



HOTEL EDEN ROC
ASCONA



LA CASETTA – A LAKEHOUSE WITH HISTORY

OPERATION SUNRISE IN ASCONA, 1945

Operation Sunrise was the codename for the covert activities which hastened the end of the Second World War in Italy. Within the scope of this operation, which had been largely planned and organized on Swiss territory, the lakeside villa then known as the „Casa Signore in Croce“, today part of the Hotel Eden Roc, played a not insignificant role.

At the end of 1942, Allen W. Dulles (later director of the CIA) was sent to Switzerland on a mission for the US Office of Strategic Services (OSS). Among the US citizens living in Switzerland who worked for him was Gero von Schulze-Gaevernitz, formerly a German national. Dulles and von Gaevernitz initially sought out contacts with German commanders on the western front who might be willing to permit a partial capitulation of German forces within their sphere of responsibility in order to prevent further senseless bloodshed.

Despite intensive efforts, however, all these attempts proved unsuccessful.

Then, in February 1945, the opportunity arose rather unexpectedly of reaching a similar agreement on the southern front in Italy. Baron Luigi Parilli (an Italian businessman with confidential contacts to the German forces of occupation in Italy) contacted his friend Dr. Max Husmann (head of the Montana Zugerberg boarding school) who approached Major Max Waibel of the Swiss army and immediately received an enthusiastic response. Initial tentative discussions aimed to achieve the unconditional surrender of the German army in Italy and to prevent the application of a scorched earth policy throughout northern Italy. On the German side, the initiative came from SS-General Karl Wolff (with the official title of SS-Obergruppenführer and Chief of Police in





Italy and Plenipotentiary General of the Armed Forces operating behind the Italian front) and his immediate subordinates SS-Standartenführer Dr. Eugen Dollmann (Hitler's interpreter in Italy and Heinrich Himmler's private „observer“ in Rome) and SS-Obersturmführer Guido Zimmer (head of SS counter-espionage in Genoa). Wolff himself had received the backing of Field Marshall Albert Kesselring for these plans. After discrete preparations, the first secret meeting took place on 3 March 1945 between German and Allied representatives in Restaurant Biaggi in Lugano. Zimmer and Dr. Dollmann met Paul Blum, the observer sent by Dulles. This meeting was followed on 8 March by the first secret border crossing by General Wolff into Switzerland, accompanied by two senior partisan leaders, whose liberation was to act as proof of his serious intent to surrender. This was the condition for another meeting with Dulles and von Gaevernitz in Zurich.

Ten days later, on 19 March 1945, General Wolff and his escort made another top-secret border crossing before traveling very discretely on to Ascona. It was by no means pure chance that Ascona had been selected as the venue for this secret meeting. Nearby Locarno had been the seat of an international peace conference in 1925. The lake, surrounded by towering mountain ranges, radiates an atmosphere of calm and serenity. The negotiating parties 5 were accommodated in two separate houses in order to facilitate preparatory talks. The allied representatives, General Terence Airey (British chief intelligence officer) and Lyman Lemnitzer (US deputy chief of staff of British Field Marshall Sir Harold Alexander, supreme commander of Allied forces), were staying in a villa above Ascona, which, like the lakeside villa, then belonged to Edmund Stinnes, brother-in-law of von Gaevernitz.

For all other participants of the secret meeting, hotel rooms had been reserved in Ascona and Locarno under pseudonyms. Before the meeting could take place, however, Dulles still had a great deal of trouble convincing his bosses in Washington D.C. of the suitability of Ascona as a negotiation venue. They were worried that German troops would dash across the lake with assault boats and kidnap the Allied generals, or even use paratroopers to snatch them from the veranda of the Gaevernitz villa. General Wolf was accompanied by his adjutant, Sturm-bannführer Wenner, and Obersturmführer Zimmer. The group was completed by Dr. Husmann and Major Max Waibel, as well as Baron Parilli. The negotiations took place from 12.30 on 19 March 1945 in the lakeside villa „Casa Signore in Croce“ (today the lakehouse La Casetta of the Hotel Eden Roc) and on the terrace of the villa. Many years later, Dulles had the following to say about it: „...the room in the lakeside villa, where the meetings were to take place, was very small and almost completely taken up by an antique octagonal table“.

