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Sebastian Maier

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

Dear Mr. Rogers:

I first heard about Sebastian Maier from Friedl Volgger, the editor of the Dolomiten. It was two o'clock in the morning, after the newspaper had been put to bed, and we were sitting in a little bar in Bozen, sampling the red wine of Kaltern and talking of the more remote valleys of South Tyrol.

There had been a little silence. "You know," said Dr. Volgger suddenly, "there's an old farmer up at the far end of the Sarntal who is a friend of Churchill." And he told me the story of Sebastian Maier and his silver fox. Dr. Volgger had been in Dachau when the story began, but he had heard it from Maier himself, after the war, when Maier was on his way to see his friend and Dr. Volgger had supplied him with an interpreter.

The story and the man fascinated me, and I decided that Sebastian Maier was the one person in South Tyrol I could not leave without seeing. So three days later, after some diligent map-study, I set out in search of the far end of the Sarntal.

Very few of the valleys of Tyrol are really remote any more, but the valley of the Talfer Brook was among the last to emerge from isolation. To the north it is closed by the great arc of the Sarntaler Alps, and to the south the little river breaks out through a steep-walled, uninhabited canyon of green porphyry to merge with the Eisack in downtown Bozen. Until 1935 the best access to the high Sarntal was by foot or horseback over Kreuzjoch (6000 feet high) from Meran to the west. Even Napoleon's troops and their Bavarian allies never found their way in during the independence war of 1809. Local folklore says that the inhabitants of the southern half of the valley are the descendants of the Visigoths, who came here in the Sixth Century, while those in the north are Bajuvarii who fled across the Sarntaler Alps some hundreds of years later to escape the Plague in Sterzing and Brenner. The dialects are different to this day. In 1935 the Italians built a motor road north through the canyon from Bozen, through 24 tunnels, and now a daily bus service connects the valley with the provincial capital.

Where the Talfer emerges from its canyon into the broad valley by Bozen stands Schloss Runkelstein, a massive Thirteenth Century castle built high on a rock by the river. Here extensive frescoes executed in the 1380's and depicting Arthurian adventures and Carolingian and German heroes, are the oldest well-preserved secular painting in the German-speaking world. North of

Runkelstein there is nothing but rock, tunnels, rushing water and an occasional ruined watchtower, until the high valley is reached. Then the world is green and peopled again and some 3000 Tyroleans live among the Alpine meadows, deep woods and occasional small villages of the 35-mile length of the Sarntal. Their brown cattle are prized throughout the Province, and their horses, a local strain similar to the American Quarter-horse, are bred for export to all of Italy. South of Sarntheim, the principal village, there are small fruit orchards and wheatfields, and the dark fir woods on the slopes above are interrupted by watchtowers and castles, relics of earlier days. The working uniform of the farmers and their families, all out haying in the warm June sun as I passed through, is the bright local costume or the Lederhosen of the Sarntal; "city" clothes are reserved for Sundays, and American-style blue denim has hardly reached the Talfer.

They are a proud, reserved people, the farmers of the Sarntal. As in most of Tyrol (except for the Vintschgau to the west), they live on their own land in preference to living in villages, and the farms are kept intact by inheritance laws requiring that they be passed to the eldest sons, never divided among the children. The new owner must then pay off his brothers and sisters in cash or equivalent for their share in the value of the inheritance. In the Sarntal this is made easy, for most of the mountain forests are owned by the individual farmers, and the eldest son will traditionally cut down trees for ready cash to settle accounts. Younger brothers may then stay on to work for him, or they will wander off to seek employment outside the valley.

The road is paved as far as Sarntheim, a pleasant village of several hundred inhabitants fourteen miles north of Bozen. This is the administrative center of the valley and so here its only Italians are found, as officials and - at the opposite end of the social scale - as manual laborers. The village church preserves its thirteenth century Romanesque tower, and across the valley Burg Reinegg, built in the same period, retains its keep and its drawbridge. It was traditionally the seat of the Counts of Sarntheim, but the present holder of the title sold the castle to one Italian, married a second, changed his name to "Sarantino" and began to live in "Old Italy". "He degenerated," was the local comment.

