

Canfranc - What Stories It Could Tell...

Written by Andy Owen



It's 92 years old. Crumbling and derelict.

Yet, when you first set eyes on Canfranc, it takes your breath away.

It is an extraordinary railway station. And it has many stories to tell, a lot of them, dark and sinister - especially from WW2.

It's a dramatic and very atmospheric building, located where you would not expect to find it - high up in the Pyrenees, in a village with a population of only 500 people.



Canfranc station was built on a grand scale by Spanish project engineer Ramirez de Dampierre, who began its construction in 1923.

No expense was spared and its bold and modern design, built in iron and glass, was visionary.

The station has 365 windows - one for every day of the year - and more than 100 doors. Its platforms are over 220 yards long - and it also had a hospital, restaurant and living quarters for customs officers from both France and Spain.

It also boasted a luxury hotel.

It took five years to build and it was formally opened on 18th July 1928, in the presence of King Alfonso XIII of Spain and Gaston Doumergue, the President of the French Republic.

Canfranc was hailed as a symbol of architectural elegance - and it became the second largest railway station in Europe - and was called "The Titanic Of The Mountains".

The reason it was built, was to connect Spain with France and the rest of Europe, after a tunnel was created through the Pyrenees, completed in 1915.

The station was situated right on the border of the two countries and it had a Spanish and French half, together with a post office and customs office for each country.

A school was set up in the village for the children of the French staff who worked in the station.

The station performed very well in its early years and was very popular.

But, during the Spanish Civil War, General Franco had the tunnels sealed on the Spanish side, as there was great concern about the smuggling of arms through the area.

When WW2 broke out, the Spanish and the German Wehrmacht set up a mutually beneficial agreement to use the line again - so the tunnels were re-opened and the station became operational once more, initially for freight.

In the early days of the war, Canfranc became an escape route for persecuted Jews and allied soldiers into neutral Spain and Portugal and also a well-used route for allied spies going the other way, to join the anti-Nazi French Resistance and to set up spy networks in France.

But in 1940, Spanish Dictator Francisco Franco met Hitler at Canfranc and was pictured with him, proudly striding along one of its many wide many platforms.



Hitler was greatly impressed by the station and saw the massive benefits it could offer to the Third Reich.

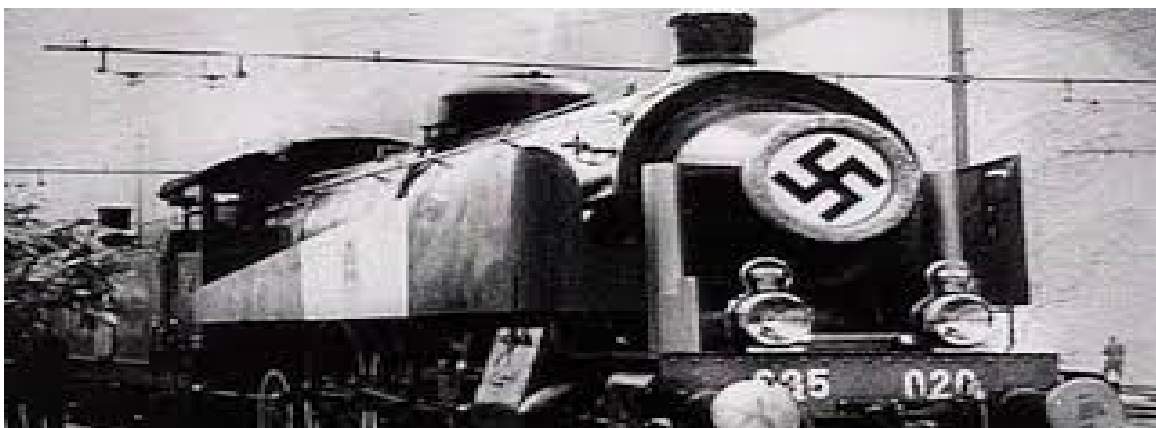
So, the Germans took control of the municipality of Canfranc and adorned the station with Swastika flags.

Journalist and historian Guy Walters, described what Canfranc was like at that time.

"Once the Nazis arrived, it became like the film Casablanca. On one level, there were Nazis holding parties - and above, there'd be railway workers gathering intelligence and passing it to the Allies".

The Germans used Canfranc heavily, to smuggle the staggering amounts of gold the Nazis had plundered from across Europe.

The 'gold run' normally started in Switzerland, after the gold had been laundered in Swiss banks, then went through France, called in at Canfranc and then went on through Spain to Portugal.



