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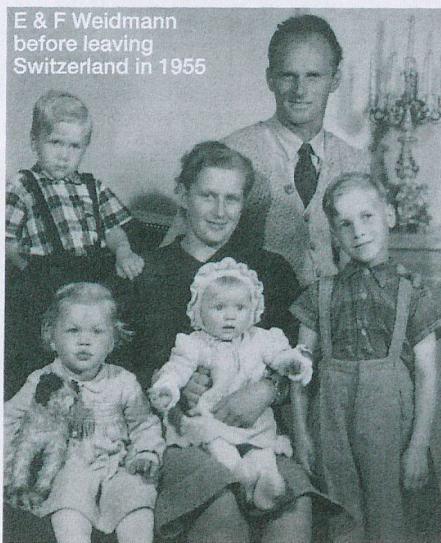
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Life Story – Ernst & Frieda Weidmann

Ernst (Ernie) Weidmann (1923-2011) was born and lived in Embrach-ZH (ca. 3,000 residents), before emigrating to New Zealand. He had four siblings, two brothers and two sisters. His parents, Jakob and Frieda, owned and worked a medium 20 acre mixed farm with aid of one farmhand, casual labour and eventually the children.



Besides a few cows, the land was used for intensive cropping - wheat, barley, potatoes, sugar beets and fruit, mainly apples and cherries. There was also contract work, e.g. mowing for hay, ploughing and carting, e.g. firewood, fresh stable manure, liquid or solid. The contracting work provided extra income especially during the winter war years with no petrol between the years 1939-1946.

From a young age Ernie had become interested in farming and became qualified in advanced farming. His father was willing to try new methods and after a few years gave him almost a free hand on the family farm. This helped his father who was very involved in the administration of the Town, as well as being Chairman of the Power Board and Farmers Trading Company, he was Town Councillor for about twenty years and then Mayor. After years of heavy workload and responsibilities it proved too much and in 1949 he died at age 59. This was an extremely hard time for the family.

After the war Ernie carried on farming and in 1946 married his sweetheart Frieda Billeter (1928-2009). Then the economics for medium to small farmers began to worsen and Ernie started to suffer a "Weidmann problem" of "getting itchy feet to explore the world". They considered Chile, Canada and the U.S.A. where an uncle lived.

They saw a film narrated by Queen Elisabeth II of England which was about a beautiful country called New Zealand, a land of rolling green hills and native bush, where the school children were neatly dressed, healthy looking and received a bottle of milk each day at lunch. He recounted, "That did it, let's go. I was also looking for excitement and adventure!! The hardest thing was to say goodbye to our loved ones!"

The neighbours called him mad - others came personally to congratulate him for his courage. In 1955 Ernie's Mother and eldest brother (Koebi) accompanied Ernie and Frieda with their four children, Bruno, Ernest, Edith and Ruth [then aged between 1-8 years], as far as Genoa, Italy, where they boarded the ship 'Oronsay' bound for Melbourne via the Suez Canal. After a train to Sydney and short stay, they boarded the ship 'Wanganella' arriving in Auckland in April after a 4 week journey.

At Auckland they were met by pen friends the 'Scheidegger's (who also had four young children) whom had generously offered to have them stay with them on their farm in Raynes Rd, Hamilton while they settled.

Fellow Swiss Countryman Joe Kennel was on the same boat and became a life-long friend and Ernie, Joe and Teresa often played 'Jass' together over the years. They also met a lot of other Swiss people in the area. Eventually they bought a house in Morrinsville and Ernie worked in a local dairy factory for 1½ seasons, while learning English. The family grew with the arrival of third daughter Katherina (Kathy). They also met new Swiss immigrants Fritz and Marlene Zurschmiede who also became life-long friends.



Ernie and Joe Kennel worked briefly together, digging drains for farmers which helped with the income.

Then the family stayed two years in a farm cottage at Springdale, with farming

kiwis Roland and Aileen Hallen and family. Ernie worked as a farmhand. The Hallens became firm friends and helped them in so many ways. Ernie later recounted that "those two years were the happiest in our lives."



Then followed 2 years in the beachside town of Whangamata growing tomatoes and picking fruit to sell in a fruit shop Ernie built in the main street. The family then moved to nearby Waihi, setting up and operating the 'Kiwi Fruit Shop' business in the main street. The family grew with the arrival of 6th child Stephen.

In 1965 they moved to Tauranga. Ernie recounted "In a way the sea impressed me very much". He operated a mussel run transporting fat Thames mussels to the East Cape to sell to the Maori people who loved them. He also worked in a fish shed and finally got a well-paid job as 'deck hand'.

Later realizing the need to be with the family more he became involved with market gardening, growing and harvesting vegetables to sell and with orchards, picking and selling Chinese gooseberries (kiwifruit), feijoas, grapefruit and lemons. These types of businesses involved a lot of physical labour so his wife Frieda and children had to help. Then they were looking for another enterprise and Ernie had an interest in mushroom farming having grown some mushrooms in caves in Switzerland. The old vacated Tauranga City Abattoir became available for long term lease. The property consisted of approximately 10,000 square feet, mostly buildings. It had to be converted to be suitable for growing mushrooms. Large (old) heavy machinery, etc. had to be dismantled and disposed of by Auction. He wrote "It sure was a very real challenge to get it off the ground".

