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The Development of Organized Winter Sport in Austria: The Example of the DAKS (Deutsche Arlberg Kurse Schneider)

Introduction

There is no doubt that skiing as a sport and winter tourism are now regarded as important elements of Austrian identity. Large Alpine events such as the traditional Hahnenkamm races or the night race in Schladming attract tens of thousands of visitors every year, and Austrian television often adopts a chauvinistic tone in its coverage of sporting competitions. Politicians also bask in the success of the athletes, as was evident – to cite just one example – in the appearance of the then Federal Chancellor Werner Faymann at the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi in 2014. Numerous studies have shown in the meantime that Alpine ski racing played an important part

in the development of Austrian identity and even in the invention of the Austrian nation in the Second Republic that developed after 1945.¹ At the same time, the concern that national identity is being put at risk in view of the dwindling number of skiers, the limited lift facilities in the countryside, the absence of young talent in the Austrian Skiing Association and the consequences of climate change has been voiced recently.²

Arlberg is one of the most famous winter sport regions in the world. It currently advertises itself as “the largest continuous skiing area in Austria”, which ranks it among “the five largest skiing resorts in the world”³. The combination of skiing and the Arlberg region is characterized in the introduction to a publication on “The Arlberg and the culture of skiing” with the following words:

“Skiing and Arlberg; in the public mind these two words are nearly synonymous with one another. Indeed, one may hardly mention one without naming the other. This is because skiing, during its long development throughout the twentieth century and as it is today, would be unthinkable without the influence of the Arlberg. In turn and through its association with skiing, the region has learned to identify (and market) itself as the Arlberg. Skiing and ski-based tourism have affected the region in a way that reaches far beyond simple sports history and economics”.⁴

The basis of this link between skiing and Arlberg and the associated development of the region, in particular in terms of its economy, was created at the end of the 19th century. The development of the communication routes, in particular, played a crucial role – above all, the opening of the Arlberg railroad in 1884 and construction of the Flexenpass road to Zürs and Lech starting in 1895. As one of the first associations to become active in this area, the Arlberg Skiing Club was founded in 1901 in St. Christoph am Arlberg by a few keen pioneers of the sport of skiing in the region. After the First World War, which had halted the development of tourism, the region was caught between “tradition and modernity” in the 1920s.⁵ That phase saw the development of a tourism brand that proved to be pioneering in the development of skiing tourism – and which was emulated far beyond the region. This was the *DAKS*, the so-called *Deutsche Arlberg Kurse Schneider* (Schneider German

Arlberg Courses), “the first skiing courses with full board, which have been imitated in similar forms everywhere ever since. In four years, St. Anton alone had over 5,000 participants in weekly courses.”⁶

The two protagonists in this tourism “brand”, Hannes Schneider (the man who gave his name to it) and Rudolf Gomperz (who came up with the idea) had already met before the First World War. At that time Gomperz, who was twelve years older, had already proved himself an important backer of the young skier Schneider. Between the wars, the two skiing pioneers were the most important promoters of the Arlberg region and were able to take their work to an international scale. The *DAKS* can be regarded as the most successful “product” of their collaboration. This article investigates the way in which Gomperz and Schneider met and tells the story of how *DAKS* developed. At the same time, it raises some questions about the significance and, in particular, the emulation of this tourism brand, the answers to which will be reserved for future research.

Gomperz and Schneider – beginnings of cooperation

Rudolf Emanuel Karl Gomperz was born in Vienna on March 10, 1878, the son of a family that had been at the top of Jewish society for generations and strove to gain acceptance from the city’s upper classes.⁷ After high school in Wieden and technical studies in Vienna, Rudolf Gomperz took a degree in Civil Engineering in Berlin. His enthusiasm for the mountains and Alpinism dated back to his student life. In 1904 he worked as an engineer on the construction of the Baghdad railroad, where he caught malaria. To recover, he was sent to St. Anton am Arlberg in the Alps. He liked it so much that he settled there. In the decades that followed he made an enormous contribution to Arlberg’s reputation as a tourist region (which was displaced from the popular consciousness after 1945).⁸ In 1906 Rudolf Gomperz became chairman of the Arlberg Skiing Club, founded only five years earlier. A year later he published an account of the origins of this club.⁹ Alongside a small business in St. Anton am Arlberg, Gomperz concentrated above all on promoting skiing in Austria and central Europe in the years leading up to the First World War. In 1908 he took over as chairman of the Austrian Skiing As-

