INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DR 16
What Language Does the Postman Speak?

St. Constantine bei Seis
Südtirol, Italy
24 June, 1959

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Rogers:

The Autonomy and immigration questions are wrapped up together in the public housing dispute here in the South Tyrol. Separate from this package stands the second major point at issue between the Tyroleans and the Italians, the problem of employment in civil service jobs.

Throughout the Province this is the problem of which the people are most constantly aware. "The greatest difficulty here," one Tyrolean said, "is that German is spoken in front of the counter, and Italian behind it. It is worse than colonialism in Africa, because there natives are found in at least the subordinate positions now, but here hardly at all." He did not add, but the thought was clearly present: "And here the 'natives' are Germans, and the colonial officials are Sicilian!"

On the first of July last year there were 11,187 state employees on service in the Province of Bozen. Approximately 1800 of them were South Tyroleans, the rest Italian. As a result, in many villages the only resident Italians are the policeman, the postmaster, the Italian schoolteacher, the director of the state employment office, and the street-sweeper. Contacts with officialdom (generally unpleasant contacts in any country) are the only contacts these villagers have with Italians. When your own policeman and your own postman do not understand the language of your village, bitterness is understandable.

The Tyroleans have been told that the de Gasperi-Gruber Accord speaks of measures to achieve "a more appropriate proportion of public employment between the two ethnical groups", they know that the mountains are full of surplus children in search of employment, and they see that there are almost no Tyroleans on the state payroll.

So they cry of injustice, of discrimination, of African colonialism in the heart of Europe, of the violation of treaties.

To which the exasperated Italian government replies: the opportunity is there, complete with special measures to encourage your people, but they do not apply. What more can

we do? We have to fill the posts with Italians. As far as we can, we fill them with Italians who speak German, but the number of Italian job-applicants who know German is also limited, especially for lower-level positions. We do the best we can.

At the beginning of 1954 (the most recent statistics provided me) 47% of the state employees in the Province (including the Tyroleans on the list) could speak some German. The Vice-Commissioner in Bozen "has reason to believe" that this situation has continued to improve in the succeeding five years. Still, with German-speaking Italians concentrated in the administrative centers, there are many smaller places where the officials speak not one word of the language of the people they serve.

The primary concession designed to encourage German-speaking citizens to apply for civil service jobs is the reserving (under a law of November, 1951) of a certain number of places at each competition for candidates "having competence in the German language". This quota is never filled.

The Commissioner's office in Bozen pointed out five other measures taken by the government "with the purpose of achieving a more satisfactory distribution of jobs between the two groups". These included the permission to use the German language in state offices, conceded in 1945 but restricted in practice to its oral use or its use within an office. (In one recent incident, two Tyrolean mayors of purely Tyrolean villages, involved in an official exchange of correspondence, were instructed by the Commissioner to carry on their correspondence in Italian. In a second incident, the town council of another purely Tyrolean village replied to a request for information from the Austrian consul in Milan in the German language and was reprimanded and instructed to make future communications of this nature in Italian.) Another concession was the recognition for promotion and pension purposes of service rendered before 1939 by Tyroleans who opted for German citizenship in that year and left the country.

Despite these measures, the Tyroleans do not apply, but continue to complain bitterly. Their leaders say: they do not apply because they know they cannot win.

There are undeniably three strikes against a South Tyrolean when he enters the competition for a state job. In the first place most of the examination, even for a German-speaking applicant, is in Italian. The Tyrolean, although he is obliged to study Italian as an obligatory course from the second school year on, feels he is at a disadvantage in competition with a man for whom the language

is his mother-tongue. In the second place, for reasons that will be examined later (DR-17), the average level of education of the South Tyrolean is considerably lower than that of the Italian, and the elementary- school graduate from the Pustertal is likely to find that his Calabrian competition has been to high school. In the third place, in determining who gets the job, a point-system is used, and the results of the examination, although weighing heavily, are not conclusive. Such things as military service, medals and decorations, and previous civil service are counted. But the South Tyrolean's military service was in the Wehrmacht, not the Italian army, and his decorations and medals bear the Swastika, not the Arms of Savoy. As for previous civil service, he was virtually excluded during the Fascist years and reluctant to try since then.

These objections cannot be pressed too far. For the younger generation now looking for jobs, the problems of military service in the wrong army and of previous civil service do not exist. The middle generation got as good a grounding in Italian in school during the Fascist years (when they grew up unable to speak or write High German at all) as their South Italian contemporaries, and if one argues that they spoke something else at home - why, so did the Calabrian or the Sicilian, and (as I know very well) the dialects of the southern hills are almost as different from proper Italian as German is.

There are two other reasons why few Tyroleans apply for state jobs. Theirs is a rich land, by Italian standards, and state jobs pay badly and promotion is slow. Those who are genuinely bi-lingual can invariably find better positions in private employment (I was told of several instances of bright young men who had entered civil service and were then lured away by offers in industry or the tourist trade). In a province where unemployment is barely over 5% there is far less incentive to push toward badly-paid post office, road work and police jobs than in the chronically depressed South. The same quality person who must apply for a state job in the Campagna to work at all can find a good position in Bozen or Meran.

Then, too, civil service in Italy is a national service and, especially in the junior years, a civil servant may find himself posted for two or three year stretches to all sorts of odd corners of the peninsula. This is particularly unwelcome to the South Tyrolean, whose language, culture, and way of life are German, not Italian. He may want government work, but he wants to stay home to do it.

For all these reasons, the South Tyroleans do not apply for public employment, and so they are governed by Italians. Whose fault is it? Until one accepts the idea that the Tyroleans deserve special treatment, it is difficult to blame the Italians.

The South Tyroleans have an answer to the civil service problem. They would like to see a special competition set up for the Bozen Province, conducted separately from the competition for posts in the rest of the country. The Bozen examination would be open to any Italian citizen from any part of the peninsula, but would be half in Italian, half in German. "Thus the Tyroleans would do better at the German section, while the Italians would do better in the Italian part." Candidates selected as a result of the special competition would serve only within the Province, although there would be nothing to prevent a Tyrolean, eager to rise higher than provincial borders will allow, from entering the national civil service instead.

What is here proposed, clearly enough, is a Provincial civil service to fill state jobs, with freedom to transfer to the state civil service. But the South Tyroleans seem peculiarly unwilling to call it that.

I asked the Italian Questura in Bozen for a comment on the Tyrolean proposal. In replying for the Vice-Commissioner, Dr. Richter pointed out the special concessions now made to encourage Tyrolean applications, added his personal opinion that little interest is shown in applying because of more remunerative opportunities elsewhere and because of "a certain aversion toward public employment shown by the German-speaking citizens." On the specific proposal for a special competition there was no comment.

When the bumper crop of babies now growing up in the South Tyrol valleys comes of age and begins to look for work, the entire employment picture may change abruptly, and with it the civil service question. But until that time, Italian will continue to be the language behind the counter in state offices, while German is spoken in the waiting rooms.

Sincerely,

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