

THE LOST PARADISE OF REMY DE HAENEN

by Victoire Theismann

IN 1945, REMY DE HAENEN, THE PIRATE, THE ADVENTURER, THE PLAYBOY, DARED TO LAND A PLANE FOR THE FIRST TIME ON THE GRASSY PLAINS OF THE SAVANNA AMONG THE WILD GOATS AND FLABBERGASTED NATIVES. A LEGEND WAS BORN. PURE PAINTS A PORTRAIT, WITHOUT RETOUCHING, OF THE MAN WHO MADE ST. BARTH.

In 1945 a strange bird landed on St. Barthélemy. This first plane to touch down on the island was flown by a brilliant lunatic who had just invented one of the shortest landing strips in the Caribbean. He later created the runway in Saba, which remains the shortest commercial runway in the world.

Rémy de Haenen is a living legend. This out-of-the-ordinary man was born in London on February 12, 1916. At age 18, he became a naturalized French citizen and entered the Merchant Navy School at Le Havre. He then discovered the world and particularly New York, the United States, the Caribbean, and South America. His strong character forced him to leave the merchant navy in 1937. Another page of his life began to unfold.

He returned to the Caribbean in 1938. He crossed the region aboard various ships, supported by numerous contracts and projects. The islands of this part of the world soon held no further secrets for him. He discovered St. Barth and was seduced by this small rocky part of the world, especially by the energy that the island gave off. The island was very poor but the people were courageous and welcoming. Rémy rented a small cottage in St. Jean and St. Barthélemy became his home port. At that time, a fleet of schooners allowed St. Barth to trade with other islands. There was only one motorboat and two cars on an island that had only one road, and was laced with rocky paths used by the kids.

The Second World War broke out. Misery prevailed on certain islands of the Caribbean. With his experience at Le Havre, Rémy opened a small shipyard in Gustavia. There he built and repaired boats with the help of people from the island. A gentleman smuggler, he trafficked between the American islands, the English islands, and those under German domination—Guadeloupe and Martinique. He transported everyday necessities, but also alcohol and even weapons! One was at war!



Since 1949 he has held the world record for the highest fine imposed for the trafficking of arms, cigarettes and alcohol. However, this type of trade was tolerated in the Caribbean. Everyone did it!

Rémy was not afraid of anything and found himself twice in prison but not for very long periods. A lord of freedom is not imprisoned, he escaped. His perfect knowledge of the Caribbean enabled him to hide more than once and also to save other people who were being hunted. One day, locked in his hotel room before being imprisoned, Rémy succeeded in persuading the two police officers who guarded him. He told them that it was essential that he went to his plane to check something. When they arrived at the plane, he asked the two men to climb aboard with him. He took off with them, still on the pretext of checking the correct functioning of the plane. He landed on another island pretending there was a problem and that an emergency landing was needed. There he asked one of the police officers to find a bucket of water and the other to get out, to help on the outside of the plane. Once the two officers were on the ground, he jumped into the plane, took off and disappeared! It is also thanks to his plane, which he could land almost anywhere, that he carried away Gisele, his partner. Rémy was fascinated by this young Martinique beauty, but Gisele came from an important family which viewed with distaste the interest which Rémy, an adventurer without a name and without a fortune, and much older than Gisele, showed in this young woman. Rémy did not ask anyone's permission. One evening after school he landed not far from the home of Gisele's parents. He suggested that she get in his plane, for a flight and he did not return. He had kidnapped her! She was 18.

Rémy is a humanist, a lord, a prince of life, and nothing ever could stop his determination to always go towards the best, the new, the out-of-the-ordinary. Sometimes he made mistakes and he paid dearly both in reality and figuratively. Several times he was ruined, but like the phoenix he always rose again and set out, each time more combative, more determined, more generous. Rémy was an idealist, an inventor, a pioneer. St Barthélémy owes him a great deal. Aviation in this part of the world owes him a great deal. He ushered in the development of trade, tourism, and the well being of the people.

Several years before landing on St Barthélemy, Rémy de Haenen rented the island of Tintamarre from its owner, L.C. Flemming, and made it both his aviation base and his home. He settled there with Gisele. It was also there that the oldest of his three daughters, Héléne, was born. When she talks to you about her father, one senses a mixture of love and anger. Yes, this man had brilliant aspects and at the same time, like all great men, he was impossible to live with and was full of paradoxes.

On Tintamarre, Rémy built a 300 meter runway, near a lagoon that could also accommodate seaplanes. In 1946 he founded the West Indian Airline Company, the CAA. He did not really receive aeronautic authorization. But this is not the type of thing to stop Rémy. He bought planes from the American army and the adventure began. He traded between the various islands thanks to his planes. Tintamarre would be the maintenance base for the CAA fleet. In 1947, there were several air crashes, which weakened the company; in one crash a nun and a pilot were killed. But it was the hurricane on September 1, 1950 that dealt a fatal blow to the young company.



