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Summary

At St. Antönien-Ascharina, located in the north of the canton of Graubünden, on the border of the Austrian Vorarlberg, in the Walser region, at 1300 m above sea level, ceramics were made from 1804 to 1898. Five potters from the Lötscher family produced tableware, tiled stoves and water pipes for four generations. The enterprise was established there because of the existence of a local clay deposit. Although the location of the pottery cannot be considered optimal, as it is isolated in a Prättigau side valley that can only be reached by mule tracks, Lötscher potters were economically prosperous until the 1870s. Probably the local products had some advantage over imports from the rest of the German-speaking part of Switzerland, southern Germany or Italy because of the transport costs. It was not until the completion of the Chur-Rhoneck railway line (Canton of St. Gallen) in 1858 and the Prättigau valley road in 1860 that freight or postal traffic could be more regular, thus promoting increased competition.

The Lötscher family has been traced back in St. Antönien to the 17th century. The first two generations lived on the farm located on the «Mittlere Rhonegga». Livelihoods were livestock and dairy products (butter and semi-fat cheese). The meadows of the valley were considered to give a very nutritious forage. In winter, however, avalanches often caused deaths for both men and livestock.

Peter Lötscher (1750–1818), who belongs to the third traceable generation, had six siblings. At the beginning of his life it was by no means certain that he would become the first potter of St. Antönien. First, he enlisted, from about 1770 to 1782, in the Dutch army. Within the «Regiment Zwitzers No. IV», under Lieutenant General Johann Christian Friedrich Schmid of Malans, he was stationed at various places, such as Maastricht and Ter Veere on the shores of the North Sea. During the winter, the regiment was deployed in various private accommodation.

We can only assume that Peter acquired his craftsmanship as a ceramics painter, respectively potter, during these stays. He later wrote in his family chronicle numerous recipes for glazes and the various stages involved in the manufacture of ceramics, tasks which he probably got to know in the Netherlands. Peter reached the highest non-commissioned rank and returned safely to his homeland as a Sergeant. He then married Dorothea Luck, a woman who could expect to receive a good inheritance.

For the next 20 years he devoted himself to the acquisition of the farm, the expansion of his land ownership and the livestock farming on the «Mittlere Rhonegga». Referring to what one can read in a chronicle of that time, he created in 1804 a pottery on his property. Previously he had sent his son Andreas, to a place we do not know, to follow the teachings of other potters. In 1806, still in his lifetime, he shared his possessions between his two sons Andreas (1787–1852) and Hans (1788–1870). Hans remained a farmer on the «Mittlere Rhonegga». Andreas, meanwhile, moved the pottery after 1810 to a lower and better place, on the Talweg (valley road). Until Peter's death in 1818, father and son worked in a workshop community, in which the father was apparently more of a ceramic painter than a turner. For the period from 1806 (oldest dated object) to 1818, the decorative styles on ceramics can hardly be distinguished between father and son. The style and manner of Peter's decorations («underglaze paintbrush decoration») is particularly well known thanks to a painted stove signed in 1811. As a model for the pictures of the stove tiles, he used a fashion diary French brochure of the pre-revolutionary period and painted poems in measured rhymes. There is no comparable example in the entire German-speaking part of Switzerland.

Father and son were also astonishingly independent and creative when it came to the vessel shapes of beakers, cups, jugs for wine, coffee-

pots, casseroles, wall fountains, hand basins and plates. The different house-shaped inkstands and displays for pocket watches are particularly imaginative. However, as far as their dishes are concerned, the father and the son shaped them like the ones used in the Bregenzerwald region. In addition to the paintbrush ornamentation, among others of the «Egg» type (according to that practiced by the Egg-Jöhle pottery in Vorarlberg), one finds typical decorations of this time, such as the decoration with dripping drops and the combed decor. The number of painted tiled stoves listed is not very important. After all, there is the stove of 1809 «Mittlere Rhonegga», the remains of a stove executed for the house of the director of the Davos silver mine at Klosters (1805) and some tiles of a stove in Klosters-Selfranga. The latter ovens apparently prove that, from the beginning, the pottery sales area covered the whole Prättigau and its 7,000 inhabitants at the time. Peter Lötscher was not only interested in the political and military events of his time but also was a good observer of the climate and nature. In the family chronicle that came to us, he recorded, among other things, the catastrophic effects of the climate on the economy for 1816, a year without summer.

