

SKETCHES FROM THE LIFE OF RAGUSAN MERCHANTS IN LONDON IN THE TIME OF HENRY VIII

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ABSTRACT: A fairly numerous colony of Ragusan merchants lived in London in the first half of the sixteenth century. Their business activities can be reconstructed to a considerable degree from the preserved notarial and customs records, but there is very little evidence of the other aspects of their lives in England. The article presents three episodes which tell us something of their private lives as well.

The reign of King Henry VIII (1509-1547) saw a rapid growth of Anglo-Ragusan commercial relations, so that a fairly numerous colony of Ragusan merchants sprang up in London. Its members were mostly merchants who were based in the English metropolis or who managed the English branch of commercial companies with the central office in Ragusa. It also included a number of young Ragusans learning the trade in the London firms of their older countrymen who had already developed commercial links in London and other trading centres.

The Ragusan merchants in London were engaged mostly in the export of English woollen cloths, then highly valued and in great demand in the Balkans and on other Eastern markets, with which Ragusa maintained a steady trade, and their imports consisted of Cretan wines and, to a lesser extent, products of the Italian manufacturing centres. The London colony was occasionally

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augmented by Ragusan seamen, whose large ships—called *argosies* in England—brought wares from the Eastern Mediterranean to the ports of London, Margate and Southampton, and loaded English products for their return voyage.¹

We have not much information of these Ragusans living in distant England in the early sixteenth century. What we can get to know from the extant records are mostly their business affairs, for considerable evidence of these activities has been preserved in the Ragusan notarial books or in the English customs accounts and port books. What else they did, who they associated with, how they passed their free time—we know next to nothing. Because of the nature of the preserved documents, observed an expert on the English history of this period, the man who had no quarrels has no history.² Indeed, we owe the scant light that falls on the private lives of these Ragusans in London mostly to the moments when they appeared in English courtrooms either as plaintiffs or as defendants. On these rare occasions we can learn something about their friends and foes, about their character traits, their attitude to that foreign country in which they made their temporary home, about their interests outside the commercial, banking or seafaring spheres, and about their love affairs.

Ragusan merchants came to England without their families or were unmarried, so that it is not surprising that we find some evidence of their entanglements with English women. The English poet John Skelton (c.1460-1529) mentions in one of his poems the concubines of foreign merchants who live in Fenchurch Street.³ That street is in the vicinity of the Tower, in the part of London in which the majority of the Ragusan merchants operating in England lived.⁴ The testaments of some of these merchants include bequests to beneficiaries who may have been their unwedded wives or their children born out of wedlock. Luca Lukarević (Luccari), one of the most eminent Ragusan merchants in London in the period 1519-1534, had an illegal daughter

¹ A detailed account of the position and activities of the Ragusan merchants in Tudor and Stuart London, of the organization of their trade and of the goods they dealt in is given in Vesevin Kostić, *Dubrovnik i Engleska 1300-1650*. Beograd: Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, 1975: pp. 97-227.

² James A. Williamson, *The Tudor Age*. London: Longmans, 1953: p. 213.

³ John Skelton, »Against Garnesche«, in: *Complete Poems*, ed. Philip Henderson. London, 1966: p. 160.

⁴ A plan of old London, with marked streets in which Ragusan merchants lived, is given in V. Kostić, *Dubrovnik i Engleska* (illustration 35).

with an Englishwoman, who later got married in London.⁵ Ivan Vuković (Giovanni Lupi, John Lupi), one of the Ragusan merchants active in London in a slightly later period, explicitly mentions his son John in the testament, born to him in England by a certain “Mistress B”.⁶ Others had less lasting relations and got involved in various affairs with young Englishwomen, which sometimes landed them in unexpected situations, made them victims of blackmail, involved them in lawsuits with their hosts or even exposed them to mortal danger. We shall examine here a few episodes which illuminate these aspects of the life of the members of the Ragusan trading colony in London in the time of King Henry VIII.

