

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DR 18
Silvius Magnago:
The Harder Line in South Tyrol

Vienna
II, Obere Donaustrasse 57/1/6
6 July 1959

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

Dear Mr. Rogers:

When the Italians get worked up over their discontented and occasionally rebellious South Tyrol compatriots, the principal target of their abuse will usually be the President of the Trentino-Alto Adige Regional Legislature, Dr. Silvius Magnago. Others may deserve it more, but he is the symbol of the new, no-

peace attitude of the German-speaking mountain people, and he is the official of the Italian Republic who traveled to Vienna last winter to enlist the support of an unfriendly state - in the view of Italian nationalists - for his anti-Italian activities.



President Magnago (right), at
Kaltern with Senator Luis Sand

The "harder line" of the Südtiroler Volkspartei (SVP) and Dr. Magnago's leadership of the Party both date from 1957 and the Sigmundskron Demonstration. Before that time the party bosses - SVP President Dr. Erich Amonn, General Secretary Otto Guggenberg, and their colleagues - had adopted an attitude of cooperate-with-the-Italians-and-all-will-be-better. The symbol of this attitude was a famous letter signed by Amonn and Guggenberg, thanking the Italian commission that drew up the Autonomy Statute for its "understanding attitude" toward the South Tyrol objections and problems.

The young Turks of the party had grown increasingly impatient with this policy and at Sigmundskron they organized their impatience. At their bidding some 35,000 South Tyrol farmers assembled at the ancient castle - which appropriately had protected the southern approaches to Bozen in the Middle Ages - and voiced their demands: the granting of Provincial autonomy in place of Regional, and legislative regulations that "in the future would hinder oppression of the German inhabitants, especially in the field of public housing."

This amounted to a revolution within the party. Dr. Amonn and Guggenberg vanished from the public scene and were replaced by Dr. Magnago and Dr. Hans Stanek.

"Already at that time," General Secretary Stanek told me in Bozen, "these 35,000 made it clear that, if the Italians refused to fulfill these demands, they would demand something more" - i.e., the right to self-determination, which is supposed to mean an altering of international borders, a return of the South Tyrol to Austria.

Dr. Magnago has lately been trying to appear somewhat more moderate than this. If the Italians will not deal with me, he implies, they will have to deal with more difficult people later. When the Italian press headlined his Kaltern speech last month (DR-15) as "Magnago Says No Peace", he was much upset, waved a copy of the Alto Adige at me during an interview and complained, "It wasn't meant that way."

Five minutes later, however, he was echoing Dr. Stanek's views: "If Italy does not give us these special regulations, and the battle today is over these, they will understand that tomorrow will come the demand for self-determination, and that has another meaning." And he added, "One must take time. When one wants to put someone in the wrong, he must negotiate first. We hope also for a little sympathy from world opinion."

What, then, of the talk of South Tyrol as "a second Cyprus"?

"We are a very peaceful people, and the SVP is first of all a Catholic party. We want to do only what is legally possible.... Violence belongs to people who are not in agreement with the methods of the SVP. But naturally I cannot say what will happen in the future. In my personal opinion the situation will deteriorate only if Italy is very unwise."

On the other hand, the Vice-President of the Party spent some time in an Italian jail two years ago after being implicated in a plot to blow up the Brenner railway.

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Dr. Silvius Magnago, like so many leaders of national minorities, is of mixed blood. His father, whose name he inherited, was from the Trentino, the Italian province south of Bozen that was included, as "Welsch-tirol" (Italian-tyrol), in the Austrian Crownland of Tyrol until 1918. But the elder Dr. Magnago married a South Tyrolean, Helena Redler, became a member of the Tyrolean Supreme Court, and lived first in Meran, then in Bozen. The son, born in 1914 in Meran, was educated in Bozen and then attended the University of Bologna, where he took his Doctor of Laws degree in June, 1940, the month that Italy entered the Second World War.

One never seems to find a South Tyrolean who fought with the Italian army, and Dr. Magnago was no exception; he did his war service with the Germans. "There were about 25,000 South Tyroleans with the Wehrmacht," he recalls, "most of us on the Eastern Front." In December, 1943, as a lieutenant in the Gebirgejäger (mountain troops), he was critically wounded at the Nikopol bridgehead. The wounds cost him the permanent loss of his health and his left leg.

In 1946 he returned home and was appointed assistant head of the Provincial Bureau for Post-war Welfare Problems to represent South Tyrolean veterans and the dependants of war-dead, internees and refugees. It was a position that brought him into immediate conflict with the Italian authorities, who did not (and do not) see why Italian veterans' and survivors' benefits should be extended to a people who voluntarily did their fighting with a foreign army.

