

Swiss hotel dynasties [continued]

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SWISS HOTEL DYNASTIES

(Continued)

THE BADRUTTS Switzerland suffered two serious crises in the early 19th century. The invasion of English machine-made yarn at the end of the Napoleonic wars spelt the death of hundreds of Swiss artisans and widespread hardship. Then a disastrous harvest in 1816 produced a near-famine throughout the country and some communes had to resort for their own survival to the banishment by a draw of the super-numerary which it could not afford to feed. This was the unfortunate lot of a certain Hans Badrutt in Pagig near Chur. Unlike many others who suffered the same fate, he did not emigrate to America but moved further up the Engadine's valleys and worked as a building foreman in Samedan, where he finally built and held a small inn for travellers. His son Johannes rented the "Pension Faller" in the neighbouring village of St. Moritz in 1855. A few years later he bought it with the financial help of a local land-ammann and turned it into the "Engadiner Kulm Hotel".

St. Moritz was already known as a thermal resort. Besides the merchants from Trieste or Glarus transiting through the Engadines, St. Moritz was also visited by a handful of enterprising Englishmen. But they stayed only in the summer and the "Kulm" was vacant for two-thirds of the year. The wealthy English clientele went to milder parts of the world during the winter, preferably to the Riviera or Egypt. One evening in 1864, as the season was coming to a close, Johannes Badrutt prodded one of his English customers to a wager. He told him that it was sunny at St. Moritz during the winter, and to back his assertion, offered him to pay all his travel expenses if he came to the "Kulm" in the following winter without finding the sun. The Englishman effectively left for Switzerland that winter, to the amazement of London's high society, and this was the creation of the winter season, soon to be followed by the birth of winter sports.

In this, Johannes Badrutt and his son Casper played an eminent role. In order to offer the best quality of life to their guests, they introduced the forgotten sport of curling, they developed figure-skating and "bandy", or the precursor of ice-hockey. It was in St. Moritz that alpine ski-ing made its hesitant debuts. Bob-sleigh also found the day at St. Moritz. The first ski ascension was made in 1898 to the summit of the Corvatsch, and a Ski Club was founded in 1903. The era of cable railways began in the Engadine with the building of the Muota Muraz railway in 1907, which was soon followed by the Chanteralla railway in St. Moritz. It was prolonged up to Corviglia after the first world war.

But the second Badrutt generation had already been active for a long time by then. Hans Caspar Badrutt was born in 1848. He wanted to study medicine, but with the success of the "Kulm"

and of the winter seasons Father Johannes needed the help of all the available children. Hans Caspar Badrutt was already thirty when he got the chance to start on his own. He bought the "Bernet" Hotel, which he changed into the "Caspar Badrutt Hotel" and acquired the "Beau Rivage".

His father died in 1890. Three years later Badrutt began to build the "Palace". It was a pseudo-castle with towers and battlements, vast halls, pompous chambers, 6-course meals, an army of chambermaids and ceremonious waiters and was the sensation of its time. For all its grandeur and luxury the rooms of the "Palace" were without a bathroom and even running water. The first hotel to be furnished with private bathrooms was the Ritz Hotel in Rome, opened in 1893. Crown princes, kings, film stars, gold, oil and diamond magnates, successful artists like Caruso and golden writers like Bernard Shaw were the regular guests of the "Palace", which glittered like a gilt facade in the twilight of the pre-war European moneyed aristocracy.

Hans Caspar Badrutt died in 1904 already, and the management of his hotels was taken over by his son Hans. He had been schooled into a first class hotelier at the "Savoy" in London, under the care of Cesar Ritz. The fourth Badrutt generation took over in 1953 and the two sons of Hans Badrutt now cater for a clientele with perhaps smaller retinues, but with as much money as before, and feeling at home in an elegant bar rather than a gleaming Table d'Hôte.

