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THEODOR EDLER (LORD) VON LERCH – HOW ALPINE SKIING CAME TO JAPAN

Many officers of the Austro-Hungarian Army had done amazing things, but in Austria and Hungary are only well known these officers who won battles or made discoveries during expeditions, for example Radetzky, Kövess von Kövesshaza, Tegetthoff, Horthy or Payer and Weyprecht. The others stayed unknown. One of them is Theodor Edler (Lord) von Lerch who in 1911 introduced alpine skiing in Japan. The achievement of Theodor von Lerch in Japan is unknown in Austria, but well known in Japan.

INTRODUCTION

The Austrian-Hungarian Forces (AHF) has not been very successful winning battles and wars since the second half of the 19th Century. The AHF suffered defeats in decisive wars at the hands of Italy, France as well as Prussia in 1866. The AHF won only unimportant battles and for the outcome of war not decisive battles like the victory of the sea-battle near the island of Lissa, situated in the Adriatic Sea, in 1866 against an inferior fighting Italian navy.

Alpine skiing (or downhill skiing) is the sport of skiing down snow-covered hills on skis with fixed-heel bindings. Alpine skiing can be contrasted with Nordic skiing-such as cross-country, ski jumping and Telemark, in which skiers use free-heel bindings. At the end of the 19th century alpine skiing made a great step forward. The most important founder of a new technique in alpine skiing in the early days was Matthias Zdarsky who lived and worked in Lilienfeld, situated in Lower Austria. Zdarsky invented a new ski binding system and a new skiing style using a long stick as an aid for riding down steep hills. It has to be mentioned that in the early days of alpine skiing the ski runs were not prepared like today and there existed also no ski lifts. Alpine skiing in the early days of the new sport was a strenuous physical exercise. One of the institutions which showed great interest in the new method of movement in snowy terrain was the AHF. Zdarsky was asked to teach officers of the AHF in the new style of skiing. Theodor Edler von Lerch was one of the officers who took part in the courses of Zdarsky. Therefore Lerch was an excellent skier in the early days of the 20th Century and he was also able to teach the new method of skiing.

THE LIFE OF THEODOR VON LERCH

Theodor von Lerch was born in August 21, 1869 in Pozsony (Bratislava) as a son of a colonel of the AHF. In 1888 Lerch entered the Theresian Military Academy in Wiener Neustadt and was promoted to Second Lieutenant in 1891. From 1891 until 1894 he served in the 102th Infantry-Regiment in Prague on different places, for example in Cattaro (Kotor). In October 1894, he was ordered to complete the general staff course at the War College in Vienna. During the Course he was promoted to First Lieutenant in 1895 and after successfully passing the course he was transferred to the 59th Infantry-Brigade in Czernowitz (Western Ukraine) in 1896. In 1897 he was transferred to the general staff office of the 11th Infantry Division in Lemberg (Western Ukraine). Lerch was promoted to Captain second class in 1898, and transferred to the 62th Infantry-Regiment as a commander of the 5th Fieldcompany in Marosvásárhely (Targu Mures in Romania). In 1900 Lerch was promoted to Captain first class and has been transferred to the general staff office of the 14th Corps in Innsbruck in Tyrol for 2 years. In 1902 he was transferred to the operations bureau of the War Ministry in Vienna and was promoted to Major in 1908. Between September, 26 1910 and January 1, 1913 Lerch stayed in Japan. During his stay in Japan he was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel in 1912. At the beginning of 1913 Lerch returned to Vienna and was transferred very soon afterwards to the 4th Regiment of the Kaiserjäger in Tyrol as a Commander of the 1st Fieldbattalion in Mezzolombardo (Northern Italy). In 1914 he was transferred to the 87th Infantry-Regiment as a commander of the detachment in Skutari (Shkodra in Albania). In 1914 before the First World War he was promoted to Colonel. After the

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beginning of the First World War, Lerch was appointed to Chief of Staff of the newly formed XVIIth Corps which was deployed to the Eastern Theater of War to the border of Russia. In 1916 the XVIIth Corps was moved to the Southern Theater of War in the Iszono-region. In August 1917 Lerch was appointed to Commander of the 20. Mountain-Brigade in Albania and later between July and September 1918 Commander of the 93th Infantry-Brigade in Albania. In 1918 Lerch was promoted to Major General and he took part in October 1918 in the Operations of the Army Group Crown Prince Rupprecht von Bavaria in Flandern (Belgium). After the end of the First World War Lerch retired in 1919 and in March 27, 1922 he married Irma Aumann. His wife brought two daughters (Irmut and Hella) in the marriage. The time in between the two world wars, Lerch gave lectures at the radio, wrote essays about military affairs and painted watercolours. Lerch died in the Christmas Eve 1945. He is buried at the Protestant part of the central cemetery of Vienna. Lerch was a well trained sportsman and he was fluently spoken German, Hungarian, Italian, English, French and Czech. During his stay in Japan, Lerch might have learnt a lit bit Japanese too.

