

The story about the Wengernalp

„Do we want it or don't we?“ was the question Fritz von Almen of Trümmelbach asked the other six members of the family council in January 1958. The five members who had been trained in the hotel business said "no" and they were right. Nevertheless, the Hotel Jungfrau was bought in May 1958 - and a glass was raised to the qualified minority. The then hotel director - as pleasant as he was thirsty - stayed on, as did the two Corgis, to console his wife. The former owners, the Alp co-operative Wengernalp, were at one stroke rid of their mortgage and their debts and were happy to give their exclusive attention to their cows once again, which was the statutory objective of the co-operative. They had been able to do the same in 1908 when they sold the Hotel Des Alpes on the Scheidegg for 100'000 gold francs. Real estate speculation in hotels didn't, and still doesn't, square with cow-grazing and cheese-making. Thanks to the excellent sale, the alp co-operative regained its former independence. But where did this transaction leave the Hotel Des Alpes on Scheidegg and the Hotel Jungfrau, Wengernalp? They landed with the Trümmelbach: the Des Alpes via the marriage of Fritz von Almen with Emma Seiler, the sole heir to the Scheidegg enterprise of the Seiler brothers, and the Hotel Jungfrau 50 years later.

Whatever Fritz von Almen wanted in life he usually obtained, and his prevailing passion - apart from Emma - was mountain hotels with all their inherent risks and difficulties, regardless of the weather factor. Soon after his marriage to Emma he became the so-called "Outdoor manager" of the Count de Renesse at the Maloja Palace Hotel in the Upper Engadine, then owner of the Scheidegg hotels, the Palace Hotel in Muerren and last but not least, the small Hotel Jungfrau on the Wengernalp.



The predilection for mountains and hotels was in the blood of the von Almen family. Already in the 19th century they owned the inn opposite the church in Lauterbrunnen; the father – Fritz the first – had the Truemmelbach, while Emma, the wife of Fritz the second, represented the third generation of Kleine Scheidegg hotel pioneers. She was also well endowed with grazing rights of the Wengernalp co-operative, which she gave to her enterprising husband.

The hotel Jungfrau has a long history. It dates back to the beginning of travelling and touring in the Alps. The Wengernalp hostelry is mentioned by G.S.Gruner in "Die Eisgebirge des Schweizerlandes" published in 1760, in Pastor Wytttenbach's report on his journey in 1771 in the Alps, in J.R. Wyss' "Reise durch's Bernerobberland", 1816 in Lord Byron's journal dated the same year. First, there was a mountain hut where you could get milk, bread, cheese and a resting place in the straw ... "the cowherds can usually offer but their stable, which is neither fresh nor very clean and fairly exposed to the elements ... one's repose is often interrupted by the cowherds who stoke up their fire throughout the night thereby producing continuous smoke, and by the noise made by the beasts, especially of the grunting of the pigs ..."

Then came a shelter hut providing food and drink. An etching shows Lord Byron sitting on the doorstep meditating on his "Manfred" ... 1816. Finally, in 1835 a guesthouse was built. Only after many years of deliberation – the innkeepers of Grindelwald and Lauterbrunnen felt their business suffer, the Canton of Bern feared drunkenness and immoral goings-on – was a full licence granted, in 1864. The hotel was built by the alp co-operative and opened and leased in 1865. Looking back into the 19th century and up to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, it is fair to say that it was these mountain hotels, regardless to their modest size, which were the founders of what was to become the international renown of Swiss hotels. There had always been first class hotels in all the major European cities, but certainly not in the mountains. That was unexpected, surprising and it echoed far and wide. The Baer and the Adler in Grindelwald, the Monte Rosa and the Riffelberg in Zermatt, the Hotel Jungfrau Eggishorn overlooking the Aletsch glacier and our very own Hotel Jungfrau on the Wengernalp. In remote places exposed to raw nature, board and lodging had to meet greater demands.



HOTEL JUNGFRAU WENGERNALP

After all, it took at least three hours to walk up to Wengernalp and just as long to cross the Scheidegg and to go down to Grindelwald. The mountains of course, were a magnet themselves. They looked so close, right in front and nothing but air in between. But the difference in altitude between the Hotel Jungfrau at 1900 meters and a summit of 4148 meters is about 2248 meters and that was a huge challenge for the pioneers.

In 1858 Richard Barrington was first to climb the Eiger, 2070 vertical meters; in 1859 Leslie Stephen was the first to cross the Eigerjoch, 1859 vertical meters from the hotel and in 1862 the same man did the first crossing of the Jungfrauoch, 1665 vertical meters from the hotel. Leslie Stephen was a frequent guest in the hotel and in his classic book "The Playground of Europe" this is how he described the Wengernalp: "surely the Wengern Alp must be precisely the loveliest place in this world. To hurry past it, and listen to the roar or the avalanches, is a very unsatisfactory mode of enjoyment; it reminds one too much of letting of crackers in a cathedral. The mountains seem to be accomplices of the people who charge 50 centimes for an echo. But it does one's moral nature good to linger there at sunset or in the early morning, when tourists have ceased from travelling and the jaded cockney may enjoy a kind of spiritual bath in the soothing calmness of the scenery". The Eiger and its glacier, the north walls of the Moench and the Jungfrau with their ice-falls, ice-flancs, buttresses and bridges, looking like "a frozen hurricane" (Byron).

The ice-cape opposite the hotel windows hangs down 1800 meters from the 4000 meter high summits to the foot of the mountains. And this ice-mass doesn't hang quietly. It cracks and splits and sends avalanches crashing down.



Since the 18th century, Wengernalp has long been a rendezvous for famous people including glaciologists, high-mountain physicists, romantic poets, painters and composers. There were also those who were the first to climb the peaks in the Golden Age of alpinism and who left us unforgettable annals of their historic feats. The artists included: Lory, G. Staub, Otto v. Kameke, Franz Niklaus Koenig, Joseph Anton Koch, Francois Diday, Alexandre Calame, Maximilian De Meuron, Lugardon, Humbert, Ferdinand Hodler, Yoshida, Vitor Surbeck. The composers were Mendelssohn, Brahms, Wagner, Flotow and Tschaikowsky. The poets and writers included Byron, Wordsworth, Daudet and Mark Twain. Guest books were only started in 1865. More or less every rank of aristocracy was represented, from Baroness and spouse to Queen. And still today there are numbers of well-known citizens who find their way to Wengernalp. Those with more left-wing leanings will be interested to learn that in the 19th century both Marx and Engels came here.

In May of 1962, Kaspar, son of Emma and Fritz, and Erica with her children, came to dwell in the Hotel Jungfrau ... And with them no camera shy dog ... for the watch of the Corgis had long been taken over by the 100-kilo black Newfoundlander Otto – who during the course of his 13 years in the Lauterbrunnen community may have seen as many cameras flash as a Big-Screen star! The hotel underwent comprehensive restoration and refurbishing during the 40 years after 1962 -and hence has gratifyingly acquired a highly pleasant, numerous and international set of regular customers. Today, Urs with Patricia and her children manage the establishment, at a distance, architectonically and synergically aided by his brother Andreas of the Kleine Scheidegg. Son Christian, and next leader in line after Erica and Kaspar, assisted the business until 1997, before deciding in favour of professional mountain photography.

Kaspar von Almen

