

The «Central» – a family chronicle

The Central Hotel is a Zurich landmark – a belle époque queen reigning over the square for which she is named. Built just in time the first Swiss National Exhibition in 1883, the hotel has aged gracefully over the decades.

Today, the “most central building in the city” is managed by the fifth generation of the very same family – and that’s not likely to change anytime soon!

Author: Daniel Fritzsche

Date: 20th August 2017

Table of contents

Foreword	3
1. Pioneering spirit at the turn of the century	
1.1. The Swiss National Exhibition as the catalyst	5
1.2. The first hotel on the square	8
1.3. Brightly lit – for a brief time	9
2. A homesick forebear	
2.1. Director of Milan’s most elegant hotel	11
2.2. An apprenticeship with Uncle Julius in the mountains	12
2.3. Love of the homeland and sound reasoning	13
3. The three brothers	
3.1. The founding father gradually hands over the reins	15
3.2. Paul Eduard Elwert-Berli – the eldest	18
3.3. Eduard «Edi» Julius Elwert-Gasteyger – the Big Boss	19
3.4. Alfred «Freddy» Richard Elwert – the luminary	24
4. The grand makeover	
4.1. A successor sought – and found	29
4.2. A renovation like a clean break	31
4.3. A hotel stay as an adventure	34
4.4. Riding the wave	37
A look ahead: The fifth generation takes over the helm	42

Impressum

Publisher: Hotel Central, Zürich	Design/layout: Aron Serafini
Author: Daniel Fritzsche	Translation/editing: Übersetzungsbüro Perfekt,
Coordination: Suad Sadok	trans-E-lation by Craig Crandall



Foreword

In the rapidly changing hotel landscape of Zurich and Switzerland, it is by no means a matter of course that a hotel stays in the ownership of the same family for more than a century. The Central Plaza Hotel is one such hotel. In 1909, Paul Elwert purchased the building «opposite the train station», as it was described in an advertisement dating from around the turn of the century. Since then, the «Central» has been passed on from generation to generation like a «challenge cup».

Over the years, the strategic orientation of the tradition-steeped hotel has changed and constantly adapted to new conditions. It was at the «Central» that the first espresso bar in German-speaking Switzerland was opened, and on the hotel roof shone Zurich's first illuminated sign. The bar remained legendary through all its metamorphoses, a meeting place for artists and night owls. Financially, the hotel has had its highs and lows. Noted personalities have shaped its history. These pages are intended to offer insight into all this and more.

Particularly in times when upheavals and changes are in the offing, it's well worth looking back in time. Today, as Dave Meyer – representing the fifth generation of the Elwert/Meyer family – gradually takes over the reins, it can be valuable to reflect on one's past and take this opportunity to learn and gain inspiration not only from previous successes, but also from the setbacks.

The conditions are indeed favourable: thanks to the renovation completed in August 2017, the Central Hotel now radiates a neat, modern look. The spaciouly redesigned «Central 1» bar has given the hotel a brand-new allure. The floor plan is now the same as it actually should have been after the last major renovation at the beginning of the 1980s.

We are very pleased and thankful that history has been kind to the hotel and the Elwert/Meyer family. May this continue in the decades to come! It is to be hoped that the «challenge cup» will – for as long as it makes commercial sense – remain in the family's hands for many a year to come.

Robert Meyer, Co-Owner of the Central Hotel, Autumn 2018

1. Pioneering spirit at the turn of the century

1.1. The Swiss National Exhibition as the catalyst

The opening of the Central Hotel is closely tied to a major event in the young constitutional democracy of Switzerland. In 1883, Zurich's Platzspitz park was transformed into the liveliest spot in Switzerland for several months. At the first National Exhibition, over 5000 exhibitors from industry, culture and business presented their best side. This grand-scale celebration marked the completion of the St. Gotthard tunnel, which had been opened to rail traffic in the previous year – a miracle of technology and a masterpiece of engineering skill. Switzerland felt proud of itself and its successes during the Belle Epoque, the period of economic vitality that followed the second wave of the Industrial Revolution. The whole of Europe was rife with optimism; science and trade flourished. This was cause for celebration – in Zurich too. Inspiration for the show came from the 1878 World Exhibition in Paris – a huge event by the standards of the time. In the Platzspitz park, right next to the main railway station, «a small group of young technicians and businessmen» (as the sources described it) wanted to attempt something similar. In a more modest setting, the group wanted to present all that Switzerland had to offer the world at the dawn of the new century. In specially designed, professionally constructed halls and pavilions, a wide variety of trades – from forestry and ceramics, to the photographic technology that was new at the time – presented themselves to visitors. And there was much for them to see: powerful machines, steam boilers, engines, pumps and turbines. But the highlight and main public attraction was something more delicate: the «Dufour Map» – the first topographic map of the modern Swiss Confederation, made to a scale of 1:100,000 by the General of the Swiss Sonderbund War, Guillaume-Henri Dufour. The country had never seen anything with such detailed precision. The colourful exhibition was accompanied by a lavish programme of entertainment, with concerts, fireworks and «Venetian nights». There was a great deal of eating, drinking and dancing – in beer halls, pastry shops and wooden taverns.

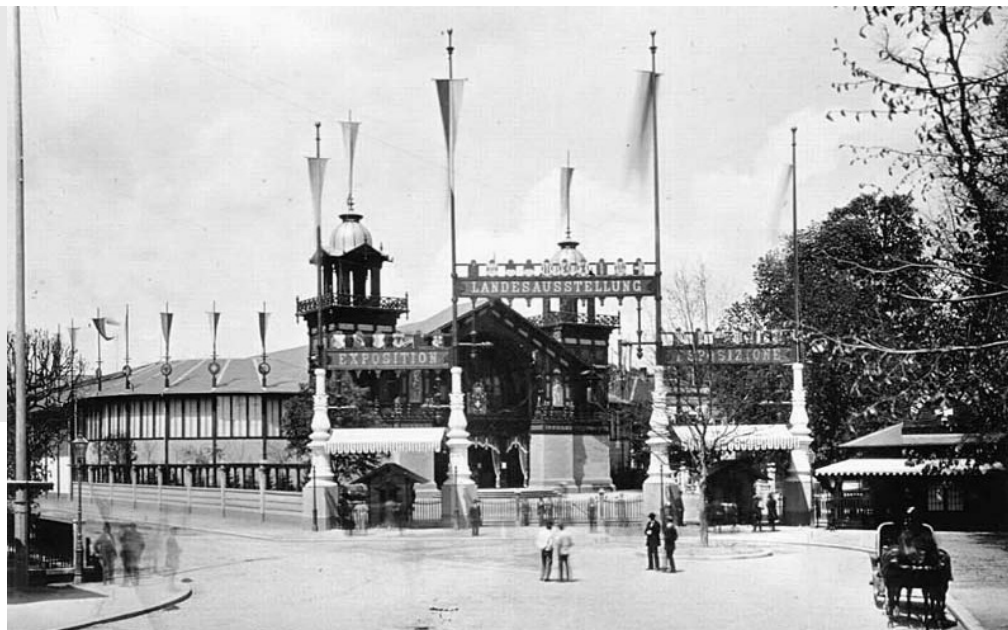
The visitors were excited and came in droves: 1.7 million people were determined not to miss this «national event on an unprecedented scale». In a letter to a friend, chronicler of the times and Zurich Secretary General Gottfried Keller wrote: «The National Exhibition in Zurich has

made a great stir for a full 5 months. Certainly half of the Swiss people – men, women, children, townsfolk and farmers – came to visit and believed that one can now hope for better times!» Neighbouring countries, too, let themselves be infected by the euphoria of «hard-working Swiss industriousness», as one newspaper article put it. Men who had already travelled widely had acknowledged «without boastfulness», «that our Swiss Exhibition can boldly stand comparison with those of Stuttgart or Nuremberg – and even surpasses them in certain respects».

The festival, which was «successful down to the smallest detail» had far-reaching effects for the city of Zurich: it boosted tourism and gave momentum to the hotel and restaurant trades. After all, the many visitors had to be catered for and accommodated somewhere. So it's no coincidence that the Central Hotel was opened in precisely that action-packed year 1883. Preserved to this very day, the earliest advertisement promoting the new hotel explicitly mentioned that the Central Hotel was situated «directly opposite the Exhibition». In adopting this marketing strategy, the «Central» was in the very best company. Other hotels also commended themselves as accommodation for festival visitors, such as the three large hotels on Bahnhofplatz square adjacent to the railway station – the «National» (today's Schweizerhof), the «Habis» and the genteel «Grand Hotel Victoria».

It can be said that the National Exhibition gave birth to the «Central». The great event made the hotel famous. In order to be able to secure its long-term existence, the first Managing Director, or «Directeur-Gérant», J.W. Habegger-Kern, had to develop new business areas and reach out to new customers. Given the hotel's outstanding location and affordable room rates, he hoped to achieve that goal.

National Exhibition 1883
Source: Zentralbibliothek Zürich



Hotel Central 1885. Source: Adolf Moser

1.2. The first hotel on the square

At the end of the 19th century, the banks of the River Limmat on today's Neumühlequai were dominated by industry. Workshops, called «Escher Wyss huts» after the engineering company of that name, were situated there. Tall factory chimneys puffed dark smoke into the sky. The Hotel Central was built directly by the water, on the same ground where a machine factory belonging to Escher-Wyss – the «Limmatburg» – had previously stood. The location was well chosen – in the immediate vicinity of today's «Bahnhofbrücke», which was in those days still called the «Limmat Bridge» (Limmatbrücke) and was the direct connection to the important transport nexus: the main railway station. There, a porter would wait for guests and transport their luggage directly to their hotel room. On a small forecourt on the Limmat side of the hotel stood a few tables where guests ate and drank under yellow and white awnings. The adjoining square was at that time still called the «Leonhardsplatz», after St. Leonhard, to whom a chapel below the Haldenegg had been dedicated in mediaeval times. Back then, the building was still listed as Niederdorfstrasse 79; it was not until the city's annexation of the municipality of Unterstrass in 1893 that it became Stampfenbachstrasse 1.

