

# The memories of an old citizen of Silvaplana

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# THE MEMORIES OF AN OLD CITIZEN OF SILVAPLANA

(Translated by the Editor from the "St. Moritz Courier")

I have read the reports appearing in the Grisons, and especially the Engadine Press, on the centenary of St. Moritz as a winter sports resort with great interest. St. Moritz apart, winter sports were unknown in the valley in those days, with the possible exception of Pontresina, where they were practised on a smaller scale. I still remember well the kind of life we led in the 90's and my reminiscences may perhaps interest the younger reader.

I was the son of the master of the relay station of Silvaplana. I can still see the horses of the Post as they left for the Maloja pass, for the Julia Pass and for the Engadines. Silvaplana lay at the junction of three different routes and the stables of the relay were filled with as many as 150 horses on some nights. They left the next day in the three directions, harnessed to sledges in winter, to post-coaches in summer. The coaches and the sledges could carry four, six or eight persons and were hauled by teams of two or four horses. I still remember well one passenger who used to drive in from the Maloja, heading for St. Moritz, at the early post once or twice a week. He was the great painter Giovanni Segantini. He dwelled at Maloja, and his son Gottardo still does so today. Before the morning post arrived, and before I had to leave for school, I used to bring the tray to the tavern next-doors to the waiting-room and bring the drivers their "canons", one or even two, double-schnaps at (mark me) 5 centimes a glass. In this way we sold well over two or three litres, and then I carried around the case of Brissagos cigars, which were selling at 5 centimes apiece. One was lit immediately, the other tucked behind the ear in reserve for the long journey. The great artist from Maloja usually took a Fernet-Branca to warm himself up. I see him in front of me, as though it were only yesterday, entering the tavern and freeing his well trimmed and pitch black beard from a long icicle. With an "A rivederci giovinotto, oggi fa frescolino", he used to spring back into the open sledge for St. Moritz. In summer he used to sit on the bench perched at the rear of the beautiful eight-seater coach, and, in this position, doubtless drove alongside the lake preoccupied with his works, contemplating the panorama of the mountains he knew so well. The trumpeting of a horn was the signal for the post coaches to leave off on their journey.

Before settling down definitely in Maloja, Segantini had lived a number of years in Savognino, and there

stands a house, to the right of the road as one enters the village, bearing a sign commemorating his memory. On his outward journey, probably looking for a more suitable place to live, Segantini passed the night with his family of six at the "Hotel zum wilden Mann", today Hotel Julier, which was kept by my grandparents. The next day he left for the Julia pass with a small carriage.

Among the other passengers who took the Post to Silvaplana or Sils fairly regularly, I remember well the old Pfarrer Emil Palioppi. He never wore a coat, even in the depth of winter, but he used to wrap himself up in a thick, chequered woollen blanket. It was always dragging on the ground and its tufts looked like dangling lumps of coke. We children found it hard to repress a silent laugh in front of the old clergyman. He was a very good man and spoke perfect Romanch. In fact his father and he were the first to compile a Romanch-German dictionary. At that time, Pfarrer Palioppi was minister of the parish of Sils, Silvaplana and Champfèr.

The stablemen who were in charge of the horses of the Post were Mr. A Joos in Silvaplana, Mr. Sebastian Gensler in Samedan (he was at the same time keeper of the "Krone" inn) and Mr. Christian Balzer in Mülhen, who was also owner of the well known Mühlen Hotel. From time to time, Mr. Gensler drove his two-horse coach to supervise the order in the staging-house for coachmen which he left to the trust of a housekeeper. After this routine control, all the post-horse owners sat for a glass of Veltliner in our inn.

When important guests were announced over the Julia pass in summer or in winter, it was usually one of the sons of Herr Balzer who drove the coach.

Among the important guests, there were two who came every year for a cure in St. Moritz at the turn of the century, they were the Duke of Baden and his wife. They used to stay in a villa on the left of the valley, in the neighbourhood of the Victoria Hotel. When the horses were changed at the Silvaplana halt, my parents used to tend to this charming couple from a pre-war age. The forthcoming arrival of German guests to the resort was always preceded with a little nervousness. We sometimes used to practice the bow of curtsy in front of a mirror! Times have changed. It was always a great honour for a coachman to drive the fresh horses of the Dukal couple. The post tariff rose on 15th June, the official beginning of the season. For this reason, most of the hotel employees who came through the Julia and Albula passes to gain their summer quarters in the Engadine travelled on the 14th. On this memorable day, all the able horses were on the roads and many private coaches had to be mobilised. When I marvel at our wonderful transport museum in Lucerne, and consider the progress achieved between the days of pack horses and the modern postal cars of today, I always remember the red one-horse buggies introduced so long ago by the postal administration of Oberhalbstein.

The winter in the outside villages was very quiet. When it had snowed badly, we children had to wait for the arrival of the post sledge from Samedan,

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which was hauled by five horses, before we left for school. No roads were ever cleared of snow. Only St. Moritz, and to a lesser extent Pontresina, had winter seasons. But the only hotels open during the winter were the Kulm Hotel, the Palace Hotel, and perhaps the Caspar-Badrutt. Winter sports had made a timid beginning in the 80's. The ice-rink of Kulm and a first bobtrack were then already in operation. At the Schweizerhof Hotel, closed during the winter, there was a very nice and educated caretaker called Herr Amsler. I remember him asking my father how he could fill his winter days in such a God-forsaken place. In St. Moritz they at least had a reading-club and they could enjoy literature. My father answered him that "we enjoyed half-literature"!

