

Switzerland

Michael O'Leary interviewed **Cornelio Sommaruga**

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O'Leary: What are your first associations with your place of birth?

Sommaruga: Although my Mama's family had come from Lombardy, she was Roman and I had inherited that. However, I always also had a strong Swiss identity. It would never have crossed my mind to say that I was Italian. No, I identify as Swiss, or rather as Italian-speaking Swiss.

O'Leary: And your father was from Ticino?

Sommaruga: Yes, he was born in Lugano, where he completed secondary school before he left for St Gallen to study economics. From there he went to Bern to get a Ph.D. After that he went to work in London until his aunt Carolina Maraini Sommaruga called him to come to Rome and help her with managing the villa and the fortune she had been left with since her husband had died. That is why my father went to Rome.

O'Leary: You spent most of your childhood in Rome. Did you go to school with local children?

Sommaruga: Because my father was an anti-fascist living in fascist Italy, he put me into a Montessori school, which was a private school, so that I did not have to join Mussolini's youth organisations such as the [*Opera Nazionale*] *Balilla* or the *Figli della Lupa*. So, I was very lucky that I did not become indoctrinated into fascism, but of course the Montessori education I received was also very valuable in and of itself. By the way, my father also made sure that, although I had Italian citizenship because I had been born in Rome, I still had the option of renouncing it when I came of age so that I would not need to serve in the Italian army.

O'Leary: What was your favourite book when you were a child?

Sommaruga: I read the Bible a couple of times and was very impressed by it, especially by the New Testament. But is it my favourite book? I don't know.

O'Leary: And at university? Was there a course that had a particular impact on you?

Sommaruga: Yes, I attended lectures given by the famous professor Zaccaria Giacometti. His lectures and his book on constitutional law were very important to the

development of my thinking about the law, but also as models for the aesthetic expression of ideas.

I also have negative recollections of my studies in Zurich, especially of the lectures we had to attend on insolvency legislation, which were held at seven o'clock in the morning! [*laughs*]. That was just impossible!

O'Leary: What motivated you to study law? Were there outside expectations for you to do so?

Sommaruga: No, my idea was to become a diplomat. And I thought that knowing the law would provide me with a good foundation for working for the state. But then I realised that I would also have to do an internship to apply for the *Concours Diplomatique*. So, to please my father, I worked at a small private bank in Zurich for two years. He was glad that I had done so, but frankly I was quite disappointed. Having finished my internship at the bank, I applied for the *Concours* and passed the entry exams. However, three days later I received a letter saying I was still not admitted because I had not passed their medical evaluation. So I asked a friend of my father about it, who told me that I should insist that they put me on a private pension-fund scheme instead of the standard public scheme. It worked: I was able to start my career as a diplomat, and after four years I had a better medical evaluation which allowed me to enter the public pension-fund scheme. Did you have other sources of knowledge apart from school?

Sommaruga: Yes, I learned a lot from reading the newspapers. My father had a subscription to the *Corriere del Ticino* and the *NZZ* [*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*]. Then, when leaving for my studies in Zurich, I told my father that he had calculated my stipend well but that he had forgotten to include the costs of a subscription to the *NZZ*, which back then was published in three daily editions. Reading that was quite arduous, but it improved my German a lot.

O'Leary: You said that you had children early in life. How did family life and work life fit together? Was your family affected by your profession?

Sommaruga: I would say that my family was always my first priority. But this did not keep me from doing my job as a diplomat in various places. My wife and I recently counted the number of cities we've lived in: fourteen! [*Laughs.*] From Zurich to Bern, Bern to Den Haag, then back to Switzerland only to leave again for Cologne after just three months, then Rome, Geneva, etc. But my family, I think, never suffered from this, they were always interested in what I was doing. Also, I developed a habit of sending a postcard to every one of my children from every country I visited. That was a lot of work! And for my eightieth birthday—now I'm eighty-seven years old—one of my sons gave a speech in which he said that I had always been a wonderful father even though I had a profession that

required a lot of attention. If he said it, it must be so. That son is a politician, he is elected to the Swiss Council of States [Carlo Sommaruga, Council of State for the Canton Geneva and member of the Social Democratic Party].

O’Leary: In retrospect, is there something in your career that you would have done differently?