BUCHER-DURRER Franz Joseph Bucher-Durrer, the son of a peasant in Obwald, built the greatest hotel empire of them all. Unlike the Badrutts, the Seilers, the Bons and Ritz he wasn't a hotelier but a pure businessman. He was the richest hotel millionaire of his time and knew how to make the best financial profit of the tourist bonanza. Born in 1834, he lost his father at the age of 15 and took charge of the family property. He was a wrestler and a brawler. At the age of thirty he decided to go into more exciting ventures and started a sawmill with the son of a sawmill owner, Joseph Durrer, and later made floor tilings as well. Bucher concerned himself with the running of the enterprise while his partner Durrer took charge of its technical aspects. Their business was rapidly successful and Bucher had both the ambition and the dynamism proper to the early capitalism of his day. He noticed the steadily growing trickle of English, German and even American tourists in the region around Lucerne. The mountain hut built in 1816 on the Rigi had great success. It was the great fashion to climb up the mountain and admire the rising sun. Bucher and Durrer built the "Sonnenberg" Hotel in Engelberg with the timber and tilings prepared in their own factory. They sold it a year later, in 1871, with a handsome profit, as they were then solely interested in

their timber business and in building. But in 1871 a toothed railway was built from Vitznau up to the Rigi Kulm and this was a sensational event. Right opposite to the Rigi there was a view vantage point, the Trittalp on the summit of the Bürgenberg, which was totally unfrequented by tourists. Bucher and Durrer bought the whole of Trittalp, known today as the "Bürgenstock". They built a road leading up to it, they evened out the soil for a hotel and blew its foundations out of the rock. Sparing themselves the luxury of an architect, they built their hotel with material produced in their own works, and in 1873 the uniquely situated "Grand Hotel Bürgenstock" was opened. This was one year after the inauguration of the "Grand Hotel National" in Lucerne, one of Europe's most luxurious hotels. At the same time Adolf Hauser, owner of the "Schweizerhof" in Lucerne, had also opened the "Lucernehof". The times were just ripe for a flowering of hotels and Lake Lucerne became a European fashion spot so that the rich of the time were irresistably attracted to landmarks like the Bürgenstock, whose new hotel benefitted particularly from a rising post-1870 German clientele.

This time Bucher and Durrer did not sell their hotel. While Durrer continued to take care of the wood business, Bucher took interest in architecture and developed the nucleus of his future empire. He campaigned for the construction of an electric power station in Engelberg only a year after Charles E. L. Brown II had laid his first 8 km power transmission line in Solothurn. This enabled Bucher to install electric lighting in the Bürgenstock Hotel and also powered the electric cable railway which he had built, the Bürgenstock Railway. He supplemented this railway with a "Bahnhof Restaurant". He built a companion to the original hotel, the "Parkhotel", and then the "Palace Hotel". He had a path hewn out of the rock and built the longest and fastest lift in Europe. He diverged into other fields. With Durrer, he founded sawmills and furniture factories in Rumania, Waachia and Moldavia. He built a cable railway between the centre of Lugano and the Station and the steepest cable railway in the world joining Lugano to San Salvatore. He furthermore built the Stan tad to Stans tramway, tramways in Genoa, a cable railway to Mont Pelerin near Vevey and the Reichenbach Railway in the Bernese Oberland.

He parted from Durrer in 1894 and his companion left him to continue with his timber business and later built the "Hotel Braunwald" in Glarus. Bucher, who had changed his name to "Bucher-Durrer" after marrying a relative of his partner, stuck to hotels.

Before their separation Bucher had already leased the "Hotel Euler" in Basle and the "Hotel de l'Europe" in Lucern. He transformed a monastery in Lugano and turned it into a "Palace Hotel". He participated in the creation of the "Grand Hotel" at Pegli, near Genoa. He sold the tramway concession of Genoa for a cool

million gold francs and had himself photographed with the money piled on his lap for his children. He founded a "Palace Hotel" in Milan, the "Quirinal Hotel" in Rome and finally the "Palace Hotel" of Lucerne. His plans to build hotels in South America never materialised, but Egypt was within his reach. He took the lease of the "Continental" in Cairo and later bought it for a lump million francs. He built the "Semiramis", but died shortly before its opening on 6th October 1906. He left a fortune estimated at 14 million francs, or 70 million of today's francs.

