

Summary

A small, historical, Liburnian village, Lipa is located in the NW of Primorje-Gorski Kotar County in Matulji Municipality only a few kilometres from the Croatia-Slovenian border, and is one of the oldest Croatian settlements in this area. Already in prehistoric and ancient times, Croats had inhabited this area by the end of the 6th and beginning of the 7th century. Under the rule of Prince Borna (818 – 821?), the settlements were incorporated into the medieval Croatian state. In the middle of the 12th century, the territory of Liburnia was seized from the parent country and in the new political constellation, it became a Hapsburg fief. The name 'Lipa' and the first mention of some of its inhabitants, date from that very time, 21 April 1429 to be precise.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, Lipa and the entire Liburnian *karst* were devastated by plague and Turkish invasions, which resulted in the settlement of vacant areas by Croats from the SE regions of Croatia. The inhabitants were subject to social tensions, wars and robbery all the way up to the end of the 18th century, when Lipa was established as an important administrative centre on the vital Trieste-Rijeka road. At the beginning of the 19th century, Lipa was assigned the status of municipality and then county (1827 – 1834); with only 62 houses and 349 inhabitants who lived in hard economic and very complex political circumstances.

The main occupation of inhabitants was agriculture, cattle breeding and forestry. Not even the abrogation of feudalism improved the condition of peasants, who remained illiterate, poor and excluded from any cultural and political life and happenings. Not until the eighteen-sixties, were rural people involved in more dynamic political action initiated by obtaining broad national-political positions within the Croatian national movement. The movement had significant reverberations in all parts of NE Istria, as in Lipa. A new generation of young supporters of the movement emerges educated at Croatian educational institutions in the spirit of the Party-of-Right ideas. They show more fighting spirit and demand equality of Croatian and Slovenian languages with Italian in public life. The development of this movement, and particularly the year 1885, were important for Lipa. A primary school was opened in Lipa and a local teacher Vinko Pintarić taught children in the Croatian language. He taught there from 1887 to 1925 and his work made a great contribution to the awakening, development and strengthening of the national consciousness of the people of Lipa.

In 1918, after World War I and the breakup of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Italian army occupied Lipa and the whole of Istria. According to the Treaty of Rapallo (1920), this Croatian town came under the rule of the Kingdom

of Italy. The new government persecuted the teachers of Croatian culture and the educational establishment, which in 1920 resulted in protests organized by Lipa inhabitants under the national flag. The Italian army used arms to disperse demonstrators.

In 1924, after the Italian annexation of the town of Rijeka, Lipa was incorporated into the newly established Kvarner Region; and under the fascist government people suffered all the consequences of forced loss of national identity and assimilation. Among the many means used to achieve that, were various new laws and decrees passed to abrogate the Croatian educational, cultural, sports and other organizations and institutions. The Italian language became the only language used in official communication, in schools and offices in particular, where the use of the mother tongue was prohibited. New Italian place names were introduced and children could not be given »foreign names« – Croatian names were Italianized.

Already in the first post-war years, new party movements and the emergence of socialist and communist groupings characterized the political situation in Lipa and other villages in the Liburnian *karst*. Large-scale politicization of the inhabitants produced a number of political activists whose engagement at the beginning of the 1890s had generated a few divisions of the socialist party; and one of these operated in Lipa: Ivan Gaberšnik, who played an important role in the operations unit, was forced to leave Lipa and go to the neighbouring Slovenian area around Ilirska Bistrica, where he became secretary of one of the newly established divisions of the Communist Party (CP). In Matulji, he participated in a congress for the union of the Communist Party of Rijeka with that of the Liburnian area, and the founding of a federation of Italian CPs for the Kvarner Region. At that time, a few new CP cells were organized, in Lipa too, with five members and two candidates.

The police and other repressive forces started systematic surveillance of opponents of the fascist regime and dictatorship, and new decrees were passed that legalized the process of assimilation of the Croatian and Slovenian people. However, at the beginning of the 1930s, the CP operation was restored and organized resistance to the fascist regime and imperial politics of B. Mussolini began. In 1935, there were conflicts with the national military police (the *Carabinieri*) because of the war in Ethiopia. In 1936, demonstrations by some eighty Lipa inhabitants broke out in support of the National Front Government in the Spanish Civil War, and then in 1937, there was a conflict with the fascist police. The anti-fascist stance of the people of Lipa was also expressed in 1940 by putting up a red flag in the village. Thereupon the situation between the antifascist and nationally conscious Croats and the fascists worsened and remained so up to the start of World War II and the attack on the Kingdom of Yugoslavia by Italy in April 1941.