Sommaruga: I think that I cannot complain. All that I had—or wanted—to do turned out very well. Although, if I could have, I would have avoided one thing: giving a visa to Svetlana Stalin [Svetlana Iosifovna Alliluyeva, née Svetlana Iosifovna Stalin, was the youngest child and only daughter of Josef Stalin and his wife Nadezhda Alliluyeva]. It’s a memorable story: When I was in Rome working as first secretary, one afternoon I received a phone call from a high-ranking official in Bern. He was also from Ticino, so he talked to me first in a local Italian dialect, then switched to Swiss German, telling me he did not want others to understand what we were saying. He told me to cancel all meetings for the afternoon and to wait for his call. Two hours later he called and told me that he had just returned from the Federal Council’s conference room, the so-called *Bundesratszimmer*, where the Council had decided to grant a visa to Stalin’s daughter, who was currently hiding in Rome under the protection of the American government. He told me that I had to ask her whether it really was her intention to come to Switzerland. She also had to sign an agreement stating that she would not make any public statements in or about Switzerland.

This was all new to me, not least because I had never filled out a visa myself. So I told a co-worker to take the day off and join me. After hours of waiting and nothing happening, we started to worry, because we knew she had to leave the country that same day. At the moment the Swissair plane to Geneva was supposed to take off, my phone rang: “You understand, we are calling you because . . .”—and so on. However, they told me that it was impossible for her to be brought to the Swiss embassy, it was too late. I asked them, “Does this mean that you’re near the airport?” “Yes!” they replied. So I told them I would drive out to Fiumicino to meet them there. I’d never driven so fast in my life. We met in front of the Swissair counter, myself and two men who really looked like Laurel and Hardy: One was tall, the other short with a hat [*laughs*] and a raincoat. The shorter man said to me, “Mr Sommaruga, let’s go!” I asked them, “Where are you taking me?” “To our car.” I said, “No, no, if we have to move, I stay in my car,” because only with the diplomatic license plate I was protected. I did not know what they were up to. We took my car and drove down narrow streets near the airport. At one point he told me to switch the headlights off. Then a car appeared behind us. “There she is!” he said. So I let her into my car. I spent around a quarter of an hour with Svetlana in my car, we talked, I gave her the papers to sign and my co-worker stuck the Swiss visa inside her passport. And then suddenly one of the Americans re-appeared and ordered me to give him the keys to my

car. Since I was sitting in the back, I made the bad decision to hand him my keys. He started driving extremely fast, saying, "We have to leave this place, there are KGB people around!" And they probably wanted to take Svetlana back. He stopped, had her move back to their car and told me to get in touch with the airline to tell them she was ready to leave.

Before coming to Rome, Svetlana had gone to New Delhi to scatter her third husband's ashes in the Ganges. After that she decided to defect, so she got in touch with the American embassy in Delhi. The ambassador told her that he would help her defect to the United States but she would have to take the next possible flight to New York. However, after exchanging a couple of telegraphs with his superiors in Washington, D.C., he retracted his offer: they did not want a direct confrontation with the Soviet Union. So they brought her to a small apartment in Rome, as the Italian government had authorised her to stay in Italy for three days. And I met her on that third day.

After that long day of work, I went home to rest. But soon the phone rang and a Swiss official from Bern told me that only Svetlana's suitcase had arrived. I talked to some representatives of the airline who told me that she had not boarded the airplane. Then I got another phone call, this time from an American, who told me that Svetlana had now left; they had had to rent a plane especially to bring her to Geneva. It turns out they had flown her out on a Qantas airplane meant for forty or fifty people, with her as the only passenger.

Perhaps this story shows you that as a diplomat you always have to be ready to do things that you would not usually expect from a diplomat—it's not just cocktail parties, dinners, etc. And as I told you in the beginning, I would have preferred never to have been involved in this story. For I was caught in a dilemma: on the one hand, the authorities in Bern had instructed me not to tell the ambassador, but on the other hand I didn't want to be disloyal towards my boss. So I had to resolve my dilemma [*laughs*]. Since that day was a Friday and I knew that the ambassador went horse riding every Friday afternoon, I called his secretary to ask her if he was around. She replied angrily that he had gone horse riding like he did every Friday afternoon. But that didn't matter, for now I at least had some sort of alibi.

The next day I went to the ambassador, asked him to sign the papers and told him the story. He replied that this was an incredible story and that he would ask the US ambassador, who would probably also be at a funeral that was happening that day, what was going on. Later he called me and told me that the American ambassador had known even less about the incident than he himself did—even though Svetlana had been staying at the home of one of his employees for three days. So there you have it. Later this story

made it into two books, one of which was written by Svetlana herself: *Only One Year*. In that book she mentions “this nice diplomat” [*laughs*] whom she met in Rome.

