APPENDIX 8

THE PENINSULA HOTEL & LEOPOLD GADDI

Almost from the beginning the Peninsula Hotel had an affinity with aviation. Its history goes back to 1924 when James H. Taggart chose his Kowloon site near the docks and the railway station. He began construction in 1925. Two years later, when ready for guests, the Government commandeered it to quarter troops. The Sino-Japanese hostilities had raised concern and Britain shipped several battalions to counteract any expansion of the conflict to Hong Kong.

It was a favourite diversion to hurl bayonets into the beautifully panelled doors. The vandalism of the soldiers meant extensive repairs. Of the battalions quartered there the least destructive was the Scots Guards.

The *Pen* opened for business Tuesday, December 11, 1928. A Carnival Dinner Dance in the Roof Garden attracted a charge of $4.00 for each person. It was a *soup-and-fish affair*, although fancy dress was an acceptable alternative. Even with this splendid addition the Colony's night-life remained provincial, with most activities closed down by 2300 hours. An American standing on the deck of a President Line boat summed it up perfectly – *the best illuminated cemetery in the world*.

In 1946, Cathay Pacific Airways rented two large rooms, 645-6, and covered the floor with camp-beds. Although the beds were comfortable the rooms lacked toilet and shower facilities.

A genial bar snuggled against the west wall of the main lounge. Many of Cathay's early charters reached maturity there. The *ladies-of-the-evening* occupied tables west of the main entrance. The more upstanding patronised the east-side that included a sprinkling of ladies who had bought respectability with wedding rings.

Li Bun, the telephone page, used to locate friends lost in the milling crowd. He chalked the name on a small blackboard, elevated on a broom-stick, with a bicycle bell attached beside his right thumb. We all had messages for him that were mostly reasonable but an overwrought floor-manager intercepted messages too colourful. *Miss Carriage* was one that brought instantaneous suspension.

It was in 1931 that Leopold *Leo* Gaddi *jumped-ship* to join the staff of the Hongkong and Shanghai Hotels Limited (now known as The Peninsula Group). He worked as a chef in

Shanghai, Peking and then Hong Kong. He became manager of The Peninsula in 1952 and lived there until he retired in 1961. He became great friends with all the airlines and their boisterous personnel. We remember him through Gaddi's. He launched his internationally famous restaurant at Christmas 1953.

Leo was a repository of local historical anecdotes. He declared that he owned car registered number two. He stated that the first automobile arrived in Hong Kong in October 1910. The automobile proved unpopular and by the early twenties they were still a rarity. He revealed Governor Sir Henry May became a car user more from necessity than enthusiasm. In July 1912, a failed assassination attack prompted a shift from sedan-chair to motorised transport.

Leo thought these cars operated before the introduction of formal registration. About 1930, the authorities issued the first plate to an American domiciled on the Island. This was Dr J. W. Noble, a dental surgeon, who housed it in a small green shed next to the Lower Peak Tram Terminus. Besides a profitable professional income he was the main share-holder of the *South China Morning Post*.

Leo Gaddi never tired of telling stories about animals. His favourites involved a camel, a tiger, and a plane load of day-old chicks.

One very eccentric member of the Belilios family loved animals. He brought a camel back to Hong Kong and used to ride up and down Old Peak Road on it. The camel had good big feet that gripped the winding road. One boisterous night the high wind of a typhoon destroyed its stable and in wandering it slipped over an embankment. The camel suffered severe injuries and had to be shot. The next problem was who should remove the carcass. There was a tremendous argument between the police and sanitary department. The police stated the sanitary department was responsible for its removal – the stench was revolting. The sanitary department retaliated by reminding the police they should remove all obstructions. Eventually, like so many problems, it solved itself by decaying.

Belilios also had a small pet tiger. His mother was very old and never left her rooms in the Hongkong Hotel. One morning he visited her taking his tiger. Belilios decided to have a quiet breakfast downstairs leaving the beast with the old lady. She became agitated and phoned the manager; *Send somebody up, there's a tiger in my room*.

The manager did not take this very seriously and thought she was going the same way as her son. Belilios saw strange creatures when he'd had a bit too much to drink. Finally he sent a boy who took one look at the tiger and bolted. At last Belilios caught his tiger but how was he to get it out of the hotel? At 0900 hours and the busiest time of the day he could hardly walk through the foyer with it. Finally he got hold of a bamboo carrying chair, removed the cushions, tied the tiger in and the coolies calmly carried it away.

One day Captain *Pinky* Wawn, of Cathay Pacific, flew in with a load of day-old chicks. Cathay lacked a place to store them so the *Pen* came to the rescue. The management allowed deKantzow to use the ground-floor store until the next morning. Pinky, Roy Farrell and Syd adjourned to the west-bar to revive their flagging spirits. Then all hell broke loose as the lounge filled with squawking, agitated chicks. The chicks invaded the kitchen, and the ladies' toilets. The occupants ran screaming into the lounge adding to the bedlam. Women, young and not so young, were standing on chairs, holding their skirts up, and screaming with alarm. The men, dragging their eyes from the entrancing underwear, got into the spirit of trapping the wayward chicks.

