
The *Book*

Preface

As intended by its founder, Ms Daniela Ambrosoli, the cultural foundation that bears her father's name in a sense continues the long and fruitful work of Pierino Ambrosoli. This continued fruitfulness is, however, not being achieved through profit-oriented activities.

The aim of the Pierino Ambrosoli Foundation is to use the inheritance Daniela Ambrosoli received from her father to help young people who have embarked on careers in performing arts fields like music and dance. Daniela Ambrosoli views this use of her inheritance as a moral legacy.

In this way, the attention and energy that Pierino Ambrosoli devoted throughout his life to commercial endeavours also serve to support the development of various artistic disciplines.

A closer look shows that the decision to devote resources to music and dance is

linked to experiences that are closely connected with the history of Ascona, Pierino Ambrosoli's hometown. Above all, modern dance in its more recent forms of expression has deep roots in the experiences of the pioneers of Monte Verità.

On the slopes of this hill, during the flowering of an "alternative" culture in the first decades of the last century, the currents that led to modern dance took form. Harald Szeemann remarks on this in his book, which describes the social and artistic richness of the Monte Verità communities: "With Rudolf von Laban and his students Mary Wigman, Katja Wulff, and Suzanne Perrottet, Monte Verità became a stronghold of body reform, natural expressive dance (1913), which in 1927 received its own building with the construction of the Teatro San Materno in Ascona for the dancer Charlotte Bara."

As evidence of the stimulating forces that the movement school in Ascona found, one can furthermore read:

“Dance, perhaps more than any other art form, sought new paths on Monte Verità, mainly through the temporary or permanent presence of personalities like Isadora Duncan, Mary Wigman, Rudolf von Laban, and later Charlotte Bara and the influence of the rhythms of Dalcroze.”

In those years, the elements of anti-academic dance emerged, which then blossomed into so-called modern dance, and were brought to full expression by the great Martha Graham. Today there are numerous dance schools that use Graham’s teachings as the ABCs of modern dance.

Thus it is no coincidence that dance caught the attention of Daniela Ambrosoli. As a child, she often heard the people in her village still talk with a mixture of irony and local colour about what was happening on Monte Verità. Daniela Ambrosoli’s attention to modern dance is also due to a hereditary factor. Her mother Sonja had the opportunity to dance in Mary Wigman’s group at a young age. Mary Wigman had settled in Dresden and founded a dance school that was perhaps the most significant centre for free dance in the post-war years.

The founding of the Pierino Ambrosoli Foundation and its purpose are no co-

incidence; they owe their existence to the aforementioned rudiments. The financial and moral legacy that Daniela Ambrosoli assumed allowed them to become a reality.

From sewing machines to Jeeps

There is a certain risk involved in talking about a person after whom a charitable foundation has been named. It is easy to fall into praise of the person, as happens at funerals, or painting a one-sided picture by focusing only on the professional, political, or familial aspects of the person. In reality, however, hardly anyone lives for one thing only. Like other mortals, Pierino Ambrosoli lived for his work, which was very important to himself, his family, and his friends. He participated actively in politics briefly, and he was known as a supporter of sport, especially Locarno football.

Pierino Ambrosoli had a strong personality, he was a determined man with significant entrepreneurial skills. He embodied the image of the *self-made man*, the businessman who relies on his skills and makes bold decisions with resolve. His figure is a phenomenon linked to the era between the two world wars. For people who seized the opportunity – without exploiting the hardship of others – this was a favourable moment. Pierino Ambrosoli was a man whose story is closely linked to a symbol of modernism: *the automobile*.





Pierino belonged to the third generation of the Ambrosoli family residing in Locarno. His grandfather Pietro came from nearby Lombardy in connection with a disaster described in the region's annuals. He found work in the laborious rebuilding of the collegiate church of Sant'Antonio, whose roof had collapsed. In 1912 Pietro Ambrosoli was naturalised and then admitted to the patriciate of Verscio. Pierino was born in May 1905, the second of three children of Enrico Ambrosoli, who, together with his brother, ran a mechanic's workshop in Piazza Grande – a workshop that seems to symbolise a way of life that is mourned today, rightly or wrongly. The photos from that time have immortalised it in the empty piazza, which seems surrealistically large. Above the door hangs a sign advertising the repair of bicycles and sewing machines. An advertisement from that time encourages people to buy the famous Peugeot bicycle, “*the best and most preferred*”. Alongside the drawing of a picture-book Frenchman on a bicycle, with cap, striped shirt, and moustache, the Ambrosoli brothers announce that a large selection of two-wheelers awaits buyers in their stores in Lugano and Locarno. In the workshops they also carried out repairs, sold oil & petrol, sewing machines, and typewriters, and rented out cars.

