

Bertha Schmidlin / Eduard Schmidlin

Bertha Schmidlin was born at Castle Altmannshofen in the Kingdom of Württemberg, Germany, on 18 September 1848. She was the first of nine children—seven of whom survived into adulthood—of Eduard Schmidlin and Maria Schmidlin-Waldraff.

Eduard Schmidlin was working as head gardener and estate manager to the Earl of Waldburg-Zeil at the time of Bertha's birth. He had been born in Rottenburg on Neckar on 8 July 1808 and went to school in Stuttgart, where he later trained as a gardener at the Royal Court Gardens. In 1828 he was allowed to attend the University of Tübingen for one year, there he read mathematics and chemistry as well as learning about book-keeping and estate management. His elder brother Hermann was a student of theology at the same university and the two brothers soon joined the 'Feuerreiter' (fire riders) student fraternity. In 1833 they were both involved in the 'Frankfurter Wachensturm', a failed attempt to start a revolution in Germany. Eduard Schmidlin was arrested, sentenced for anti-monarchist activities and held prisoner in the Hohenasperg fortress for ten months. After his release from prison, he went back to the Royal Court Gardens to work as a gardener, but as he had received an unusually thorough training, he soon expanded into writing on botany and gardening and was at times able to live as a successful author in Stuttgart, Constance and elsewhere in the region. One of his books, "Die bürgerliche Gartenkunst", became a best-seller and was reprinted several times. In the mid 1850s Eduard Schmidlin lived in Stuttgart with his family as a writer. Even though he had not been part of the 1848 revolution, he still had sympathies for the revolutionaries, one of whom was the nobleman, manor owner and mining entrepreneur Conrad von Rappard. In 1856 Rappard bought the land surrounding the Giessbach Falls in the Bernese Oberland and a year later, at his behest, Eduard Schmidlin and his four surviving children—Bertha, Marie, Hermann, Emil—left Württemberg and came to settle at Giessbach. Here, Eduard Schmidlin was entrusted with the landscape planning of the parks and gardens around the newly built hotel. Soon he also took over the hotel management, ably supported by his wife and, later, the daughters, especially the two eldest, Bertha and Marie.

An article published in the Times on 21st September 1865 pointed out one important difference between the Giessbach and other Swiss hotels:

The landlord greets you at the door as you come in; he hovers about you like a guardian angel, invisible yet omnipresent, during all your stay; anticipates all your wants, forestalls all your wishes, and only leaves you to the tender care of his bevy of daughters—he has, I am told, seven of them—and of other maids, all tidy and blooming and pretty, waitresses at board no less than in chamber; mine host himself being the only individual of the male sex in attendance whose foot is allowed to tread the floors within this hospitable threshold.

The 'holiday correspondent' who was the author of this piece got rather carried away with regard to the number of the landlord's daughters. In fact, Eduard Schmidlin had just four daughters who survived into adulthood. The two younger ones, Antonia and Johanna, were both born at Giessbach, in 1857 and 1859 respectively.

Marie Schmidlin, who was often referred to as 'Marie of the Giessbach' by British visitors, became friends with John Ruskin, who stayed at the hotel several times in the 1860s and wrote about both sisters in his autobiography *Praeterita*. One chapter which Ruskin intended for this was to be called "The Rainbows of the Giessbach". (This chapter, compiled from John Ruskin's materials by Bernard Richards, was privately published in Oxford in 2010) On his 1866 visit, Ruskin noted that one of the sisters was a very young widow, and this was indeed Bertha. In October 1865, she had been

