

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DR 37
Sommerfrische Sunday in South Tyrol

Pension Eggen
St. Nikolaus-in-Eggen
South Tyrol, Italy
11 September 1961

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

Dear Mr. Nolte:

The Sommerfrische, not unknown in metropolitan America, is a widespread and eminently sensible custom in this part of the world. From mid-June to mid-September the cities of northern Italy and Austria are hot, stuffy, hazy and unpleasant, and the cool mountains are enticingly close. So those who can do so pack their wives and children off to lakeside or Alp and follow them there on weekends and holidays. In Milan, Turin, Rijeka or Vienna this means the minority of those who can afford the expenses involved or who have conveniently located relations; in the German-speaking South Tyrol it means everyone, because everyone has conveniently located relatives.

St. Nikolaus-in-Eggen is just such a Sommerfrische-Ort for Bozen's seasonal commuters. There is not a ski-lift in the valley, and for German and Italian summer tourists the higher Dolomites that begin five miles away are a more attractive target. But for local purposes the village is pleasantly situated on a southwest-facing Alp 3500 feet above sealevel, and it is only a 45-minute drive from Bozen, up the spectacular canyon to the Eggental Brook, leaving the Great Dolomite Highway at Birchabruck for fifteen minutes of reasonable dirt road. There is a handsome church (handsome outside, Baroque inside) with a tall Gothic spire, the usual quota of general stores, four modest Gasthäuser, and a thousand inhabitants scattered over the mountainside with spare rooms for their town-dwelling children and cousins.

It is a peculiar composition of South Tyrol society that lends the South Tyrol Sommerfrische - and South Tyrol politics, one might add - their special nature. In few other lands that I know are town and countryside so closely linked. Almost every German-speaking Bozener, if not himself born in the country, has a parent who was or remains a peasant. They all therefore possess fathers, brothers, or at least first cousins who live from the land in this distinctively peasant society. And what a happy arrangement for all concerned, when the town-dwelling daughter brings her children up here from the June day that school closes until the October day that school re-opens! There are extra hands for the farm just when they are needed - a child of ten can make hay (three such are helping grandfather in the pasture below my window at this moment) and a child of seven can

become a sunburnt philosopher while watching the family's five cows on a high Alp among the Dolomite crags. And all grow up incapable of understanding the Italian neighbor who likes the city and its noise, and who prefers a sidewalk cafe on Piazza Walter to the Germanic cameraderie of a village Gasthof in the Alpine sun.

Take the Ebner family for example. Herr Dr. Toni Ebner is one of the most important men in South Tyrol, of whom I have had and will have much to say in other letters. He is publisher and chief owner of the Dolomiten, the German-language daily of the South Tyrolers, a member of the Italian Parliament, and former chairman of the South Tyrol People's Party. Wednesday he will be in Rome for the first meeting of the Italian Government's special Commission to study the South Tyrol problem, and next week, time permitting, he will be in Strasbourg to represent his people at the autumn plenary session of the Council of Europe. But this weekend he is in St. Nikolaus-in-Eggen, where his family has been coming for twenty years for Sommerfrische. Dr. Ebner was born nearby, and his sister is housekeeper to the parish priest of St. Nikolaus, who was a school friend of both of them thirty years ago; the vicarage is large, complete with barn and livestock, and there in the summer months one can find Frau Martha Ebner, her three children, and sometimes Martha's mother, Frau Flies. Frau Flies, if she has lived all her adult life in Bozen, was born and raised in one of the side valleys on the other side of South Tyrol, southwest of Meran; her brother, also born a peasant, was the locally famous Canon Michael Gamper, leader and inspiration of the South Tyrol resistance to Fascism and founder of the Dolomiten. The roots of the Ebner family - and of the Dolomiten and the People's Party - are struck deep in the soil of many of these valleys. To the farmers of St. Nikolaus an Italian is the incomprehensible stranger in Carabinieri uniform; Dr. Ebner is the friend and cousin who sat playing cards with them in Pension Eggen until midnight last night.

A late summer Sunday in St. Nikolaus has its own special routine, loosely connected with the institution of the Sommerfrische. The town-tied relatives of those who are enjoying their last weeks in the mountains come up for the day or the weekend, and the local peasants descend from their widely scattered mountain farms for church and society, so that one discovers that the village does really have a thousand inhabitants. The day begins with six o'clock mass by the parish priest, a big, comfortable, authoritative man with a big, comfortable, authoritative stomach, such as a Tyroler priest should have. Yesterday he must have been a little sleepy at this early mass, after the card game that had held him, Dr. Ebner, the Host of Pension Eggen and myself in the bar here until midnight on Saturday, but he must at least have been there or they would not have rung the bells that roused me.