In the first of them the real or alleged victim was the young Ragusan nobleman Frano Gradić (Francesco de Gradi). He came to England around 1525 and in the course of the next fifteen or so years we meet him as one of the better-known, though not the most eminent Ragusan merchants in England, who carried out various business activities in London, Margate and Southampton in his own name and as an agent of various merchants in Ragusa, Venice and Flanders.⁷

Gradić’s reputation was, however, brought into question about 1535, when John Fuller from London submitted a bill of complaint to the London court accusing him of violent behaviour, robbery and adultery. Gradić protested that the accusation was trumped up, made with the intent to implicate him and extort from him indemnity for the crimes he had never committed. Nevertheless, Gradić did not want his case to be tried by the municipal court of London and by a jury composed of London citizens, for he doubted that he would get a fair trial, especially since there was considerable anti-alien sentiment among the London citizens at that time. Therefore he applied to the Chancery Court, petitioning it to take over his case.

⁵ *Testamenta notariae*, ser. 10.1, vol. 37, ff. 197-198v, State Archives of Dubrovnik (Državni arhiv u Dubrovniku), henceforth: SAD.

⁶ Vuković’s will, made in English in Addington on 25 November 1603 (Register of Wills Proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, 7 Harte), is published in V. Kostić: *Dubrovnik i Engleska* (Appendix 27).

⁷ *Procurae notariae*, ser. 30, vol. 15, f. 191v (SAD); *Diversa notariae*, ser. 26, vol. 101, ff. 154v-155r (SAD); *Lettere di Levante*, ser. 27.1, vol. 17, f. 150rv (SAD); *Port Books* SC5/4/37, (15 September 1531), f. 67rv (Southampton, Civic Record Office); *Diversa cancellariae*, ser. 25, vol. 121, f. 109 (SAD). Cf. V. Kostić, *Dubrovnik i Engleska*: pp. 217-218, 247-248, 502, 600.

The Chancery Court differed from the municipal and other common-law courts in several of its practices, one of them being that it did not confine itself to the strict application of formal legal norms and of the principle of precedent, but reached its verdicts guided by consciousness and equity. It was established in the fifteenth century and gained increasing importance in the sixteenth century, for it was efficient and comparatively impartial, so that many litigants dissatisfied with the proceeding in or verdicts of lower courts appealed to it. Gradić's petition addressed to that court has been preserved,⁸ testifying to what crime he was accused of and how he represented his case.

Gradić says that he had known John Fuller and his wife Elizabeth for about a year. The pair often visited him in his house, and they became close friends. John and his wife were rather poor and Gradić showed sympathy for their difficult material position, and was always willing to help them and to do them various other favours. However, the relations between John and Elizabeth deteriorated because of John's violent temper, and Elizabeth, in fear for her safety, left her husband. Thereupon he brought charges against her before the London court, accusing her that she owed him two hundred pounds. Consequently, Elizabeth was imprisoned, and John hoped that she would remain in jail for the rest of her life because she was unable to pay the security demanded for her release. Gradić and some other of Elizabeth's friends (whom the Ragusan does not name), however, provided the money for the security, and Elizabeth was released. But John continued to treat her so roughly that she stood in fear of her life and dared not return to their house. Moreover, John, enraged because Gradić was helping Elizabeth in her predicament, submitted a bill of complaint against him to the London court. He alleged that on 8 February 1534 Gradić broke into his house armed "with Sword and knyves", assaulted his wife, and abducted her, taking "dyuerse parcelles of the goodes and catelles of the sayd fullor", including "a womans gown of wollen Clothe color blacke lyned with Turkey saten... vij Ringes of Gold with precyious Stones yn them ynfixed one Ringe of golde grayvd with a ff and a D iij Table Clothes of lynen Clothe vj napkins of lynen Clothe three toweles", a number of pewter vessels as well as some more valuable pieces, such as a goblet of gilt silver. The total value of the things thus taken by Gradić amounted, Fuller claimed in his complaint, to forty pounds.

⁸ *Early Chancery Proceedings*, C1/804, f. 23 (London, Public Record Office; henceforth: PRO).

