

Northern Italy: Over 50 Years of 'Convivenza'

Can a given territory only be inhabited by one crowd / one group? Are we stuck in the supremacist mindset, which implies that one crowd inevitably is lording it over another?

Here is a glimpse into the 50th anniversary of a successful transition:

A long-lasting conflict between Austria and Italy over a border province, found a framework for settlement in 1972, which is formally called 'The Second Autonomy Status'. Some of the main actors in negotiating this settlement were public figures who knew of and were inspired by lofC / Caux.

Members of the Italian Parliament from opposing sides found themselves on the same side in the context of the European Parliament, and there.... they learned to work together: This was just one among many elements that helped to remove the bottlenecks to this negotiated framework.

Flashback to 1970 and Dr. Karl Mitterdorfer, MEP

Yet another season of encounters was under way in the former Caux Palace Hotel. One of them were 'consultations between Northern Irish and South Tyrolians'. What did they have in common? Issues arising from State borders going through the middle of people's settlement areas, but this was not in the Third World, it was in Europe.

Dr. Karl Mitterdorfer, an Italian member of Parliament representing the German language Province of South Tyrol in Rome, and with him a Vice-President and Senator of the same political Party had been visiting Northern Ireland some months before, reporting on the settlement they had reached in their conflict over regional autonomy. Starting in 1919 with the attribution of this province from Austria to Italy, this conflict intensified under Italian Fascism and boiled up into armed violence in the 1960's. Regional Autonomy had not been implemented, although agreed by a United Nations Resolution of 5 September 1946.

Mitterdorfer and his Senator colleague had not seen eye to eye on policy, and as it turned out, not on personal terms either. To a Belfast audience, Mitterdorfer explained: 'A situation that is caused by a narrow nationalism cannot be solved through another nationalism... On both sides the insight was reached that negotiation was the way to resolve this problem. But the best laws can only diffuse a situation, on their own they do not suffice. Last November our Party approved the "package" (negotiated set of Autonomy measures, ed.) Here I should add some personal remarks. Two years ago, I visited Caux for the first time, aware that we needed help. I gained a wider perspective in which to place the South Tyrol problem... It occurred to me that it was not a matter of renouncing our rights, but rather to grow into a responsibility that goes beyond our own interests, that paves the way to approach opposite positions. Something had to change...'

Mitterdorfer then portrayed a meeting with a leader of the then Government party in Rome, which ended in the unexpected admission of mistakes of that party leader, who later reiterated this in Parliament. Turning to his own Senator colleague, he explained to the Belfast audience that between them they had had harsh verbal clashes over policies with the ensuing danger of a split in the party. 'Then one day I had the thought to talk to him... As I examined my position I discovered much envy and jealousy towards colleagues who I

considered as more talented and successful than me. After much thought and deferral, I apologized to my Senator colleague about the things that divided me from him... I would not like to overestimate such personal steps like this one. But I know that it introduced a new dimension into our relationship... It may have contributed to keep the unity of our Party, which is indispensable for our relations with the Italian Government.'

Twenty-two years later, in 1992

The Implementation Clauses of the Autonomy Status finally were in place, the UN Ambassadors of Austria and Italy filed their Declarations of Settlement with the UN General Secretary. The Rome correspondent of the Swiss daily *Journal de Genève* wrote on June 11: 'A burning regional autonomy question, which began at the end of World War I is (...) sorted out. Thirty-two years of negotiations for a seventy-year old conflict! Hence it is not exaggerated to talk about a "historic Agreement", as the long serving Chairman of the South Tyrol Party (SVP), Silvius Magnago, put it...'

Chairman Magnago had headed the delegations to Caux with their Italian counterparts. Many people have woven the tapestry of this 'historic Agreement', among them Mitterdorfer, who after a war-torn young adulthood had actually wanted to become a violinist.

The story continues 23 years later, on March 6, 2015, the Italian daily *La Stampa*, covering its Prime Minister's visit to Moscow, headlined: 'Renzi to Putin: The model of South Tyrol...'. Then, in early 2017 Mitterdorfer died, only a day before his 97th birthday. One of the Speakers at his funeral pointed out: 'Your high reputation as a Member of Parliament in Rome, but also as a European politician, was based on the fact that it was part of your nature to be able to combine loyalty to the values of your Tyrolean homeland with cosmopolitanism.'

And finally in 2021, the current SVP Chairman, Philipp Achammer, paid tribute to his predecessor Magnago: 'With great gratitude, but also humility, we commemorate today (the 11th death anniversary, ed.) Silvius Magnago, whose political legacy one encounters in South Tyrol almost every day, whether unconsciously or consciously.'

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