

Egyptian Blues of Zadar Cats

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Company: HRT – Croatian radio

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SUMMARY

Radio-documentary „Egyptian Blues of Zadar Cats“ is dedicated – as the title suggests – to the cats of Zadar, and alleged („imaginary“) legend that the first cats arrived into the city during Roman colonization, 1st century B.C. Using the radiophonic palette, the author, using fiction as well as documentary recordings, creates a hybrid form, and leads us throughout this made and imaginary world of quasi-historic documentary reveals some original and living inhabitants of Zadar and their special relations to these interesting and mysterious creatures.

TRANSCRIPT

MUSIC INTRO

ANNOUNCER: Egyptian Blues of Zadar Cats

DARIJO ŠPELIĆ: A letter from Marko Porsena, administrator of corn supply in Alexandria, probably from the year 28 before Christ.

ANNOUNCER: Darijo Špelić, the so-called historian and felinophile. Histor histeriae.

DARIJO ŠPELIĆ: Dear Decimus, I wish you health and happiness. Business first. At the beginning of May, I have sent you a liburna with twenty bales of Egyptian cotton and the money I received from the sale of the last part of the booty we earned on our raid to the East. And now some news from this land of torture called Egypt. When Octavian, after his victory over that drunk Mark Antony and his Egyptian mistress, left me in Alexandria with the task to oversee the supply of corn to Rome I did not know that this job would be so nasty. The greatest thieves trade in food, you remember the one who tried to sell us barley full of worms when we were preparing to advance towards Egypt after Actium. I broke many clubs on the backs of those thieves who attempt to double-cross Rome. I am not concerned with thieves, I have learnt all their tricks already, I am concerned with Egypt.

DRAGAN VESELIĆ: After the horrors of Theban massacre during the reign of the

18th dynasty, one of many sphinxes decided that its future is no doubt sombre, if not inexistent, so it furtively reached the Alexandria port at night, threw itself into the warm Mediterranean Sea and swam.

ANNOUNCER: Dragan Veselić, alias Mate Brusina, ludio ludus imperiae.

DRAGAN VESELIĆ: The records show that it touched land on the place where Zadar will develop somewhat later. Swimming behind it were cats... cats... cats... cats... cats.

KREŠO VASILJ: Well, Zadar is a town protected by cats, in a way... from rats, and you see there is also... for cleanliness. So, Zadar is a town protected by cats, and the inhabitants of Zadar also protect cats.

ŠIME PEFA: Look here, say, the rat is afraid of the cat only, only the cat, it does not have to catch it; I would not even let it catch it, but it flees bellow, where it belongs. It goes down to the sewerage.

KREŠO VASILJ: Look, there's a cat. It sits there, one of many and it stayed alone. There, you see, it bristled up and looks down the manhole. Because rats come out through manholes.

ŠIME PEFA: And so, I regret that people do not get it that these cats are important, very important for the town. They are not random, they are not for nothing, how can I say, and they are... a miracle. A miracle. There, I do not recall when I saw a rat in the town, and there are a million down there in the sewerage.

Sometimes it happens that a rat, I know that, I watch the documentaries, comes out as a reconnaissance patrol. And if it does not return, they don't... and this is true. Well, Makarska, for instance, I read that they have a problem – they sterilized all, poisoned all, all were... and now they have a problem with rats. The rat is not afraid of people. It can jump on person's chest. No problem. And it fears the cat. It is afraid only of the cat. I think that these cats should be guarded, protected, because they are wild cats. They are not mine, I just feed them.

MUSIC

DRAGAN VESELIĆ: The discovery of the Egyptian origin of Zadar cats is attributed to Spiridon Brusina's nephew, Mate.

DARIJO ŠPELIĆ: After Mate Brusina, the research into the origin of Zadar street cats has been fading away slowly, to disappear completely and vanish in the rush of pragmatism that forced the Egyptian cats to accept manual tasks: destruction of rats and occasional begging for food in restaurants, which led to the development of the phenomenon of passive aggression in them.