sociation (ÖSV), and two years later he became chairman of the Central European Skiing Association, the umbrella organization for the Austrian and German associations. He remained in his post as director of the ÖSV. He had married Munich-born Clara Susanna Westphal in 1907. The couple subsequently moved around between Munich, Innsbruck, Salzburg and St. Anton, before eventually settling in Arlberg in 1912, the year in which the family home was built under the name “Sonnenheim”. Around this time Gomperz’s friend Bernhard Trier had the Villa Trier, now the museum of St. Anton am Arlberg, built. To propagate the sport of skiing, which was still in its infancy, Gomperz did a lot, including releasing publications, lecturing and traveling. In St. Anton, investment in the first tourist infrastructure – a ski jump, an ice rink and the toboggan run – was on his initiative.¹⁰

“In 1907, Hannes Schneider appears on the scene.”¹¹ Johann Baptist Schneider, the son of a road builder who worked on the Arlbergstraße, was born on June 24, 1890 – just a few years after the opening of the Arlberg railroad – in Stuben am Arlberg, where he grew up in an era of great change. In 1930, when he was already a world-famous skiing instructor, he recounted his early meetings with fellow skiers and told of a skiing course run by Viktor Sohm in Zürs. It was from him that the young Schneider learned “Telemark skiing, Christiania turns, and jumping on a looping slope”¹². Subsequently, Schneider attracted the interest of the skiing world as a talented racer.¹³ He had also been noticed in St. Anton am Arlberg:

“As novice skiers were coming to Arlberg in increasing numbers in this period, it soon seemed like a good idea to offer them the opportunity to take lessons. Pursuing this goal, the club [Arlberg Skiing Club, author’s note] and the far-sighted hotelier Carl Schuler succeeded in recruiting the young Schneider as a skiing instructor in the fall of 1907, and on December 7, 1907 Hannes Schneider, then 17 years old, moved permanently to St. Anton as the skiing instructor of the S.C.A.”¹⁴

In Arlberg the young skiing instructor Schneider found the ideal conditions for observing the development of skiing techniques in that period. In the first decade of the 20th century, many important pioneers visited the region to ski and also to hold courses. They included, in

addition to Viktor Sohm mentioned previously, Hermann Hartmann, Fridolin Hochleitner, Josef Ostler, Wilhelm Paulcke and Wilhelm Rickmer-Rickmers. The latter was a leading exponent of the “Lilienfeld skiing technique”, while Paulcke was the best known proponent of the “Norwegian” technique.¹⁵

But Rudolf Gomperz was to become the most important supporter of Schneider, as he had recognized the talent of this exceptional skier early on. Together with Bernhard Trier, his successor as the head of Arlberg Skiing Club, he became a leading figure in a controversy that ran in the magazine “Der Winter” about the question of amateur status. As a paid skiing instructor, Schneider was not permitted to take part in skiing races in Austria.¹⁶

The development of tourism in St. Anton and skiing in the region gave cause for hope. In any case, Schneider, who in recent years had increasingly developed a new method of downhill skiing, was able to employ his first two assistant instructors, Robert Schuler and Bernhard Trier, in 1912. The outbreak of the First World War, however, practically killed off tourism. During the war the paths of Gomperz and Schneider were also to diverge for several years.

When the war broke out in the summer of 1914, the skiing instructor Schneider was drafted into Infantry Regiment No. 14. He had already begun his military service with this regiment in 1911, but had been discharged after a short time – as a result, he suspected, of an intervention from St. Anton. In February 1915 the war took him to the Russian front. He was then appointed to a cadre in Trient, and in May 1915 he was sent as a non-commissioned officer to the Italian front.¹⁷ There he met a former pupil of his skiing school, Lieutenant Paul Passini. Schneider began running skiing courses for soldiers as a training officer and taught them following his own system, even though the method of Mathias Zdarsky was standard in the Austro-Hungarian army. The advantage was that Schneider was able to give orders in the army, and strict discipline was therefore in place. In the inter-war period this discipline was also to characterize his civilian skiing school, which was shaped significantly by his military experiences.¹⁸

