A Zermatt Retrospect

PAULA BINER

(Plates 58, 59)

The Hotel Bahnhof was built by our father Alois Biner, around 1900. He married Bertha Varonier from Varen, a little village in the Rhône Valley above Leuk, in 1898. After managing the Buffet de la Gare in Visp for some years, my mother with her mother and sister moved to Zermatt. Here they rented the Hotel Gornergrat and ran it. Father Alois got his guide's certificate in 1892 and worked as a guide for more than 60 years. He was a guide with all his heart and never intended to become a hotel-keeper.

The newly-built Hotel Bahnhof was rented out to the Seiler Hotels as an annexe of the Hotel Victoria for a very long period. Grandmother and mother, who had both been in the hotel business, would have been prepared to take the Bahnhof into their hands, but taking care of a large household and raising seven children kept them more than busy. So we spent a wonderful youth in a quiet, unspoiled village and enjoyed the family life at home for which we are thankful to our dear parents and ancestors.

Our brother Bernard also became a guide in 1924 and worked in his profession with extraordinary skill and much love for the mountains. Both father and Bernard were great friends of the British climbers. With a large number of them they entertained a considerable friendship which our family still gladly remembers. Among so many others, I would like to mention the Rev Lord Gordon who climbed with father for a long period, year after year. Lord Gordon stayed at the Riffelalp Hotel and went climbing with his guide Alois all around the Alps, including the traverse of the high alpine passes with snow-shoes in spring. We also remember with much love the late Rt Rev Bishop of Leicester, Dr Ronald Williams and his wife, the late Mrs Cicely Williams, who were both great friends and climbing partners of father's as well as of Bernard's. They came to Zermatt regularly for very many years; Mrs Williams's last visit was in 1985, the year she died.

It was in 1951 that we took over the Hotel Bahnhof which had been rented to the Seilers up till then. It all started with a talk that Bernard had up at Riffelalp with Mrs Emeline Zschokke-Seiler, then manageress of the Riffelalp Hotel. She had received an enquiry from a French priest in Lyons who was looking for cheap accommodation for a group of students. Mrs Emeline encouraged Bernard to offer them room at the Bahnhof which had not been opened for some summers. The facilities there did not provide the necessary comfort as an annexe of the Hotel Victoria any more. In those days I myself worked at the tourist office in Zermatt, and I saw the great demand from tourists for a cheap place to stay. I felt sorry, knowing that at our hotel the

shutters were closed. Bernard agreed to Mrs Zschokke's suggestion and told her that she could offer the accommodation to the college priest. But he then forgot all about it and never mentioned this to anyone in our family. On 28 July 1951, a fine summer day, the French priest knocked at our door at the Haus Rosa and asked for the promised lodging. Our surprise was great, the rooms were not ready and we were not prepared. But the group insisted, so with my parents' agreement I went to the Seilers' central office to collect the key. The management was quite prepared to release the contract and off I went and opened the entrance door of the Hotel Bahnhof. With the help of my sister we got the rooms ready, and this is how the family Alois Biner started running the Bahnhof.

Soon after this French group had left, climbers came to the door and asked for lodgings. In those days the hotel was the first building at the entrance of the village. Below it there were only meadows and fields. Many tourists came by bicycle and the first cheap place they saw they happily chose for spending the night. To more and more British climbers the Bahnhof became their favourite inn while in town.

Very soon we all realized that my sister Bertha and I were not able to cope with all the work that needed to be done, so Bernard too came to work with us. To our great surprise, even he got interested and helped wherever possible. After a serious illness, Bernard was not allowed to do hard climbs any more and it became his aim to undertake the necessary alterations to the building into which he put many hours of work and great skill. Yet he never gave up climbing completely.

My personal work at the hotel was a wonderful experience and with all of Bernard's help a real pleasure. Luckily, our dear father was still able to see how the hotel became a place much in demand by climbers. During our first summer season, he would come for a visit and watch with pleasure the start of our little family enterprise. It was in May 1952 that he passed away. Mother too was very happy to see how we managed. Her support and moral assistance helped us a great deal. It was good to know that our parents appreciated what we did. Mother died at the astonishing age of 90, in 1964.

At Easter 1952 we opened the hotel for the first time for spring skiing. The previous autumn Bernard, together with a friend, had installed electric heating. From then on the house was ready to receive winter guests as well.