Gradić dismissed all these allegations, maintaining that Fuller had never in his life owned goods worth so much as a third of that sum, and that he had nothing to do with the things Fuller mentioned in his complaint. He added, however, that some of them were in Elizabeth's possession, but that she was ready to admit it at any time if required, provided she could come to court without danger of imprisonment. In spite of that, Gradić continued, Fuller insisted that Gradić be brought to court as soon as possible and condemned unjustly. The trial of this case by the London court would be very perilous for Gradić, not only because Elizabeth would not dare to appear personally as a witness and declare the truth in that matter, but also because it would soil his reputation and cause great damage and loss to him as a foreigner and a merchant. Gradić therefore appealed to the Lord Chancellor to have a writ of *certiorari* directed to the mayor, aldermen and sheriffs of London, so that the Chancery Court might verify all the circumstances of the case and reach a just verdict.

We do not know what sentence, if any, the Chancery Court passed in this case. Of all the papers relating to this matter, only this petition by Gradić has been preserved, so that there is no evidence of the proofs or arguments that Fuller may have adduced against him. Judging, however, by what Gradić himself says, it does not appear that he was quite innocent in that matter. It seems, though, that regardless of the final outcome of the suit, Gradić's business reputation was not seriously or lastingly damaged, as he feared, for we continue to meet him as an exporter and importer based in the English capital several years longer.⁹

More vivid details have been preserved in the documents connected with another suit brought before the Chancery Court about ten years later. It was a dispute between a London craftsman named Thomas Roydon and the Ragusan merchant Gabro Marinov Pucić (de Poza). Roydon's trade was the making of pewter vessels, an article which formed a substantial portion of the exports of the Ragusan merchants in London. He had a house and a shop in Lombard Street in the vicinity of the Tower. Pucić lived in the adjacent Billiter Lane. He had resided in London from about 1543¹⁰ and he and Roydon knew each other for a considerable time. Their friendly relations were, however, broken

⁹ *Port Books*, SC5/4/38, 28 July 1535 (Southampton, Civic record Office); *High Court of Admiralty*, 3/2, f. 189v (PRO); *Exchequer. The King's Remembrancer, Customs Accounts*, E 122/82/8, *passim* (PRO).

¹⁰ *Diversa cancellariae*, vol. 132, f. 132rv; *Diversa notariae*, vol. 109, f. 209.

when the Englishman brought a suit before the London Court against Pucić, alleging that the Ragusan had seduced his wife Anne and appropriated some of his valuables. Thus Pucić and Roydon's wife Anne found themselves in the London jail. Pucić then applied, as Gradić had done, to the Chancery Court with a petition that the case be transferred to that institution. The petition contained his version of the developments which had led to the dispute.¹¹

Pucić says that he often passed through Lombard Street¹² and thus got to know Roydon's wife, who was a seamstress and had a workshop in her house there. She once offered her services to him and Pucić gave her a length of cloth to make several shirts and handkerchiefs for him. After that he came to her shop several times to inquire whether the things he ordered were ready and how the work progressed. Anne would invite him on such occasions to come into the house so that the passers-by should not stop and gaze at the things she was showing him on the stall. Thus he would enter Roydon's house, often at the invitation of Roydon himself, and many times Pucić sat there having a drink and chatting with Roydon and his wife. It happened often on such occasions that Roydon had to go out on some business and leave the Ragusan alone with his wife. When the shirts were made, Pucić paid for them what Anne asked. Then his troubles began. Roydon devised a plan, in collusion with his wife and some of his neighbours, to exact money from him. So, one night at about nine or ten o'clock he sent his housemaid to Pucić's house to ask him, in his own and his wife's name, to come to their house. The housemaid found Pucić in the company of some distinguished merchants, who, seeing that Pucić was reluctant, persuaded him to go. Thus he went, together with the maid, to Roydon's house. The door was opened by Anne, who asked him to come in, whereupon Pucić, suspecting nothing, entered. Then the things took a dramatic turn. He had hardly entered the house, when Roydon stepped out of a corner and asked Pucić what he was doing in his house at that time of night. He began to shout that he knew that Pucić had several time defiled his wife and that he was going to pay for it before he left. "And euen incontynent there", continued Pucić, "came the Constable & others whyche were appoynted for the same matter purposely before & demanded the cause of your Oratour beying there. And your sayd Orator beying aboute to open and shewe to them the cyrcumstaunces of the sayd matter, they sayd that they knewe yt well enough.