I stopped in the village square to stretch and look around. A boy on a bicycle stopped, too, and stared with interest at my license plates, my car, and me.

"Grüss' Gott!" I said.

"French?" he asked.

"American," I said.

"Oh!" he cried with great excitement. "I speak English." And he added proudly, but still in German, "I think I'm the only person in the Sarntal who does."

Luis Thurner of Sarntheim, age 18, is studying in a teachers' seminar in Meran. He is an only child, son of a Sarntal farm laborer now 74 years old. He took the normal three years of high school in one year and, when he completes teachers training next year, will return to the Elementary School in his village to work. He learned Italian in Sarntheim (it is required from the second grade), he is learning French in Meran, and he is teaching himself English. He is eager and ambitious, but wants to find his future in his own valley. If possible.

He led me to the top of a hill behind the village, for what he declared was the best view of the Sarntal. "If it were only rocks, it is home," he said fervently, and added, "But it is beautiful!"

Then he asked, as we were coming down again: "Where are you going?"

"I am looking for a man named Sebastian Maier," I said.

"How lucky you are!" Luis exclaimed. "I know him well, because I watched cattle two summers in the pastures just near his farm. I'll go with you, because it is not easy to find - the road ends three kilometers before you get there. Besides," he grinned, "you may need me as an interpreter - from Sarntal dialect into German!"

At the hamlet of Pens, fifteen miles beyond Sarntheim - where Sebastian Maier had taken the bus on his way to see Churchill - the dirt road did end, and we continued across the fields and through fences, toward the spot where the Talfer has its source between the Tatschspitz (8200') and the Tagewaldhorn (8800'), still snow-capped. We passed a sub-hamlet of two farmhouses, with barns, two chalets and a tiny chapel ("they say mass there once a year"), and saw, farther up the mountain, a row of three farmhouses, each with its barn alongside, the barns the same size and style as the houses, but distinguishable from them by being made of wood and unpainted.

"The first farm is the one," said Luis, "and there is Sebastian standing out by the meadow." I looked and saw a short, stocky man in the local peasant Tracht, who was watching our approach. Two brown cows, a brown calf and a brown horse came to greet us as we made our way up to him.

Luis saluted the farmer in dialect, asked after his family, and then introduced me. Sebastian Meier shook hands, said "Grüss Gott," and waited.

"I have been talking to Dr. Volgger at the Dolomiten in Bozen," I said, "and he has told me a story about you and Mr. Churchill. So I wanted to meet you and talk to you."

"I have not seen Dr. Folgger in a long time. How is he?"

"He is very well. He sends you his greetings."

Sebastian Maier grunted. He was a small man, solidly built, with a little paunch, in homemade trousers and shirt, a leather vest and a big, floppy hat. His shoes were homemade, big, clumsy, and mudcaked. His look was appraising, but not unfriendly.

After a moment he said, "I think we can talk better inside," and led the way to the house, taking his shoes off at the door and stomping in in stockingfeet. There was a long, dark passageway, smelling of old wood and last year's fires, of last night's supper and farmer's sons. We were escorted into a big room of dark wood, low-ceilinged and bare. Across from it I glimpsed a kitchen of the same size, with cuts of meat hanging up to age. In the living room a huge Tyrolean stove, as big as a boiler, filled one corner, and opposite it in another corner was a big square table, four feet on a side, scrubbed over so many years that the knots in the wood stood half an inch higher than the rest of the surface. There was little other furniture: a pair of straight-back wooden chairs, and another built-in table that folded up into the wall, a large radio on a windowsill, and a few week-old copies of the Dolomiten. On the walls were two photographs of peasants - Sebastian's grandfather, bearded and wise, and his mother, small and old and curiously unwrinkled - a foot-high crucifix with an ear of corn hung from each arm, and, over near the big stove, a steel frame in which I could see a typewritten letter on the left and a photograph of Winston Churchill on the right.