MUSIC

DRAGAN VESELIĆ: You have probably already heard the term passive aggression. These are behaviours during which the cat is aggressive, but it strikes with its paws, does not lash out or attack actively, insulting openly, cursing or shouting. During passive aggression the cat hides the feeling of anger on purpose masking

itself into something else. We can all be passive-aggressive sometimes, especially in a situation when we are not allowed to, or we think that we are not allowed to show how angry we are.

ŠIME PEFA: What the cat caught, in the last table at Toni's. Rats, they have a reconnaissance patrol and there is a kind of, I don't know how to say this... you see how big it is... look, there's blood on the floor. You see... oh my god... And this was caught by the small one which came with me, she saw that something was happening. And then she came like... and she left the pack you know. That one and Reks, the yellow one, they left the pack. And Leptirica comes here. **DARIJO**

ŠPELIĆ: A letter from Marko Porsena, administrator of corn supply in Alexandria, probably from the year 28 before Christ.

Here in Egypt, there is no animal whose head wasn't stuck on a human body and made a deity. Crocodiles, birds, dogs, cats, there is nothing they did not make a deity. The madness does not stop here. You know that they bury their dead by taking out their intestines and brain, and then dry them and wrap in a cloth. As if that was not weird enough, I found out that they do the same with cats. You know that I am not interested in that nonsense, but I had to deal with it too. I mean, the port attracts all kinds of people, good and bad – merchants and honest travellers, but also all kinds of thieves and vermin. There are cats, naturally, and

they are useful, because where there is corn there are all kinds of rodents that they hunt. But I did not expect more cats than rats on ships.

ŠIME PEFA: Look, this is Lepurica, she will go with us there, to join the gang. They come here, two-three, then there, now we'll see, let's go there now, we'll give them now, ha, okay? Let's go, let's go, Lepurica, come on, come along, let's go... Leptirica, let's go, come on... Here, we will give you some... no, they are waiting, they know exactly when I arrive... I am a bit late, and already they are... Leptirica, you come here, she stays here... she lives at Stipe's... you have it here, look... and we are moving on...

DARIJO ŠPELIĆ (v/o): Šime Pefa, imperial grand feeder and cat groomer, custos cattorum.

ŠIME PEFA: There, she's one of the donors, she gives for cats every month, she and her husband, Tome Čerina, there are few of us. There's Robi, he is going, you see... Let's go Leptirica, action, come on... Leptirica (laughter)... Well, Robi will give some money too (laughter)... Well, gang, there she is, this is mama. You see, this is mama, Vrtirepka. This is Lepurica, this the oldest one, this... Gang, gang...

KREŠO VASILJ: Essentially, the entire town of Zadar is intertwined, someone calls them catacombs... these are corridors that used to be cisterns earlier. Cisterns that were filled with water... and for the majority of people in Croatia... Pet

bunara¹ is the best known. Water was collected there since the Roman times. And now here, where we are going, this is called Rivnica, it is an old district tightly

linked with Kalelarga. I think that I need not explain what Kalelarga² is to the people from...

DARIJO ŠPELIĆ (v/o): Krešo Vasilj, guide through Zadar catacombs, custos catacubarum.

KREŠO VASILJ: These are narrow streets, streets of Zadar, but below them... just look how many manholes are here: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven... there are canals under this whole part. There, on the right, this is closed now, it is probably... now I will show you only... with my finger, although you cannot see it on the radio... this part, it is closed now and catacombs are here too. When we were children we used to call them catacombs, but they are, as I have said, cisterns intertwined through the whole town, from here all the way to Bokanjac. Bokanjac is a district in Zadar, some five kilometres away from the town. Since these are canals, that is catacombs, rats always used to gather here and the whole town was full of mice, rats, you know what a rat is... And it was precisely the cats that prevented the rats to propagate. So, rats transmit all kinds of diseases... the cats waited for them... they would not, eh, eat them, but they

¹ Pet bunara = Five wells

² Kalelarga is the main street in Zadar, the original meaning of the word is broad street.

would only, how can I put it nicely, they would only strangle them. Look how many cats are up there... one, two, three passed... because they know that they gather here. Cats are on watch above, over the opening, waiting for a mouse or a rat to come out, in other words, a rodent... they just wait, strangle it and leave it. Then the rats stay inside, in the canals.

