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Life Story

Heinz and Heidi Leuenberger

Heinz was born in November 1931 and grew up, together with one brother and three sisters, in Zollbrück, Bern. They had a happy upbringing, despite difficult times. His father, Adolf, had started his own tailoring business in Zollbrück shortly after World War I, at the house of an aunt, which he eventually took over. His mother, Emilie, ran the haberdashery shop. During the war, they were kept busy sewing uniforms for the Swiss Army.

Already early on, a particular teacher encouraged Heinz to work towards a move up to secondary school, which he achieved. In the spring of 1947, being too young to begin an apprenticeship, he spent a year working as porter at a Pâtisserie in Geneva, at the same time also improving his French. In April, 1948, Heinz started a three year apprenticeship as a baker / pâtissiere (pastry chef) in Bern. 18 months later, the business ceased, so he opted to move back to Geneva to finish his training, a move he never regretted, despite the 'primitive' working conditions. This bakery was located in one of Geneva's oldest quarters, and still used an 'ancient' wood burner oven - and Heinz needed all of these 18 months to eventually master its operation and idiosyncrasies!

Compulsory military duty called, and in 1951, Heinz joined the Navy anti-aircraft section. Not surprisingly, as a baker, he was regularly seconded to kitchen duty. A six week NCO chef course followed the initial 17 weeks, and then in early 1952 came another 17 weeks as chef at an air force establishment in Payerne. After nearly a year military service, Heinz then took what turned out to be his only job as a baker in Switzerland for just three months; before moving into the hotel industry as pâtissiere or cook in various



seasonal jobs in Bern, Aarau, Braunwald, Gstaad and Wengen; followed by a move to cook at a Hotel in Cornwall, England, in 1956. As getting an extension to a work permit in England was next to impossible at this time, Heinz was resigned to eventually returning to Switzerland. In the meantime, he went to London to visit a friend working as a restaurant barman at Picadilly Circus. Lamenting his eventual return home, Heinz was introduced to the boss and promptly offered a job - which he accepted - as the work was a bit more interesting for the remainder of his work permit.

On days off Heinz would often go down to the Royal Albert Docks, and once, on a whim, approached an office clerk to say he was interested in a job on a ship. A two minute phone call later the clerk told him to take Bus No. 5 to 122 Leadenhall Street where a job would be waiting. It was the office of the P&O Shipping Co. and the job was as 3rd baker. No qualifications were asked for, the only condition was compulsory membership of the Seaman's Union. Next, it was off to the Immigration Dept. for a stamp in the passport - the biggest bonus being that as a seaman serving on a foreign going vessel, no work permit was required. Four stressful days later, having complied with all the necessary bureaucracy, Heinz became the newest crew member on the Stratheden, a 24,000 ton passenger ship doing the "Aussie run".

Meanwhile, in February 1932, Heidi Widmer was born in Windisch, Aargau. As a young child, her family moved to Sumiswald, Bern, where her four younger siblings were later born. Life was tough and money was scarce for this farming family, particularly during the war years. Heidi spent four years at primary school and five years at secondary school, followed by a year working at a farmhouse near Yverdon to work and learn French - a common move for young girls just out of school in those days.

Back in Sumiswald, she then worked in a children's home for a year, before moving in with the Balz family at nearby Wasen, where for the next five years she independently ran the whole household - home and garden - as well as working in their shop. By now in her twenties, Heidi also enjoyed a very active social life - she sang in the local choir; was involved with a theatre group; and danced with the 'Trachten Gruppe'. And anyone who has seen the old 1950's Swiss film 'Ueli der Pächter' may even have spotted her dancing in the background of a scene filmed in Sumiswald's 'Gasthof Kreuz'. In 1957, Heidi made the 'big' move to Brugg, Aargau, where she worked for some time in a cheese shop.

It was during shore leave and a trip home in early 1958 when Heinz first set eyes on his future bride. Heidi had returned to Sumiswald for the weekend where she and her younger sister, Bertha, attended a local dance, which Heinz also went to.... there they met and romance blossomed. Early on, Heinz already made his wish to emigrate quite clear, as after having seen and experienced the big wide world, he had no intention to remain in Switzerland. Heidi decided to accept this future path, and so very soon, they were engaged... and married in January 1959.



They began their married life in Aarau and started looking for work 'somewhere' overseas. In March, 1960, they left Switzerland with only a few humble possessions - and their six month old son, Charlie. They could not have gone any further - to a position at the 'Swiss Chalet' in Gisborne, New Zealand. In the hotel breakfast room in London, on the eve of their departure, they met Hannelore Henning, a young German school teacher, who would be travelling on the same ship to New Zealand. Unable to speak English, other than Heinz, Hannelore was the only person Heidi could



talk to on that six week long journey on the Rangitata.

