
SKULLS OF ISTRIA

by **Rick Harsch**

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Cover art: Self-Portrait with Death Playing the Fiddle by Arnold Böcklin (1872)

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Many of the characters in this book are real people doing things they actually did do according to history; for instance, some of the Uskok pirates and feckless Venetians. Others do things for the convenience of the narrative. The only one who would legally be in a position to sue me is the professor who I pay homage to in Chapter 2, but he is dead and left no heirs.

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Burja.

I was just admiring – sit down, don't lurch over me, sit down before you get colitis or something. Your intention all along, eh comrade... nonetheless, welcome. I guess you Skulls of Istria don't play cards. Or perhaps your vendetta has reached a state of détente.

I was just admiring the advent of this latest, this last, burja. Magnificent, isn't it? Look: I could reach out and Skulls of Istria touch the Italian Alps, all the coastal vapors suddenly blown away... Dolomitis... Or is that the Greek... They say Hemingway froze a leopard up there while Joyce was drinking himself blind down here... Or something, something about the Dolomite Alps. Tito surrounded Trieste, but *they* surrounded Tito. A melancholy Skulls of Istria transhumance, dumb Balkan come down to shore out of season. Perhaps, though, that saved us World War Three. Follow my theory: say they let Tito keep Trieste. Once Belgrade had it they'd never let it go, thus the Slovene war would've been a real one, at which time Skulls of Istria a horde of your Skulls of Istria weekend D'Annunzios would've seized the opportunity to regain Trieste, fume into Fiume, not to mention the rest of Dalmatia, all the way down to Ragusa, never mind this mere devil's beard Istria... and in comes Boris Yeltsin. That's the short version... so you see how your bitterness is misplaced. Your bitterness, pal, not mine.

Frankly, I'm not appeased by frigid beauty – ice maidens, et al. Besides, this wind is invisible, Skulls of Istria its finest quality, such as Skulls of Istria can not even be said of my viljamovka, nor Skulls of Istria whatever that fuel for sadists you're swilling is called. Low snowy alps behind the snow chopped sea, another country, another age... Hyperborean philosophers bleating Wagnerian from the peaks. And here we sit... Where are all the fishermen, the squidnuncs, the raiders of the sea, barques drawn up on shore? Have we been abandoned, friend? You I've seen here before, burja or no burja...

Burja... ur like in pure, pure cold hell, blown violence of Balkan politics, implacable Hapsburgh vagaries, babblings of blinded Bulgars, howling of hungry Hungarians, hungry for the sea. A rocky land, to be sure. Your famous burja – a masculine wind, unlike the mistral, that sissy wind from France, never mind all those legends of merchant ships set out from Genoa planning simply to hug the coast a little ways, just to Barcelona, all of them winding up blown to Africa; nor Requesnes' squadron of galleys destined for the kingdom of Granada, blown to Sardinia, Sicily, some as far as Pantelleria... Never mind all that – ships surprised by the burja never made it past the heel of the boot...

And your j a y: burja, ya like ya wohl, a fascist wind sweeping thoughts of anarchy into the Skulls of Istria sea. You know how the anarchists loved their hats. But let's not talk politics, you and I. In fact, I'd rather you not talk at all, you just listen, I'll talk. It's a question of time – that's a little phrase I picked up from Maja (there's that ja again, speaking of fascists). No. Let's not talk politics, I've had enough of it. Let's talk hats. I nearly lost mine on the way over here today, right out there, just rounding the punta, if you don't mind my language. But as you know, I wouldn't have been the first. It seems our friend Skulls of Istria Marjan – the fruitseller, that Marjan, I mean to assume you eat fruit – Marjan lost a hat right here in the same place, in the

