

The Schloss



60 years on from the first encounter

Brian Walling, March 2024 updated

THE SCHLOSS

I first set eyes on the Schloss some 60 years ago, in the wet days of early June, 8 June 1965 to be precise. This was just after the end of my student days, when I was walking in southern Germany from west to east along the foothills of the Bavarian Alps.

I was between jobs then. I had left university a year earlier and taken a job in financial services in the City of London. This proved to be boring and did not provide the challenge that I had expected. So I left the first job after securing another job with a large engineering group in north England. The second job had a start date a couple of months away and this gave me some time for another Continental trip.

Although I was no longer a student then, I somehow managed again to secure a seat on cheap student charter flights over to and back from the Continent. So on 21 May 1965 I found myself at Southend Airport boarding a DC-3 of Channel Airways on a short hop (400km or 250miles) over to Düsseldorf in Germany.



Channel Airways Douglas DC-3 at Southend Airport in July 1965. I flew in this or a similar plane on my trip just two months earlier. This 1930s-1940s piston-engined aircraft typically had 32 seats. It became the workhorse of many short-haul airlines after the 2nd World War, until more modern designs evolved.



The cabin inside was quite cramped.

I had no detailed itinerary in mind. The general objective was to visit or revisit places that had long been on my agenda in southern Germany and Austria, ending in Vienna (which I already knew and greatly liked from the previous year). My charter flight back was therefore booked from Vienna five weeks later. Düsseldorf was acknowledged among student travellers as a good starting point for Continental trips.

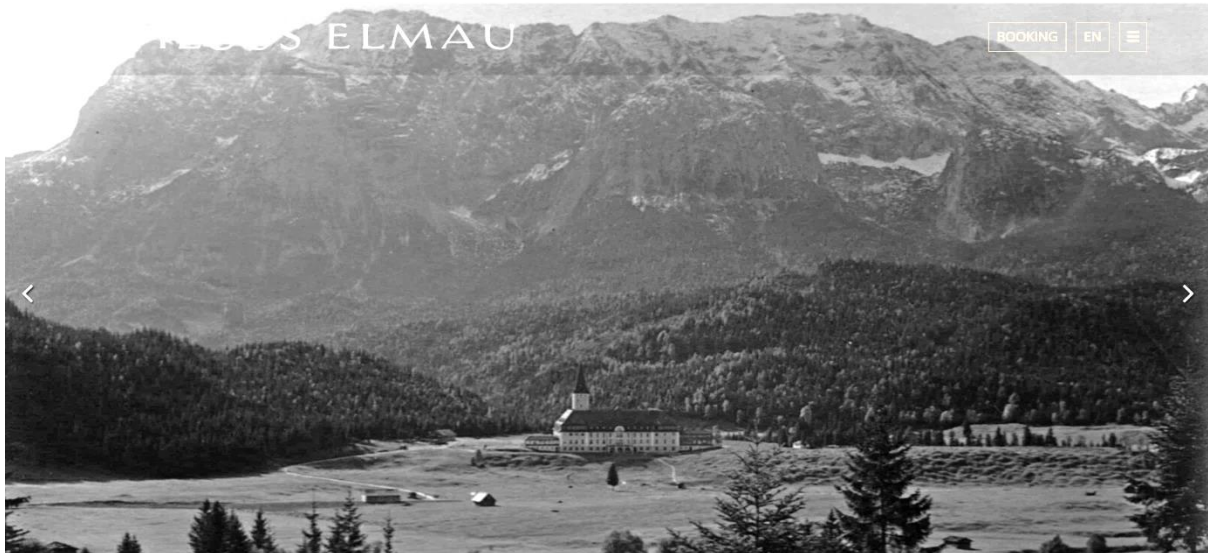
I planned to stay in German and Austrian Youth Hostels. I had favourable experience of these from earlier Continental trips. For travelling in the direction of southern Germany and then Vienna I planned generally to "hitch-hike", but use train or other public transport when necessary. In the event, in southern Germany I ended up covering considerable distances by just walking. By opting generally to hitch-hike I was therefore committing myself to some uncertainty about where I would pass through or end up each day.

I stopped the first night at Düsseldorf's Youth Hostel beside the Rhine. The previous year I had stopped there for two days, so felt no need to linger in Düsseldorf this time. However, I did start the journey south this time with a pre-arranged visit to some old German friends in Koblenz, 120km south, where I stayed three days. The husband of the couple had been a Prisoner-of-War in Britain and I had recently met him on his return visit to Britain to see old British acquaintances. (My brother and I also stopped and paid this couple a visit the following year, 1966, when we were returning by car to England from a trip to what was then Yugoslavia.)

