



# SEQUERCIANI

Casa • Vino • Olio



## The story of Sequerciani

### Part I

by Ruedi Gerber // Illustrations by Hannes Binder

When I was 17 I fell in love with a friend of my parent's place in a little village in Maremma and I never forgot it.

Later – while living in NY and after film school, I still had a dream about having a place in Maremma and couldn't let it go. I thought, I have to make this dream a reality or forget dreaming.

#### **One thing is this place is about dreaming.**

I was a beginning filmmaker living completely in the virtual world and because of this, I longed to find something solid.

In 1991 I started a search for fulfill that dream. I heard about a nice house that was for sale. Before I went to that meeting with the agent, I decided to search for the owner to meet them without anyone influencing me.

I drove along a dirt road with a house on a hill with an incredible panoramic view; secretly I hoped it was the house, but it was much bigger.





**I sat in front of the house – it was just stones, earth and sun.**

The magic of the place and the silent language of the house, was speaking to me; towering over so many hills leading to the sea.

When I went to my appointment to see the house, I felt it was too small and the farmer didn't want to sell any land around it.

Chatting with each other, two farmers strolled by. I overheard a conversation in a strong Tuscan dialect slang about a Swiss couple owning a house but who were arguing and possibly selling their house.

My ears perked up and I asked in Italian where that house was. They pointed at some hills where I couldn't see a house. I insisted there is no house! Where! They walked with me and pointed at a hill. I couldn't believe my eyes it was the house I had just discovered!

Nobody had an idea how to find those Swiss owners.

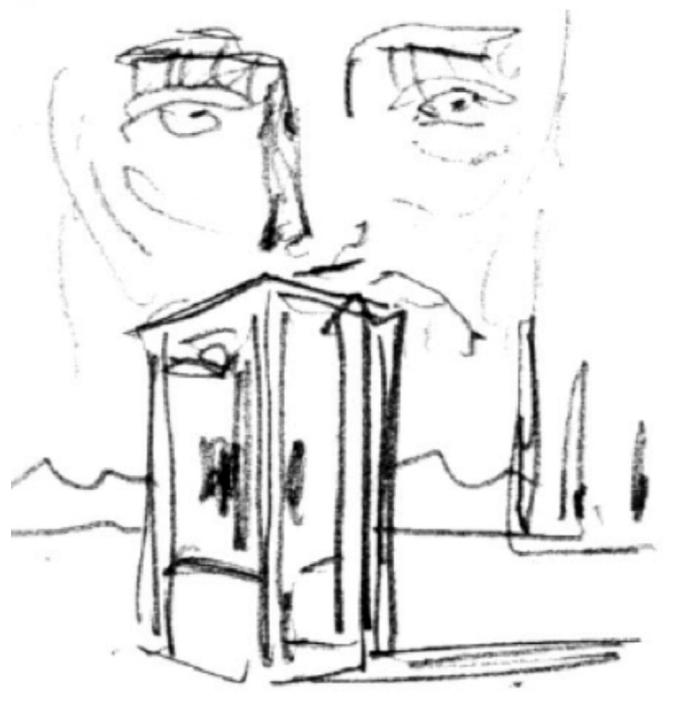
They told me that it had just been sold 2 years before by the old farmer Filippo Venturini – but had no clue where he was living because he moved in with his new wife in another area. They said it was impossible. But Filippo had relatives in the village of Bagno di Gavorrano – the next village over.

I gave up deciding it was too difficult.

I stopped at gas station and thought that this is too good to be true, I wanted to investigate more and went to find a public phone. The old phone book still had the pages with the names and contacts of the people of Bagno di Gavorrano.

I started calling all the Venturinis in the book – the fifth Venturini knew Filippo and gave me his number.

When I called Filippo Venturini – I hardly understood his hard Tuscan dialect. I asked him to give me the names of the Swiss people he sold the house to. He kept mentioning Urtz Federico. I asked him if I could come visit him to see how the name was written. Somehow he indicated some village name and I started to drive his house.

