Inverlair No. 6 Special Workshop School: ‘The Cooler’

The Security Section found itself responsible for SOE’s recruiting mistakes, in the form of men who proved unsuited to the rigours of life as an agent in the field. Usually removed as their unsuitability became apparent during training, these men were held at the ‘No. 6 Special Workshop School’ at Inverlair Lodge, Inverness-shire, a facility which has achieved an unfair notoriety in the post-war world. Officially known in London as ‘the Cooler’, but simply as ‘Inverlair’ north of the border, the facility provided the inspiration for George Markstein’s 1974 novel, *The Cooler*. It has been claimed that Markstein found out about Inverlair while working as a journalist on the US forces magazine *Stars and Stripes* in post-war Europe. While *The Cooler* has faded into obscurity, the influence of Inverlair can also be seen in the cult television series *The Prisoner*, which Markstein developed with the show’s star Patrick McGoohan.

The SOE reality was far less sinister than the nightmare vision of ‘The Village’ faced by McGoohan’s character ‘Number 6’, from which escape was impossible. As the Security History emphasised, the Cooler was ‘in no sense a punishment or detention camp’. Rather, it was intended for the housing and employment of alien personnel who, for security reasons, had to be removed from the Training Courses, but who, on account of the knowledge which they had gained, had to live in retirement for some time.

Charting the origins of Inverlair is to throw light on the perhaps inevitable deficiencies of SOE’s training and recruiting practices in the early days of the organisation. Three of the earliest residents at Inverlair – Leonida Rosa, Rinaldo Purisol and Charles Bertoli – were sent there
following an unsuccessful attempt to recruit Italians for subversive activity from ‘material available in this country’, including those who had been interned on the Isle of Man upon Italy’s entry into the war in June 1940, a result of Churchill’s order to ‘collar the lot’.3 Pressure to make progress in Italy came from the top; SOE’s Minister, Hugh Dalton, recorded his ‘explosive’ impatience over the Italian situation in his diary.4 Such pressure helps account for decisions to recruit questionable candidates that may not have otherwise been taken. A similar problem was also faced by the Spanish Country Section, which found itself with a number of recruits on its hands which it was soon keen to be rid of. Such removal was complicated by the SOE training process; while the deficiencies of poor recruits eventually became apparent, in the meantime they accumulated a certain amount of knowledge about SOE, which led to the serious problem of how they could be disposed of safely.

Rinaldo Purisiol first came to SOE’s attention in August 1940, when he was brought from the Palace Internment Camp on the Isle of Man to be interviewed at MI5’s interrogation facility, the Oratory School. Born in Venice in 1893, Purisiol fled Italy as a political refugee in 1931. He arrived in Britain in May 1940, and was described as ‘a tough type of man who has worked as a ship’s machinist in the Mediterranean and around the Belgian and English coasts’. The SOE officer who conducted the interview recorded,

This man appears to be an international adventurer who fought as a Republican in the Spanish War. I should say that he is pretty ‘red’: he admits, in fact, to having worked for the Free Masons in France (he would not say what kind of work). He looks very tough and has worked as a ship machinist in the Mediterranean and around the Belgian and English coasts. He says he knows how to navigate. I should say that he was genuinely anti-Fascist and would be a useful man for us if carefully handled.5

A second interview was arranged, and Purisiol was taken on by SOE.6 He quickly became the cause of some concern. Field Security Officer L/Cpl Searle was given instructions to keep a watch on Purisiol in early January 1941, as ‘he was liable to cause dissatisfaction amongst the trainees’.7 Searle, however, defended Purisiol, arguing that his behaviour may have been ‘caused by the fact that he had been in a poor state of health at the time’, exacerbated by the age gap between Purisiol and the other trainees: ‘At 48 he is, perhaps too old to be put with men of twenty.’ Searle did concede that ‘His voice sometimes runs away with him’, but