Sebastian Maier turned without a word and left us. Presently he returned with two small glasses and a bottle of Enzian, the strong, slightly bitter Schnapps of the South Tyrol. He poured to over-flowing, and we both drank. He watched us.

"This is a wonderful room," I ventured. "How old is your house?"

"About two hundred years," he said, stood a moment, and vanished again. Soon he came back with two larger glasses and a flask of red wine. He poured, set the glasses on the big table, and indicated that we should sit. He joined us for a moment, still silent, then said: "You should try our butter. But our bread is hard." And he left again. Luis looked at me, winked, and looked very pleased.

This time a plate of dark yellow butter, two knives, and a bowl filled with a dark, incredibly hard bread broken into irregular bite-size chunks were brought. As we ate, Maier walked to the wall by the stove, took down the framed letter and picture and brought them back to me.

"That is a good thing to keep," I said when I had read it. "How did you have the idea?" And Sebastian Maier smiled and began to talk.

For a number of years before the war he had supplemented his farm income by raising silver foxes for their pelts. In the spring of 1940 a particularly fine cub was born - "the finest I ever saw" - and about the same time Italy joined Germany in war

against France and England. Sebastian Maier had not liked Fascism, but he had a notion that German Nazism was no better, and during the Battle of Britain, he made an astonishing announcement: that very special silver fox was to be a gift for Winston Churchill, when the British had won the war.

In 1943, after the fall of Italy, the Germans occupied South Tyrol, and some SS-men, hearing of the silver foxes of the Sarntal, came to Maier to buy some pelts. He politely refused to sell to them. They spotted a three-year-old animal with a wonderful pelt and said they would particularly like to have that.

"I'm sorry," said Sebastian Maier, "but that one is reserved for Churchill."

His visitors were astonished. What did he mean? He meant he would prepare the pelt as soon as the Allies invaded Fortress Europa, and send it to Churchill when he could.

Luckily, the Germans refused to take him seriously. "There will never be an invasion, old man," they laughed, and went away.

When the war was over, Maier took the pelt to Bozen, where it was entrusted to British officials for forwarding to the Prime Minister (Maier thought it had been given to British occupation authorities, but Dr. Volgger understood it had been sent through the British Consul then in Bozen). As the years went by, nothing was heard, and Sebastian decided that British officials were just like Fascist ones, and that his fox was probably adorning the neck of a petty bureaucrat's wife somewhere.

Then, nearly three years later, came a letter forwarded through the nearest British Consulate, dated October 31, 1948. It said:

"My dear Sir:

"I have received with much pleasure the beautiful silver fox fur which Dr. Amonn sent to me under cover of a letter explaining its history. I was moved by what he told me of your determination to rear the animal especially for me, and I thank you most warmly for your goodwill, and for this lovely gift.

"I am sending you a signed photograph which I hope you will accept as a small token of my appreciation of your kindness.

"Yours very faithfully,

(signed) Winston S. Churchill."

Sebastian Maier framed the letter and the picture, and hung them on his wall.

Then, in 1949, Sir Winston Churchill came to Italy for a vacation, and chose the Karerpass Hotel in the Dolomites, a luxury golf and mountain resort exactly on the language border between

Tyrolean and Italian and on the provincial border between Bozen and Trento. A delegation of high officials from the district came to call on the great man, received a cursory "how d'you do" and were hurried away. Sir Winston was not to be disturbed.

At the far end of the Sarntal, Sebastian Maier heard that Churchill was in the South Tyrol. He walked to Pens and took the bus to Bozen, where he went to see Dr. Friedrich Volgger, who, besides editing the German-language newspaper of the province, is Vice-President of the South Tyrol People's Party.

"I hear the man is here," said Sebastian. "I want to see him, but I suspect he doesn't speak German."