The final count found dozens missing! This brought alarm and despondency to Syd and Roy Farrell. Leo Gaddi had few doubts that waiters and room-boys dined grandly off the proceeds of that *great escape*.

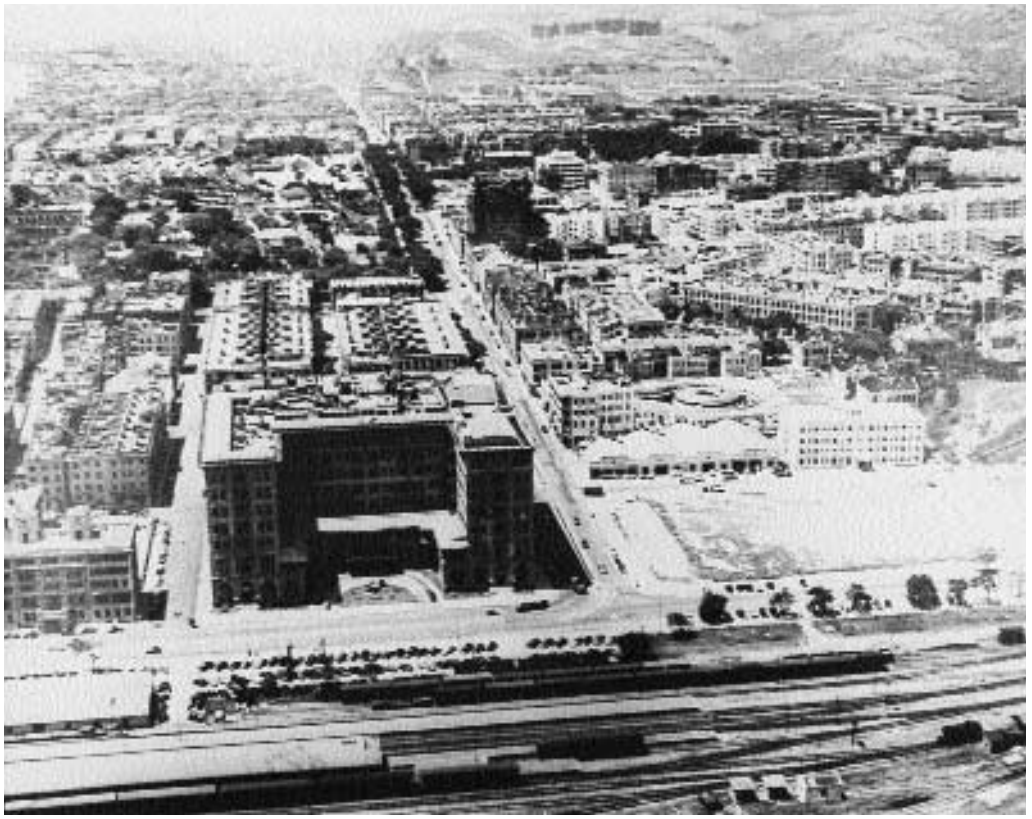
Later, when PanAm and BOAC stayed there, the management had turned the Grand Ballroom or *Rose Room* into small cubicles. Each room had a private toilet and shower and

were known, by the more naive book-in clerks, as crew rooms. Leo Gaddi, with his intimate knowledge of their prime function, unhesitatingly called them *screw rooms*. We always thought he expressed this with a tinge of jealousy.

Cathay crews derived no benefit from this upgrade in accommodation. The management housed the bachelors at 48 Grampian Road, near Kowloon City, with the rest scattered around Kowloon.

On January 24, 1963, Leopold Gaddi died of a heart attack. That day he was driving on a back road in Switzerland and rounding a bend saw a school-bus stalled across a train line. As he hurried towards the bus he heard the whistle of an approaching train. The children in the bus began to scream with terror. Leo alone pushed the bus from the crossing seconds before the train thundered by. Shaking with the effort he sank on to the grass verge. The bus driver rushed to express his thanks but found him dead.

Leo had died as he had lived – helping others!



MY FIRST AERIAL VIEW FROM *BETSY* 1946

To left of the Peninsula Hotel the YMCA, to the right a vacant area (used for exhibitions), then Middle Road separating the Far East Motors (car repairs). The Mariner's Club further right and the circular Chung King Arcade just behind. The Kowloon Railway complex in the foreground and the dearth of road traffic. (Photo: Peter Gautschi)

SEPTEMBER 23, 1983 – *BETSY* COMES HOME

The same view 37 years later. The Pen hasn't changed much – the Sheraton Hotel occupies the exhibition area – the Space Museum (Planetarium) occupies part of the old Kowloon Railway complex and the road traffic has increased.

(Photo: Captain Martin Willing)