

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 85 (2019)
Heft: [5]

Artikel: Walter Zuber the Swiss panelbeater
Autor: Zuber, Walter / Zuber, Anita
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-943870>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

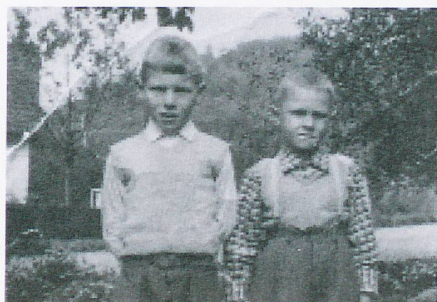
The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 17.02.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Walter Zuber the Swiss Panelbeater

Walter was born in the Northwest of Switzerland near the historic town of Solothurn in the small village of Hubersdorf which in Walter's youth had a population of 400. It had a primary school, two restaurants, one general store, a bolt manufacturing company, a milk and cheese store, five farmers and a post office.



Walter was born in one of those restaurants, child number five out of eight - four brothers and three sisters. The Restaurant Freundschaft was open every day from 9am until midnight. Through the day his father worked in the nearby papermill as a qualified mechanic. In the early days of his childhood they also had two cows and calves, so his parents were kept busy tending to children, jobs and animals.

When Walter was very young there was a Foot and Mouth disease break-out that was slowly moving closer to their village. One morning, as the Zuber children approached the stable, they noticed the animals were missing. Quite some time later they found out that their father, having bound the animals' hooves with sacking so no one would hear them, had soundlessly moved them to their grandparent's farm the previous evening. If he had failed to move them, he would have had to close the restaurant.

Restaurant Freundschaft sometimes had bookings for up to 80 meals, and all the children had to do their part by doing dishes, peeling potatoes, bring the wine and beer up from the cellar, polishing the floors and waiting on tables. The restaurant is still in the family



today, run by one of Walter's brothers, who is the third generation to run it. The family tradition is for the inheritance to be offered to the youngest male first, but as the youngest was living in Canada, he turned it down and the second youngest inherited the restaurant.

Through his school years Walter joined the local gymnastic/ athletic and fitness club, and in winter he went skiing and ice-skating. Walter got on well with his tutor and in winter-time when the temperature dropped to below zero, they would build an ice-rink to play ice hockey. The tutor knew that Walter was sneaking out of bed at night to join him to play against some other club members. After the game the club members called in at his parents' restaurant while Walter would sneak back to bed. No-one ever told his parents about Walter's escapades.

In his school holidays, it was off to the grandparent's farm, where he developed a love of animals, especially working with and riding the horses. The Swiss farmers have a variety of animals such as pigs, cows, horses, hens and calves, all of which are kept in a stable. They also do a bit of everything, growing potatoes, corn, apples and pears. In wintertime, the work entailed felling trees in the forest and stacking them for the local sawmill for firewood, so the chores were varied. For this he was paid some money with which he had to buy his own clothes and shoes.

It was during his final year at school that he became interested in panel-beating. His two older brothers were already in apprenticeships as a tool mechanic and an auto-mechanic. His father told him to get out there and find a shop that would take him on before all the jobs were taken, and so he went from shop to shop until he found Carrosserie Hess in Bellach a large company building buses, truck decks and doing crash work.

Walter was very impressed with the size of this operation and was pleased when they offered him an apprenticeship. As it was some distance from home, with his small savings and help from his father he purchased a small 30cc scooter. His contract for his apprenticeship was for four years with the wages set down right through to the last day and if he broke this contract a fine was set by the company.

Towards the end of his four years Walter really started to enjoy his apprenticeship and his yearly exam results were starting to look very good, to such an extent that he received compliments from the company owner. This was very rare for

such a large company in very formal Switzerland, and the boss encouraged him to enter the Swiss Skill Bodybuilder (Carrosserie) competition. Walter was a bit sceptical at first, as he was one of the youngest to enter the competition, but he thought that he would give it a go.



As it happened, Walter won the Swiss competition and then went on to represent Switzerland in the World Competition (now WorldSkills) in Brussels. This was a real eye-opener for him as he just went with a box of hammers and dollies whereas the Japanese competitor turned up with a six-metre box with all the equipment from his welding plant to the smallest screwdrivers. Walter just missed out on a medal and came in fourth place.

In Switzerland, all males, upon reaching the age of 20 have to do compulsory military training, which is for 17 weeks initial training. After your 17 weeks, you take all your equipment including your rifle and ammunition home. It is your job to look after it and bring it to the annual three weeks training for the next nine years.

Walter had heard that prior to getting called up, it was advisable to go for practice shooting as you could get bullied in the army if you were a poor shot. It was through this unauthorised training that he damaged his hearing and consequently was put in the first aid division, which meant 14 weeks training and 3 weeks hospital service, and of course no guns were allowed in this division.



Walter remembers the military training being really physically and mentally hard, but in hindsight it was a great experience for the camaraderie and of course, the great experience of doing three weeks hospital work. This hospital work entailed many duties, including washing and storing bodies after post-mortems had been carried out.

