



Preface

In the intents of its promoter, Mrs Daniela Ambrosoli, the constitution of the Pierino Ambrosoli Cultural Foundation should represent a kind of continuity of her father's long fruitful activity. A continuity, which does not materialise, however, in profit-making undertakings but in putting those profits bequeathed to her by her father to the service of young people who have chosen artistic disciplines such as music and dance. A distribution of wealth which Daniela Ambrosoli feels as a sort of moral inheritance; almost as if, by means of the Foundation, Pierino Ambrosoli can dedicate to forms of artistic expression that attention and energy which he had lavished on business while alive.

As a matter of fact the choice to direct funds towards music and dance is connected to experiences and places bound hand in glove to the history of the town of Ascona, of which Pierino Ambrosoli was a citizen. Dance particularly has profound roots in the experiences of the pioneers of Monte Verità; especially as far as the new expressive forms, which it has assumed since the first few decades of the last century are concerned. On the slopes of the hill, in the flowering of a culture which we could define as alternative, the dance forms took shape in the first few decades of the last century; these then developed into modern dance.

In the beautiful volume which reconstructs the environment, the human and artistic wealth of the community which populated Monte Verità, Harald Szeemann notes: "With Rudolf von Laban and his pupils, Mary Wigman, Katia Wulff and Suzanne Perrottet, Monte Verità was the stronghold of the reform of the human body, of natural expressive dance which had its own recognised temple in the San Materno Theatre, constructed in Ascona in 1927." As witness to the propelling stimulus which the school of the movement found in Ascona we can further read: "Dance, possibly more than any other artistic expression, looked for new ways on the Mount, above all for the occasional or continuous presence of personalities like Isadora Duncan, Charlotte Bara, Rudolf von Laban, Mary Wigman and for the influence of the rhythmic of Dalcroze." In those years were focused the elements of that anti-academic dance, which would then flower into so-called modern dance, later brought to the finest expressive and didactic levels by the great Martha Graham. Today numerous dance schools have taken their ABC of modern dance from the teachings of Graham.

Therefore it was not by chance that dance catalysed the attention of Daniela Ambrosoli, who in her childhood years spent in Ascona still heard the people of that town tell of what happened at Monte Verità, tales which were often a mixture of irony and local colouring. But the attention which Daniela Ambrosoli dedicates to modern dance is also due to a factor which can be defined as genetic: in her youth her mother, Sonja, had the chance to dance in the company of Mary Wigman, who, having settled in Dresden, had founded a school which may have represented the most important centre of free dance of post-war times.

So a concurrence of elements, not really casual in nature, as can be seen, led to the constitution of the Pierino Ambrosoli Cultural Foundation with the aims which Daniela Ambrosoli wanted to give it. An inheritance in financial terms and an inheritance which can be defined as moral have made it into reality. From sewing machines to "Jeeps"

Speaking about a character to whom a charitable initiative is linked is an operation which implies some risks. The risk, which it is easy to run, of beatifying him, a bit as is done in homilies for the dead, or else the risk of giving a partial image, remembering only the professional or political or family side to him. In fact no-one, or very few, live for one cause only. So too Pierino Ambrosoli, like many common mortals, lived between work - which, it is true, was a very important part of his life - family and friends. He was actively involved in politics, although not for long, and made a decisive contribution to sport, especially football in the Locarno region.

Nonetheless Pierino Ambrosoli was a character of his age, a man of character with great entrepreneurial talents: in fact we can say that he incarnated the image of the "self-made man", the business man able to get on by himself,





courageous in his decisions, confident in his abilities and profoundly determined. A figure closely attached to a precise historical period, between the two wars, a favourable moment for whoever was able to read the chances, which were created, certainly not speculating on the misery of others. A man of the modern age, whose story is closely bound to another symbol of modernity: the car.

