

Brehan F. Brady

Elementary German I Honors

Professor Panaccione

December 17, 2019

Skilaufen:

Ein germanisches Geschenk an die Welt

Every winter, millions take to the mountains to partake in the most pleasurable of alpine endeavors: downhill skiing. The modern ski industry employs tens of thousands of people and contributes billions of dollars in revenue to small ski towns and major resorts across the globe. The modern sport of skiing has its roots firmly planted in the Tirolean Alps of western Austria, and it was a native of these lofty peaks who first developed the techniques that have made skiing accessible to generations of powder-hounds around the world. This man was Hannes Schneider, a pioneer and visionary who dedicated his life to the art of gliding down snow covered mountains with grace and style.

Johann "Hannes" Schneider was born in the small alpine town of Stuben am Arlberg in 1890, the oldest of four children. The mountains surrounding his childhood home provided a fertile nursery for the new sport of downhill skiing, and according to his family biographer, young Hannes made his first turns at the age of 10. He proved to be an apt pupil of this new vocation, winning his first competition at the age of 15, the prize being a new pair of skis in lieu of a trophy. At the age of 17, he had received several invitations to become a ski instructor in both Switzerland and Austria, one of which came from Rudolph Gomperz who was the

chairman of the newly formed Ski Club Arlberg. He chose to take up Herr Gomperz on his offer and began his teaching career at the Hotel Post in St. Anton in 1907.

Skiing grew slowly during the years leading up to the First World War. Learning to ski was a matter of imitation and repetition where a student would be paired with an instructor and they would do their best to imitate the technique being demonstrated. This was a time-consuming process, and in the days before the invention of the chairlift, labor intensive as well since both the student and the instructor would have to hike back up the side of the mountain at the conclusion of each run. Under these conditions, the growth of skiing as a form of recreation was limited by both the availability of instructors and the aerobic fitness of the prospective student.

For Hannes, he spent much of his free time in these days working on refining his technique. His goal was to make skiing as fast as safety would allow, and his habit of crouching down on his skis as he schussed his way down the mountain became known as the Arlberg squat. It was also in these pre-war years that Hannes began to develop a progressive technique through which a novice could learn to ski that was based on a structured progression of skills rather than the free form imitation that was the standard of the day. When war came in 1914, Hannes, along with millions of young men across Europe, was conscripted into the army and traded in the trappings of a civilian for a more martial wardrobe.

When the clouds of war finally lifted in 1918, Hannes was poised to revolutionize the ski industry. Having had spent the majority of his time in uniform as a mountaineering instructor, he had gained valuable experience in the instruction of large groups. When he returned that winter to St. Anton, he combined this insight with his pre-war innovations in ski instruction to

create what would become known as the “Arlberg Technique”. The combination of a formalized system of instruction based on a progression of skills and the division of students into groups based on ability allowed for the rapid growth of the sport. Hannes founded his own independent ski school in 1920, and his system of instruction helped to promote the steady growth and expansion of the industry through the 1920’s and 1930’s.

Hannes renown as one of the worlds preeminent skiers grew as the result of two factors. The first being the advent of a genre of films that were known as “Germain Mountain Films”, which would be readily recognized by any modern aficionado of the works of Warren Miller or Greg Stump as the worlds first ski movies. These silent, black and white reels showcased the skills of Schneider and his contemporaries as they seemed to effortlessly glide across the silver screen, exposing untold thousands to the potential held by a snow-covered mountain. The second influence on Hannes international fame was the result of the success of his ski school in St. Anton. Young ski instructors who had learned their trade from Hannes himself brought these skills with them when they traveled and eventually emigrated to new countries. The propagation of his techniques into and across America eventually led to requests for demonstrations by the skimeister himself, and in 1936 Hannes and one of his instructors, a fellow Austrian named Benno Rybizka, toured the US. They gave demonstrations in front of packed crowds in Boston and New York City, showcasing their skills and presenting the newest innovations in techniques and methods to audiences infected by the skiing bug.

