

ON MARCONI'S TRAIL IN SWITZERLAND

by Dr.Max C. de Henseler, HB9RS

From an early age Marconi was interested in science and by his late teens, at his home in Pontecchio, on the third floor of the Villa Griffone, he worked relentlessly in his own experimental laboratory trying to transmit a wireless message using electromagnetic waves.

In her book «My father Marconi», Degna Marconi recalls that the Marconi Boys spent part of the summer of 1894 in the mountains of Biellese in the Italian Alps of Lombardy, at a remote and charming place, Santuario d' Oropa. One day Guglielmo was reading an Italian scientific journal, probably brought with him from the University library of Bologna. The magazine contained an article written by Augusto Righi, whose lectures Guglielmo had attended the previous winter in Bologna, about the extraordinary work with electromagnetic waves done by Heinrich Hertz who had died on January 1. This was the turning point in Marconi's life.

Back in Pontecchio, Marconi went back to work more intensively than ever and by the end of the winter, in early 1895, after some encouraging trials, he was ready to take his experiments outdoors and especially into mountainous areas. Based on numerous testimonies made by eye witnesses and by Marconi's own helper, it was during the two summer months of 1895 that Guglielmo and his brother Alfonso went on the other side of the Alps to spend their vacation, in the then well known health resort of Salvan in Switzerland.



Figure 1 : «Millionaires Row» a street in Salvan ; Marconi stayed on the second floor of the first house on the left.

Located less than one hundred kilometers away, as the crow flies, from Santuario d'Oropa, nestling in the Swiss Alps at an altitude of 934 meters above sea level and about 7 kilometers north-west of the town of Martigny, lies the village of Salvan, a small community of some 1500 inhabitants. In 1895, the only way to reach Salvan was after a couple of hours mule ride from Vernaya, down in the valley. Today it is only a few minutes away from Martigny by road or by the «Mont-Blanc Express» train .

When Marconi got to Salvan, he was just a summer visitor like the others except that he transported with great care some strange apparatuses which intrigued in particular one young boy by the name of Maurice Gay-Balmaz, aged ten at the time, who became Marconi's assistant-helper, perhaps the person who held the first antenna. According to Maurice's own account of the experiments, Marconi was stationed on top of «La Pierre Bergère» with a small transmitter, while Maurice gradually moved further away with a receiver which sounded a bell when a signal was received.



Figure 2 : «La Pierre Bergère» (the shepherdess's rock), an erratic block detached from the Mont-Blanc, dominating the village of Salvan.

Maurice carried the receiving aerial raised on an 8 foot pole, and waived a red flag when the receiver bell sounded. From the Pierre Bergère rock, links were established with the «Rochers du Soir, Ladrays, the cret du Serré» and even with a «piece of land at the top of les Marcottes» more than half kilometer away. When Marconi arrived in Salvan in July 1895 he had already succeeded in transmitting signals over a few dozen meters and by the end of August, using an earth and an elevated aerial at both transmitter and receiver, he was able to transmit Morse code over a distance of almost one kilometer.

Princess Elettra Marconi-Giovanelli wrote speaking of Salvan « your village can pride itself on having offered its ideal setting for the first stages of one of the most important discoveries of our time : Wireless Telegraphy».



Figure 3 : Princess Elettra Marconi Giovanelli and her son Prince Guglielmo Giovanelli at the International Conference on « 100 years of Radio » held in London in 1995. The Princess is being presented a research paper on Marconi's early experiments in Switzerland by the author.

In Salvan, Marconi's experiments remained for a long time a trivial event passed on by word of mouth within the village. But as Marconi's fame became more widespread, the villagers became more and more conscious of what they had witnessed and the whole story was recorded on tape in 1965 through a detailed interview with Maurice Gay-Balmaz, still alive at the time, organized by the members of the Development Society of Salvan. A first official recognition to immortalize Marconi's experiments in

Salvan was made on the occasion of his birth centenary celebration in 1974, when the municipality of Salvan decided to place a plaque on the « Pierre Bergère ». The plaque was unveiled a year later during a ceremony attended by numerous officials of the region and by the Vice Consul of Italy in Switzerland. This was followed by a final consecration when the authorities decided in 1996, one hundred years after Marconi's sojourn in Salvan, to re-enact Marconi's experiments. For this event they secured the support of the Swiss Telecom PTT and the Swiss National Audiovisual Museum to set up in Salvan an exhibition of early wireless and radio sets, including the building of a replica of Marconi's transmitter which could be operated, ringing a receiver bell some twenty meters away. One of the notable foreign guest was Professor Gian Carlo Corazza, President of the Marconi Foundation in Italy who presented the Mayor of Salvan with a beautifully engraved silver plaque portraying the Villa Griffone and the Marconi Mausoleum located in Pontecchio.

In 1896 Marconi went to England where he filed the world's first patent for a system of telegraphy using hertzian waves and later established the world renowned Marconi's Wireless Telegraph Company. He never came back to Salvan, but his short stay has been the beginning of a long and most profitable relationship between Switzerland and his Company which equipped most of the national broadcasting stations and airport telecommunications facilities during the 1920's and 30's.

References :

My Father Marconi by Degna Marconi, second edition revised, 1982 Balmuir Book Publishing Ltd., Ottawa, Canada.

Salvan - Following Marconi's Footsteps by Yves Fournier. Preface by Princess Elettra Marconi-Giovanelli.

Second edition, 2000. Published by the Commune de Salvan, c/o Yves Fournier, Rue Petits-Epiney 27 CH-1920 Martigny. Switzerland. E-mail : YVES . FOURNIER @ INAME. COM

A Marconi Mystery by Pat Leggatt. In Bulletin of the British Vintage Wireless Society, Vol.21, No.2, 1996 and Vol.22, No.3, 1997.

My beloved Marconi by Maria Christina Marconi. Dante University of America Press, Boston.1999.

Distributed by Branden Publishing Company, P.O.Box 812094, Wellesley MA 02482