

# Bismarck in Biarritz – a matter of life and death

By Tony Boullemier

THE sliding doors of history hold a grim fascination. How our lives could have changed had things turned out just a little bit differently.

Last month I stumbled on a grim case in point where one man's lucky break arguably led to two world wars and tens of millions of deaths.

Ever since I published an historical novel about the French Second Empire, I've wanted to visit Biarritz, where Napoleon III built a holiday home for his empress in the 1850s and named it Villa Eugenie.

Since then it has since been rebuilt and extended into the magnificent five-star Hotel du Palais. It looks a bit like the London Ritz and sits imposingly above the resort's main beach.

I chose a stormy week to stay there in May. The day I arrived, big waves were sweeping in from the Atlantic and the surfers were out in their dozens.

The following day the waves were massive, spray was lashing the cliffs and the sea appeared to be boiling. The surfers were sitting safely on the sea wall and telling of powerful currents that pulled in opposite directions.

No-one was in the water. And that made the tale I was told by the genial hotel manager Jean-Louis Leimbacher all the more intriguing.

His hotel has played host to a long line of royalty, politicians and showbiz stars. Queen Victoria stayed. So did the Duke of Windsor, Winston Churchill, Charlie Chaplin and Frank Sinatra.

King Edward VII was a frequent visitor and his ground floor apartment had a back door through which his mistress Mrs Alice Keppel would enter, unobserved by staff.

Monsieur Leimbacher knows Prince Charles, who was yet another guest. And he confessed that when Charles married Alice's descendant Camilla, he almost wrote to the couple inviting them to honeymoon in the same room where their great grandparents had made their assignments.

A rather less congenial guest a few years earlier was Otto von Bismarck. He visited in 1862 when he was in his 40s and acting as Prussia's ambassador to Paris.

Bismarck arrived at the Villa Eugenie with his mistress, a 21-year-old Prussian Princess called Katherina Orloff and the two of them went for a swim.

It was the currents that did it. Both of them were swept out to sea and got into difficulties.

A local lighthouse keeper and part-time lifeguard called Pierre Lafleur spotted them and went to the rescue. The princess was unconscious by the time he reached her and he pulled her to the shore first.

Then he went back for the floundering Bismarck who was waving frantically for help. By the time Lafleur got the giant Prussian back to the beach he too had passed out and it took the attentions of a doctor to revive him.

Three years later Bismarck returned to Biarritz and strolled with Napoleon III along the same beach.

He was now Prussia's Chancellor and was planning to make war on Austria to remove their influence from the south German states. His mission was to persuade Napoleon to remain neutral while this happened.

Napoleon did so and Prussia duly defeated Austria at the Battle of Koneggratz in 1866. The stage was set for the next part of Bismarck's plan – a crushing victory over France which would convince the remaining independent German states to combine into a Greater Germany.

Had Bismarck drowned in Biarritz Bay, it is unlikely there would have been a war with Austria and therefore no Koneggratz, no Franco-Prussian War and no Greater Germany created over the fallen body of France.

With no German land grab of Alsace and Lorraine to avenge and no crazed kaiser ruling in Berlin, France and Germany would have been unlikely to enter the 1914 Balkan conflict involving Austria, Serbia and Russia that turned into World War I. And ergo no World War II either.

So it was certainly a bad day for Europe when Pierre the lifeguard pulled Bismarck out of Biarritz Bay. We came unbelievably close to avoiding four major wars and countless millions of unnecessary deaths.

And all the more so when I tell you that just four weeks after Bismarck's lucky escape, Pierre Lafleur was himself drowned in the Atlantic.

Sliding doors indeed.

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