



The fire brigade in the Bärengraben

Shortly around the turn of the century into the twentieth century, some pioneers discovered tourism in the Saanenland. It was the time when our mountain valleys were opened up with modern railways and freed us from isolation. In the 18th and partly even in the 19th century, the rural exodus was very great. There was a lack of food and work. The communities paid contributions to willing emigrants. The mountain regions were extremely poor and the pressure of suffering was very great, so that an income from tourism was very welcome.

In 1911, the large spa and sports hotel was opened. 50 beds and spacious lounges were offered to the welcome guests. The hotel was of an extraordinary size for a scattered settlement. In addition, the hotel was built entirely of wood and other combustible materials from the second floor upwards. There were no modern fire control systems yet and the respect for fires was very great.

The hotel owners decided to set up a powerful fire brigade. Actually, this would have been a task of the municipality. However, the municipality of Saanen was poor and needed the meagre tax revenues for road construction and other infrastructure in the villages of Saanen and Gstaad. Gstaad was still suffering the consequences of the fire of 1898, which destroyed practically the entire village within a few hours.

The hoteliers bought hoses and a pump. The new acquisition was regularly used for fire drills. The balconies were climbed with ladders and "guests" were evacuated and the fire fought. Over time, a certain routine developed and some members of the Saanenmöser fire brigade wanted to use the fire pump for a different purpose during the final exercise.

What could be more suitable than to start a trial with another liquid substance? The Sporthotelkeller was already known for good top-quality wines. The only question was how well the fire pump could still generate pressure with this liquid. Without much hesitation, the pump was filled up with good French wine and the pump crew was given the order. "Attack the source of the fire on the second floor".

What a disaster that would have been. The hotel would have burned to the ground. Not a drop of the noble water ever reached the source of the fire. The firemen quenched their own thirst first. The drink was of the best quality and really too good for a drill. The villagers turned up in droves at the call of the fire horn. A huge party and fun developed. All of Saanenmöser enjoyed the "fire drill" of a special kind. Children and adults joined in. Even a hand organ player helped to embellish the occasion. Everyone enjoyed the moment and felt the good cohesion in the village. It was a time when everyone depended on each other.

By the way, I would have soon forgotten that the toddler present enjoyed the wine more than the milk bottle and that not everyone present found control over the dosage. A bit of a headache and hangover were the result. Unfortunately, there were hardly any effective powders at that time.



Mountain tour on Oldenhorn

Many guests believe that out-of-house activities belong to the modern age. Far from it, a hundred years ago the Kur- und Sporthotel already had its own mountain guide, named Emanuel Romang. He was one of the first to hold a mountain guide's licence in Switzerland. As a mountain farmer, he was very dependent on a good extra income. Once a week he went on a big mountain tour. In those days, it was quite complicated to go on an excursion. Saanenmöser - Gstaad with the Montreux Oberland Bahn, by horse-drawn post to Gsteig and then on foot to the Oldenhorn. Gsteig 1189 m above sea level - Oldenhorn summit 3122 m above sea level, without ascent aids was really a cramp and very impassable in parts.

On such a tour, mountain guide Romang accompanied six gentlemen and one lady who felt strong enough for such an excursion. Initially everything went well and soon the group of seven reached the Cabane de Diablerets. A well-deserved break with a hearty snack and some relaxation exercises gave the participants the necessary strength to tackle the more difficult part of the ascent. A lot of strength and concentration were needed to avoid a slip with fatal consequences.

Climbing the plateau from the glacier with a fantastic panoramic view of the Valais mountains rewarded the eager climbers. Now it was just under an hour and the longed-for goal, the Oldenhorn, was within reach. Another short rest and determinedly towards the summit.

What was supposed to be the "dessert" of the trip ended abruptly at a crevasse, which was obviously filled by the only female climber in the group. Fear and panic spread and not with a hundred horses and good coaxing was it possible to get the lady to cross the obstacle.

A strange atmosphere, the goal right in front of us, but already somewhat tired bones, advanced time, the climber somewhat embarrassed and ashamed. How to continue or not?

Reason was the salvation for the lady struggling with herself. The group was overwhelmed with the wonderful view of the panorama of several four-thousand-metre peaks of the masses and happy that the summit of the pyramid was renounced. A few quips and jokes could not be avoided on the equally arduous way back. But the hikers were just in time to take the last horse-drawn carriage and then the train to Saanenmöser.

