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SWISS HOTEL DYNASTIES

(Conclusion)

THE BONS The site of the "Quellenhof" belonged to the communal president of Bad Ragaz, Anton Bon. He died shortly after the appearance of Bernhardt Simon at Bad Ragaz and left a son, Anton, whom Bernhardt Simon took in charge and educated in the hotel trade, sending him to Italy, France and England. This was between 1873 and 1879. Anton Bon married Marie Nigg, the sister-in-law of Joseph Giger, the founder of the "Waldhaus" in Sils Maria, and leased the "Bodenhaus and Post" hotel on the San Bernardino Pass in 1879. But two years later, in 1882, the Gothard Tunnel was opened and traffic on the San Bernardino dwindled rapidly. Bon and his wife left it to lease the "Rigi First" in 1892 and then the "Pension Pfyffer" in Vitznau. It was at the turn of the century, when he was already 50, that Anton Bon made the steps that were to bring him into the limelight of the hotel world.

He made a journey to Germany and England with an architect and studied the tastes of the gentility of these countries and returned with the working ideas to transform his "Pension Pfyffer" into the "Parkhotel". It was pompous and showy. But Anton Bon had rebuilt his hotel for a specific clientele and knew what he was doing. Success was immediate and the international set soon flocked to the "Parkhotel". It attracted among other prominences the great diamond baron Sydney Goldmann. He had money to invest in hotels and bought the "Villa Suvretta" in St. Moritz from an Englishman and the surrounding land from local estate developers. He offered Anton Bon the job of building and managing a new grand hotel in St. Moritz. After failed attempts to take over the "Kulm" in St. Moritz from the Badrutt family in 1912, Bon founded the majestic but silent "Suvretta House". It found immediate success, but the war was, alas, to come and it was to be a very short-lived success. In the summer of 1914 all the hotels suddenly became empty — to remain so for many years until the beginning of a new era. Anton Bon died in 1915 and left three sons, all of whom were highly trained hoteliers. The eldest, Anton Bon II, managed the "Suvretta" until 1918 and then left for Germany, where he reorganised a chain of hotels. He became Nestle's director in England and then managed the "Dorchester" from 1936 to 1951, magnificent in a period of crises and war. The second son, Hans, took over the care of the "Suvretta" and managed it up to 1950. The youngest son, Primus Bon, was manager of the Bahnhof Buffet in Zurich for 32 years.

CESAR RITZ, THE MOST LAVISH HOST OF ALL

Cesar Ritz was the thirteenth child of a peasant family in Niederwald, near Goms, in the Upper Valais. He followed school for three years and stole away from home at fifteen to serve an apprenticeship in a small inn and then at a boarding school. Having been dismissed on both occasions for incapacity he left for Paris to seek his luck. He had heard that there were vacancies for hotel personnel because of the World Exhibition (1867). He was engaged in the small, lowly "Hotel de la Fidelite" where he cleaned shoes, swept floors and carried luggage. He soon was promoted to waiter but moved from hotel to hotel until he had acquired sufficient proficiency to be engaged as second waiter at the classy "Voisin" restaurant. This is where he made his first encounter with the world elite to whose service he was to dedicate his life. At the "Voisin" he attended to leading politicians and diplomatists, to George Sand, Sarah Bernhardt, and the Prince of Wales.

Cesar Ritz lived through the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, the fall of the Empire, the seige of Paris, the famine and the Commune while catering for the exclusive guests of the "Voisin" with the little that remained to eat. The next lap of his career brought him to the post of head waiter at the "Splendide", Place de l'Opera. The war was over and Paris recovered. The upper class emerged again from its retreat and a new style of clientele, with the Vanderbilts, the Morgans and other new tycoons, came to enjoy Ritz's calculated attentions. Ritz's career was a long succession of prestigious posts at the head of Europe's top hotels. Although he had soon earned enough money and over to start his own hotels, his interest lay primarily in the new and distinguished art of the hotelier. He bought the "Hotel de Provence" in Cannes and a restaurant in Baden-Baden, where he also had the lease on the "Hotel Minerva", fairly early on in his career. But he eventually gave up these sidelines and concentrated on his management of the best hotels of Europe. In the event he earned more fame than he ever could have dreamt of as a localised hotel owner. His name remains associated with an exclusive and perhaps short-lived tradition of lavish and individual attention. Ritz used to know every one of his illustrious guests personally. He kept files on the tastes, likes and dislikes of all his regular customers so that the Prince of Wales could leave him with the choice of his menu, telling Ritz that he knew better than he did himself what he liked best. Ritz could speak on equal footing with the great of the world. He was at their service, but also one of theirs. He was a revered and demanded "pillar" of the beau monde and was invited to all the ducal weddings and aristocratic celebrations of Europe. Ritz loved high society and the life of glamour. But the toil of managing an impressive series of hotels and restaurants in the top resorts of Europe, the strain of main-

taining his personal status in the world and of being the prized friend of the whole aristocracy proved too much for him, and Ritz collapsed irrevocably and suddenly at the age of 52.