married at Brienz to the German engineer Otto Stephani, born in 1832, who in 1861 had become the first manager of the municipal gas works in Bern. According to a letter written by Eduard Schmidlin to his uncle, it was a love match despite the great difference in age. Just four months after the wedding, on 8 February 1866, Otto Stephani died after a lengthy illness. His young widow returned to the Giessbach to be with her parents and siblings and to help with the running of the hotel. In a German novel of the time, “Der Löwe von Luzern” [The Lion of Lucerne] by Philip Galen, there is a chapter set at the Giessbach and in it Bertha Stephani and her sad fate are mentioned—with her full name—in a footnote, which also points out how popular she was with hotel guests of both sexes. According to reports of the time, Bertha and Marie spoke very good English and also French in addition to their native language German. As the Giessbach is quite secluded and girls did not have even remotely similar chances of receiving an education as boys did, one wonders where the Schmidlin daughters got their language skills from. Perhaps they were privately taught. Eduard Schmidlin certainly knew English: in 1855 he published a German edition of *The Book of the Farm* by Henry Stephens, which he had translated and adapted so that it would be of practical use to German readers.

Presumably, John Bullough was one of the visitors of the Giessbach, however, it is not known exactly how he and Bertha first met. When they were married at Brienz, Bertha was a Swiss citizen as the entire Schmidlin family had become naturalised citizens of their adopted country in April 1868. In 1870 the Giessbach was sold to the Hauser family of hoteliers and Eduard Schmidlin had to look for new employment at the age of 62. After a brief stint back in Germany, he returned to Switzerland and took over the management of the Hotel Bellevue at Thun, which belonged to the Lake Thun and Lake Brienz Steamship Company. It was at the Bellevue Hotel that his grandson Edward Bullough was born on 28 March 1880. At that time Bertha and John Bullough were going through their divorce and she was living in separation from her husband.

With the closing of the season of 1882 Eduard Schmidlin retired from hotel management and, according to an article in the “Schweizer Fremdenblatt”, he and his wife went to live with their youngest daughter in Dresden, Saxony. This was Johanna, born 1859, who married Karl Schall in Dresden in 1887. Karl Schall was an instrument maker and pioneer of medical technology who had set up his own business in London in 1888. The Schall family became British subjects in 1893. Karl Schall’s brother-in-law, Franz Schmidlin, the youngest of the Schmidlin children, who had emigrated to Australia in 1892, made that country’s first X-ray image in 1896 and became the sole representative in Australia of Karl Schall’s firm.

On 9 January, 1886, Bertha Bullough-Stephani-Schmidlin had been married for the third time, in Dresden, to Judge Friedrich Eduard Strüver, who was ten years younger than she and with whom she had one son and three daughters. According to one of her granddaughters, she was a highly respected lady in Dresden society, not least because she insisted on her children taking regular baths, something which apparently was quite unusual at the time in German families. Her parents both died in Dresden, Maria Schmidlin-Waldruff in November 1883 and Eduard Schmidlin in February 1890, and on 13 November 1913 she too passed away in the Saxon capital.

Further reading (in German):

Burschenschaft Germania Tübingen. Gesamtverzeichnis der Mitglieder seit der Gründung 12. Dezember 1816. Neuauflage 2008. Erstellt von Karl Philipp. [Stuttgart] 2008

Dvorak, Helge: Biographisches Lexikon der Deutschen Burschenschaft. Im Auftrag der Gesellschaft für burschenschaftliche Geschichtsforschung e. V. hrsg. von Prof. Dr. Christian Hünemörder. Band I: Politiker, Teilband 5: R-S Heidelberg 2002.

Krebs, Thomas: Eduard Schmidlin—Gärtner, Botaniker und Hotelier. In: Lebensbilder aus Baden-Württemberg. Im Auftr. der Kommission für geschichtliche Landeskunde in Baden-Württemberg hrsg. von Gerhard Taddey ... [et al.]. - Stuttgart : W. Kohlhammer, 2010, pp.: 176–198

Krebs, Thomas: Eduard Schmidlin (1808-1890)—Gärtner, Revolutionär, botanischer Schriftsteller, Hoteldirektor, Tourismuspionier. In: Zandera. Mitteilungen aus der Bücherei des Deutschen Gartenbaues e. V., Berlin: Vol. 26 (2011), pp: 14–28