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## Agriculture in Switzerland – Then and Now



Zuercher Weinland Village Stammheim

The following is an interview by Trudi Fill-Weidmann with the co-owners of BEGE, a fusion of two Swiss farms. This enterprise is situated west of the Thurgau border, near the shores of the river Thur, in Niederwil, near Andelfingen, in a region named the Zuercher Weinland. Drops like Klosterberger, Schiiterberger, Ossinger and Stammheimer are wines that are grown in the area, mainly from the red Blauburgund or the white Riesling Sylvaner grape. The land is post glacial, flat, easy to cultivate and slightly sandy, which is beneficial to root crops like potatoes, carrots, beets and asparagus. The geological make-up of the area has been deemed well suited for the final storage of medium and high radioactive waste, according to scientific research carried out by NAGRA. Deep down. One day. Just by the way.

Agriculture as a social and political institution has undergone enormous changes. Industrialisation has made it less labour intensive and more profitable. The emergence of the European Union during the 80s and 90s, and the opening up of trade barriers within Europe has exposed the industry to the open market and forced it to compete with the influx of produce from other countries. With growing affluence and flooding of produce from around the continent, consumers have become choosy and demanding, and a trend for more ecological mindfulness also put demands on producers to oblige.

This was the time when the industry needed to re-evaluate the function of agriculture in Switzerland. This expanded from the simple task of striving for self-sufficiency (i.e. feeding the nation) to

that of maintaining competitiveness, land sustainability and diversity of species multi-functionality. The basis for financial support has shifted: the old subsidy system which was based on tariff rates recorded when exporting and importing goods (Zollzulagen) could no longer be used. Incentives have now been designed to motivate farmers to stay on their land and thus fulfil this important function.

1992 saw the introduction of Ökologischer Leistungsnachweis (ÖLN, proof of ecological compliance), a fundamental set of conditions under which every farmer has to operate in order to sell his/her produce, and given the conditions are adhered to, a basic Flaechenzulage (a payment per area of land to enable the year's growth) was also paid out. The conditions cover 10 major criteria: humane animal keeping, balance in the use of fertiliser, designating a certain area for the promotion of species diversity, following strict guidelines when cultivating areas of national significance, observance of crop rotation, protecting the soil, using only accepted insecticides, choosing designated plants and seeds only, following instruction regarding the growth of special crops and keeping buffer zones near open waters.

This payment is just the baseline. More payments can be achieved by adding measures that contribute to either the sustainability of the land or diversity of species. Thus, a pile of rocks in the middle of a field will entitle a farmer to a pay-out because lizards and other creatures can breed there. This is a major shift from production-based

payments (paid for quantity of goods) to operational payments (paid by area of land). NB: This payment is paid only to the fully qualified owner-operator of the farm, who has to be occupied with farming for the majority of his working time. This is to avoid unqualified people purchasing land and collecting these payments without putting the effort into maintaining the land.

These changes are placing much pressure on the farming community and the attraction of earning better money forces many farmers, at least part time, to seek employment in other industries. A general abandoning of the farm life is often the result. This is to the advantage of the remaining, usually passionate farmers who are keen to expand their field of operation to increase their production base and thus their chance of survival. The number of farms has shrunk from 206,000 to 66,000 between 1955 – 2004. A trend continuing: it is said that since 2010, every day 3 farms have ceased operation.

Not these two: my brother Nocki Weidmann (62yrs, single with 3 adult daughters) and his Goettibueb Florian Peter (34yrs, single). Having faced the same scenario, having tossed with the same dreary options (walk away, plod along and work for someone else full or part time?) they came up with a solution and are now going from strength to strength.

*Q: What were your starting points and what were the main problems facing you then?*

**Nocki:** 1979: After the obligatory year away as an apprentice in the Western part of Switzerland (im Waelsche), I took on the running of my father's farm which consisted of 10 ha arable land, 7 cows with a handful of yearlings and calves, one village bull (uhuu!), one building in the village, serving as home, food storage, animal shelter, machine shed and workshop, and a storage shed in the field. Income was from the produce and milk delivered, by kg. Sales prices were adjusted by the state to ensure a reasonable standard of living, through various schemes (Zollabgaben which compensated for the difference in price that was earned when goods were exported to what the local price was). The machinery used to maintain and harvest crops from the land was owned. A more expensive and sophisticated machine such as a combine harvester or a potato digger was sometimes owned between the farmers.

The first problem I faced was that the dairy side needed major upgrading to make it more worthwhile financially and to provide a more humane living space for the animals. Though government support was available, I didn't want to lock myself into a life of dairying, and decided to abandon dairying altogether. I continued with the same crops but started to experiment with others, such as peas, sunflowers, rapeseed, and finally settled with 1ha of asparagus, a long-term investment which proved very successful. Another difficulty was that there was not enough income to support a family, so I took on wood cutting and the driving of the communal farming machinery. I gradually purchased machinery for myself and offered my services to farmers around the area. Florian became my main driver.

