

EUROLANG : 13.10.2004

Father of South Tyrolean autonomy receives Coudenhove-Kalergi award

Silvius Magnago, former governor of the province of South Tyrol, received this year's "Coudenhove-Kalergi award" in recognition of his life long dedication to a Europe of regions. Silvius Magnago, former governor of the province of South Tyrol, received this year's "Coudenhove-Kalergi award" in recognition of his life long dedication to a Europe of regions.

The Coudenhove-Kalergi award, presented in Bozen, South Tyrol, at the weekend, is named after the founder of the Pan-European Union, the Austrian writer Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, one of the first personalities to promote a united Europe of regions rather than one of nation-states in the 1920s.

The Pan-European Union is currently headed by Otto von Habsburg, who praised Silvius Magnago in his speech. "Magnago sought to achieve the maximum with his will and determination, but he never rushed things and always understood the importance of a step by step approach with a clear goal in his mind", Habsburg said.

Silvius Magnago was born in Meran/Merano, South Tyrol, in 1914 as the son of an Italian-speaking father from the neighbouring Trentino province and a German-speaking mother from the Austrian Vorarlberg. He was four years old when the Austro-Hungarian Empire collapsed and the predominantly German-speaking region of South Tyrol was awarded to Italy at the peace treaty of St Germain and broken off from the remainder of the Tyrol and Austria.

After finishing a law degree at the University of Bologna in 1936 he became a victim of the infamous Hitler-Mussolini agreement, which forced the German and Ladin speaking population of South Tyrol to either opt to leave the country and become German, or convert to an Italian name and assimilate. Under Mussolini all German and Ladin schools were closed and the use of the native languages became officially prohibited.

Magnago opted to leave the country and become a German citizen. During the war he served in the German army and lost his leg. He returned to South Tyrol in 1948 to work as a lawyer, but quickly launched a political career, first becoming Deputy Lord Mayor of Bozen/Bolzano and then moving up to the leadership of the influential South Tyrolean People's Party (SVP), eventually gaining the position of provincial governor of South Tyrol/ Südtirol.

After the Second World War the victorious Allied powers considered the case for a return of South Tyrol to Austria. During the Paris peace treaty negotiations between Italy and the Allies in 1946 Austria called for a referendum, but due to various political reasons it was decided that South Tyrol was to remain a part of Italy. However the Allies imposed strict conditions on the protection of the German and Ladin minorities, and gave Austria protecting powers over the German minority outlined in the so called Gruber- de Gasperi agreement signed at Paris in 1946. In the agreement Italy also agrees to provide local autonomy to South Tyrol.

When Magnago became governor of South Tyrol in 1960 most of the Gruber-de Gasperi agreement remained unfulfilled. He approached Vienna and asked for their support on the international stage. Bruno Kreisky, then Foreign Minister- later Federal Chancellor- of Austria, decided to present the case to the UN in New York. The UN asked Italy and Austria to find a bilateral solution based on the Gruber- de Gasperi agreement. Magnago was the main driving force in the difficult negotiations between Austria and Italy in the 60s. His consistency and diplomatic approach finally paid off when Vienna and Rome agreed to the famous "South Tyrol package" in 1969, which made the province a model for minority protection across Europe.

Magnago continued his efforts to strengthen the South Tyrolean autonomy, which culminated in the so called "Second South Tyrol package" in 1992. Since then South Tyrol is often referred to as a "state in a state" with Europe's most extensive regional autonomy.

Although some issues, including the continued official recognition of Italian topographic names introduced under fascism, as well as the Mussolini built "Monument of Victory" in central Bozen/ Bolzano remain very controversial, some consider the peaceful coexistence between the

German speaking majority and the Italian and Ladin minorities as exemplary. Mr Magnago was the architect of this model region for the Europe of tomorrow.

In a second ceremony at the same event the journalist Reinhard Olt, correspondent of the German "FAZ" newspaper at Vienna, received the first "Otto Habsburg Award", newly awarded by MIDAS, the network of European minority newspapers. (Eurolang)