The influential master builders Baur and Nabholz designed the hotel structure in the neo-Renaissance style. They supervised the construction work and were the hotel's first owners. Johannes Baur was a trained mason, who rose in the mid-nineteenth century to become one of the city's most important building contractors and was also a member of the Cantonal Council. He was also the creator of the «Burghölzli Insane Asylum», as it was then called, and the Deaconesses' House in Neumünster. Baur was the managing director of a company with up to 500 employees in the Zurich district of Riesbach. Future architect Adolf Nabholz completed an apprenticeship with him and, in 1875, became a shareholder of that company.

The pair resolutely designed the «Central» to be a mid-range hotel. They intentionally refrained from including too much luxury and unnecessary frills. However, the standard was extremely high. In advertisements, the «Central» was promoted as a «comfortable second-category hotel with 100 rooms». It said that the furnishings were even comparable to those of first-class hotels. The target group were commercial travellers, which in light of its central yet not particularly charming location, was certainly the right strategy. In the beginning, the restaurant area was the primary source of revenue, not the hotel beds. Thus, a night's stay cost a reasonable 1.75 Swiss

francs. By contrast, a full menu at the restaurant would set you back by 3 francs. This shows where the priorities lay. The hotel was advertised with the slogan: «Friendly Service – Good Food – Proper Wines».

Was it thanks to these amenities that in those years the hotel became a preferred lodging for bishops from all over the world? It is a documented fact that, among others, the cleric Yanishev – the confessor of the Russian Tsars – lived at the «Central» for a short time. But it was not only the clergy who liked to stay at the hotel: the exiled German Social Democrat Wilhelm Liebknecht and the winner of the Nobel Prize for Physics, Albert Einstein, were also guests from time to time. The hotel was also a popular event venue. For example, in 1894, the nationalisation and unification of the Swiss rail industry was proclaimed in the Assembly Hall (Versammlungssaal) of the hotel. Four years later, a national referendum laid the foundation for today's Swiss Federal Railways, the SBB.

Already at that time, the «Central» had perfect connections to the public transport system. «Tramway station next to the hotel», announced a contemporary brochure. The horse-drawn Rössli Tram made its regular stops at the square, and then from about 1900 was replaced by the electrified version. On weekends, the guests sat in the hotel restaurant and the adjoining bar until late – as did the tram chauffeur – and if the revellers didn't feel like going home yet, they simply donated an extra schnapps to the tram driver. Consequently, the last tram run from Central Square to Oerlikon was frequently delayed for an indefinite amount of time – and everyone was happy. That would no longer be possible today!

1.3. Brightly lit – for a brief time

Just under ten years after its opening, the hotel was bought in 1892 by Emil Baltischwiler. And of course it suited him quite nicely that, in 1898, the National Museum (Landesmuseum), designed by Gustav Gull, was opened in the Platzspitz park. This new attraction brought the ideally situated hotel further guests.

Baltischwiler, the new man at the helm, tried out a number of new things. In keeping with the time, he emphasised in advertisements that there was electric light throughout the hotel. It can be assumed that it was he who had illuminated signs installed on the roof of the hotel, which were – for that time – gigantic. Dozens of light bulbs painted «HOTEL CENTRAL» in large capital letters



1912 during the backfill of the Neumühle Canal
Source: Tiefbauamt Zürich

in the night sky of Zurich; neon lighting hadn't yet been invented. That new kind of illuminated advertising must have been a sensation. Of course, as one might expect in Zurich, not everyone was enthusiastic about it. Environmentalists and national heritage organisations protested. They pilloried the «multicoloured conflagrations» that were disfiguring the appearance of the city. The «monstrous advertising» that was flowing from «barbaric America» to Europe and Switzerland had to be combated. In general, the «wild excesses of the advertising cowboys» showed that the «sense of culture and decency in business matters» was disappearing. The Swiss Association for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage (Schweizerische Vereinigung für Heimatschutz), founded in 1905, successfully called for new regulations. In 1912, the City Council of Zurich ordered the sign on the «Central» to be taken down again, as is recorded in the minutes of the municipal government. There, one can also read that a permit for a similar installation on the Hotel Bellevue was refused as well. The City Council did not want this new form of advertising to spread. It can therefore be concluded that the first large-scale illuminated signage in the city had in fact

stood on the roof of the «Central». An official department for illuminated advertising was not established until 1928, this only after the use of neon lights became increasingly widespread and the accursed things were also being produced in Switzerland. Today, only a few examples still bear witness to those pioneering days – notably the neon signs on Corso (dating from 1934) and on the former department store “Ober” at the Sihl river (1932). Today, these are officially protected landmarks. So, what was once condemned by the authorities is now being protected by them: that's how much times can change. The «Central» was just a bit ahead of its time.

2. A homesick forebear

2.1. Director of Milan's most elegant hotel

Paul Julius Elwert was General Manager of the most prestigious hotel in Milan. Nevertheless, in 1909 he decided to purchase the «Central» and return to Switzerland. On 11th October, he signed the bill of sale, which contained all the details. He handed over a cool 1,050,000 Swiss francs and in so doing became the progenitor of a hotelier dynasty in Zurich that has now existed for well over a century.

What on earth motivated Elwert to take that step? At first glance, the decision doesn't seem to make sense. Elwert was managing the Hotel Grande Bretagne & Reichmann in Milan, a genteel, historically significant establishment near the world-famous Duomo. August von Goethe, son of the poet, stayed there on his trip to Italy and praised it in his ca. 1830 diary. Composer Giuseppe Verdi spent the last years of his life, from 1872 to 1901, in one of the hotel's rooms. It was the best address in the city.

The hotel had been founded by a Swiss gentleman, a certain Herr Reichmann, who had early on recognised the advantages of the central location of this important city on the north-south trading axis. Elwert took over the hotel in 1897. By that time, «Grande Bretagne» had already been



Suitcase sticker Hôtel Grande Bretagne et Reichmann

added to its name. This was intended to make it attractive to travel-hungry British tourists, who came in ever increasing numbers during the Belle Époque. One well-known British travel guide of that time, entitled «The Hôtels of Europe, America, Asia, Australia & Africa», had the following to say about the hotel: «The only first-class in Milan with moderate charges, completely transformed and re-decorated, (...), winter garden, lift, English sanitary arrangements, (...), omnibus to all trains.» The description could later have been applied almost word-for-word to the «Central».

2.2. An apprenticeship with Uncle Julius in the mountains

So, why did Elwert give up that dream position in Milan in favour of an unpredictable adventure in a relatively new hotel in Zurich? The reasons certainly lie deeply buried in the life story of the founding father of the Elwert dynasty. Let's start from the beginning. Paul Elwert was born on 10th November 1864 in Reutlingen in what is today Baden-Württemberg, Germany. His father was a weaver; he grew up in humble circumstances. The Swabian Alps where he spent his childhood ultimately produced several famous hotelier families. Among others, the Kraft family (Bernerhof Hotel, Bern and Kraft Hotel, Florence), Wirth family (Victoria Hotel, Rome) and Armleder family (Le Richemond, Geneva) all come from there: a good environment for a young man who seemed interested in tourism.

What's more, his uncle – Heinrich Karl Julius Elwert-Maier – already worked in the sector. He owned the Bodenhause at the foot of the Splügen and San Bernardino Passes. Already back in the early 18th century, the Bodenhause was a popular hostelry for travellers – above all, traders who were crossing the Alps. Everyone of rank and reputation who was passing through stopped at the hotel, which was enlarged in 1820: Albert Einstein, Friedrich Nietzsche, William Turner, Prinz Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, Hans Christian Andersen and Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen. However, the «original Elwert» – Julius or Jules, as he always signed his name on the bills that are preserved to this very day – must also have realised that the forthcoming festive opening of the Gotthard Tunnel which, as everyone knew, was already planned for 1882, would have a major impact on the old Bodenhause. It was foreseeable that the route would be less frequented than before and that the overnight stays at the Bodenhause would decrease. Elwert was able to draw on the wealth of experience of hotel colleagues after the openings of the railway routes at Semmering (1854), Brenner (1867) and Fréjus/Mont-Cenis (1871). It's possible that this was the reason why he already left

Splügen in the mid-1870s and moved to Chur. There, he took over the Lukmanier Hotel – and it was here that the paths of Uncle Julius and his nephew Paul Julius first crossed (the similarity of their names would, incidentally, lead to several mix-ups in later life).

The 13-year-old Paul had been sent to Chur to help his uncle at the hotel and to be his apprentice. In those days, it was not unusual for youngsters to be shipped off to relatives abroad. The aim was to give the child greater opportunities for development; it also relieved their parents of a financial burden, while the relatives abroad gained a free worker. Back then, the profession of hotelier was a lucrative one. Young Paul was a hard-working apprentice. In a very short time and through constant contact with hotel guests, he learned foreign languages: English, French and Italian. He took on responsibility at a young age, which prepared him for his later life as a hotelier. In between, he completed an internship at a bank in Neuenburg and took temporary jobs at hotels in France, England and Italy. Here too, his uncle's good network of contacts was a help. When his uncle died in 1887, Paul Elwert was ready to follow in his footsteps. The 23-year-old became the new director of the Lukmanier Hotel, which had recently been turned into a joint-stock corporation.