After Koblenz, my first stop-over this time was Heidelberg followed by Lindau on the Bodensee, close to Switzerland. From there I progressed, largely on my own feet, eastwards through the foothills of the Bavarian Alps, often using tracks and paths through the hills and forests to connect places (navigating by map and compass if necessary), rather than sticking to the roads, reaching Berchtesgarden from Lindau in 19 days. From there it was an easy hop to Salzburg and then on to Vienna, where I arrived in ample time for my flight home.

After three stops eastwards out of Lindau (Obersdorf, Kempten, Füssen) I reached Garmisch. I stayed there 3 nights. It was then, on one of my off-road stretches of route, through the forests and over the hills, that I came across the Schloss. From Garmisch to Mittenwald (my proposed next stop after Garmisch), I mapped out what looked like an interesting route of some 20km along forest tracks, from Garmisch's level of 700m rising quickly to about 1,000m with later another rise to a significant hilltop (Hoher Kranzberg) at 1,400m, that promised interesting views, before dropping down into Mittenwald at 1,000m again.

About halfway along this 20km route I emerged from a track that had followed a small river valley (the Ferchenbachtal) and found myself in a large open area among the forests. There, in front of me was a monumental building (the Schloss) that looked somewhat forbidding. I assumed that it was a monastery or similar institution. Not sure whether I had in fact entered private property, I hurried on along my intended route, leaving the clearing and passing directly into the forest at the side of the Schloss heading through the trees directly up to the summit of the Kranzberg, some 3 km further on and 400m higher.



Looking south across the Schloss Elmau estate in an old photo, probably late 1900s. Rising beyond the Schloss are the Wetterstein mountains on the border with Austria. In June 1965 I crossed this spot from right to left, walking just this side of the tree line, passing very close to the other side of the Schloss, and re-entered the forest just to the left of the Schloss in the photo, to make my way upwards to the Kranzberg summit, some way to the left and 400m above the level of the Schloss. (Image from the Schloss Elmau website.)

I probably never entertained a single further thought about the Schloss for a full half century after walking past it – until 2015 when there was extensive TV coverage of the G7 leaders meeting in Bavaria, Germany for their annual summit on 7-8 June. The German government and the TV media heavily played up the scenic beauty of the location – which appeared absolutely exquisite on the TV screen. The scenery seemed vaguely familiar, so I checked its precise location on the map and soon realised that it was indeed the area that I had walked through – exactly 50 years earlier on 8 June 1965!

The Schloss itself also attracted my attention this time, in view of the several substantial swimming pools that it seemed to feature. Swimming is one of our daily pastimes (one km non-stop, before dawn each day). Any interesting hotel that comes to our attention is immediately checked for its swimming facilities and this one seemed to more than meet requirements. Additionally making it interesting was the meticulous Germanic excellence that the place seemed to exude. So the Schloss in 2015 joined our list of hotels potentially deserving a visit.

Seven years further on, in June 2022, when Germany again was the host for the G7 summit, the Schloss once more had its brief moment of glory in the media when the Summit took place here. Around the same time, a BBC TV documentary series on unusual luxury hotels, “Amazing Hotels”, was produced, in which one hour-long episode featured Schloss Elmau and provided some most interesting behind-the-scenes photography and commentary on the hotel and its operations and philosophy. The documentary, among other things, highlighted another unique feature of the hotel: the regular high-class musical and cultural events provided for guests without charge. All this has reinforced our decision to keep Schloss Elmau on our wish list for a lengthy stay sometime. We have always enjoyed high-class German hospitality in country settings.

Below are the Youth Hostel stamps from my member card for the stays in June 1965 at Garmisch and at Mittenwald, between which my brief acquaintance with the Schloss took place.



Why Germany for this trip?

Several factors combined to lead me to this trip to Germany and Austria – instead of one of the more predictable destinations fashionable with students at that time, such as France, Spain, Italy or Greece. Germany, by contrast, was not particularly in fashion or favour – for understandable reasons. 1965 was still only 20 years after the end of the Second War and doubt and ambivalence about Germany and things German still prevailed then. War damaged buildings (from aerial bombing) were still visible in Britain and people were still sensitive to the loss and suffering of friends and family members on military service or in the aerial bombing raids over southern England. In my own family, just over a year before I was born, a German aerial bombing raid in 1940 destroyed half the houses in the suburban London street where my parents lived. Their house was damaged but repairable; they survived the bombing, taking shelter for the night in a neighbour's nearby air raid shelter. Very soon after that, three close relatives were killed in German bombing just three miles (five km) from my parents' home: the wife, daughter and mother-in-law of my father's brother. I still then in 1965 had memories (and still do now), of having to take shelter from the bombing raids. Nevertheless, I had grown to become personally quite Germanophile and the past was not an issue for me.