The Welfare Bureau also provided an open door to politics, and through it Dr. Magnago walked into the City Council of Bozen in 1947. At the first public session of the new Council - held at a time when a post-war influx of Italians was frightening the Tyrolean remnant in the provincial capital - he spoke out sharply against Italian immigration and against the activity of the Housing Bureau, whose projected reconstruction of war-damaged Bozen was felt to threaten the German-speaking community. The hard-pressed South Tyroleans hearkened to the Magnago voice raised stridently in their defense, and when the City Council was converted in 1948 from an appointive into an elective body, he became Vice-Mayor, a job he held until 1952 (with an Italian majority, Bozen always has an Italian mayor, a Tyrolean Vice Mayor).

As long as the moderates remained in control of the SVP, Dr. Magnago remained in distinguished noise-making, but relatively powerless, positions. The establishment of the Trentino-Alto Adige Autonomous Region in 1948 created an important new titular post - the presidency of the Regional Legislature - which is rotated every two years between an Italian from the Trentino and a Tyrolean from the Alto Adige. Dr. Magnago has filled this post in 1951-2, 1955-6, and now in 1959-60, and in the intervening biennial periods he serves as President of the Provincial Council.

Then came the Sigmundskron Demonstration in 1957, and the younger, impatient men of the war generation took over the Party as well. Dr. Magnago, made into President of the SVP at Sigmundskron, became the voice of South Tyrol.

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The voice is that of an unwell man. The severe war wounds and the years of responsibility and anger have taken their toll. The hand that holds a telephone today shakes, the speech is sometimes a little unsteady, and his skin has that wax-like transparency that is often found in invalids. A young, attractive wife is full of vitality and ambition, and one senses - and hears - that she has enough of both driving qualities for two.

In an interview he has a tedious habit of quoting at length from his latest public speech - but whether this was the habit of a politician or of a sick man conserving mental energy was hard to say. He greeted me by saying, "You saw in Kaltern, we are a conservative people, but in a good sense - hanging on to what is good in our old ways," and he rattled on through a rambling historical preamble about Andreas Hofer and the 1809 revolution.

One senses in Silvius Magnago the honorable fire of local patriotism, smouldering hotly in this lean and nervous remnant of a vigorous Alpine intellectual. Like so many of his kind, however, he finds it difficult to see beyond the confines of the South Tyrolean valleys -

an ability that in Bozen seems reserved to business and professional men of the older generation, no longer listened to.

"We are for Europe," he said, "because then the borders will fall, or lose their meaning, and the Brenner will go with the rest. Then there will be no more division between us and Austria, to whom we belong. But the language borders", he added, "they must remain. Each part of Europe has its own way of life, and it would be a pity for Europe if these cultural borders fell."

How should this be managed - the falling of political borders and the preservation of ethnic ones? He did not seem to know.

He complained of the headlines in the Italian press after his Kaltern speech, but then repeated substantially what he had said there: "We cannot stand a peace at any price; peace can only be with justice and freedom. So long as we have no self-administration, so that our existence as a people is guaranteed, and until our language is recognized, there will be no relaxation."

Progress has been made, Dr. Magnago feels, since the South Tyroleans turned from cooperation to threats and action. In Meran some months ago the display of the Tyrolean red-white flag was forbidden (in practice although never in writing), and this was followed by a rash of Tyrolean flags all over the country. (In one case, I had heard, Italian Carabinieri attempting to get a flag down from a high-tension line had got stuck and had to be rescued by the local Tyrolean fire department!) So at Kaltern the Italian authorities had allowed the display of a "reasonable" number of Tyrolean flags to bring an end to this form of civil disobedience.

"What the Italians have allowed, they have allowed in preference to something worse," Dr. Magnago said.

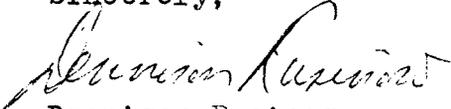
He spoke, too, of the Communism and Left Socialism brought by the Italians who immigrate to South Tyrol (a favorite argument of Tyroleans with an eye on American sympathy). This comes with industry. "We are a conservative and a Catholic people. We want no large industry here, only some home industries for our valleys."

This is the pure, isolationist Tyrol conservatism of the men now in charge of the Südtiroler Volkspartei. Even their Austrian friends sometimes view them as "unrealistic". But one of their local opponents, a businessman who had been a leader in the Party before Sigmundskron, admitted to me: "They have the support of the farmers today."

If this is true, then the Italian and Austrian view of Silvius Magnago as the voice of South Tyrol - conservative, provincial, patriotic, stubborn, clever, unrealistic, isolationist - is not far wrong.

His supporters say: "If only his health will hold."

Sincerely,



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