

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 81 (2015)
Heft: [3]

Artikel: Swiss-New Zealand life histories : the Itens' intrepid itinerary
Autor: Steinemann, Nelly / Blaser, Adrian
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-943535>

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Swiss-New Zealand life histories: The Itens' Intrepid Itinerary

April 2015 was a special month for Hilda and Hans Iten: Not only did they celebrate their 55th wedding anniversary, but also Hans's 90th Birthday. Adrian and I had the privilege of hearing of some of their journeys. We trust you find them as amazing as we did.

Childhood memories – the travelling bug is in the genes!

Hans Iten had been christened Johannes, but was widely known as 'Hänsel Furrer'. The village had too many Itens, so most had nicknames! Hans was one of nine children – one older brother, and seven sisters. He was born and bred in the Swiss village of Unterägeri in the canton of Zug. His father had grown up in a 'Cheese Dairy' (Käserei), and then took over a farm, but when the milk price dropped by 80 percent after the First World War he became a forest warden (Förster), a job he liked and was very good at. His Mum who loved to travel had been to England to learn English prior to the First World War, and five of his sisters learnt the language there too.

Hilda Iten also came from a large family; she was the oldest of six girls. Five of them are still alive. Hilda's favourite sister passed away at age 78. Born in Wolhusen near Lucerne as Hildegard Greter, Hilda describes her Dad as having itchy feet – she went to seven different schools. Dad was a farmer; they leased farms, mainly in the canton of Lucerne. Hilda's first memory of school is being taught the old-fashioned German writing; she later got familiar with today's script.

Young adults – from Switzerland to England and to Geneva

Hilda left school and the family when she was 15, to start a variety of jobs. At 17 she moved to Luzern, where she learnt the hotel trade. After two years she was attracted to the big city of Zürich. She soon found her way round, and worked there for some 12 years in the hospitality industry. This was during and after the Second World War. At the end of the war, there were many American soldiers who came to Switzerland for their leave. As they did not speak German, Hilda took English lessons, so she could converse with them. She quite liked the language, and went to England with a group of other girls at age 30. Again her work was in a cafeteria, this time in a holiday place. The food in England was a big shock to her – not being used to baked beans,



A celebration for Hans Iten's 90th birthday party

and something that seemed to be made of sawdust and was called sausage. The position was meant to be for one season, from March to November. But when it was time to leave, an English friend asked Hilda whether she would like to work in a hospital. Never having done this, but being courageous, Hilda wrote applications with the help of her friend, got three interviews and three job offers, and was a nurse aid which gave her amazing insight into a different part of life. She lovingly remembers the matron and her corgi dog, and how she did perms for her (the matron, not the dog). Although she was invited to do nursing training, she eventually preferred hospitality, worked in a Swiss hotel, and found that the Americans were the messiest eaters she had ever met. She loved going out with her friends. The memory of one particular restaurant with fiery Spanish women dancers performing still makes her glow.

Hans had the opportunity to become a farmer when he left school, as an uncle had bequeathed the family a farm. But that's not what he wanted. It was war time, all the able bodied adult men had to join the army and defend the Swiss borders, so the teenager ended up working hard on a couple of typical Swiss subsistence farms anyway. He proudly remembers putting a yoke on a cow to make her tow the freshly mown grass, after he had done it himself for months with a wheelbarrow. And he is just as proud to have stood up for

himself, when the greedy farmer did not let him have bacon or sausage from the pig they had just slaughtered: Hans then went to the local bakery, bought himself a couple of almond croissants, and put them on an account for his boss. His heart was not in farming though. There was a cooper (Barrel-maker, Küfer) in his village. Although drunk a lot of the time, he did do a good job when he set his mind to it. Hans decided that there would be a future for him in barrel making, and started an apprenticeship at the age of 17. The master was not exactly friendly, often angry, shouted a lot – Hans can only recall one incident where he praised him. He trained in the canton of Lucerne, and is still kicking himself for having been 4k away from Hilda then, and not having known about her!

There was still a long journey ahead for these two to meet. After his training Hans decided he needed to know about wine too, not just cider and schnapps, familiar enough in Lucerne. He got a job in the French speaking part of Switzerland. To his surprise he did not learn much French there – all the coopers spoke German! After a year with a rather stingy boss, he took a job in Geneva, where he not only got better pay, but also a 13th monthly wage at Christmas, a thing never heard of before. One thought troubled him though – wooden barrels were used less and less, there was no future in the trade. But he saw an easy solution – he read that 'South Australia'

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was the vineyard of the Commonwealth', and assumed that they would be 20 years behind there, i.e. still use the wooden barrels. So he booked a ship to Adelaide, after having taken some English lessons with a French-speaking lady. Not terribly helpful – but at least her lessons helped him complete the immigration forms.

