

## Tragedy of Sixteen Laundrywomen from Preko

**“There came bora and a sudden storm and sixteen lavandieras did not return home” (1)**  
**“My mother is no longer with me for she sleeps under the deep sea” (2)**

Due to their remoteness, barren soil, dependency on rain, and harsh living conditions, all Adriatic islands share the same fate, which is especially poignant for the most remote islands (3). In the past centuries, according to the patriarchal division of social roles, men were the main breadwinners in the family. They were usually sailors and fishermen. Many used to leave for the New World to work there for long periods of time, sending the hard-earned money home to support their families. Women were primarily housewives, wives, and mothers, spending most of their time at home. Working in the field and attending church mass on Sundays were the only two occasions for them to have contacts with the world outside their households. However, living conditions and frequent absence of their husbands and elder sons forced women to face the necessity of taking over men's work, including earning money and dividing household chores among the family members. In such circumstances, women became the breadwinners and pillars of the family, which strengthened their family and social position. The fate of women liv-

ing on the Adriatic islands was very similar, but there were distinctive features as well (4).

Women from Preko, a small town on the island of Ugljan, made a living by doing laundry for aristocracy in the city of Zadar in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. At that time, Preko, which was named as such (preko = *across* in Croatian) because it is located across a 3.5-mile wide canal opposite to Zadar, had between 1000 and 2500 inhabitants. According to historical records, at one point up to one-third of local women earned money by doing laundry (5,6). With the introduction of vapor laundrettes (“*Lavanderia zaratina a vapore*”) at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, the need for this type of service gradually disappeared and the laundrywomen from Preko lost their main source of income (5,6).

Life and work of laundrywomen from Preko was very harsh. They were paid meager wages for a job that was extremely strenuous and exhausting, and some of them even did laundry for several households. However, due to the communication and exposure to urban surroundings,

these women brought new information into their villages, which gradually strengthened their social status. Their job had a fixed schedule. Mondays they picked up laundry in Zadar, traveling there on small rowboats or sailing boats in all weather conditions, whereas Sundays they returned washed and ironed clothes and linens to the owners. During the day, they looked after their children and worked in the household. Early in the morning, before the dawn, they would wash the laundry with ash and homemade soap in a bucket, using water from almost dried wells. They often had to walk for miles to remote villages to get ash. After washing the laundry, they would go to the seashore to rinse it in freshwater that could be found in small freshwater undersea springs (*vruljice*) at low tides. Then they returned home, hang it to dry, and continued with their household chores. Although already tired, with their hand and cheeks hardened and reddened by wind and fire, they would cook and clean for the rest of the day and then iron the laundry with heavy irons filled with ember in the evening. That is how each day went by (5).

According to the records, they went on strike for better working conditions (5), which coincided with the introduction of an all-girl class in the local school in Preko in 1880. Until then, only boys had gone to school (founded in 1842). It gradually became clear that reading, writing, and arithmetic could improve the quality of work of laundrywomen as well as their communication with their employees in Zadar, and that the education of women would enable their children to have higher morals and culture (6).

A legend about sixteen laundrywomen, so-called *lavandieras*, based on a true account testifies to their harsh life and suffering. On All Souls Day, on November 2, 1891, at 7 AM, sixteen laundrywomen from Preko drowned when a small 24 feet-long sailing-boat that was taking them to Zadar capsized in the canal. As soon as the boat pushed off from the shore in Preko, it listed so heavily in the vicinity of the nearby is-

land of Galevac (*Školjić*) due to a strong wind (bora) and high waves, that the water filled the boat and it sank. There were 31 passengers on board, 7 men and 24 laundrywomen. The laundrywomen who died were in the interior of the ship, under the hatch cover, trying to protect themselves and laundry from the bad weather. They were squeezed between the baskets of clean laundry prepared to be delivered to the owners in Zadar. The youngest was 14 years old, and the oldest 75. There were two pregnant women among them. The fact that majority of these women were the main providers for their families made this tragedy even more atrocious. According to the newspaper records from the period, the local people wore black caps and kerchiefs as a sign of mourning for a long time; soon after the event, a stone monument with crucifix was erected on the island of Galevac in memory of these women (5,7).

The accident was reported in the local and other newspapers (8-10). Subsequently, numerous stories were written about *lavandieras* from Preko as well as the life of islander women in general (4-7). The death of *lavandieras* from Preko has inspired numerous artists, poets, musicians, and painters. Stjepan Benzon, the famous poet from Split, who was a young teacher in Preko at the time, wrote the poem titled "Sixteen *Lavandieras*," whereas the musician Ivica Stamač wrote the score, which was subsequently performed marvelously by Vice Vukov on the music festival "Melodies from the Adriatic" in Split in 1968 (1). In 1991, Slavko Govorčin and Ivo Nižić wrote the musical "Requiem for Sixteen *Lavandieras*," which was often performed in Croatia and abroad by a female harmony-singing group "Lavandiere" and the authentic folklore group "Kanica" from Preko (2). On the centenary of the death of the laundrywomen from Preko in 1991, the town of Preko organized an event in memory of the sixteen *lavandieras*, which lasted for several day and included a poetry evening, musical and artistic performances, a memorial

service, an art exhibition, and the “Sixteen Sailing-Boats Regatta”. The latter was organized by the Zadar sailing club “Uskok.”

In 2001, on Vruljica, a place where *lavandieras* washed the laundry for decades, a memorial ground was built, framed by a circular staircase, and a sculpture by the sculptor Anselmo Dorkin was installed (11). Dorkin is a self-taught artist from Preko whose numerous artifacts have been inspired by sketches from life and suffering of *lavandieras* from Preko. His work was exhibited in Zagreb in 1993 and some of his oeuvre was immortalized by outstanding photographs of the famous Croatian artist Marija Braut.

Hence, the legend of the sixteen *lavandieras*, based on the true tragic story, has become a symbol of suffering, death, harsh life, toilsome work, and fight for survival. Moreover, the legend serves as a homage to islander woman, especially those from Preko, to their persistence and endurance, independence, pride, and sacrifice for the family.

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