Cars and sewing machines sound like strange bedfellows today:

But back then, specialisation was not commonplace. The more diversified the business, the greater the success.

Enrico Ambrosoli had long been passionate about motorised four-wheelers. As early as 1898, he owned what was perhaps the first automobile in Locarno. Later, he was also the first driving-test expert in the region and prospective drivers had to turn to him to obtain their driving licence. Enrico Ambrosoli was a prudent man and knew the importance of good education for his children. After they had attended grammar school in Locarno, Pierino, his brother Giannetto, and later also their sister Enrica, were sent to the German-speaking part of Switzerland. They learned languages in one of those famously strict boarding schools in Schwyz. Enrico and his wife insisted on sound education of their sons in order to ensure the continuity of the family business. With the spread of the automobile, that business became increasingly lucrative.

The strict rules and the studies of the boarding school on the other side of the Alps failed to greatly inspire the lively young Pierino.

Once he even fled from the boarding school in Schwyz. The escape, however, came to an end after only a few hours. His father, who found him at the front

door of the house in the early morning, put him on the next train back through the Gotthard after a firm reprimand. His sister Enrica, who was always fond of her older brother, describes him as a brilliant pupil, despite his occasional stubbornness. He succeeded at everything he endeavoured. After learning languages, he studied at the business school in St. Gallen in the twenties. Following engineering studies in Mittweiden, Germany, his father finally sent the two brothers to Paris for two years. This was not to breathe the air of the bohemian world or to explore the circles of the artistic avant-garde – Enrico Ambrosoli was a practical man – but to gain experience at Saint Augustin Garage. Enrico Ambrosoli owned a share of this garage together with another Locarnese, a certain Pedrazzini, who had moved to Paris.

In 1929, at the beginning of the great crisis, Pierino and his brother and lifelong business partner Giannetto returned to Locarno.

Together they took the reins of the mechanic's workshop in Piazza Grande, which had meanwhile developed into a full-fledged garage.

During one of his short stays at home during his Paris years, Pierino Ambrosoli made an important romantic encounter; he met the woman he would marry a few years later.

At that time, a dancer was staying in Locarno, whose stage name seemed Russian. Sonja Bragowa was actually born in Stuttgart. She attended the music academy, but left it to devote herself to her passion, dance. She danced under the instruction of the director of the Stuttgart Opera. In Hamburg she decided to pursue modern dance. As chance would have it, one of the leading figures of modern dance, Mary Wigman, who had her school in Dresden, was looking for a dancer for her group. And so it happened that the name Sonja Bragowa, a former student of Mary Wigman, appeared on the playbills and in the newspaper reviews of the time. After two intensive years with Wigman's group, she decided to pursue a different genre: the grand revue, which was causing a craze at the time – a musical festival with extravagant costumes. She also worked in the "Wintergarten", in Teddy Stauffer's company, which was on the programme of the well-known Berlin Theatre for an entire year. With Teddy Stauffer she went on an extended tour in Italy, where she also had the opportunity to work with Wanda Osiris, the most popular soubrette of the time. Whenever possible, Pierino Ambrosoli went to the places Sonja was performing. One day he suggested she leave the stage and marry him. Actually, she had dreamed of returning to Germany and opening a dance school together with a colleague. But things turned out dif-





ferently and her heart won out over her career. Few women at that time would have decided differently.

Sonja and Pierino Ambrosoli became husband and wife, and the busy life of the theatre world was replaced by the tranquillity of hearth and home.

The couple settled in Ascona, where their daughter Daniela was born.

Before the outbreak of the Second World War, the Ambrosoli Brothers had opened a branch automobile showroom in Zurich, in Seefeldstrasse.

This business was temporarily closed during the war. But the Swiss Army

needed vehicles and turned to the two brothers from Locarno, who, as distributors for the American brand Dodge for all of Switzerland, owned 60 cars. The cars were rented out to the Army, which paid a daily fee for each vehicle. At the end of the war the cars, still in good condition, were returned to the Ambrosoli garage. The war had been a difficult time. But now some people did not want to give up the car as a status symbol, and the 60 Dodges sold like hot cakes. The two brothers were suddenly facing a rosy future. In 1946 they opened the new headquarters of the garage in St. Peterstrasse. Just a stone's throw from the central Bahnhofstrasse, the new showroom featured metre after metre of shiny new "Americans".

The garage became a symbol of efficiency and modernism:

No longer a dark workshop, but large, well-lit rooms and long corridors with shelves loaded with spare parts for all the models, arranged in perfect order.