NORDIC AND ALPINE SKIING IN THE AUSTRIAN-HUNGARIAN FORCES

While Lerch made his first experiences in alpine skiing at the turn of the century, in Austria few civilian and soldiers were already skilled alpine skiers. In the 1890s the Norwegian Fridjof Nansen published his book "The First Crossing of Greenland" which raised the interest for skiing. Nearly the same time military officers from Klosterneuburg near Vienna made excursion on skier and in Steyr and Villach the first ski troops were organized. A regular ski training in the Austrian-Hungarian Army first happened at the Kaiserjäger Regiment in 1894. One year later Lieutenant Georg Bilgeri made his first ski training and after that he organized with his comrades in Hall in Tyrol regular ski exercises. In 1897 he wrote the book "Instructions for use of ski" which was a forerunner of the later "Manuals for Alpine Skiing" which were distributed to all battalions of the Army. During the same time in Lilienfeld in Lower Austria, Zdarsky Matthias developed his type of alpine ski and his style and technique with one stick. At the beginning of the 20th Century alpine skiing became an economic factor and the first ski regions were developed. The AHF founded its first ski workshop in Salzburg in 1905 and one year later the workshop produced 1,400 pair of ski. An important step forward to develop alpine skiing was achieved by Bilgeri in 1910 while he combined his style using two sticks and the style of Zdarsky using only one stick. Therefore, with this achievement, Bilgeri became the pioneer of modern skiing.

WHY JAPAN?

At the beginning of the 20th Century Japan was a favourite destination for travelling of military officers of all countries of the world. The reason therefore was the decisive victory of Japan, an Asian power in being, over Russia, a European great power, in the Russo-Japanese War 1904/05. In this war the belligerents made use of all new weapons, especially modern heavy siege artillery and machineguns. All great powers of the world therefore wanted to study the effects of these new weapons.

Japan and the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy opened diplomatic relationship in 1869 and after that both countries exchanged knowledge and persons to study the performances of the other nations. Though in the eyes of the Japanese general staff the importance of the Austrian-Hungarian Army and Navy was not high, Japan and the Austrian Hungarian Monarchy exchanged military staff personal, for example military attaches and other military personal for the purpose of studying military affairs in the foreign country.

TAKATA 1911 - A STRONG BEGIN

Lerch left Triest (Upper Italy) on board of the steamship "Franz Ferdinand" of the Austrian Lloyd in 1910. He was accompanied by Major Putz Franz who was the designated military attaché in Tokyo. Putz had to replace Lieutenant Colonel

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Adalbert Dáni von Gyarmata and Magyar-Czéke who was a Hungarian and has served as a military attaché in Tokyo since 1907. He also was the first officers of the Austrian-Hungarian Army who made studies about the Russo-Japanese war. Lerch took with him 2 pairs of alpine ski, because he knew that in Japan in many regions it snows heavy and therefore it was possible to do alpine skiing. The steamer arrived in Yokohama in November 30, 1910. After his arrival, Lerch introduced himself at the war ministry in Tokyo.

Because the Japanese knew about the special talent of Lerch to be an excellent skier, the war ministry in Tokyo sent Lerch to the 58th Infantry-Regiment in Takata which was a place where in wintertime a large amount of snow falls. The 58th Infantry-Regiment was a part of the 13th Infantry-Division. The Commander of the Division was Lieutenant General Nagaoka Gaishi who spent some years in Germany as a military attaché and spoke fluently German. Nagaoka supported Lerch and he helped him introducing alpine skiing into the Japanese Army.

In January 1911 Lerch was welcomed at the railway station of Takata by the mayor of the village, a journalist of the Asahi Shinbun and by a delegation of the Regiment. The arrival of Lerch in a small village away from the main cities was a sensation for the people living there.

At the barracks Lerch was friendly welcomed by Colonel Horiuchi Bunjiro the Commander of the Regiment. Horiuchi had little knowledge about nordic skiing and some practical experiences, because he owned Nordic ski. Therefore he was full of enthusiasm as he saw that Lerch brought alpine ski with one. The officers of the regiment asked Lerch to demonstrate downhill skiing in the surroundings of Takata. Lerch and the officers of the regiment therefore walked on January 12, 1911 to the Kanaya hill in the western part of Takata. Lerch demonstrated his ability to ride down the hill without a downfall (=the purpose of skiing) and he was cheered with the exclamation "Banzai" which means 10,000 years or simple Hurrah. The demonstration of Lerch was the starting point of the success of Alpine skiing in Japan. Horiuchi and Lerch decided that the Arsenal in Tokyo should produce such type of ski and they wanted to use it to train the soldiers in alpine skiing. Two weeks after the Arsenal sent 10 pair of ski to Takata and Lerch began teaching skiing. Lerch's first training group consists of officers of the regiment; even the Commander took part in the training. Training happened 3 or 4 times per week on different places. During the training Lerch spoke French and Captain Yamaguchi Juhachi, the general staff officer of the 13th Division, translated the instructions of Lerch into Japanese. Because of his often used "Mettre ski!" (put on the ski!), Lerch got the nickname "Monseigneur Mettre Ski". On February 12, 1911 the training group undertook a one day tour on the 1,700 meters high Nanbuyama. The following week the training group undertook some military exercises with the ski. The enthusiasm for alpine skiing caught more and more Japanese and in February 19, 1911 the first Japanese Ski Club was founded. Lerch and field marshal Nogi were appointed to members of honours. At the foundation ceremony of the club a Japanese prince and the Minister of Education were present. 1912 the club had nearly 6,000 members. One important part of the Japanese Ski History is the attempt of Lerch to ascend up Mount Fuji in wintertime. Though it was forbidden for Japanese to ascend Mount Fuji in wintertime, Lerch ascended the Mount Fuji by himself. The Mount Fuji is 3,776 meters high and in wintertime the top of the mountain is covered with ice. Lerch ascended until 3,600 meters and then he had to return because the last 300 meters were icy and he had no ice axe and climbing iron with him. At the bottom of the mountain Lerch was awaited by journalists of the important newspapers of Japan. A few days later Lerch reported his adventure to Nogi who wrote him a poem: "High in the heaven above raises Mount Fuji. Under Mount Fuji during the sunrise is glitteringly lying the land of the rising sun. Don't say narrow-minded that this land is beautiful if you don't feel real patriotism".

