTM1>.

² Most of the information comes from the digitized pages (PDF) of "Uradni list Narodne vlade iz obdobja 1918-1941" (www.sistory.si/11686/ for example the following dates: 14th June 1924 (file 214), 3rd February and 10th April 1926 (file 216), 30th June 1928 (file 218) e 20th August 1928 (file 219)) and "Jutro dnevnik za gospodarstvo, prosveto in politiko", 29th January 1933 (<https://www.dlib.si/details/URN:NBN:SI:doc-00K5GSQH>).

³ <https://www.geni.com/people/Emilijan-Milan-Lenarčič>.

⁴ More briefly Ninka, Minka in Italian documents.

⁵ This information, along with other ones about the Stare family and about Breda Rus, whom we will talk about, comes to us from some emails. First of all, by prof. Irena Tršinar (wife of Dr. Bojan Tršinar, heir of Breda), who consulted, in addition to her husband, Prof. Matija Stare (a cousin, daughter of Ninka's brother Vladimir Stare), Vida Štrumbelj (a lady, a lawyer by profession, who spent a lot of time with Stare family). The correspondence is from February 2019. I would like to express my special thanks to Irena for her exquisite courtesy. Then we have other email from Devana Lavrenčič (2nd February 2011), a friend of Vida Rus. Thanks to all of them!

At beginning of the marriage, Ninka and Milan lived in Josipdol, in northern Slovenia, in a villa near the forest and the Pohorje quarry, but after the invasion of Slovenia (April 1941) their properties were seized by the Germans, who were interested in materials such as timber.

This forced the engineer Lenarčič to move south towards Vrhnika where he was born⁶ and had other properties, because this territory was controlled by the Italians.

Here he did not stay long, after a short while he moved to Preganziol, near Treviso. We don't know why he chose this place for expatriation. At the time, in order to escape retaliation most pro-monarchists had moved to London, where the monarchist government in exile resided.

It is probable that he chose that part of Italy for business. In fact, in the documents of the Prefecture of Treviso, an unspecified debt to the Yugoslav company of Simon Stare is mentioned. In his wife's family there was a certain Simon born in 1815 in Bohinj. It is not certain whether he was his ancestor or not. However, if this were the case and if the company he founded had kept the name, the Slovenian engineer would have had reason and opportunity to collect the credit. Lenarčič was certainly in the Treviso area on 31st October 1941, when he bought a big house surrounded by land, and also a sawmill, a wheat mill (with operating license and all the machinery for the millstone): Villa Pace, this is the name of the house, was located along the Terraglio, the tree-lined road that connects Treviso to Venice. We do not know why it is called this way (Pace means Peace).

If Milan was the one to give it this name, it is possible it was meant to express his intolerance towards the war, both the WWII and the civil war, which took place in Slovenia. Or perhaps the engineer was looking for peace when confronted with a very strong personal pain: his only son and only heir Miloš, born on 31st May 1920 died, at twenty-two, on 11th September 1942. Our engineer decided to leave the estate to a testamentary executor, who, assisted by a board of directors, assigned scholarships to deserving students. It is a project that shows Lenarčič's belief in humanitarian philosophy of the Cyril and Methodius Society of which he was a partner and supporter.

A few months after the death of his son, in December 1942, as stated in notarial deed drawn in Venice, he sold the mill, the sawmill and a house of four rooms to Emanuele Zennaro for the sum of sixty thousand lire. A good sum, probably destined to help Slavic prisoners: a gesture of generosity, in accordance with his philanthropic spirit, which perhaps could have helped him to overcome his grave personal loss. In this action, which exposed him to considerable risks, he got help from his niece Breda Rus, whom we will talk about shortly, and, at the hospital, from Dr. Boccazzi. Lenarčič also seems to have housed Slovenians prisoners who had run away illegally from the hospital to his villa: this makes his work meritorious and his person respectable, but the story does not end here.

