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'Swiss Gigolo' admits blackmailing BMW heiress

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A smooth-talking con man known as the "Swiss Gigolo" has been jailed for six years for cheating and blackmailing a string of super-rich lovers, including Germany's wealthiest woman.

Helg Sgarbi, 44, admitted as his trial opened in Munich "the essence" of the charges against him, which included trying to hoodwink BMW heiress Susanne Klatten out of more than 340 million euro (\$671 million).

"I would like to apologise publicly to my victims," the dark-haired, inconspicuous-looking Sgarbi told the packed courtroom on Monday.

He was accused of trying to defraud Klatten with sob stories, promises of a new life together and finally threats to release compromising video footage of their affair.

Prosecutors had called for a jail term of nine years, saying his confession should be counted in his favour since it would mean that Klatten and the other women would be spared the embarrassing ordeal of having to testify.

His defence lawyer Egon Geis - who in the past has taken on several high-profile cases, including that of Hitler "diaries" forger Konrad Paul Kujau in the 1980s - called for five years.

Klatten, 46, is a major shareholder in German luxury carmaker BMW, inherited from her industrialist father Herbert Quandt, who had links to the Nazis, and who saved the Bavarian firm from collapse in 1957 and built it up to a global champion.

Sgarbi, who told his conquests he was a "special Swiss government representative in crisis zones", first met her while hunting for rich, lonely women at the exclusive Austrian health resort of Lanserhof in July 2007.

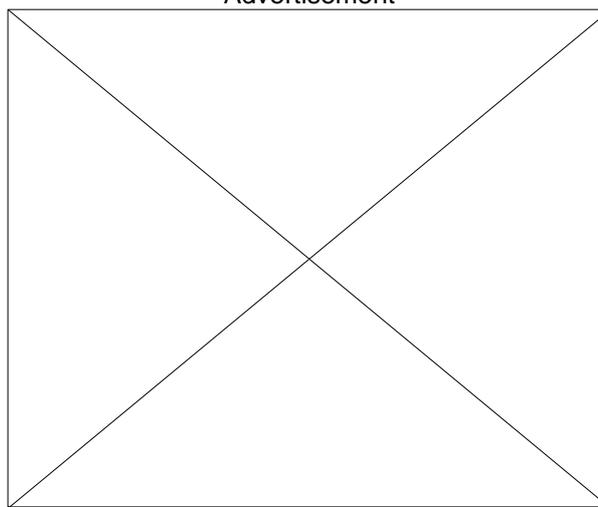
At first the married mother-of-three spurned Sgarbi's advances but began an affair when he turned up unexpectedly in the south of France where she was on holiday the following month.

Later in August 2007 they met in the relatively inexpensive Holiday Inn hotel in Munich for an "intimate" encounter that Sgarbi secretly filmed, according to the charges.

In September they met at the same hotel and this time Sgarbi allegedly said that he needed 10 million euro because he had injured a small girl in a car crash in Florida - asking Klatten to lend him a cool seven million euro.

Klatten duly handed over the sum in the Holiday Inn's underground garage in a cardboard box containing

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14 plastic folders each with one thousand 500-euro banknotes.

But when the gigolo told her to leave her husband and put 290 million euro in a trust fund to finance their new life, Klatten balked and ended the relationship.

Then Sgarbi turned nasty, according to prosecutors, threatening to send compromising video footage of their steamy hotel encounters to the press, to the board of BMW and to her husband.

This time he allegedly demanded 49 million euro, which he then reduced to 14 million euro, and set a deadline of January 15 last year. But she had long since informed the police, and Sgarbi was arrested.

She was not Sgarbi's only alleged victim, and the Klatten affair has prompted several others to come out of the woodwork.

According to German magazine *Stern*, he first came to the attention of the authorities in Geneva in 2001 because his "fiancee", one Countess Verena du Pasquier-Geubels - 50 years his senior - had gone to the police.

According to the list of charges against him, he spun a similar line with each of his victims, saying he needed millions of euro because he had injured a child in a road accident or claiming to have video footage.

Sgarbi's main accomplice is suspected to be Ernano Barretta, a mysterious 64-year-old due to go on trial in his native Italy on March 24.

Barretta was the head of a sect-like organisation in the Swiss city of Zurich, posing as a Christ-like faith healer who persuaded wealthy women to share his bed and part with their fortunes, according to *Stern*.

AFP

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/world/swiss-gigolo-admits-blackmailing-bmw-heiress-20090310-8tmg.html>