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Johannes Badrutt senior (1791-1855): master builder and founder of the hotel dynasty

The story of the famous Badrutt hotel pioneers began in the early 19th century in Samedan. At that time, the mountain village in the Upper Engadine had about 440 inhabitants, who were Protestant and predominantly spoke Romansh. Compared with many other mountain regions, there were also well-to-do families in the Engadine as many citizens had emigrated to the major European cities in the preceding decades and established flourishing patisseries, coffee and trading houses. The wealthy family clans demonstrated their entrepreneurial success by building grand houses in their home villages. At the same time they provided work in the Engadine valley, as part of the capital they had saved abroad was invested in the emerging hotel industry.

*Portrait of Johannes
Badrutt's wife, Anna
Maria Donatsch.*



*Signature of Johannes
Badrutt senior, 1825.*

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Joh. Badrutt' with a large, decorative flourish at the end.

Roots in Pagig

Samedan's blossoming economy also attracted many foreign craftsmen and merchants to the village, including Johannes Badrutt senior (1791-1855). His parents were Badrutt Badrutt and Ursula, née Jäger. The name Badrutt comes from the Romansh Christian name Padruot, which means Peter in English. For a long time, the family name was spelt with a «P» on official documents. Johannes Badrutt's an-

cestors came from Pagig, a poor hamlet in the Schanfigg area between Chur and Arosa. Johannes senior's great-great-grandson Hansjürg Badrutt once visited the village of his forebears with his brother Andrea and noted that there are still many Badrutt houses to this day. «However, our family no longer had a good reputation there. My brother defended our name and we revealed our identities.»

Professional and personal happiness

In the first decade of the 19th century, Johannes Badrutt left Pagig and moved to the cantonal capital of Chur in the hope of making a living as a craftsman. He apparently soon succeeded in gaining a foothold professionally, as well as finding personal happiness: in 1812, the 21-year-old Johannes married Anna Maria Donatsch (1790-1872), who was almost the same age, in the reformed Church of

Engadine confectioners: the emigrant workers of yesteryear

Due to its small size and scant resources, Switzerland has always been dependent on trade and services. Until far into the 19th century, excessive numbers of Swiss left the country. Many young men and women were forced to earn their living abroad, either as mercenaries, tradespeople or domestic servants. The situation was no different in the Engadine, but what is special is the fact that most of the emigrants worked as patissiers and coffee vendors, initially in Venice, and then in many other large European cities. Because Romansh surnames were often difficult to pronounce abroad, many families adapted the spellings.

For example, the name Jenatsch became Jenatzki, Clanschut became Klainguti or Giosch became Josty. Desserts made by «Swiss bakers» enjoyed an excellent reputation all over Europe. The ties between the emigrant families and those who had stayed behind were usually close. For this reason, part of the capital saved flowed back into their home villages and stimulated the economy. Without this money, notes Dolf Kaiser, the expert on the history of Graubünden confectioners, the pioneering achievements in the Engadine hotel industry of the 19th century would scarcely have been possible.

St. Regula in Chur. Anna Maria was the daughter of Christian Donatsch from the Graubünden village of Malans and Barbara Brunold from Peist in the Schanfigg area.

In 1814, Johannes was given an attractive professional opportunity by J. Baratty of Samedan, a rich merchant working in Amsterdam, who offered Johannes a job as a painter and wood-turner in his home village of Samedan. Johannes had obviously demonstrated his competence in Chur and made a good name for himself. Without hesitation, he went to the Upper Engadine valley, but initially alone. His wife Anna Maria and their first-born son Christian remained in Chur.

Over the Albula Pass on foot

At the end of February 1815, Johannes fell so seriously ill that his wife came over the snow-covered Albula Pass, probably even on foot, to look after him. Thanks to this care, her husband

recovered sufficiently after three weeks to enable her to return to Chur. About one year later, in March 1816, the family joined Johannes, who had rapidly worked his way up in Samedan and, in 1817, became a master builder. According to Johannes Badrutt junior's memoirs, the Badrutts lived in a house, which J. Baratty had organised for them. That same year, their daughter Ursula was born, followed by Anna Maria the year after.

Fateful years for Graubünden

The years 1816/17 were fateful for Graubünden. Throughout Central Europe, a cold summer with much rain and even snow caused catastrophic crop failure, leading to terrible famine and many fatalities. The regions north of the Alps were particularly hard hit, but Johannes Badrutt and his family were spared the worst, as he wrote in his memoirs: «God ensured that my family had to live only one day with-

The Petzi House, Samedan, built in 1817. «The first newly-built small house» (Johannes Badrutt), today the Restaurant Hirschen.

out bread.» In the year of famine, 1817, Johannes even received his first large-scale building contract in Samedan. He built the house of Christian Petzi, who had made his fortune as a patissier in Lyon. This building now houses the Restaurant Hirschen. However, 1817 was also the year that Badrutt's «friend and patron» Baratty moved back to Amsterdam with his entire family – «This meant I was losing one good support» noted Johannes with regret.