After 8th September 1943, as previously said, the concentration camp was closed. In 1944 the villa was, at least partially, requisitioned by the Germans and by the Decima Mas. We do not know if Milan and Ninka moved elsewhere, but Villa Pace was certainly their residence from 1945 to 1949⁷.

⁶ <https://www.rova.si/grad-kolovec>.

⁷ In 1947 M. L. declared that he enjoyed Italian citizenship when, in the Treviso Chamber of Commerce, he presented two industrial patents for a parking lot. This detail is interesting: Lenarčič, by now over sixty years old, continued to work - Perhaps he needed to earn, having lost the goods left at home due to Tito's requisitions.

Since during spring 1945 the Terraglio residence sheltered many Slovenian refugees, often waiting for a visa to America. This was told by Ladislav Bevc⁸, who was stationed in the Displaced Persons camp of Riccione. Given the endless lengthening of the procedure to get a Visa, Bevc had turned to his friend to be hosted, but Milan refused: Villa Pace, he had told him, was too small to satisfy all the requests (about a hundred).

On 19th September 1949, before leaving for the USA, Bevc went to Preganziol to greet him. When he got there from Lucca, "a certain Luigi Hrovat", a common friend, told him that he had arrived just in time for the funeral. Two days earlier, while cycling back from Treviso, Milan had been run over and dragged for sixty feet by a car. He had died almost instantly. In his last will, as it has been said, he requested the creation of a foundation for young students.

The local newspaper "Il Gazzettino" spoke of a serious road accident, which had taken place the night before along the Terraglio: Lenarčič had been hit while crossing the road in the dark. The news arrived in Slovenia by telegram. The family, who in the meantime had been evicted from the house of Vrhnika, had an obituary published in Ljubljana. The industrialist Dušan Lajovic, who emigrated to Australia, suggested that it was a murder, disguised as an accident, to be attributed to the Yugoslav Secret Police, OZNA.

This hypothesis is not entirely fictional but it draws on a research on English Intelligence in Veneto conducted by Marco Ruzzi⁹. In fact, in the North-East of Italy, several OZNA agents were acting, and for them the elimination of a "dangerous" subject by means of a "road accident" was a classic remedy. In our book, we have carefully assessed this possibility, also by consulting a court expert.

However, the weekly "Demokracija" does not question Lenarčič's death: it speaks of a fatal accident. The article describes his life, full of economic and political relationships, extending beyond the borders of the Slovenian community, to embrace other Slavic, Serbian and Croatian peoples, and concludes the portrait of this figure with a touch of heroism: "During the war he fought, firm and indefatigable, for the rights of his people and for a better future, and was the herald of an unyielding resistance against foreign invaders".

The funeral took place in the small church of San Trovaso and not in the cathedral, as Bevc wrote, who also spoke of 'a mausoleum dedicated to the illustrious deceased in the park of Villa Pace', which did not exist. The question that arises is: why this mythical transfiguration of reality? Can we envisage a narrative of Lenarčič as a Slovenian liberal hero, a victim first of Nazi-fascism and then of Titoism? It is difficult to find documented answers. We do not know for sure whether he behaved in the same righteous way towards all Monigo Camp's inmates, independently from their political affiliation.

Lenarčič's body was placed in the cemetery of San Trovaso, from where it was removed in 2003: after the cremation, which took place in the crematorium of S. Bona (Treviso), the ashes were

⁸ Ladislav Bevc, *Spomini Založništvo Jutro*, Ljubljana 2006 (*Liberal Forces in Twentieth Century Yugoslavia: Memoirs of Ladislav Bevc*, Peter Lang 2007, Digitized 7th August 2009).

⁹ Marco Ruzzi, *Spionaggio, controspionaggio e ordine pubblico in Veneto. Aprile-dicembre 1945*, Cierre, Sommacampagna 2010, p. 147.

brought back to his birthplace and precisely to the cemetery of Verd, beside the remains of his only son Miloš¹⁰.

¹⁰ Date reported in the tomb of Verd which houses his ashes: 17th September 1949 (I thank Ivo Jevnikar who provided me this information after a visit to the cemetery).