

LEO GURSCHLER AND THE SPORTS VILLAGE OF KURZRAS

The development of the Schnalstal tourist industry is without any doubt the joint achievement of many women and men of action throughout the valley. Nevertheless, the progress that came into Schnals is connected with the achievement of one single, great man, who as the initiator and pioneer not only accelerated progress by the wealth of his own ideas and physical, mental and psychic achievements, but who also even sacrificed his own existence finally, breaking in the end due to the difficulties which seemed to be completely unsolvable. This man was Leo Gurschler, husband of Giuliana and father of Hermann, Martina, Caroline and Michael.

For the people he was a kind of status symbol of the rising Schnalstal and in addition a bit of Confidence.

Leo Gurschler grew up in the mountains. At the age of 10, already, he climbed up the Weißkogel. There was no rocky slope that was too steep for him, no peak too high, no crest too narrow, no ski run too difficult. Thus, having attained manhood he still continued to be a kind of enthusiastic mountain climber, a person, who did not turn back halfway, who did not stop at the slightest danger, who was untiring in pursuing his goal, who knew how to encourage his mountain fellows, sweeping them along with him. He remained an undaunted and fearless crest hiker, who did not feel dizzy when looking down into the depth, being very well aware of the fact that a single false step could mean the disaster, a crest hiker, who kept his courage as long as there was any kind of hold. He remained a passionate skier. What was characteristic for him were his skill and quick reactivity, his sense of balance, virtues and good qualities without with a person having planted his feet firmly on the ground can not get along. You have to know all that, taking this into account when judging Leo Gurschler, otherwise you do not justice to this man, who in his heart and soul was a hunter, whom wind and weather were unable to harm, who loved the freedom of nature, detesting nothing more than staying –at-home, who knew to wait for the suitable moment for observation, tracking down his prey, knowing how to shoot accurately.

Leo was a man who never refused to help other people, in particular if the worst came to the worst. He was the man who stepped into the breach when other people could not do anything more. With his helicopter he saved many lives.

Leo was a man who knuckled down, a “doer” in the positive sense of the word, a practical person, of which he gave evidence a thousand times, in particular when building the glacier run. Again and again he was brooding over new ideas, never getting tired, with the energy of a locomotive running at full steam. Despite of all setbacks he wanted to create something, continue to work, however, he did not quite know how, where and what.

That’s the way it is – Leo could not achieve everything he had determined to create (an

electrical generating station for Kurzras, and artificial snow area, the Hintereislift, broadcasting stations, ...). However, his greatest dream has become true – the development of the Hochjochferner as an all-season skiing area. It is his idea and for the major part his work as well. At the age of thirteen already he is said to have proposed to his father that he should build a funicular railway into the Grawand. However, in the opinion of his father this was nonsense, the crazy idea of a young lad. However, Leo never gave up this idea ...

At the tender age of seventeen, already, he was an independent peasant and restaurateur at Kurzras, master over the largest and certainly richest estate of Schnalstal, at all. Even therefore, he enjoyed – as already his father Hermann and his grandfather Serafin did – a high unimpeachable standing. Both had been pioneers of the tourist industry on a modest scale, having achieved respectable success in their time. When Leo announced his plan to build a funicular railway on the Grawand to make it possible for the ski sports fans from far and near to romp around the Hochjoch glacier throughout the whole year, he did no longer fall on deaf ears at the local council – what he had experienced with his father. The council was very well aware of the fact that the funicular railway had to make skiing possible all seasons, throughout the year, that waiting times for the glacier cable car had to be prevented and that the whole project had to be handled generously and in a modern way. It was only by such an approach that the attractiveness could be attained necessary to vitally improve the economic situation of the Schnalstal.

It did not take very long until the “project of the century” of the rural commune of Schnalstal was announced. Thus, on 6 July 1972 the joint stock company of Schnalstal was founded with a capital stock in the amount of 50 million Lire (corresponding to appr. 29,000 Euro). This modest amount already gives a slight idea of the immeasurable difficulties encountered when realizing this project. Indeed, if the young commune had foreseen even the slightest forthcoming, financial problems, some stockholders would have lost courage. The inclemency of the area, again and again creating new, unforeseeable obstacles on the one hand and the first great oil crisis of 1974, resulting in an economic recession on the other hand, made prices soar to an unconceivable extent. In addition, price inflation existing since 1973 and the resulting increase in interests, partly exceeding the 20% limit, had to be taken into account. The rural commune of Schnals very soon realized that it would have been too much for them alone so that they had to make it possible for people not residing at the Schnalstal to buy shares of the joint stock company, also. Thus, Leo led innumerable conversations with banks, seeking to attract further stockholders and increased his own shares.

