

The Lost Ski Museum!

By Christian Wacker

In December 2015, 21 lorries arrived in Vaduz, the tiny but charming capital of Liechtenstein and came to a halt in front of the ski museum. The complete collection of the museum comprising some 15,000 items was loaded onto the trucks which then crossed the border into Austria. These included 4000 pairs of mostly wooden skis, some of them still without iron lateral edges and more than 80 years old. The bindings made of leather or willow rod came from the dawn of Alpine skiing. In addition skiing boots, sledges, bobsleighs, images, posters, medals, trophies, a library about skiing sports and

around 150 mannequins displaying suits for ski racing disappeared. The collection told the story of ski racing in Eastern Switzerland, Liechtenstein and Austria and now it was been gone.

The items had been gathered by former ski racer Noldi Beck, an enthusiastic collector. He used to work in a sports shop and had been particularly interested in ski bindings. As a result of his communication skills and excellent networks in and around Liechtenstein his collection quickly grew. In 1993 the Vaduz

Ski museum was officially founded. By 2005 it had been recognised by the International Skiing Federation (FIS). As with many similar sport museum projects the enthusiasm of an individual was the driving force.

The museum seems to have been the life and destiny of Noldi Beck. Over decades he approached skiing clubs, sports shops but also famous pioneers in skiing technology such as Brosi Bettosini and racing heroes like Willi Forrer. All passed on their collections to the "Noldi Beck Museum" in Vaduz. Beck himself never signed any formal loan or donation contract and did not seriously bother to catalogue his objects.

The cultural foundation of Liechtenstein supported the museum between 2008 and 2013 with a significant budget to compile inventories and categorise the material. Beck was unwilling to cooperate and their

efforts and subsidies did only happen partially. He simply did not want anybody too close to his treasures and risk unintentional losses or damages to important skiing heritage.

Beck died unexpectedly in 2014 and after his death several attempts were made to offer the collection to skiing clubs and museums in Germany and Austria but unfortunately these had no success. The collection must have been confusing to navigate without an inventory or collection policy. World Cup winner Andreas Wenzel developed a plan to organise the museum during the following months. Then Noldi's widow Sara sold the whole collection to what was at the time an unknown party in Austria.

The collection had an estimated value of around 1.1 million Swiss Francs according to a 1990s evaluation. It later became clear that it was eventually sold for 400,000 Euro to the tourism association in Kitzbühel. The driving force behind the deal seemed to have been Signe Reisch, one of the most powerful women in Kitzbühel and president of the tourism association.

Even so, it is still not certain whether the association itself purchased the collection or whether it was the Reisch family themselves. They are known as the "Denver Clan of Kitzbühel" in certain media. It is known that the collection left Liechtenstein and is stored in Kitzbühel. Women from the NostalSki group in Liechtenstein even discovered the depository, where the collection is stored, but Signe Reisch would not confirm or deny that she had purchased the 15,000 skiing items and refused to offer further comment.

This is a very sad and confusion story from the perspective of preserving archive and museum collections. There may well be plans to showcase this extraordinary collection somewhere in Kitzbühel. The Reisch family will surely not wish to have the items hidden away in the shadows forever. But the lack of inventory lists and contracts do not permit a public exhibition today, before the legal positioning of lenders and donors is clearly established. But who might take over the responsibility for that? When all is said and done a personal passion for collecting has done more harm than good: the Ski Museum Vaduz is gone, lenders have lost their objects and memorabilia of unforgettable moments, a new museum is in abeyance for legal reasons. If sports heritage is to be regarded as part of cultural heritage we have all simply lost part of our sport culture! ■



Former Liechtenstein ski racer Noldi Beck at his museum. After his death a unique collection mysteriously vanished into thin air.

Photo: Landesarchiv Vaduz