An exhausting and interesting day ended in the famous "Bärengarben" with good food, delicious wine and lively music. Tired but extremely happy, the group went to sleep.

History of Walter von Siebenthal



Holidays a hundred years ago at the spa and sports hotel in Saanenmöser

First, guests from the cities of Europe and Switzerland discovered holidays in the mountains. Healthy mountain air, sun, well-kept landscape and pure nature were reasons for holidays in the mountains. Already a hundred years ago, the farmers made a great contribution to our holiday region with their care of the pastures and alps. Of course, the new hotels in the Saanenland outdid themselves with their offers. The spa and sports hotel was also able to keep up well. In addition to a large farm that delivered its products to the hotel, the hotel had its own tennis court and, in winter, its own ice rink with curling rink, reading room, lounge, fumoir, passenger lift, various restaurants, a sunny veranda and, believe it or not, a ballroom with a six-man orchestra.

What were holidays in Saanenmöser like in summer ?

First of all, enjoying the peace and quiet and the wonderful view on the spacious balcony. Then have breakfast on the sunny terrace, enjoy milk, butter, cheese, hamme and sausages from our own farm, then walk along the path by the little Simme and listen to the babbling brook and take a deep breath. After a delicious lunch, take the Montreux Oberland Bahn for an excursion with an extended walk in Gstaad or at Lenk. In the late afternoon, unwind in a deckchair on the balcony and mentally prepare for the evening. For an aperitif in the reading room, catch up on the latest news from the newspaper and then dine properly in the dining room and enjoy a good glass of wine from the exquisite cellar.

After an eventful day, without hecticness and nervousness, one would actually have the necessary weight in bed to process the many positive impressions in one's dreams. Dance music tempts the guests into dancing and now another cosy part of the day begins. Acquaintances, even friendships, are made over racy music and a conversation with the barmaid reveals many interesting stories about the hotel and the region. After a nightcap, the eventful day comes to an end and the guests go to sleep overjoyed.

Wednesday is a highlight. The photographer is visiting. What is done today with a mobile phone was celebrated as a real ceremony back then and was part of a happy holiday. A quick comb-over and tie adjustment and Jacques Nägeli, a long-time photographer in Gstaad and friend of the hotelier's family, takes his picture from under the black cover.

Another event awaits on Friday. On foot up the Hornberg. At the Seyberg, a "déjeuner sur herbe". How wonderful to dine in the open air, in peace and quiet, and to listen to an excursus on mountain farming by the hotelier and mountain farmer in order to better understand traditional connections. At the end of lunch, a spicy herbal schnapps from the region is served as a digestive.



As the holidays draw to a close, on Saturday the hotelier invites us to the culinary culmination of the holiday week. "La table d'hôte du patron" is the actual closing bouquet. A wonderful fish buffet as an entrée, a spicy beef broth with local mushrooms, a rustic roast beef from the hotel's own stables and for dessert homemade meringue and double cream from the Hornberg, and for coffee delicious "Gützeni und Bräzeleni mit Nidle".

In winter, the hotel services are similar. The "déjeuner sur herb" is replaced by a ride in the caterpillar car up the Hornberg. Once you've reached the funiculars below the Hornberg, you can continue your trip in comfort on the "Jeanette" or "Rosmary". On the Hornbergläger, a snack of hearty soup, bread and a smoked sausage is enjoyed in a mountain hut before the descent on unprepared slopes. In the early afternoon, the day is rounded off with a game of curling. Under the expert guidance of the hotel owner, the aperitif is played out. A "hand fault" costs a bottle of wine. The "competitors" enjoy the well-deserved aperitif with Hobelkäse on the sunny terrace and get in the mood for the excellent Saanen night meal.

Connoisseurs hike over the "Mööser" from the hotel between individual groups of trees and birches to Schönried and enjoy the many tracks of hares and stoats.

On Sunday it's time to say goodbye. A wonderful trip with the MOB to Montreux and on home or to Zweisimmen and then through the Simmental to Spiez awaits the departing guests. It is hard to say goodbye, but the faithful porter Bruno brings the guests to the station in time with their luggage and helps to stow the suitcases - au revoir.