Pierino was one of the third generations of Ambrosolis resident in Locarno. His grandfather, Pietro, came to Ticino from nearby Lombardy at the same time as a mishap which remains written in the annals of the history of the region: the collapse of the roof of the collegiate church of Saint Anthony. Like many others he found work in the laborious reconstruction. The naturalisation of Enrico Ambrosoli and his children took place in 1912, followed by admission to the patrician society of Verscio. Pierino was born in May 1905, the second of three children. His father, Enrico Ambrosoli, was the owner of a mechanical workshop in Piazza Grande with his brother; one of those shops which seem to be the symbol of a way of life which today is often regretted, partly wrongly and partly rightly. The photos of the period have immortalised it on the square, so empty as to seem bigger, with a sign over the door announcing bicycle and sewing machine repairs. An advertisement of the time invites cyclists to buy the famous Peugeot bicycle, "the best and favourite". And beside the drawing of a perfect Frenchman on a bicycle, beret, striped shirt, prominent moustache and all, it is pointed out that in the Ambrosoli "stores" in Lugano and Locarno a vast assortment of two-wheeled vehicles is to be found, but not only: repairs are carried out, oil and petrol are sold, as are sewing machines and typewriters, and finally cars are for hire.

Cars and sewing machines: a combination which may appear a bit strange nowadays, but in those days people weren't in the habit of specialising, and the more one was able to do the better.

The passion for four wheels and an engine had infected Enrico Ambrosoli for some time, and in 1898 he already owned one of the first, if not the first, vehicle in Locarno. Would-be drivers had to refer to him for their driving licence, as he was also the first driving examiner in the region. His business must have done well, because soon Enrico Ambrosoli was the owner of the building, which stood where the Coop building is today. Enrico Ambrosoli was a shrewd man and knew the importance of giving his children an education. After the senior secondary school in Locarno Pierino, his brother, Giannetto, and then their sister, Enrica, were sent to the German part of Switzerland to those then well-known colleges of austere appearance in Schwyz, where languages were learnt. With their expectations for their business, which looked more interesting than ever with the arrival of the first cars, Enrico Ambrosoli and his wife took care to give their male sons, as was the custom then, a solid preparation so as to be able to guarantee the continuity of the family business.

The rigid environment of the colleges on the other side of the Alps and study can't have made the young, lively Pierino enthusiastic; he once even managed to escape briefly from the college of Schwyz: a short flight which ended within a few hours as his father, on seeing him arrive at the house door early in the morning, sent him back with a scolding on the first train headed beyond the Saint Gotthard. Their sister, Enrica, was always particularly attached to this "big brother" and in spite of some little whim, remembers him as brilliant in his studies, as moreover in everything he set about doing.

It was the twenties and, as they had now learned languages, it was time for the business school in Saint Gallen, followed by technical studies in engineering in Mittweiden in Germany. When these were finished their father sent the two boys to Paris for a couple of years. Certainly not to breathe in the wind of the Bohème, or to taste the atmosphere of the artistic avant-garde - Enrico was a practical man - but to gain experience in a garage. To be exact the Saint Augustin Garage, in which Enrico Ambrosoli owned a share, together with another man from Locarno, a Pedrazzini, who had emigrated there.

When they came back to Locarno in 1929, the period of the great depression, Pierino and his brother, Giannetto, for all their lives inseparable business partners, were ready to take up the reins of the Piazza Grande workshop, which had already become a real garage.



On one of his brief returns from Paris Pierino Ambrosoli had an important sentimental meeting; the woman who a few years later would become his first wife. At that time there was a ballerina in Locarno whose artistic name had something Russian about it, even if she was not Russian. Sonja Bragowa, who in fact was born in Stuttgart, had gone to the conservatory but had then left, taken as she was by her passion for dance. At first under the guidance of the director of the Stuttgart Opera and then in Hamburg she chose the stream of modern dance. Chance decreed that one of the leading exponents of the modern movement, Mary Wigman, who at that time had her school in Dresden, was looking for a ballerina for her ballet corps. So it was that the name of Sonja Bragowa, who had already been her pupil, appeared on the billboards and in the newspaper reviews of that period. Having spent two intense years in Wigman's company, she opted for a genre then much in vogue: the great revue, a festival of extravagant costumes and music, which was all the rage in those days. She worked at the Wintergarten, in Teddy Stauffer's show, which ran for a whole year in the best-known theatre in Berlin, and then with Stauffer's company went on a long tour of Italy, where she had the chance to perform with the most loved soubrette of the time, Wanda Osiris. When it was possible for him to do so, Pierino Ambrosoli moved to the cities where Sonja's company was working. Until the day when he proposed that she leave the stage and marry him. Sonja would have liked to open a dance school with a colleague of hers. But things turned out differently and her heart won over her career, which in those days was certainly not a frequent choice for a woman. Sonja and Pierino Ambrosoli became husband and wife, and her active life in show business was ousted by domestic tranquillity. They settled in Ascona where their daughter, Daniela, was born.