2.3. Love of the homeland and sound reasoning

There were only two things missing to round out young Elwert's happiness: a Swiss passport and a wife. He didn't have to wait long for them. A mere two years later, he married Marie Eggen from Aarau, who was one year his junior. They had made each other's acquaintance in Chur, when Marie was visiting Uncle Julius' daughter, who was a friend of hers. One year later, Paul Elwert was granted citizenship of Chur. The family grew at a steady pace: three children were born in 1891, 1893 and 1897 – three boys, Paul, Eduard and Alfred. Given this initial situation, the foundation for a long family tradition had now been well and truly laid. Paul Elwert bought himself a car, which back then in rural Chur was an absolute sensation. According to his descendant Alex Meyer, it was the first motorcar in the city, where the traffic otherwise consisted only of horse-drawn carriages. Due to their lifestyle, the family was viewed with suspicion and resented by some; horse dung was thrown at the car as it passed. Perhaps this was another reason why the family of five moved to Milan in 1897. Elwert was given the opportunity to purchase the Hotel Grande Bretagne & Reichmann. He didn't have to be asked twice. He was able to sell his shares in

«Lukmanier AG» at a good price.

He thus became the manager of the prestigious hotel in northern Italy, but he never felt completely at home there. He sent the children to an international school, as he probably realised early on that the «Grande Bretagne» would only be another intermediate stop. He missed the Alpine region too much, particularly Switzerland, of which he was now a citizen. His wife, who maintained close ties with her homeland, must likewise have played a role in Paul Elwert's accepting the aforementioned offer from Zurich and moving to the «Central» in 1909. The children were able to enjoy a better education there – and in their native language. All the knowledge that Paul Elwert had autodidactically acquired through hard private study would now be easier for his sons to accumulate. By the way, he had also toyed with the idea of purchasing the «Eden au Lac», but ultimately decided to take the «Central» offer because of its proximity to the railway station.

Freeze-over of lake Zurich in front of castle Rapperswil in February 1929

from left: Marie Elwert-Eggen, Paul Julius Elwert-Eggen, Rita (Meyer-) Elwert, Gertrud Gasteyger, Heinz Elwert, Carl Julius Gasteyger, Erna Elwert-Gasteyger und Eduard Elwert-Gasteyger



So, yes, homesickness certainly influenced Paul's decision to return to Switzerland. However, that wasn't the only decisive factor. The same considerations that led his uncle to leave the Bodenhause hotel on the Splügen Pass due to the opening of the Gotthard railway tunnel must also have played a role. Here in Zurich, the «Central» was at the opposite end of the food chain. After all, it actually profited from this new means of travel – as a starting point and final destination for tourists and tradesmen travelling along the north-south route. In that sense, Elwert's signature on the bill of sale of 1909 closed the circle of a series of events that to a large extent had been set in motion by the new Gotthard tunnel.

3. The three brothers

3.1. The founding father gradually hands over the reins

Paul Julius Elwert wanted to remain in Zurich. Here at the «Central», he had found his domain.

He involved his three sons in the business at a young age; they helped out both publicly and behind the scenes. Their careers in the hotel trade were already mapped out; with such a family history, it was impossible to imagine them doing anything else. Their mother, Marie Elwert-Eggen, was also a very strong presence as the hostess. The «capable woman», as she was described, played a major role in smartening up the hotel and giving it fresh impetus. After just a few years under Elwert's management, the «Central» had risen to become a «prestigious place of hospitality», as an acclaimed series of publications on «Swiss Host Families» put it. In the foreword to the publication, Zurich mayor emeritus Thomas Wagner praises the assiduity of Zurich's hoteliers, who had made a vital contribution towards the excellent growth of tourism in the city and the development of Zurich as an attractive location. Like hardly any other industry, this was living proof of the virtuous yet often inconvenient



Marie Elwert-Eggen 1929

law that quality is not a matter of theory, but depends on people, writes Wagner. He pointed out that the visible or invisible «master of the house» – or mistress of the house – definitively shapes the image of a hotel. «This influence is palpable for the guest from the instant they enter the hotel to the moment when they've just paid the bill» wrote the Mayor. Those words apply perfectly to Paul Elwert, his wife and the three sons. They were hoteliers with heart and soul.

Before the outbreak of the First World War, Father Paul was active in many associations that further promoted tourism. He was an active member of the Board of Directors of the «International Hotel Owners' Association», among other bodies, and was careful to keep his books in good order – his father had instilled in him the habit of thrifty budgeting. Nonetheless, he was not afraid of making investments. He tried out innovative things. For instance, he renovated the illuminated sign his predecessor Baltischwiler had already installed – so that now it could also beam out the latest news from around the world. An air of Times Square wafted through the city on the River Limmat.

Elwert also opened the first espresso bar in German-speaking Switzerland. It caused a sensation! It's safe to assume that he had brought the expertise for it from his days in Milan. In the bar, a bell was installed which the person in charge of the Rössli tram could operate from outside to let the guests know that the tram would soon be leaving. As in the early days of the «Central» – particularly late at night, just before closing time – this was very helpful. The bell was removed in 1919 when the tram line was extended over the bridge to Zurich's main station.

Prior to that, the room housed a «Vienna Café», which offered (among other delicacies) sweet dishes from Austria-Hungary. At the time, this café was still leased to a certain Head Waiter Woerz, who also ran the Steindl Café in the style of the Danube Monarchy. The café was located on the ground floor; the entrance opened to the Leonhardsplatz square. A large railway station clock hanging over the door showed the time. Contemporary photographs show passers-by – the ladies in long skirts, the gentlemen with hats – strolling past the café. Back then, automobiles were still absolute rarities at what is today a busy traffic hub. Nevertheless, mobility was gradually increasing in those days. The city therefore decided to backfill the adjoining Neumühle Canal to create space for a new street. That was how the Neumühlequai came into being. The «Central» thus lost its direct proximity to the water in 1911/12. It was no longer possible to dine under white-and-yellow striped sunshades, directly on the canal. A little bit of Riviera ambiance was lost.

However, in the end the roadwork did benefit the hotel in one way. The installation of the quay



Hotel Central 1905
before the backfill
of the Neumühle
canal
Source: unknown



Hotel Central 1912
with Neumühlequai
and illuminated
sign
Source: Tiefbauamt
Zürich

made it possible to build a single-storey extension, designed by architect Alexander Strakosch. The semi-circular, neoclassical porch, which stood at the place where a small terrace had previously been situated, was opened in 1922. The hotel rooms likewise underwent a minor redecoration at the time. However, the heaters – one in each room – remained: a fact borne out by photographs showing innumerable chimneys on the roof of the hotel. In those days, each room did not yet have its own en suite bathroom – instead, there were shared facilities at the end of the hall. In the 1920s, the three Elwert sons began to play an increasingly active role in the management of the hotel. Father Paul Julius gradually handed over the reins to them. His wife Marie died in 1929; he himself lived on until 1938. The era of the three brothers had dawned.

3.2. Paul Eduard Elwert-Berli – the eldest

Paul Elwert was the eldest of the three brothers and thus essentially the predestined heir of the Elwert dynasty. However, he was the one who played the smallest role in shaping the «Central». This is likely due to the fact that, when the family came to Zurich in 1909, he was already 18 years old and wanted – or had to – pursue his own career. At the time his father acquired the «Central», he was in an apprenticeship at the Savoy Hotel in London. There, he gained experience in the business. During childhood and adolescence, he had – like his predecessors – watched his parents at their work and had lent a hand: first, at the Lukmanier Hotel in Chur, where he was born on 13 May 1891, and later at the «Grande Bretagne» in Milan.

Also in 1909, he had just completed basic military training and, in the politically-charged international atmosphere on the eve of the First World War, decided on a military career. He ultimately rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel in the General Staff. He saw active duty from 1914 to 1918 and therefore was absent from the hotel. After the war, he – like his brothers – had the desire to go abroad again, so he took up a job as receptionist at the «Heliopolis» Hotel in Cairo. Subsequently, he returned to Switzerland and for ten years worked in various functions at his parents' hotel.

It was during this time that he married Nellie Marie Berli in 1929. She had an interesting family history as well. She was the daughter of a wealthy Swiss tradesman, whose business activities were conducted chiefly in Thailand. His company – the Berli Jucker Company, founded in 1882 – still exists today. Thanks to this «lucrative alliance», from 1932 onwards Paul Elwert no longer needed to work. When he was about 40 years old, he took early retirement, travelled round the world

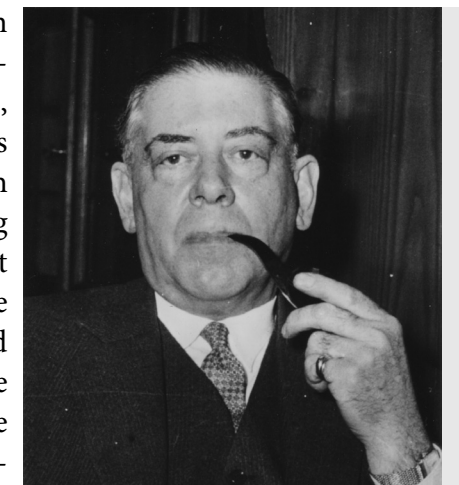
and spent a lot of time at the chalet he had built in Arosa, which is still owned by the family to this very day. In his leisure time, he actively promoted Thailand – or Siam, as the country was known in those days – as a desirable location. Thanks to his wife's good contacts, he was even given the opportunity to have an audience with the King of Thailand. In an article he wrote for the «Hotel Revue», he praised the country's outstanding railway infrastructure and the up-and-coming tourist industry. The fine hotels were run by Europeans or Chinese. «In general, the Siamese is not very well suited to the hotel trade, as he tends to be rather slow in service as well as forgetful, although quiet and polite for that matter,» he wrote. He also recommended the concerts of the Royal Siamese Symphony Orchestra, «which can satisfy even a fastidious ear».