Coffee: a «slow poison»

The hard work on the building sites began to take its toll: in May 1818 Johannes again fell ill, supposedly because «I had drunk wine with cold water.» Thanks to medical help in Bad Alvaneu he slowly recovered, and was able to work again in July. However, he had to take care of his stomach: «From then on, I considered coffee a slow poison, especially for men who had to work hard.»

Despite these health problems, Johannes senior established himself as a master builder and completed various building projects for influential Engadine families. As the Badrutt family had by now grown to six with the



birth of the second son, Johannes, his father bought his own house from the wealthy Samedan physician, Dr Johann Ulrich Wettstein-Ronzi, on 13th March 1820 for the price of 2,000 guilders. This was the «Haus zur Mühle und Säge» (the sawmill house, now belonging to Mr Ottavio Clavuot) located by the village stream. As a cost comparison, a parson's annual income was 300 guilders, and that of a teacher 60 guilders, so Johannes senior must have already been very successful. In 1822 Johannes Badrutt built for Josua Curtin in Sils Maria, the «Chesa Curtin», an elongated building that documents the transition from the typical Engadine house to a bourgeois dwelling. In 1823 he constructed a «Maiensäss» (mountain summer house) for the chief magistrate of the district, Rudolf von Planta, and in 1824/25 a grand house (now called the «Chesa Melna») in Pontresina for Peter Jenny, confectioner in Vilnius. The building contract from von Planta was to prove especially important in the ensuing years, as von Planta became a friend and patron of the Badrutt family.

The Curtin House, Sils, built in 1822.



Hard and dangerous work

The work was hard and dangerous. In 1823, for example, when the «Maiensäss» was being built, a serious accident was only avoided by a great stroke of luck: during a break, the barn collapsed. If this had happened a little earlier, twelve workers would have been seriously injured. A year later, on 18th July 1824, Johannes Badrutt himself had an accident whilst travelling with his «employer Jenny in a horse and cart.» He suddenly had to jump off, seriously injuring his knee. It took three months before he was able to work again. The loss of earnings was considerable.

In 1826, Badrutt built subsidised housing in Sils and Silvaplana. A year later, work began on the «Chesa Lorsa» in Celerina for Constant Peter Nuttli, owner of a confectioner's in Marseille. The following year, Johannes constructed a house with seven pannelled rooms for Josua Curtin's parents in Sils. He described this building as «one of the most beautiful and solid houses in the Engadine». Today it serves as offices for the town council and tourist bureau. In 1829 he built for the Berlin brewer Daniel Josty of Madulain the «Palazzo Josty», in the foundations of which he hid a lead box containing information about the times in which he lived.

Versatile and always busy

As a busy master builder of many talents, Badrutt not only constructed buildings, but also worked as a roofer for the large house of the chief district magistrate Rudolf von Planta (1827) as well as building a bridge near Punt Muragl (1828) and a canal in Sils (1822–1829). Badrutt was thus a very successful businessman. Between 1821 and 1830, several more children were born: Peter, Miarta, Caspar, Margaretha and his last child, Emilia.

To supplement their income and for their own use, the Badrutts kept several dairy cows and pigs in the barn beside their house, as Diane Conrad's research into the family has revealed. The animals were often mentioned in the family's correspondence and Samedan's village records also refer to Badrutt's livestock.

Guest rooms as a source of income

In 1830, Johannes Badrutt senior intended to create a further source of income – by offering hospitality to visitors. Around this time, tourism gradually began to focus on the Engadine. For decades, a journey through Switzerland had been practically mandatory for educated and well-to-do Europeans. However, the actual development of the country and the pioneering days of the Swiss hotel industry began only around 1830, at the same time as the liberal movement was gaining strength throughout Europe and the economic prosperity connected with it increased. The development of the road network in Graubünden in the 1820s helped to make travelling to the high-altitude Engadine valley more pleasant. The Badrutts intended to profit from the increasing demand for guesthouses in Samedan, so they furnished guest rooms in their own house and installed a ballroom on the upper floor, which soon enjoyed great popularity as the first in the Engadine. According to Dolf Kaiser, Johannes Badrutt senior's guesthouse can thus be described as «the cradle of the Engadine hotel industry.»