Adelaide, and still apart

Hilda had further ambitions. She was ready to travel to the US from England, had a job lined up but was still waiting for her health certificate. Meantime her Australian friend Erika suggested they both go to Adelaide. Hilda then knew she would never go to New Zealand, as a New Zealand friend had told her about earthquakes (famous last words!). Australia sounded good. After a year of applications and preparations, the two left on a ship. They met many other passengers who proved helpful later – like these two men who took them on a three-day tour in their sporty car. All above board! Hilda was very adaptable again – apart from hospitality she also worked in hospitals, and in a linen factory, and enjoyed the company of many friends.

Hans soon realised that Australia had gone off wooden barrels too. He had a variety of jobs, from making bumper bars to making sweets and chocolate Easter bunnies. At one stage his boss even sent him to Melbourne to learn the chocolate trade – but that did not work out.

Hans's pride and joy was a Holden car that he bought after a few years. His friends could not believe it when he told them he had paid cash for it.

Finally, on Swiss National Day 1959

By that time Hilda had been in Adelaide for less than two years, Hans for four. Hilda's friend Erika phoned her on the 1st of August, telling her she had met a Swiss guy who would like to spend the evening in Swiss company. There was no Swiss club as such, but a group did get together at times. Erika told the man she would take her friend along too, and so it happened that Hilda rushed home from her hospital job, got changed, took the bus, and met Erika and Hans. It was a nice evening out indeed. Erika had to be back home at 11.30, whereas Hilda was free to return as she pleased. So Hans took Erika home first, and then got a chance to arrange another evening with Hilda. It did not take long before they decided to get married.

26 April 1960, a cool wedding – and more travels

Hans had an 'Australian mother', an older woman who had been taking care of him. She lived in Ballarat, about 500 miles from Adelaide, and invited them to get married there, offered her house to Hilda and her friends. In those days the groom was not allowed to be in the same house before the wedding. April in Ballarat can be very cold. Hilda did feel uneasy about her friends being offered beds with no hot water bottles, and was herself freezing the night before the wedding. But married they got; I do hope the next night felt a bit warmer.

They had decided to move to New Zealand even before they got married, Adelaide was just too hot for comfort in summer. But things now proved more complicated: Whereas prior to the wedding they had immigration permits, they now needed a sponsor who guaranteed them accommodation and work. That took a while to get through. Finally, after another year, they drove the trusty Holden to Sydney where they took the MS Wanganella to Auckland. Fortunately they had been advised to ship their car over too; it was near impossible to buy cars in New Zealand at the time.

Settling in New Zealand

Hans's sponsor was a cabinetmaker. Hans liked him, and he very much appreciated Hans's skills. They first lived in a house owned by him, together with several others, shared bathroom and kitchen again like they had done in the past. Hilda worked at Croxley envelopes next door.

But after six months when Hilda was expecting Andrew, they decided they needed their own house. Easier said than done, when you don't have a huge deposit. They found a villa they liked, managed to secure a loan, and proudly moved into their first home in Mount Eden, Auckland. Some disappointments initially – the nice-looking newly-painted roof was actually leaking badly when the first rain came. Hans worked very hard on the villa – his boss allowed him to use his workshop in his spare time. He converted a part of the house into a self-contained flat. They both did up the old furniture, and were able to welcome Andrew and later Liliane into a nice homely place.

The Swiss Club had not been on their agenda initially. They had been told that 'the men only play cards, and the women

knit'. But by coincidence Hans got his hair cut by a Swiss hairdresser, Louis Müller. That changed it all, especially as Louis happened to be the president at the time. There was no Jass club after all so Hans got into action. He and his friend Köbi Glauser visited the Hamilton Swiss Club Jass group to find out how it was done – and decided to start up here. That was in 1964. Hans has been the Jass Master ever since, and done a fantastic job to keep us together. Hilda is a keen card player too, with many tricks up her sleeve.

Herbs have always played a big role in Hilda's life. She used to collect them for her mother, and has a big library of books on herbs. Hilda feels their good health has a lot to do with 'Sweden Bitter', a mixture of many herbs and schnapps. She lately had some difficulties to get the right schnapps, as it should be made from pip fruit. We hope she manages, and keeps Hans and herself fit and healthy.

Hans continued to work as a cabinetmaker. The family later moved to their next home in Garden Place, Mount Eden, and last year to an apartment in Selwyn Village. They are avid travellers still, have escaped our winter with a trip to Switzerland for many years, and are planning to be off again soon. Best wishes!

It has been a pleasure to find out about your amazing lives Hans and Hildi. Thank you so much. You are trumps!

Nelly Steinemann & Adrian Blaser

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