

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DR 17
Book-larnin' in the South Tyrol

St. Konstantine bei Seis
Südtirol, Italy
25 June 1959

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

Dear Mr. Rogers:

In the village of Burgeis bei Mals (pop.500) there are two brand-new buildings - the mayor's house (financed, the villagers assured me hastily, by his efforts as head of the local dairy cooperative and by the frugality of his wife) and the village schoolhouse. The latter is the pride of Burgeis, which does not yet have a paved street.

Consisting of two modest modern buildings connected by a breezeway, the school took seven years to build and cost 36 million Lire (\$60,000). Across the breezeway roof one has a glimpse of Schloss Fürstenburg, built 1272-1282 by the Bishop of Chur and now an agricultural school. To the right, higher up the mountain, is the Benedictine monastery of Marienberg, founded in 1150 and now the seat of an Internat, a Catholic boarding school. Together the three institutions make Burgeis something like the cultural center of the upper Vintschgau.



The new schoolhouse might have been completed much sooner if the land on which it was to be built had not belonged to the Monastery. The good monks proved very reluctant to sell this bit of property, because real estate values in the village happened to be low at the time. "They are socially somewhat shortsighted," Mayor Joseph Baer admits ruefully.

Then the town fathers made too elaborate a plan for their schoolhouse, complete with an auditorium, and the Regional authorities in Trento suggested they re-work the project. For the final structure the Region provided half the money, the township (Mals) to which Burgeis belongs provided a sixth, and the village assembled 12 million Lire as its share. The central government in Rome paid to outfit the elementary school classrooms (1.4 million Lire). A committee of local citizens, headed by the mayor, traveled around the South Tyrol looking at modern schools, picking the equipment they wanted, and a master cabinet-maker in Taufers, a village twelve miles away on the Swiss border, made the desks, tables, and chairs.

The result of this cooperative effort, opened last autumn, is something any American town would be proud of. Light, bright, airy, with the latest in classroom, kitchen, showerroom and toilet equipment. Now, in June, school is out, but the kindergarten continues to operate. Here Fräulein Marlene Steiner, graduate of three years of high school in Bozen (generally rated the equivalent of one or two years of college in America) and of three years' kindergarten seminar, exercises a control that would be the envy of any Stateside teacher over 46 bright-eyed, bushy-tailed mountain children.



This could be a story of improvement in rural education in any country in Europe. But in the South Tyrol, Burgeis is one of the few communities where the story is unsullied by the nationalities question. That is because it is one of the rare villages that do not have a single Italian inhabitant - since, as a dependency of the larger town of Mals, it does not have its own policeman, or postman, or Italian schoolteacher.

Education for the German-speaking inhabitants in the South Tyrol in the last decade and a half has meant a struggle to make up for the years of Fascist oppression. From 1926 to 1945 the German schools were closed and the only education in the German language was conducted surreptitiously in church basements (DR-14). When the German schools reopened at the end of the war, only 25 high school teachers could be reassembled - they had spent the Fascist years teaching in the south of Italy - and only 20% of the elementary school teachers were qualified for their jobs.

"The great concern," said Dr. Fritz Ebner, the Assistant Superintendent of Provincial Schools, "was and is the lack of teachers." Dr. Ebner is a balding, harrassed priest in his late thirties, with something boyish lingering in his eyes and his fleeting grin. He is the only cleric serving as a school superintendent in all of Italy, and his appointment is mite evidence of the lack of trained personnel in the German-speaking community outside of the Church. (The provincial Superintendent in South Tyrol is an Italian, but his assistant, by law, must be from the German community.) He himself learned German only in the "Catacomb schools" of the '20's, then went to the Catholic gymnasium that survived in Meran and so into the priesthood and Catholic education.

"But you see," he adds, "we have really achieved a great deal in the first fifteen years." A Teachers' Seminar in Meran has been turning out new teachers at a prodigious rate since 1946, and now only about 200 elementary instructors are not fully qualified.

"There is no shortage of students for the Seminar," Vice-Assessor Dr. Mayr, in charge of school administration for the Provincial government with its German majority. "Since, with our birth-rate, there are too many to feed on the land, the farmers are happy to make some of their sons and daughters available to us." If the teachers and trainees I talked to both in Bozen and in the high valleys are a fair sample, the quality of training is excellent.

The problem of competition with the Italian-speaking section of the community dominates the thinking of provincial school officials. This year there were some 30,000 German-speaking pupils in the first eight grades, 12,000 Italian-speaking and 1800 Ladin-speaking. To serve them there were about 2400 German-speaking, 920 Italian-speaking and 170 Ladin-speaking teachers. This disproportionately large number of Italian teachers sheds an interesting sidelight on the entire nationalities problem.

In the first place, all children in the province are entitled to instruction in their mother tongue, but all must also learn the other major language - Italian children must learn German and Tyrolean and Ladin children must learn Italian. This is theoretically achieved by requiring three hours a week of instruction in the second language from the second school-year, and six hours a week from the fourth school year. Since Italian instruction is always given to Tyrolean and Ladin children by an Italian, this has meant at least one Italian teacher in each German or Ladin school. This does not, however, work in reverse; German is taught to Italian children by Italian teachers.

