

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 34 (1971)
Heft: [12]

Artikel: Swiss hotel dynasties
Autor: Stucki, Lorenz
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-942274>

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SWISS HOTEL DYNASTIES

IN 1966 Switzerland made 2.9 billion francs out of tourism: 485 francs per inhabitant and two-thirds of the trade deficit. Seven thousand, seven hundred hotels with 245,000 beds catered for 10 million foreign tourists. A further estimated 10 million slept in pensions and camping sites. All this tremendous industry began at the instigation of a handful of entrepreneurs, the hotel kings which brought wealth to the Alps and built the renown of the Swiss hotel trade, whose story we are now going to relate.

The Swiss hotel industry came to life at a time when the economic geography of the country was more or less established. The north and the east lived on textiles. The requirements of this industry gave rise to the machine and subsequently to the chemical industries of these regions. Geneva and Neuchatel lived off watch-making and the cantons of Vaud and Berne found their lifeline in chocolates and foodstuffs. There remained the Alps, which covered an overwhelming part of the country.

When the hotel trade was not yet in existence and at a time when the notion of tourism was not yet born, the travellers that there were made use of frugal and functional inns furnished with the barest amenities and set out the following day on the next lap of their journey. When the village was either too small or remote, the traveller found a haven at the local doctor's, minister or post officer.

The prefiguration of Switzerland as a tourist centre was the opening of the Baden conference to end the Wars of Spanish Succession. The envoys of the Pope, the King of France and the Austrian Emperor met on neutral soil in the small thermal resort. But the proper beginning of tourism in Switzerland was inspired by the romantic movement and the works of such writers as Rousseau, Goethe, Von Haller and others. All men who were exalted by the grandeur and the wilderness of nature and who found a realisation of their poetic dreams in the sceneries of the Alps. Imbued with Byronic ideals and filled with both courage and money, the first Englishmen set out for Switzerland and ventured to visit the surroundings of Geneva, the Four-Cantons Lake and the nearer reaches of the Bernese Oberland. It was at first quite an expedition to go as far as Interlaken.

It was in this uniquely situated village that the first guest houses for the new wave of rich English tourists were built. The English voyaged all the long way to Interlaken to see the Jungfrau, the Stanbach falls and the grandiose spectacle of a real glacier. The peasants of the regions acted as their hosts. This enabled them to earn a welcome side income, but the idea to cash in on the new tourist phenomenon in Interlaken first came to the mind of a quarry worker, Johanne Seiler, who bought a shop standing on the present site of the Jungfrau Hotel and rented the two upper floors to the visitors from England.

During the three decades that followed, railways were built linking Basle and Geneva directly to England and the rest of the world. Switzerland then followed suit and built her own trunk routes in the 1880's. There followed a spree of construction of mountain railways. The Berne-Thun railway, the railway on the Brunig Pass leading to Lucerne, the Lauterbrunnen and Grindelwald railways were only a few instances of a series of vital railway links criss-crossing the Oberland and paving the way for the fortunes of Murren, Adelboden, Saanenmöser and Gstaad. They culminated in the Jungfraubahn, Europe's highest railway and engineering feat. Johannes Seiler's modest innovation was followed many years later by the building of the "Schweizerhof" in 1859, Interlaken's first "grand hotel", and by the "Hotel Victoria", beloved by the subjects of Queen Victoria, in 1864.

THE SEILERS However, it was not in Interlaken but in Zermatt that the Seiler hotel dynasty was to make its name. Johannes' son, Alexander Seiler I, was born in 1820 at Goms, in the upper Valais. He worked in Sion as a soap and candle maker with moderate success. The Valais was a rather backward canton ruled by the Catholic clergy and a leisurely class of landowners. His brother chose the ministry and became chaplain in Zermatt. There he saw the insufficiencies of the accommodation that his neighbour, Dr Lauber, was offering the English mountaineers who were beginning to frequent Zermatt, and realised the potentialities that lay in opening a suitable pension. He wrote to his brother in Sion and invited him to abandon his business and come up to Zermatt. There was a wonderful site, he wrote, on the foot of Monte Rosa, two hours walk from the village, where he and Dr Lauber planned to build a hotel. A few years later in 1852, Alexander folded up his affairs in Sion and undertook to materialise the ideas of his brother. He leased Dr Lauber's "Cerie Hotel" and transformed it into the "Gasthaus zum Monte Rosa", which had the stately number of six beds. He leased an inn that had been built on the Riffelalp above Zermatt and bought a plot of land in his native Goms.

He and his wife settled in their new job of hoteliers and developed the art of pleasing English guests. 1865 was a highlight as an English party led by Claude Whymper and his Swiss guides succeeded in ascending the Matterhorn for the first time. The expedition ended in tragedy and Whymper and his Swiss companion were the only ones to come back. This accident made Zermatt famous and fired the imagination of the holidaying world. Everyone wanted to witness the awesome mountain which was the scene of the first great mountaineering tragedy.

Seiler's business grew rapidly. He bought the small "Mont Cervin" Hotel and enlarged it. He leased the "Schwarzsee", "Riffelberg" and "Zermatterhof" hotels from the commune and built an inn in Gletsch, near to the source of the Rhone. He

enlarged his original hotel on the Riffelalp and ran an agricultural concern in Brig to supply his hotels. Soon he was the master of a staff of 600 catering for over 1000 guests.

Seiler was the man who made Zermatt. However, the elder citizens of this mountain commune were not prepared to accept him as one of theirs and Seiler spent the last years of his life in a vain struggle to become a citizen of Zermatt. He died in 1891, the year of the opening of the Vitznau-Visp-Zermatt railway.

He had an estimated 14 to 18 children. They nearly all died in infancy as those were the days when powdered milk invented by Nestle which had already reached the rich children of America and England, was not yet available to the poor children of the upper Alpine valleys. Three sons remained to outlive him and run his enterprise. Joseph settled in Gletsch and confined himself to the management of the inn founded there by his father. Hermann was a law student and not interested in keeping hotels. He eventually became national councillor, a promoter of the national "Verkehrszentral", a champion of the hotel industry and of the thousands living on it before the First World War. But it was Alexander II who was to keep the empire going. He was a man of great charm, a "**grand seigneur**", a champion of liberalism who spent his life in a struggle against the forces of reaction in his native Valais. He modernised and improved his legacy, but did not expand it. He died in 1920, six years after Sarajevo and at the outset of a world crisis which was to hit the traditional hotellery which his kith and kin had so much contributed to establish.

(To be Continued.)

NEWS OF THE COLONY

Hamilton Swiss Club

CHRISTMAS CELEBRATION

Parents at our Christmas Party were once again outnumbered by their children, and how healthy and noisy they all were! But when the candles decorating the tables were lit, a hush fell and everyone had only eyes for the stage. And well worth it it was! The scene opened in a toy shop with about ten "dolls" dressed in national costumes from various countries. Belinda Fluhler, as shopkeeper, while dancing in her graceful way, dusted the dolls and fell then asleep. But the fairies appeared and the "dolls" in the shop and from the storeroom came alive like magic. In their clear voices they sang Christmas songs from England, Switzerland, Sweden, Spain, France, Germany and Burgundy.