They were met in Auckland by their new boss, and after only 10 minutes, quickly decided they would not be with him for very long. As for the road trip to Gisborne, Heidi, in particular, thought she had come to the ends of the earth - or even further!!

Hannelore visited them in Gisborne for that first Christmas - both women went from one shop to another in search of



candles to decorate the tree - but with no luck. Such things were unknown here, only coloured electric fairy lights were available. Not wanting to go without, they finally bought some birthday cake candles and tied them to the tree with cotton. Lesson learned - make do with what you can get!

Finally, 13 months later, with daughter Beatrice just two months old, they moved to the Waikato, where Heinz worked as a barman at the Okoroirie Hotel. They lived in a small two roomed and sparsely furnished 'hut', with no kitchen, bathroom, toilet, or running



water - having to use the hotel facilities across the road. Life was tough and homesickness was rife, but their time here taught them much about the New Zealand way of life. In the Spring of 1962, with a third child on the way, Heinz was offered a job at the Tirau bakery. The salary was twice as much, but the doughman's job was hard work, averaging 60 hours a week. But, at least their living conditions improved greatly, and for the first time, the family actually had a small house, provided by the bakery, complete with 'basic' amenities. In November, their second daughter, Monique, was born.

Friendships were gradually made with both New Zealanders and Swiss - including Bob and Frieda Keller, who then owned the Geneva Coffee Bar in Putaruru. In 1965, The Keller family wanted to return to Switzerland, so Heinz and Heidi purchased the business, and moved into their house, living there for two years before purchasing their very own first home.

The business did extremely well, but the hours were long - Fridays and Saturdays were open until 3.00am the next morning - cooking countless toasted sandwiches and hamburgers; and providing pies, milkshakes and coffee to young locals out on the town at the weekend. Whilst Heidi and Heinz worked, the three young children spent those Friday and Saturday nights on the lounge floor at the next door neighbour's house - their very own and loved 'Aunty Eileen'. With no other family in New Zealand, bonds like this were extremely valuable.

These were kind years in New Zealand, and despite the initial homesickness, hardship and some extremely basic living conditions, with tenacity and a great deal of hard work, life was looking up. They joined the Hamilton Swiss Club and also built up good and close friendships with people from the local community. In late 1970, a local Swiss painter and friend, Albert Suter, offered Heinz work to paint with him, which he accepted and the coffee bar was sold. For Heinz, this career change gave him his first weekend off in his whole working life!

After twelve years in New Zealand, the family travelled to Switzerland in 1972 - finally a chance for the children (then aged 13, 11 and nine) to meet their grandparents and other relatives. They were based at Heinz's parent's house, the same house where he grew up in Zollbrück. A car, a white VW beetle,

was soon purchased from a local car dealer, who agreed to later buy it back again. This became the perfect way to travel around Switzerland during their 4½ month stay - it was the trip of a lifetime for the whole family.

Back in New Zealand, Heinz continued painting for another year before returning to cooking - a restaurant / takeaway business, the newly named Swiss Inn Restaurant in Putaruru, was purchased in 1973. And then a year later, their third daughter, Michelle, was born. It was a family business, and with a new baby added to the mix, the whole family had to play their part, particularly in late 1976 when a telegram arrived to say Heinz's father had been accidentally killed - he'd been out for a walk and was hit by a trailer which had come loose from its towing vehicle. Heinz immediately left for Switzerland, whilst Heidi, with help from the kids, kept business and home afloat.

In 1977, the family moved for the final time to a bigger house where Heinz and Heidi still are today. The children grew up, and both Beatrice, followed by Charlie, spent several years in Switzerland. Some years later, Michelle also made the move, but all are now back living in New Zealand. The restaurant was eventually wound up in 1984, and Heinz once again returned to painting, joined in partnership with Charlie for six years, before permanently laying down his paint brushes and fully retiring at age 78, finally giving him time to pursue his passion of cycling.

Following that first trip 'back home' in 1972, Heinz and Heidi have been back to Switzerland many times to visit family and friends, the last time in 2005. Heidi still has all her siblings and through internet, remains in close contact; Heinz has one remaining sister. Sadly, daughter Monique passed away in 2010 after suffering from Motor Neurone Disease for five years.

Today, both Heinz and Heidi are in reasonable health - they still regularly attend Swiss Club functions and look forward to their weekly get-together with Swiss friends for a game of cards. They also enjoy and regularly see their extended family - including three granddaughters and two great grandsons. Switzerland will always be 'back home', but New Zealand has long become, and is most definitely, 'home'.

Article compiled by
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