Of the 15 children begotten from two marriages, none was capable of keeping his empire together. The first world war and the oncoming hotel crisis soon forced its many sectors into bankruptcy. The whole of the Bürgenstock complex, which had stood empty for years, was sold at a depressed 600,000 francs to Fritz Frey-Fürst, a successful engineer turned hotel magnate. He modernised the "Park", the "Palace" and the "Grand Hotel" at great cost and kept them going until his death in 1953, when they were taken over by his son, Fritz Frey II.

Another personality with a marking influence on the development of Swiss Hotelery was Colonel Maximilian-Alphons Pfyffer von Altshofen. He came from a patrician family in Lucerne and served under the King of Naples. He fought against Garibaldi as commander of the Swiss Regiment. When the Kingdom of Naples disappeared he returned to Lucerne, where he decided to invest his considerable capital sensibly. He got together with the brothers Segesser from Brunegg and built the "Grand Hotel National". This imposing establishment was opened in 1873 but very soon turned out to be a resounding failure. The brothers Segesser pulled out but Colonel Pfyffer stood firm. In the course of a visit at the "Rigi Kulm" he met its young head waiter, Cesar Ritz, and took due note of his name. He soon firmly decided to hire him. Within a very short time, the mixture of genuine aristocracy and hotelier genius in Cesar Ritz helped to turn the "National" into the most famous hotel of Europe. Pfyffer authorised his young manager to undertake the wildest high life fancies and extravagance. The galas and fetes staged by Ritz for his ducal guests at the "National" were the scream of the well-heeled world.

Colonel Pfyffer never became a hotelier himself. He rose in the military career to end up as head of the General Staff. At his death in 1890 his son Hans took over the management of the "National". Hans Pfyffer became president of the Ritz in Paris, president of the "Groupe des Hotels Ritz-Carlton" and co-founder of the Lucerne Music Festival. His younger brother, Alphonsus Pfyffer, followed Cesar Ritz to Rome in 1893 and become manager of the "Grand Hotel", a Ritz creation, and later of the "Excelsior".

Thousands of Swiss entrepreneurs banked on tourists and a growing hotel industry during the early years of this century. The legends in this field are usually attached to glamorous names like

the Bardutts, the Seilers, Ritz and the like. But the list could easily be extended. One typical example of a "second line" successful hotelier would be Alexandre Emery from Yverdon. He became manager of three great Paris hotels, the "Edouard VIII", the "Grand Hotel", and the "Maurice". He was the founder of the "Montreux Palace", the Hotel Caux" and the promoter of the Montreux-Oberland railway which opened Gstaadt to the international touristic plutocracy. Another name deserving mention would be that of Michel Zufferey. Having served as diplomatic courier to Napoleon III in Russia, Egypt and North Africa and been antiquarian in London for two years, he had amassed sufficient money and contracts to open a series of hotels in Montana, Vermala and Sierre. Charles Bahler, from Thun, probably had the most exotic career. Having set out from his native Thun to seek adventure in the East at the age of 21, he found a job as accountant at Cairo's "Shepherd's Hotel". A few years later he became manager of this luxury hotel and hit the jackpot with the "Irish Sweepstakes" lottery, winning half a million gold francs in one go. As the First World War had depressed the shares of the "Egyptian Hotel Company", Bahler used his godsent fortune to acquire this majority and before long found himself in control of four-fifths of the leading hotels in Egypt, from Luxor to Cairo and Alexandria. A few years later he commissioned a Swiss architect to build the "King David" in Jerusalem. He sold his empire to a Belgian group in 1932. Another name, Bernhard Simon, will remain associated with a glittering row of private hotels built for the 19th century first families and one of the largest fortunes ever made out of architecture. After a life of activities in the capitals of the world, Bernhard Simon came back to the homeland and founded the "Quellenhof" in Bad Ragaz, besides other ventures in railways and reconstruction. (To be continued.)

NEWS OF THE COLONY

Auckland Swiss Club

On November 20th the Auckland Swiss Club held its Annual Shooting Ball. The evening began with a superb buffet dinner, prepared by Paul Wuthrich, followed by the prize-giving.

We were also entertained by our 'Jodler Klub', the Swiss Band and blowing of the alp horns. The dance band played until the early hours of the morning. Everybody enjoyed themselves and the evening was a great success.

We would like to express our thanks to all those who gave a helping hand to make the evening possible. —P.W.