**Florian:** From 2001-2008 I operated a "Generation Bond" (a father-and-son co-ownership) on 20ha of land with emphasis on potatoes. Though my father (who is of Nocki's generation) in the 70s took over a modern cowshed from his father, he had to cease dairying for health reasons. A slice of my father's income came from administrative jobs and offices in the community. I myself was drawn to the field and made potatoes my specialty. Right from the beginning of my farming career, I earned 50% of my income as a machine operator, partly driving the harvesters and potato diggers for Nocki's operation and the other part for a construction firm. The main problem in farming is that there isn't enough income from the core activity anymore.



The participants of the "Betriebsgemeinschaft": Florian Peter (l) Nocki Weidmann (r)

**Q:** What lead to the idea of an amalgamation?

**Florian:** There we were, both doing the same jobs, each having the same sets of machinery, but they weren't used to their full capacity. It didn't make sense and it was lonely and demotivating.

**Q:** So what have you come up with?

**F+N:** We merged the two farms: we now operate 30 ha of our own land, plus about 20ha on a management or lease basis. The asparagus area has increased from 1ha to 3ha and continues to play an important role, as it is a seasonal gap-filler. The moment we merged in 2008 we had twice the machine park, thus double the capacity which opened up the ability to take on more contracting work. Contracting is not restricted to the mechanical application of our machinery but often includes the planning of the whole crop cycle and incorporating it into our crop rotation plan, sowing and maintaining the crop until its harvest right up to delivery. With the increase of part-time farmers there is no shortage of work in this area. The machine park now consists of 3 combine grain harvesters, 4 potato harvesters, 6 tractors, one seed combo machine, one planting combo, one fertiliser machine, one plough. One lorry-size tractor and trailer combination is exclusively used for the delivery of flour and builds the basis for a new branch of the business. A rather large "Halle 11" (barn) now stands on one parcel of Nocki's land and serves for the storage of the machines and the produce, and contains an office, staff room, sophisticated workshop which is manned by the permanently employed Yves, an agriculture mechanic. A 3rd-year apprentice, Dylan, is also permanently employed.

**Florian:** Now that we have doubled the size of our farm and with doubled capacity can easily manage the work for other farms. And we have fun together. We share our personal resources. We discuss stuff, we bring in two sets of ideas and that makes the unit more than twice as strong. It's called synergy. I feel more secure in this environment – you share the successes as well as the mistakes.

**Q:** Is this normal practice in agriculture?

**Nocki:** Attempts like our merge are being made across the industry, with different combinations. There is a "Betriebsgemeinschaft" called Lomec (Lohn und Mechanic) which combines a contracting business with machinery

maintenance. A rather tragic merger happened in the dairy sector, where 4 farmers built a combined shed where their stock is being kept together but their maintenance remains entirely in the individual owner's care. The disharmony in that unit shows clearly in the atmosphere and health of the livestock. Though back in 2008 we were rather pioneers, it is now being done more and more.

**Q:** What are the main challenges in this kind of operation?

**N+F:** We are constantly having to check our legal position – do we still qualify for the classic farming picture which grants us certain dispensations regarding our machine park and the hall it is kept in, as well as the entitlement to the payments? Sometimes it is a matter of juggling land from hand to hand in order to keep it in balance between us, sometimes it is a matter of adjusting our activities to remain agriculture oriented, sometimes it is simply a matter of wording.

**Q:** What do you put your success down to?

**Nocki:** Both Florian and I put the health of the soil and people before profits. So in any decision we make, the first question is not: how much will we make? But: how does it fit into our current operation, how can we do the people involved, including ourselves, justice, and most importantly, will it negatively affect any of our main ecological and ethical integrity? The mere combination of us as partners would not have even started negotiations in the beginning, were it not for our harmonising personalities. In the interview, there is an obvious passion for the group, within the group, that makes it hard to cut through the fun stories and cover the more mundane areas like finances and law.

**Q:** How are you earning points for the ÖLN, for instance?

**N+F:** For fertiliser we almost exclusively use sewage. We buy it from various sources – from vegetable growers, or a biogas production plant or from a pig farm in the Appenzell. Animal sewage offers optimal fertilising quality.

**Q:** How much are computers in use in your operation?

**Nocki:** Apart from the films that I keep for my granddaughters... Florian has always used computers for the area planning and is now putting data into a new system. Of course the accounting is done on the computer, by Florian's father Heinz.

