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Société Imaginaire



Members of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the Société Imaginaire meeting in Cadenabbia, Lake Como, May 18-24, 1996. Photo by Peter Granser.

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Letter From Cadenabbia (Hand-Delivered)



Villa La Collina by Peter Granser.

The second joint conference to take place in Cadenabbia, Italy, between the Société Imaginaire and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, turned out to be hard work: two sessions daily on topics such as "Culture and Politics," "On Constructivism," "Literary Translation," "Publications," and "Art on Hand-Made Paper." In addition, there were calls for closer cooperation between the Société and the Foundation, reorganization within the Société, emphasis on planning, accountability and, what's more, *results*. The question was raised whether this informal, definition-defying, uncharted network of writers, artists, and politicians on three continents could still afford to conduct its business as casually as it had since its inception ten years ago. Speaking about the circumstances of his founding of the Société, Batuz said that he imagined a *polis* of individuals who were not present, but were closely linked nevertheless: an imaginary *polis*. He stressed the "shifting" nature of the Société, and his conviction that "if it were to be defined concretely, it would most certainly become history." Taking this into consideration, how do you go about re-organizing an imaginary entity, a *polis* that defies organization to begin with? To the chagrin of some of its communicants, there were even calls for getting on the Internet.

The week-long deliberations were rendered simultaneously over the

system in English, German, or Spanish by two multilingual interpreters, the professional breed. As usual, informal discussions and debates over espresso breaks, meals, and walks in what I can only describe as a paradise setting were intense but substantive.



After-hours brandy and conversation in La Collina. By Peter Granser.

Situated on the shores of Lake Como are the villas and exquisite gardens of three major international foundations: the Rockefeller Foundation at Bellagio (an artist haven known to many American poets and artists); the Vigoni Foundation (concerned with German-Italian history and art); and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Cadenabbia.

Surrounded by many private villas, old villages, rolling hills and mountains, Lake Como still retains a 19th century outlook and aura. Its unique micro-climate, lush vegetation, clean air, and quietude — except for the early morning chorus of an astonishing variety of birds — make it one of the most enviable regions anywhere. On the western horizon there is even a view of the snow-capped summits of the Alps.

Competing with its natural grandeur is the region's cultural background and its pantheon of nobles and great artists, composers, writers, and of course, politicians: Franz Liszt and the Countess d'Agoult; Cosima and Richard Wagner; Giuseppe Verdi; Stendhal; Giacometti; Benito Mussolini and Claretta Petacci (killed by the partisans a few kilometers from Cadenabbia in April 1945); and the Brentano family, members of which have flourished here since the 12th century, as well as in Germany and the United States. It was Heinrich von Brentano, Foreign Minister of the first post-war German government, who recommended Lake Como to Konrad Adenauer.

The Chancellor came to Villa la Collina in Cadenabbia once or twice a year from 1957 to 1966, and it was here that he wrote his memoirs after he retired from politics. By that time, Cadenabbia had become known as the alternative seat of the German government, hosting cabinet and international meetings and accommodating foreign dignitaries, including then-Secretary of State Dean Rusk and National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy. The great Oskar Kokoschka visited here to make a portrait of Adenauer in his ninetieth year.

Lothar Kraft, CEO of the Foundation, who made available useful information on Lake Como and the first post-war Chancellor, confirmed that Adenauer owned priceless paintings by Titian, El Greco, and Velasquez, and some by Churchill and Eisenhower as well. Less well known was his reading of mysteries by Edgar Wallace and his love for poetry, much of which he had memorized, and which he recited frequently.



Lothar Kraft by Peter Granser.

The Konrad Adenauer Foundation was incorporated to benefit the general public with symposia and with scholarships, grants, and other programs in twenty-two countries. It promotes a wide array of issues such as European unification, civic education, and the increase of understanding among nations through the dissemination of ideas, and exchange programs. In many cases, it has offered moral and material support to individual victims of political persecution. The Else Heilinger Fund, bequeathed to the Adenauer Foundation by Else Heilinger of Aachen, supports the arts through direct grants and through the sponsorship of readings, exhibitions, and concerts.

In 1977, ten years after Adenauer's death, the Foundation bought Villa La Collina, and since then it has become a European center for reflection on contemporary issues, for intellectual debate, and for cultural activity. It was therefore through the spirit of the place, and the kindred spirit of their ideals, that the Konrad Adenauer Foundation invited the Société Imaginaire for a week-long dialogue in Cadenabbia in May 1996.

