

ROMA
HASSLER
STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

THE BUCHER-WIRTH HOTEL DYNASTY

FRANZ-JOSEF BUCHER

Franz-Josef Bucher, one of the pioneers of the hotel industry in Europe, was born on January 17, 1834 in Kerns, near Lucerne in Switzerland, son of Sebastian, farmer and town-hall counsellor, and Theresia Durrer, daughter of an affluent landowner and banker.

He began his school education locally and then moved to the near-by town of Sarnen to pursue his secondary degree. Upon his father's death, young Bucher had to leave school in order to help his mother manage the family estate. This lack of an in-depth school education did not, however, prevent him from becoming a great entrepreneur.

The turning point in Bucher's life occurred when he met Josef Durrer, with whom he soon became close friends. Together they founded "Bucher & Durrer", a construction firm running sawmills. Some time later, in 1868, the two partners opened in Kagiswil, near Lucerne, a factory producing parquetry and timber.

Bucher, who in the meanwhile had married twice and had already 11 of his 16 children, in 1871 bought the Trittalp, an intact and inaccessible area on the Burgenberg in Switzerland where he built, at his own expense, a road to the summit. With the material resulting from the construction of the road, he built the Grand Hotel Buergenstock, which he inaugurated in 1873. In the following years, he added the Park Hotel, the Palace Hotel, and the Hammetschwand which is still the highest chair-lift in Europe, and the Buergenstock railway.

This was just the beginning of Franz-Josef Bucher's hotel industry. In 1879, he started to expand, buying a partnership in the Hotel de la Méditerranée in Liguria, a lovely region in Northern Italy, and starting to operate, in 1883, the Hotel Europe in Lucerne.

In the meanwhile, under Josef Durrer's direction, the Bucher & Durrer firm expanded its wood-related commercial activities to South-Eastern Europe, inaugurating a parquetry and wooden-furniture firm in Romania that was soon to become the official provider of furniture to the most famous noble families across Europe.

Moreover, the Bucher & Durrer firm started to build roads, inclines (for instance the incline of the Lugano railway station), chair-lifts (Mount San Salvatore, Stanserhorn and Mont Pelerin, in Switzerland) and tramways. In 1888 the two partners also built the first electric incline connecting the small village of Kehrsiten to the top of Buergenstock. In Genoa, Italy, Franz-Josef Bucher built the tunnel that still links the railway station to the city centre, an incline in the port and started the first tramway system of the city.

Franz-Josef Bucher's real passion, however, remained the hotel business, and he soon realized that city hotels were much more profitable than those situated in resort places. Therefore, in 1890 he sent his son-in-law, Heinrich Wirth, to Rome as the manager of the Hotel Minerva, located in the city's center.

A few years later, he decided to buy the Hotel Quirinale in Rome (built in 1874), finally purchasing it in 1894 for 2 million lire after lengthy negotiations.

Bucher's belief that city hotels were more valuable led him to buy and restore, in 1897, a building situated near the Central Railway station in Milan, the Grand Hotel Palace. A couple of years later he bought first some shares, and then the entire property of the Hotel du Parc in Lugano, which after restoration in 1903, was opened with the name of Grand Hotel Palace.

Bucher was still not satisfied with the expansion of his empire and decided to buy some land in Cairo, Egypt, where in 1905 he built the Hotel Semiramis that was inaugurated in 1906.

Unfortunately though, Franz-Josef Bucher could not appreciate the success of his first hotel outside Europe, since he died of pneumonia on October 6, 1906, the day before the inauguration of the hotel.

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HEINRICH GOTTLÖB WIRTH

Around 1883, **a young man** who was to play a relevant role in the family's destiny **started to work for Bucher: his name was Heinrich Gottlob Wirth**. Franz-Josef Bucher considered him as one of his own children and he was the one who really followed Bucher's steps.

Heinrich Wirth was born in Maulach, in the German Wuerttemberg region, on September 6, 1858. He was the second of 10 children and after graduating from school, he started his apprenticeship in some inns around his hometown and on the lake of Geneva. There he met a couple of English ladies who asked him to become their butler and follow them to London. Thus he started his travels around Europe, which brought him to Cologne, Zurich and Rome. In Rome he worked as a waiter at the Hotel Quirinale, which did not belong to Bucher yet. **Wirth could not imagine at that time the importance that that hotel was to play in his life.**

Wirth's thirst for experience would not allow him to stay for too long in the same place, therefore after Rome he moved to Bologna and then to Lucerne where he worked at the Schweizerhof. Finally, in 1883 he started to work at the Hotel de la Méditerranée in Liguria, Italy, thus intertwining his destiny with that of the Buchers. In 1887 he married Cristina Bucher, daughter of Franz-Josef.

In 1890, Wirth was sent by his father-in-law to Rome, to manage the Hotel Minerva. The young couple already had two children: Roberto (1888) and Elsa (1890).

In Rome, Wirth managed the hotel on behalf of his father-in-law who had learned only one word in Italian: "Subito", which means "immediately". He was a man of character who did not want to wait to have his wishes accomplished. From then on, in Italy, Franz-Josef Bucher was known as *Signor Subito*. In the Summer of 1893, Cristina and Heinrich's third child was born: Oscar.

After managing the Hotel Minerva for four years, Heinrich Wirth moved to Burgenstock with his family to supervise the works that would unite the Restaurant with the Park Hotel and later that same year, 1894, he returned to Rome to manage the Hotel Quirinale which had been recently bought by his father-in-law, Franz Josef Bucher.

