

LETTER FROM ITALY

A SINKING FEELING

Doesn't Venice want to be saved?

BY MICHAEL SPECTER

THIS has been a thoroughly humiliating year for the people of Venice. The city's population of doddering countesses and hapless roués has declined to its lowest level since long before the fall of the Serenissima, two hundred years ago. It has been three years since *La Fenice*, the wondrous eighteenth-century opera house, which presented the premières of "Rigoletto" and "La Traviata," burned to the ground. Avarice, graft, and a thick web of lawsuits have insured that it will be a long time before anyone sings a note there again. The town fathers were deeply offended this spring by the opening in Las Vegas of a billion-dollar virtual version of their city called the Venetian Resort, but they were even more offended at not having been asked to help design it. Explaining why he refused to travel to Las Vegas for the opening, Massimo Cacciari, the mayor of the real city, said, "Besides being a mega-galactic example of kitsch, the project was developed without involving the city of Venice in the slightest bit."

One is supposed to regard Venice, which has been stitched together over centuries from a few lonely scraps of land into an enchanted republic, as a mystical refuge. But to do that is getting harder every year. Venetians are famously proud and aloof, and when they speak about their city they refer to sixteenth-century naval victories and the perfidy of Napoleon as if both issues

affected them today. The Mayor, a philosopher and a man of the left, often blames Venetian troubles on the West's craven need for memorabilia, and has commissioned an advertising campaign that will feature rats, dead pigeons, and canals cluttered with refuse—all in an attempt to beat back the hordes who invade the city by water every day, only to withdraw by nightfall. "Venice needs intelligent visitors, not the tourists who assault it, who run in, grab what they want, and run out again," Cacciari said in May when he described the new campaign, which has been put together

by Oliviero Toscani, the man behind the controversial advertisements for Benetton. "We need visitors who are not seeing the picture-postcard image of Venice, but who realize what problems the city faces. *Basta* with the gondolas and the Bridge of Sighs."

What other city so wholly dependent on tourists has shown such contempt for them? Cacciari says he is sick to death of the bridge-and-tunnel crowd—the groups of Poles and Slovenians who race about the city and then, less than six hours later, roll on toward Padua to check out Giotto's chapel. He wants guests who will come for a while, stay at the Cipriani, spend their money in the pricey shops on St. Mark's Square, and stroll purposelessly along the Riva degli Schiavoni. It is an utterly naïve and hopeless desire. As Mary McCarthy pointed out more than forty years ago (in "Venice Observed"), Venice is a "folding picture-postcard of itself": the tourist Venice *is* Venice, and

it is folly to pretend anything else. "It has been part museum, part amusement park," she wrote, "living off the entrance fees of tourists, ever since the early eighteenth century when its former sources of revenue ran dry."

Things have been tumbling steadily since McCarthy wrote those words. In Venice today, there are nearly twice as many women who are older than seventy-five than women who are younger than eighteen. Just three per cent of the population is in elementary school—an astonishingly bleak figure, even in the country that for much of the past decade has had the lowest birth rate on earth. But, if this year has been burdensome, the year 2000—when the millennium and the Papal Jubilee promise to bring as many as twenty million people to Venice—will be far worse. Venetian officials have mumbled darkly about selling tickets or putting quotas on the number of



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visitors who may enter each day. None of that will be possible; Venice is still not quite Disneyland. But, in the end, concern is understandable, because the city is in bad shape.

More than thirty years after the great flood of 1966, when the world first came to understand how fragile the place is—after three decades of discussion by governments from the local tribunals of the Veneto to the United Nations, after half the population has fled and dozens of commissions have been appointed, disbanded, and reformed, and their recommendations ignored with increasing contempt, and after international experts have endorsed a giant rescue plan appropriately called Project Moses, which would bring a sophisticated system of floating barriers to the waters of the lagoon—Venetians continue to spurn outside efforts to rescue their doomed maze of fetid waterways, crumbling alleys, and priceless art.

