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Autor: Amstalden, Paul
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In 1939 from Rotzberg, Ennetmoos, to Mt Taranaki in New Zealand

An emotional family story out of Nidwalden as recounted by Rev. Father Frank Von Holzen appeared in Nidwalden Wochenllatt on August 8, 2002. Translated to English by Paul Amstalden.

On February 17, 2002 a memorial service was held in the parish church in Stans in canton Nidwalden, for Adolf Fluhler, who died in New Zealand on January 18.

Who was this Adolf Fluhler? To find out I had to go back in time some 80 years. At that time two young Fluhler families were living in a spacious but not overly large Rotzberg-Hostatt house, which was the homestead of the Fluhler family.

However, by the mid-1920s things were starting to get a little cramped for room. The house and farm belonged to Adolf's uncle Walter Fluhler. He and his wife Marie also had eight children, three sons and five daughters. This was just the reverse from Adolf (senior) and wife Agnes, who had five sons and three daughters.

The family of manual labourer Adolf suffered a terrible blow when in 1927 their devoted mother and wife suddenly died of Pneumonia.

What was there to do for a grieving widower with eight children all under the age of 15?

In 1927 there was no such thing as Orphans Benefit or the National Superannuation. That was still 20 years into the future. Fortunately the Fluhler families had a large group of related and close friend families. Several of these offered to take one of Adolf's children and look after them until the end of primary school when they could go into the world and earn their own keep.

So the eldest four or five were taken by several families while their father kept the youngest two or three at home. These children were aged from one to six years, 14-year-old Agnes, who was fresh out of primary school, looked after them while their Dad was at work, and there was always Aunty Marie below, ready with good advice and help if young Agnes had a crisis.

The Fluhler family

I had the chance to speak to several of the family who were in foster care and they all said they were all treated well by their foster families. They said they were very grateful for this during these difficult childhood years. Luckily all the children were with families within 10km of home, a relatively easy bike ride on a Sunday for an 11 to 15-year-old.

So as each became old enough to tackle the cycle trip home, visits home became a regular feature in their lives. There on the Hostatt, they were enthusiastically welcomed by not only their father and siblings, but also Uncle Walter's family, who treated them more like siblings than cousins.

So time reached the 1930s with its political and worldwide economic turmoils. Just when the oldest five siblings were old enough to tackle reasonably well paid jobs, the job market began to collapse. By the mid-1930s anyone without a trade certificate became unemployable.

The only option for the young brothers, Adolf, Werner, and Walter, was to try and get farm jobs for Fr25 to Fr35 per month and keep. Trouble was, for every job available, there were a dozen applicants. It became inevitable that the word "emigration" became a vocal talking point between Dad, Adolf, and his three eldest sons every time they got together. But where to? America, Canada? Then, in the spring of 1938 they heard from a neighbour, Martin Zimmermann, that his sister Josie, who was married to Josef Kaiser in New Zealand, had recently arrived on a visit and suggested the Fluhler boys meet with her to talk about New Zealand as a possible homeland.

Josef Kaiser hailed from the farm Bitzi in Stans, less than 3km from the Fluhlers' home and had emigrated to New Zealand in 1920.

Through Mrs Kaiser, the Fluhler brothers became acquainted with Frank Ehrler of

Rotzberg-Hostatt house, the homestead of the Fluhler family.