The 1936 American tour proved to be fortuitous when the storm clouds of conflict began to darken European skies just two years later. Following Nazi Germanies annexation of Austria in 1938, known as the Anschluss, Hannes and his family found themselves under house

arrest at the hands of their occupiers. Hannes had made no secret of his disdain for the Nazi regime and his refusal to cooperate with them had resulted in him being labeled as a political enemy of the German people. He was saved from deportation to a concentration camp by the intervention of an American businessman named Harvey Gibson. Mr. Gibson was also the owner of Mt. Cranmore, a new ski area in New Hampshire that had opened the year before with its ski school operating under Benno Rybizka, the protégé of Schneider's that had accompanied him on the 1936 tour. Through Mr. Gibson's financial connections with the German Reichsbank, the entire Schneider family was able to secure visas and emigrate to the United States, arriving by train in North Conway, NH to much fanfare on February 11, 1939.

By 1940, the dark clouds over Europe had erupted into war, and it was clear to many in America that it was only a matter of time before they too were drawn into a second global conflagration. One of these was a man named Charles "Minnie" Dole, a wealthy and well-connected New York businessman who recognized a serious short coming of the current state of American military preparedness. Owing to a combination of his reading of world events, and his deep passion for all things alpine, he recognized that in the whole of the United States military there was not a single unit with the ability to fight in mountainous terrain. He brought this concern to the War department, pointing out to the generals there that Europe, the most likely theater of battle for American forces, happens to contain several prominent mountain ranges. Utterly unique in the annals of American military history, the War department authorized Mr. Dole, a civilian, to begin to recruit a special unit for the Army that was intended to fight in alpine conditions. Mr. Dole, who had extensive experience skiing in New Hampshire, used his connections there to solicit volunteers for the mountain troops, a call that was

answered by several of Hannes Schneider's instructors at Mt. Cranmore, including Hannes' 20-year-old son Herbert. One of the results of this initial call for volunteers from the skiing community was that the core of what would come to be known as the 10th Mountain Division was comprised of numerous Austrian ex-pats who would someday find themselves fighting on the very doorstep of their childhood homes.

A major component of the training that the 10th underwent consisted of military operations in alpine terrain and as a result, learning to ski was a priority. For many of the Austrians who had pre-war instructor experience, they found themselves teaching the fundamentals of downhill skiing to their khaki clad comrades first on the slopes of Washington's Mt. Rainier and then later in Camp Hale, Colorado. One of the perks that accompanied the instructor billet was an exemption from having to undergo the rigors of military basic training, a benefit that Herb Schneider and his compatriots no doubt thoroughly appreciated. The 10th Mountain Division had to wait until their specialized skills were needed on the battlefield and it wasn't until January of 1945, when the allied advance up the Italian peninsula had reached the foothills of the Alps, that the division finally entered combat. The divisions four years of intense training paid off in victory on the battlefield, and the Nazi surrender in May of 1945 found the men of the 10th in southern Austria. This advantageous location provided some of the 10th's Austrian natives, such as Herb Schneider and Toni Matt, an opportunity to visit their hometowns and reconnect with family and friends that they had not seen since fleeing the Nazi occupation of their country.

Skiing experienced a boom in the post-war years that could only be described as an avalanche of growth. In America, where the public had followed the exploits of the soldiers of

the 10th with rapturous interest, the ski industry provided the public with a new recreational outlet. With military surplus ski equipment available for the princely sum of \$3.50, and ski schools staffed by veterans of the mountain troops who had learned their downhill craft from the disciples of Hannes Schneider, skiing became the winter past time for tens of thousands. For the veterans of the 10th, skiing provided a way for them to transition back into their civilian lives while maintaining a connection to the comradery of the slopes that had been forged in the crucible of war. These men literally created the modern ski industry, establishing the ski Meccas of Vail, Aspen, and Whiteface to name just a few. By the mid-1950's, 62 different American ski resorts had a direct connection to the 10th Mountain Division, and this connection would be maintained into the modern era through the innumerable reunions of veterans and their family members held annually on the slopes of these mountains.