On September 1, 1950, St Barthélemy's fleet of schooners was totally destroyed, also by the hurricane. Indirectly, Rémy de Haenen would make it possible for St. Barthélemy to escape from this difficult period. Indeed, by creating a runway in St. Jean five years later, he enabled St Barth to open to the world in another way and, little by little, he was going to show them that air travel could be a different method of doing business.

This would take more than 20 years, but in the 1970s tourism started very gently to develop, and a concrete runway was created at the same place where Rémy landed for the first time. The Gustav III airport was a small hut in the middle of a savanna crossed by a very rudimentary runway but within several years it would see a parade of stars, heads of state, and the largest fortunes on the planet. The majority of them came for Rémy and his Eden Rock. This place, so individual, so simple, was where one was received as a friend. Indeed, in 1953, Rémy bought a site that no one wanted for 200 dollars. He built, with his own hands and with the help of the inhabitants of the island, a house on the peninsula projecting into the bay of St Jean. The first hotel on the island was born: The Eden Rock.



St Jean

This small guest house, very simple and at the end of the world, would host the Begum Aga Khan, Robert Mitchum, Louis Malle, Johnny Weissmuller, the King of Sweden, Montgomery Clift, Eddy Constantine, David Rockefeller, Pierre Salinger, Commander Cousteau with whom Rémy would build a binding friendship. He would leave with Cousteau aboard the Calypso, to try to find the fabulous treasure of the Conception, Spanish galleons full of gold lingots, cast in a hurricane in 1641 onto the legendary Banc d'Argent.

When one lodged at Eden Rock, one paid for the bedroom and dinner. All the rest was provided free of charge. It was this same elegance that contributed to the reputation of the Eden Rock. Whether one was rich, famous or not, everyone was received on the same basis as a friend.

One day, a certain Suzy Schmidt reserved a bedroom, for three nights, at Eden Rock. When she arrived, Rémy immediately noticed the initials GG on her bags. In particular, he recognized the enigmatic beauty of her face, and the incredible presence that this woman possessed. Greta Garbo fell under the charm of this adventurous gentleman and

would finally stay three weeks. It would not be the first, or the last time, that this simple, elegant and magnetic man would turn a head. There were to be many men and women amongst the clients of Eden Rock who came to spend several days and extended their stay, fascinated by this exceptional person.

The Eden Rock rapidly became an essential place for a certain elite and the house of the Good Lord for others because everyone who had a problem, whatever it was and whatever the time of day, was welcome. There were many people who this "Lord of the Air" had gracefully assisted in the middle of the night, with his plane, to save their lives. Or those which he had helped in another way, by accommodating them a few times, hiding them, such as one friend, an opponent of Papa Doc, who Rémy took with his plane and hid amongst the islands. Or for this other friend, sought by the French police in St Martin, for whom he emptied his cistern, in order to hide him. When one knows how invaluable water is, one can only admire the gesture he made and the friend that he was. But there was one problem he forgot his friend in the cistern! When Rémy remembered his presence, it was 11pm and his friend was rescued, but in a sad state after more than a day had passed, imprisoned at the bottom of a cistern!

In 1953, Rémy de Haenen became "Councillor General" (Departmental Councilor) and from 1962 to 1977, mayor of St. Barthélemy. He was elected against an outstanding figure of the island: Alexandre Magras. A crowd of 400 to 500 people screaming his name carried him around the island. It was a general plebiscite. And as mayor he was distinguished from the common man, while his temperament and his ambitions would come to shake up many people.