Lisbon was the favourite destination. From there, most of the gold was shipped to South America.

Most of it has never been recovered.

These gold shipments were not without issues, however.

The main one being the need to offload and reload the gold bars from the French train to the Spanish train. This was because the French rail tracks, which were the standard European gauge-tracks, did not match the Spanish broad-gauge tracks.

This was tough work, as it all had to be hand-balled over.

And gold is heavy. Most bars were five kilos - a little over 11 pounds.

If each box carried five bars, that's 55 pounds in weight, which needed two pretty strong men to offload from the French train and transfer to the waiting Spanish train.

Most gold trains had hundreds of boxes of gold.

The villagers of Canfranc were enlisted to do the heavy lifting work.



When Bill Clinton declassified thousands of WW2 documents, it was revealed that both Salazar, the dictator of Portugal and the Spanish Government, were paid in looted gold for providing the Third Reich with tungsten - a metal that reinforces steel and was vital to the Nazi war effort.

Upon further investigation, it became clear that both the Spanish and Portuguese were revealed to have returned only a tiny fraction of the amount they received from the Nazis.

Surprisingly, nothing has been done about this.

Once in total charge of Canfranc, the Germans tightened up on all aspects of security, both in and out of France and Spain.

Escape through Canfranc became harder - and over the next two years, thousands of people were captured and executed, only yards from freedom.

You can only imagine how desperate refugees must have felt in the station hall, while in line to have their passports stamped to enter neutral Spain.

They had endured so much to get there. But many were hauled out of the line by Gestapo agents, never to be seen again.



Nazi gold trafficking was known to the allies, but the level of activity couldn't be proved, until a remarkable find in 2000, confirmed what had been happening.

Local bus driver Jonathan Diaz, was just exploring some of the adjacent buildings on the station grounds, and came across a large patch of yellowing paperwork in an old customs house.

One of them bore the words 'gold bar' in heavy type.



On further investigation, it became clear that this paperwork, which were official Nazi documents, confirmed that 86 tons of Nazi gold passed through the station between 1942 and 1943.

Later, more documents were uncovered in European and American archives that suggested that more than 200 tons of gold passed through the station in total, during the war.

The more sinister tales and goings-on surrounding the station happened in 1945, when Germany had clearly lost the war.

Canfranc became a hotbed of espionage and more trains than ever were arriving, but most of these trains, did not contain gold. They contained people.

Bad people.

Canfranc was one of the 'ratlines' - a system of escape routes for Nazis and other war criminals fleeing Europe in the aftermath of World War II.

There were two primary routes: the first went from Germany to Rome and Genoa, then on to South America. The second, went from Germany to Spain, then to Argentina.

This second route, very often included Canfranc.



It was alleged that these ratlines were aided, abetted and supported by high-ranking clergy of the Catholic Church - and many historians, including the well-respected Michael Phayer, claims this went right to the top.

This meant the Vatican and the Pope himself.

"Spain, not Rome, was the first centre of ratline activity that facilitated the escape of Nazi fascists," said Phayer, although the exodus itself was planned within the Vatican.

We can be pretty certain that hundreds, if not thousands of Nazi war criminals, were at some stage, arrogantly strutting around Canfranc station enjoying their escape from justice.

According to Phayer, "Pope Pius XII preferred to see fascist war criminals on board ships sailing to the New World, rather than seeing them rotting in POW camps in zonal Germany".

Spain and Portugal were fully aware of the atrocities of the Third Reich, but had chosen to turn a blind eye to them, in return for the Gold bars they continued to enjoy.

At the end of the war, they steadfastly denied that they were harbouring or assisting Nazi war criminals. International pressure was ramped up on Spain in particular, to give them up.

But Spain played everything with a straight bat.

This severely damaged the country's standing with the rest of Europe and caused them many issues for decades to come.

There is no doubt that Canfranc station, stunningly beautiful as it was - and still is - played a key part in the dying embers of the most inhumane period in human history.

Its crumbling walls hold many secrets - but most of them will now never be told.



After the war, the French lost interest in the line and allowed it to deteriorate. And the final train whistle was sounded in 1970, when a train derailed on the French side.

That signalled the end and France abandoned the line.

The stunning Canfranc station was left to rot.



The tracks rusted, many of the ceilings collapsed with the harsh winter weather - and vandalism did the rest.

Some restoration did take place and there has been talk for nearly 10 years of turning the station into a museum, so that the memory of its past is not lost.

But, don't hold your breath...

I think this grand old lady died of shame many years ago.