His final post was at the Victoria Hotel in Zurich – of all places, the «Central's» rival establishment since the time of the first National Exhibition – where he was Director from 1930 to 1932 until the former grande dame on the Bahnhofplatz square was converted into an office building with a restaurant.

The eldest Elwert brother died on 20 December 1964. He left no offspring.

3.3. Eduard «Edi» Julius Elwert-Gasteyger – the Big Boss

Eduard Julius Elwert, known as Edi, born on 9 June 1893 in Chur, developed into the new director of the hotel on the Leonhardsplatz. He was a «hotelier of the old school and calibre», as Edi Bohli put it so aptly in his monograph on Zurich hotels – someone who «permeated and shaped the whole hotel with his will and personality». He officially took over the hotel along with his brothers after the death of their father in 1938. But in fact he had been actively involved in the business since the First World War. Already in 1934, he was elected to the Board of Directors of the Zurich Hotelier Association, with which he remained closely associated all his life. He presided over the organisation for 20 years and was also an active networker elsewhere. Despite his being a proud member of the Kämbel guild, in 1940 he set up the St. Niklausen parlour at the «Central»,



«Edi» Elwert-Gasteyger 1970

where the precinct guild of the same name used to meet. In addition, he was a board member of the «Züspa» autumn trade fair ever since its founding in 1946. Elwert also belonged to the Zurich Transport Association, the Swiss Hotelier Association, the Wine Trade Commission and the FIG airport real-estate company.

Thanks to these good contacts, he became a man with an excellent reputation and considerable influence in the city. His word carried weight; «Big Boss Edi» (Oberchef Edi) was one of his nicknames. He viewed hoteliers with innovative ideas, such as the founder of Mövenpick, Ueli Prager, with a certain degree of suspicion. As the President of the Hotelier Association, he also resisted the establishment of American hotel chains in Zurich and its environs. According to the minutes of one meeting, he said: «We maintain the standpoint that we in Switzerland have succeeded in running hotels as they ought to be run.» He pointed out that the Americans had a very different approach to the hospitality business.

Elwert embraced the classic form of hostelry that he had learned from his parents. New-fangled trends were not his thing. «He was always averse to change», as a publication on the bygone years of Zurich once wrote about him. Yet the article continued by noting that he possessed an unmistakable talent for true hospitality and a pleasant ambience. He knew his guests by name and did not hesitate to invite them to the «Boss's table» in the «Knight's Hall» or Rittersaal. Incidentally, it isn't known how that room with its lily-patterned carpet and flowery wallpaper got its name, as neither suits of armour, lances, swords nor coats of arms were on display there.

Like his brothers, Edi learned the hotel trade through practical experience. After graduating from the Aarau Cantonal School, he took up posts in London at the «Savoy», first in its supervisory office and later the reception desk, then in Egypt at the Winter Palace Hotel in Luxor and at «Shepherd's» in Cairo (the latter would play a more prominent role in the life of the youngest of the Elwert brothers, Freddy). But Edi Elwert also did an apprenticeship at the «Central»: for example, he worked in the kitchen as a cook for seven months.

The Big Boss was described by his contemporaries as a «real character». He could sometimes be crusty – as, for instance, when he ranted about the «garden gnomes from Sicily» who got more things wrong than right as guest workers in the hospitality sector. However, he was certainly a person who commanded respect and who was approached with veneration. The passionate pipe-smoker did technical tasks at the hotel up to an advanced age. Even when he was walking with a stick, he still always carried a screwdriver and a small monkey wrench on his person. If a

light bulb burnt out, he changed it himself. If a table was creaking, he put it right. If a spoon was twisted, he bent it straight again. As a passionate inventor, he also developed his own gadgets, such as an electric torch with a manually-driven generator, which he used regularly. A real do-it-yourselfer! Part of his legacy is also an amusing invention which he distributed in the hotel bar as a promotional gift: a coin which was slightly convex in the middle; on one side, it was stamped with the words «Hotel Central, Zürich (Suisse)» and on the other, «You Pay» accompanied by an arrow. When two or more people arranged to meet at the hotel bar, they set the coin spinning on the table. When it stopped, the person at whom the arrow was pointing had to pay for the next round. A merry pastime which, to top it all, boosted sales at the bar. The coin even made it into the American press as a great advertisement for the «fabled Swiss inn», as one New York newspaper called it.

In the «Hotel Revue» journal, a eulogy was dedicated to Elwert on his 65th birthday: «Anyone who has ever had the privilege of working with him deeply appreciates his well-considered style of managing the business, which is always focused on the essential and is always able to get to the core of matters and make constructive decisions amid conflicting opinions.» But where did he get that business acumen and «do-it-yourself» mentality? A large part of it was attributable to his life story. There is no doubt that the two world wars he experienced as an officer greatly shaped his character. During the Second World War, which – due to a hip complaint – he experienced not on the border, but in the area of Zurich, he had a special task: as a demolition expert, he was responsible for the bridge between the main railway station and the Hotel Central. In the event of an invasion by Nazi Germany, his task would have been to set off the explosive charges which were attached to the bridge. Luckily, it never came to that. At that time, General Henri Guisan stayed at the Hotel Central several times. And during the First World War, Edi Elwert was assigned to Bündner Mountain Infantry Battalion 93 for four years as a lieutenant.

As was typical for members of the war generation, he was a thrifty person. As the Swiss aphorism goes, he turned over every coin twice before spending it. Whenever possible, he avoided debt. This certainly explains why he did not want to purchase the building next door to the «Central» when it was offered to him. He always thought twice before undertaking costly renovations. In photographs from the late 1970s, for example, the hotel kitchen looks almost identical to the way it was in the 1920s. The reception had the look of a Western saloon – with lots of solid timber, a telephone with a rotary dial and the obligatory board with key hooks.

However, as the economy and, in particular, tourism was severely affected during the war years, the «Central» found itself in severe financial straits a number of times. Distant relatives from Germany helped the hotelier out with loans, and a wealthy Egyptian cotton merchant also supported the hotel. In return, Elwert allowed the lenders to live at the hotel for a long period, thereby settling the debt. Edi Elwert's descendants have fond memories of this mysterious man. He was always munching pistachios and wore a carnation in his buttonhole, with water being supplied to it via a thin tube hidden behind his lapel.

After the Second World War, tourism increased markedly. In an article published in 1949, the «Tages-Anzeiger» daily newspaper writes of a veritable «invasion» by American GIs who took up quarters at the «Central». This enabled the hotel to initiate a gentle renovation. The rooms received new furniture, the radiators were refurbished, the staff room enlarged, and the bar freshly decorated and rearranged. The «Tages-Anzeiger» was full of praise: «With extraordinary skill and relatively simple means, the architect has achieved the astounding transformation of the ground floor rooms and made them into something really tasteful in layout, colour and décor.» The NZZ newspaper, too, waxed enthusiastic about the renovation and described how the architect Max Sütterlin had achieved the miracle by simply laying a new floor, bleaching the dark oak panelling and turning it into an agreeable grey tone, painting the ceilings and walls white, and finally replacing the outdated, worn-out curtains with modern ones. «Thus, the redecorated areas now blend in splendidly with the other rooms.» The long-neglected café-restaurant now flourished in new, timeless resplendence. In order to complete the renovation in good time, everyone had helped with the work: from apprentice to – no surprises there – the Big Boss.

The rejuvenation of the building was completed in 1949 – precisely 40 years after the Elwerts acquired the hotel on the River Limmat. However, that point in time was also of relevance for another reason: one year earlier, Zurich voters had approved the large-scale development of the area surrounding the main railway station, which affected the «Central» very directly. As was the case with the backfilling of Neumühlequai, the reason given for this new municipal project was the growing need for mobility. The NZZ wrote at the time: «Almost all inhabitants of the city have occasion to observe that this junction is less and less able to cope with the steadily increasing demands of public transport, and that a structural conversion is becoming increasingly unavoidable.» One particular focus of attention was the «impractical» design of the Leonhardsplatz square where the «Central» was situated. In fact, contemporary photographs do show that markedly

more cars were standing in each other's way. In order to create space for the new four-rail trackage and longer trams, the city opted for a radical solution: it decreed that buildings should be demolished – including the one that stood in front of today's Polybahn narrow-gauge railway station. The square was also enlarged in the direction of the Limmat. Additional columns were driven into the riverbed and the street was built on top of them. When the trams drive over this area today, you can still hear the rumbling in the hotel due to the hollow space directly beneath. As a result of this reconstruction, the square obtained a new look; it was now markedly more spacious. And the modifications at the «Central» were intended to parallel that development.

A year later came the icing on the cake: Leonhardsplatz square was renamed Central square on 4 November 1950. This demonstrated the extent to which the hotel had become an inseparable part of the surroundings. The old name had never really caught on. A group of shopkeepers and house owners submitted a petition, in accordance with City Council protocol, «to give the square the name by which it's known among the people – namely, the Central». One can safely assume that, with his good network of contacts, Edi Elwert must have been one of the co-initiators of this plan. The Street Naming Commission took up the case. At first, it recommended leaving things the way they were by asserting that the name had historical roots, and that the memory of St. Leonhard should be kept alive. Upon review, however, the Commission became open to discussion – «in a fit of realism», as one newspaper of the time commented. The Commission decided that a change would be alright, because with the Leonhardstrasse and the Leonhardshalde there were sufficient alternative tributes to the saint nearby. It is not unusual for a square to be named after a hotel. The same honour was accorded to the former Grand Hotel Bellevue. However, unlike the «Bellevue», which was closed in 1945, the «Central» continues to exist.