MUSIC

ŠIME PEFA: Come on, here... He, he, well done kitty, come on. They are a bit afraid now, eh...

DARIJO ŠPELIĆ (v/o): Zadar cats do not meow. Their Egyptian origin as well as centuries-old tenderness and loyalty that the inhabitants of Zadar bestow on them, resulted in the disappearance of the need to meow. They do not beg, they receive.

ŠIME PEFA: ... there... Three are there by the technical school. They are, like... I give them specially... come... Leptirica, oh look, she came too...

DARIJO ŠPELIĆ (v/o): Since Zadar cats do not meow, cats in this documentary are exclusively studio-like.

ŠIME PEFA: So, every morning like this, and evening. Without fail. During COVID pandemic, there was a lockdown and so... and I said, I have to feed the cats... and nobody, like... they did not touch me, but... every morning and evening. And water. Water is the most important to them. They know when I arrive and they

are waiting. Sometimes I am a bit late, but they are always waiting for me. During summer Davor Gobac³ is with me too, Psihomodo... on Četiri kantuna⁴... he does not have... one year, there is even an anecdote, the two of us were sitting in front of Toni's and Davor Gobac said, he said, Pefa, holy shit, everybody is taking photos of your cats, so you could think of something. I said, fine, I would try, we would put out a can. And then we, like... poor kitty... I throw in fifty lipas, and all those foreigners going back home they threw in one euro or one kuna⁵ for the cat. Six hundred and fifty kunas for one hour, so I had the idea that they could perhaps feed themselves, because they cost a lot. Tome Čerina, Vinko Srhoj, that art critic, they give every month. Then the yellow one Reks, he has not arrived yet, every month, from Tennessee he gets 100 dollars. Every month. Andro, Branimir Andrić, he lives in Tennessee, but he sends them 100 dollars each month. And then like this, they are therapeutic to me. I love cats. When I was a child, I always had a cat, without fail. It was my toy, in the family. Cats and horses. My father always had three horses and so I kept that love for them. I go somewhere for two days, I wonder, I leave the food to Tomo, Nena, they give it too, but I have committed to feed them.

³ Leading vocal of the popular Croatian punk group Psihomodo Pop.

⁴ A meeting place in Zadar, the name means four corners, derived from the fact that four streets meet at this point.

⁵ Kuna and lipa (100 lipa = 1 kuna), used to be Croatian national currency till 1st of January 2023.

MUSIC

DARIJO ŠPELIĆ (v/o): The care for Zadar cats has not faded, and associations developed, or individuals appeared in districts collecting voluntary donations to this very day and caring for the well-being, health and feeding of cats.

A TELEPHONE RINGS

MARINO MIRČETA: Greetings to the listeners of the Croatian Radio, my name is Marino Mirčeta, a veterinary surgeon from Zadar, Puntamika Veterinary Surgery. We are the surgery providing services of treatment, disease prevention and castration for kitties in the area of Zadar, we know that there is a number of persons, and even some associations that take care of kitties on a voluntary basis. They feed them, prevent contagious diseases by vaccination, prevent the uncontrolled growth of cat population by castration and the final goal of these associations and volunteers is to find homes for kitties. In principle they operate so that every district has its, let's call it, feeding site for these street kitties, the girls feed them and if they notice a sick one, they bring it to the surgery for treatment. The healthy ones are vaccinated, in order to prevent the uncontrolled spread of virus in that population and in that district. Likewise, if a new kitty appears they register it for sterilisation or castration, and thus they prevent the uncontrolled growth of population... to everyone's joy.