Batuz's opening remarks on the genesis of the Société did not really resonate until the end of the week, when Paul Wink, Associate Director of the well-organized, efficient, and properly accountable Adenauer Foundation,

put pressure on the Société for — what else — re-organization, efficiency, and accountability. If the two entities were to embark on a closer, long-range coordination of activities, it was obviously required that the Société become better organized, rather than the Foundation become unruly. By concentrating on projects of mutual interest, however, the two sides bought valuable time and conflict-free discussion. One such project, introduced by Batuz in his opening remarks, was to focus on the Constructivist Movement in art and architecture. Constructivism will be the topic of the next gathering of the Société, scheduled to take place in Montevideo, Uruguay this coming November. Hosted by the president of that country, Julio M. Sanguinetti, the event will aspire to generate an ambitious program of lectures, exhibits, and publications on the Constructivist Movement in East Europe and South America. Batuz concluded by introducing Steven Mansbach, Director of the American Academy of Berlin.

Mansbach spoke of Russian and eastern European Constructivism as having drawn creatively on a repertoire of geometrical forms to sketch a nearly perfect universe, free from limitations of the world and its histories. Although there were many forms of constructivist art and contending versions of constructivist philosophy, there was nonetheless a shared sense of obligation to overcome all borders and conventional limitations — aesthetic, social, historical, and geographic — in a heroic attempt to point the way to a better and more rational life. Mansbach went on to say that close examination of the work made by passionately committed artists from eastern Europe and Latin America will foster a better understanding of the scope, perspective, and aspirations of the Constructivist Movement. He then urged organiza-



Batuz shopping loquats at Bellagio. By Peter Granser.

tions such as the Societe Imaginaire to undertake a form of "archaeology" to recover the richly inventive and visually compelling character of Constructivism's transcendent vision. In this regard, Mansbach saw the Societe as uniquely positioned to play an essential role.

Several other participants commenting on the subject were: Prof. Stefan Slachta, Director of the Academy of Fine Arts of Slovakia; Dr. Rith Magni, art historian and co-editor of *Humboldt* magazine, published by Internationes, a government organization representing Germany abroad; and Marcos Aguinis, an Argentinian who has practiced psychoanalysis and has served as Minister of Culture, authoring his government's democratization charter. Aguinis is also the author of sixteen books, the most recent of which, a novel, will be published in the United States under the title, *Marano, an Epic*.



Adenauer's favorite pastime, Bocce, at La Collina. By Peter Granser.

Speaking in Spanish on the subject of Culture and Politics, Marcos Aguinis suggested that Moses, Christ, Marx, and Einstein each created and promoted fragmentation in the human community. All ideologies are dead, he said, and all art since 1920 is anti-art in nature. He then referred to the Right and the Left, and alluded to a new force in the making, whose objectives as of now are unclear. Aguinis sees religious fundamentalism as expressing individual and collective resentment, and the unemployed as a new social class. The Société is like a forum that enables the expression of ideas before they are spoken, he said.

Lothar Kraft asked if in an age of great transformations there is much to be expected of technology, adding that

we are facing a re-organization of the old order, with the polarity between the Right and the Left dissolving into a middle-of-the-road democracy. Still, polls in Germany indicate that active political participation (party membership) is down to three percent — "That's very few people pushing the cart forward," Kraft said.

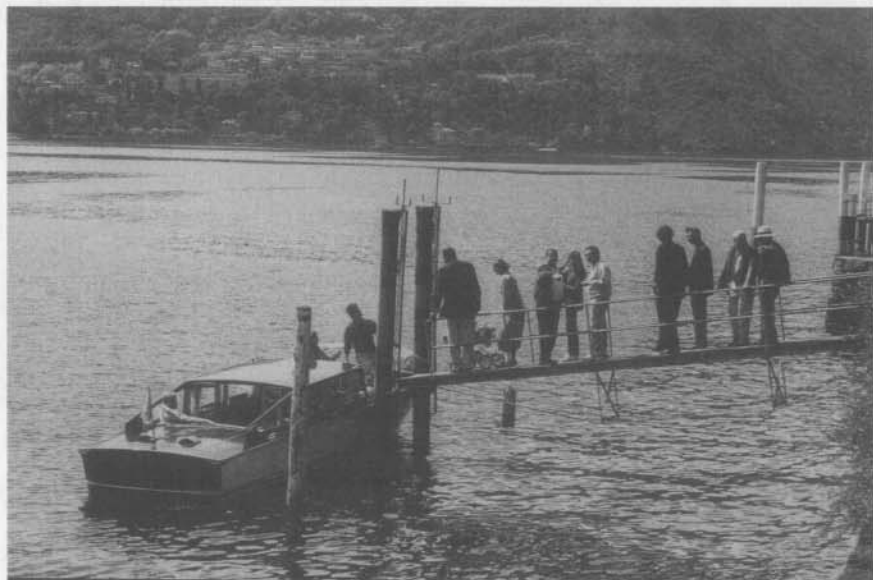
Aguinis spoke of democracy as a rule of law and freedom of information. There are mature and immature democracies. A mature democracy assumes a *critical* attitude. Germany may not be the model for other societies. He went on to say that intellectuals sometimes performed well under dictatorships. "That's *protesta et propoesta*: a child *protests*; a protester is a dependent. *Propoesta* calls for people to seize the initiative."