Between 1818 and about 1843, Peter's son, Andreas Lötscher, ran the pottery alone. Meanwhile, further tiled stoves were produced, featuring characteristic decorations with a brush. The animals painted on one of the stoves prove, for the first time, the existence of a pig of an indigenous breed, now extinct in the Prättigau. The oldest stove dates from 1822 and has been used until recently. Andreas continued the production, almost without interruption, keeping the traditional forms and decorations of his father. The only ceramic technical innovation refers to the use of dendritic decorations (Mocha ware) from 1829 at the latest. With his wife, Barbara Hartmann, Andreas had four sons and three daughters. Like his father Peter, Andreas was called to sit as a juror and was apparently a

member of the local court and sometimes communal secretary. In addition to pottery, livestock farming has always played an important role, constituting the economic base of the household. In addition, Andreas also produced lime in his lime kiln below his house. During the difficult economic period of the potato famine, between 1845 and 1847, he had to face the departure of his oldest son Peter, who emigrated to America. Another son and many of his grandchildren followed him with their families in 1867, 1871 and 1889.

His second son, Christian (1821–1880), was trained in pottery at Horgen on the shores of Lake Zurich. From 1843, he purposefully assures the direction of his father's workshop and signs his first tiled stoves. His father, Andreas, however, continued to work in the workshop. The last objects that can be attributed to him date from the year 1847. Christian, who was an exceptional turner, introduced a number of new features in the workshop. He used the slip trailer for his decor instead of the paintbrush and stencilled most of his stove tiles with his own green decor. In addition, he mastered the technology of faience, which he used especially for his stoves. Some of his attempts on stoves were very original. In at least two cases there is the presence of a big cow. As for the containers, a whole series of shapes has been completely renewed by Christian, including, in particular, large cream pots with two handles. A particular form of double handle pots with lids has finally been used throughout Prättigau for dyeing textile fibres in blue using urine and indigo. His tea-pots and coffee-pots are also very characteristic and, sometimes, unusual. His ceramics are decorated with a red, black and white background slip. By 1846, probably because of the massive competition from Berneck (Canton of St. Gallen), he also produced for the first-time bowls with sharp edges, very modern for the time, as they were in the rest of the German-speaking Switzerland. As from 1849, he also experimented

with manganese colouring particles in the slip (an invention from Langnau im Emmental – canton Bern), which he also used for stoves during the last period of his workshop.

After the death of his father Andreas in 1852, Christian began to renovate and embellish the pottery house. Then, in 1857, he built, next to the house, a new workshop with a glaze mill and the preparation of the clay moved by a hydraulic force. He undertook, according to the general trend of the time, the production of pressed water pipes. Finally, the pipe press that he bought also allowed him to produce pressed stove tiles, opening up new technological perspectives, like no other potter in German-speaking Switzerland. Christian installed tiled stoves throughout the Prättigau between Davos and Landquart. Various stoves have been kept in working order until today. He adorned individual stoves and ceramics with scenes from alpine pastures which, in their representations, are very close to those of the canton of Appenzell, respectively of Toggenburg. Unusual duck-shaped sugar bowls, paperweights with lions and goats, and children's toys (animal figures, terracotta whistles of various animal shapes – aerophones) probably also date back to this time.

Christian is described as strict, believer, frugal, indefatigable, punctual, accurate, conscientious, blessed by the Gods but always modest in the public office, a trustworthy counsellor and devoted friend: «He knew the truth and confessed it openly, blatantly, and ruthlessly». He was probably not always easy to get along with. Therefore, it is not surprising that, during his life, we found Christian in almost every imaginable public office, except that of mayor. As a potter, he was financially prosperous. At the same time, he was an active farmer, member of the parish council, responsible for forests, communal councillor, mediator in the court of justice and, from 1851, in charge of the post office of Ascharina for the Swiss Federal Post. He was also one of

the few newspaper readers in the valley. As often as he could, he enlarged his properties by buying meadows and pastures.

