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THE **MEMORIAL** ROOM

AT THE FRANCISCAN FRIARY AT POLJUD, SPLIT

This project goes back several years. We very much wanted to do something in memory of our past trustees, who have helped the Trust to achieve so much in the last 31 years of our existence. The Trust also received special funding for this purpose. The trustees who we commemorate, are, in alphabetical order, my late husband Henry Grant de la Poer Beresford-Peirse, Sherban Cantacuzino, John Julius Norwich and Peter Stormonth Darling.

Several possibilities were considered. In the end, we decided on the Library of the Franciscan Friary at Poljud, Split. The library holds a valuable collection of books, incunabula and various documents of national importance, going back for centuries. It seemed worthy every effort to try to preserve this collection for future generation. This became especially clear after the exhibition, “Lorenzo Lotto Portraits”, held at the Museo Nacional del Prado in Madrid from June to September 2018 and at the National Gallery in London from November 2018 to February 2019.





The exhibitions included the portrait of Bishop Toma Mrčić, latinised Niger, born c. 1460, died c. 1532. This portrait is in the collection of the Franciscans at Poljud, Split. It is 'oil on panel' and it measures 42 x 53.8 cm. It is signed and dated: Laurentius Lotus 1527. Bishop Toma Niger is also buried at the Friary and his tomb is now in the Friary cloister. It used to stand in a prominent place, in the church, right in front of the main altar, until about 1898 when the church was repaved and all memorials were moved to the Friary cloister.

There are many documents attesting to Bishop Toma Niger's visits to Venice and other places, trying to gather help in their struggles against the Ottoman powers. (See Radoslav Tomić, Lorenzo Lotto, Portret Tome Nigera u Splitu, Institut za povijest umjetnosti, 2021). Toma Niger was painted by Lotto in 1527, the same year as the well-known portrait of the collector, Andrea Odoni, (The Royal Collection, Hampton Court). Another remarkable thing about our portrait at Split is that it is in its original frame. This was especially singled out at the exhibition in London when it was said that there was not a single painting in the collection of the National Gallery, nor in any other, dating to those times, still in its original frame.

A suitable room was found in the Friary, with a lovely outlook to the cloister, which we completely refurbished, with new flooring, electrics, everything that





was necessary. We bought conservation cupboards and chests, conservation material, and restored several pieces of furniture belonging to the friary. There are paintings on the walls, together with a memorial plaque which lists the names of our trustees. This was carved in stone by Marin Barišić, a stone conservator, who works for the Croatian Conservation Institute and who came to England many years ago to train at Weymouth College under our auspices. We give thanks to Marin for doing this for the Trust.

The room will have paintings on the walls, table and chairs, lamps, everything to make it a comfortable study room, a “Studiolo”, for researchers to work in. The room will also be open to the public. It will have the latest “state of the art” equipment in security and conservation protection. Now, the prospect of moving the oldest and most important documents into this secure environment loomed large. Luckily, a young paper conservator from Split, Mia Perković, who had trained at the University of Dubrovnik and worked for two years at the National and University Library at Zagreb, was found. Mia’s work is funded by our Trust.

There is a great amount of work to be done as is clearly shown on these photographs. Mia has now found an assistant, Heidi Vuković, also a qualified paper restorer, who needed work experience. Heidi’s work will be funded by the Franciscans.





They are both working hard and with great enthusiasm, warmly welcomed by the friars. They have found material which is not in the Library inventory, they are making a new inventory and identifying items. Mia is mechanically cleaning and stabilizing the material and putting it into archival boxes, while Heidi is making lists of the contents of the boxes. In September, they were half-way into the 16th century collection. They are isolating the infected material which will be treated separately to prevent further contamination. To this purpose, Mia has taken samples to the Institute for Public Health and depending on the results she will decide on the method of treatment. Some books will require restoration and for this they will apply to the Ministry of Culture for funding.

As we know, there are big plans to enlarge the library, applying for EU funding, to employ a proper and full-time librarian, which would greatly enhance its importance. I always remember the bibliophile Anthony Hobson telling me once how lucky Croatia was, in spite of all the upheavals, not to have had Henry VIII nor the French revolution! We must wish them well! The library holds interesting and important documents and it would be a great pity if they continued to languish, uncared for and not open to further research. Our effort, with the Memorial Room, planted a seed which we hope will flourish for many years.





Here, I would like to make a special appeal to the Croatian citizens who live in this country (UK) and pay their taxes here, as any such donation is qualified for Gift Aid which brings in another 25% from the Government. And, indeed, to any Croatian living anywhere, to consider helping this project. Our present contracts with Mia and Heidi are for three months and it would be important for them to finish this work, i.e., complete this phase of moving the early books, documents and works on paper, whatever can fit into the room, properly conserved and protected and safe for many future generations. It would be a pity that because of lack of funding we were not able to save these treasure, such an important part of the Croatian Cultural Heritage.

Now, mid-November, Mia and Heidi will complete this first phase of the work, the 16th century material, and place all they can in the Memorial Room. Then, their contracts will end. Recently, they had a visit from Mrs Urem, from the University Library of Split, who is the person in charge of library collections and who rated their work as first class. Mrs Urem will help to put the whole collection on the Register of Cultural Goods and this will thus acquire legal protection. However, much remains to be done for the 17th and 18th centuries collections and they have sent us a plan for approval. The 17th century collection is particularly numerous: it





is not protected, it is infected, there is humidity in the library and there is not a list of complete contents. They suggest to return to do this work beginning in April next year, lasting for about six months. This work will cost about 60,000 kunas, not a lot of money, but hugely important, and this is what I am appealing for. Please help us to complete this work, This will make the Library a jewel of the Croatian monastic libraries, worth every penny spent. This example may lead other libraries to follow suit. And, of course, we will thus give employment to two young people, an opportunity to put their skills to a great use. Soon they are expecting a visit from journalists which, I hope, will give the project the much needed publicity.

Please, go and visit them when you are in Split. The friars would welcome you. And, of course, I have more information and photographs should any-one be interested.

We would appreciate greatly any help you may be able to give us.

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