The Austrian influence on skiing extends beyond its martial and recreational facets into the realm of intense competition. The first organized ski races of the modern era were organized between the Kandahar and St. Anton ski clubs in the decade following the first world war and were held on the slopes of the peaks of the Arlberg region of Austria. This competition soon spread to the North America in the form of the legendary Inferno races of the 1930's held on the slopes of New Hampshire's Mt. Washington, specifically down the steep inclines of the infamous Tuckerman's Ravine. Austrian native, and future 10th Mountain soldier, Toni Matt's victory in the 1939 Mt. Washington Inferno became the stuff of legend when he defeated his next closest competitor by over a minute in a sport where the margins of victory are usually measured in tenths of seconds. While his achievement was as much the result of youthful daring and recklessness as it was skill, it has never been equaled.

The Austrian dominance in skiing extends far beyond the slopes of New England mountains into the pinnacle of international competition: the Olympics. Since the introduction of downhill skiing events to the winter Olympics in 1936, the Austrian team has won nearly twice as many medals (121) as their next closest competitor (Switzerland, 66). This is the result of the intersection of cultural and climatological factors. As the de facto inventors of the modern sport of skiing, the Austrians consider it to be more than just a national past time, it is woven into the fabric of their national culture. It is as much a part of their identity as the mountain slopes where they refine their craft. These mountains, with their miles of pristine glaciers and snowfields, offer an unmatched opportunity to hone the skills that have led to this nation's unmatched dominance in the sport of skiing. These mountains, however, are showing the effects of global climate change in an undeniable way that portends a dire future not only for skiing, but for the entire ecosystem.

According to an article published by the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, the future of skiing is in serious jeopardy if current rates of global warming continue unabated. It is estimated that, as a result of the current rate of carbon dioxide emissions, the ski industry in New England will cease to exist by 2090, and that snow depths above 3,000 meters in Europe will be cut in half by 2100. The mountain slopes that framed the life of Hannes Schneider from his youth in St. Anton to the sanctuary of his later years in New Hampshire will be barren and devoid of snow within the span of a single human life if substantial action is not taken now to alter the course of climate change. Residents of the Andermatt in Switzerland have had to take the extreme measure of covering portions of the glacier there with blankets during the summer in order to slow the rate of glacier loss, but even

this heroic measure is not enough in the face of global warming. Because of the exorbitant amounts of energy used in the production of artificial snow, a mainstay of ski areas attempting to remain commercially viable, the ski industry itself is contributing to its own demise.

The thought that the massive and eternal glaciers that provided the setting for Hannes Schneider's first turns would someday be relegated to old faded photographs would have been impossible for he or his contemporaries to comprehend. Reliable snow, something that generations of skiers across continents had always taken for granted, is rapidly transforming from an abundant commodity to a luxury. The current generation of those who love and treasure the beauty and majesty of the mountains in winter have now been charged with the task of preserving those same majestic vistas. Given the perseverance in the face of adversity that has been an undercurrent of the history of those who seek the solace of the mountains on a pair of skis, transcending nationality and the darkest moments of human conflict, the current challenge posed by climate change is simply one more to be overcome. The international skiing community must join with other, likeminded individuals to seek out and develop alternatives that will enable the preservation of both the snow-covered mountain ranges that they hold so dear and the planet as a whole. The key to success, just as it is when faced with a steep and unknown slope, is to remain poised, undaunted, and determined to take it one turn at a time, all the while with the goal set firmly in the mind. Through this can the legacy of a humble man from St. Anton be passed on to successive generations of skiers who will treasure and protect the mountains that enable them to Fliegen ohne Flügel, to fly without wings.

Works Cited

- Scott, Michon "Climate & Skiing". <https://www.climate.gov/news-features/climate-and/climate-skiing>. 11/15/2019
- Shelton, Peter. Climb to Conquer: The Untold Story of WWII's 10th Mountain Division. Scribner, 2011
- None. "Biography of Hannes Schneider". <https://www.hanesschneiderfoundation.com/english/hannes-schneider/>. 10/19/2019
- None. "Remembering Toni Matt and the 1939 Inferno". <http://newenglandskimuseum.org/remembering-toni-matt-and-the-1939-inferno/>. 10/19/2019