In 1941, after the military and political breakup of the Yugoslav Monarchy, Italy annexed the new Croatian and Slovenian territories and submitted them to Italianization and Fascistization by force. The only parties resisting that, were the Communist Parties of Croatia and Slovenia. They incited the enslaved nations to insurgencies and joint resistance based on a broadly proclaimed anti-fascist and social program. They also invited the Croats and Slovenians from the other side of the Rapallo border to join in the struggle.

A few important meetings were organized and attended by the representatives of the CP of Croatia (CPC) and the Liburnian antifascists and patriots, one in August 1941 in Zamet (Rijeka) and the other in Mihelići (above Matulji). At those meetings, a CPC Local Committee for Rijeka and a CPC ad hoc group for Istria were founded. This was when sympathisers of the National Liberation Movement (NLM) started their operations in Lipa; they founded an anti-fascist group and joined up with leading NLM people in the Kastav area and with those from the Osvobodilna fronta (Liberation Front, LF) in Jelšane and Ilirska Bistrica.

At the end of 1941, a CPC leadership for Liburnia was appointed and one of its members was responsible for political work with the new NLM in Lipa. Unfortunately, at the beginning of February 1942, the organization was uncovered and nine of its activists were arrested and sent to the internment camps. The security of the CPC local committee for Liburnia was also broken, all its members and many other leading people were arrested and sentenced to prison. The NLM suffered a serious blow from the stringent repressive measures but in the middle of 1942, the movement recovered and came up with new forms of organization and programs. They were very much involved in setting up the second Vladimir Gortan battalion in Gorski Kotar, which was located along the Rapallo border itself. Its task was to transfer war operations to the Liburnia area and further into Istria. Within the battalion, the 5th company was set up consisting of Istrian people who had already joined the ranks of the National Liberation Army of Croatia (NLAC) or were engaged in political operations locally.

At the end of 1942, the company crossed the old border and set up a camp in the Planika woodlands from where they established contact with a number of villages. Operating in the territory of the fascist Kingdom of Italy, the combatants initiated and developed political work among the people but did not neglect combat operations. This is confirmed by a sabotage raid on 28 October when they attacked a military transport train between Rukavac and Jušići, which resulted in severe human and material losses on the fascist side. The fascist authorities were about to conduct a comprehensive cleaning up action on mount Učka when a captive informed them of the company's location. Fortunately, they did not succeed in destroying it. Since they could no longer stay in this part of Liburnia, the company was reorganized and assigned new tasks, first in the territory of the Slovenian Brkina and then again in the Croatian part of Istria.

Because of the fascist attack on the 5th Company of the 2nd battalion Vladimir Gortany, popularly known as the First Istrian Partisan Company, the development of NLM and armed conflicts and uprisings in the Liburnia region and in Lipa were suspended. However, after the fall of Mussolini and his regime (25 July 1943), the Lipa NLM organization still managed to slip five combatants across the former border to the National Liberation Army of Croatia (NLAC) before the military collapse of the Kingdom of Italy.

After the capitulation of Italy (8 September 1943) Istria was engulfed by a mass country-wide insurrection that also reverberated powerfully in Lipa. A local guard was set up as the first armed unit of insurgents followed by a partisan company made of volunteers from Lipa and the surrounding villages. On 13 September, they started a war of resistance against the invading forces of the new occupier, this time the Germans, who were advancing from Pivka towards Rijeka. Their attempt to make a breakthrough to Klana was stopped at positions near Lipa. When the 2nd Sušak-Kastav Unit was set up, the people of Lipa joined the 2nd company of that unit and closed the passage on the Rupa-Klana road thus repelling several attempts made by the Germans to get to Klana and Rijeka through Lipa.