The summer of 1896 was marred by continual rain, and this naturally had an adverse effect on the season. The roads, both inside and outside the villages, were not tarred and the passengers who arrived after the day's journey over the Julia were covered from head to foot with dust or mud. In hot periods, the roads were watered by means of a large barrel connected to a wide perforated tube from which the water had to dribble down. In Silvaplana, the job of watering the roads was entrusted to a somewhat retarded Italian with an old Somolago nag. When the weather was bad and when rain poured in buckets, the lad had naturally nothing to do. One morning, when my father was looking outside to sniff the weather he saw him standing in the hotel entrance.

My father asked him: "Cosa fai qui?". The lad fumbled with his straw hat, looked up to the sky and answered: "Ma, go paura, che vien al bel temp!" You can imagine the kind of answer he got from a preoccupied innkeeper. The lad didn't appear at the door for a long time.

The gentlemen of the hotel trade, personnel managers above all, may be interested to learn that we kept the same staff in our hotel for years. The housekeeper for instance remained for 30 seasons, the head cook for 12 seasons, the maids for 10 to 12 seasons. All would eat in the same room. 25 in all, a large family.

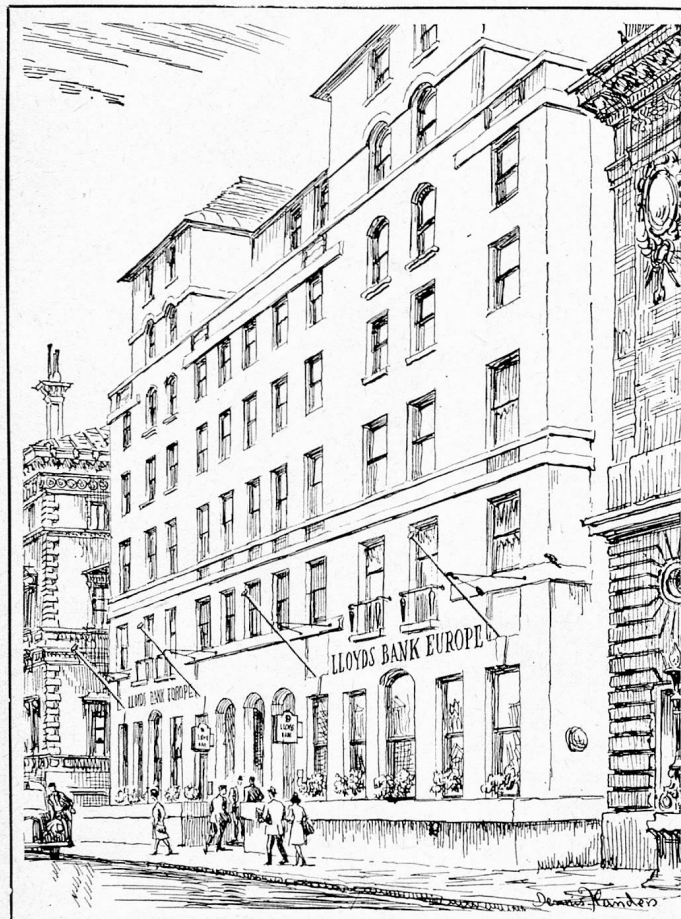
The evening post in winter, a large sledge hauled by ten to fifteen horses arrived at six o'clock, due to leave the next day at eight. Sometimes, when there had been really hefty snowstorms, the post arrived as late as nine, or even later. Passengers for the Bergell had to stay for the night at Silvaplana. The guests of the Kulm and Palace hotels were fetched by private sledges driven by Mathis and Conrad, the horse owners. They could end their journey in somewhat more comfortable conditions. On these stormy days, the passengers of the Post arrived at Silvaplana covered with snow, but protected by the warm and thick blankets supplied to them by their drivers. For the next lap, the open sledges were equipped with foot-warmers heated with coal.

To end my reminiscences, which must sound rather long for the younger generation, I will say a few words about the first skis to appear in our village. The first person to possess skis

in Silvaplana was the late butcher Silvio Gaudenzi (father of Dolfi Gaudenzi, of the Corvatsch teleferic). He had them specially made out of larchwood by Herr Eggenberger, the carpenter of Sils-Baseglia. The binding consisted of two canes crossed over the boot. I was one of the first children of the village school to possess a pair of skis, equally produced by Herr Eggenberger. A ski-ing tour to the Alp Surley was already considered quite a feat. A signal with a postal horn informed our parents in the village below that we had reached the goal.

We had not even dreamt of the possibility of a cable railway being built up the Corvatsch! A couple or ropes knotted round our skis performed the duties of seal skins perfectly, and this was our only way of reaching the heights. Neither did we know of 500-franc pairs of skis. Although staves were used in Glarus, we in the Engadines never made use of them.

In 1906, Pfarrer Punchera (who had succeeded to the aging Pfarrer Riz à Porta, but who unfortunately was to die at a premature age) organised the first ski-ing club. We were about twenty members at the beginning. He was himself a sports enthusiast, having won a crown in marksmanship and been a champion wrestler,—a strong and marked character. Under his headship, the newly-founded club ordered the first 30 pairs of skis produced by the firm Jakober in Glarus. They had a Ballata binding, similar to the Bavarian Bilgeri binding. This kind of binding however was short lived and was replaced by the Huitfeld binding, and later by the strap binding.



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