On this particular Sunday there was the added attraction of two funerals before 8:30 high mass, complete with the local brass band in Eggentaler costume to cheer the proceedings. As a result, the 8:30 mass was unusually crowded, and there was standing room only for the sermon, a drearily routine piece by a pleasant young priest who seemed extraordinarily nervous - a fact explained by the discovery that he is a local boy home on holiday, invited to address his childhood neighbors and cousins from the pulpit of his childhood church. He also turned out to be an aspiring priest-journalist, in the Canon Gamper tradition, with one published book already to his credit.

After mass, when the church had emptied, the organist, who doubles as postman and town crier, mounted the churchyard wall to read the week's announcements to the assembled villagers, as is customary. The item of major interest this week was that the Eggentaler World Olympics (the phrase brought a laugh), with footraces, standing and running broadjumping, discus-throwing, nine-pins bowling, etc., etc., will be held in a fortnight's time in Welschnofen (or did he say Deutschnofen?). When the reading was finished, the priests (three of them by now), the politician, and the populace repaired to the nearest Gasthof for a few glasses of wine...and another card game. The acknowledged village experts at this favorite indoor sport, a sort of cross between bridge and poker played with a 32-card deck, are the parish priest and the member of Parliament. Another part of Sunday routine, with innumerable impatient small children kept pacified with sweets and orange pop until lunchtime.

It is a pleasant fifteen-minute Sunday afternoon walk through sunny meadows from St. Nikolaus to the farm called the Flecker (the Little Spot?). This is the property of Herr Weissensteiner, the Deputy-Mayor of the Commune of Welschnofen. Of course he is never known here as Herr Weissensteiner, but always as "the Flecker", just as the Host of Pension Eggen is not Herr Pichler, but "the Grott", which is the name of his farm up the mountainside. (I am asked: "Are you staying with the Grott?" Since the Tyrolese Hof normally remains in the same family for centuries, the custom causes little confusion. Younger brothers, who have no share in the ownership of the Hof in this land of jealously-guarded primogeniture laws, are known as "Grott Toni" or "Flecker Michaeli", or whatever it may be, even if they wander far from home to take up salaried work in a shop or on another farm.)

The Flecker is a large, handsome Tyrolese house in a favorite local style, the basic plan of which is reminiscent of plantation houses in the Southern United States: a broad, airy hallway runs through the middle connecting front and back doors, and all rooms open to left and right from this hallway. In the side garden among the plum trees there is a wooden alley for bowling nine-pins, a game played locally with a hard rubber ball.

Eggentaler ground-rules were a little difficult to learn - about fifteen of us, including the Weissensteiners' maid, were divided into two teams - but a stranger was helpfully told which pins he should aim for, and there were red wine, conversation, and fights among the children (who were supposed to be setting up the pins) to distract. Besides the Weissensteiners and their maid, there were four villagers present; the rest of us were up from Bozen for Sommerfrische, many only for the day. Between rounds Dr. Ebner and one of the guests, who had been a functionary of the People's Party until the "radicals" took over leadership in 1957, wandered among the plum trees discussing the hopes of the moderates for a come-back on the present tide of anti-terrorist reaction in South Tyrol. The sun was warm, the air cool, and the leaves just beginning to turn.

And in the evening there was another card game in the Bauernstuberl of Pension Eggen.

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In this atmosphere the reports in the Italian newspaper from Bozen of a new Saturday-night series of bomb outrages struck a discordant and improbably note. Locals pointed out to the foreign visitor that those arrested the night before in Trento and elsewhere all seemed to be Germans or Austrians, not South Tyrolers, and two repeated the theory I had already heard here that the whole terrorist campaign is a Communist plot directed from Moscow - or East Berlin. In the Eggental, in any case, it is difficult to believe that the South Tyrol is a blossoming "Second Cyprus", or even that it is a part of Italy.

And that fact in itself is also worthy of comment. Exactly three miles south of St. Nikolaus-in-Eggen is the low Lavazè Pass (5500 feet above sealevel) and beyond Lavazè the villages and the farmers are as exclusively Italian as they are German-Tyrolese here. The pass today is the provincial border between the Alto Adige (South Tyrol) and the Trentino, but it has never been more than that: the two districts were united under Austria before 1918 and under Italy afterward. No law ever prevented movement across this open and easy mountain ridge. Nevertheless for hundreds of years the language border between German and Italian has been fixed there, and even the present Italian linguistic "invasion" of South Tyrol up the Adige valley has quite by-passed the southwestern Dolomites.

Eastern Europe is a curious place. But without noting curiosities like these, how can we begin to understand such apparent absurdities as South Tyrol "freedom fighters"?

Yours sincerely,

Received New York
October 2, 1961



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