¹¹ *Early Chancery Proceedings*, C1/1051, f. 40. The document is badly damaged in the upper right corner.

¹² Lombard Street was a hive of international trade and banking in Tudor London.

And then the sayd Roydon vpon that sayd openly: Maisters seying he wyll not agreee nowe to gyve me money for amendes, I pray you take & bring him to the Counter”. Thus Pucić was taken to the local prison by the commandment of the alderman of that ward and spent the night there. The following morning Roydon’s neighbours declared before the alderman that Anne was “in a way a common woman of her bodie”, which she did not deny when examined, saying that she was driven to such behaviour out of necessity because her husband, whom she wanted to divorce, was not able to maintain her. The alderman then realized that the whole affair was contrived, and released Pucić from prison.

Roydon, however, did not give up, but brought formal charges against Pucić, so that the Ragusan had to put up surety in order to avoid imprisonment while the case was pending. Roydon alleged that Pucić had broken into his house on that particular night and on several other occasions and dishonored his wife. Therefore he claimed damages of a hundred pounds (a very high sum at that time, roughly as much as a craftsman could earn in four to five years).

Pucić further says in his complaint that he is compelled to apply to the Court of Chancery Court, for, being a stranger, he dares not await trial by a jury composed of twelve London citizens, “for as much as the sayd Roydon shall haue a Jurye empanelled whiche shalbe hys frendes & of his own eleccyion, and that all redye he avauteth and made boste of whyche Jurie, he & many other of hys Neybours hath also avauted, shall gyve your sayd Oratour soure sauce to hys swete meate... that he shall paye as well for the same as euer any did paie for the lyke cause. And that all the Jurye shall followe & do as parte of them whyche be hys fryndes shall do therin, orels they shall dryve them thereto by forse and long tarrying”.

Besides, Pucić continues, Anne often complained to him over the previous three months that her husband spent all the money he could get hold of on prostitutes and dice, that he had also taken all that she could earn by sewing, and had even pawned some of her apparel. Therefore she asked Pucić on several occasions to lend her some money to recover her things, promising that she and her husband would live honestly in the future. Wishing to help her, Pucić lent her more than five pounds over several months, but then he realized that she only dissembled in order to obtain money from him, and refused to help her any further. When Roydon and his wife saw that they could no longer elicit money from him in that way, they made a plan to lure him to their house, accuse him before witnesses of trespassing and thus extort damages from him.

At the end of his petition, Pucić asks Lord Chancellor to take over his case and forbid Roydon to proceed with his suit in the London court before it is considered in the Chancery Court.

The procedure in the Chancery Court was such that it was necessary for the plaintiff to submit a bill of complaint adducing reasons for the transfer of his case, and then, if the petition was accepted, the other party was asked to submit a written reply to all the points cited in the petition. The plaintiff could then submit his rejoinder to this reply, and the parties were thus allowed to contradict each other until they exhausted all their arguments. The Court then used all these documents in the next stage of the proceedings, which consisted in the examination of evidence.

In the suit between Frano Gradić and John Fuller, which was discussed at the beginning of this paper, no document apart from Gradić's petition has come down to us, so that we know only how he wished to present the case. The preserved documents in Pucić's case, on the other hand, include a barrage of charges and countercharges, which enables us to get a clearer picture of the problems the Court had in establishing the truth.