Rudolf Gomperz was also drafted immediately after the outbreak of the First World War, but was soon discharged as unfit for military ser-

vice. After he volunteered again, he was appointed as technical head of the Imperial and Royal Skiing Workshop in Salzburg on the basis of his skills. Alpine equipment was made and procured for the German and Austrian military there. Especially after Italy entered the war, the Skiing Workshop developed into a virtual factory supplying the front, under the leadership of Gomperz and Georg Bilgeri.¹⁹



Rudolf Gomperz and Hannes Schneider (second and third from right) with a group of skier from a DAKS course. Photo: Museumsverein Klosters.

The development of Hannes Schneider's group skiing school

Winter tourism had practically died out because of the First World War. The ban on carrying sporting equipment by train in particular harmed tourism. Nevertheless, Rudolf Gomperz was able to report in 1918, the fourth year of the war, that young people in Arlberg were “working extremely hard” on their skiing.²⁰ On the other hand, the absence of guests was causing difficulties for many places. The vacation accommodation provided by the hospice in St. Christoph, for example, had to be abandoned in April 1918 because there were no guests.²¹

At the end of the war, Hannes Schneider returned from the Italian front to his home, but had hardly any opportunity to run skiing courses in the winter of 1918/19. Apart from Italian soldiers, there were at the start virtually no visitors to St. Anton.²² From 1920 he began working as a skiing instructor again, now independently of the Hotel Post and the Arlberg Skiing Club. Success came relatively quickly, and by 1922 Schneider was able to appoint his first assistant skiing instructors and introduce group instruction for the participants. From this point on Hannes Schneider had his own skiing school in St. Anton am Arlberg.²³

Walther Flaig described the skiing school as follows:

“Now we can legitimately refer to an Arlberg school, as in 1922 Hannes [Schneider, author's note] began teaching skiing as if in a school with his assistant instructors Hermann Schuler and Oswald Schweiger. The course participants are divided into classes and groups. They advance from class to class at different speeds, depending on their ability. The instructor no longer has to deal with all levels at the same time and pupils do not have to try anything that they cannot manage. In addition, there is huge incentive for ambitious pupils. This group instruction is completely revolutionizing the skiing course system and makes it possible – assuming the pupil is able and hard-working – to turn a complete beginner and ski novice into a decent skier inside a week. If, in the past, the “slow-motion Christiania” – in other words, the switchback turn – had been a strength of his downhill skiing, he is now able to use the stem Christiania, a universal

turn, whenever he wishes. – The Arlberg school is becoming a model for skiing schools throughout the Alps, however reluctant some might be to admit it.”²⁴

The films of Dr. Arnold Fanck played a large part in popularizing Hannes Schneider’s skiing school. The film director, who came from Freiburg im Breisgau, had already noted Schneider’s talent as a skier before the First World War. Schneider first starred in “*Wunder des Schneeschuhs*” (“Miracle of the snowshoe”) in 1920. This and subsequent films played a large part in making skiing “popular in a way not previously known”²⁵ in the media. A “by-product” of the film work became a worldwide success in its own right. In 1925 Fanck and Schneider published their book “*Wunder des Schneeschuhs – ein System des richtigen Skilaufens und seiner Anwendung im alpinen Geländelauf*” (published in English as “The Wonders of Skis – A Method of Correct Skiing and its Application to Alpine Running”), and in the following years it went through numerous editions and was translated into several languages. The success of the business was also reflected in the increasing number of skiing instructors employed. By 1930, there were 20.²⁶

At the same time, the method of teaching skiing that Hannes Schneider had created was enjoying increasing acceptance. In 1924 it was introduced as the official teaching method in Tyrol.²⁷

The origin of the Deutsche Arlberg Kurse Schneider

“In the fall of 1925”, Schneider wrote in 1937, “the first course for heads of schools was held in St. Anton a/A by the German Ski Association and at this the head instructors from various parts of Germany were present. Several gentlemen explained their method of instruction and I also had an opportunity to demonstrate my manner of teaching. The result of this course was that the German Ski School heads were directed to see to it that in the future in their regions ski instruction was given according to my method and technique of teaching.”²⁸

