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ELISABETH GÜRTLER: VIENNA'S TOP HOTELIER

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View of Vienna Opera House from the Sacher Hotel. Photo Lucy Gordan

Like the hotel she owns and runs meticulously with her children Alexandra and Georg, Elisabeth Gürtler is super-Viennese and glamorous. Immediately after my return from the Sacher bakery, this petite, charismatic workaholic with sparkling periwinkle eyes and a somewhat wicked sense of humor took time out of her busy schedule to meet with me over a prosecco in the Hotel's very posh, yet home-like bar. Instantly she made me feel as if we'd been friends all our lives.

LG: Can you give me a brief history of your family and how it came to own this hotel?

EG: Eduard Sacher, the son of the creator of the Original Sacher-Torte opened this hotel in 1876. Upon his death, his eccentric cigar-smoking wife Anna, the daughter of a butcher from Leopoldstadt, turned it into a favorite meeting place for the aristocracy including the Emperor Franz Josef himself.

Sadly, Anna's charisma could not prevent the First World War and the downfall of the Austro-Hungary Empire. Anna Sacher died in 1930 believing that she was a wealthy woman. She left legacies to the hotel's employees, but an accounting of her estate showed that she'd been heavily in debt. The hotel went into bankruptcy and it was managed by the courts until it was put up for auction and bought by my deceased husband's grandfather Hans, who was a very famous lawyer. His partner was a man named Siller, who knew how to run coffee shops. They made a contract that when one of them died, it was the right of the other family to buy out the deceased's share. At first Mr. Siller and his wife managed the food; my husband's grandfather the finances, and his wife, a very beautiful lady, guest relations. The Sillers had no children, so since their deaths the Hotel has belonged to the Gürtler family.

LG: You also own the Hotel Sacher in Salzburg and the Imperial Hofburg in Innsbruck?

EG: Yes, in 1988 my husband took over the hotel in Salzburg. The Imperial Hofburg in Innsbruck is a café. We rented the location and ran it by ourselves until two years ago when we turned it over to a franchise.

LG: Your hotels are also well-known for their cafés and I've heard you are planning to open others on a franchise basis; where?

EG: Yes, this was our intent and Innsbruck is the first, but we are very particular about the terms of the franchise: an excellent location, the franchiser's impeccable professionalism, and knowledge of Austrian hospitality. This explains why we have only one franchise abroad: in Bolzano in Italy, a hotelier who sells all our products. Life in Bolzano is not very expensive; as you know, it was in Austria until after the First World War; and his hotel, L'Albergo della Città, although nextdoor to the shop, is a separate entity. Plus Italians love sachertorte.

We've had several requests from China, Japan, and Hong Kong; so far I've always refused because the essence of a Viennese café is that people stay a long time, must be left in peace, and only drink a cup of coffee and read newspapers. This means there is no turnaround on the chair so, if you have a very expensive rent, you won't be able to make money.

LG: Any amusing anecdotes about the history of the Sacher and its guests?

EG: Let me think; our VIP guest list is so long. Lots of royalty stay with us: Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands, Queen Sonia of Norway, Grace Kelly and Princess Caroline of Monaco, and recently Prince Albert, as well as the former President of Iran. When the Beatles stayed here, Yoko Ono and John Lennon held a press conference in bed. Leonard Bernstein loved this picture above us here. I always hung it in his room, which also had to have a grand piano. When my ex-husband, Peter Gürtler, married Reagan's ambassador to Austria in 1985, Bernstein, who was a staunch Democrat, refused to stay here again because the second Mrs. Gürtler, Austrian-born Helene Van Damm, Reagan's personal secretary when governor of California, was a Republican.



Anna Sacher

LG: I recently interviewed Roberto Wirth, the owner of the Hassler in Rome. He told me that the Hassler has remained such a top hotel over the years because it's family-owned. Is that also true of the Sacher?