Christian was married to Magdalena Buol, from a respected and wealthy family in Ascharina. A preserved family picture, taken around 1870, shows him with his wife and his then living seven children, including his sons Peter and Andreas, posing as a patriarch. In April 1867, Christian Lötscher decided to withdraw from the workshop and hand over the pottery to his son Peter the Younger, who had been working there since 1864. Together with his wife, they founded the «Lötscher» boardinghouse, today's Hotel «Rhätia» in St. Antönien-Platz.

In taking over from his father, Peter the Younger (1845–1894) did an honest job as a potter, imitating his stoves and pipes. However, looking at his endproducts more closely, we can see that he did not seem to have the professional passion, nor the turner's and decorator's skills, neither, probably, the economic ambitions of his father. Peter's work presumably did not meet paternal expectations and there is suspicion of a long-standing father-son conflict. Now married, Peter avoids this conflict by emigrating to the United States in 1871. The letters of the uncles, cousins and distant relatives, already emigrated to this «country of unlimited possibilities», and read in the circle of the family, had likely cast a powerful spell on him. With a cousin of the same name, he embarked for New Orleans and settled with his family in Conway, Arkansas, where he first earned his living successfully as a farmer and winemaker. Mainly thanks to the paternal inheritance, he bought, between 1880 and 1883, about 80 acres of land. During the clashes following the strict application of the prohibition at Conway, he was, in 1894, at his farm, the innocent victim of manslaughter.

Following the emigration of Peter the Younger in 1871, Christian Lötscher had no choice but

to take over the workshop himself again. His youngest son, Andreas (1857–1933), was only 14 years old at the time. Christian continued to successfully produce stoves and pipes between 1872 and 1879, even though the range of crockery was then more limited than during his first production period. From this period we found, in particular, bowls, inkstands, cream pots, double handle pots with lids for dyeing textile fibres and onion pots. In addition, he rounded up his property in St. Antönien with some more real estate purchases.

With the death of Christian, Andreas Lötscher the Younger became the fifth potter of the St. Antönien's workshop and produced, according to his own words, predominantly water pipes. There is no known stove from his hand and only a few crockery items date back to 1891. They betray the hand of an inexperienced turner and ceramic decorator. The construction of the Rhaetian Railway in 1889/90 ultimately reduced transport costs for ceramics producers outside the canton and even abroad, to such an extent that Andreas Lötscher was no longer able to economically maintain the production of ceramics. He finally closed his business in 1898. As he also held many public offices and found an financially wealthy wife in Verena Luck, he managed, in the following years, to convert his livelihoods into livestock. In 1910 a flood destroyed some of the workshop buildings and machinery. Andreas Lötscher sold the pottery building in Ascharina in 1920 and died in 1933, just above, in the «Bärtsch» house, which his wife had inherited.

There are many reasons why it was possible for us to write such a comprehensive story about the family and pottery 120 years after the closure of the workshop in Ascharina. On the one hand, there are the written sources, fortunately preserved, including those from the pottery itself and, on the other hand, the family chronicle on the «Mittlere Rhonegga». This information

is supplemented by those kept in the local archives, by entries in the land register and by meticulous genealogical research. On the other hand, one is amazed by the surprisingly high number of preserved ceramic objects, water pipes and tiled stoves, which can be assigned, at least partially, to individual potters. The surprising interest of two museum directors, just a few years after the pottery closed, was particularly significant in the safeguarding of ceramics data. Without the special commitment of the first curator of the Rhaetian Museum of Chur, Fritz Jecklin, and the director of the Swiss National Museum in Zurich, Hans Lehmann, we would not have had the two largest and indispensable collections forming the basis of this study. It is thanks to the last potter Andreas Lötscher, local teacher Valentin Flütsch-Egli and the antique dealer of Chur Johann Jakob Hablützel that most of the historical material concerning this extraordinary 19th century pottery was saved. In the twentieth century various collectors, as well as local museums (Klosters, Davos, Grüşch and St. Antönien), and the Museum of Cultures in Basle successfully participated in these efforts of documentation and of safeguarding.

Translation:

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