This fact highlights a special connection between German visitors and the Arlberg region. This is primarily the result of Hannes Schneider’s

reputation in Germany. It had been consolidated by his sporting successes and skiing films, as Schneider and Gomperz reported in their skiing guide, published in 1927:

“Schneider had these films and their wide distribution to thank for his wide-ranging popularity and the general recognition of his outstanding skiing and climbing skills. When, in 1922, at the first German Winter Sports Games, he became champion in the 1st class ski jump and came first in the ski jump at the big Swiss skiing championships in Grindelwald in 1923, he had positioned himself clearly as the leading German skier.”²⁹

In 1926, because of a lack of snow in many regions, the arrangements for the German skiing championship were made quickly. The German Skiing Association appointed Hannes Schneider as its first “Honorary Patron”³⁰. In the same year Rudolf Gomperz was asked to structure and organize the sport of skiing and tourism in St. Anton am Arlberg, and so he returned. He had done this voluntarily for almost ten years before the First World War, but was now dependent on a modest salary, having lost his money in the inflation following the First World War. “The engineer Gomperz, now 48, began working on behalf of St. Anton full of enthusiasm for the Arlberg region.”³¹

Gomperz clearly recognized the huge potential in German visitors. Shortly after he began working in St. Anton he established the “*Deutsche Arlberg-Kurse der Skischule Hannes Schneider*” (German Arlberg Courses of Hannes Schneider’s Skiing School) as an additional course, which subsequently became the *Deutsche Arlberg-Kurse Schneider*, or *DAKS*. They courses were set up “to cater in particular to German skiing associations and clubs”. All course participants enjoyed “full board in heated rooms with several beds, with beer money, skiing course fees and even an attractive badge included in the all-in price of RM 50.00 for one week – Sunday evening until Sunday morning.”³²

Hans Thöni reported that Herta Schneider, born in 1921 to the skiing pioneer, recalled that she and her brother Herber were responsible for issuing the equipment that was hired out every Sunday – the skis, boots and poles.³³



Hannes Schneider as a ski instructor. Photo: Museumsverein Klosters.

Hannes Schneider oversaw the skiing courses, which were led, according to Rudolf Gomperz, by “excellent” skiing instructors in groups according to ability. The participants were all trained systematically for the next performance level. An important aspect of the immediate success of the new courses was the good skiing conditions in the winter of 1926/27. From March 20, two weekly courses were also offered for beginners. From April 3, touring courses for experienced skiers were also available for four weeks.³⁴

In June 1927 the *Voralberger Tagblatt* reported on the first season of the *DAKS*:

“At the suggestion of the German Skiing Association, the *Deutsche Arlbergkurse der Schieschule Hannes Schneiders (DAKS)* were established in St. Anton am Arlberg in the fall of 1926. Above all, the aim of the courses was to give less well-off German skiers a week’s skiing instruction, food and accommodation at a cheap flat rate. Last winter, 950 people took part in these courses. 900 of them were from Germany. All courses were held un-

der the overall leadership of Hannes Schneider, in groups that practiced with an assistant instructor. At the end of each week, tours were run. Encouraged by this success, the *DAKS* has now set up its own summer service, which provides guided tours of the Arlberg region every day. High-altitude hikes and mountain tours in two groups are led by mountain guides. Every summer visitor to the Arlberg region now has the chance to join a guided tour every day. For young people, single ladies and families who may want to take part in more or less strenuous tours depending on the capabilities of their members, there are particularly welcome opportunities here. As in winter, package prices have been introduced and cover all expenses for the tours, accommodation and food, and at only slightly higher cost than the standard local prices for full board and service.”³⁵

In their 1927 skiing guide, Schneider and Gomperz reported that more than 2,000 pupils had been taught in the *DAKS* in that first winter.³⁶ This success justified their efforts and strengthened their decision to offer something similar in the summer. According to the annual report of the Arlberg Skiing Club, around 2,000 people also attended the *DAKS* courses in the winter of 1928/29, some of them already for the second or third time.³⁷ The success of the *Deutsche Arlberg Kurse* Schneider was covered in numerous newspaper articles, including one in the *Voralberger Landeszeitung* in September 1928:

