



IT STARTS WITH THE BIG LADLE

In the poorer part of town on this side of the Rhine, in Kleinbasel, there has been an atmosphere of change for some time. The population is growing rapidly and trade is giving way to industry. The chemical industry develops from the dye works, which in Basel are closely linked to traditional silk ribbon production.

The Rheingasse is an important traffic artery in Kleinbasel, which has just been freed from the city walls. Construction is underway: At the bridgehead the extension of the House of Honour Societies, and right next door the construction of an inn, today's Hotel Hecht. Infected by the euphoria, the landlord Ernst Krafft commissions the Basel architect Ferdinand Iselin to design a hotel that meets the requirements of the time. The result is an imposing four-storey building with neo-classical features. The high round-arched windows in the base storey and the symmetrical rows of lancet windows on the upper storeys are striking on both the Rhine and the alley sides. Facing the busy Rheingasse, there is a drinking bar on the ground floor.

The Hotel Krafft opened in 1873. After Ernst Krafft had transferred his tavern rights from the "Schwarzer Bär" to the new building, he runs the entire business for another decade and a half. Then he moves on. The Hotel am Rhein is the parent house of a whole chain of hotels, that Krafft later builds up under his name in the flourishing tourist regions of Southern Europe. But only the Basel hotel is still called by that name today.

HERMANN HESSE, PARROT AND STEPPENWOLF

Following in the footsteps of the founding father, another Black Forest man takes over the Hotel Krafft in Basel: Wilhelm Gottlieb Lutz. When he died unexpectedly in 1894 - his youngest was just one year old - the house had to be sold to the hotelier Johannes Steger-Koch. Before the First World War, however, the Lutz family succeeds in buying back the beloved hotel by the Rhine and in appointing their own manager. And when the youngest son of the owner family is old enough, he follows in his father's footsteps and becomes the sole owner of the Hotel Krafft: Friedrich Lutz-Haisch makes a name for himself in Basel not only as a committed host, but also as the long-standing president of the local hoteliers' association.

In addition to hotel guests from all over the world who are passing through, the Krafft also accommodates pensioners: old people, students, people who have stayed in Basel. The Hotel am Rhein also plays a central role in the life and work of the German writer Hermann Hesse. His second wife, Ruth Wenger, a Swiss woman, studied singing in Basel in the mid-twenties and lives in the attic of the Hotel Krafft with her cat, dog and parrot Coco.

The young Ruth is the daughter of Lisa Wenger, a designer and children's book author who lives and works in the Ticino artists' colony of Carona and with whom Hesse has been closely associated with for years. Under pressure from her father, the Delsberg pocket knife manufacturer Theo Wenger, Ruth and the recently divorced Hesse marry in January 1924. The marriage lasts three years. During the time with Ruth the hotel on the Rhine is the centre of the restless writer's life. Here, in what is now room number 401, he also writes his novel "Der Steppenwolf", inspired by the Basel tavern scene.

1950s: MAD IDEAS AND SIESTA PLEASURES

Hans Waldmeyer and Dora Schneider have to get married in 1946. The reason: The young innkeepers from Fricktal in Aargau buy the Hotel Krafft in Basel together. Their children Hanspeter and Irena grow up in the hotel. While father and mother run the prestigious guesthouse with a lot of energy, the children are alternately taken care of by a nurse, the hotel staff and the guests. Saying goodbye and getting to know new things are part of everyday life. And also the huge gong that calls the guests to breakfast. The adventures in the large attic, where all the bed and table linen dries. The hotel dog that lies like a king in the middle of the Rheingasse. Dino, the porter, who swims down the Rhine with the two hotelier's children on truck hoses...

At the beginning of the 1950s, an urban planning vision - typical of the time - was taking shape in Basel: to tear down the entire Kleinbasel head of the Mittlere Brücke and build it over in a uniform manner. The idea fails because of the finances. The Hotel Krafft lives on. The enterprising landlord and landlady Waldmeyer-Schneider invest in their house. In 1953, according to the ideas of the architect Ernst Egeler, the entrance hall, the dining room and the breakfast room on the mezzanine floor are modernised. Egeler partially "de-cluttered" the rooms and equipped them with another window, new elegant curtains, wallpaper, chandeliers and chairs. As a replacement for the Trinkstube on Rheingasse, which has been closed for years, a small restaurant with a bar is built in the Soussol - the Schnooggeloch. The new restaurant with the "intimate atmosphere", as the press comments, is dominated by a fresco by the Basel painter Otto Abt, which depicts the traditional Kleinbasel symbols of honour, the Lion, the Wild Man and the Gryff bird.