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Seewen, in canton Schwyz, who had returned with Mrs Kaiser to Switzerland with his wife and daughter for a visit.
Through Mr Ehrler they discovered that he intended to take a whole group of young Swiss back to New Zealand with him as there were plenty of jobs available for good workers, especially on farms.
Armed with this and further information from Mr Ehrler about this distant country on the other side of the world, it took the three brothers and their colleague and sister Berta's boyfriend, Paul Zimmermann from neighbouring Lowengrube, only days to decide to go with the group. Of course when Berta got wind of his decision she told them that she was going too.
So after hectic "paperwork" and preparations for the long journey these five joined the little group of emigrants and set sail from Marseilles on May 5, 1939 for distant Taranaki.
On arrival, all these new settlers were helped into jobs by the many Swiss settlers who had been there for years. A number of jobs were with Swiss farmers, which made it easier language-wise.
It was not all milk and honey either, it was hard work and perseverance and in between, trying to learn this strange new language. Just months after their arrival, the outbreak of WWII added to their worries about their loved ones left at home. The mail service to and from Switzerland became more sporadic month by month after the "fall of France" in 1940. So letters often took five or six months one way, if they got through at all. But life had to go on for these intrepid emigres.
Within the first few years Berta had married her beau Paul. Werner and Walter married daughters of Swiss families, and Adolf never married, remaining a bachelor until his death. Youngest brother Paul later joined his siblings in New Zealand in 1950 and married an Austrian girl many years later.
Sadly, with the death of Adolf, only sister Berta and her husband Paul, both in their 80s, are the only two still alive of our six brave Ennetmooser who ventured to a new home on the opposite side of the world, a whole lifetime ago.

Alterssitz in Taranaki: Paul and Berta Zimmermann-Fluhler.

EPILOGUE:
In 1998 I had the good fortune to be appointed "Spiritual Shepherd" to a team of Swiss wrestlers who were going on a tour downunder. During our travels we were able to visit the Swiss colony in the province of Taranaki.
Here, eyeing this awesome Mt. Taranaki, standing in the middle of rich plains of farms, and its feet covered by the beautiful Egmont National Park, I began to understand why so many Swiss settled here and call this "home".
I learned that this region, with its many rivers and streams gurgling off this mighty mountain, its colourful little towns, is often called "little Switzerland of New Zealand"...and no wonder, with names like Steiner, Schuler, Luond, Buhler, Gwerder, Suter, Schicker, Kaiser, Kiser, Fluhler, Zimmermann, and very many more being mentioned. I thought I had fallen into a secret, forgotten corner of Switzerland.
This feeling was only reinforced on Sunday, when I had the privilege of conducting an "alplermesse" Sunday service with yodelling and alphorn tunes in the Taranaki Swiss Club's clubhouse in Kaponga.
The family of Remigi Zimmermann, the children beautifully dressed in true Nidwaldner costumes, helped with the service and made it really feel like at home.
Remigis' roots are from Amattli in Stans, more commonly known as "s'Alaphonsa". Just like at home, I had no sooner closed the Mass with a blessing and out came the jasscards; and soon a lovely aroma of coffee-trasch wafted from the kitchen.
Big world, small world. Where loving, happy people live, work and laugh together, there is "home". However, this story cannot end here, there is more. What of the part of the Fluhler family who stayed at home?
Sadly, father Adolf's dearest wish and intention to one day visit his children and grandchildren in New Zealand was never granted to him. A hardworking quarry-labourer, he died in a quarry accident in 1942. Two years later his fourth son, Julius, who worked in the same quarry, was also badly injured when a blasting shot went wrong. Julius had also intended to join his older siblings in New Zealand as soon as it was safe to travel there after the war. Now he was almost totally blind. His friend and workmate, Matthias Durrer, lost his life in the same accident. Julius never lost his spirit in spite of his awful handicap. Amongst members of the blind institute he found never-ending new encouragement every time his spirits were low, and learnt a new trade. This stood him in good stead for the rest of his life. He also got to know his soon-to-be-wife Luise, with whom he had two lovely daughters. Today the 81-year-old is still alive.
The eldest sibling Agnes, married Toni Christen from Buren, and died in 1998 aged 84. The second youngest of the family, Anny, is also still alive at a sprightly 80 years.
I wanted to record the story of this gallant family out of the heartland of our "Heimatland", who were so badly pressed by hard times and tragedies yet battled on regardless, because I did not want it lost forever in the forgotten sea of antiquity.
I hope I have succeeded in this.

(Abridged)

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