With the help of his brothers and the large staff, Edi Elwert thus managed to position the hotel effectively after the Second World War. He continued his father's legacy and further expanded it – as second generations in family businesses often do. Throughout all his years at the hotel – which would ultimately amount to 58 – Edi's wife, Erna Elwert-Gasteyger, was constantly at his side with a helping hand. He married his teenage sweetheart in 1917. She was skilled in mediating in the event of any conflicts between the three brothers or with their parents and became the heart and soul of the hotel. Her family, the Gasteygers, had also had a close relationship with the hotel trade. Thus, her nephew Rolf Gasteyger held several posts at the «Central» before taking over the Hotel International in Basel as its Director General in 1963. Her family also owned a corner building on

Bellevue Square which brought in a good income. The hotelier couple had two children, Rita Erika and Heinz Alfred. As the result of an accident, the latter died in 1940 at the age of only 19 while studying law in Lausanne. The young man fell off a four-metre wall near the football stadium and succumbed to his injuries. As the only descendant, Rita Elwert was thus destined to continue the family line. But more on this later.

Edi Elwert remained at the «Central» all his life. Although he did buy a house in Stäfa on Lake Zurich in the 1930s, he only used it as a holiday home. The hotel was everything to him. For example, at weekends he issued invitations to «Thé dansant», a dance performance which he and his wife organised in the grand ballroom. Another legendary event was his «Bündner-Stamm», a relaxed gathering of exiles from the mountainous Graubünden region, (or Grisons, as that canton is called in English) to which Elwert himself belonged, as he was a registered citizen of Chur through his father. At the regulars' table in the hotel restaurant, Veltliner wine, laughter and discussion flowed freely. One welcome guest was, for instance, Zarli Carigiet. At times, the hotel bar was like a home away from home for the actor. Alberto Giacometti, too, was a visitor to the hotel – a fact to which stickers on his suitcase, which was auctioned off in 2012, clearly testify.

A few years before they died, Erna and Edi Elwert moved their residence to the 5th floor of the hotel since the building next door, which had been constructed as an extension to the «Central» and where they had lived since the 1930s, had to give way to a new building. In 1976, the Big Boss died after a long, active life. His wife followed him in 1982.

3.4. Alfred «Freddy» Richard Elwert – the luminary

The youngest of the Elwert brothers was a gentleman and bon vivant. Alfred, or «Freddy» as everyone called him, had seen the world and brought a bit of glamour to the «Central». Whereas his brother Edi took care of the accounts and kept the business going, Freddy was the born host, raconteur and master of ceremonies. He liked to call himself simply a «soup-monger and mattress-renter ». One obituary about him said: «Freddy Elwert's personal charisma, his sense of aesthetics and humour and his cultural air practically predestined him to have a successful career as a hotelier.» However, he got involved in the family business in Zurich relatively late.

Alfred Richard Elwert was born on 25 February 1897, shortly before the family moved to Milan. Later on, in Zurich, he attended secondary school and the cantonal commercial college. When both his

brothers had to enter active service during the First World War, 17-year-old Freddy took on several jobs at once at his parents' hotel, due to lack of staff. He worked at the reception and cash desk. However, he didn't long to be tied to his parents' business – he wanted to go out into the big wide world. After completing basic military training with the rank of lieutenant, he initially felt drawn to England in 1921. He was engaged as a staff clerk at the Carlton Hotel in London, and one year later worked at the «Berkeley» as a receptionist and, subsequently, as sous-directeur. His good reputation preceded him. He became assistant manager at the London «Savoy» and then, in 1926, was given the opportunity to move to the so-called «Bedouin School» in Cairo to become director of the legendary «Shepherd's Hotel» - a post in which he would remain for 13 years.

«Shepherd's» wasn't just any hotel, but the most famous hotel on the African continent, and certainly in Egypt. Napoleon had once taken up quarters there when he marched into North Africa with his troops. In 1841 – in colonial times – it was acquired by British hotelier Samuel Shepherd, whose name it bore thereafter. It had a private zoo and was particularly popular with members of the British military. In 1952, when Freddy Elwert was no longer working there, the building was destroyed by insurgents as it was regarded by strict Muslims as a den of iniquity and a disgrace, where alcohol was drunk and guests wallowed in the Western lifestyle.

During his time at «Shepherd's», Freddy Elwert was given the nickname «Freddy of Shepherd's» by British officers. As his niece, Rita Elwert, writes in a life history, he enjoyed that role and fulfilled it to perfection. «He always gave festive occasions a special note due to the personal charisma that was a natural part of his being and made him a successful hotelier.» She describes how that charisma stood him in particularly good stead when receiving royal personages in the 1920s and 1930s. He recorded all these encounters with illustrious figures in his «Golden Book», an extensive guestbook which is today in the safekeeping of his great-nephew Alex Meyer. Kings, as well as statesmen, film stars and field marshals are immortalised in the book. It is a treasure of incalculable value, a testimonial filled with contemporary history.

Freddy Elwert took his Golden Book with him to Zurich when his 13-year stint at the chic «Shep-



«Freddy» Elwert 1970

heard's» came to an end in 1939. Just at the time the second large-scale National Exhibition was being held in Zurich, he took up residence on a street called Wühre, in a handsome old-town apartment with a view of the Limmat, the City Hall and the Grossmünster church. The house belonged to a friend of his, the painter and pilot Robert Fretz. Like his brother Edi, Freddy too had to do military service during the Second World War. He was stationed in Prättigau and Rheintal as a first lieutenant. He spent his holidays in Ascona, Ticino.

However, the seasoned hotel manager did not retire at that point. He joined the family business and managed the «Central» together with his brother. He was primarily responsible for «public relations» with the clientele. His domain was the smart hotel bar, which he designed and furnished himself. It was kept in the American style, a cocktail bar à la «Harry's».

Time and again, his past at «Shepherd's» caught up with him – in a good way – and this not just due to the legendary «Hangover Chart» that he had brought with him from Egypt. This ivory panel bore inscriptions plotting the correlation between mood (from «bloody awful» to «excellent») and the number of drinks consumed at the bar. Guests from all over the world who knew Freddy Elwert from the earlier days visited him in Zurich. He kept up lively correspondence with many of them, and his highly original English-style New Year's cards were legendary.

The bar was also an exclusive meeting place for members of Zurich's gay association «The Circle» (Der Kreis), which campaigned for the rights of homosexuals from the 1940s to the 1960s. Freddy, himself homosexual, moved in these circles – not openly, however, but in secret. The members of «The Circle» met at selected places where their lifestyle was accepted. At that time, gays had to reckon with repression. Up to 1942, homosexual behaviour was a criminal offence under Swiss law, and social resentment persisted for a long time to come. Under the pseudonym «Arfe», Freddy Elwert contributed pictures to the magazine that was published by «The Circle» and bore the same name. He also campaigned for the organisation to have its own «Circle» bar, which would have been financed by means of a building fund. The gay magazine was unique in all of Europe. It contained German, French and English articles and was read by subscribers all over the world. Besides articles on the «homophile cause», as the authors called it, its pages also included erotic, though never salacious, images of young men. The subscriber base served as a contact exchange. This enabled gays to meet one another without repressive measures – as, for example, in Freddy's cosy hotel bar.

As manager of the establishment, he insisted on good manners. He therefore politely requested guests who wore a coat or hat inside to take them off. A stylish appearance and decorum were a must for

these aesthetes and culture-lovers. When it came to certain personages, however, even he held back: for instance, in the case of a long-standing Zurich police superintendent who had had a bit too much to drink one evening. Shortly before closing time, or «police hour» (Polizeistunde) as it was called, the host wanted to ring the bell for the last round. The superintendent however, wanted to stay a bit longer. «Police hour is when I say it is», he's said to have roared. After a few more glasses, he then called a patrolman who drove the city councillor – drunk as a skunk – home in the police cruiser.

A special feature of the hotel bar was, even back then, the live piano music. The well-known composer Nico Kaufmann – likewise a member of «The Circle» – often sat down at the piano. Sometimes, Freddy himself would pick up his ukulele and entertain the guests. The live music lent the room a unique atmosphere and made the bar a popular meeting place for artists, intellectuals and musicians. Among others, the composer Paul Burckhard was a welcome guest, as were playwright Jürg Amstein, composer Hans Schaeuble and puppeteer Fred Schneckeburger. Yet also international greats like Josephine Baker honoured the bar with their presence. Poet and writer Fridolin Tschudi even immortalised the very special ambience and clientele of the bar in a poem (translated from the German, without the rhymes, below). One critic saw in it a «multifaceted mirror of the physically and psychologically stressed illusory world»:

Eyes and cut crystal glitter here
It reeks of cigarettes,
Of gin, perfume and the Fall of Man,
White Label and Manhattan.

The Anglo-Saxon flourishes,
And clean-shaven men
Turn out to be well-versed
As real whisky connoisseurs.

They rarely drink wine and beer,
But rather the obligatory
Four Roses or Sixty-Nine,
Just like over in the States.

Subdued jazz music resonates
And softly titillates the nerves,
And even when Armstrong hoarsely croons,
It still sounds like something out of a can.

The bar stool becomes a confessional,
The barmaid a confidante.
You pour out to her, with great feeling,
The things that are bursting to come out.

She listens, certainly out of compassion
And for other reasons too,
Gives us her absolution... –
Isn't the bar a blessing?

Like his brother Edi, Freddy Elwert could be found at the hotel almost every day. However, time and again he was drawn to travel abroad. He toured North and South America and went on safari in Kenya. He liked making trips to the Côte d'Azur, where he could enjoy the sun that he loved so much. He had a close friendship with Margrit Knie-Lippuner from the 4th generation of the famous circus dynasty. He went for spa treatments at the Verenhof Hotel in Baden several times in her company. He only began to suffer from minor ailments at a very advanced age. Freddy Elwert died in 1979, at the age of 82. He left no children behind him, but instead innumerable stories and anecdotes galore about his exciting life.