“Venice is in great immediate peril,” Rafael L. Bras told me recently. “And I mean immediate.” Bras is a professor of civil and environmental engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He has consulted on water projects of varying immensity from San Juan to the Nile, and last year he led (yet another) team of international consultants who urged Venice to move rapidly forward with Project Moses. The project would deploy a series of giant hinged flaps at the entrances to the lagoon. Normally, they would be invisible, lying beneath the water, but when tides became high enough they could be raised within an hour to protect Venice from the surging Adriatic.

The project has been tough to sell, though. The Green Party and its allies still matter in Venice. They embody the popular sentimental notion that the city has finally, after centuries, fallen to invaders. The Greens talk constantly about the “natural” harmony of the lagoon and say the project would destroy its ecological balance: they somehow forget that Venice’s lagoon is highly polluted, deeply dependent on human intervention, and no longer natural in any way.

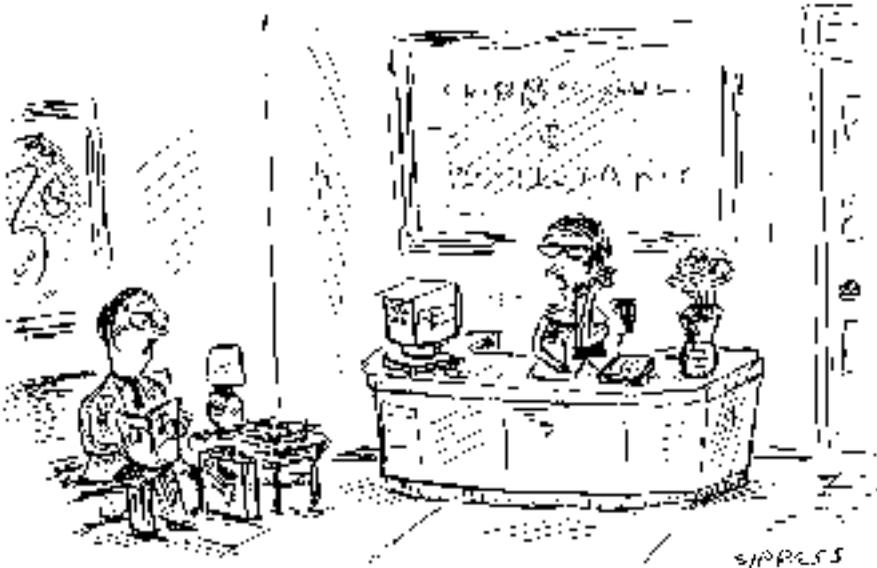
The Moses plan has been around for twenty years, and the need for it has become glaringly obvious. But after the M.I.T. group said that the barriers were essential—and a second team of world experts, appointed by the Italian government, said the same thing—the city

simply shrugged and formed another committee. A few weeks after that, Edo Ronchi, the Italian Environmental Minister (and a Green), surprised no one by postponing Moses until more studies could be completed.

“Those recommendations were biased,” Stefano Boato, a local Green Party leader who is a professor of urban planning at Venice’s University of Architecture, told me. “These are foreigners who were paid to come here and agree to this plan. It was a fix. Why should we listen?”

ONE afternoon not long ago, I walked over to the Compagnia della Vela, a turn-of-the-century yacht club whose terrace spreads along the Grand Canal just off St. Mark’s Square, near Harry’s Bar. I was on my way to meet Gianpietro Zucchetta, a giant fellow with glasses the size of picture frames and one of those mustacheless beards favored by C. Everett Koop and Abraham Lincoln, for whom he could have been a body double. Zucchetta is a special Venetian type. He has one wife, three cats, no children, and is obsessed by the city of his birth. Zucchetta is the author of “Venice Bridge by Bridge,” a two-volume, twelve-pound work that treats each of the island’s four hundred and forty-six bridges as if it were a cherished young member of a royal family. He has also published several other exhaustive works on Venetian history. “I wanted to leave some documentation of this city when it is gone,” he said.

