

Joan Waldvogel : writing about Swiss settlers in New Zealand

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Joan Waldvogel: Writing about Swiss Settlers in New Zealand

Some twenty-five years ago, when I was transcribing the recording that a friend had made of her English mother talking about her life, I realised the importance of recording people's life stories. I regretted not having written down the stories my father used to tell us about his life, and made recordings of my mother talking about her life. It was already too late. While her childhood memories were vivid, she remembered very little of her later life. However, I wrote up what she had told me for the family. All this led to a growing interest in oral history and the awareness that the Swiss of my parent's generation, whom I had grown up amongst in Taranaki, were getting older. Unless they were captured, their stories would disappear with them.

From there, it was just one more step to thinking about the history of the Swiss in New Zealand, a history that was waiting to be written. Other European ethnic groups such as the Germans, the Dutch, the Italians and the Finns, had their New Zealand histories, but not the Swiss. When I began looking in libraries for information about the Swiss, I was constantly disappointed. I'd pick up a New Zealand history, check the index, and search in vain for the word 'Swiss'. Apart from Irene Weber-de Candolle's essay *'The First Swiss in New Zealand'* an eleven page article by Hans-Peter Stoffel entitled *'Swiss Settlers in New Zealand'*, a three page entry by Helen Baumer in *'Settler and Migrant Peoples in New Zealand'* and her book, *'One-way Ticket to New Zealand'* which looked at Swiss Immigration to New Zealand after World War Two, it was a desert out there. Could I write such a history? Where would I start? I felt reasonably confident about my writing skills, but my research skills at the time were practically zero.

Through his daughter Ann, a colleague at the time, I was able to meet up again with Professor Rollo Arnold, an historian at Victoria University who had been one of my lecturers at teachers' college. He had written a history of the Kaponga settlement and gave me some helpful starting points. I was fortunate in that my workplace in Wellington was very close to the National Library and the National Archives. Most of my lunchtimes were then spent in these two places working my way through naturalisation and old shipping records. I ended up with two lists. One was of the 1,461 Swiss who had become naturalised or taken out New Zealand citizenship in the period between 1870 and 1981. The records

gave the person's name, date of birth or age at the time of their becoming naturalised, their place of birth in Switzerland, their occupation and place of residence in New Zealand and the date of their naturalisation. As the records were old, they were not always very clear and spelling was sometimes suspect. One thing that struck me was that many of the first Swiss to be naturalised had Italian or French names. Many of them gave addresses on the West Coast and were miners. After this early period, nearly all the later names were German. It was obvious that it was gold that had brought the first Swiss settlers here, but what puzzled me was how these Swiss Italian and French, living for the most part in remote areas in Switzerland, had heard about a country on the other side of the world. I was to find the answer to that question much later. The second list was the names of people who had come to New Zealand on early migrant ships and whose country of origin was Switzerland. Having two lists of names was a start, but what was I going to do with them and where was I going to go from here.

Restructuring at my work place turned out to have a silver lining. It gave me the chance to go back to university, which in turn enabled me to study the writing of history and acquire the research skills I desperately needed.

2001 was a busy year. In addition to working part-time, I started work on my PhD and completed a history honours research essay entitled: *Swiss migration to New Zealand, 1935-1945*. For this I interviewed twelve Swiss, six in Taranaki and six in Wellington who had arrived just before and after the Second World War. The urgency to do this was justified, as three weeks after I interviewed my uncle, Joe Fohn, he died. Information from his story was used in his eulogy. I was pleased to have at least captured a few stories before it was too late and thought that my essay could form the basis of one chapter of the 'book' if I ever got around to writing it.

Over the next few years, any more serious study of the Swiss had to be shelved because of other commitments, and I began to view 'the history' as a retirement project. In the meantime I did the odd interview and worked my way through all the copies of Helvetia held in the Alexander Turnbull Library and any other material I could find on the Swiss, matching up some of it with the names on my list. Hours of searching turned

up several valuable family histories and a journal article which answered the question of how some of those early Swiss got to come to New Zealand.

