

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Postscript to Three Letters:
Gschnitzer and the Minorities

Schloss Albrechtsberg an der
grossen Krems,
Niederösterreich, Austria.

27 September, 1960.

Mr. Richard H. Nolte,
Institute of Current World Affairs,
366, Madison Avenue,
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Dr. Franz Gschnitzer, State Secretary in the Austrian Foreign Ministry (i.e. Assistant Foreign Minister), currently in New York with his chief, Foreign Minister Bruno Kreisky, pushing the South Tyrol before the United Nations, looks like what he used to be: a provincial university professor, small, with snow-white hair, sprightly and intelligent, with a personality that mixes the kindly and the courtly. Not at all what one expects the man to look like who built a successful political career out of the complaints of the South Tyrol minority.

Moreover, no name could be more Tyrolean than "Gschnitzer", and one has come to expect the champions of oppressed nations to have more dubious credentials as members of the nation they are championing (like Magnago for the South Tyrolers, Zwitter and Tischler for the Carinthian Slovenes, Kornfeind for the Burgenland Croats, Austrian Hitler for the Germans, Dutch Vervoerd for the Afrikaners ...). Perhaps the fact that Dr. Gschnitzer is a Protestant from one of the world's most devoutly Catholic lands provides an alternative explanation - if one is really needed.

Before the war Dr. Gschnitzer was a professor at the University of Innsbruck, where he disagreed with the Schuschnigg government and got into trouble with the Hitler government by teaching South Tyrol irredentism - when both Schuschnigg and Hitler, seeking Mussolini's favor for rather different reasons, were eager to forget the existence of the Province of Bolzano. After the war he found his way into Tyrolean politics (with the clerical Austrian People's Party) and to Vienna as the great advocate of the South Tyrol cause. Most eastern Austrians - and the leaders of the Second Republic come overwhelmingly from the eastern provinces - are privately slightly annoyed by Tyrolean nationalism, but in order to show publicly that they support the cause, they made Dr. Gschnitzer into number two man at the Foreign Ministry.

Or such, at least, was the impression of him I had acquired in Vienna. Meeting him last year was therefore a pleasant surprise a moderate, intelligent, handsome gentleman of the old style, whom Austria might be proud to have as her representative at any international gathering. The irredentist speeches he reserved for domestic audiences, not including domestically-based American students.

I went to see him again last week, on the eve of his departure for New York, to talk about Carinthia (which I had just visited), South Tyrol, and the United Nations. The results provide an incidental postscript to my letters on both these minority questions - and to those on Trieste.

Dr. Gschnitzer was eager to compare the attitude of the South Tyrol leadership and that of the Carinthian Slovenes to any form of plebescite or Minderheitenfeststellung. The former are eager to accept one at any time, the latter will not hear of it. I was reminded that Titoist leader Dr. Franz Zwitter, in a candid moment, had said virtually the same thing: "Free confession (Bekenntnis) of nationality is for the stronger group, the objective criteria principle is for the weaker minority; the South Tyrolers are still strong enough - they are a majority in their province - to stand the confession-principle."

The difficulty, Dr. Gschnitzer added, is that existing minority legislation, concerning the use of Slovene as a second legal and administrative language and the use of Slovene place names, all carries the stipulation "after the identification (Feststellung) of the minority." Village names, for example, are to be officially in Slovene, in addition to German (as in the South Tyrol, where at the city limits the signs read "Bolzano - Bozen"), wherever the Slovene minority in the village tops 15-20%. It is clear that one must know first where the minority lives. But the day before my Vienna visit the Cabinet had met and once again decided to postpone the conducting of the Feststellung, in deference to the strong feelings of the Slovene leaders. These same leaders, moreover, will also not accept the results of the last (1951) census, conducted according to the Bekenntnis-prinzip. The Federal government, Dr. Gschnitzer told me, must as a matter of democratic principle conduct its census on the basis of Bekenntnis, while he recognizes that "the Wends will never confess themselves as Slovenes, for whatever good or bad reason."