But back to his rising career. In 1873, he was head waiter of the "Trois Freres Provencaux" in Vienna. This luxury establishment was opposite to the World Exhibition of 1873 and afforded him once again the opportunity of mixing with emperors and kings. The Czar of Russia, the Emperor of Prussia, the Prince of Wales, Bismark, all came to the "Trois Freres Provencaux".

The same year, at the age of 23, Ritz went to be manager of the restaurant of the "Grand Hotel" in Nice, a resort frequented in winter by the international upper crust. There he met the head waiter of the "Rigi Kulm", and accepted his offer to assist him. The "Rigi Kulm" was already accessible by a small toothed railway and had just been uniquely fitted with central heating. At the end of one season in September this central heating broke down and the whole staff was bewildered. Ritz took control and ordered dinner to be served not at the "table d'hotel" in the vast dining hall but in the lounge. He had forty heavy baking bricks warmed up in the kitchen so that when his forty American guests came in from the freezing cold outside for dinner, they enjoyed the feet-warming comfort of these stones while they relished a simple meal in which hors d'oeuvre had been replaced by bouillon and ice-cream by blazed pancakes. They found this improvisation both delightful and exciting.

Colonel Pfyffer heard of this story and before long Ritz was asked to be director of the "National". During the winter seasons he left for the Italian Riviera and Menton, where he met his future wife, an Alsatian woman from a small hotel-keeping family. He became the manager of the "Grand Hotel" in Monte Carlo and discovered during a trip to Paris an expert chef, Auguste Escoffier, who was to follow him during the rest of his starring career.

Ritz left the "Grand Hotel" at Monte Carlo in 1887. There had been an earthquake and its owners had decided to sell it. His next lap was at the "Savoy" in London. This opulent hotel had been founded by the Irishman d'Oyle Carte in 1889 but had soon emerged as an outstanding failure. Even a hotel like the "Savoy" could not succeed unless it was properly managed and, as the hotel's shares were taking a plunge, d'Oyle Carte was besieged by cries to call on the services of Cesar Ritz. Ritz very soon took the "Savoy" under his care, bringing the situation under his control and lending a reputation to the "Savoy" which it has never lost.

In 1889 Ritz sold his hotel in Cannes and his interests in Baden-Baden. He had become Chairman of the "Ritz Hotel Development Company", a growth company in which the diamond millionaire Sydney Goldmann had important stakes and which controlled an expanding chain of hotels and restaurants in England, France, Germany and Italy. In London the group founded and controlled

“Claridges”, the “Savoy”, the “Hyde Park” and the “Carlton”. Ritz was troubled at the “Savoy” by various intrigues and left for Wiesbaden with Escoffier and a few faithfuls to manage the “Kaiserhof” and the “Auguste-Viktoria-Bader”. He later came back to London, and managed the “Carlton” and finally the “Ritz” in Paris.

Ritz had the ambition that all “his” hotels should bear the mark of his perfectionism. But he eventually had to pay a terrible price for the energy and incredible enthusiasm expended in keeping a firm hold on such a decentralised empire. In 1902, as his friend the 60-year-old Prince of Wales was crowned Edward VII, Ritz broke down mentally and phycically. He lost his memory for long periods, he became melancholic and was plagued by prolonged fits of depression which were a burden for his wife and his surroundings. He received psychiatric treatment in Switzerland, but he had to abandon all his managerial responsibilities and never recovered. He died sixteen years later at the age of 68, when the great War was nearing to an end, and with it his own epoch.

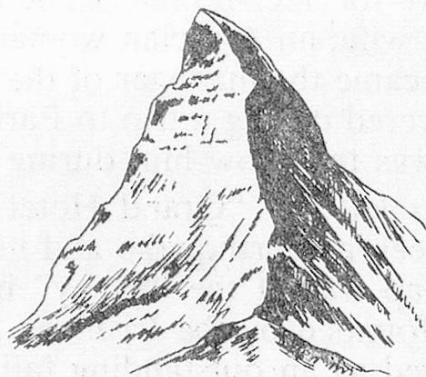
(Adapted from “Das Heimliche Imperium”, a history of Swiss prosperity,
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