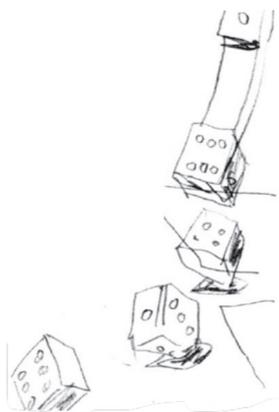




I got lost in the plains in the darkness of the night. Finally a Fiat 500 in a light blue colour came along and I had to stop it. They gave me the instructions on how to find the village.

Filippo was a small bald, staunch man, who welcomed me with a huge smile. He offered me prosciutto and cheese; but didn't have the contract (later I found out a relative of his kept his paper work since he wasn't able to read).

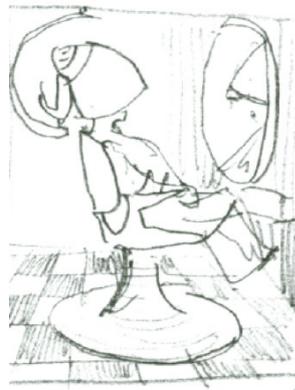
I called my friend in Zurich to search for names like Urtz Federico, but had no luck. Finally I left Filippo my number to call me if he found the people who owned the house.



A month later on a Monday in mid-September – after I had forgotten all about the house, Filippo called me to say he had found the names of the people who owned the house. They were living near Zurich – with a similar name as he pronounced.

I straight away called those people – the wife picked up the phone and said, “what a coincidence – we finally decided to sell the house on Sunday night, and sent the keys to an agent in Massa Marittima.

But you came to us without an agent. Also you are very lucky – my husband who is a stone sculptor who loves the house so much, he doesn't want to sell it. But since my money is invested in the house, I've decided to sell it and we will –but you have to talk to my husband and negotiate with him”.



We negotiated over 4 months without results – when I met them I realized they were an odd couple, she - the blonde hairdresser with a red sports car, trying to flirt with me and he a silent sculptor of grave stones;

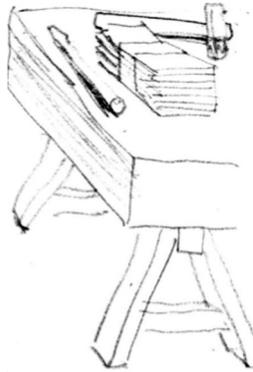
I felt almost sad to take his beloved house away from him – he loved it so much. It would have been easy to even take his wife away from him. I kept my focus on the house.

Finally I gave up and things in my life felt upside down. I got sick and felt really down. After New Years – 1992 – a friend encouraged me to ask those people to offer me a written offer for the house, which they did – and even at that time it was a modest price.

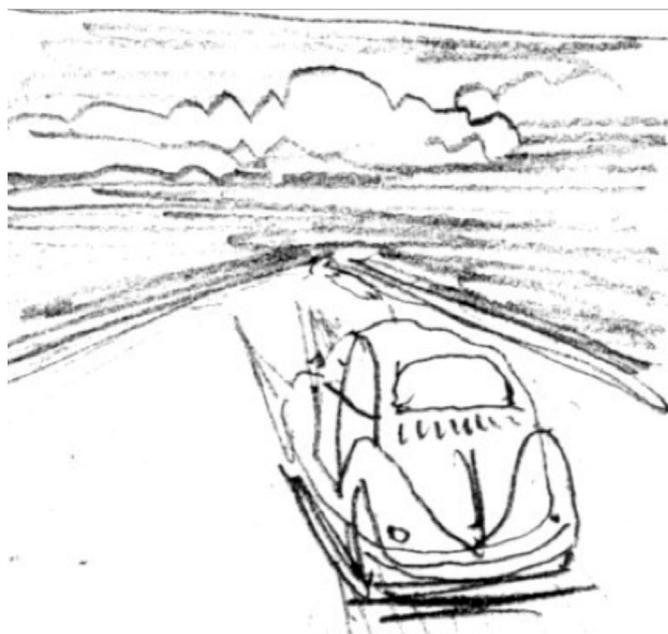


With that letter in my hands, I took my gold VW to Maremma to really check the house, the water (there was none) the electricity (there was none) and all the dangers that would await me in case I buy it.