Initial contact with St. Moritz

While Anna Maria Badrutt took care of the household and the guests, Johannes made fast progress in his master building activities. In about 1830 he made his first business contact

St. Moritz spa building, 1832.



with St. Moritz. On the western shore of Lake St. Moritz, a mineral spring had enjoyed a good reputation since the Middle Ages but had never really been exploited commercially. Influential St. Moritz families formed a joint-stock company in 1831 and a spa building was constructed. Supervised by Dr Wettstein, the building work was in the hands of Johannes Badrutt, who lived in Wettstein's old house and was presumably given the commission as a result. The spa building opened in 1832.

In the 1830s, Badrutt's commissions declined. In a letter of 14th March 1833, for example, he wrote to his eldest son Christian: «I have ordered the workers, the masons that is, for 20th April. I shall have to make do with 75 men this summer; the work is only repairs and there is very little carpentry work.»

Trade in building materials

Perhaps due to the deterioration of his business, Badrutt senior also attempted to enter the trade in building materials. To this end and with the support of his patron Rudolf von Planta, he erected a round-gabled construction,

the first industrial building and warehouse in Samedan (today's «Chesa Barbara Zisler»). This was directly opposite his house and consisted of a carpentry workshop, a metal-working shop powered by water and a depot for iron, which also served as interim storage for the powerful Chur transport company, «Massner & Braun».

A look at a picture of Samedan from this period reveals that Badrutt's warehouse with its workshops was located slightly below the patrician houses of the old, established families. Here by the village stream, he could realise his entrepreneurial ideas, thus taking the first steps towards the «modern Samedan».

Recurring losses

The «Werk- und Handelshaus für Bauwesen» (Workshops and building trade warehouse) in Samedan opened on 1st April 1836. According to Diane Conrad, Johannes senior had already traded in building materials on a smaller scale, which helped to offset the balance sheet. From the very beginning, many building commissions, such as the house built for Peter Jenny or the construction of the bridge at

Punt Muragl, proved to be loss-making ventures.

In 1836, Johannes Badrutt built a house in the neighbouring village of Celerina for the confectioner Giovanni Frizzoni, who worked in Turin. The «Chesa Frizzoni» became famous because the Nobel Prize winner Albert Einstein lived there in 1928/29. In the early 1840s, Badrutt built a house for Andreas B. Puonz, a confectioner in Berlin and Stettin.

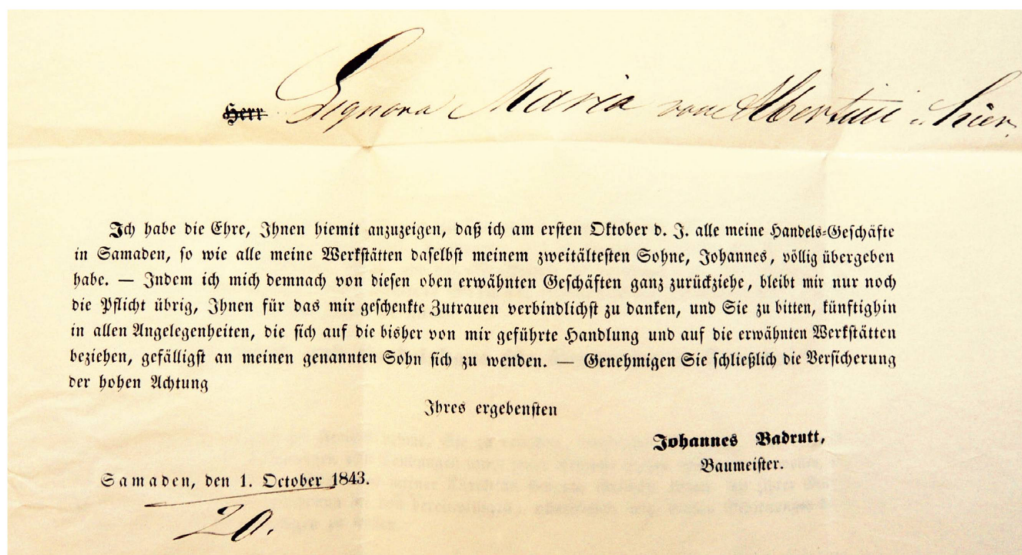
Business problems and bankruptcy

As Diane Conrad has discovered, Johannes Badrutt senior had the tendency to exceed the estimates for his building work. In Samedan's Cultural Archives there are lists of additional work that became necessary after completion, which Johannes submitted to various clients. He possibly had difficulty in recruiting enough workers for his varied and complicated building projects, and in paying them. On top of this, his health was not stable, which may also have led to missed deadlines and consequently additional costs. Local historians speculate that the German-speaker's limited knowledge of Romansh became a further problem in his business. He possibly only partially understood his building contracts in Ro-

mansh and was thus in a weaker position to negotiate. Finally, the trade in building materials also became a losing venture. These factors caused Johannes Badrutt's building company to go bankrupt in October 1847. He had apparently already been involved in a court case in the spring of that year and it was certainly no coincidence that his two younger sons, Peter and Caspar, emigrated to the United States in 1848. Tragically, Caspar died that same year during the Atlantic crossing.