It had two doors opposite each other, one leading to the spacious lakeside terrace and the other to the kitchen. To comply with Airey's wishes (not to have to shake an SS-General's hand), von Gaevernitz suggested that „he and the generals should enter the room from the kitchen, whereas Wolff and I should come via the terrace“. Wolff and the generals were thus separated by the large table – too far from each other to shake hands. But that's not what actually happened. As soon as the welcoming formalities were over, Wolff suddenly went around the table and shook first Airey's and then Lemnitzer's hand. In so doing, he had to squeeze his powerful frame between the table and the wall. For the Allied generals, the handshake was more of a reflex movement. They took the outstretched hand automatically. Had they done otherwise, it would have been seen as an affront which would certainly have disturbed the course of the negotiations. The scene was unique and not without a certain solemnity. It was the first time during the Second World War





that senior Allied officers met a German general on neutral territory to discuss a German surrender. It was the first peaceful negotiation taking place while their respective armies fought each other beyond the Swiss frontiers. In addition to basic agreements regarding the objectives to be reached, it was also agreed in the lakeside villa that qualified German military representatives were to meet their Allied counterparts to work out the details. It was also decided how to treat the German plenipotentiaries who had up to that time been accommodated in Waibel's country estate of Dorenbach near Lucerne. In order to avoid possible serious difficulties on the southern front, they were to be accompanied under Allied protection and the strictest secrecy as far as the airfield at Annecy in France. From there they would be flown to Allied headquarters at Caserta in Italy to sign the surrender document and then flown back. This was the result of the secret meeting in Ascona. The further course of Operation Sunrise up to the surrender of German Army Group C in

Italy resembled an espionage thriller. However, those involved in Operation Sunrise became aware of attempts to thwart this plan by Himmler and Kaltenbrunner.

Himmler consequently changed his (official) standpoint as regards Wolff and allowed him to keep the doors to the Allies open but forbade him to make any further trips to Switzerland for negotiations. At a meeting between Wolff and Hitler on April 18, 1945, however, Wolff was given a free hand for his activities, as Hitler agreed to their continuation. But he demanded much better conditions, still in the hope of driving a wedge between the Western Allies and the Russians, whom he saw as the common enemy to be fought jointly. The complex developments of the next few days saw the leading protagonists on the German side personally involved in dramatic situations which could have brought Sunrise to naught. Whereas there was now official willingness on the German side to negotiate in principle about a partial surrender in

Italy, Washington now withdrew its willingness in order not to provoke the Russians. This led to the tragic situation that the German plenipotentiaries had to wait for several days in Switzerland for the surrender negotiations to begin, until Washington was finally ready to proceed on 27 April 1945. But just as General Wolff wanted to return from Ascona to his headquarters in Fasano, he was trapped by partisans in Cernobbio, not far from Como. A risky and top secret commando mission with international participation had to set off from Chiasso to free him.

The next day, Oberstleutnant Hans Lothar von Schweinitz and SS-Obersturmführer Max* Wenner flew to Allied headquarters in Caserta in order to sign the surrender document after a doomed attempt at negotiation.

Matters were made more difficult by questions of military honor and obedience raised by Generaloberst Heinrich von Vietinghoff, and the rigid insistence of the Allies on unconditional surrender which was felt to be humiliating.

However, with effect from 2 May 1945, at 14 o'clock local time, the guns finally fell silent on the Italian front.

In the early 1960s, the lakeside villa in which the secret surrender negotiations had taken place was acquired by the owner of the Hotel Europa, which had been built nearby in the late 1950s. With the change of ownership in 1997, the Hotel Eden Roc came to acquire the small lakeside villa in addition to the former Hotel Europe. It was ultimately converted to the present restaurant La Casetta. A bronze plaque today recalls the memorable negotiations of March 1945.





***VOLKER LEISTE**

(With supplements by Alfredo Ardizzi in 2002).

The forename of SS-Sturmbannführer Wenner appears in different forms: thus F. Lanfranchi calls him „Max” in „La resa degli Ottocentomila” (the surrender of the eight hundred thousand) whereas B.Y. Smith and E. Agarossi in „Operation Sunrise” call him „Eugen”.

EPILOGUE

This piece of history invites our guests to reflect: The Second World War led to a horrific 55 million deaths, including more than 40 million in Europe. It was particularly tragic that more than half the victims were civilians. This shows the mass destruction caused by the unscrupulous wartime bombing by the German Luftwaffe, which was deployed against both military and civilian targets.

FIGURES WHICH SHALL NOT BE FORGOTTEN

Some leading historians estimate – perhaps somewhat generously – that Operation Sunrise had hastened the end of the Second World War by 6 to 8 weeks. It certainly prevented the destruction which would have followed a scorched earth policy. It can be assumed on statistical grounds that the Second World War, which lasted about 300 weeks of fighting, claimed an average of some 133 000 lives per week. So this shortening of the war may have saved more than a million human lives. Failure of Operation Sunrise would certainly have led to the destruction of harbors, cities, transport links, industries and irreplaceable cultural treasures as well as to many additional victims among the civilian population.

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