same way, perhaps on his way to this same little tavern. Marjan's was a very distinct hat, a felt Tyrol job with a red silk band, a green feather, and a gold seagull pinned to one side. He'd acquired the hat in trade from some octogenarian in Skulls of Istria from Cottbus or some such, who had found dapper Marjan's Greek fisherman's cap quaint and local. It was the seagull pin that sealed the deal. Not two days later, no doubt even before the old coot had been cottbused home to his own little reich, the burja snatched the hat from Marjan's head and carried it off to sea. Which should have been the end of the story, but clever Marjan managed to track the hat down – or at least run into it. Strolling the narrow lanes of Capodistria – if you'll pardon me my Italian – strolling the narrow lanes of Capodistria one afternoon he was elbowed aside by one of those trios Skulls of Istria of sailors common to that mini-port, one of whom was sporting a felt Tyrol hat with a red silk band and a gold seagull pinned to one side. The feather hadn't survived. Timid Marjan was unable to recover the hat, but he did ascertain that it was perched on the capo d'Ancona of a sailor from that very port – I mean Ancona – who claimed he found Skulls of Istria the thing on his home shore, far from international waters. Now we could call this sailor a liar – it would go more easily on our limited credulity to simply imagine a sailor finding a hat at sea – yet as Marjan tells the tale and we gaze intrepidly at the discomfited slopes of his balding skull, another Balkan slope bared by the teaming of Italian and burja, we feel impolite in refusing to see, along with Marjan, who after all witnessed the early stages of his hat's defection, if we don't picture that hat burja blown, skipping from one whitecap to the next all the way to Ancona – too specific a destination, I know, for a burja blown hat, yet at the same time just specific enough to spin the convergence of phenomena into an enduring myth, to wit: 'The burja once blew a man's hat from Piran to Ancona.' Besides, such instances of material reincarnation are not new to these parts. Skulls of Istria Take the old, though not at the time, Archduke Charles, a man who went to great lengths to keep his wife a happy Hapsburgh, dining one evening with a Levantine merchant who recognized draped around the frau's neck the very pearl necklace – a valuable item indeed – plucked from his ship by Uskoks the season before. That's a true story. At any rate, though, believe what we must, we know to hold our hats to our heads with our hands when the burja blows in.

And speaking of Uskoks, to them the fierce burja was both friend and ally. And don't tell me you don't know what an Uskok is. Wasn't one of Tito's generals called Uskokovi?? I'm sure of it... But here I am carrying on and your glass is empty...

There – now we're both empty. Let's see if our host would rather play cards or earn a few toalars. I know, the answer is cards, but he's... proscribed... by that famously begrudging Slovene hospitality.

Gospod! Dve viljamovki... Prosim. You don't mind switching to something less toxic, I Skulls of Istria trust. Hvala.

Is it dva or dve, by the way?

No matter, as long as it's not trey... the Serb salute – what is it? Repeat after me: God, Rakija, Slaughter... and it has to be all three or it's no good... You're not one, are you? Kako se re?e 'Are you a Serb?' po slovensko?

Ah, don't give me that look, I just bought you a drink – I know what that means hereabouts. Besides, you're all jugomongrels when it Skulls of Istria comes down to it. Never mistake religious or linguistic fidelity for the abominable integrity of blood.

Judging by that scar – looks like somebody tried to carve out your eyeball – I'd say you got a little Uskok in you yourself. Like our own Inspector Plodni?, whose missing ear and walnut nose so precisely recall the Uskok leader Juraj Dani?i?. That's right, the same Dani?i? who engineered that famously daring escape from the Venetian trap under cover of burja. These are the stories they used to tell little Balkanites to put them to sleep, before they started teaching them to count by pointing to the bodies in a ravine or floating down a storied river. That's why you wear that puzzled look. Well let me fill in the gap. It was about four hundred years ago. After leading 18 Uskok barks on a raid of Ottoman territory that netted 8,000 Skulls of Istria head of Skulls of Istria cattle – that's 32,000 hooves – Skulls of Istria they put in at the bay of Rogožni?a, where they were blockaded by Venetian galleys under the command of one Bembo. Why were the Venetians concerned with these raids on heathen Turk? Perhaps we'll get to that when we get to Venice. Our heros were outnumbered, outgunned, surrounded, their situation hopeless. Luckily for Dani?i? and his corsairs, a burja blew to the rescue. They used its cover at nightfall to slip one by one past the miserable sentries posted on Bembo's galleys... I invite you to imagine those feckless Venetian sentries, their cold misery, burja buffeted through the night, wondering what the hell they were doing out there – no one could possibly sail in such weather, or row, nobody was going anywhere, yet there they were forced to stand nightstormblind, grumbling in pairs, deafened by the wind and the clap of wave on wood, only to find in the morning that their vigilance did nought but earn them a lashing, for in the morning the Uskoks were long gone.