Exiled to Pisa

Johannes himself also left Samedan in 1848 to join his eldest son Christian in Pisa, Italy, where the family of Christian's wife, Emilia Chatrigna Faller, owned a confectionery business. Christian himself had his own brewery, in which his father also worked. As Diane Conrad's research has revealed, Johannes Badrutt senior wrote on 29th December 1850 to his son Peter in New York: «Otherwise we live happily in our family circle; the good old habits haven't changed; there are few dull hours, and they are only short, so I can say that we're healthy, thank God, and enjoy our daily bread in peace.» Business, however, was not going so well, as the letter subse-



Letter to clients announcing the transfer of the business to Johannes Badrutt junior, 1st October 1843.



View of Samedan ca.1849, with the Chesa Planta in the centre. To the left, the barrel-roofed warehouse for building materials – the first industrial building in Samedan, later the hotel «A la Vue du Bernina».

quently shows, because the summer was cool and rainy. Johannes's wife, Anna Maria Badrutt, had refused to accompany her husband to Italy, however. She went instead to her daughter Mierta, whose husband, Daniel Denz, ran a guesthouse in St. Moritz, where Anna Maria helped in the kitchen.

Badrutt senior: entrepreneur in the best sense of the word

Despite the bankruptcy, the hard-working master builder's reputation did not apparently suffer in Samedan. Maria Badrutt-Berry, his son Johannes's wife, assured him in her Christmas letter of 1850 that «this summer and since, I have so often heard from the workers and others – 'Ah, the old master was a good man, a worker and a father to the poor, who often knew in advance that he was making a loss and nevertheless did the job well and, thanks to him, how many a poor man was able to earn money, which has long since ceased to flow so plentifully'.» With this affectionate characterisation, Maria drew attention to two of her father-in-

law's important attributes – his sense of responsibility and his attention to quality which can be seen to this day in numerous Badrutt houses in Upper Engadine villages. At the same time, Johannes senior, even if he ultimately failed, was an entrepreneur in the best sense of the word. He tried out new business ideas and his ballroom and guest rooms marked the beginning of the tourist industry that was to make his descendants world-famous.

Prospects for the children

The Badrutts tried to give their children a good upbringing and to offer them prospects for their professional development. This already started with their choice of godparents, who were often selected from among their influential clients. Gaudenz von Planta (1757–1834), one of the most powerful politicians in Graubünden and the richest man in Samedan, was a godfather of Johannes Badrutt junior. The Badrutts' first-born son Christian studied at Munich Polytechnic; Peter and his sisters Ursula and Anna Maria attended school in Ftan. Peter

and probably also Caspar studied at the Polytechnic Institute in Paris. Johannes was the only brother who did not enjoy a formal education. It is interesting that the least-educated of the siblings should have become the most successful.

Search for suitable marriage partners

Apart from providing their children with a solid schooling, it was a matter of concern for the Badrutts that their children should find partners from good families. Practically all their spouses came from the Engadine's confectionery or hospitality trades. The Badrutts' first-born son Christian, for example, married Emilia Chatrigna Faller, as mentioned earlier.

Johannes senior's eldest daughter Ursula married Gian Battista Klainguti. He also came from Samedan, but had established a successful confectionery business with his elder brother in

Genoa. Ursula died in childbirth at the age of 21 and Gian Battista afterwards married her younger sister Anna Maria. Johannes junior married Maria Berry, daughter of Chur city councillor and district magistrate Johannes Berry. Mierta Badrutt, Johannes senior's third daughter, married Johann Daniel Denz, who owned a guesthouse in St. Moritz, as mentioned earlier. The second-youngest daughter, Margaretha, married Florian Held and did the ironing in her own laundry business.

Return with head held high

Thanks to the support of his son Johannes, Johannes senior was able to return before his death to his home village of Samedan with his head held high.

His wife Anna Maria, however, stayed with her son-in-law in St. Moritz. Johannes Badrutt senior died of pneumonia in Samedan on 14th July 1855.



The barrel-roofed «Bernina Vegl» today; in the foreground to the left the Clavuot house «Mulin Vegl» and beside it, the «Resgia Veglia».