That is not something that he expects to take centuries, by the way. “We certainly have a generation left. We may even have two,” he told me while we sipped prosecco and stared at the vaporetta crisscrossing their way down the Grand Canal. Dozens of men were selling tchotchkes on the walkway below us—bad sketches of frail boats, the type of tiny stuffed toys that come with Happy Meals, and pictures of the great Venetian muse Cindy Crawford. “I don’t really think anyone serious believes there will be a Venice in a hundred years,” he continued evenly. “I don’t see how there can be.” Zucchetta is not given to gloomy projections, and he is well aware that predicting the death of Venice is obvious and trite. He was the first Venetian I spoke with (but not the only one) to make fun of Byron’s over-



"He's dead. Would you like his voice mail?"

wrought lines about the inevitable fate of the city:

Oh Venice! Venice! When thy marble walls

Are level with the waters, there shall be
A cry of nations o'er thy sunken halls,
A loud lament along the sweeping sea!

Like any normal Venetian, Zucchetta shrugs off such hysteria, but he has nevertheless come to believe that Byron had a point about the sunken halls. It is a belief he came to in a most unusual way.

"A few years ago, I decided to build an exact replica of Casanova's gondola," he told me. It was a famous boat, because Casanova was perhaps the eighteenth century's most famous man about the waterways. Zucchetta began his project as a lark, but as a serious lark, because he built the boat to Casanova's specifications. "It was all for fun," he went on. "I love boats. But when it was built I realized that the water is now too high in many of the canals for the gondola to pass beneath the bridges. It's the same weight, size, and type as Casanova's. But you cannot use it to move around the city anymore. That scared me, because I realized then that the big floods aren't the problem for Venice. The small ones are."

MUCH is made of the possibility of a single, devastating flood that, through a combination of high tides, climatic depressions in the Adriatic, and hellacious siroccos (powerful winds

from the southeast that carry great humidity and begin, typically, in the deserts of North Africa), could strike the city. That is what happened in 1966. Venetians talk about the *acqua alta*—high water—the way Angelenos talk about "the big one." They worry far more, however, about pollution, sewage problems, and their inability to cram themselves into overcrowded boats. "Everyone here can put on a pair of gum boots a few times a year," Armando Danella told me. He is the chief of special laws for Venice—its urban-planning director. "A pileup on the highway will kill more people than floods in Venice," he said. "Remember, in 1966 nobody even died. That is not our problem. Tourists are our problem. It would be nice to live like a normal person. You can't get home and you can't get to work. The vaporetti are always full of tourists."

If Venice banned tourists tomorrow, though, its water problems would still keep getting worse. At the beginning of this century, St. Mark's Square was flooded about six times a year. By 1989, it was flooded forty times, and in 1996 the number was ninety-nine. The problem goes back (as most things in the city do) to the way Venice has been built since the tenth century. First, oak piles are driven far enough into the ground to rest on compressed clay at the bottom of the lagoon. Wooden planks are placed on top of them. Then, finally,

a layer of Istrian stone—a kind of marble—is used as a foundation beneath the palazzi and the streets of the city. There is no problem if the stones get wet a couple of times a year. But if they get wet every month—as they have done for at least a decade—they stay wet. When they don't dry out, a mortar version of mildew sets in: salt water moves up into the stone through capillary action, the stones crack, and the foundation of the city starts to literally fall apart.

That is what is happening now. Thanks largely to the warming of the world's oceans, the sea level around Venice has risen about four and a half inches since 1900. At the same time, the land base on which the city is built has subsided by more than eight inches. Meteorologists and oceanographers who focus on global climate change predict that seas, including the Adriatic, will be at least eight inches higher by the middle of the next century. That would put Venice under water at least half of the year. In many other countries, among them England and the Netherlands, hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent in preparation for the sea change to come. Both London and Rotterdam already use floating barriers similar to the ones proposed for Venice.

In Venice, however, people are not convinced that meteorological and physical realities of the past—or the future—apply to them. "The sea is so tricky," Armando Danella told me during our conversation in his office. "Yes, it is rising. In the world, absolutely. But it cannot be proved that the water will rise in the upper Adriatic. Perhaps it will. But we don't know for sure, because there is no proof."