History of Walter von Siebenthal



The construction of the MOB in the Saanenland

For more than three decades, projects were forged for a connection between Lake Geneva and Lake Thun. More than twenty different variants were examined. Either they were too expensive or technically difficult. Finally, between 1897 and 1906, an all-electric, metre-gauge railway was built between Montreux and Zweisimmen. The railway was supposed to continue to Erlenbach, where it would connect to the Spiez - Erlenbach railway. Time was pressing and the population wanted to be connected as quickly as possible. For this reason, the people of Simmental founded the railway, which built the continuation to Zweisimmen. It was called the Erlenbach - Zweisimmen Railway.

The MOB was therefore too late in Zweisimmen. After an interruption of five years, the Zweisimmen - Lenk i. S. was started. The ceremonial opening took place in 1913 and Lenk was connected to the big, wide world. Actually, the line should have been built over the Hahnenmoos Pass to Adelboden. The First World War caused such projects to be abandoned. Lenk is now the terminus of the line.

The line through the Saanenland was originally planned from Saanen via the Sonnseite directly to Saanenmöser. This caused Councillor Carl Reichenbach to intervene. In his opinion, the line had to be built via Gstaad. As a master sawyer, he also wanted to have the possibility of transporting his products by train. Robert von Grünigen, also a councillor, saw the problem quite differently. As a stagecoach owner in Saanen for the valleys of Lauenen and Gsteig - Col du Pillon, he was of the opinion that the projected line should not be built.

A fierce internal dispute arose. Carl Reichenbach made representations to the authorities and also to Bern. He recommended that the Saanen municipal council not pay the CHF 100,000.00 that they had subscribed. He wanted to bring the railway constructors to the negotiating table and negotiate the "diversions" to Gstaad. The municipal council followed his advice, nothing was paid and the railway company took the default to the Federal Court. The court recommended that the municipality of Saanen pay the CHF 100,000.00 in order to avoid a legal claim. Incidentally, the now rich municipality of Saanen did not have the necessary money and had to take out a loan in this amount from a bank.



Carl Reichenbach insisted on his idea. With persistence he brought the builder to the negotiating table and made a deal with her. The municipality increased its contribution by CHF 100,000.00 and the additional 3.5 KM of tracks via Gstaad were built. This was much to the chagrin of Robert von Grünigen and an internal "war" broke out between Saanen and Gstaad. A "war" that still breaks out from time to time after a hundred years. Robert von Grünigen knew perfectly well, of course, that if the railway made a loop to Gstaad, the stagecoaches would no longer run from Saanen and he would thus lose these concessions. The internal Saanen-Gstaad dispute was of course settled without murder or manslaughter.

At a very memorable community meeting held in the church of Saanen with over 800 people in attendance, the far-sighted people of Saanen decided to increase their contribution on the condition that the railway would use the Reichenbach curve. The decision was the right one. Since the line went into operation, Gstaad has always generated the highest revenues, and Gstaad developed accordingly. Within nine years, the Royal Winter Palace was built in Gstaad, which can celebrate one hundred years as the world's leading hotel in 2013. Despite all the turmoil and crises, the hotel has never lost its good 5-star superior classification.

In addition to the Palace, three other Grand Hotels were built. The development of Gstaad was enormous. Over twenty other hotels were built. Saanenmöser also underwent a great development. Saanenmöser was discovered to be an ideal ski resort and soon skiers were being driven up the Hornberg, initially by horse-drawn sleigh. A short time later the horses were replaced by three caterpillar vehicles, and in 1937 a modern toboggan cableway was built in 2 sections. The initiator was the owner of the Sporthotel Saanenmöser. The Hornberg became a family mountain and contributed a lot to the skiing boom. At the end of 1970, the ski area was expanded and extended into the Obersimmental. Today it forms the regular ski area of the western Bernese Oberland.

The war between Reichenbach and von Grünigen was put to bed with an apple shoot-out. The somewhat unbalanced duel ended with an embarrassment for Robert von Grünigen, who did not much appreciate the Schneenasenstüber, but accepted it in Saanen style. Those present had a fun spectacle and rewarded the players with schadenfreude, which can obviously be better painted than explained.

The need in the region was so great at the time that any solution that would open up the valley was welcome. Since the opening up by the railway, the Saanenland became prosperous. The rural exodus was stopped and the region developed harmoniously. Today, good, secure jobs are available, especially for our young Saanen residents. The people of Saanen are proud of their Saanenland and offer their guests carefree holidays. The Montreux Oberland Railway as the motor of tourism is still a dynamic, comfortable and modern railway after more than a hundred years.