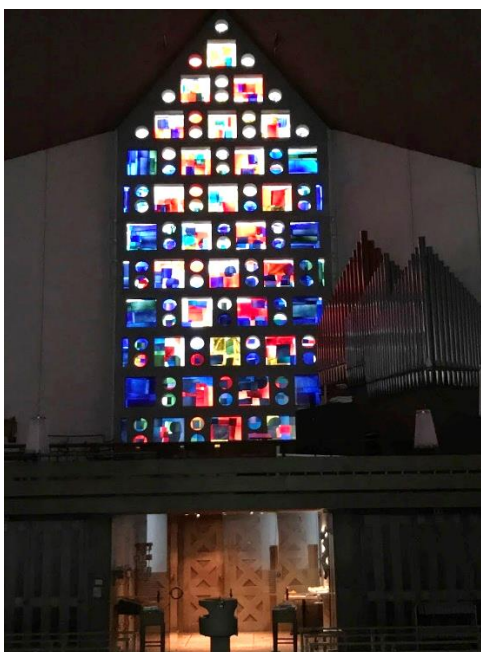
My father had served with the British Army in Belgium and north Germany at the end of and just after the War. He had returned with considerable respect for how Germany and Germans worked and conducted themselves. He encouraged me to visit Germany and see things there as soon as I was old enough. He also encouraged me to take optional German classes in my final school years. And so from 1963 onwards, when I was still a student, I took myself to his old haunts in the Rhineland and north Germany. Liking what I found, I continued by gearing all my Continental travelling in those days to Germany and Austria, during which my liking for German Europe and things German became progressively stronger. I also developed an awareness and liking for German and Austrian folk music (Volkslieder), often finding myself close to this in the Youth Hostels where I stayed. This complemented my interest in German classical music which I had developed at school. Long later, in my business career, I continued to have interaction with Germans and Germany and developed further German interests – such as German fine wines.

Other memories of the Garmisch-Mittenwald area from the 1965 trip

I have a number of colour slides taken on this trip in 1965 and they include some scenes from this area of Bavaria. However, they will need to be extracted from archives and reprocessed digitally before the images can be viewed properly. In advance of this being accomplished, I can recall, from memory, a few scenes from the area, including:

The Youth Hostel (Deutsche Jugendherberge) at Garmisch:

This was newly constructed, purpose-built and comfortable, set in landscaped surroundings. It was a little way out of the town centre, in Burgrain, a small post-war suburb of Garmisch, some 3km north of Garmisch centre. The hostel is still there in Jochstrase, but expanded from its original size. Next to it is the St Michael Catholic church, which you had to pass going to or from the Hostel on foot. The church was just two years old then. Its design seemed quite avant-garde at the time. I looked inside once and know that I have a 1965 colour slide of it in the archives. I have substituted a current file photo below.



Temporary image: File photo, interior of St Michael's Burgrain

The Youth Hostel (Deutsche Jugendherberge) at Mittenwald:

At Mittenwald the Hostel was similarly a newly constructed, purpose-built and comfortable building, in a somewhat isolated position, with dramatic views of the mountains, in fields some 4km north of Mittenwald centre. The Hostel is still there. It is named Ganghofer Jugendherberge, in honour of Ludwig Ganghofer (1855-1920), a prolific Bavarian writer of popular novels, many of which were made into movies. The area of Mittenwald where it is located is loosely called Buckelwiesen (=humpback meadows). This refers to a geological phenomenon that occurred during the melting of local glaciers at the end of the last Ice Age. This left small mounds of glacial debris scattered loosely across large areas, creating Alpine meadows that are full of small humps today. An area extending over several kilometres stretching from Mittenwald to Elmau, contains the only significant surviving stretches of this terrain in the whole of the Alps region. Over the centuries most of history's humpback meadows have been levelled by farmers, but fortunately the surviving portions in this area today are largely protected by conservation laws.



A current scene near Elmau in which some of the humpback fields (Buckelwiesen) can be seen.

I know that I have a 1965 colour slide of Mittenwald's Ganghofer Youth Hostel sitting in the middle of fields. Pending the extraction of my image from archives, below is a similar file image of that building, probably from the 1980s or 1990s.