The hotel was situated on the Via Nazionale, a new artery that linked the railway station to the Royal Palace. It consisted of various floors, 266 rooms and 2 bathrooms, one on the mezzanine and one on the second floor, each providing two large bathtubs. The Quirinale was the first hotel in Rome to have a centralized heating system. Under the direction of Heinrich Wirth, it soon became one of the most prestigious hotels of the Italian capital.

Unfortunately, on January 28, 1905, Cristina Bucher died in Rome of heart failure. The children, who were still very young, were deeply marked by this great bereavement. For Heinrich Wirth, Cristina's death not only meant the loss of his beloved wife, but also the loss of a capable partner. He had to solve a series of organizational problems quickly: in Burgenstock for instance, Cristina managed the Park Hotel and the Bahnhofrestaurant, while Heinrich directed the Palace. Now, Heinrich had to find the right substitute to help him manage both family and business. This situation forced him to remarry after only two years from Cristina's death, with a Swiss teacher of Italian origins: Alberta Wally. The couple had two children: Alberto, born in Lucerne in 1910 and Lotty, who was born in Rome in 1916.

The 1920s brought several difficulties to Heinrich Wirth due to many disagreements with Bucher-Durrer AG, the company in charge of the Franz-Josef Bucher estate, created after Bucher's death. Wirth advised his children against dealing with the family group since he could not envisage a future for the company. As a matter of fact, in 1921, he made his son Oscar sign a partnership with Franz Nistelweck, an old friend of his, married to Berta Hassler and son-in-law of Albert Hassler, the founder of the Hotel Hassler, with the purpose of reopening a hotel situated in the Ludovisi quarter, in Rome, the well-known Hotel Eden located at Via Ludovisi 49.

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Also the other children had followed the family's tradition in the hotel business: Roberto undertook the management of the Hotel Palace in Milan that had been sold by Bucher-Durrer AG, while Elsa married Bernhard Anton Bossi and together with him worked first at the Grand Hotel de la Méditerranée and then, with her father's help, bought the Hotel Regina Palace in Stresa, on the Lake Maggiore, in Northern Italy.

In 1925, Bucher-Durrer AG decided to sell the Hotel Quirinale, in order to repay the debts that the company had incurred with several Swiss banks. The board of directors erroneously feared that the bad Italian economic

situation of the initial post-war period was such that the hotel in Rome would soon be a liability rather than an asset. The hotel was thus sold to an ex-member of the Italian parliament, a certain Mr. Gioacchino Mecheri, with Heinrich Wirth's great sorrow. Wirth had managed it with such care and affection to render the hotel a point of reference in the Eternal City. However, what really saddened Wirth was not only the sale of the Hotel Quirinale but the way the entire negotiation had been dealt with by the Bucher-Durrer AG, resulting in a long legal action started by Mecheri against Wirth, which in the end was won, in a large part, by Wirth's heirs after his death.

In the meanwhile Heinrich Wirth, having realized that the Bucher-Durrer AG was in deep water, decided to buy, together with a gentleman of German origins who lived in Rome, the Hotel Victoria near Via Veneto, bordering the Borghese Gardens. He wanted to assure his own future and that of his new family: his wife Alberta and his children Alberto and Lotty.

In 1949, ten years after Heinrich Wirth's death, the hotel was completely taken over by Oscar Wirth who became the sole proprietor.

Heinrich Wirth died in 1939. His sudden death did not come unexpectedly, since his health conditions had considerably worsened after the lawsuit Mecheri had started against him.

OSCAR WIRTH

Heinrich Wirth's third child, Oscar, followed in his father's footsteps in Rome. Heinrich's great friend Franz Nistelweck asked him to open a company together that shared the management of both the Hotel Eden and Hassler. Heinrich accepted and set his son Oscar to manage the properties, where he worked as General Manager, in partnership with Franz Nistelweck, since 1921, then becoming co-proprietor as of 1936. Oscar was the operational arm of the partnership, managing both the Eden and the Hassler personally since 1964, when he and Franz Nistelweck's descendents, Giuseppe and Francesco Ciaceri, decided to separate the properties, so that the Hassler remained with Oscar Wirth and the Eden to the Ciaceri's (until 1988 when it was sold to Charles Forte).

Between 1943 and 1944, Oscar Wirth lived through Rome's military periods, both at the Eden with the German occupation and then the English Liberation army, and at the Hassler, under the command of General Eisenhower.

The hotel located at the top of the Spanish Steps had all the necessary requirements to become one of the most important hotels in Rome, but strongly needed to be restructured. Therefore, **in 1939 Oscar Wirth demolished the building almost entirely in order to rebuild it anew.** It is only due to Wirth's stubbornness that the Hassler can now be admired as it is: in fact Oscar Wirth had to fight against government officers who did not want to grant the permission for the reconstruction of the building. At the end of World War II, the hotel was requisitioned by the U.S. Air-Force and became their headquarters in Rome. It was not until 1947 that the Hassler was finally re-opened to its clients, with Oscar Wirth as its General Manager.

In 1949, during a trip to New York, Oscar Wirth met his cousin Carmen Bucher, great-grand-daughter of Franz Josef Bucher and fell in love with her. In August of the same year, the two got married, thus linking for the second time in less than a century the destinies of two great hotelier families. In May 1950, their first son, Roberto was born and he is one of the few descendants of the Bucher-Wirth family still at the head of a prestigious hotel such as the Hassler.

The Hotel Hassler now belongs entirely to Roberto E. Wirth, who manages it with great care, passion and vision.

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