

SEEKING GREATER VALUE PIETRO BONANOMI, SWITZERLAND

One of the smallest but most beautiful international airports in the world is in Lugano, nestled in the Alps near the border between Italy and Switzerland. Lugano, with its warm climate, lake and breathtaking views of the Alps, is one of southern Switzerland's most beautiful resorts. The population of about 100,000 speak mainly Italian, as the area has had strong ties with Italy since the days of the Roman Empire.

Pietro Bonanomi was born and raised here. Coming from a line of carpenters and cabinetmakers, it was only natural that he should leave school early and enter a trade and design school in nearby Bellinzona. After graduating at the age of 20, he began working for a construction firm.

Since childhood, Mr. Bonanomi had always enjoyed skiing, mountain climbing and camping as well as volunteer activities in his local community. However, surrounded as he was by the beauty of the mountains and such a variety of outdoor pursuits, he was always troubled by one question: How could this sort of life in such a pastoral setting benefit society? Searching for the answer, he felt that there was a limit to what he could achieve in Lugano. The more he pondered this question, the more he felt that if he continued leading the same life-style, he would be incapable of making any real impact on society.

After leaving school, Mr. Bonanomi felt that by pursuing a career in architecture he could be of value to society and bring happiness to other people while finding fulfillment, but he had no way to pursue this dream. He was 26 years old when the construction firm for which he worked placed him in charge of their concerns in southern Switzerland. He was still troubled by the feeling that there must be something more, something of greater value that he should be doing with his life. He set out in earnest to discover what this might be, and almost immediately after making this decision, he encountered the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin. His uncle, a Catholic priest studying the Japanese martial art of kendo, introduced him to one of his fellow students who was a Soka Gakkai International (SGI) member.

Upon reading *Life—An Enigma, a Precious Jewel* by SGI President Ikeda, Mr. Bonanomi had the immediate impression that he had found what he had been searching for — a religion that enabled one to change one's individual fate and at the same time affect the destiny of society. "This is it!" he thought. "This is the most important thing I've ever found!"

He had no doubt that the SGI practice of Buddhism would enable him to change his life. This was in 1976. Within two years he had married his wife Nicola and had embarked on a new life based on his newfound belief.

One day while he was chanting to the Gohonzon he was struck by the idea of going to a university and furthering his study of architecture. Studying would give him the opportunity to actualize his full potential, to transform himself into an individual who could contribute to society. The more he chanted about the idea, the stronger his conviction grew that this was the correct path for him to follow.

He decided to apply to the Lausanne Federal Polytechnic, which along with the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology drew the finest students in the country. However, gaining admission to this prestigious institution was a daunting prospect for someone already 31 years of age who had never even completed high school.

Mr. Bonanomi realized that he faced seemingly overwhelming obstacles, including

taking entrance exams with people much younger than himself. His wife Nicola provided wholehearted support when she saw the strength of his resolve. Faced with meeting university entrance requirements in eleven subjects within three years, he entered a private high school in Lugano. Every night he sat up late studying, sometimes falling asleep and waking up the next morning slumped over his textbooks.

At that time there were few SGI members in Switzerland, and even fewer in Lugano. Discussion meetings were held there every weekend, however, and Mr. Bonanomi set aside time from his study schedule to attend them. Throughout these difficult times he drew encouragement from a passage in the writings of Nichiren Daishonin, “Strengthen, your faith day by day and month after month” (MW-1, 241–42). He knew that if he slackened even slightly, he could not keep moving forward.

Mr. Bonanomi’s other main concern during this time was about his brother, who suffered from severe depression, which occasionally resulted in hospitalization. After praying fervently every day for his brother’s recovery, Mr. Bonanomi was able to see a marked improvement in his brother’s condition. This experience demonstrated to Mr. Bonanomi that Buddhist practice could concretely help one achieve one’s desires. He was encouraged to attack his studies with renewed vigor.

In 1982, after only two years of study, Mr. Bonanomi passed all eleven subjects. He and Nicola moved to Lausanne, where he continued his studies with her support. Their cramped apartment became the venue for local discussion meetings, and Mr. Bonanomi encouraged members in the area to the best of his ability.

In 1983, when SGI President Ikeda visited Zurich, Mr. Bonanomi was one of the local members working behind the scenes to support the activities associated with the visit, an experience he found deeply rewarding.

Finally, in 1987, after five years of studying in Lausanne, Mr. Bonanomi graduated from university as a chartered architect. The path he had been striving for, as a qualified architect, opened out in front of him. Then a professor at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, who was impressed by Mr. Bonanomi’s commitment to his studies and his passion for architecture, offered him a one-year contract as an assistant tutor. Following that, he was able to secure a position teaching architectural technology in his hometown of Lugano. He is currently a member of three major architectural partnerships.

Looking back on the years since he started out practicing Buddhism, Mr. Bonanomi realizes that he began as someone searching for meaning in life, developed into someone seeking to actualize his potential, and finally became someone who successfully changed not only his own life but also the world around him.

“Switzerland can be very resistant to new ideas after long centuries of peace and relative isolation,” he observes. “This can result in an outlook focused on self-protection and can lead people to be selfish.” However, Mr. Bonanomi carries in his heart a blueprint based on the Buddhist teachings for the transformation of Lugano and southern Switzerland, and his days are filled with challenge and enthusiasm. □