Impasse. We moved on to speak of the South Tyrol.

Why, I asked, the change in the Federal government's strategy? Fifteen months ago in this same office I had heard that Austria wanted to avoid carrying the South Tyrol problem before the United Nations because she feared (1) unwelcome support from the Communist bloc, which would be embarrassing, and (2) the meddling in a purely European and white-man's dispute of the new African and Asian states - of which there are far more now than there were then.

The alternative to the UN, Dr. Gschnitzer said, is the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. But this implies the International Court of Justice at The Hague, and decisions there are always a matter of years, while the Italians, as the whole world knows, are "artists" in the field of law.

Of the same order of objection is the fact that "the International Court decides on the basis of law only, not on the basis of facts, and the laws in the South Tyrol are carefully worded" with reference to the Gruber-de Gaspari Accord.

This was all true last year as well, but now "the situation in Bozen has sharpened, and we are afraid to wait. If there is no action in their favor, they may fly loose down there on the basis of the demand for self-determination" (which means union with Austria). "The South Tyrol question is now only soluble if the demanded provincial autonomy is given. There is no other way."

As for unwanted support from the Eastern Bloc, the Austrian government has little fear now. Almost all the East European countries have their own, analogous minority problems, and for internal reasons are hardly in a position to support the Austrian complaint. (This was not the view of other Austrian politicians and observers I talked to, but events so far in New York have supported the government estimate of the situation.) As for Asia and Africa, "some of the new states will vote with us, some against us; they will split evenly enough not to be an embarrassment. We hope for much support, on the other hand, from South America." And Italy's NATO allies? "We hope they will not make their decision on the basis of NATO loyalty, but on the basis of the facts."

I then asked if Austria's trade with Trieste (DR-27) would be affected by the dispute with Italy. "Not negatively, I think," Dr. Gschnitzer replied. "On the other hand, we did think possibly to influence Italian policy toward the South Tyrol by suggesting that we would be willing, after amicable settlement of the South Tyrol dispute, to take measures to channel even more of our trade through Trieste than now goes there. There was no reaction to this bait at all. It seems that Neapolitan and Genoese interests are much stronger in Rome, and they do not care about Trieste anyway."

To a comment about the strength of sentiment in favor of provincial or regional autonomy as I had found it in Trieste in the spring, Dr. Gschnitzer looked grave. "That will make our problem in Bozen more difficult," he said.

In New York this week the link connecting these three minority-problem areas was again exposed in a curious way. Austria had gone there to bring its complaint about Italian policy in the South Tyrol before the UN. There the Austrian delegation headed by Kreisky and Gschnitzer was joined by South Tyrolean "observers", Senator Luis Sand, Landesrat Dr. Alphons Benedikter, and Dolomiten editor Dr. Friedl Volgger (all in DR-15), all three of whom had been threatened with Italian treason laws for their activities on behalf of a foreign power - Austria.

Then, as the maneuvering for position in the General Assembly's Steering Committee got underway, the Austrian delegation was embarrassed to discover its sole European support coming from Yugoslavia, the country with minority claims against both Italy (Trieste's Slovenes) and Austria (Carinthia's Slovenes). Vienna newspapers spoke with painful irony of "our only ally". What was the motive for this unexpected support? A Yugoslav friend I have spoken

to since hazards the guess that bigger things lay behind the Belgrade decision than the playing off of help over South Tyrol against concessions in the Klagenfurt Basin. He sees it as support for a fellow-neutral against a member of one of the Great Power blocs (NATO in this instance), as part of Tito's efforts to build the neutrals into a third force. He reminded me that Foreign Minister Kreisky's official visit to Belgrade this spring was a notable success, and that some speak of Kreisky as a possible successor to UN General Secretary Dag Hammarskjöld.

Possibly, but the Austrians are watching suspiciously for new demands in connection with their Slovene minority, as a more tangible quid pro quo for help offered at Turtle Bay.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Dennison Rusinow". The signature is written in dark ink and is centered on the page.

Dennison Rusinow

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