EG: I'm a close friend of Roberto and of his wife Astrid. I admire them both. Yes, what he said is true because nowadays hotel managers job-hop. If they manage a hotel in Vienna, they move to Paris, and then after a few years to New York, which are considered more exciting. This means that, when a guest returns, he or she probably won't find the same managing director especially since most hotels belong to chains now. Yes, we Gürtlers, Roberto, the Badrutts, the owners of the Palace in St. Moritz, the Volkhardts of the Bayerischehof in Munich, the sixth generation of the Kracht family of the 162-year-old Baur au Lac in Zurich, are a dying breed. Family-run hotels mean continuity, good service, the same style of decor throughout the hotel, and a softer home-like atmosphere. Otherwise managers think they have the right to make refurbishments; in five years they are gone, and the new manager wants to leave his own imprint and insists on his own changes. I decorate everything myself because I like it and I stand for this. My husband ran this hotel for 20 years; this is my 17th year.

LG: How many members of the Gürtler family work here and how do you divide up the responsibilities?

EG: At the end of each day only one person has the final responsibility. My children are young. Before taking over, first they have to have run a sector of our hotels. You can't run everything at the beginning of your career; you don't have enough experience. My daughter Alexandra is in charge of sales and marketing. She likes to travel, to talk to people. She's very proud of this hotel so she's very convincing. My son Georg loves to supervise the staff. He's in charge of quality and keeping up our standards. Their support helps me, but the financial responsibility rests with one person.

LG: When I met Mr. Heilmann, the Managing Director, last year, he told me that the Sacher has a famous art collection; can you give me its history? What are your favorite pieces? Have you continued to add to it? Do you collect something else?

EG: Yes, we do. The collection began with Anna Sacher because her brother studied with a lot of famous Austrian artists and she bought their works. My husband's grandfather collected paintings and so did the Siller family and they both hung them in the hotel.

We own over 1,000 paintings by 19th-century Austrian painters. I don't add new artists, but I buy works by artists we already own. Our largest number of paintings by one artist are 17 by Aistauer. A contemporary of Anna Sacher, he lived in Salzburg and Vienna. His works hang in our "Anna Sacher" restaurant. Tonight you'll see that he was full of admiration for Cezanne until he developed his own style. Besides still lifes, he painted his family. He was very much in love with his wife.

LG: Do you collect anything else?

EG: No, I'm too busy running the hotel, but I do collect Sacher Hotel memorabilia.

LG: Your favorite artist, musician, composer, singer, color, flower, food, wine?

EG: Herbert Boeckl and Anton Kolig, painters from Carinthia; the soprano from St. Petersburg Anna Netrebko and the German-Canadian tenor Michael Schade; Verdi, Donizetti, the operettas, Strauss, Lehar; peach, salmon-peach; amaryllis; yogurt; and Austrian wine, especially Styrian wine and especially Sauvignon Blanc.

LG: What do you think are the essential qualities of a top hotelier?

EG: What is your definition of top and success? It's much easier to run an already successful and well-known company like this hotel than to start one. When VIPs come to Vienna, they want to stay here; it's glamorous; just across the street from the Opera, it's at the center of attention. It's not so difficult to run a successful company. You just have to be on your toes to keep it successful.

LG: Your typical day?

EG: With my sister I also run my family company. I go there every morning and come here around noon and work until 10 or 11 PM. So my day is work, work, work.

LG: What do you like most about your job?

EG: Decorating. I love it and it helps me to relax. A lot of my lady friends are jealous because I can redecorate. I like to design fabrics, like the red and beige "wall paper," carpets, and bedware, in your room. The Sacher Hotel has always had a connection with red, so I wanted to have some red decor on our new 7th floor. Red is connected with our Emperor.

LG: What do you like the least?

EG: Disciplining and firing staff in order to assure top-quality.

LG: Do you have a favorite hotel or hotels besides this one?

EG: When I travel, I'm never relaxed. I have to observe, remember, and write down every detail. The Hassler in Rome, the Bayerischehof in Munich, Baur au Lac in Zurich, the Crillon in Paris.

LG: Where do you go on vacation?

EG: I never go on vacation. I'm constantly going between our several hotels.

LG: If you hadn't been a hotelier what profession would you have chosen?

EG: Running my father's grain business which includes the development of new seeds, hybrids. I knew from an early age that I would have to work. I have no brothers. I had no choice.



Elisabeth Gürtler