With the start of the construction work, however, immediately the biggest, technical difficulties arose. How could it have been differently? Anybody looking up to the Grawand for the first time when standing at Kurzras will not understand at all how it had been possible to erect the top station of a funicular railway by means of very heavy construction parts and

machinery there on top of the crest, and above all how it had been possible to get the support cables weighing many tons up the mountain. Only people having grown up in such a rough mountain landscape could meet such challenges. Leo Gurschler without any doubt was the soul and the driving force of the project. Comparing his physical achievements he could take on the construction workers any time. That was shown best when he drove onto the Grawand with a bucket excavator in a kind of adventurous trip.

The excavator was supplied by the company, however, it was Leo who had to get the excavator onto the ridge, as the demonstrator refused to drive the machine for lack of a suitable road. Thus Leo followed the narrow path of the winter downhill run partly characterized by almost horizontal, sometimes even dropping routes and lateral gradients, which could have made the machine both slip or tilt.

Rocky ridges had to be blasted, the excavator had to be secured by fixing steel cables onto the wall. When the caterpillar-tracked vehicles did not longer manage to move the big machine upward, it was Leo who hauled the bucket dug into the rock in centimetres further and further upward. On the glacier further problems arose as the caterpillar tracks did not have any more hold with the machine being threatened to slip. Therefore, "climbing irons" had to be manufactured for that sole purpose; and moreover, the fuel had to be carried in litres by the assistants behind the excavator. After fifteen, up to eighteen days of work Leo finally succeeded.

This personal achievement within the framework of a project will not easily be beaten by a normal mortal being.

However, for the great day to come off, several unconceivable problems had to be surmounted. On 12 July 1975 the day finally came and the glacier cable car of Schnalstal could be put into operation. Thus, Leo's childhood dream had come true, maybe to a greater extent than he had ever dared to think about. From thereupon the glacier cable car made profits, continuing to do so until today to the welfare of the Schnalstal and by up-keeping secure workplaces in its capacity as a sound company.

From the very beginning Leo knew that a highly frequented glacier cable car could not survive without a certain amount of permanent users. And that's why for Leo the sports village was a second pillar of the glacier cable car.

According to his ideas a village with a size of ten hectares, 240 bungalows and sports hotel with 80 beds was to build in the Kurzras valley area. After a very short time already he began to toy with the idea of building up five or six large hotels near the old Kurzhof, which actually had already been enlarged by the restaurant and a sports hotel. However, that project was not approved of by the commission on landscape protection. Therefore, a planning team from Bozen designed a complex of three large buildings, as they do exist today, with its architecture being adjusted to the overall contours of the mountain landscape.

Leo Gurschler has not deserved at all to be blamed as the sole scapegoat of the architecture of

New Kurzras!!! It did not bring him anything but disadvantages : His revenues from the Sales of the building land turned out to be lower than budgeted in the beginning and he was forced to realize the whole project within a short period and without interruption, unable to continue his work step by step according to the available stock capital – as it was planned originally. In addition to that there were the countless critiques, annoyed letters to the editors and newspapers articles.

He even received anonymous letters and phone calls, which posed a great strain on him!!! As a consequence, in the early eighties Leo Gurschler saw himself trapped in an inextricable network densely tied by shareholders, banks, companies, creditors and debtors.

The greatest setback, however, he suffered was the loss of the farm his ancestors had led for five generations since the beginning of the 19 th century, the riches of which they had multiplied.

In his most difficult years some inhabitants of Schnalstal, some of his own colleagues and persons not so much involved in the company are supposed to have turned away from Leo, also. Those who did no longer like Kurzras, blamed him. He more and more received cold looks, even from those who had been his friends.

Which young man can bear as much as load as that at the same time ????? Leo passed away On 28 October 1983. Who knows, how the Schnalstal could look like today? Which Dreams did he still have? What could he have changed, improved, build up?

In the course of the years even ski stars such as Gustav Thöni, Ingemar Stenmark, Alberto Tomba, Deborah Compagnoni, Martina Ertl and other important figures of the international competitive ski sports did discover the Hochjochferner as an ideal, all-season training area, which it has remained until today.

In summertime as well the area is crowded: On the one hand you can go skiing and on the other hand the beautiful landscape makes you go on wonderful hiking tours to farmhouses and alpine pastures of the most various kind.

Giuliana, his wife had thereupon to raise four children (Hermann, Martina, Caroline and Michael), having to build a new life for them. With the assistance and support of her mother-in law, Maria Oberhofer, she reached her goal. Now it's the turn of the children to continue this work at the Piccolo Hotel Gurschler.