With the photos in my hands I went to an experienced German man in a Maremma village nearby, to ask his opinion. Looking at the photos, he stared at me in disbelief and said – “What! A house like that is never for sale – I will give you 20,000 cash in your hand right now! What are you waiting for!!!”



Leaving the man I checked my answering machine in Zurich and heard the hairdresser was looking for me.



I called her right away and she said there are other people from Germany who want to buy the house.

I said, “No wait please I’m here right now just checking the water and electricity! I’m seriously interested.”

I hung up jumped in my car, drove to Zurich as fast as I could, went to my bank, took 20,000 CHF and went to the gravestone sculptor’s shop near Zurich.

I threw the cash on the actual gravestone he was working on. He took his work glasses off, smiled at me and said, “I never believed you had a dime

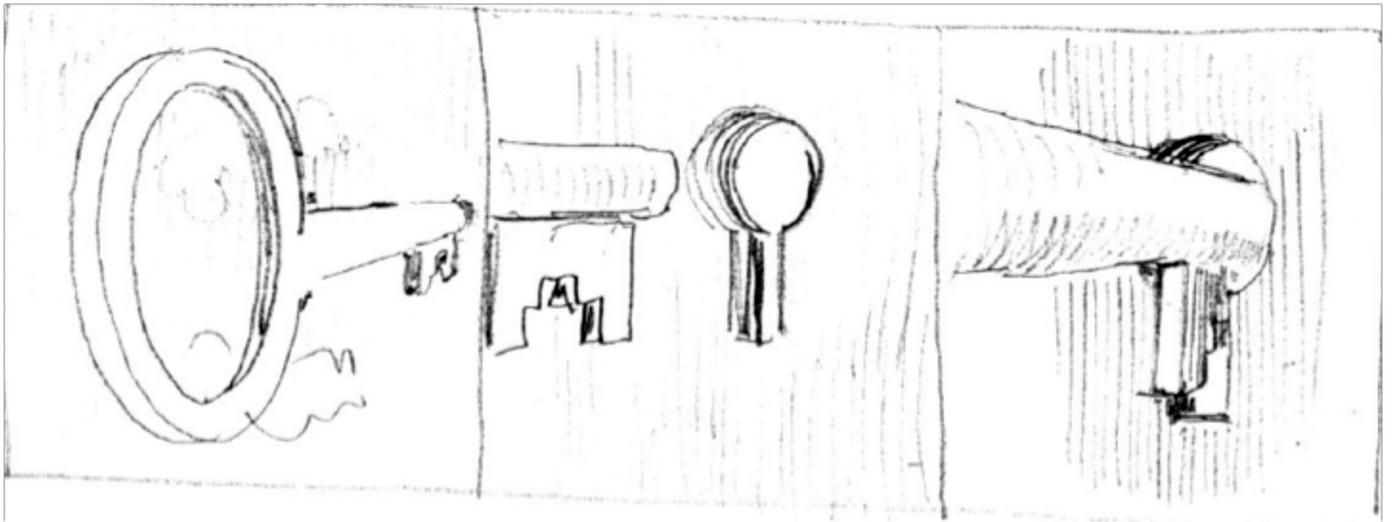


We signed the pre-contract (compromesso). When I went home, I got a phone call 2 hours later from him and he said, “You are lucky, the German’s signed as well, but you were 2 hours earlier – it’s yours”.