That this may in part be due to the shortage of teachers from the German-speaking community does not impress the Tyroleans. It smells of discrimination to them, and of a boondoggle to give employment to some more Italian teachers and bring more Italian immigrants into South Tyrol.

(Incidentally, I am absolutely convinced that second-language training in the Province's schools is completely unsuccessful in creating a bi-lingual population. Tyrolean children I talked to throughout the district - outside of Bozen itself - could speak only a few words of Italian, or none at all. Italian young people I talked to - there were fewer of them, so I am more wary of generalization here - spoke little or no German. I questioned teachers and parents and got the same answer everywhere: "It's taught, but the children don't have much interest." A natural disinclination to learn something difficult is given a stamp of patriotic approval, in fact, but each ethnic group is only hurting itself. If the authorities know this, they do not recognize it. Officially, the South Tyrol is a rosy example of what should be done for the language problem in a mixed-language area.

Another source of extra Italian teachers on the payroll are the mountain villages that are purely Tyrolean except for the postmaster and the policeman. If one of these officials has a school-age child, there must be a second Italian teacher for it, even though it is the only Italian child in the school. Thus in the township of Laas in the Vintschgau, where there are 350 Italians out of a total population of 3500 (the highest Italian concentration in the Vintschgau, there because of a marble quarry), there are 10 Tyrolean

teachers and 10 Italian. Three of these Italian teachers are in Laas village, but the other seven are scattered through the township, teaching Italian to the Tyrolean children or teaching the isolated Italian child.

In the secondary schools of Bozen Province, the problem is quite a different one. The statistics for the school year just over speak for themselves: 553 Italian-speaking teachers, 317 German-speaking, no Ladins; 4900 German- and Ladin-speaking students, 7000 Italian. 72% of the Bozen-province Italians go beyond the required eight years elementary school; only 18% of the Tyroleans.

Here is undoubtedly a primary source of the Tyrolean difficulty in getting a larger share of state jobs (DR-16) or in holding their own in non-agricultural employment and the professions in South Tyrol. I am not at all sure how many of them - certainly very few of the politicians now heading their party - are aware of the importance of this fact.

Part of the problem is again lack of teachers - a far more acute problem in the secondary schools than in the elementary. Again the Fascist years took their toll, scattering the older generation of teachers so thoroughly that only 25 could be re-assembled after the Second World War. But here the gap could not be made up through a pressure-cooker Teachers' Seminar, because high school teachers are supposed to be University graduates.

This meant an Italian university in "Old Italy", where the Tyrol boy or girl usually does not feel at home and where sometimes (as several told me personally) they are actually jeered or ostracized as "Germans". Or it meant one of the three Austrian universities or West Germany. An increasing number have been choosing this second course, as the Austrian government and private groups north of the Brenner are making an increasing number of scholarships available to their "persecuted" kinsmen from Bozen. (One South Tyrol girl, who had attended school in Padua and at Ca' Foscari in Venice before transferring to Innsbruck, complained sadly that she found the Tyrol university "provincial" and its students "dowdy" and "peculiar"!)

In any case, it takes time to build a corps of teachers this way, especially when university graduates are scarce and in demand elsewhere as well. Even when more teachers are available, how many more students will come down out of the mountains to go to high school? It is a long and expensive trek from Tatschspitz to Bozen (35 miles) or from Spondinig to Meran (30 miles) over mountain roads, and not many farmers are convinced that it is worth it. More teachers alone will not raise the Tyrolean 18% that go on to high school to anything like the Italian 72%.

But until the percentages are brought closer together, the Tyrolean youth will continue to have difficulty competing with their Italian compatriots and will continue to complain of colonialism-in-Europe.

I have a long list of other problems - schoolteachers here, like their American colleagues, are fluent and eager complainers - but these seem central. There is no doubt that many of these problems

could be solved more easily, as the Tyroleans argue, by giving the Province more competence in running its own schools. But this is a difficulty of Italian (or French) centralistic government in general, not a special South Tyrol problem.

Dr. Ebner and Dr. Mayr also argue that the situation would be improved if the German and Italian schools of the Province were brought under separate authorities, instead of being under one in which the German-speaking element is second-in-command. This would undoubtedly simplify many things, but one wonders if this administrative segregation would not create more problems than it solved.



How much school? Sarntaler children. Luis, on the right, is a teacher-trainee, a rarity in this area; Johann, second from left, at 14 has finished school, speaks no Italian.

In speaking of education in South Tyrol, however, one should not end on a discordant note of nationalist antagonisms. I prefer the picture I saw in Burgeis. In new school plants like the one there, in dedicated and intelligent teachers like Marlene Steiner, and in alert and progressive-minded village leaders like Mayor Baer the problems of mid-Twentieth Century education have as happy a prospect as in any land I know.

Sincerely,

Dennison Rusinow
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Received New York July 20, 1959