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Life Stories

The Yodeller with an Extraordinary Voice



I sat down recently with my older brother Peter Arnold and asked him to share with me his Yodelling /Singing journey.

Peter started by sharing a few moments from his childhood years, 1949-1961, when we were all still living in Switzerland. He always felt drawn to listening to anyone who he heard yodelling and he assured me that our father, Josef (Sepp) Arnold, did not always yodel, he tended to keep the yodelling moments to the rehearsals and final events. Peter told me that Dad whistled a lot, as he "head-composed" his "Natur Juits" while performing the endless tasks that running a farm in Rengg, Aplanach demanded. Peter seemed to soak up these moments, as did apparently the whole family.

I must digress for a minute and share a recently discovered Arnold family moment:

Since Peter's recent return to our family roots in Alpnach, he has been told by many of the older locals in Aplanach area that they remember a special Mass being held in 1961 for the departure of the Arnold family. Apparently the whole family stood at the front of the church and sang.

Back to our conversation where we have now reached July 1961 and we, the Arnold family, have immigrated to New Zealand. A vastly different culture, language and governmental system needed to be assimilated. The relatively flat Waikato land did not reverberate with the sound of yodelling or of cowbells and a good cheese and salami (we won't talk about yoghurt) was unattainable.

However the Hamilton Swiss Club did exist and in 1965 a few of its members including our father, Sepp Arnold,

decided to form a Yodelling Group to help retain some Swiss customs and use them to entertain themselves and others. Dad often performed his solo-yodels at Swiss functions. As for Peter, he sat in on some of the practise sessions, but never participated.

There was always something that Peter had that was not obvious to himself - a God-given talent to sing. This became obvious to me when, during our reminiscing, Peter told me how in his first few months at school here in New Zealand, he was pulled out of the class choir by the singing teacher who proceeded to say "You have an unusual voice. Where did you learn to sing like that?" A perplexed Peter said "Nowhere" and immediately became the choir's lead singer.

Fast forward to the age of 17 onwards when a lot of time was spent partying with other young Swiss immigrants. Most of these parties took place in Auckland and occasionally at Louis and Martha Baggenstoss's place at Ngarua near Morrinsville. At these they always sang and yodelled. It was not important whether they knew all the words - the flow of alcohol smoothed the vocal chords and banished any sense of shyness. Photos attest to the fun and frivolity enjoyed by the many young Swiss girls and boys.

In the late 1960s serious life took hold. Adulthood had arrived. Marriage and 2 children followed and a farming career began.

During this time Hansueli Hess, a member of the Auckland Swiss Club approached Peter, who by this time

was dairyfarming at Te Kauwhata, and invited him to join the Auckland Yodel Club where our older brother Joe was already yodelling.

"It was not an easy process to join" Peter told me "I was put through my paces by Hans Fitz the organiser and conductor of the group. He asked me if I could hold a tune and did I know what the musical scale was? I floundered my way through the test and I was accepted into the group".

So began more than 35 years of yodelling and singing with a fabulous group of like-minded Swiss people. It was during this time that the now divorced Peter met his 2nd wife, Ursula, who had also joined the Auckland Swiss Club. Ursula was and still is a very talented accordion player and musician herself and, along with the Yodel group, played a huge part in helping Peter to continue to harness his God-given talents.

Auckland Swiss Kiwi Yodel Group was eventually formed and Ursi eventually became its conductor. The group began to travel and entertain not only in NZ, but Japan, Korea, Australia, Canada, China and of-course Switzerland where the Yodel Group attended 5 National Yodel Fests and took part in both Team (Group) and Yodel solo categories. As a group they attained four Class 1 (highest category) and one Class 2. Generally the competitors were (and still are) mostly from Switzerland with only a few foreign countries, like NZ, taking part. In competitions there were (and still are) over 400 groups participating and approximately 50 solo competitors.

Peter has always felt drawn to folkloric tunes and yodels. His voice has brought great joy to many and mystified a few:

An Opera singer approached him once and asked: "How do you sing those extremely high notes so easily?" Reply: "I don't know". She said "open your mouth"; he obeyed; she looked in, she said: "Ah you have a high rear upper palate"; he said: "do I?" And both parted company knowing more!!!

Return to Switzerland

Ursi and Peter had for a while discussed the idea of moving back to Switzerland to further their musical careers and the death of our brother Frank helped to show how, in life, one must seize the moment. So in 2012 they sold up and relocated to Stans not far from our birthplace. Life there has taken