A few years later Dani?i? got himself in trouble again, post-Bembo, who had been deposed after a scandal involving a Hapsburgh Whore. Yet another successful Uskok raid was imperilled by a Venetian blockade, this time at the island Skulls of Istria of Iz. The Uskoks dug in on shore, while the Venetians, a relatively dainty fighting breed, awaited reinforcements – they were planning a safe slaughter of Uskoks. Remember, this in Venetian defense, those were days when to die in battle was to have one's head paraded about on a spike, a practice I know first hand led to some interesting graves, and what surely must be considered the definitive statement on the separation of church and state... and then given the reputation, justified or not, the Uskoks acquired for tearing into the flesh of live victims with their teeth, of drinking their blood, male and female Uskok alike – nothing so orderly as drawing and quartering for these Uskoks – well, it's not hard to understand why the Venetians liked not to attack without insurmountable odds. So they waited, within sniffing distance of roasting stolen beasts, within earshot of feisty tamburas... they waited... and while they were waiting, to make their wait more miserable a magnificent burja arrived, a benevolent burja timed to aid the marauders, who kept their fires going, kept the tamburas hammering, the blasting burja covering a fury of activity – they cut down trees to use as rollers, you know, to roll their barks across the land, with the help of fat from stolen cattle, see what I mean: greasing the way... and by this method they pulled every one of their barks over the spine of the island and made off the other direction, unafraid of any burja. When the storm Skulls of Istria had passed, the Venetians cautiously approached the Uskok barricade, which they found abandoned, a few Uskok hats propped on rocks, several olive staffs propped to look like guns from a distance...

How can we put this, in this day and age... You might say the burja was to the Uskoks what the jungle was to the Vietminh...

Or you might just Skulls of Istria sit there and swill one misnomer of brandy after another for three days, then sleep Skulls of Istria it off til Skulls of Istria the next burja. You won't get any argument from me. I've made it my business Skulls of Istria to study the role of man in this world and believe me no argument is more persuasive than yours, bold Uskok. I knew a Pole once who spent a romantic evening alone with a bottle of rakija in Dubrovnik. When it was empty he hatched the inspired notion of circling a palm tree until he blacked out. He woke in the morning on the beach in a tidepool of vomit, seaweed, and crabs. I know of no more eloquent illustration of modern man's argossey, if you catch my pun... So here's to you, good Vlach...

What say we get ourselves a bottle... on me...

Gospod! Relinquish thy hand! Steklenica – Williams, a bottle, yes. Steklenica, prosim.

It's important to know the right words to smooth the way wherever you go. For instance, that same Pole knew just two words of French after a month in Paris: la meme chose: once more, or, same again... Hvala – and godspeed, gospod. And hvala to you as well – Here's to burrowing in for the burja. I'd say bottoms up, but this isn't the day for it. I would much rather her bottom stayed down. A slim chance, but shapely...

Yes, a few choice words, like I say, and this may surprise you but as far as I'm concerned the best of them all is Zastava, symbol of your former nation like the Volkswagon never quite was for Germany. The Zastava never let you down. A most charming auto, and you know, the most charming burja story I ever heard involves a Zastava. I won't say I believe a word of it, other than Zastava, Skulls of Istria yet I have a soft spot for the tale in that it was related to me by none other than Maja. And Skulls of Istria let's face it, if we're ever to face anything – the truth from women like Maja is never really what we want. Let the crimsoning of your scar each mention of her name attest to that.

So you knew her, too – so what. That's right – I say: So what. Everybody knew Maja, Gypsy queen of Primorska, parading her bare belly about the obala. But I dare say it was the minority who knew her as well as I.

Get it?

We traveled together only as far as Rijeka, our plans to reach Zadar done in by a burja so feisty the highway Skulls of Istria was closed Skulls of Istria south of Senj – the Uskoks would've laughed, scoffed, jeered, I know, and probably if they were around today they would've driven their Zastavas off the cliffs one after the other; there just isn't enough room in those cars for all the rocks you'd need to keep the car from being lifted off the road during the worst of the burja... Anyway, the Uskoks have been gone from Senj for three hundred years...

I won't start theorizing...

The ones who never took any chances are still around... some of them, anyway...

We were stranded. And to this moment I can't keep from thinking it's impossible she planned that – but then I remember it was Maja herself who told me Nona heard it on the radio. Anyway, there was a burja, fiercer, or more advanced, than this feeble episode. Perhaps it was my disappointment over the trip being postponed, but I insisted to Maja that even in my limited time in the Balkans I had seen Skulls of Istria worse – much worse. I told her about the old crone lifted by the burja entirely off her feet right in the middle of Tito Square in Koper. They say these labyrinthine towns owe their design to the burja – frankly I doubt that very much, but I'm no longer an accredited historian and therefore it's not my place to speak on controversial matters... where was I... city planning – a failure: the wind carried the old bitch a full four or five feet before setting her down. May you never Skulls of Istria know her fright – within the fluid surreality of the event – actually, a step prolonged, merely, magically – within the event there was a static moment, with a clear beginning and a definite end, and during which she had no reason to trust the physics she knew: once off the ground she had no reason to believe she would land short of water, or Ancona, for that matter... knowing that at her age she could expect no sailor to bring her back...

And lost are the Uskoks...

Skulls Skulls of Istria Of Istria

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