

Obituary : Berta Marie Zimmerman : 16 October 1919 - 22 September 2011

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Berta Marie Zimmerman



16 October 1919 – 22 September 2011

Berta Marie Fluhler was born in Ennetmoos near Stans in Canton Nidwalden. She was the fifth child in a family of eight.

Her mother died in 1927 and some of the children were sent to live with relatives; Berta was sent to Wille-gasse to live with another family.

In 1939 she and three of her five brothers, Dolfi, Werner and Walter, and a neighbor, Paul Zimmermann, joined a party of eighteen other adult Swiss to emigrate to New Zealand for the farming opportunities and possible land ownership that beckoned.

They travelled by ship in a journey that lasted six weeks. They arrived in Wellington on the 13th of June and headed for Taranaki where other established farmers were keen to take them on as farm workers.

This was just five months prior to the outbreak of World War 2. During the war many of the new Swiss were classed as “aliens” probably due to their German-Swiss dialects and had to hand in their passports and report to the local police station weekly.

Berta worked as a housemaid and waitress in hotels in Hawera despite having few words of English, one of which was “soup?”

Her burgeoning relationship with Paul Zimmermann developed into full romance and they married in 1943. Initially they share-milked, then bought their own farm in Meremere near Hawera. They had four children, Peter, Pauline, Helen and Tony.

In 1962 the family moved to another farm in Stratford. Berta was fully involved in all facets of farm work, raising children, growing a huge vegetable garden and orchard, cooking and knitting for her own family and others.

In 1971 Berta and Paul retired from the farm and returned to Hawera where Berta worked part-time for a catering firm in a continuation of her love for serving others. Berta and Paul enjoyed a very happy and long retirement until Paul pre-deceased her in 2005.

Berta continued to live a fully independent life enjoying her family, her garden and her card playing – both Jass and Euchre – with her friends.

In May Berta's health declined rapidly and she spent the last four months of her life in a rest home in New Plymouth. She is sadly missed by her children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren. May she rest in peace.

Helen Zimmermann - Hall

The Taranaki Swiss Club and the Swiss Society of New Zealand extend their deepest sympathy to Berta's family.

Recently my mother passed away and a number of Swiss women have spoken to me about her and how she helped them when they arrived as new immigrants to New Zealand, how she supplied them with meat and vegies, with hand knitted garments for their babies and children and provided them with companionship and comfort, mother tongue and wisdom.

It got me thinking about some of the wonderful strong Swiss women who supported Mum when she came to New Zealand in 1939 as a nineteen year old and I want to pay tribute to them. When I think back to how I was at nineteen and when I saw my own daughters at that age I marvel at the courage, determination and tenacity she must have had to take such a step in an age when travel was by slow slow ship, communication by slow slow and unreliable postal service, no cell phones or e-mail. To leave family and familiarity possibly forever, to go to the other side of the world must have been a huge leap of faith!

One of the women who helped Mum when she disembarked and found her way to Taranaki was Jean (Albertine) Kalin; she was from Alsace in France and married to a Swiss.

Just as an aside: I've had a little difficulty researching some of these women in discovering their Christian names; most of the written material describes them as Mrs and their husband's name, common in that time I know. If anyone dared address me that way these days they would receive at best a very withering look if not a sharp rebuke !

Mrs Kalin was a superlative woman and role model of great stature in the Swiss community and probably in the wider community. She adopted Mum into her family and she and her young daughters prepared Mum for her wedding in 1943. I know Mum always regarded her as only slightly less than a saint.

In 1940's and 1950's New Zealand, the role of women was very well defined and new arrivals needed help to adjust and adapt to the new culture with its constraints and proprieties.

There were also on the ship that brought Mum to New Zealand a number of older married women, two of whom were to become firm friends and mentors until the end of their lives. They were Mrs Anny Schuler and Mrs Agnes Amstalden, both brave and stalwart women. They were great housekeepers, mothers, cooks and craftswomen; the fact that they both played Jass cannot be incidental either!

Another name I heard spoken frequently in my childhood in little less than awed tones was Mrs Walter Risi. It has taken me a number of phone calls to elicit her name was Marie Theresia; this lady was another strong influence and guide.

There were no doubt others but these are the ones I remember or at least remember being spoken of. I guess these stories are a mirror of how it has been and still remains in immigrant communities to any country: Those who come earlier assist those who come later and so it continues to foster and cement relationships and communities.

It gives me great pleasure and solace to belatedly acknowledge them, and their families can be very proud of them.

Helen Zimmermann - Hall