



## THE SAGA OF THE QUINTESSENCE

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The saga of Palmizana, the Meneghello family and their court at Palmizana could well be broached with a forgotten but very aromatic little episode from the time of the Napoleonic wars when in 1807 the army physician Pierre Jerome Gaugiran, exhausted by his many battles, came to the town of Hvar. A year or two later, Napoleon was beaten, his army left the politically swollen Adriatic, and Hvar, on which Gaugiran had come to feel at ease, was taken over by the Habsburgs. The Frenchman made a firm resolve to stay on the island, getting married and starting a family, and obtained a license to set up an apothecary's shop. He was well-acquainted with the then extremely up-to-date process of fractional distillation. This was a procedure that had been introduced only a few years earlier by member of the French Academy Lavoisier, and so on Hvar, this Frenchman started to produce, in his own laboratory, unusually high-quality essential oils based on rosemary. From his workshop started to come those remarkable, but today totally forgotten, drinks and ointments that smelled of rosemary, but in which traces of pinene, camphene and cineole were to be sensed.

Gaugiran's apothecary's soon attracted the attention of an enquiring young Hvar chap from the Meneghello family. This Gian Battista Meneghello soon became an assistant in the Frenchman's house, and he himself learned to make the miraculous essences; not long passed before he became Gaugiran's son-in-law, having married his only daughter. Thus young Meneghello, whose family actually came from Bergamo, and whose forebears had carried out the trade of mason, became the only guardian of his father-in-law's mysterious quintessence, the fabulous drink that this physician of Napoleon's had brought from France, and then brought to perfection on Hvar, intimately in contact with the setting, and using in the production of his compound of essences plants but poorly known elsewhere.

Gian Battista Meneghello's admission into this secret and mysterious world of plants and pharmacy was crucially to colour the further activities of his family, and the love of the man for the apothecary's trade and for plants was to strengthen the bond of destiny between the Menghellos and Palmizana, a pretty little place on the Pakleni Islands, in the Hvaran archipelago, that had been known to the Palestinian pilgrims as far back as the 15<sup>th</sup> century, for no other reason than its exotic flora, simples and fabulous fragrances.

The Meneghellos bought the estate of the island in the nineteenth century, and it became for them a parallel family quintessence. One quintessence was produced from rosemary and packed in little bottles, and the other was produced from the dreams that took up their abode on the locality of Palmizana in the Pakleni Islands.

As soon as it took over Dalmatia, the Austrian authorities devoted a great deal of attention to its flora. All the Habsburg pharmacopoeias included Mediterranean herbs, and rosemary was particularly cited as a simple that no pharmacy could afford to do without. It was held that loss of both potency and hair, stomach pains and inflammations of the skin were best treated with extract of rosemary oil.

And with assiduous industry over the decades, the Meneghellos became the most important Austrian producers of rosemary extract, that pharmaceutical hit of the Europe of Franz Josef. And it was on the island of Hvar, in the Meneghello family apothecary, that in the nineteenth century more than half of the entire Austrian production of rosemary extract was produced – more than 10 tons a year. Gian Battista Meneghello turned the little apothecary's shop of his father-in-law into something much bigger and much more commercial. And so in the year of revolutions, 1848, when the rest of Europe was at the barricades, this industrious Meneghello obtained the attest of the Venetian authorities, allowing him to produce and sell his Quintessence, Which, according to this official certificate, was to be based on rosemary oil and packed in special little bottles. The Quintessence was sold in small kidney-shaped bottles that were made in Murano; to each, a tastefully printed brochure was affixed. This document was dated 20 May 1848, and it explains in detail for what sicknesses the Menghello Quintessence was sovereign, and also explained in detail how the ingredients were measured. In this today exceptionally interesting prospectus, the vernacular pedigree of the medicine is stressed, its antiquity and the spread of its use, and then stressed the elite nature of extract of rosemary oil, and then, in the spirit of the pharmacognosy very current at the period, encouraged the enlightened European clientele to buy this Hvaran product. The Meneghello pharmacy became known far and wide for its Quintessence, and the male members of the family in the following generations studied pharmacology in Padua and Vienna. Some of these well-to-do commoners also worked as notaries on their native island; but as the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed, they increasingly moved away from the town of Hvar, and one branch of the family discovered the beauty of its holdings in the area called Vinogradišće on the Pakleni Islands, at a locality which the owners and all the travellers of the time started to call *Palmižana*.

There is not much in the town of Hvar today to recall the Meneghello family. They gradually abandoned this ancient but increasingly banal settlement, a town that was increasingly losing its ancient glory, for the arcadia of their estate on the Pakleni Islands, the estate at Palmižana. In Hvar, the only stone monument to the Meneghellos is at the cemetery of St Michael, where the year 1898 is carved on the family tomb – this was the year in which Mate Meneghello died. This son of Gian Battista was the last real apothecary in the family. What was to happen in the Meneghello family after the death of Mate was no longer to have any connection whatever with essential oil or with the quintessence that was sold in little vials throughout Europe. For a new passion had been born in the family. The family head no longer looked for the quintessence in the distillation of rosemary, but in the pastoral world of Palmižana. He was called Eugen Meneghello, and was born on Hvar in 1878. He was the most enterprising member of his family. After his studies in Vienna, at one time he taught maths and botany at the Dubrovnik Nautical Academy, but more than anything else he should be considered the discoverer of the today famed locality of Palmižana, its spiritual and real father. If in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Gian Battista sought the quintessence in bottles, this modern Meneghello found it in the perfect harmony of nature and culture, discovered it in hospitality and saw it when he endeavoured to share with others the esoteric beauty of his Palmižana estate.

