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**Ramses Delafontaine**

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# Gilbert Bosetti, *Trieste, port des Habsbourg 1719-1915 : De l'intégration des immigrés à la désintégration du creuset* (EN)

Ramses Delafontaine

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- 1 This book, written in French by Gilbert Bosetti, Italianist and honorary professor of the University of Grenoble, is part of a research project supported by the CNRS on social challenges such as religious pluralism, integration through the mastery of a language, and the condition of minorities and national identities in Europe. *Trieste, harbour of the Habsburgs* is divided into three parts. The first part analyses the history of Trieste from its designation as a free port in 1719 until 1813 when the city returned to the Austrian Empire after a brief period of incorporation into the first French empire. In the second part of the book the author describes the golden age of Trieste in the nineteenth century and the high point of the melting pot of immigrants (*creuset*). In the final part Bosetti presents the growth of nationalistic sentiments – especially Italian Irredentism – and its effects on Trieste up to the start of the First World War. The book consists of small stories which are not longer than four pages.
- 2 Bosetti has written a long history of over two centuries. He starts in 1719 when Charles VI instituted the free port and finishes in 1915 when Italy entered the First World War. Nonetheless, the author manages to include a large quantity of detail in his book. He writes about Italians, Slovenians, Jews, Greeks, Albanians, Serbs, Croats, Illyrians, Swiss, Germans, Austrians, Hungarians, Moravians, Czechs, Bohemians, Flemish, Scandinavians, English, Turks, and Romanians, etc. With short histories Bosetti describes the success of immigrant families of different ethnic but also of different religious backgrounds. In Austrian-governed Trieste we meet Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Orthodox Christians, Jews, and also families who were, except for the sake of appearances, secularized. The protagonists of Bosetti's short histories are bankers, long

distance sea captains, business immigrants involved in maritime trade, the managers of import and export companies, and the managers of insurance companies of trade and especially maritime trade. From the nineteenth century onwards Bosetti adds romancers and politicians to his stories as well as the opera, the arts and sciences, architecture and other cultural activities mainly reserved for the elites of Trieste. The unnamed, the little men and women who lived and worked in Trieste are, on the other hand, almost completely absent from the book.

- 3 The elites of Trieste, sometimes for the benefit of commercial interests, engaged in intercommunity civil marriages which in their own turn contributed, according to Bosetti, to the secularization of immigrant elites. Bosetti writes that “The mixed marriages were at times the cause and the effect of conciliations between the communities” (p. 141) which transcended their religious denominations. The liberty and the right to have their own educational facilities and the right to use one’s native tongue in school was also an important aspect of the immigrant’s life in Trieste. Intriguingly Bosetti adds on this point that “in Trieste national identity was not founded on blood but on language, the carrier of culture” (p. 243). Bosetti tells us that integration in Trieste happened because of commerce: “When religion divides the sectarians, trade brings them back together” (p. 76). The author concludes that business obliged and that it was the commercial attitude of the immigrants which explained the success of migrant integration in Trieste in the nineteenth century. Bosetti is clear on this point: “In a period of economic growth, the free exchange of goods favors a liberalization of attitudes and traditions in the face of the weight of religious traditions” (p. 151). I do not share Bosetti’s conviction of the total validity of this rule. I think Bosetti’s rule furthermore does not hold up for those immigrants not engaged in high-stakes commerce and who had to sell their labor.
- 4 Despite the subtitle which indicates that the book has the ambition of answering difficult questions on immigration, the book does not achieve that goal. Bosetti does indeed draw our attention to the importance of trade, religion, language, cultural assimilation, and nationalism as essential elements of an understanding of the success, the challenges and the disintegration of the melting pot in Trieste. But the analysis misses a research question as well as a discussion of the employed methodology. What archives did Bosetti consult? Which source genres has he used? I also have to note the absence of English or German historiography on Trieste. A state of the art would not have gone amiss as it would have helped to situate the work in the literature on Trieste and the Austrian empire and how that state coped with its challenging multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition. Despite the detail of the concise stories, I found few references to primary sources – with the exception of published literary works – with the result that it is difficult for other researchers to share in the descriptive richness of Bosetti’s short histories. The focus on literary works might help explain the dominance of migrant elites in Bosetti’s work.
- 5 Notwithstanding the fundamental nature of these missing parts, I learned a lot on Trieste and its inhabitants. I am left with the historical experience of having met several immigrants that came to Trieste in the time of the Habsburg empire. I have come to understand their problems and their fears but also their ambitions, their pride, and their independent nature. This historical experience is a goal of historical scholarship in its own right, often forgotten. Bosetti, in my opinion, did not write this book to advance big explanations on the integration of immigrants in Trieste. Instead he chose to describe

Trieste and the immigrants that arrived there during the rule of the Austrian emperors. Through his vivid descriptions, he has given us the opportunity to reflect on the subject of immigration with historical examples.

- 6 The history of Trieste between 1719 and 1915 is told as a tragedy which ends with the disintegration of the melting pot because of intercommunity tensions, especially between the Italian and Slovenian bourgeoisies. Bosetti woefully concludes that “it was the dismemberment of the Triestine melting pot and the ruin of a European fraternity” (p. 321).

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## AUTEUR

### RAMSES DELAFONTAINE

Ramses Delafontaine started his Ph.D. at the history department of Ghent University in 2014. He studies the judicial use of historical argumentation with a focus on historians serving as an expert witnesses in legal proceedings. His primary case study is tobacco litigation in the US. His first monograph, which was published with Springer International Publishing in April of 2015, is entitled: *Historians as Expert judicial witnesses in tobacco litigation: a controversial legal practice*. Delafontaine's research combines philosophy of history, public history, and legal history. He is a member of the organizing committee of the International Network for Theory of History [INTH]. From 2015 to 2016 he was a Fulbright visiting researcher at Stanford University. Currently he is writing his PhD dissertation. Personal website: [www.thejudgeandthehistorian.ugent.be](http://www.thejudgeandthehistorian.ugent.be).