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Objekttyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): **- (1961)**

Heft 1378

PDF erstellt am: **28.04.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-686754>

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NORTH'S TOP CATERING JOB GOES TO "CHAMPAGNE CHARLES"

By DEREK MEAKIN

The man they call "Champagne Charles" — Swiss-born Charles Herzog, one of the North's most colourful personalities — has just taken on the biggest job of his career.

Mecca have promoted him to general manager of Manchester's plush Café Royal, where he has been in charge of the top-price La Reignette restaurant for the last five years. Now he has under his control five bars, two restaurants, one banqueting suite and an off-licence shop.

It was only after the announcement of his appointment that Charles revealed a secret he has kept to himself during the whole of the time he has been in England — that he was struck dumb at the age of 12 and doctors said he would never talk again.

"For seven years I had been singing in the choir of the abbey church in Einsiedeln, my birthplace", he told me. "By the time I was 12 I was the leading soprano in a choir of 300.

"That particular Sunday I was singing in the big mass of the day, which lasts from 9.30 a.m. to 11 a.m. Then, without any warning, my voice broke.

"As soon as I came out of church I ran home. I could hardly say a word but my parents were not too worried at first. As it was winter time they thought it was due to the cold. And when I was taken to the doctor the next day he said the same.

"But by Tuesday my voice was reduced to a very faint whisper and we all began to get rather concerned. My parents decided to take me to Zurich right away to see a famous specialist.

"Then came the bombshell. After the specialist had examined my throat he told my mother: 'I am terribly sorry to tell you, Madame, but your son will never talk again. His vocal chords are paralysed'."

From then on Charles started paying twice-weekly visits to Zurich for special treatment. But, voice or no voice, he soon decided to make his own way in the world, and his choice fell on the hotel industry.

When he was 14 the watchmaker's son became an apprentice at the Hotel du Lac at Lucerne. The hotel

is no longer in existence, but the building where Charles started his career washing dishes and scrubbing floors remains — as the resort's General Post Office.

There he was taken in hand by the late Mr. Burkardt Spillman, owner of the hotel and, as president of the International Hotel Association, one of the most influential people in the profession.

It was Mr. Spillman who first noticed that despite his difficulties the boy showed considerable promise. Though he could only whisper, his employer had long talks with him encouraging him to take a pride in his work and, at the same time, persuading him to continue with his treatment.

None of the doctors he saw could promise a cure, but Charles persevered and by the age of 15 his voice slowly returned — but it was so different from the one he had known three years before! The silvery tones of the boy soprano had become what he now calls "a tuneless croak".

Armed with his new voice and a tremendous amount of confidence, Charles set out to make his name.

At 31 he had become an expert in the different branches of culinary art, and he decided to see what opportunities lay in Britain.

He arrived at a Cornish seaside hotel as restaurant manager — intending to stay six months. But love, in the shape of a hotel receptionist, took over. That receptionist is now his wife, Constance, and mother of their five-year-old daughter, Helen.

From Cornwall he moved to the Pigalle, in London, then to Manchester Airport as restaurant manager, and now to Manchester's famous Café Royal.

While in Manchester he has played host to most of the big names in show business, industry and politics.

It was in Charles' restaurant that Norman Wisdom was turned away for not wearing a tie. When Charles heard what had happened he chased after the comedian and brought him back to the best meal the chef could provide — free!


When Bruce Forsyth made his first visit, Charles was waiting for him on the doorstep wearing an out-sized apron on which was printed: "I'M IN CHARGE!"

Not only is he on first-name terms with many top television stars, but he is also a TV personality in his own right.


And strangely enough it is his voice, the relic of his childhood affliction, that has contributed to his success in this difficult field just as much as his culinary skill and talent.

His distinctive, gravelly voice has made him known to millions of viewers and at the same time contributed to developing the Café Royal into a leading centre of Northern social life.

(*Helvetic News Service*).



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