Before the outbreak of the Second World War the Ambrosoli Brothers had opened a branch for the sale of cars in Zurich, in Seefeldstrasse. The activity stopped temporarily during the war period. But the army needed cars, so it turned to the two brothers from Locarno, who, as representatives for the American Dodge for all of Switzerland, owned 60 cars. The cars were put at the disposal of the army, which paid a daily amount for each vehicle. At the end of the war the cars, still in good condition, were returned to the Ambrosoli garage. Although times were miserable for many there were some people who did not want to do without what had already become a status symbol, the car. So it was that the sixty Dodge were sold like hot cakes and the two brothers suddenly had rosy development prospects in front of them.

In 1946 the new garage premises open in St Peterstrasse. Two steps away from the central Bahnhofstrasse the new company makes a show of metres and metres of window, where the bright "Americans" shine. The garage is the emblem of efficiency and modernity: no longer small dark shops, but light open spaces and long corridors provided with shelves where spare parts for all the models are lined up in order. The business of the Ambrosoli Brothers knows a moment of great expansion, thanks above all to the far-sightedness of Pierino Ambrosoli, who makes good use of his flair for business. In the same year the two brothers obtain the sole agency for all Switzerland as representatives of a vehicle, which will turn out to be their lucky break: the Jeep. It is the beginning of a big business with 30 sales outlets spread over all the national territory and which in 30 years of exclusive rights will lead to the sale of at least 20,000 Jeeps.

These strong unstoppable vehicles arrive by ship from the other side of the Atlantic and then arrive in Basle on barges which ply the Rhine. The cases with the separate parts are opened in a workshop in Basle from which the assembled brand-new Jeeps come out headed for the five sales outlets of the Ambrosoli Brothers: Zurich, Lausanne, Basle, Geneva and, of course, Locarno.

The St Peterstrasse garage gave work to a good number of people, (the firm finally had as many as 200 employees), many of whom remained in the service of the Ambrosolis for years. And not by chance: today many still remember Pierino Ambrosoli's affection for his employees: in spite of his serious almost severe air, he made himself liked for the attention which he dedicated to their problems and for the generosity with which he often rewarded the deserving and helped the more needy. Not very loquacious, almost reserved, he did not incarnate the figure of the modern "manager" as much as that of the "boss" of

bygone days. The employees addressed him as "signor Pierino" and looked up to him with respect and a certain fear. He was demanding as far as punctuality was concerned, however he did not fail to give them a good example and could usually be seen arriving at work at 8 a.m.

It sometimes happened that during his weekly visits to Zurich he took a Ticinese friend with him. Pierino Ambrosoli's affection for Ticino, especially for the Locarno area, was proverbial. All those close to him knew how little he liked travelling, if not to give himself a little holiday at the Lido of Venice, or in Montecarlo, and how much he loved to stay between Ascona and Locarno, in the company of a group of friends at the grotto or restaurant.

A couple of his journeys with friends had adventurous endings, to put it mildly, and those who experienced them with him remember even today. Fedele Cavalli, his collaborator for many years, remembers delightful episodes. On a winter evening of 1941 the four friends were travelling aboard a "Willys", with headlights out, as the law prescribed. The car left the badly delimited road and ended upside down in the muddy grounds of the Saleggi. In a jiffy the four passengers were blocked inside the car and soaked in petrol. Another time, coming down from the Monti, the car jumped over the edge of the road and got stuck on the poles of a vineyard: miraculously no one was hurt.

Although he wasn't a great sportsman Pierino Ambrosoli loved to go hunting in the grounds of the Saleggi, which then swarmed with small wild animals. But more than anything else these too were chances to stay in the company of his friends and end the day with a merry dinner. He also showed his affection for his land of origin by promoting public works among which we remember a donation to the La Carità hospital and a grant for Ticinese students. Many also remember the enthusiasm with which he sponsored the Locarno Football Club and favoured the construction of the tribune at the Lido stadium. For a brief period - to be exact in 1948 - he also sat on the Town Council of Ascona in the ranks of the Liberal party; his help to the Ascona Sporting Union was decisive too.