At the same time as the Kellerbistro, the Waldmeyers also open the Boulevardcafé on the Rheinweg: the forty or so comfortable chairs on a red carpet and under black and white sun blinds, surrounded by oleander, vines and roses are enthusiastically taken up by the sun-hungry people of Basel.

THE BIGGEST MAN IN EUROPE, CHEMICAL PEOPLE AND THE MILITARY

All kinds of people stay at the hotel. The hotelier's daughter Irena rummages: a Russian pianist who brings along all her possessions – five Persian carpets - and lays them on top of each other in the room. Two Alsatian sisters who supply themselves with morphine in Basel and who always want to take the host's children in their arms. Or the pensioner from the top floor, who fetches the water for the washbasin on the ground floor because it's supposed to be fresher. Or a dark-skinned man at a time when there were still no black people in Basel. Year after year, a troupe of Lilliputians who perform at the Knie Circus, which makes a guest appearance in Basel, also descends on the Hotel Krafft. In the dining room they need help to get onto the chairs and they can't use the lift on their own.

The Krafft has always had a magical attraction on artists and performers: Actors, painters, cabaret artists, musicians, writers they all sign the guest book - often with enthusiastic words. This reads like a "Who's who" of Swiss cultural creation in the middle of the last century: Carigiet, Streuli, Keiser and Läubli, Frisch, later Dimitri... But there were also well-travelled businessmen visiting the chemical companies in Basel, and Swiss military personnel who held so-called general staff courses in the hotel on the Rhine during the Cold War, among the regular guests.

NOBLE HOSTEL FOR ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Waldmeyers do not rest on their laurels. In 1958 - again under the direction of the architect Ernst Egeler - the entire house is renovated, rebuilt and extended. The entrepreneurial spirit with which the old buildings are modernised and given a "modern form and flair" is well received in the city.

On the river side, the balconies with their ornate wrought iron railings had to be removed on the instructions of the State Commission for the Protection of Cultural Heritage, which advocated a "purification" of the classicist building. Instead of the mansards, the fourth floor of the Krafft building, facing the Rhine receive the characteristic attic storey.

At the same time, upstream on the Rhine – instead of the Waldmeyer family's home which was still a medieval house, the typical Krafft extension with its eye-catching loggias and the passage to the Rheingasse, where the kiosk is still located today, was build.

Opposite the hotel entrance on Rheingasse, on the corner of Schafsgässlein, a dependency is added in the property of a former grocery store, in which the Waldmeyer parents set up a student dormitory; in later years, the corner house is open to people looking for a place to stay at short notice.

The well-kept interior is now able to satisfy even the most spoiled guests. "The tastefully furnished rooms, which are quiet despite their location in the centre of Kleinbasel, have a bath or shower, telephone and radio. There is a garage for motorists and a multi-storey car park nearby", praises the Basel hotel guide from the time. Hostess Dora Waldmeyer never lets up and makes sure that in her 80-bed hotel, which the press likes to call a "posh place", is renewed every year and adapted to the state of the art in the hotel business. In 1973, on the occasion of a vernissage at the Beyeler Gallery, the New York Pop Art artist Roy Lichtenstein stayed at the Hotel Krafft and left a small sketch in the guest book.



FIRE IN THE HOTEL KRAFFT

The Haus am Rhein with the Le Petit Bâle restaurant on the mezzanine floor, the Kellerbistro and the Boulevardcafé are also well known to guests from the region. Father Waldmeyer and now also son Hanspeter are personally in the kitchen. Long before multicultural cuisine boomed, specialities from Hawaii, Uruguay, China and Greece could be ordered in the Krafft restaurants at the end of the 1970s.

The neighbourhood of the Krafft has changed over the years. At times there are problems with the drug scene, on the banks of the Rhine and near the main entrance. The Rheingasse has long since ceased to be the traffic axis of the Gründerzeit. The traditional taverns have partly given way to the milieu. But there is always a mix of inns, bars, small shops and medieval, beautifully renovated residential houses.