In the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Eugen Meneghello started the organised afforestation of his great estate. He turned the stone waste he found into a very high quality and carefully tended arboretum, and in the house built in 1820, in the middle of the estates on the Pakleni Islands, he opened a guesthouse that, in the printed material, he called Palmižana Palace. Even by then, this prescient Dubrovnikan teacher had concluded that the future belonged to Palmižana, understood that people would come flocking to his botanical paradise, not in order to feel at home there, but to find out everything that was missing at home. From the time of the first Meneghello guesthouse there is a photograph extant in which it can be seen with how much care his palace was arranged, and what kind of taste was possessed by these descendants of Hvaran apothecaries and notaries.

Their island salon was up to any bourgeois setting of its time, and in the nearby town of Hvar there were but few of them. Eugen Menghello very early on figured out that he could best bring people to his Palmižana if he let them sail, if he could take them on nocturnal fishing trips and on hunting parties. From the very founding of his guesthouse, Eugen Meneghelo kept a visitors' book, from which it can be seen that very exacting visitors started coming quite early on to Palmižana; most of them were very well-educated globetrotters, and they did not find it hard to understand that on Palmižana there was no fight with nature, rather a harmonisation with it; the guests' long walks with the professor were not in the way of physical exercises, but lessons in botany, fishing with him was a return to the lost civilisation of the ancient Greeks, hunting for partridges and pheasants was done according to the rules of medieval chivalry. Then on Palmižana they drank the far-famed organic champagne of the professor, and evening balls were organised. The Meneghelo Palace was thus increasingly to be found in the guidebooks of the world, with the obligatory admonition that one could not approach Palmižana without the prior consent of the owner. All this went on right up to the beginning of World War II; immediately afterwards, the arrogant collectivism of the new times came into conflict with the individualism that the Meneghellos had championed for decades on their island possessions. The new time endeavoured brutally to smash the quintessence that had been acquired with such noble endeavours, to jeopardise the combination of work and leisure, the harmony of fatigue and dissipation that had been achieved at Palmižana.

It needed a lot of strength to preserve everything that had been achieved in a time that had ceased to believe in the elitism of the spirit. It needed a great deal of effort to affirm a new spirit for Palmižana, to recognise the spirit of the inheritance in it, respond to the skill of recalling and transmitting the messages of the past. In these post-war years, Eugen's son, called by his friends Toto, became the new master of Palmižana. One photograph of Toto Meneghelo is preserved, taken some year or two after the end of World War II. A moment is recorded on it, in which two friends, and two of the most liberated, at that time, most original and noblest men of Hvar, Mirko Kasandrić and Toto Meneghelo, in working men's clothing, tired, but with a smile, sitting cross-legged in the armchairs of their forebears, for all the world as if time had not gone mad around them. The two of them are sitting and looking into the camera with the mildness of those who know and understand everything. For Palmižana is a book that can be read with closed eyes. To be in love with this Mediterranean domain and its complex is to know and understand everything, to love it all. It is this knowledge on the part of Eugen's son that led him once again to put Palmižana into the fragrant phial of quintessence of his forebears. When in 1967 Toto married the Zagreb journalist Dagmar, née Gebauer, Palmižana obtained yet another priest, this time to the Park, to cherish and still more to ennoble its remarkable beauty. Dagmar Meneghelo brought the fine arts to the island. In her own island gallery, for some two decades, she showed the finest paintings of modern Croatian fine arts, not in order to sell them to someone or other, but through their energy to give additional strength to the long-forgotten bottle with the quintessence of Gian Battista. The Palmižana that was created in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Dagmar and Toto, and is today still being created by their children Romina, Tarin and Gjenko, holds up to each one of us an internal mirror. For at Palmižana the hospitable, even eyes that are closed can open wide. In the illuminated Palmižana nights all the drama of inheritance can be felt. The weight of the past is there too, but something of its gladness can also be made out. Here at the joint of tradition it is as if at each minute there appear the ghosts of the pharmacist, Gaugiran, who brought to Hvar the knowledge of French distillation, and of his son-in-law, Gian Battista Meneghelo, who created the family quintessence. Here can be sensed the gentle and learned spirit of Eugen the teacher and his long since deceased guests, here can be felt the mild gaze of his late son Toto.

Today's guardian of the hearth, Dagmar Meneghello, has a vivid feeling for the apocalypse of the bygone world, but also senses a world to come, now being created, which will know how to inherit what is even now vanishing.

Its owners came upon Palmižana as if it were some unknown continent, explored it gradually, and effortfully then mobilised there all the energies of their biographies. They cast aside what they had been, and hurried to meet the unannounced future from their Palmižana.

**They never took anything from the island. They left everything upon it.**

Palmižana is a reservoir of destinies, it is a summation of gladdening to others, and that is why it is a reservoir of other people's happinesses. This place has not earned its virginity by flexing its abstention. Virginity is a passion on Palmižana, a reconstruction of the first contact between man and nature, the voice of a primordial and elsewhere totally discarded sanctity. Perfection lives only with itself in Palmižana. Perfection arose in the creators of this paradise as a protest against the hard-heartedness and callousness of the mighty, a protest against the owners of other people's fates. Palmižana is a place of self-creation, a place where each person can, for himself or herself, express the quintessence, and where it can easily be given to others.