Temporary image: File photo, Ganghofer Jugendherberge, Mittenwald.

Mittenwald – Kranzberg chairlift.

My walk from Garmisch to Mittenwald had taken me over the summit of the Hoher Kranzberg. On the way down into Mittenwald the path more or less followed the course of the Kranzberg Sesselbahn (chairlift from Mittenwald up to the Kranzberg summit). At the Hostel in Mittenwald I met a French pastry chef who was on the way to Vienna to work and I recall us both taking the chair lift one morning the 400m up to the summit, with lunch in a tavern at the top (we had Gulaschsuppe), and down again.

Zugspitze, Germany's highest mountain:

This lies some 10km south-west of Garmisch town centre. It is accessible by local train from Garmisch station which stops at Eibsee, alongside the bottom station of the cable car that rises 1,900m to the Zugspitze summit. I made this trip in 1965 and recall the striking view at the summit (still snow-covered on my visit in June 1965) and from the cable car on the way up and down.

Mittenwald – painted houses

A striking feature of Mittenwald in those days was the array of image-decorated houses in the town centre. These appear to have been preserved and still feature as one of the attractions of the town.

Other and subsequent visits to the area

On a previous trip in the year before, 1964, I had passed through this region briefly, staying at Youth Hostels at Kufstein, Innsbruck and Stuttgart on my way back to England from Vienna.

In the decades following my 1965 trip and encounter with the Schloss, I must have passed through southern Bavaria a dozen or so times, on road trips to the south, generally to northern parts of Italy, from my (later) homes in Belgium and Switzerland. On one of these in the late 1980s, I remember driving specifically through the Arlberg to Garmisch with my wife from our home at that time in Switzerland (at Montreux). This was a short one-day visit to follow up some potential property interest. We spent some time looking around the centre of Garmisch, the highlight of which that we both recall was a most memorable stop at the Konditorei Krönner where we feasted on an exquisite Apfelstrudel mit Vanillesosse. On another trip, coming back from Italy to Belgium, we stopped en route for one night at Lermoos, just in Austria, at the old Posthotel, from where there was a memorable view, 8 km away, of the Zugspitze at the western end of the Wetterstein massif, rising near-vertically 2,000 m from the flat valley floor to its 3,000m summit.

Photos from 1965

Some photos from 1965 will be added here later, once they have been located and reproduced from archives.

Background and history of the Schloss

The Schloss lies in the extreme south of Germany, halfway along the country's southern edge – see map on next page. It lies just north of the country's border with Austria; the nearest point of Austria is only 3½ km from the Schloss. The impressive mountain wall (the Wetterstein massif), that lies just beyond the Schloss and that dominates all southwards-looking photos, marks the border with Austria. At the western end of this massif lies Germany's highest peak, the Zugspitze (2,962 m or 9,718 ft).

The Schloss was built in 1914-1916 by a German theologian-philosopher named Johannes Müller, who obtained financial support from a wealthy duchess friend. Opening in 1916, it was operated initially as a retreat or sanctuary for wealthy guests who felt at ease with Müller's somewhat eccentric "take" on Christianity, with its liberal and laissez-faire approach to self-enjoyment. The place attracted a wide mixture of artistic and intellectual individuals, politicians, royalty and nobility.

With the rise of the Nazis and Hitler in the 1930s, Müller found some common ground with Hitler's ideas of perfection and pursuit of ideals and seems to have been an admirer of Hitler himself, but is said to have been strongly opposed to the Hitler doctrine of official discrimination against and persecution of Jews. This led to a strained relationship with the Nazi regime. With the coming of war, he leased the property to the German state, to serve as a sanatorium for soldiers. After the war, the Allied Occupying Powers judged him to have been an important Nazi supporter and blacklisted him, blocking return of the property to him. After Müller's death in 1949, however, his family succeeded in recovering legal ownership of the property and the guest operations were resumed

By the 1980s the family-run operation started to lose impetus, it seems. In 1997 Dietmar, the grandson of the founder, returned from a successful career in IT in the USA, and re-joined the family enterprise, subsequently taking up leadership of the business, investing significantly in the spa-wellness concept and also launching the Schloss's music and cultural programs.

Eight years later, in 1905, an electrical fire caused substantial damage in the upper floors of a large part of the hotel, halting the operation. Dietmar Müller-Elmau (as the family seems to have renamed itself after the War) seized this as an opportunity to rebuild the Schloss along its original lines, but with substantial improvements and with expansion of the health, wellness and recreation facilities. At the same time an additional bedroom block was added, close to the original building.