DARIJO ŠPELIĆ (THE LETTER CONTINUES): Since I was curious why cats did that, I asked the priest. Here, in this crazy country, not only in the south in the town called Bast⁶, but in others too, they worship cats as deities, they hunt them, kill them and then they treat them like they treat dead people. They take out their internal organs, dry them and wrap them in bandages. They tell me that in the south, whole temples are full of cats mummified in this way. What do you care about these cats, you are probably asking yourself? I do because I am probably the only supply supervisor who does not have to struggle with merchants and rats, but with cats. There are so many in Alexandria port, that I feel as if I have breathed some poisonous fumes and am thus seeing things. I know that animals are irrational creatures, but I also know that my horse could smell a wolf or a bear even before I was conscious of the danger myself. Dogs saved us from imminent attack on the camp more than once. So these cats also know what is in store for them in this crazy country and they are determined to leave. Since Egypt is surrounded by desert on three sides, ports are their only way out, and this one in Alexandria is the biggest and thus the most attractive. You might think that I have taken leave of my senses, but if you could see cats swimming towards a boat that sails out from Alexandria, it would all be clear to you. I have not yet seen a cat jump into the water, here, there are thousands of them doing it every day.

⁶ Bast – also means a goddess shaped like a cat.

ŠIME PEFA: There, a seagull comes, Pero the seagull. It comes too. Everyone comes. Two crows come too. There she is, Leptirica, she came too, she knew that something was happening. Actually, she lives there in the entrance by Maks's, but she came because she saw that something was going on, a special situation. She is interested. They are too clever. They are splendid. And to me this is... there, now I feed them here, they have water in the court-yard there, and now we are here in the sun, they like it here. They allow me to feed them here now, while they are not working. I can tell you, and I don't know, I gave a lot of money but it returns in another way... I don't know, I will not tell names, I will not mention, but it comes back.

There is this Brigo from Ist⁷, he is feeding twenty five, twenty five. See you, my friend. He buys a roasted hen at Katuša's every Sunday and when he arrives at Ist he gives it to cats, and other things, salami, and the like... those he gives them every day.

DARIJO ŠPELIĆ (THE LETTER CONTINUES): If you are asking what will I do with those cats, my answer is nothing. Octavian left me here to bring order in corn supply and that is what I am doing. I do not question his command and I will stay in this crazy country until he calls me back to Rome. And to the cats, I will at least enable them to do what is unattainable to me, I will let them leave Egypt. Well,

⁷ Ist – a small island in the Adriatic Sea, Croatia.

only yesterday I happily watched cats jumping from the pier onto a boat I directed towards Dalmatia. True, there are those savages Delmatae who broke Octavian's knee with a sling, and put pressure on us near Salona, but I think that even they are better than these weirdos here in Egypt who kill them and then put them dried into tombs. This much from me. Stay well. I am sending a new liburna with cargo in July, expect cats on it as well, if the sailors do not eat them.

MUSIC

ŠIME PEFA: Cats know precisely. They sit in front of Toni's and watch for my arrival. I can be late an hour or two, like this morning, they know which direction I am coming from and then I surprise and come from another side... what a show. Well, there, you see, they are all full, there is some twelve, twelve, because Reks has not come yet, he will come to Toni's now, he has his snack there. He lives in Stipe Knežević's restaurant, so that... I get by... my duty is to feed them. They are... they are my... look at Glavonja, he is so pretty. He was thrown in during COVID, and then everyone accepted him. Now he is the ringleader... ringleader. Not everyone came, but well... they are not hungry... come on, have a little more... there. This is it. This is Kasper. We called him Kasper. Šepka... look. Over there, you see, I am feeding them here. Here, here they have water and here they are...

Before people used to shout at me and then I would shout back at them. So be it, everything for the protection of cats. Well, people let me do it. There are these two lads here who like cats and say: “Pefa, you just bring it to them and no problem.” Their water is there under the olive tree, and this is their yard. Now they are there in the sun and... Šepka, come Šepka... the seagull is also waiting. It knows. We’ll give some to the seagull.