I must say later I found out I was double lucky – the old farmer Filippo Venturini never gave his key to any by passer who was interested to look at the house - and there were many. But he liked me. I liked him too. Later we became close friends and I found out Federico (the gravestone sculptor) called him Babbo – which means Dad in Tuscan dialect – he was an orphan and never had a father.

The house was mine? Well in order to do the actual sales contract – I had to go to a Notary. The first one told me to my face – in Italy – you might buy the house and have it – but maybe it might not be yours. I said, “What”! He told me that Swiss people are not allowed to buy property in Italy. I left him very upset and he wanted to charge me \$500 – and later I found it was true – I needed a special permit from the foreign ministry; seemingly an impossible task.

People advised me – you needed to know someone in Italy and it dawned me that I might actually know someone. I met, at the end of 1991, during a small wedding- the Italian bride of a journalist friend of mine. They met in Rome. Since I spoke Italian, I could guide her, in her fur coat, in December through Zurich and she had given me her number.



Now in need of some advice or even help – I called her in Feb. 1992 – and she kindly told me she would take care of my problem. She would give instructions and I should call Giovanna and she will fix everything – and it was true within a week I had my permit and I owned the property.

I can't even imagine having to have spent months and months to try to get the permits, which wouldn't have happened without her help. It was a chain of many coincidences that the house came to me – it kept coming back to me.

Then I had renovate the house – there was no water only rain water that went into a huge cisterna in front of the house.



So I started to renovate – from top to bottom. First I made the top floor ready so that I could inhabit the house. I brought my script of my next film with me and started organizing the renovation.

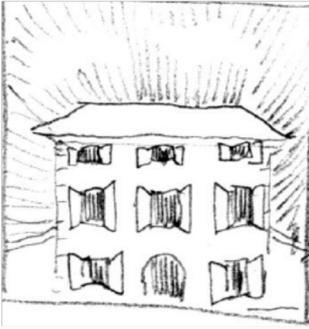


I discovered organic building (bio edilizia). I learned that it was about the material you use to build – like stone earth and sun.

More and more I started to learn that each stone was it's own issue. I thought - I have a house with no electric wiring or water pipes and not connected to a water acquadotto. But it was the perfect organic house.

I felt like it was a tent in nature made out of stone. The house has an amazing positive spirit; all I needed was to follow that spirit. The house was telling me what to do. I listened to the house, even at night you could hear the strange sound of the animals that live around here.

When there were very few people or no one – the house was there almost sad and patiently waiting.



When there were lots of people, the house became happy and started to laugh. It was a happy house. Children understood the house.

There is on top of the main entrance of the door – a crest (insegna) which indicates half an eagle because the house was originally built and owned by the famous Barabesi Bourbon di Pitrella.



They were a family that owned thousands of hectares here in the Maremma, who installed themselves in Tatti as their main residence at the end of the 18th century - 1896. The house was built in 1908 and finished in 1910.

There are two years carved into the stone in the house, one at the pizza oven, 1908, and 1910 (the year it was finished) on the left side of the house.

In the 1950s when the farmers felt left out and without control of their farming, there came the reforma agraria and they distributed the land to the people. That is when Filippo Venturini, who worked in the mines; we are here bordering the famous Colline Metallifere ; had the chance to buy the land and make a

living through agriculture, together with his brother Mario.

Filippo showed me how to harvest the olives, he told me about his life and his beloved wife who passed away. He also showed me in his age of 80 years, how to climb down into the cistern and clean it.



He also showed me in his age of 80 years, how to climb down into the cistern and clean it.

The love for this house and especially the love for the location where you have almost a perfect 360 degree view, connected everyone who came here and new friendships came out of the place.

The house always told me what to do with its simplicity, symmetry and good proportions. It was hard to alter its rigidity and purity with a new kind of design. This house always says – a house is a house is a house.

A new phase started – we bought new land – enlarging it if from 8 – 16 hectares – and we started to develop the potential with olive groves and wine groves.

**We woke up the sleeping beauty.**