Upon completing his apprenticeship Walter stayed with the same company until he had completed his initial army training. However, as the army tried to persuade him to carry on the following year, he left the country in 1971 and headed to Sweden for a year to work at a VW and Porsche Dealership in Stockholm. This was all contract work, which taught Walter the value of speed and efficiency.

After a year in Sweden he received a job offer in Switzerland, but when he returned he was immediately called up for three weeks army training. After that little overseas experience he found that life back home wasn't the same anymore and he started to look at going overseas again. His oldest brother had emigrated to Canada and so he thought about following him or even moving to Japan.

All of these thoughts were about to change however, when he met his future wife Anita in 1972, just a few months after returning from Sweden. Anita was on holiday with her family from New Zealand, who were also Swiss. Walter and Anita met in Berne and caught up several times before her family returned to New Zealand. After corresponding for a year, he joined her in New Zealand for a six-month working holiday.

After Walter's six months was up, they returned to Switzerland together for 15 months and got married in Switzerland. In 1975 they bought an old VW Kombi van and travelled overland east via India and Nepal as far as Sri Lanka. This was a great and moving experience seeing the different countries and the poverty in this part of the world. The trip took three months and then the VW was shipped from Sri Lanka to Auckland while Anita and Walter flew via Singapore, Bali and Sydney to their final destination, Auckland.

Once settled in Hamilton, as he couldn't speak a word of English, Walter worked for his father-in-law as an upholsterer. However, he had the desire to get back into panel-beating and after six months, Anita applied for a panel-beating job for him. That first job was at Brian Lafferty's Panel-beaters in Hamilton East.



In January 1977, the Zubers managed to buy an existing business in Riverlea Road in Hamilton, and Walter worked there on his own for about a year before employing his first apprentice. Anita continued her work at the Education Department to make sure there was still money coming in, and she would call in at lunchtime to help out with the paperwork.

Anita could speak Swiss, but Walter became frustrated with his English being constantly corrected by her, so he enrolled in night classes at Polytechnic for a while but this went by the board once he had his own shop and had to work long hours. He was helped quite a bit though, as in those days the insurance assessors still called at panel-shops and some assessors were really helpful, correcting him and helping with his spelling mistakes as much as they could.

Times were good in the collision repair industry at that time, with plenty of work around, so when Walter couldn't sleep, he would go to work regardless of the time, even as early as 2am, and it did not matter if it was the weekend, as Saturday or Sunday made no difference. Over the years Walter built his business and increased his workforce to a staff of ten and around 1990 he added a paint booth. Anita worked alongside him doing the accounts in the office and greeting customers when Walter was on the shop floor. They were well respected by the Insurance industry and were made Gold Repairers around the millennium.

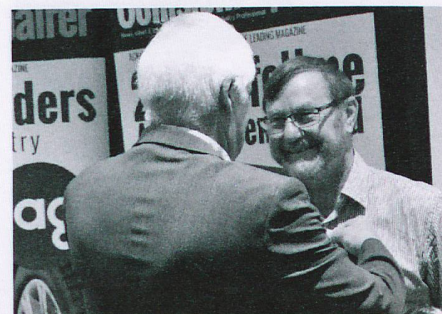
While Walter's first love was repairing vehicles, he found the management side of the business extremely stressful, and finally after 29 years in business in 2006 Anita convinced him that it was time to sell as his stress levels were at an unsustainable level.

During their time in business both had several trips to Switzerland, often separately as it was not easy leaving the business to the staff. Walter attended related trade shows in Frankfurt and

Anita's trips focused on visiting their daughters, one of which has now permanently settled in Switzerland, together with her Swiss partner and eight-year old son.

After selling the business Walter did some welding test work for I-CAR and then the following year was asked to take over the Membership Liaison role covering the North Island. A few years later he was also offered the South Island membership and this took him throughout the country up until the end of 2017. In April of 2018 Walter attended the annual conference of the Collision Repair Association and was surprised to be bestowed with Life Membership. He received a framed and signed rugby jersey of his favourite Chiefs team that he has supported for many years. This proudly hangs in the stairwell of their home in Whitianga.

This year while attending a trade exhibition in Melbourne he was also bestowed Lifetime Achievement Award of the Australian counterpart organisation. He received a beautiful glass vase that is proudly sitting on the coffee table in Hamilton.



Walter has continued doing welding tests for I-Car NZ and is also a welding instructor running courses throughout the North Island. He has started a part-time role mentoring apprentices through the Motor Industry Training Organisation as now in his late sixties he is not quite ready to retire.

While on a three-month holiday in Switzerland in 2018 Walter put his panel-beating skills to the test once again working on his brother's Ford T. This is an on-going project and this year he is hard at work trying to finish it off - in particular, working on the motor-trimming side of the job.

Life for Walter today, when he is away from the work, revolves around his hobbies of fishing and spending lots of time maintaining his boat, and spending any spare time at their house in Whitianga which they built seven years ago.

Anita and Walter Zuber