Jacek Bochenski, the Polish fiction writer, wondered whether some nations are mature enough to adapt to democracy, or whether democracy ought to adapt to their people. He went on to voice concern about the youth in Poland poking fun at democracy, and voting for adversaries for the hell of it.

Aguinis: Democracy is by no means without contradictions. In wall-to-wall carpeting, you can't sweep anything under the rug. Offering peace, security, freedom, and human rights, democracy is only a framework for societies to elaborate on their particulars.

Timothy Keating, the American Dean of Franklin College in Switzerland, spoke about literary translation and the Société's long-term correspondence project between poets and writers of different languages and the collaborative efforts between poets and visual artists. He then proposed creation and preservation of a Société archive. He envisioned the university as a natural environment to generate translation projects. (Coincidentally, a team headed by Harvard's Professor of English Werner Sollors had just launched a massive translation project in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with Johns Hopkins University Press undertaking publication of the texts).

A discussion ensued on the correspondence project between Jacek Bochenski and Alvaro Mutis of Mexico that failed because of a lack of goals and of translator participation. Batuz, Bochenski, Margarete Kraft (co-editor of *Humboldt*), Karl-Wilhelm Pohl (lawyer and conservator), and Mark Lammert (artist), debated aspects of literary translation and reviewed publishing venues. Referring to the Bochenski-Mutis project, M. Kraft wondered whether



Off to sight-seeing on Lake Como. By Peter Granser.

the kernel of a goal may not have been present after all. Bochenski replied that you never know what the outcome of any effort will be. "At any rate, I can only speak for myself," he said, "Maybe we should ask Mutis the same

question." Batuz analyzed the word "correspondence" in English and Spanish, adding, "It's important, I suppose, who plays with whom. I myself play the matchmaker."

Pohl suggested expanding publication outlets into the commercial sphere and mentioned poet Michael Krüger, the Editor-in-Chief of Hanser Verlag. Lammert referred to the Societe headquarters at Altzella, a former monastery, as the ideal place for translation residencies and artists' workshops. Altzella owns a hand-made paper facility. Lothar Kraft encouraged a wide program of residencies and exchanges at Altzella. "Translate and transmit," he urged.

Culture and Politics and reorganization of the Société were the predominant topics on the last day of the



Johannes Schmitz, youngest Société member, communicates with Mom.
By Peter Granser.

meeting at Cadenabbia. Batuz remarked that self-preservation during World War II made necessary an emphasis on cultural differences, and he derided Nazi practices relating to culture. Today only nationalist arrogance fragments Europe, he said. Then, expressing the opinion that today's Germany makes no sense outside a European context, he went on to ask: "Is Russia part of Europe?"

Walter Schmitz, Pro-Rector of the Technical University of Dresden, pointed to Germany's transformation into an international culture. Paul Wink talked about German-Polish relations, and suggested that Europe cannot expand eastward while ignoring the South. Neglect of Africa is a crime, he said. Jacek Bochenski urged that Russians be invited to join the Societe, and said he would do his best to promote Russian membership in the European Community. Aguinis remarked that Argentinians try to fit in with other Latin American cultures; he quoted Octavio Paz to the effect that collectively, Latin Americans are closer to Europe than the U.S.

At this point, Franz-Josef Reuter, Head of the U.S., Europe, and Japan Department of the Adenauer Foundation, introduced the subject of restructuring the Société's forums. He went on to recommend an annual gathering of leading members and invited speakers at Cadenabbia. Schmitz urged the

Société to open up its membership, and to invite the general public to its meetings.

A brief discussion ensued on the topic Culture and Politics, often represented by members of the Société, who have been elected to high office in local or national governments. It was stressed that although the Société is



Peter Granser at Villa Vigoni

speakers to future meetings. We are trying to create a platform for dialogue."

A motor boat sight-seeing ride on Lake Como, and a special buffet dinner, prepared by the Italian staff of La Collina, closed the week-long gathering, along with more lively conversation and with the Villa's own brand of Valpolicella.

Peter Granser, a brilliant young photojournalist from Stuttgart, documented conference and excursion with many memorable photos.

Until November in Montevideo, I remain, your obedient servant,

Stratis Haviaras

non-partisan, the two institutions can work together on many issues of mutual interest.

Batuz: "I have been debating this with Stratis, and I have agreed that the Societe must stay away from narrow political objectives."

Aguinis: "From goals to methodology — that's an easy way to fall into a trap.... The Foundation simply wishes that we carry out our projects in a way that produces results. I don't think that the Adenauer Foundation wants the Société Imaginaire to give up its independence."

Wink: "There is no misunderstanding. I intentionally alluded to politics and business as a context for inviting

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