Lobby Hotel Central. Left: 1920. Right: 1930



4. The grand makeover

4.1. A successor sought – and found

Edi and Freddy Elwert were the figureheads of the «Central», so how could things possibly go on without those omnipresent alpha males? Footsteps like that are difficult to fill. Upon reaching a more sedate age, the two of them appointed directors who ran the hotel in accordance with its tradition. There were no sons to carry on the legacy. Rita Elwert, the daughter of Edi and Erna Elwert, was the sole heir. She had graduated from the «Villa Belvoir» college of hotel management and innkeeping and thus was in principle the predestined successor. She had also held various posts at the hotel, yet remained mainly in the background. In an article on women's lives in the magazine «Annabelle», she said in retrospect: «If I had not been a woman, I could have taken over the hotel.» She said she had longed for independence, but her father Edi, in particular, curbed that desire. For example, he forbade her to accept a post at the «Drei Könige» Hotel in Basel. Anyway, Edi Elwert had never wanted any children in the first place. «My father used to say that they only get in the way», confessed daughter Rita in «Annabelle».

However, his lone daughter did do something that was decisive for the succession issue. And this is how it happened: one fine day, on a train journey, she spoke to a gallant gentleman who had caught her fancy. That chance encounter developed into a romantic relationship. A few years later, in 1943, Rita Elwert married the Solothurn-born engineer Ernst Meyer. «My husband is a technician», she said, years later, in «Annabelle». «All the technicians I know are short on words. They have other qualities.»

Between 1944 and 1950, Rita Meyer-Elwert gave birth to four children in rapid succession: Alex Richard Ernst, Robert Eduard, Susanne Katrin and Helen Barbara. As chance (or the gentle pressure of family history) would have it, two of them – Alex and Susanne – were interested in the hotel trade and attended the Lausanne College of Hotel Management. Alex, the eldest of the four siblings, emphasises the fact that already as a seven-year-old, he dreamed of one day taking over his grandparents' hotel. As a young man, he completed practical traineeships at the «Glockenhof» in Zurich and the «Excelsior» in Arosa. He also worked at the «Negresco» in Nice and the «Atlantic» in Hamburg as an apprentice. He worked in administration and the reception desk at

the «Bernina» in Samedan, as well as at the famous «Dorchester» in London and the «Eden» in Rome. From 1969 onwards, he was then ready to start at the «Central» as a management assistant. After a few years, he became the licence-holder and finally, in 1973, director of the family business. The initial years were turbulent: the financial situation was difficult. According to Alex Meyer, bankruptcy was only avoided thanks to a bank loan he had applied for. Together with his siblings, he then became part of a general partnership – «Gebrüder Elwert's Erben» («Elwert Brothers' Heirs»). Later, he married Regula Meyer-Fux and the couple had two children, Kathiana and Francesca. The latter has been a member of the Board of Directors since 2018.

From 1975 onwards, Alex's sister Susanne was in charge of Housekeeping at the «Central». That same year, she married Urs Germann, a computer specialist. Together, they had two children, Roger and Aline. Before that, Susanne, the graduate in hotel management, had worked at the Grand Hotel Dolder and also at the «Gstaad-Palace» and the «Du Rhône» in Geneva. The youngest Meyer-Elwert daughter, Helen, showed little interest in the hotel business. She pursued a different career, and has practised physiotherapy in, among other places, the Inselspital in Bern, in England and Tunisia. She is married to Walter Spielmann and has four children: Nina, Carla, Franca and Jannik.

That leaves us with Robert Meyer-Büttler. The second-oldest Meyer scion had originally planned a completely different career. He wanted to take over his father's equally long-established company, «Meyer Mühlenbau». Having little interest in the hotel trade, he originally started his studies in engineering at Zurich Technical University (ETH) and then switched to economics at the University of St. Gallen. After graduation, he spent seven years working as a commercial lawyer at a trust company on Zurich's Bahnhofplatz square, where he advised many a Swiss small and medium-sized enterprise on commercial and corporate law matters. Interestingly, that firm was based in the very same office building that had been built on the grounds of the former «Victoria» hotel, where great-uncle Paul Elwert had once held the post of director. What a coincidence.

Like his siblings, Robert Meyer grew up in Solothurn, in a beautiful old house dating back to Napoleonic times. Zurich and the «Central» were far away. He remembers the visits to his grandfather and great-uncle Edi and Freddy. The family would then stay at the hotel for two or three days. On those occasions, the children were forced to dress smartly: the boys needed to wear ties and be well-behaved. To the children, the hotel was a strange, unfamiliar world. There was the concierge, who could fulfil practically any wish. Once, in return for his outstanding service, he

was apparently even given a car as a “tip” from a satisfied customer. A receptionist redirected calls, connecting the lines with plugs that led to the individual hotel rooms. The lobby was impressively high; the dining room, with its whirling waiters and Chefs du Service made a big impression on the Meyer children.

Only after a time did Robert Meyer enter the hotel business – as a crisis manager, so to speak: namely because, in the 1970s, the «Central» suffered severely. From 1979 onwards, Robert decided to stop using his expertise in the service of outside companies, but to instead devote it entirely to the family business. Financially, the hotel was no longer in good shape. The thriftiness that characterised his grandfather Edi Elwert had stood in the way of necessary investments and renovations. During that time, the hotel even lost one of its stars: it was downgraded from a four- to a three-star hotel. What a disgrace for the once model establishment! The hotel, with its somewhat stuffy, conservative comfort, was quite simply no longer in keeping with the times. The guestrooms were too small; the gastronomy too passé. The «Knight's Hall», with its imitation-wood mouldings, was no longer in vogue. All of that now should – or had to – be changed. After patriarchs Edi and Freddy died, their heirs got to work. Incorporating ideas from Alex Meyer, and with the energetic assistance of his sister Susanne, Robert Meyer planned the biggest renovation the «Central» had ever undergone in its entire history.

4.2. A renovation like a clean break

The Meyer family spent months poring over the plans for the big renovation. Robert coordinated the project, evaluated the building contractors and set up the financing. Time was short. The construction work was planned to take place simultaneously with that on the adjoining Publimedia building, which had been demolished down to the 3rd basement floor. It was no longer possible to carry on the business of the hotel in an orderly, efficient manner. At that time, too, the tunnel for the suburban rapid-transit railway was being excavated underneath the «Central». The conditions for change were thus more than favourable.

For three whole weeks, Alex Meyer jetted around the world with interior designers to gather inspirational ideas. The family also brought in a large number of experts. «The guest was given priority in all the deliberations», reported a detailed article in the «Hotel- und Gastgewerbe-Rundschau» hotelier journal. The aim was to create a 4-star hotel with every comfort, such as air-conditioning,

optimal soundproofing and plenty of atmosphere. The hotel portion and restaurants were to seamlessly interconnect, and small shops added to round out the services: plans were for a take-away stand, a chemist's, a newspaper kiosk, a boutique, a flower shop and even a bank. Here, the creed was: «The hotel guest should immediately feel comfortable in an otherwise unfamiliar environment; they should be able to find many things right at the hotel itself rather than merely remaining holed up with strangers in an enclave built for them.» However, in planning the shops, the Meyers were not seeking to appeal only to hotel guests but, above all, also the people of Zurich. The restaurants and shops were conceived to attract a very broad clientele.

Besides the urgently-needed modernisation, there were at least three more reasons for the major renovation in the early 1980s:

1) One decisive factor was a tragic event which in 1969 had shaken the city of Zurich to its foundations. At that time, the Metzgerbräu Hotel in Beatengasse had completely burnt down. Ten people died, and nine were severely injured. An assistant porter had deliberately started the fire. The blaze spread like lightning because the hotel had an atrium which let in daylight from above. But in the end, this shaft worked like a flue and fire accelerant. The «Central» was constructed in a very similar way: the hotel rooms were clustered around an atrium. After the catastrophe at the «Metzgerbräu», the city issued new fire protection regulations. As there was about to be a change of licence-holder at the «Central», these regulations now had to be quickly implemented. The renovation presented a chance to eliminate this danger once and for all.

2) In order to get back into the black financially, it was also necessary to drastically increase the number of rooms at the «Central». Before the renovation, there were only about 60 – far too few for a mid-range hotel with relatively affordable prices. The envisaged plans, which took into account the space gained by removing the atrium, would almost double that number. The planners calculated that this would enable the costs of the renovation – estimated at a whopping 25 million Swiss francs – to be fully recouped over the medium term.

3) Not least, the Meyer family intended to celebrate the hotel's 100-year jubilee in a fitting manner. In 1983, exactly 100 years after its grand opening in parallel with the Swiss National Exhibition, the «Central» was to shine in new splendour. Suffice it to say in advance: the timetable was met. At the end of 1983, the renovated «Central» was able to fête its reopening as a fully fledged 4-star hotel.



Brasserie 1943



Atrium 1943



Single room 1930



Double room 1958

However, before things reached that stage, there was quite a bit to do. After some tough negotiations with the city, and particularly with the Department for the Preservation of Historical Monuments, the planners obtained the building permit. The interior of the hotel was to be completely gutted, so that basically only the protection-worthy façade would remain. Other options were quickly dismissed. For example, had they erected a completely new building, the hotel would no longer have been allowed to be utilised to the same height as before. Had they demolished the façade, the regulations regarding building limitation lines – i.e. the distance between the outer walls and the street – would have to have been adhered to. This would have meant moving the three exterior façades back five metres. It was impossible to obtain an exemption permit, as was the case with the new «Savoy» hotel on Paradeplatz, within a reasonable period of time.