They started in 1969 when there were about 20 mushroom growers in New Zealand. By 1975 there were 54, by 1980 down to 25, by 1990 down to only 12 and before retiring, there were only about 8 growers left.

While Ernie's wife Frieda and the children all helped with the businesses, second eldest son Ernest was a significant help after leaving school, working full time with the market gardens, orchards and then the mushroom farm called 'Enterprise Mushrooms' named after the starship 'Enterprise' from the TV program 'Star Trek'.

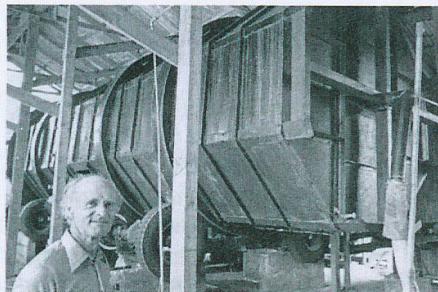
Ernie recounted "In the early seventies there was a Mushroom Growers Association set up. Every year a conference was held on one of the farms. Scientists even from overseas were giving out the latest tips. The N.Z. representative was Dr. Sanderson, a mite and bacteria scientist from the N.Z. Agriculture Department. He made all sorts of practical tests at Lincoln University in Christchurch. In about 1975



and 1978, growers were asked to send a sack of ready compost for controlled growing of mushrooms. About 20-30 growers took part. At the first trial my compost out-cropped the next best by 10%. At the second lot we were the best by 20% and declared the best Grower in New Zealand".

Ernie designed and built all the machinery at the mushroom farm, adapting them often and making improvements as needed. For example a press to compress the compost down into the growing boxes, another one for the spawning (seeding time) and a stacking machine for stacking the boxes.

He designed and self-built the first forklift (of two) and after having to turn the compost over by hand with pitchforks for some time, designed and built two different compost turning machines to automate the process somewhat.



He said "We had a lot of trouble with the first machine and somebody suggested, "why don't you make a drum out of wood?" and so he started to draw plans. It had to be made about 40 feet long (approximately 13 meters x 2-1/2 meters in diameter), quite a big machine! Ernie was an adventurer and enjoyed coming up with creative solutions to challenges along the way.

He went to Australia to see such a machine operating there. Ernie recounted "the owner must have made some money as he had it all with hydraulic motors turning things and that was far too expensive then for me, so I had to make it mechanically with four truck differentials. I had to reduce it from 1 to 2-3,000 reduction, which was a problem by itself but I managed to do it. That was very handy as I could just push a button. It took us a day for loading up and filling the drum with a truck load full of hay soaked and a truck load full of chicken manure and all sorts for the compost mix. Then it went all night with the water turned on, raining on it when it was turning over the top. It had to be wet to make compost which became ready made in 10 days. Then we had to empty the drum, 200 boxes full which were about a 1 meter by 1.2 meters long and 150mm deep. That was another big job, a full days' work, emptying the compost into the boxes and then moving them into the conditioning room. This was required to get the ammonium out so that the mushroom compost was ready to sow the spawn (seed), otherwise the spawn wouldn't grow. That was another full day's work, and so the time went by. One day we had to empty a shed because every two weeks we needed a shed and every two weeks we had to have the compost ready, with 160-170 bales of hay and straw. That was a big job. I haven't forgotten it in a hurry. And as I mentioned before we were the best growers for 2-3 years and then suddenly the crops started to fail."

"In 1988 the man from Christchurch (Agriculture Department) came to have a look at the mushroom culture and

he gave me a hint that he doesn't like it, it must be something serious. He had to take samples and send them in to the laboratory for testing where it was discovered that there were three different viruses. They didn't give our crops a good hope to survive them. Apparently the mushroom virus had come in with the spawn, proven that it came from England with some original mushroom seed. The seed-maker had to get the first lot from England. It was called the 'master culture' in tubes like fingers and they multiplied that over and over until they could make lots. The seed was cultivated on sterilized wheat grain with a handful in each box which was enough to mix it through -then it grew like that. It was the same seed with which we made the records in 1975-1978, and then the quality of it went down and down. We tried all sorts of things, (originally) blaming ourselves with making a mistake, all sorts."

"We had bought some other properties instead of buying the mushroom farm property, but then had to sell them to keep up with the costs and failing crops, and so that was the end of the Mushroom business". Mushroom growing finished altogether in 1994 after many successful years with up to 15 employees in the business. The work was labour intensive and many challenges were overcome except for the last.

As hobbies Ernie enjoyed landscaping, gardening, propagating plants, fishing and playing 'Jass' with friends. He was also a champion pool player. His wife Frieda was a keen sewer having made many of the outfits for the growing family.

During their retirement years they moved to their home in Welcome Bay, Tauranga where they lived their remaining years, enjoying the grounds they had set up over previous years, gardening and growing fruit and vegetables. To date, they are survived by four of their six children, eight grandchildren and four great grandchildren.

Compiled by Kathy Sanders (daughter) from Ernie's personal notes.