Pierino Ambrosoli never thought seriously of leaving the Locarno area. An attempt to move to Zurich immediately after the war did not last long; although his wife very much loved the atmosphere of the city on the Limmat, which in those days pulsed with life, he showed signs of nostalgia and after a short stay decided to return to Ticino with his family.

The car and Jeep business was flourishing by now. But Pierino Ambrosoli was not the kind of person to rest on his laurels, and in the fifties he decided to invest the company profits in the real estate sector. His flair for business had led him to realise buying and selling operations before, but it was a question of opportunities seized on the spot, with that decision which everyone knew in him by then. Thus for example the Tonascia holding was bought and resold in the space of twenty-four hours; it was a farm in difficulty which Pierino Ambrosoli passed to Giuseppe Rampazzi and which is known today as the Terreni alla Maggia. Far-sighted, he had founded a small farming consortium during the difficult times of the war to cope with the lack of vegetables and grain.

Among the lightning transactions, which are still remembered by his ex-collaborators was the purchase of the Metropole Hotel of Locarno. The hotel, as Renato Perucchi (his "right hand" for many years) remembers, boasted a marvellous water lift in its inventory. An old glory of the Locarno area hotel industry, the Metropole stood where the Globus building is today. It was his second real estate purchase in town (the first was the San Galli Garage, on via Luini, today Moto Maggetti). He kept it for a couple of years and then the Metropole passed into other hands. Pierino Ambrosoli regretted the operation almost immediately, so much so that he tried in vain to regain ownership of the hotel.

The turning point in the real estate activity comes in the fifties when the Ambrosoli Brothers expand their range of action from the Locarno area to Zurich. In the city on the Limmat commercial buildings and blocks of flats are built, the purchase of grounds is promoted. The branch of immovable properties is consolidated in Locarno and Ascona too, with the construction of several houses, until in 1968 the activity of the real estate sector is officially separated from the car sector.

Tourism, the vocation of the region, is another field in which the Ambrosoli Brothers do not delay in establishing themselves. Perhaps because of the bitter feeling left after the sale of the Metropole Hotel, or perhaps because his flair for business tells him that is the road to follow, Pierino Ambrosoli sets his sights on hotels. First the Delta is built, on the left bank of the Maggia, and then the Eden Roc, on the lakefront of Ascona.

An untiring man of a thousand resources, Pierino Ambrosoli accepts the challenge of something new and loves to diversify his fields of activity: from gravel extraction, with the purchase of a large piece of ground on the left bank of the mouth of the Maggia, he passes to hotels. Later he abandons the activity linked to the gravel sector to give more space to the Delta camping site, created in 1957 by Renato Perucchi and managed from 1981 by Alberto Battiston, two men whose lives are closely bound to the Ambrosoli family, both having given their service for almost 50 years.

Today the owner of the campsite is Pierino Ambrosoli's daughter, Daniela, who with her husband Franz Marcacci, has given a decisive impetus to the activity. The clearance of the area following criteria most respectful of the environment, the creation of recreational and cultural spaces, like the amphitheatre on the water, and careful management have made the Delta camp site one of the best-known in Europe. Since 1999, Camping Delta is run by Mila Merker, son of Daniela Ambrosoli, in the fourth generation.

But let's go back to the seventies. For Pierino Ambrosoli, sustained until shortly before by excellent health, an inexorable physical decline begins. Illness devours his organism. However, thanks to the willpower, which has always accompanied him, he resists the illness with courage. Those close to him witness with impotence the diminishing of the energy, which seemed to be inextinguishable. The lucidity and awareness with which he faces the therapy lead him to earn respect and admiration in these circumstances too. The tumour cuts off Pierino Ambrosoli's life on 17th March 1975 at the age of 70. He leaves his brother, Giannetto, his inseparable business partner, his second wife, Thildy, with their daughter, Barbara, and his firstborn, Daniela, with her mother, Sonja; his sister, Enrica, with his niece and nephews, Brunella, Giampiero and Enrico.

After the death of her father, Daniela Ambrosoli wants to remember the figure of this man with the Foundation which bears his name, Pierino Ambrosoli Foundation; thanks to his deeds a desire long cherished can be realised. And at the same time that vein of generosity, which characterised her father's whole life can be strengthened.