The Schloss, while remaining family-controlled, is a member of the association of luxury hotels, The Leading Hotels of the World, and seems firmly to have established its credentials as a quite unique destination for those seeking a "retreat" to refresh both their physical and intellectual well-being, all in an exceptionally peaceful and scenic setting. The holding of the G7 Summits at the Schloss, in 2015 and 2022 when it was Germany's turn to be host, can be seen as confirmation of the Schloss's success in maintaining its leading position in this field.

Regardless of what might have been the family's real moral position during and after the Nazi era, it seems clear that after the post-fire rebuild in 1905 the family established good relations with a number of American and other Jewish intellectual communities and supported and hosted their activities at the Schloss.



● = Elmau

What is a Schloss?

A German **Schloss** is essentially a substantial, freestanding luxury residence. The nearest one-word English translation is probably **palace**.

Schloss usually implies some level of architectural design and sophistication. This is linked with the *Schloss*'s typical role as a home or residence of privileged or wealthy people or members of the nobility. The English phrase **stately home** encapsulates this concept well.

The English word **castle** is often used as a translation of *Schloss*. In some cases this is quite appropriate. Many English stately homes and palaces have names that include the word "castle". However, it should be remembered that the word "castle" basically implies some degree of visible defensive fortification – even if just decorative as an architectural feature rather than real. "Castle" also implies some degree of antiquity. English stately homes that carry the title "castle" without appearing to display any attributes of traditional castles are often subconsciously mocked for pretending to be "castles".

Castle in English fundamentally means a fort or fortress. The word has descended over the centuries from the Latin word *castrum*, which means a military fort or fortified position. *Castellum* is a diminutive Latin form of this word and means a small fort. Thus *castle* came to mean a fortified military headquarters or outpost. Although a *castle* may have been manned and lived in by military personnel, or served as the residence of military commanders, any residential function was generally secondary to the defensive military function.

Alongside *Schloss*, with its connotations of luxury residence, German does have other words that go with militarily fortified buildings. Principal among these is *Burg* – probably the closest German word to the English *castle* in its fortified sense. Other words include *Festung*, which can be translated as *fortress* (as in the case of the massive edifice in the centre of Salzburg, *Festung Hohensalzburg*, or the *Festung Kufstein*, a similar but smaller structure in the centre of Kufstein).

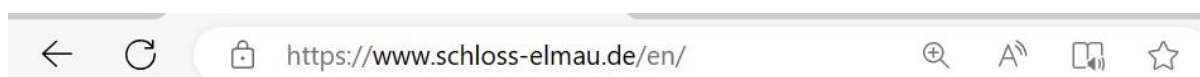
There are similar blurred meanings in French. The French word *château*, which like the German *Schloss* is often translated as *castle* in English (and which also has origins in the Latin *castrum*), most often refers to a substantial palatial residence and not to a fortified structure. For the latter, French has other words, such as *château-fort* or *forteresse*.

Postscript

It had long been my intention at some point to return to this area for a stay at the Schloss – given the excellent swimming facilities that it possessed and given its delightful alpine setting so close to my old haunts of Garmisch and Mittenwald.

However, this dream was rather brutally shattered and abandoned in March 2024 when I revisited the Schloss Elmau hotel website (which I had visited numerous times before), to find that the whole second page of the site had been taken over by a large image of an Israeli flag and a paragraph of text espousing the Israeli position on the latest conflict in Gaza and occupied Palestine (see below).

This would seem to indicate that the Müller family at heart holds a deeply pro-Israel position and is prepared to demonstrate very poor judgment in allowing these Zionist-type feelings to intrude into the everyday business of running a renowned resort hotel. Maybe the family is continuing to “bend over backwards” in order to demonstrate that it was not Nazi-sympathetic in the past. Whatever its position on Israel and Palestine, the family has shown extremely poor judgment in posting this one-sided statement publicly on its hotel website. Schloss Elmau is thus now off my “to do” list.



schloss elmau has always been honored and grateful to host numerous guests, artists, and writers from Israel. my thoughts and heart go out to Israel. I share the pain and sorrow of all families who lost loved ones on oct.7 and I pray for the safe liberation of the hostages. I am deeply shaken by the unfathomable atrocities in the genocidal massacre carried out by hamas. Their relentless pursuit to annihilate Israel is also responsible for the suffering in gaza, which they can stop by releasing all hostages unconditionally and ending the war against Israel. I hope that Israel will emerge from this incredible tragedy more united and secure than ever before, which will be for the sake of all Israelis and Palestinians yearning for peace and liberty. dietmar mueller-elmau