“In St. Anton one clearly sees the guiding hand of the well-known skiing instructor Hannes Schneider and the tireless engineer Gomperz, the two men who introduced the *Daks-Kurse* (*Deutsche Arlberg-Kurse*) several years ago and in doing so struck gold.”³⁸

The *DAKS* ran from 1926 to 1932. As Hans Thöni writes, they “properly established the reputation of St. Anton as a skiing resort for the first time”³⁹. Political developments in Germany eventually led to the end of this significant tourist innovation. The extent to which it affected the building boom, which began in St. Anton at the end of the 1920s, is a matter to be explored in future studies. Nor can the question as to the factors that influenced Rudolf Gomperz in developing the idea of a

modern concept of tourism with full board and all-inclusive service be answered properly as yet. It is nevertheless a fact that the model found numerous imitators and played a large part in establishing the reputation of Arlberg as the “High School of Skiing”. Gomperz recounted this himself in an interesting article in the magazine “*Bergland*” in 1934:

“In 1926 the “DAKS” (“Deutsche Arlbergkurse Schneider”) full-board accommodation with skiing lessons at fixed prices - came into being. These courses were very popular and were subsequently imitated elsewhere. The weekly lectures of the author on the subject of avalanches were a special attraction; well over 100 such talks were held, and over 7000 ski course participants listened to them. A group from Strasbourg provided the best students. These went on to found an “*école d’Arlberg*” at the “Lac Blanc” in the Vosges mountains. As a result, the French became interested. Whereupon a Norwegian ski instructor working in Savoy waxed wroth and wrote a pretty stupid “open letter” to Schneider. The answer that I myself had occasion to give appeared in many French sports periodicals, finished the Norwegian off once and for all and really drew attention to the Arlberg. The English, who had first visited the Arlberg region under the guidance of E. C. Richardson back in 1907, were slowly increasing in numbers. There now also appeared their highly literate leader Arnold Lunn, who found Schneider and his method so much to his taste that he established close ties between his piste-loving friends from the Kandahar Club and the Arlberg Ski Club. The Arlberg-Kandahar Cup for downhill and slalom racing was established and held for the first time at the Arlberg in 1928. It was - as always - impeccably organised from a sporting point of view and made a convincing start. Later it was decided to hold the “Kandahar” alternately in Mürren and St. Anton. Its superior sporting significance is recognised internationally. Naturally enough [...] the Italians became involved - after all, in an act of high praise they coined the phrase “*l’Università dello sci*” for the Arlberg - and the Swiss are also coming across every year in ever greater numbers. When, in 1930, Hannes Schneider was invited to Japan for a month to give lectures and run ski courses, this also contributed in no small way to the spread of his reputation and that

of the Arlberg, and since that time eager-to-learn Japanese can always be found on the Arlberg. [...] In any case, the “Arlberg“ has become a permanent fixture in the winter sports calendar; its position of pre-eminence is truly not undeserved.”⁴⁰

Conclusion

In introducing the *Deutsche Arlberg Kurse Schneider (DAKS)* in 1926, Rudolf Gomperz and Hannes Schneider clearly touched a contemporary nerve. A broad-based concept allowed many vacationers to come to Arlberg and to learn how to ski while they were there. This development can certainly be regarded as a milestone in the rise of winter tourism. The presence of numerous German visitors in St. Anton was later described by a French observer as a “pre-annexation takeover”⁴¹. Ultimately, it was the “real annexation” in 1938, when the German army crossed the border in March of that year, that was to determine the fate of the two protagonists Gomperz and Schneider in a tragic way. According to the Nuremberg race laws, Gomperz was regarded as a “full Jew” and he was subjected to increasing repression under the Nazi regime. Eventually he was forced to resettle in Vienna and was murdered in Maly Trostinec in 1942. Hannes Schneider was arrested by the Nazis in March 1938 and had to leave St. Anton. Thanks to some international string-pulling, was able to emigrate to the USA in 1939, where he devoted himself to setting up a ski resort. Today, almost 80 years after the so-called “annexation” of Austria, a pair of monuments in the park of the St. Anton am Arlberg museum commemorate the two great innovators and founders of the *DAKS*.

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