The first insurgent days in Lipa were marked by an operation by the newly established National Liberation Committee, which organized the collection of war booty and was rather successful in its operations. During those dramatic days, the people managed to topple the annexation government and disarm its army, so the defeat and expulsion of the occupier assumed prime importance. An Operational Headquarters (OHQ) was established for Istria and tactical military units were set up – the 1st Istrian Vladimir Gortan Brigade and 1st Učka Partisan Unit. On 13 September 1943, the District National Liberation Committee (NLC) for Istria made the decision to reunite Istria with its parent country Croatia. On 20 September 1943, the State Anti-fascist Council for the National Liberation of Croatia (ZAVNOH) and the Regional NLC for Istria acknowledged the decision at their historic session in Pazin on 25th and 26th September 1943.

In only a few days, the insurgent forces armed and organized themselves and liberated the entire area of Istria and the Slovenian Littoral except for Trieste, Pula, Rijeka and the towns along the Liburnian coast. This was a strong blow to Hitler's war plan to disarm the Italian army and occupy the territory, which had been a part of the Kingdom of Italy up to 8 September 1943. In that territory, the Germans established an Operational Zone Jadransko primorje (Adriatic Littoral) and at the beginning of October, they undertook the Operation ISTRIN during which they encircled the partisan units caught on the Učka massif. With a far greater number of soldiers, enviable technical levels of equipment and military prowess, the new occupier surprised the NLM military and political leadership and inflicted large losses on young partisan units. The peo-

ple suffered great losses and injuries. It all resulted in a temporary stoppage of the NLM operation.

In spite of serious blows the German formations inflicted on the NLM military organization, they could not destroy people's fighting spirit. The partisan units consolidated their ranks relatively quickly. Lipa was also facing the turmoil of war. Already at the end of 1943, thirteen new partisan companies were set up with the 1st company locating its mobilization and operation area in Lipa. Some 15 young people from Lipa and a number from the neighbouring villages joined the company. During November and December 1943, these companies undertook a series of successful military actions, attacking the enemy and at the same time recruiting new combatants. In the middle of January 1944, four battalions were formed in Istria two of which were assault units. Most of the people from Lipa served in the ranks of the 2nd battalion.

With the formation of the assault battalions, the Liburnian *karst* area became a scene of intensive armed conflicts so Headquarters did not want to lose control over the initiative and went on expanding its forces. Taking into account the number of units (1280 combatants) and the fighting spirit of the battalions, Headquarters decided to reinvigorate the brigades and units in the strategically most important part of Istria thus assuming a stronger attack initiative on the semi-liberated territory of eastern Liburnia where it held a third of its forces.

By attacking railway transports or enemy truck convoys, partisan units caused serious problems for the Nazis in supplying war equipment and material to their garrisons and posed a threat to their manpower. General Ludwig Kübler, the Zone Commander, himself confirmed, in his report of 24 February 1944, that the Germans suffered enormous losses in manpower and material resources. He cited detailed data on German soldiers killed, vehicles and railways destroyed, and bridges demolished. Consequently, he ordered the most vigorous retaliatory measures to be taken against anybody who helped the partisans and even to punish whole villages if they were »intentionally helping bandits«.

Simultaneously with the formation of large military units of the NLM, the political structure was subject to reorganization. By the end of March 1944, there was a five-member National Liberation Committee (NLC) operating in Lipa presided over by Franjo Iskra. Its main responsibility was to organize the collection of food, clothes, money, medical supplies and other materials needed for units of the National Liberation Army of Croatia (NLAC). In Lipa, »everybody was bringing food for partisans« about which the NLC kept very detailed records. An important part of its work also involved education and culture. At that time, there was a school for the Lipa area and Škalnica with a teacher, Zora Jurčić Pužev, from Lipa.

Because of the Germans' inability to establish control over railroad and road traffic on the Rijeka-Trieste stretch, General Kübler decided to try to keep Istri-

an partisans away by launching a new offensive on the mountain massif Učka-Planik-Lisina. The offensive, known as the Braunschweig offensive, was finally launched with the participation, in addition to the motorized Wermacht forces, of the special SS police formations and some groups of Croatian and Slovenian Chetniks (militant Serbs).