With that, the expensive renovation was a done deal. The enormous construction costs were 100 per cent loan-financed. The partners assumed joint and several liability as borrowers. The risk was therefore great, and the young Meyer siblings were demonstrating almost as much courage as their great-grandfather Paul Elwert did when he brought the hotel into family ownership in 1909. Then everything moved very fast. On 12 December – i.e. shortly before the hotel closed down for renovation – Radio DRS broadcast from the «Knight's Hall» for an entire day. The final guests bid adieu and on 18 December 1981, two weeks before the demolition excavators arrived, the hotel management issued invitations to a grand liquidation sale. All the old furnishings and accessories – from the champagne buckets to the smallest salon table – were sold at very reasonable prices. Among others, there were eager buyers from the AJZ (autonomous youth centre), which had reopened on the other side of the Limmat after some recent unruly demonstrations. The AJZers bought more or less the entire contents of the staff and service rooms. One admirer of Henri Guisan purchased the interior of the room where the Swiss General had overnighted during the Second World War. After the last imitation leather chair and the last baroque writing desk had found a new owner, the hotel now stood empty – for the first time in its history.

4.3. A hotel stay as an adventure

The construction schedule ran according to plan. There was a minor delay of two weeks due to an error in the plans. The construction workers had nearly demolished a load-bearing wall: luckily, the mistake was noticed in time. In September 1983, the hotel was partially reopened, and then

on 11 November, reopened completely. The event was celebrated at great effort and expense in the courtyard of the National Museum. At exactly 11:11 a.m., the new restaurants at the «Central» opened their doors for business. The 1s were symbolic of the fact that the hotel had a new address: it was now officially Central 1 rather than its previous Stampfenbachstrasse designation. The newly established Radio Z broadcast from the premises of the completely renovated hotel. The three Management Committee members, namely Alex, Robert and Susanne Meyer, were justifiably proud of what had been achieved after 21 months of construction work.

The newspapers reported on the «completely transformed hotel». The critic of the NZZ newspaper wrote: «The first impression confirms that the owners of the hotel have sought out the best and most modern ideas from across the globe.» Nonetheless, he concludes on a slightly critical note: «In the hall, some fairly massive palms and other quite large plants add an exotic touch, while the reflective, light-metal leaves shimmering in different colours on the ceiling create an almost tacky touch of fairground magic.» He went on to say that the holiday atmosphere with the artificial waterfall was literally forced on one in the renovated hotel. By contrast, the modernised hotel rooms got a positive review. It was pointed out that, thanks to the good insulation, the noise of the traffic outside was now reduced to a barely perceptible hum. As a special attraction, each guest was issued a pocket walkie-talkie – a forerunner of the mobile phone – with which they were constantly reachable within a 20-kilometre radius.

The well-known urban traveller Benedikt Loderer reported on his trip to the «Hotel with a South Sea flair» in the «Tages-Anzeiger» newspaper. He didn't particularly like the palms that had been newly added to the lobby as well as to the hotel logo. «We've shifted from a lounge to Alpamare,» he wrote, noting that the «Central» had not only undergone a change of generation, but also a social shift. «The elegant has become casual, the bourgeoisie have become beautiful people» – from palms, marble and mirrors, a little bit of South Sea with metropolitan water has come into being.

In fact, the concept was oriented towards the changed tastes and desires of the 1980s. «Happiness is Central» then became the new slogan, created by Alex Meyer; another was «Get more Central». Eating and drinking were to be exciting experiences – and plenty of those experiences were offered in the new «locales within the locale», particularly in a culinary sense. Guests could choose from no fewer than five different restaurants. At the time, this type of variety was unique in Zurich: the genteel Cascade restaurant offered French and Italian specialities; the Concertino café was home

to the breakfast buffet, and in the evenings it was transformed into a romantic bar. Every three months, at «Apérozeit» (a social cocktail get-together), guests were invited to what was called the «Ausholzete» («wood-clearing») event. The four-metre-high weeping fig (ficus benjamina) decorating the room was then ceremonially felled and replaced with a new one – once, a chainsaw was even used. Another highlight was the live piano music at the «Concertino». Until well past retirement age, Freddy Zimmermann continued to give great performances there. Many visitors only came to the «Central» because of him. He played their song requests and was always focused on the guests. Sometimes there were spontaneous vocal performances – if, for instance, an opera singer in the audience felt inspired. Diana Krall, one of the world's most successful jazz pianists, subsequently performed at the «Central» as well. In an interview, she later said that she had been discovered in Zurich.

In the initial phase that followed the 1983 opening, the bar had yet to attract very many guests. Alice Meyer-Büttler, Robert's wife, wanted to liven the place up. A guest got into conversation with her and asked her what her name was. «Meyer», she said. However, he thought she said «Maya». So, «Maya» and the guest got to chatting. The meeting was inspiring. Together with others, they arranged to meet again on the coming Thursday. That chance meeting marked the start of the «Thursday Club». Ever since then, almost every week a loose-knit circle centred on Alice and Robert Meyer has met for relaxed conversation in the bar. The composition of the group changed constantly as new people joined. Soon, the group was also celebrating New Year's Eve together. In this way, wonderful friendships developed that lasted for many years.

In addition to the «Concertino», there was another bar at the new «Central» – the «Casablanca», which guests used to visit before having a meal in one of the restaurants. The bar took its name from the famous 1942 film starring Humphrey Bogart, and in reminiscence of «Rick's Café américain», with its piano player and the memorable «Play it again, Sam» catchphrase. The adjacent Canapé restaurant offered sandwiches and snacks, which were also available for take-away. And lastly, the speciality restaurant «Entrecôte», situated in the basement, rounded out this culinary spectrum. Here, according to Alex Meyer, one would be served «une entrecôte, des frites et de la salade» which was «of a quality easily comparable to any to be found in Paris or Geneva». In short, after the renovation, the interior of the hotel – though not the exterior – represented something that was practically the total antithesis to the long-standing tradition of the Elwert brothers, Edi and Freddy. A new era had dawned.

4.4. Riding the wave

The new concept was well-received by the guests – from abroad as well as those from Zurich. The financial figures quickly improved, thanks in particular to the additional hotel beds. After six months, the business was already covering its costs. That was sorely needed, as the aforementioned loans would not have sufficed much longer. However, the various businesses now operating under the roof of the «Central» were personnel-intensive. At that time, 136 staff were employed at the hotel. The attractive, lavish range of services was costly to run, and operating capital remained in short supply. Robert Meyer, who was primarily in charge of the finances, suffered sleepless nights due to bills, wages and debt interest. Looking back, he describes that time as a «war on many fronts». At the time, he was also trying to avert the bankruptcy of his father's company, «Meyer Mühlenbau». In addition, the «Central» was also burdened by a dispute with the sole heir of Freddy Elwert, who had lodged a demand for a third of the hotel. As if that weren't enough, certain new technology at the hotel was also causing problems: waste heat recovery was not yet a fully mature science and repeatedly forced Robert Meyer, who like his grandfather Edi, often took on the role of deputy janitor, to do night-time repairs.

It soon became clear that this range of services, impractically divided into too many small units, could not be run in a cost-effective way. The operating processes were not ideal either. Robert Meyer recalls, «What we needed now were no longer original ideas, but services that could be run cost-effectively.» The original restaurant and shop concept was therefore continually adapted over the ensuing years. The chemist's, newspaper kiosk, boutique and flower shop gradually disappeared. The bank branch was also drastically downsized; all that was left were a few cash machines.

The restaurants and bars were streamlined and underwent a few metamorphoses. At the end of the 1980s, for instance, the Canapé take-away was transformed into a suave champagne bar – the «most successful bar in German-speaking Switzerland,» as Alex Meyer says. Like a number of other trends set by the «Central», this meeting point was something special in Zurich. In the beginning, the fact that it only offered one kind of beer led to many a discussion between staff and guests. However, people became accustomed to it. In the bar, guests were served flutes featuring a different brand of bubbly each month. Champagne was very much en vogue at the time, and particularly popular with the ladies as an aperitif. The walls bore a golden hue and the chairs were

upholstered in pink leather – the interior of the «Champagne Rendezvous» (Champagnertreff) was designed to drape the damsels in gold lamé. That was the idea behind it, and it ultimately had a positive effect on business. Because where lovely ladies sip at their delicate stem glasses, the gentlemen won't be far away either. The new bar enhanced the lobby of the hotel, which was now



Champagne bar 1987

officially named the «Central Plaza», and functioned as a desirable buffer to the «Niederdorf» (the rive droit of Zurich's old town) with its somewhat raucous social scene.

However, as is the way with trends, after a few years champagne lost its renown as the go-to beverage. So the bar morphed yet again and reappeared as the «Central Café Bar». The gold was painted over, the pink leather banished. The «Entrecôte» restaurant also underwent a change. In 1997, due to the BSE epidemic (mad cow disease), its name was no longer especially tantalising. The erstwhile cult bistro in the basement was renamed «King's Cave» and, thanks to the removal of the vault belonging to the bank branch, considerably enlarged. However, the restaurant remained famous for its meat specialities.



Lobby Hotel Central 1983

At the «Central», everything was in a state of flux. Even in the kitchen, new things were constantly being tried out. Themed «Food Festivals» focusing on various themes and cuisines like Creole dishes or delicacies from Singapore were very popular. In 2009, the «Central Garden» was created – an outdoor terrace situated on the Neumühlequai side of the hotel.