Much sadness and worry overcame us at the sudden death of dear Bernard in April 1965. What will the Bahnhof become without him, and how am I to manage? After serious reflection and with advice from family members, I decided to carry on. Especially my brother-in-law, Elias Lauber, and his wife, my sister Pia, were of considerable support henceforth.

The summer of 1965 with its centenary celebrations of the first Matterhorn ascent will never be forgotten. Many climbing friends of Bernard's came to visit and to encourage me. This will always be gratefully remembered.

During the summer of 1966 many British climbers contributed to a commemoration plaque. It was unveiled in front of the hotel by the Rt Rev Bishop Williams in August 1966 in the presence of many English alpinists, of family members and of Bernard's friends. The inscription reads as follows:

GRATEFULLY REMEMBERING
BERNARD BINER

29th December 1900 – 9th April 1965

HIS BRITISH FRIENDS
COMMEMORATE WITH THIS TABLET
A GREAT GUIDE
AND A GOOD FRIEND TO ALL CLIMBERS

On 19 August 1986 the plaque was replaced by a new one made of Scottish granite with the same inscription. We treasure that gift and it gets lots of appreciation and praise from the hotel guests and from passers-by.

I myself was offered a fine present containing a watch, a barometer and a hydrometer with a very dear inscription. It has been of indescribable value for giving weather information to our guests. We consult it daily with success and feel grateful to the donors.

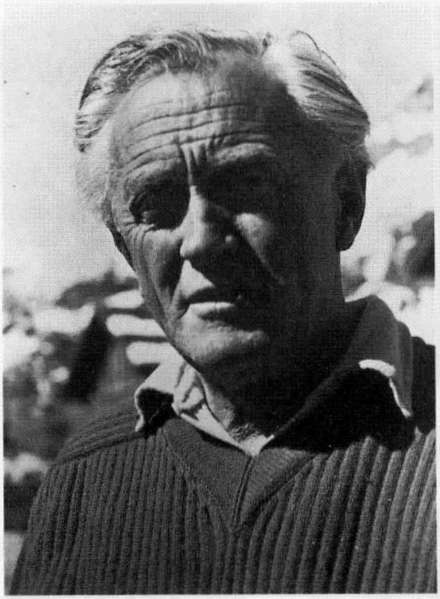
In 1960 the British mountaineers presented Bernard with a book for entries of successful climbs. It now contains a great number of entries and descriptions of exceptional interest, made by famous climbers from all over the world, and it evokes many fine memories.

During its existence the Bahnhof has known many highlights associated with successful climbs. The first British ascent of the Matterhorn N face occurred in summer 1961, the one of the S face in September 1966. Ever since there has been a Bahnhof, and up until today, very many important, difficult climbs and first ascents were undertaken by alpinists staying there. Besides the British, all possible nationalities are represented, such as the Austrian, German, French, Italian and Spanish, the Polish, Slovak and Czechoslovak, the American, Japanese and Korean and, of course, the Swiss. After their big achievements, it has been our joy and pride to welcome the happy climbers back to the hotel decorated with their respective national flag.

Of course there have also been sad times, with accidents occurring in the mountains. We have spend many worrying days waiting for climbers to come back and many a prayer has been sent to our Lord for a safe return. During those long hours, I felt most how helpless I really was without the assistance of Bernard who used to advise and inform the climbers before they set off for the hard routes.

You might like to know what changes there have been observed in the mountaineering scene during the past 40 years. Nowadays, among the alpinists who intend to reach one of the surrounding peaks, especially the Matterhorn, there tend to be more and more of those who underestimate the seriousness and dangers of the mountains. Earlier on, climbers liked to spend more time acclimatizing and getting themselves prepared for a demanding ascent.

Numerous were and still are British mountaineers as well as mountaineers from all over the world who enter our door and who keep coming year after year, renewing our friendship. We only hope that the young generation will also keep up with this tradition and consider the Bahnhof as their home. They must know that they will always be very welcome.



58. Bernard Biner, Bergführer Zermatt. 29 December 1900 – 9 April 1965. Gedenket seiner im Gebete. (p 129)



59. Hotel Bahnhof, Zermatt. (Perren-Barberini, by permission) (p 129)