O’Leary: Does this mean that the American intelligence agency was in touch with the Swiss Federal Council, which then got in touch with the Swiss secret service?

Sommaruga: No, the American embassy in Bern contacted a high official to ask him if they could arrange a visa for Svetlana. He then asked the Federal Council, which agreed to grant her a provisional visa.

O’Leary: Can you name a politician you admire or used to admire?

Sommaruga: I was positively impressed by several Federal Councillors, in particular two who happened to come from Zurich: Ernst Brugger and Fritz Honegger. They were both easy to talk to and they listened to what you had to say. But things changed when Kurt Furgler became the head of the Department of Economic Affairs. There things started to worsen, which you would never have guessed looking at it from the outside. For Furgler always gave the impression of being a decisive man. But that was not the case at all. Oftentimes he would avoid hot topics until other officials in his department had to intervene and make decisions, which he would then blame us for.

But one politician I particularly admire comes from Ticino: Dick Marty. Dick Marty is one of very few politicians to have occupied all three roles in government: he was state prosecutor, then state councillor [for the canton of Ticino], and finally member of the Council of States as well as of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. For instance, the Council of Europe commissioned him to carry out investigations throughout the world. He also wrote a book that bears the title *Une certaine idée de la justice* [“A Certain Idea of Justice”], which he wrote in French because he was born in a French speaking town [Sorengo in Lugano, Ticino]. Writing books in French, doing academic research in German and English, but he is a true *Ticinese*.

O’Leary: So, you obviously experienced a lot of political events from up close, but is there any one event that particularly affected you or members of your family personally?

Sommaruga: What really affected me was the Secret Files Scandal [A parliamentary investigation in 1989 revealed that during the Cold War the Swiss government had established an illegal system of mass surveillance of left-leaning individuals and organisations, compiling more than 900,000 files in secret archives. After the scandal was made public, individuals could demand to see any files pertaining to them]. You know that the state gathered secret files on many Swiss citizens and that all sorts of things were found in these files. When we were given the right to look at our files, I preferred not to do so, even though many of my friends and colleagues had demanded them. I didn’t

bother because when I was working in the Commerce Division as delegate for trade agreements, it was my job to negotiate with all the Comecon [Council for Mutual Economic Assistance—an economic organisation headed by the Soviet Union and comprising countries in the Eastern Bloc and other socialist states around the world] countries. So, I travelled often to these countries: I was twice in Moscow, once in Budapest, Warsaw, Prague, Bucharest. I'm sure the secret police had their work cut out for them. They must have thought, "This Swiss guy must be dangerous, he has all these contacts in communist countries!"

O'Leary: Did the Secret Files Scandal affect you or your family directly?

Sommaruga: I don't know. In any case my professional *iter* [Italian: *career*]
—I don't like the French term *carrière*—appears not to have been impeded, otherwise I would not have been asked to become the director of the Commerce Division.

By the way, if you'll allow me this brief anecdote, it was Furgler who made me director. It all started when we were flying in the Federal Council's plane to attend meetings in Belgrade. We were chatting when Furgler told me that [Paul Rudolf] Jolles was going to finish his stint as director of the Commerce Division and that he was looking for someone to replace him. He had ten viable candidates in mind, one of whom was me. I told him that he could take me off that list of his, that he had only nine candidates because I was not willing to take on such a complex task. I told him that I wasn't a fan of the Peter Principle [A satirical principle articulated by Laurence J. Peter and Raymond Hull in a book of the same name. It states that people in organisations tend to get promoted until they are in a position for which they lack any competence].

After that conversation I didn't think any more of it until one day my secretary told me that there were journalists outside waiting to talk to me and that Furgler wanted to see me. I told her to tell him that I was in a meeting and that I would go see him after. Soon after that [laughs] she comes back and says that he wouldn't have time later but that I could see him while he was having lunch. So I went and asked him what was going on. He told me that he had just suggested to the Federal Council that I be chosen as future director of the Commerce Division. I told him he knew I wasn't enthusiastic about the job but if his colleagues decided to put me in that position I would accept. At that Furgler got furious and asked me—and this was typical Furgler—"How could you think that my fellow Federal Council members would not accept a proposal of mine?" At the press conference held jointly with Jolles and me, he told everyone, "Now we will have sunshine, he's from Ticino, it's Cornelio Sommaruga!"

O'Leary: Are there moments when you feel Swiss rather than Italian? And are there moments when you feel more European?