In commemoration of his achievements, Takata honoured Lerch with the construction of a large monument on the top of mount Kanaya and with a ski memorial museum nearby. In addition to that, every year the City of Joetsu-Takata is a part of Joetsu-celebrated the day of the first ski training with a large ceremony.

LERCH-STUDYING MILITARY AFFAIRS IN JAPAN

After the long wintertime in Takata, Lerch made his studies about the Japanese Army. He undertook journeys and sight-seeing tours. He also took part at manoeuvres and exercises of the Japanese Army, for example he took part at the

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Emperor's manoeuvres in Kyushu where he met his Horiuchi, the former commander of the 58th Infantry Regiment in Takata and, now promoted to major general, commander of the 23rd Infantry Brigade in Kyushu.

ASAHIKAWA 1912- A SUCCESSFUL CONTINUATION

In 1912 Lerch was ordered to go to Asahikawa which was a large military town at the Northern main island Hokkaido. Though the winter is long and cold in Hokkaido (during daytime minus 15 degrees Celsius and in night time minus 30 degrees Celsius), Asahikawa was an important garrison which hosted the Command of the 7th Infantry division, 3 Infantry regiments, 1 Artillery regiment, 1 cavalry regiment, 1 Engineer battalion and 1 Logistics battalion. After his arrival in February 6, 1912 Lerch was asked by Lieutenant general Hayashi Tauchihiro, the commander of the division to train his soldiers in alpine skiing. Lerch was willing to teach the soldiers of the garrison in alpine skiing with pleasure. After Takata sent ski to Asahikawa, Lerch began with his training. The training was very successful and after a month of training the group made a longer tour to the artillery shooting range near Asahikawa. In April 12, after two months training, the group ascended the Yezo Fuji. Though it was very cold some members of the group suffered frostbite on hands and legs. Nevertheless the ascent and the downhill skiing were a success.

In commemoration of his achievements, Asahikawa honoured Lerch with the construction of a large monument near the airport and with an exhibition in the Hokuchin museum.

LERCH'S SUCCESSORS

After Lerch left the country forever, other Austrians skier came to Japan to teach the Austrian school of alpine skiing. After the First World War, in the 1930s it was Hannes Schneider and after the Second World War in 1958 Rudi Matt, in the 1960s Stefan Kruckenhauser and in the 1970s Franz Hoppichler. And even legendary ski-champions from Austria found their ways to Japan. Very popular in Japan was and is Toni Sailer, who won 3 Gold medals during the Winter Olympic Games in Cortina d'Ampezzo in 1956 and also Hermann Maier became popular due to his crash in the downhill race and the following victory in super giant slalom the next day during the Olympic Winter games in Nagano in 1998. Lerch was not the only Austrian soldier who taught skiing in Japan. In the 1960ies, Niederreiter and Hutter, two non-commissioned officers of the Austrian Armed Forces (Österreichisches Bundesheer), taught skiing in Hokkaido, for example winter ranger of the Japanese Ground Self Defence Forces, and in 2009 the author of the essay hold two lecture in Japanese about the history of alpine skiing in the Austro-Hungarian Army and Lerch in Asahikawa as a special contribution to the celebration of the 140 anniversary of the begin of diplomatic relationship between the Austrian Hungarian Monarchy and Japan.

FINAL REMARKS

Today millions of Japanese like alpine skiing. This is a merit of Lerch. Lerch's achievements also influenced the economic relationship between Austria and Japan positively. Since many decades Japanese skier have been using ski and winter sportswear made in Austria. Therefore with his achievements, Lerch was a forerunner of a modern CIMIC officer. Austria will commemorate the achievement of Lerch with a symposium in autumn 2011.

REFERENCES

Curriculum vitae of Theodor Edler Lord von Lerch until 1919

Personal interview with Mrs. Barbara Lalljee (grandchild of Theodor Edler Lord von Lerch)