## Obituaries



Josef Martin Sidler

1 April 1930 – 7 January 2016

Joe, as he was known to us, was born on the 1st of April, the eldest of eight children to a farming family in Lauerz, Canton Schwyz. He left school at 14 and had to go to work to help support the family during the war years. Initially he worked on a neighbour's farm until he was old enough to work away from home. He worked in the Calendria factory in Immersee, a book binding establishment. At 21, he had worked long enough to save his passage for the six week boat trip to New Zealand.

Initially he worked on a farm in Taranaki, and then moved around the country working in orchards and farms. In the South Island, he landed a project job on the Roxburgh dam as a surveyor's assistant. Despite his limited education, he excelled at this job and stayed there for some time.

Upon leaving Switzerland, he had promised his mother that he would be back within five years, and true to his word, he returned to Switzerland in 1956. Perhaps he returned to find a "Swiss Miss"? On 3rd September 1957, he married Berta and they left for New Zealand two weeks later. They settled in Mokoia, Taranaki, where Joe worked in the dairy factory. Later, they purchased their own farm on the Rama Road but lived on a farmlet on Fairfield Road. Joe returned to the Mokoia factory and with further studies achieved his Marine tickets to operate boilers. When the factory closed, he worked for Kiwi Dairies at Whareroa on shift.

Joe was very industrious – he raised pigs, calves and sheep, trapped possums, sold firewood and later became a bee keeper. He was also an avid recycler; nothing was thrown away.

Joe and Berta enjoyed participating in Swiss Club activities, particularly jassen. They also appreciated several bus trips away with us. They also enjoyed several trips back to their homeland.

On behalf of the Taranaki Swiss Club and the Swiss Society of New Zealand we extend our deepest sympathy to Berta and family.



Margrit Herren

7 April 1935 – 10 December 1915

Margrit was born in Rüeggisberg, Canton Bern, the youngest of six children. After secondary school Margrit spent one year in the French part of Switzerland to learn the language before completing an apprenticeship as a sales person. She worked in a supermarket until she married Otto in 1960.

They farmed in Riggisberg for eight years before immigrating to New Zealand in 1968 with their son, Hans-Ueli. Margrit and Otto had two further children in New Zealand, Franziska and Christina. All three children live in New Plymouth. After dairy farming on Taikatu Road, Manaia, for several years, they bought a citrus farm in Kerikeri where they stayed for six years. However Hans-Ueli wanted to milk cows so Otto and Margrit decided to come back to Taranaki. In 2000 they retired to New Plymouth.

The Taranaki Swiss Club and the Swiss Society of New Zealand extend their deepest sympathy to Otto and family on the sudden loss of Margrit.



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**Q: What are the main income streams of the BEGE?**

**N+F:** Contracting

- Arable land. This includes 8ha potatoes which is considered the main arable crop and is of course part of the crop rotation cycle, together with the obligatory grain, corn, beet, then a green fertilising plant such as mustard or lupin. Where in the past, 90% of income from arable land came from delivery of crop, now it's only 60%.

• Asparagus. The area of this crop has grown from 1ha to 3ha and is seen as a separate branch. As it is harvested between April and June it fits in well with the other activities, and it's fun. It's our "Schaufenster (shop window) crop".

**Q: What is the role of the woman in your Betriebsgemeinschaft?**

**Florian:** If a woman (assuming it's the life partner of any of the co-owners) were to actively get involved in our well-oiled team, that would be chaotic and disruptive. We are in good harmony at the moment, and a woman can only play an outside role. This is a major shift from the traditional farm, where the woman played a central role in the labouring and planning of the farm. Where she was the main partner, now we are the partners.

**Q: What is the challenge of 2016?**

**Florian:** We are taking on the management of a rather sizeable 49ha extra land from the daughter of a retiring farmer (my sister-in-law). At this point, an acceptance of the contract has been given and we are in the course of working out how the personalities involved will cope with the change, especially from their side, what and how much involvement we will and can need/want from their side, and how our operation can best integrate the land into our workflow. The harmony between the parties is paramount.

**Q: What does the future hold?**

**Florian:** as Nocki will be officially retired in 2018, (which means that his share of government payments will cease) it's not that I will suddenly be the owner of a farm double the size of what I started out with. It is planned that the operation will be split into two main branches: the contracting branch and the farming branch. I will continue to own and run the farming branch, and the contracting branch can be sold or split. Nocki will be employed by the contracting branch for as long as he wishes. One of the main advantages of this kind of operation is total flexibility. We are not bound by land or building or people or government obligation. We can, at any time, leave. And that's why it's so good to work like that. We will never want to leave.

**Q: What would you be if you weren't farmers?**

**Nocki:** something mechanic, but there was never really a question of that.

**Florian:** meteorological something.

By Trudi Fill-Weidmann

Sources:

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