Sommaruga: No, no, I feel Swiss, very much so. But, being Swiss, I look beyond our national borders and feel European. But not European in the sense of the European Union, rather Europe as it is represented by the Council of Europe, which includes more than forty countries spanning the continent from the Atlantic Ocean to Siberia. When I speak of the Council of Europe, I am well aware that this organisation is the bearer of values that all of its member countries are supposed to share, but that unfortunately this is not always the case.

O’Leary: Are there things about Europe that frustrate or, worse, scare you?

Sommaruga: Well, yes, the way some countries behave is not always ideal. In particular all member states are also members of the European Court of Human Rights, which means that they have an obligation to implement the rulings of this court at the national level. Unfortunately, member nations do not always do so.

O’Leary: Is Europe more a political or a cultural project?

Sommaruga: It is both. But the political aspect probably plays a more important role than the cultural. However, the cultural aspect comes along with it, and its importance is not to be underestimated!

O’Leary: What should the cultural aspect be?

Sommaruga: The cultural aspect contains the values of the Council of Europe. These are human rights, democracy, and respect towards smaller countries, minorities. All of these values are part of our European culture, which has a very important history that is reflected, for instance, in the vast French, Italian, and German literary cultures.

O’Leary: I assume that an important change during your lifetime was the elimination of inner-European borders. Was this important to you? Did it match your expectations?

Sommaruga: Yes, this is something I experienced even as a child, as well as later, in my adult life. However, it always seemed to exist more on paper than in reality. I have crossed the Swiss border to the south, north, west, and east an untold number of times—and there were always border controls. The borders have never been forgotten. Even with the Schengen agreement the borders remained as an important political concept, which we can see now better than ever with the outbreak of the coronavirus.

O’Leary: Did something happen in the past in Europe that you never thought would happen?

Sommaruga: Yes, I think that the indifference towards the interests of smaller member states in the European Union has become a big problem. In particular France and

Germany have been setting the rules, and the European Commission has never dared not to follow them.

O’Leary: You now mention the three big countries: France, Germany, England—

Sommaruga: No, I did not mention England! England is a very special case [*laughs*]. Well, actually we shouldn’t talk about England but rather the United Kingdom at the time when it was a member state of the EFTA [European Free Trade Association]. Actually, I was acting secretary-general of the EFTA when the United Kingdom was in the process of leaving the association. The negotiations were extremely difficult because the UK ultimately was not willing to respect its counterparts’ wishes, constantly demanding exceptions without offering anything in return. These negotiations paralleled the exit negotiations we had with Denmark and Norway, which in both cases were much easier. And in the end Norway held a referendum in which its people decided against leaving, so they stayed in the EFTA and are still a member country as of today.

O’Leary: You’ve sketched out a dynamic within the European Union where the big countries make decisions over the heads of the smaller ones. The Swiss resist this dynamic by pushing for an alternative to the EU, namely the EFTA. This leads me to a bigger question: Do you think that the biggest danger comes from within, for example from the ignorance shown by the big countries, or from outside Europe, from external threats?

Sommaruga: I think there are threats from both sides, internal and external, but I think that the dangers from within are graver. This is especially true after Brexit, because the UK left by invoking the TEU [Treaty on European Union], which regulates the process whereby countries can leave the EU. In doing so, the UK has set a bad example for other countries that might not feel so comfortable in the Union on account of the larger countries’ dominance.

O’Leary: Is Switzerland also a player in this game? After all, it played a pivotal role in the creation of the EFTA. Are forces at work in Switzerland that could pose a danger to the European idea and to the coherence of Europe?

Sommaruga: I don’t think so, no. Switzerland has enough problems on its own. In particular, it needs to clarify its relationship with the European Union and the open questions regarding the institutional agreement between the EU and Switzerland. I don’t think that at this point Switzerland could play any role of any kind at the European level.

O’Leary: What about the bigger, more global context: EFTA and the EEC [European Economic Community; now the EU] are European organisations. But more recent developments are also marked by the rise of China as a superpower and the United

States' recent isolationism—does this mean that it would become conceivable for the EFTA and EU to come closer together and build a true union? And would it be desirable?

Sommaruga: It would be desirable, but I don't believe it will happen. The European Union has quite strict rules, especially since the Treaty of Maastricht and the introduction of the European currency. This makes cooperation with third-party states more challenging. But it is interesting to see how individual member countries within the EFTA and the EFTA secretariat as a body are trying to establish free-trade agreements with various countries, especially in Asia, such as Thailand and the Philippines.

O'Leary: We have talked a lot about economic policies—what about peace? What is your experience with Europe as a source of peace?