In his answer,¹³ Roydon declares that the Ragusan's bill of complaint is "vntrue & sclanderous conteynyng no suffycyent matter wherunto the said Thomas ought to be compelled to make ony answer". However, since he wants it to be known how badly Pucić behaved, he wants to declare that his wife had always been an honest woman and known as such to all their neighbours, until Pucić, "of a long time knowen for a vycyous person", seduced her during his frequent visits and provoked her to satisfy his lust. Thus he abused Anne for a long time "to the great sclaunder and damage" of Roydon, who did not suspect anything, although the affair was well known in their neighbourhood. Pucić falsely alleges that Roydon and his wife sent their maid to summon him to their house. What happened in fact was that Roydon, advised by his neighbours, let it be known that he would be away from home for some time. The plan was to conceal himself with several witnesses in his house and surprise the Ragusan in the nightly visit to his wife, and thus make manifest their adultery. The first night Pucić dared not enter Roydon's house because he noticed a poor man lying in the doorway, who might see him going in to Anne, but the night following he came at about eleven o'clock and Anne let him in at the back

¹³ "Thanswere of Thomas Roydon to the byll of Complaynt of Gabryell de poza" (*Early Chancery Proceedings*, C1/1051, f. 41).

door. At that moment there appeared Roydon, the constable and several neighbours and found Pucić and Roydon's wife together. Thereupon the constable committed them both to prison, and when they were released, Pucić took away Anne, who had previously taken some of Roydon's possessions, and has continued to maintain her. These are, concludes Roydon, the real reasons why he accused Pucić of trespassing.

After that it was the Ragusan's turn.¹⁴ It is understandable, he says in his reply, that Roydon does not see why an answer should be demanded from him, for, as it can be seen, he cannot offer any satisfactory reply. But neither does Pucić, on his part, see why he should give any answer to what Roydon has alleged, because all that is untrue, untrustworthy and without proper legal grounds. Nevertheless, he wants to stress again that Roydon, wishing to defraud him of his money and goods, did send, in collusion with his wife and some other people, his maid for him and that it was at Roydon's explicit request that he came to his house on the night he was imprisoned. All the other allegations made by Roydon against him are slanderous and false accusations.

This short "replication" was countered by the Englishman with an even shorter "rejoinder".¹⁵ The parties were obviously running short of arguments, and Roydon's reply boils down to the assertion that all he said was true, and all that the other party affirmed was false.

These are all the documents relative to this dispute which have been preserved. We do not know how the examination of the evidence proceeded or what the witnesses said, or, for that matter, what verdict was finally passed.

As opposed to these disputes the outcome of which is not known, the preserved documents in another case make it possible for us to reconstruct the entire chain of events which led to the murder of a young Ragusan and his friend on the Thames on a summer night in 1533.

That Ragusan was Jerko Đurđević (Heronimo Jac. de Giorgio), member of a patrician family which had been active in the Ragusan trade with England for years. His brother Marin had been based in London from about 1524, and

¹⁴ "The Replycaciun of Gabryell de Poza to thanswere of Thomas Roydon" (*Early Chancery Proceedings*, C1/1051, f. 42).

¹⁵ "The reioyndre of Thomas Roydon to the replicacion of Gabriell de Poza" (*Early Chancery Proceedings*, C1/1051, f. 43).

he exported mainly woollen cloths and hides. Jerko came to England about 1528, possibly to replace his brother Marin, who is last mentioned in London in 1527. Although very young, Marin was a capable and reliable businessman, and in a very short time he became one of the most eminent Ragusan merchants in London. Many merchants in Ragusa entrusted him with their orders for English goods, and his trading relations rapidly expanded. His ability earned him high repute even outside the Ragusan trading sphere and he established numerous business links with commercial and transit centres in Flanders and Central Europe.¹⁶

We can only speculate how Jerko's further commercial activity in England would have developed, for his career was abruptly terminated. In the summer of 1533, Johann Wolf, a member of the German trading colony in London, made, together with three Englishmen from Westminster, a plan to murder Jerko and his friend, a young German merchant named Karl Bench, who lived in the same house as Jerko. At the instigation of these four men, Wolf's wife Alice, an Englishwoman, invited Jerko and Karl to a house on the Thames between London and Westminster, which was a separate town at that time. The two young men responded to the invitation, since they had known Alice for some time. They spent the whole afternoon together, and when they were about to return to London, Alice asked them to wait until dark, promising that she would accompany them and spend the night with them. Jerko and his friend agreed to wait until evening. When it became completely dark, Alice led them to a boat on the Thames that was to take them to London. The vessel was manned by two rowers and it looked like all the other boats for hire which were used for traffic on the Thames at that time. In the covered part at the stern, however, lay concealed Alice's husband Johann Wolf, while the men disguised as rowers were in fact Wolf's accomplices from Westminster.

