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Licio Gelli obituary: Who hanged the dodgy banking chief?

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LICIO GELLI

Life-long fascist



Licio Gelli as a fascist volunteer in 1941.

21-4-1919 – 15-12-2015

A bank manager was found hanging from London's Blackfriars Bridge. A Sicilian banker was murdered in jail with a poisoned cup of coffee. And in the middle of it all was Licio Gelli, a one-time fascist blackshirt and grandmaster of a secret masonic lodge called P2. It was Italy's biggest post-war political scandal which centered around the collapse of the Banco Ambrosiano, Italy's largest private bank, in 1982.

Roberto Calvi, the bank's former president whose body was found hanging from the bridge in June of that year, had risen to the top job in the 1970s, during which time he worked hand-in-glove with Michele "The Shark" Sindona, a Sicilian banker well-connected with both the Mafia and the Christian Democrat political establishment. Both men were members of the P2 lodge led by Gelli and which had operated illegally after it was dissolved by the official Freemasons in 1976. With Sindona (poisoned in 1986), Calvi was thought to have set up a complicated web of banking and insurance interests, including laundering drug money for the Mafia. Many paths were allegedly smoothed by Gelli.

An investigation into Calvi's dealings began in 1978, and in 1981 he was sentenced to four years in jail on financial charges. Freed pending appeal, on June 10 1982 he fled to London on a false passport with a briefcase full of incriminating documents, some showing he was attempting to blackmail the Vatican. His body was discovered a week later by a postal clerk crossing Blackfriars Bridge.

In August 1982 Ambrosiano finally collapsed and it became clear that over \$1 billion had disappeared. The fact that Calvi was a member of Gelli's lodge, whose members called themselves the "frati neri" ("black friars"), and that he was found hanging under Blackfriar's Bridge, his pockets weighted down with bricks, raised suspicions that P2 was somehow involved in his death. But a coroner's inquest returned a verdict of suicide.

In 2003, however, London police reopened their investigation as a murder inquiry after British and German forensic experts concluded that Calvi could not have killed himself, and in 2005 Gelli and five others, including the Mafia boss Giuseppe "Pippo" Calo, were formally placed under investigation in Italy on charges of ordering his murder. But Gelli's name was not in the final indictment at the trial that started in October that year, and the case against the other suspects was dismissed after 20 months for lack of evidence.

There were other dark pages in the Gelli story. In 1981, the year before the bank collapse, Gelli had made international headlines when police raided his office and discovered a secret list of 1000 prominent politicians, magistrates, journalists, businessmen (among them Italy's future leader Silvio Berlusconi), policemen, the heads of all three of Italy's secret services and some 40 senior military commanders, who were all members of P2. The discovery helped bring down the Christian Democrat government of Arnaldo Forlani.

Two years ago tax fraud charges were filed against Gelli and the state took ownership of his villa, though he continued to live there until his death. "I am a fascist and will die a fascist," he declared in 1999.

He is survived by his second wife, Gabriella, and by a daughter and two sons.

Telegraph, London

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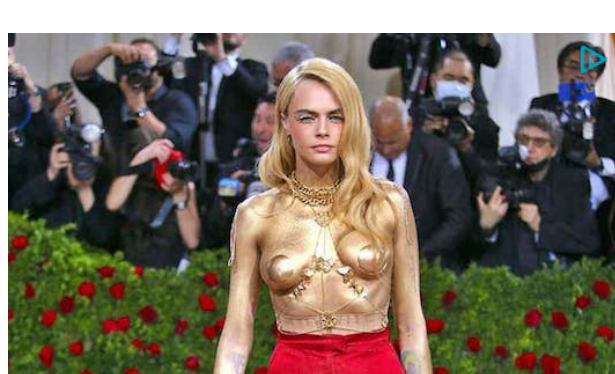
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