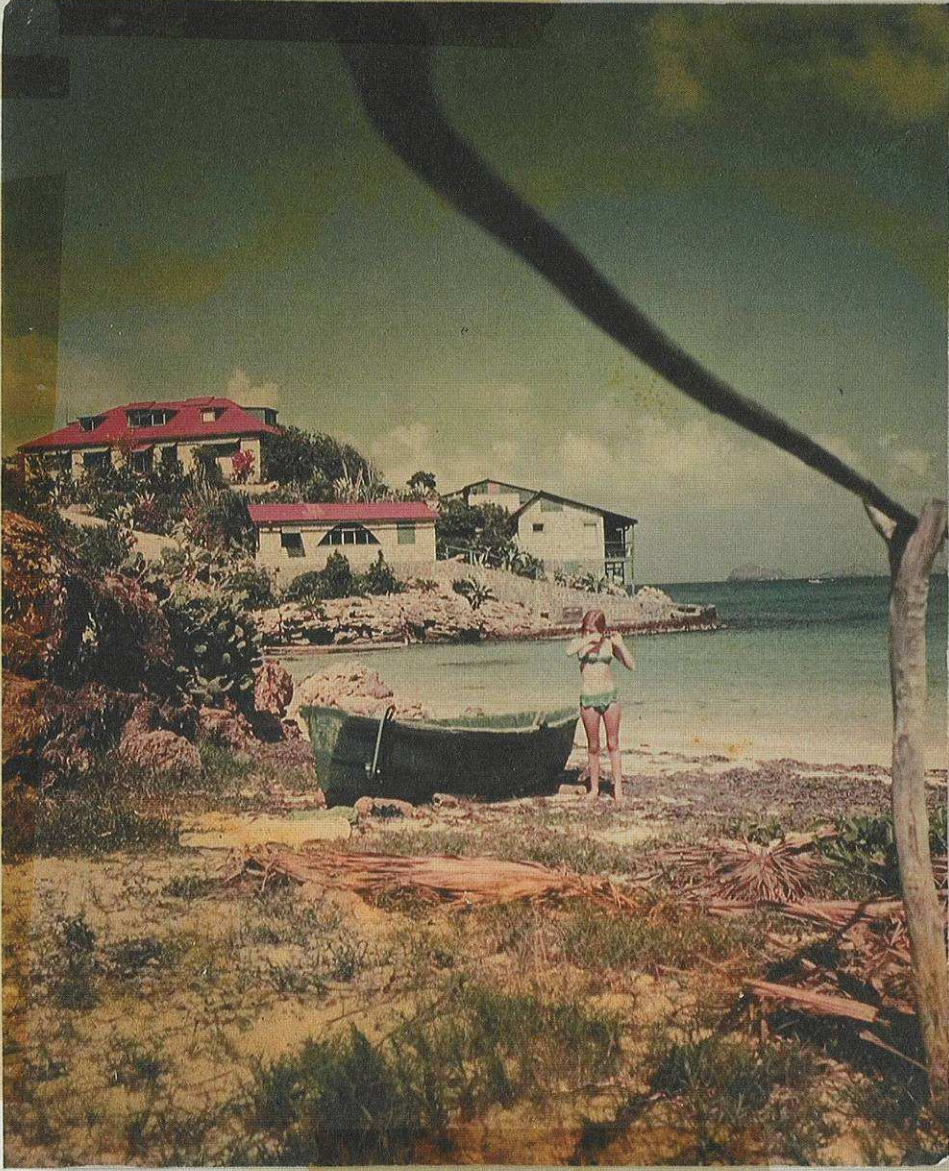
Tristan, his grandson, describes him as a hard man sometimes with others and especially with him, physically very courageous and mentally very strong. A man who spoke little but in an outstanding way: a stubborn and persevering person, authoritative and also generous.

Certain school lessons took place in the town hall. A fifty-year-old tells how as a child he was in such a lesson, and suddenly a shot resounded. It was Rémy de Haenen. He had fired a revolver into the ceiling to calm the mounting emotions and to assert his authority in the town council.

He was at the origin of the change in the political status of the island. He was the initiator, the origin of the idea. For this project, he moved mountains and even succeeded in meeting General de Gaulle when he came to Guadeloupe, to discuss the dream he held for St. Barthélemy. Rémy created most of the roads on the island and he promoted many developmental projects on the island. All was waiting to be created. The electrical supply network, the water supply, the roads. He was the first to organize the construction of a seawater desalination plant.

He received President Chirac and President Giscard d'Estaing and never minced his words. He was afraid of no one. The tax collector remembered him for a long time. At the instigation of Rémy de Haenen, a crowd of 300 people awaited the arrival of the tax collector with pitchforks, tar and feathers. There was no question of yielding the duty-free status of the island. The tax collector left at once, and did not even get out of the plane.

EDEN ROCK 1960/65



Saba 1959



Soon it will be 20 years that the island of St Barthélemy has been flourishing and it has finally obtained that new administrative status. Its development and its autonomy have been achieved in large measure due to this extraordinary man, who went up in the clouds aboard his plane and poured out kilos of salt hoping to make it rain over St. Barth.

Risk taker, brilliant, dreamer, impassioned, adventurer, great lover of life and of women, Remy de Haenen is an exceptional man. He has always been a great admirer of St. Exupéry; he has the same panache, spirit of freedom, and sense of risk. He had everything and he lost everything. A visionary, he enabled the rise of St. Barthélémy. He retains those memories, and the gratitude of the inhabitants of the island. It is this exceptional person, who everyone respects and admires. His granddaughter Alexandra, who he brought up as a daughter, takes care of him, as he took care of her when she was small.

Perhaps you will be lucky enough to encounter his long, fragile silhouette in Gustavia, and catch his eye. In understanding this man, you will quickly understand why, without him St. Barthélemy could have never become St. Barth.