Alas, all these changes were not realised without friction between the partners. Particularly the two brothers, Robert and Alex Meyer, often held different opinions concerning the future orientation of the hotel. Already back in 1986 – that is, three years after the major renovation – it was decided at a momentous board meeting that a single general manager was to replace the hitherto collective operative management of the hotel. As Delegate of the Board of Directors, Robert Meyer was appointed to that post and from then on took sole personal charge of the conceptual planning, construction work, the ongoing operation of the business, the building maintenance and all the financial matters at the hotel in collaboration with the personnel. His wife Alice was in charge of the furnishings at the hotel, or in other words, «the ambience». She decorated the establishment, looked after the details, and would also play a major role in the subsequent redesign of the bar in 2017. Robert's sister, Susanne Germann-Meyer, continued to manage Housekeeping for a few more years, before she then withdrew from the operational business. Today, her husband, Urs Germann, still supports the team of the «Central» in administrative matters.

Alex Meyer was still responsible for representing the «Central» in public – a role that perhaps in some respects paralleled that of his great-uncle Freddy Elwert. He took care of the guests and

advertised the hotel – sometimes with sensational promotion campaigns. «How can I get into the newspapers?» was a question he regularly asked himself. Once, in collaboration with a cycling club, he organised a «Tour de Baloney Salad» to which journalists were invited. Another time, three Alphorn players gave a concert on the terrace of the hotel. On a later occasion, members of the Tall People's Club (Klub der Langen Menschen) were guests at the hotel – at the same time as the Small People's Club (Verein Kleinwüchsiger Menschen). «I wanted to grab people's attention,» says Meyer. The advertising posters he commissioned won prizes for their brilliant designs. In addition, he secured the official Internet address «www.central.ch» at a very early date.

Prominent guests were part of this marketing offensive. Among other personages, Meyer hosted the Dalai Lama in 1993. The press reported on his stay. According to the «Züri-Woche» weekly, the hotel director gave the leader of the Tibetans tips for shopping on Bahnhofstrasse, which he was very pleased to receive. Alex Meyer remembers that his famous guest got up at 4:30 every morning, drank butter tea and meditated. This contact led to the hotel's gaining a Tibetan on its staff. National presidents also stayed at the «Central» in the 1990s. It is documented that during his year as Swiss President, Otto Stich met with the Austrian Minister of Finance several times in the gallery in order to discuss relations with the EU. Other famous guests have numbered conductor of the century Herbert von Karajan, singer/songwriter Julian Lennon (son of John Lennon) and Sting, whose songs were played on the piano in the hotel bar in the presence of the «Police» headliner himself. Haile Selassie, the last Emperor of Abyssinia, stayed here, as did Peter II, the King of Yugoslavia. As a young man, the legendary Mayor of Zurich Emil Landolt took a dance course in the «Knight's Hall» and remained a regular guest at the hotel for many years. And Swiss comedian Emil Steinberger enthusiastically wrote in the guestbook: «Right in the middle of Zurich, yet nice and peaceful».

As illustrious as the stream of guests was, and as gratifying the growth of the hotel's operating income, the ownership proportions remained a bone of contention during those years. In 1999, parents Rita and Ernst Meyer wanted to lay the foundation for a clear majority vote. Accordingly, they allotted two more shares to their son Robert than to the three other siblings. This meant that, together with one of his sisters, he now had a majority and was thus able to overrule his brother Alex regarding important strategic decisions. In 2006, Susanne Germann-Meyer and in 2008, also the other sister, Helen Spielmann-Meyer, withdrew completely and sold their shares to Robert. Alex Meyer still retains his shares, but already withdrew from the operational business quite some time ago.

Despite the turmoil surrounding succession issues and majority shareholdings, the «Central» has remained a purely family-run business even beyond the turn of the millennium. To this very day, all the shares are still in family hands – something that was of particular importance to the mother of the Meyer siblings, Rita Meyer-Elwert. In 1994, 16 years before her death, she wrote down her personal wishes for the «Central» of the future: «The hotel places an obligation on us to continue the quality-conscious yet progressive management of this haven of hospitality in effort to ensure the well-being and satisfaction of guests from around the world. May future generations of this hotelier family be inspired to take up the wonderful profession of serving those guests.» Rita Elwert's wish deserves to be granted.

A look ahead: The fifth generation takes over the helm

Far from being abandoned, the family tradition at the «Central» is set to continue. Dave Mike Cyrill Meyer, who was born to Robert and Alice Meyer in 1981, has worked at the hotel since 2009. He is member of both the Management Committee and Board of Directors, and is ready and willing to carry on his forebears' legacy – even though, like his father, he originally pursued a different career. He studied computer science at the Zurich Polytechnic Institute (ETH) – at the time he preferred not to get involved in the rather complex family construct at the «Central» with its various stakeholders.

However, time and again his path through young life included encounters with the hotel business. Already as a small boy, he would ride round the hotel lobby on his tricycle. At family celebrations, he played under the tables with his cousins. Once, he ordered something from «Room Service» and gave the nonplussed waiter a 20-centime coin as a tip. The night porter who guarded the reception also made an impression on him. He was a very kind, elderly man with metal-rimmed spectacles, who is also memorable for the fact that he was constantly at loggerheads with the computer («Look at that, it's disgraceful!»). Little Dave was allowed to help him stamp the arrival bulletins. Later, as a teenager, he took part in the hotel's New Year's parties with colleagues and watched the fireworks through the hotel window. During his studies, he conducted a survey of individual staff members for a term paper and derived a statistical analysis from the findings. Thanks to all these encounters, Dave's interest in his parents' profession gradually grew.

After completing his studies, the time came when he had to choose a specific profession. At which point, Dave Meyer said to himself, «Why not?» Even though he doesn't see himself as the man at the front lines but more of a «figures guy» behind the scenes, he decided to stake everything on the «Central». Classic hotelier training is not included in his CV; like his dad, he's made a lateral career change. Father Robert helped him to find his feet: Dave became his assistant or «errand boy», as he likes to say. He took care of payments and opened letters; he worked in every department of the hotel – for instance, by helping out the cleaning personnel in Room Service. In this way, he gained increasing confidence and got to know the hotel staff. It was also during this time that he met his wife, Alexandra Aphaia Katharina Meyer-Waldvogel, a certified hotel professional who since then sees to the décor of the «Central» and is present in many other ways. She wants to

support her husband, whom she married in 2015, wherever the path may lead in life, as she says. She is also actively preparing herself for future assignments.

Now that Dave Meyer is assuming more responsibility as his father gradually steps back from the business, he's been giving a lot of thought to the future of the hotel. He doesn't want «to miss the boat», as he explains – unlike his great grandfather Edi Elwert, who certainly waited too long with the renovation of the hotel. However, Dave Meyer doesn't want to go overboard either, as occurred at the time of the major renovation in the early 1980s. Back then, a lot of money was spent, and businesses were opened that later had to be closed again. The young Meyer is trying to find a happy medium between conscientious budgeting and gentle renovation. As at the time of the first National Exhibition, he regards the hotel's central location, right in the midst of the urban bustle, as its greatest strength. And as in 1883, when one advertisement explicitly targeted «Authorised Commercial Travellers», he wants to continue to successfully attract business customers in particular.

In the summer of 2017, the Central Hotel took its first step into the new age. While the Central square at its doorstep was being lavishly renovated, a lot was going on inside the «Central» itself. For a full six weeks, the 4-star hotel was spruced up: the façades were renovated; the kitchen was moved to the ground floor and modernised; the rooms were redecorated step by step; and the bathrooms were refurbished. The bar, now called simply «Central 1», has been given a completely new look-and-feel. Once again, a bar pianist will play music to accompany many pleasant hours and – if fate and good fortune will have it – many upcoming generations at the helm of the Central Hotel as they perpetuate its rich tradition. The conditions for that future are already in place: in February 2018, the youngest scion of the family came into the world: Louis Marlon Colin, son of Dave and Alexandra Meyer, glimpsed the first light of day. Whether or not he will eventually be interested in the hotel trade is still written in the stars. However, given the long family history of the «Central», the odds of that happening are, to say the least, not bad at all.

Annex

A word of thanks

The Board of Directors and Management Committee of the Central Hotel would like to thank the many long-standing employees who have shaped this hotel in the past and continue to do so. They are helping to ensure that the hospitality at this virtually “central” landmark of the city will continue to live up to its reputation in the decades to come. We thank you sincerely.

The following individuals have played a key role in the creation of this chronicle:

- Dragan Aleksic
- Urs Germann
- Nicole Lüneburg
- Alex Meyer
- Dave Meyer
- Robert Meyer
- Matthias Mönig
- Sladjana Novakovic
- Mica Stojanovic
- Susanna Trainini-Firl
- Raffaela Waldvogel
- Theo Zimmermann

Suad Sadok accompanied this project with a watchful eye and open ears, always ready with reliable advice and helpful deeds.

List of sources

Newspapers/magazines

Hotellerie et Gastronomie, Hotel und Tourismus Revue, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Schweizerische Bauzeitung, Tagblatt der Stadt Zürich, Tages-Anzeiger, Turicum, Züri-Leu, Züri-Woche, Zeitschrift der Schweizer Vereinigung für Heimatschutz, Zürichsee-Zeitung.

Books

Frédéric Ammann: Schweizer Gastgeberfamilien – Traditionsfamilien und ihre Hotels. Biel 1979.

Amt für Städtebau Zürich: Reklame im Stadtbild. Zurich 2009.

Walter Baumann: Zu Gast im alten Zürich. Zurich 1996.

Edi Bohli: Zürcher Grosshotels. Zurich 1985.

Edi Bohli: Zürcher Stadthotels. Zurich 1990.

Jürg Fierz: Zürich – wer kennt sich da noch aus? Zurich 1971.

Gesellschaft für Schweizerische Kunstgeschichte: Zürich – Architektur und Städtebau, 1850-1920. Zurich 2000



1981

Source: Bauarchiv Zürich