Later, I discovered Papers Past, the digitalised NZ and Pacific newspapers from the 19th and 20th centuries which became a wonderful resource. Finally, my two lists of names, proved their worth. When I had reduced my working hours, I began to make my way systematically through the list of Swiss who had become naturalised. Some names produced no hits, others produced a wealth of entries. Names, which had been mere words on a page, came alive as real people whose lives in New Zealand I could often follow through. Hours were spent trolling through Papers Past, gathering information about those early Swiss. I was filled with admiration as I read about their struggles, their successes, and the disasters that befell them. Papers Past gave me the information I needed for my first chapter.

Two particularly remarkable men I encountered, and whose stories are in the history, were Antonio Lardi and Antonio Zala. On a trip to Switzerland in 2014, I went down to the lovely little town of Poschiavo in the Ticino to get a feel for where these early Swiss had come from. I was hoping also to find their descendants. On the wall of a hotel and another business, I saw the name Lardi, but I would have needed a knowledge of Italian and more time to follow this up. Back home and fully retired, I began work in earnest on the book and drafted the first chapter. 'The history' was underway and I began to see the shape it could take. In my research, I was to encounter many other interesting Swiss among the early pioneers. Amongst them was Jacob Lauper the explorer, Felix Hunger, the man responsible for initiating the Taranaki Swiss settlement, the two scientists, Richard Haeusler and Henry Suter who came on the same boat, and Ernest Eugster, who founded the Helvetia Settlement in South Auckland with other Appenzellers.

Another very fruitful source of information was The Taranaki Research Centre at Puke Ariki in New Plymouth where I spent several days tracking down information on the Taranaki Swiss. I am very grateful to the people who translated into English letters written by members of the Meuli and Hunger families, a newspaper account of the journey to New Zealand of the Swiss assisted immigrants who arrived in New



Fromm Family

Plymouth on the Halcione in 1875, and the diary of Anton Fromm, another of those adventurous and very resilient early Swiss. All of this material has been incorporated into the history and along with material from the Helvetia, family histories and other sources, gave me the information I needed to write the chapters relating to the period before the Second World War. For the period since the war, I relied mainly on my interviews with Swiss throughout New Zealand, and with information gleaned from a survey of 61 Swiss recruited through the Swiss Clubs.

By the end of 2016 I had a first draft. Most of 2017 was spent in editing and preparing the manuscript for the publisher. As Peter Lang were international publishers, they wanted maps of New Zealand, which

had to be specially drawn, and any terms that might not be understood by someone living out of New Zealand, to be explained. They also wanted the manuscript as a Word document. Converting it from Open Office was a nightmare. I was told publication time would be three to four months. However, as the completed manuscript reached the publisher just as they were in the process of moving their head office, the publication was not without problems and delays, and it was nearly a year before I received my copies.

The writing of this book has taken me on an amazing journey as I've traced the story of Swiss settlers from the goldfields of the West Coast to the farmlands opening up in Taranaki and South Auckland and later into New Zealand's developing urban areas. It has given me new skills and introduced me to Swiss people and others I would not otherwise have met, and who have been a pleasure to meet. I am sure that like me, when writing about their lives, readers too will realise and appreciate the contribution that New Zealand's Swiss settlers have made to this country. The Swiss have a New Zealand history of which they can be justifiably proud.

I would like to thank all those Swiss who have helped me in the writing of this history either through agreeing to be interviewed, completing the survey, allowing me access to their family histories or providing photos or other information. Without you and the Swiss Clubs who always responded very willingly to my requests for help, the story of the Swiss in New Zealand could not have been written.

In all sixty-two Swiss-born people were interviewed. Each one had a very interesting story to tell. Unfortunately not all their stories could be included in *Swiss Settlers in New Zealand*. However, as each person's story was unique and worthy of telling, I am now writing a companion volume to be entitled: *Swiss Settler Stories*, which will incorporate most of the untold stories and a few others from interviews presently being conducted by myself and my sister, Judy. It is intended to publish this companion volume in New Zealand.

Joan Waldvogel

Swiss Settlers in New Zealand is available from the publisher, Peter Lang, www.peterlang.com And from online sources such as Amazon and The Book Depository, either in hard cover or as an e-book.



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