The business of the Ambrosoli brothers flourished thanks to the ingenuity of Pierino Ambrosoli, who relied on his good business sense. In the same year, the two brothers became Switzerland's exclusive distributor for the Jeep. This vehicle turned out to be their real stroke of luck. This marked the start of a large business with 30 sales outlets throughout Switzerland. The brothers sold a good 20,000 Jeeps over 30 years of exclusive distributorship. The powerful vehicles, which could master virtually any terrain, arrived by ship from overseas and were barged up the Rhine to Basel. The crates filled with separate parts were opened in a workshop where the vehicles were assembled. The brand-new jeeps were then sent to the Ambrosoli brothers'

sales outlets in Zürich, Lausanne, Basel, Geneva, and, of course, Locarno.

The St. Peterstrasse garage employed up to 200 people. Many of them remained in the service of the Ambrosoli brothers for many years. This was no coincidence. Many still remember Pierino Ambrosoli's bond with his employees.

Despite his serious, almost stern appearance, he won them over with the attention he paid to their needs and by the generosity with which he rewarded the hardworking and helped the needy.

Not very talkative and rather reserved, he embodied less the image of a modern manager than that of the master from a bygone era. The employees addressed him as "Signor Pierino" and looked up to him with respect and a certain reverence. He insisted on punctuality and never missed the opportunity to set a good example. As a rule, he arrived at work at 8 o'clock in the morning. He





took friends from Ticino with him on his weekly visit to Zurich. Pierino Ambrosoli's attachment to Ticino, especially to Locarno, was almost proverbial. Everyone who was close to him knew how reluctant he was to travel. The exceptions were the holidays he allowed himself at the Lido of Venice or in Monte Carlo. Everyone knew how much he loved to spend time in Ascona and Locarno in the company of his friends in a restaurant or a so-called grotto. Two of his outings with friends had adventurous endings, to say the least. Those who experienced them still remember them well. Fedele Cavalli, a long-time employee, still tells of that winter evening in 1941 when they were riding in a Willys that, as required, had its headlights blackened out. The car ran off the low-shouldered road and came to rest upside down in the Saleggi mire. All four passengers were stuck in it, soaked through and through with petrol. Another time, on the way back from the Monti, the car ran off the road and ended up impaled on the stakes of a vineyard. Miraculously, no one was injured.

Pierino Ambrosoli was not a great sportsman. He loved to hunt on the Saleggi grounds, which were teeming with small game at the time. These were also convivial occasions, and the evenings ended in merriment with a shared dinner among friends. He also

showed his devotion to his homeland by supporting projects of public interest, including a donation to the hospital "La Carità" and a scholarship in support of the youth of Ticino. Many still remember the zeal with which he sponsored the Locarno football club and supported the construction of the grandstand at the Lido stadium.

In 1948, he briefly sat on the Ascona municipal council as a member of the Free Democratic Party. His support for the Unione Sportiva Ascona was also notable.

Pierino Ambrosoli never seriously considered leaving Locarno.

His attempt to move to Zürich immediately after the war was short-lived, although his wife loved the atmosphere of the city on the Limmat, which was pulsating with life at the time. Pierino Ambrosoli felt homesick and decided to return to Ticino after a short time.

Sales of cars and Jeeps flourished.

Pierino Ambrosoli, however, was not the type to rest on his laurels. In the 1950s he decided to invest the company's profits in real estate. With his flair, he had already previously capitalised on individual opportunities. Pierino Ambrosoli had bought the Tonascia estate – today Terreni alla Maggia – a farming business in distress, and sold it to Giuseppe

Rampazzi within 24 hours. As a precautionary measure, he had founded a small agricultural cooperative in the difficult war years to offset the shortage of grain and other foods. One of the lightning deals his former employees still remember today was the purchase of Hotel Metropole in Locarno. The hotel, recalls his right-hand man Renato Perucchi, boasted a wonderful water-powered lift. This former gem of Locarno's hotel industry was located where the Jelmo-li department store now stands. It was Pierino Ambrosoli's second real estate purchase in the city; he had previously acquired the San Galli garage on Via Luini, now Moto Maggetti. He kept the hotel for about two years and then sold it. He regretted this sale almost immediately and tried in vain to regain possession of the hotel. His focused entry into the real estate business took place in the 1950s, when the Ambrosoli brothers expanded their activities from Locarno to Zurich. They built commercial and residential buildings and bought land in the city on the Limmat. Their real estate business also flourished in Locarno and Ascona with the construction of numerous residential buildings. In 1968, the real estate and automotive businesses were split.