Anticipating the Nazis' intentions, the Operational HQ for Istria managed to withdraw the main force units from the Učka and Ćićarija sectors and transfer them north of the railway and the main road to the Klana-Kastav-Ilirska Bistrica area. The offensive started on 25 April 1944 and Nazi forces needed only 2 days to block the sector around Učka and make a thorough combing of the area around Lisina and Planika. However, this enemy action was futile, because no Istrian units were there any longer. On the contrary, having moved most of their forces north of the railway and the road, they went on with their operations and on 30 April 1944, launched a decisive attack with mortar fire on a garrison of Mussolini's black-shirts and military police in Rupa from a position on Gavrani Hill near Lipa.

The attack started at 5 a.m. and lasted two hours. The garrison's commander was Aurelio Piesz from Rijeka (Fiume), a black-shirts lieutenant. Unexpectedly, a smaller motorized German convoy appeared at Rupa and was subject to intense fire. Five German soldiers were killed and more still badly wounded; thereupon the partisan group withdrew to nearby Lisac village. An immediate rallying of Nazi forces from the neighbouring and other garrisons followed. Under the command of Piesz they blocked Lipa and subjected it to heavy artillery fire. When they were sure no partisans were left in Lipa, the Nazis entered the village and at 4 p.m. started a massacre by burning down houses and stables, seizing cattle and other valuable resources, and beating and raping women and girls. In this bestial retribution against helpless and defenceless people, they savagely tortured and killed 21 inhabitants, including even babies in their cradles.

The remaining inhabitants were ordered to pack their essentials and set out towards Rupa. At the last house in Lipa, they were told to leave their belongings and were forced into a large building where old people, women and children were killed by hand-grenades and machine-guns. Then the building was doused with petrol and set on fire; many people were burned alive. The only survivors of the massacre were those who by chance were either not in Lipa that tragic Sunday, or somehow managed to hide. According to the first of the subsequent investigations, 269 inhabitants were killed, of which almost seventy-six were 12-year old children. Actually, twenty percent of the youngest inhabitants of Lipa were killed together with their teacher and Lipa resident Zora Jurčić Pužev. Subsequent investigations came up with another eleven victims, which brought the number of people killed to 280.

Without trustworthy documentation, it is not possible to ascertain why the Nazis vented their anger on and took a genocidal reprisal against, of all people, the inhabitants of Lipa. They certainly wanted to frighten the inhabitants of the Liburnian *karst* and divide them from the National Liberation Movement, which they supported and provided with food and other necessities. Regardless of the motive and reasons, those inhabitants who happened to be in Lipa that day were massacred and 87 buildings and 85 outbuildings were burned. This was one of the most appalling war crimes committed in the territory of Istria in World War II. Other villages in the *karst* region also suffered the consequences of war, but the fact is that Lipa paid for its freedom and antifascist inclination with the largest number of victims and enormous material losses. The Movement in the area was placed in a very difficult position because the logistics base was destroyed and Istrian partisan units could not stay in that devastated area any longer. This was actually one of the main targets of the »Braunschweig« offensive.

On 6 May 1945, when Lipa was finally liberated, the inhabitants who managed to survive started to slowly return. They did not want Lipa to become a »ghost village«. This hard working, thrifty and proud people found the physical strength and morale to rebuild and start a new life in Lipa. A few families returned to Lipa and laid the foundations for its reconstruction and development. Through the meritorious help of the National Liberation Committee and the support of the community, in 1948 25 households with 108 inhabitants were restored. They engaged in farming the land, cattle breeding and forestry.

In 1952/53, the primary school building was reconstructed. The children from both Lipa and Rupa attended the school in Lipa and then continued their education in Matulji and Rijeka. The reconstruction of Lipa was completed in the 1960s when a special-purpose Lipa Fund was set up and the place was proclaimed a protected historical monument [of culture]. The money collected was used for reconstruction of the road, restoration of the school, village electrification, for construction of the water supply system, for rebuilding of residential houses and outbuildings, and for a Memorial Museum, which opened officially on 1 March 1969. The social structure of the population changed as many men and women from Lipa found employment, but also because many new people moved into the area and decided to live there with their families.

On the place where the majority of Lipa inhabitants were killed and burned beyond all recognition, a modest monument has been erected. It consists of six stone slabs with the engraved names of 269 victims. On the other side of the village, there is a memorial listing the names of all Lipa people who fell in action. In the neighbouring village of Rupa there is a memorial plaque on the spot where the Nazis hanged the NLC president and two of its members in 1944.

Translation: Marija Slunjski