When the old Waldmeyer parents retire from the Krafft, it is Hanspeter's turn to take over the entire business. The regular guests, fine gentlemen and tourist groups from Germany, the Netherlands, England, remain loyal to the hotel. And so do many of the employees. The long-time manager of the lingerie sums it up: "The Krafft is special, it really holds you."

The Hotel Krafft made headlines in April 1997, when during the international watch and jewellery fair, a fire broke out in the fully booked hotel. At first, the staff did not take the fire alarm seriously, after all, there had always been false alarms. Until a horrified passer-by, who sees the roof on fire rushes in. The fire broke out in the kitchen and office area on the mezzanine floor and spread to the top floor via an exhaust duct. The fire brigade quickly has the fire under control and no one is injured despite the heavy smoke. The evacuation of the neighbouring buildings and the closure of the Mittlere Brücke can soon be lifted. Damage is caused to the hotel, so that the guests have to leave the building and spend the night on a Rhine boat. Only one couple, old regulars, refuse to leave and stay in the Krafft.



THE BOY'S DREAM COME TRUE: A HOTEL BY THE RIVER

On 18 December 2002, a boy's dream came true for Franz-Xaver Leonhardt. The still young restaurateur, who is nevertheless well known in Basel signed the purchase contract for the Hotel Krafft. And by Christmas Leonhardt serves breakfast in the arched window room facing the Rhine. Even as a young boy, Leonhardt wrote in a school essay about his wish to one day run a hotel by a river or lake. He falls in love with the Hotel Krafft years before it is put up for sale. He starts to observe the house on the Rhine while jogging, thinking up concepts and making his first contacts; at the same time, he continues to train and develop professionally.

The sales negotiations drag on for a long time. In the final phase the competition is strong, prominent and old-established. But Leonhardt is one step ahead and his plans are convincing. The house, which has hardly changed since it was rebuilt in 1958, is to be cleared out to its best advantage. Everyone who enters the open house should feel comfortable. There is talk of "authenticity" and "quality", but Leonhardt does not want to hear anything about "upmarket": The Krafft is and will remain on Rheingasse.

As Franz-Xaver Leonhardt gradually gets to know his hotel, he realises that the house is even more special than in his dreams. "The Krafft is an absolutely public place." And it became clear to Leonhardt that in future he would like to work here and create something new, but that he would not have to own the historic stones of the Krafft in order to do so. Coincidence or not: it was during this time that the hotelier came into contact with the Edith Maryon Foundation. The Foundation for the Promotion of Social Living and Working Places, which is also behind the cultural project "Unternehmen Mitte" in Basel, is dedicated to preserving and upgrading public places. In May 2003, it acquired the Hotel Krafft together with the corner building on the opposite side. A long-term lease is signed with Franz-Xaver Leonhardt and his entourage.



OUR HOTEL KRAFFT

After an initial dust removal and renovation phase, the dining restaurant on the Beletage with its brand-new kitchen in the Soussol reopens its doors at the beginning of 2004 next to the hotel, which was never closed during the entire transitional period. This was soon followed by the reopening of the newly spruced-up cellar bistro and the sun terrace. On the menu, a creative cuisine du marché, which focuses on fresh products from the region.

And the people come. The house with the unique view belongs to the guests again - the foreigners and the locals. And no one leans back. In addition to host Leonhardt, the Krafft management crew now consists of head chef Andi Steiner, hotel manager Sabine Handschin and restaurant manager Catherine Leonhardt-Daviot. The renovation of the hotel rooms took place in summer 2005. The 45 rooms in the main house will be equipped with new bathrooms, the rest will be gently renovated. Classic Swiss type furniture, chairs by Eames & Saarinen and bed and wardrobe elements specially designed for the Hotel Krafft are skilfully combined with parts of the existing furnishings. As part of the renovation, the hotel's facades – both on the side of the Rhine promenade and on Rheingasse – will be given a new coat of paint. The characteristic windows of the entire building will be adapted to contemporary standards.

And since it is not the task of a hotel to come to rest, the Krafft lives on even after this intervention. Now more than ever. There are plenty of plans. And once there's nothing left to do in the main building at Rheingasse 12, there's always the annexe diagonally opposite on the corner of Schafsgässlein. The young "hotelier family" dreams of someday realising something here that complements the living and dining culture lived at the Krafft in a meaningful, perhaps even sensual, way.

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