Not suspecting anything, the two young men went with Alice in the boat, and the rowers pushed off and began rowing down the dark river. When they passed a certain part of the journey and began rowing along the less inhabited river banks, Wolf sprang up from his hiding place and stabbed Bench, who was sitting facing the prow, three times with his sword. The very first thrust went straight to his heart and Jerko's friend died in a few seconds. Then Wolf and the rowers assaulted Jerko. They stabbed him several times, but he continued to defend himself a considerable time, and the struggle was ended

¹⁶ Cf. V. Kostić, *Dubrovnik i Engleska*: pp. 221-222.

only when they broke his neck with one blow (probably with an oar). The murderers then took the jewelry, clothes and keys of their victims, bound their bodies back to back, hung heavy stones on them and dropped them into the Thames. Then they went to their rooms, opened them with the stolen keys and took the money, chains, rings and other valuables they found in them.

The news of the disappearance of these two men caused a great stir in London. An investigation was instituted and in a few days the murderers were identified. Two accomplices were caught and they confessed how the murder was perpetrated and who were the other participants in the crime. These two were immediately executed, and the Parliament passed a special Act ordering all English authorities to execute immediately, without the usual legal procedure, the remaining murderers if they apprehended them.¹⁷

That was an exceptional measure, but the English authorities considered that they had to take some exceptional steps, for the news of the murder of the two eminent aliens in London spread rapidly even outside England and left a very bad impression. Only ten days after the murder on the Thames, William Lock, an English merchant based in Antwerp, wrote to the Lord Chancellor Thomas Cromwell that there was much talk in that town of the ignominious murder of Đurđević and his friend. Lock recommended in his letter that the perpetrators be severely punished in order to mitigate the indignation caused by the fate of these two aliens, “for here the ij strangers be takyn a mong merchantes strangers for grett hed men of yong men”.¹⁸

Đurđević’s case is, however, quite exceptional in the history of Anglo-Ragusan relations in this period. There are even very few instances of bad treatment or unfriendly relations between the Ragusan merchants based in London and their English hosts. We can find expressions of open enmity towards the Genoese, the Venetians and other foreign merchants, but the Ragusans in London were very rarely objects of anti-alien feelings. The London merchants may have been envious of the flourishing business of some Ragusans in their midst, but they realized that they still had no real means of diverting the profits of the Ragusan merchants into their pockets. Besides, the

¹⁷ “An Acte concerning the attaynder of John Wolff his wyffe and others”, *Statutes of the Realm*, 28 Henry VIII, c. 34. The above account of the circumstances of Đurđević’s murder is based on the details mentioned in this document. The Act is reprinted in V. Kostić, *Dubrovnik i Engleska* (Appendix 18).

¹⁸ *State Papers*, 1, vol. 78, f. 37 (PRO).

Ragusans, unlike the Italian merchants, did not import into England provocatively luxurious goods, such as Italian costly textiles or showy articles of fashion. The decisive factor, however, in determining the English attitude towards the Ragusans in London was the fact that they exported from England finished cloths, so that they did not deprive the numerous class of English craftsmen engaged in the manufacture of woollens of their livelihood, as did the Venetians, the Genoese and the Florentines, who bought up the best English wool and exported it into the developed Italian manufacturing centres. The 1530 anti-alien riots in London, we may be reminded, broke out precisely because of the popular feeling that foreign merchants were putting English weavers out of their jobs by sending English wool abroad. The Ragusans, on the other hand, could claim on good grounds that their exports of finished woollen cloths contributed to the general employment in England and also increased the funds of the English treasury, to which they were paying considerable sums of money in the form of customs and other duties.