The Ambrosoli brothers did not miss the opportunity to venture into tourism, to which Locarno seems predestined.

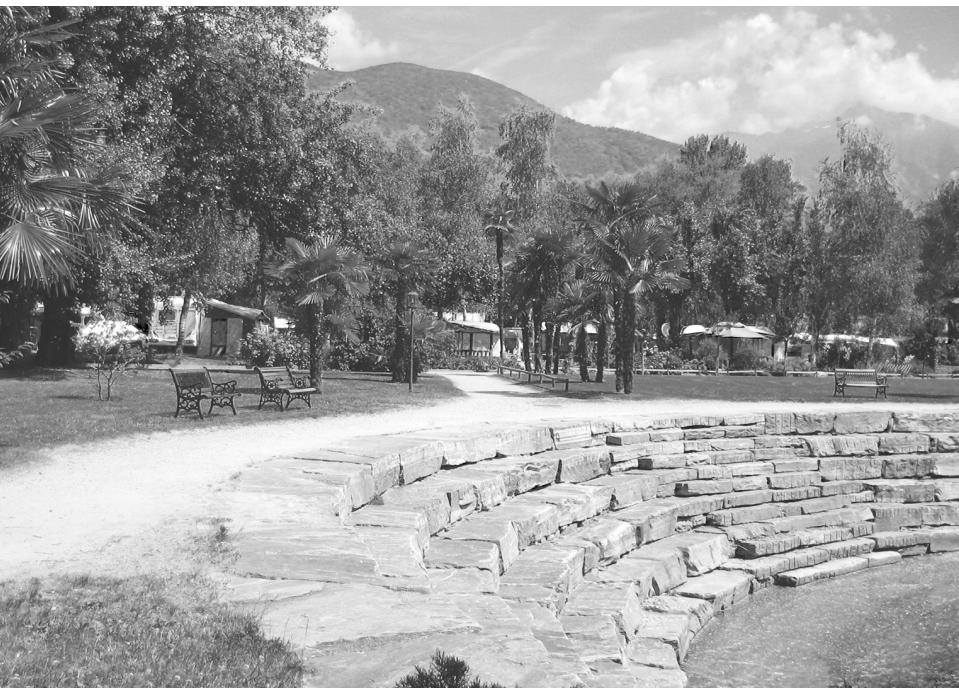
Perhaps out of resentment of the sale of Hotel Metropol, but certainly also because his business sense pointed him in this direction, Pierino Ambrosoli began building hotels.

First came the *Hotel Delta* on the right bank of the Maggia, then *Hotel Eden Roc* on the lake promenade in Ascona.

A tireless person who constantly had new ideas, Pierino Ambrosoli accepted the challenge of the new. He loved to be active in various fields. After buying a large piece of land on the left side of the mouth of the Maggia River, he started quarrying gravel. Later he devoted himself to the hotel business and gave up the quarry. He intensively looked after his own Delta campsite, which had been founded by Renato Perucchi in 1957 and has been run by Alberto Battiston since 1981. These two people, whose lives are closely linked to the Ambrosoli family, each worked for the Ambrosolis for nearly fifty years.

The owner of the campsite today is Pierino Ambrosoli's daughter, Daniela, who, together with her husband Franz Marcacci, has given the business a decisive new impetus. The environmentally friendly renovation of the site, the construction of recreational space and cultural facilities such as the amphitheatre on the lake, and the careful management of the business have made Camping Delta one of the best-known campsites in Europe. Since 1999, Camping Delta has





been run by Daniela Ambrosoli's son, Mila Merker, the third generation.

Let's return to the seventies.

For Pierino Ambrosoli, who until then had enjoyed the best of health, a relentless physical decay begins. The disease takes root in his organism. Pierino Ambrosoli resists it with his characteristic strong will, but those close to him have to watch as his once seemingly indelible energy slowly begins to wane. The conscious and clear way in which he approaches the therapy earns him respect and admiration even in this situation. In the course of the illness, his dignity grows with the will to face reality, no

matter how bitter it may be. Pierino Ambrosoli dies of a tumour on 17 March 1975 at the age of 70. He is survived by his brother Giannetto, his faithful business partner, his second wife Thildy and their daughter Barbara, their first-born daughter Daniela and her mother Sonja, and sister Enrica with nephews Brunella, Giampiero, and Enrico.

With the "*Pierino Ambrosoli Foundation*", Daniela Ambrosoli intends to commemorate the person of her father, thanks to whose work she can fulfil a deep longing. At the same time, she wants to continue the generosity that characterised Pierino Ambrosoli's entire life.

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