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Italy Probes VIP Death

By Charles Foley
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ROME—Would a famous European spymaster, scorning the cyanide phial, end his life by shooting.

If he did choose the harder way, why should he put aside his regulation 0.9 Beretta in favor of a feminine contraption with a mother-of-pearl butt, and a gilt barrel, which might have left him blinded or paralyzed for life? And then, why should he lie down on the floor before putting the pistol to his head?

Questions like these are raining on the authorities dealing with the case of Col. Renzo Rocca, who for 20 years directed REI, the most delicate section of Italian counter-espionage. In both Houses of Parliament, and in the leftwing press, the official theory of suicide has been strongly challenged.

Premier Giovanni Leone's Christian Democrat minority government has been forced to bow to the mounting pressure and agree to a full parliamentary debate on the circumstances surrounding Rocca's death.

Rocca was a powerful man in Italy. The belief that he clung to most of his power, after his retirement a year ago at the age of 57, is fortified by the fact that within an hour of his death four REI agents swooped on his sixth-floor office in the Via Barberini, a street of tall buildings in the tourist heart of Rome. Their leader, with colonial's rank, glanced at Rocca's body on a carpet in the hall, questioned those who had found it, conducted a search and—according to reports—went off with a quantity of documents before the police could move.

Some of the sequestered material is believed to deal with arms contracts for Middle East and African countries running into many millions of dollars that might prove embarrassing to a government that shows a neutral face. Others are said to concern secret equipment for Italy's military forces, including a nuclear submarine.

What particularly intrigues Italians, however, is the report that lists of payments made by REI to helpful politicians were among the papers taken. The list earlier had vanished from official files. These, with 130 dossiers on journalists, are seen as the secret weapons which Rocca took with him into retirement and may account for the silence of a certain section of the press.

Rocca's REI handled industrial and economic matters. Hue deals were subject to his security veto and big business interests competed for his favors. He also had a cover life as Dr. Pino Renzi, vouched to by an official passport, visiting cards in his name on the door of an office in the Palazzo Doria, on the Cora. Here, among the offices of lawyers and business men, he conducted another side of his activities—gleaning news of the technological progress of Italy's potential enemies on the basis of a training course in England.

His modest official salary took him far—from a cold-water, walk-up apartment to a \$480,000 villa in the Via Nomentana near Mussolini's former home. When after 20 years Rocca gave up his job, his two favorite assistants went with him: his pretty young secretary and his chauffeur. They were released from

government service on the same day that he resigned.

On June 27, Rocca's lunchtime break was interrupted. He telephoned his wife Renata that he could not join her and their two sons, but had to stay at the Via Barberini for an important meeting. Soon after, it appears, he telephoned his successor at REI, Col. Falde, urgently requesting an appointment in a bar near the Central Station at 5:30 p.m.

It was the chauffeur, calling to pick Rocca up after the long siesta which overheated Rome enjoys, who found the body. Both he and the secretary, when she arrived shortly after, said Rocca had been in good humour and looking forward to a trip to Cairo when they last spoke with him.

Investigation showed a gap in Rocca's personal security. The three windows of his suite adjoined an empty office. All are linked by a yard-wide cornice, and it would have been simple for an assassin to pass along this from one office to the other, then slip down a second staircase to the busy streets. His only risk was a small chance he might be spotted while moving along the cornice. The shutter on the secretary's window was found open, yet the girl, Lauretta Alegrucci, is certain that she had closed it.

Since finding the unsuspected second exit from Rocca's office, investigators have found two sets of rubber-soled footprints on the cornice between the two streets.

The little 6.5-mm pistol with which Rocca was killed has been identified as a Christmas gift from an arms firm. He was fond of showing it to his friends and it may have been on his desk when he received the fatal call.