Dr. Volgger was dubious, especially since Sebastian had come down from the mountains in his workday Tracht, but he supplied a girl who could interpret from Sarntal dialect into English and saw the two of them off for the Dolomites.

The manager of the Karerpass Hotel was horrified. "The gentleman is seeing no one," he protested.

"He'll see me," said Sebastian. "Take this to him." And he produced, as a calling card, the framed letter and picture. The manager was impressed enough to do as he was bid, and soon returned even more impressed.

"He says he'll see you, you're a friend of his!"

Sebastian Maier was received by both Sir Winston and Lady Churchill (whom he found to be "a very modest lady, modestly dressed, not like most of our women when they get into important positions"), and spent fifteen minutes with them.

"The Italian authorities are trying to find out to this day what was said," Dr. Volgger had told me. "I don't really know myself, except that I believe Sebastian wished Churchill good luck in his next election and said he hoped to see him back as Prime minister again, which Churchill found terribly funny."

Luis Thurner was more direct. "What did you talk about?" he asked.

"He wanted to know where I lived and how far I had come," Maier said, "and he had a map brought so that I could show him. He said he would like to come here to visit me. This worried me and I told him I thought that wouldn't do, because the road was very bad, and there was no hotel, or even a Gasthaus here. Churchill said he just wanted to be among farmers a while and away from everything, to paint and fish, and he asked about the fishing and the mountains here. But I think the road discouraged him."

Luis looked disappointed.

Sebastian returned his framed letter to its place of honor, and we spoke of other things. Why had he disliked Nazism so much?

He looked at me quite directly and said simply: "The important thing, in my view, is that men should treat men as men. That is what this system did not do. Some of them were quite decent as individuals - even some of the SS-men I met here - but what such a system brought them to do..."

Then it was his turn to ask questions. I came from Vienna, so what did I think would be the result of the prolonged Austrian government crisis? I was an American, what did I think of Geneva, and when would Mr. Herter get tired and go home (after all, he must have other things to do)? I suggested that perhaps the important thing was to keep talking, and he agreed eagerly. We spoke of the Adenauer-Erhard crisis in Bonn, and Sebastian Maier suggested that Churchill had known when to step down.

We spoke of his farm. Cows, a little grain, horses, and wood. He has five boys and two girls, ranging in age from 21 to eight; there had been another child that died. "I wish I had seven more, if they were no more trouble than the seven I have. They are good children." The oldest son is off studying in an agricultural higher school (one of the vocational schools that take children who have finished the eight grades of primary school - attended by very few South Tyroleans). "If he is going to work with me here, he must learn about modern techniques; we are a little backward here." He fetched two of the son's agriculture textbooks for me to examine and then, with evident pride, a prize book won by the son last month, inscribed by the head of the school "to an outstanding student." The second son, 19, is in Bozen learning to be an automobile mechanic.

I said I must return toward Bozen, and we went back outside. The sun was setting behind the western arm of the Sarntaler Alps, casting long shadows across the valley, leaving the wooded slopes and snowy peaks to the east in dazzling light. It seemed one of the most beautiful spots on earth, and I said so. Sebastian looked pleased.

"It is very quiet here - no one has nerves. I told Dr. Volgger I would never want to exchange places with him, for all that a big town has to offer. The pace is too fast and the important things too far away. I'd never want to leave here."

I thought there was something in this. "You must come again," said Sebastian, "when you have time to stay a while, and no work to do. These mountains are wonderful climbing, and the hunting is good. You'd like it. I'll look forward to seeing you."

I'd like that," I said, feeling tremendously flattered. He shook hands warmly and watched us leave. The two brown cows, the brown calf and the brown horse came to say goodbye as we walked down through the pasture toward the little chapel.

When we got back to the car, three small children were standing in a row, looking at it with wide eyes. The oldest looked at me. "America?" he asked, in a tone of profoundest awe.

Sincerely,

Dennison Rusinow