When I asked him how you could prove something that would take place in the future, he looked at me as if I had finally come to understand the Venetian mind. "Exactly," he said, smiling. "That is just my point."

THE average Venetian couldn't care less about all this nonsense. When I tried to talk to gondoliers (whose fees start at eighty-five dollars for a brief, predictable ride) about the water problems, they laughed me off with a wave of their ornamental straw hats. "I am more concerned about whether one of

your bombs falls on us than whether we will be swallowed by the sea," one of them told me, the week after NATO pilots accidentally dumped some cluster bombs in the waters off Chioggia, a fishing center south of Venice.

Most merchants don't mind the daily turnover in tourists. They live off kitsch, and they live pretty well. There seem to be a million places to buy glass beads and lace napkins in Venice—at ridiculous prices. There are, of course, many visitors who see the city the way Mayor Cacciari wants them to—staying for days, visiting the thirteenth-century glassworks of Murano and the alluring but spookily desolate island of Torcello. But the price of wandering the basic paths of Venice is higher than it has been in years, and since almost everyone leaves the city the day he arrives, there is no incentive to develop a culture that is kind to the consumer. There is, for that reason, a sort of abandon to the place that makes it seem like a permanent Weimar.

The oldest residents are often the fiercest opponents of change—by which they mean Project Moses or anything that reminds them that Venice is no longer an independent republic. Some of that is because they believe Venice has already accommodated itself too completely to the world; the rest, it seems, is a perfectly understandable fear of the future.

Countess Teresa Foscolo Foscari is perhaps the most prominent exception. She is willing not only to acknowledge the future but to embrace it. Known in her earlier days as the Red Countess, for political views that scandalized the upper class, she married into the family of Francesco Foscari, the famous Doge who led the republic in a ruinous series of wars against Milan in the fifteenth century (and who is the subject of Byron's tragedy "The Two Foscari" and of the Verdi opera). On her side of the family, Ugo Foscolo was a poet and novelist whose work, written during the Napoleonic era, is considered to be among the masterpieces of Italian literature. Teresa Foscolo Foscari was a founder of the Venetian branch of one of Italy's most important conservation organizations, Italia Nostra, and she has spent nearly every day of her eighty-three years in Venice.

I went to see her, in her flat, which

takes up part of a frayed but still inviting palazzo on the edge of a quiet waterway. It was one of the season's first truly humid days. "What can I offer but coffee when the sirocco is hunting the city?" she asked, and then she instructed her butler, who was dressed in a black wool three-piece suit and who has been with her for fifty years, to make espresso. Her parlor was filled with lithographs, old rugs, and vases of freshly cut flowers. The Countess has white hair parted severely in the middle. Her face is deeply lined, but her eyes are bright, and she was eager to talk. After a preliminary lecture that touched on a thousand years of history, rambling through digressions on Freud, the decline of the family, and Venice's still strange relationship with Rome ("I am absolutely opposed to any talk of Venice as a separate republic," she told me, as if that issue might be put before parliament during this session. "It has to remain a part of Italy"), she got to her point.

"We have always been both isolated and defended by water," she said. "The lack of a bridge meant for so long we had freedom from the Church, true independence. But there was a price. We never grew up. Venice is intemperate—we never learned how to be citizens. So now our strength has become what is killing us." She walked over to a window and gazed at the sea, as if to consult the weather. Venice, she went on, has become too independent for its own good and it no longer has the right to be that way.

The butler brought our drinks. Outside, the boats were making their late-afternoon noises, and the water was lapping against the wall of the palazzo. "We need to be protected," the Countess said. "We are not alone anymore. They don't know history, even." She was referring to the city leaders and to the local chapter of Italia Nostra, which she no longer supports; she sees them as unrealistic and utopian. "In 1500, they rerouted the rivers to save the lagoon," she said. "Then they had resolve. Now they have nothing." After a while, she grew tired, and it was time for me to leave. "Thank you for coming," she said, rising slowly and offering her hand as her butler appeared to show me out. "And if you see the Greens tell them they have destroyed Paradise." ♦