This is mama. Mama has a three-room flat. She is sleeping in a bed, and these are managing as best they can.

Come on, seagull, there it is, come on. Come on.

Vrtirepka, let it be.

So, well, the seagull comes here... we have to give them. And to the seagull. It must have too. It has its mission too.

This is Kasper, come kitty. He used to be sickly, but he is fine. The girls who work here in the tavern say that love cured him. Everyone is touching him, cuddling him. And he goes to Tome Čerina, that painter, he goes home.

MUSIC

MARINO MIRČETA: These are usually anecdotes with street kitties, they are wild, so to say, they are not actually tame, and then they can escape in the surgery, and that is comedy with those kitties, but only after a while, because the difference between comedy and tragedy is in the lapse of time. So, when a kitty

escapes and topples medicines in the surgery, like Tom and Jerry, then it is a bit tragic, afterwards we laugh, with the lapse of time we laugh...

ANNOUNCER (v/o): Marino Mirčeta, a veterinary surgeon, castrator catorum.

MARINO MIRČETA: What I like the most is watching spirited kittens play, perform acrobatics. I like that best in kitties. A litter, three-four kittens playing and jumping.

I have now remembered an anecdote, from... this is usually about owners, not kitties. The other day a girl came, young, to the surgery, and I said: "Put the kitty on the table, why have you come?" She told me, ok, let's go to the scales, and she left the kitty on the table and walked to the scales like a model and weighed herself. And the kitty jumped and I caught it by its back side. The kitty bit me, naturally, and I started swearing, and the girl said: "There, fifty-two point four kilograms." Not you, the kitty on the scales. Well, this happened the other day and anecdotes are usually related to kitty owners.

Kitties have character, they are their own.

MUSIC

ŠIME PEFA: They eat a bit too much. A bit too much. But never mind... while I'm alive they will have. Some for me, some for them, and that's that. I adore them. They are beautiful and have a therapeutic effect on people. A miracle. Some are

afraid, some... cats are a miracle, a miracle and that's final. I love them, I really love them.

Pefa is always carrying this sack. I have a spare one in the car, and then I prepare for cats, do what is needed. They must have. I am always carrying this with me.

I am going to a disco, I am going... a sack for cats is always with me. When a "meow" stops me, immediately, there, there. Everything for cats.

MUSIC

ŠIME PEFA: If we say that what you are doing will be good for cats, then great.

So that people dig what cats are. Cats are like us, the same. Living creatures.

There must be cats and rats, and everything makes sense, there's a reason, everyone has its place. I'm going to a coffee bar. They are rolling nicely here.

Pero the seagull will come now and pick this up... and so. Ok lads, let's go now...

MUSIC

DARIJO ŠPELIĆ: On a late winter afternoon we finished our task and left Zadar behind us, without fear for its destiny and future, because it is protected by cats...

cats... cats...

ŠIME PEFA: Those are from the Croatian radio and they... not me, the cats, a cat...

PASSER-BY: Which one? Mine or yours?

ŠIME PEFA: Ours, Leptirica. These are ours; I live on Bili brig⁸, these are yours.

⁸ 8 A district in Zadar.

You'll have to give some money for those cats.

PASSER-BY: I have three. Each one is housed. He housed them well.

ŠIME PEFA: Reks is at Stipe's... they saw a bit more. Vrtirepka, Kasper, Glavonja, then Lepurica, Leptirica. Those come to Toni's. Reks, the yellow one, he still hasn't eaten. He opens the bag himself; can you believe that...

Lads, it's ok, it's ok...

DARIJO ŠPELIĆ: This documentary is not based on any historically or scientifically verifiable facts.

Any similarity with real cats is deliberate.

Participants:

Šime Pefa, imperial grand feeder and cat groomer, custos cattorum

Dragan Veselić, alias Mate Brusina, ludio ludus imperiae

Krešo Vasilj, guide through Zadar catacombs, custos catacumbarum

Marino Mirčeta, veterinary surgeon, castrator catorum

Darijo Špelić, the so-called historian and felineophile