Sommaruga: I would say that in Switzerland we have not yet realised what a pivotal role the European Economic Community and its predecessor, the European Coal and Steel Community, have played for establishing peace in Europe and settling the very problematic post-war relationship between France and Germany.

O'Leary: And what was the role of Europe beyond Central Europe, i.e. in the Balkans, Eastern Europe, and globally?

Sommaruga: The expansion of the European Union is always a good thing, in part because the values of the European Union are transmitted to countries that so far have not benefitted from them. However, economically this is a problem. In becoming part of the European Union, weaker economies get crushed just by virtue of having to compete in the same single market. So, while expanding collaboration among countries is good politically, there will be a lot of challenges on the economic side.

O'Leary: What are the important European values?

Sommaruga: Human rights and democracy.

O'Leary: What role does religion play in your personal life?

Sommaruga: An important role! I am an observant Catholic and happy to see that there is a real community of Catholics who are engaged with the Church. I feel less positively about the Vatican. Not so much because of our current pope, Francis, who I admire a lot, but rather because the Roman Curia under his reign has not been capable of changing enough. It is nevertheless important to note that it is a good thing that the Church has persisted.

I am also very ecumenical and have great admiration for the Reformed Church. I occasionally attend the ceremonies on Sunday morning at the St Pierre Cathedral here

in Geneva. Just as important as ecumenicalism is inter-religiosity. I am also part of a group of people from different religions such as Christians, Buddhists, Shintoists, and Hindus who have written an *appel spirituel de Genève* ["Genevan spiritual appeal"] with a valuable text that we published at St Pierre twelve years ago. We renew our appeal every year in one of the places of worship in Geneva.

O'Leary: We recently saw politicians [in Switzerland], most notably from the Christian Democratic Party, demanding that religious authorities should abstain from political discussion.

Sommaruga: That is right, we should not mix politics and religion. That is why I would not object to taking the adjective "Christian" out of the name of the Christian Democratic Party. Their name itself represents an entanglement of politics and religion.

O'Leary: Is there anything that happened during your time as president of the ICRC that left a particular impression on you personally?

Sommaruga: There were many such moments; I was in touch with ICRC delegates all the time. But there is one particularly sad memory: At four o'clock in the morning our director of operations called me and told me, "Monsieur le Président, I have to tell you that six of our nurses have been killed tonight in Grozny." It happened in a hospital in Chechnya that we had taken over. So there were still many locals working at the hospital, and they realised immediately that the murderers were Chechens as well, since they had spoken in Chechen with other Chechens who were there. That crisis at the ICRC was very tough for us all and I had to take measures immediately. The first thing I did was get in touch with different heads of state to tell them that they were responsible for allowing a situation to arise in which the Geneva Convention, which they had ratified, was not respected. The second thing was that I had to take care of the victims' families and their grief. We organised a ceremony in Geneva—also at St Pierre Cathedral—and invited the families, some of whom came from abroad. After the ceremony I had a member of the Red Cross Committee accompany the remains of each nurse on their final journey home. The third thing I had to do, which was very difficult, was to reinstate a healthy climate within the ICRC. This was so difficult because the murders in Grozny were a sign that the ICRC had lost its status as an organisation that no one would dare attack. And this shift was not limited to the zone of Russian influence: soon after that [certain actors] in Congo complained about the presence of the ICRC and threatened to follow the example of the Chechen killers.

O'Leary: These murders happened after the end of the Cold War. Was there a connection?

Sommaruga: I don't think these events are related, at least not in the sense of this incident being part of a conflict along the lines of the Cold War. It was rather due to an internal conflict within the Russian Federation. The culprits were locals who were fighting for an independent and sovereign Chechnya, and Moscow didn't want that region to leave the Federation. We've never found out how what prompted these murders, but I have the impression that ultimately an order had arrived from Moscow that was then carried out by local or even Russian security forces.

O'Leary: Does this mean that on Russia's part there was a perception that the ICRC was an instrument of the West aimed at controlling other regions?

Sommaruga: Hmm, I am not so convinced of this. Although sometimes remarks were made that pointed in that direction, that Russia wanted to draw a line as to how much was possible in the Chechen fight for independence. Perhaps some groups in Moscow thought in those terms, but this was never obvious to us.

O'Leary: Do you have a message for Europe's future generations?

Sommaruga: Yes: Europe must get stronger, and that is best done by strengthening the Council of Europe. Its Parliamentary Assembly would be best placed for having discussions on the future and values of the European community. I cannot tell you what will happen in fifty years, but I do hope that the Council of Europe will become stronger in the decades to come.