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Three times President of the Auckland Swiss Club, President of the Swiss Society of New Zealand for five years and founding member of the Swiss Kiwi Yodellers, Hans Fitzi has made a name for himself wherever he is with his pioneer spirit.

Born in the middle of five siblings on 4th October 1926, he grew up in Gais. His parents ran a restaurant and a sawmill. Hard work and a simple life marked his growing up. The second world war left a lasting memory for Hans: Within three hours of the declaration of war, Switzerland was mobilized and ready to defend. Food was rationed and extra produce was planted on playfields at his school. Refugees such as Russian defectors started to live in Hans' village and were used as a labour force in farming and such.

The bright young lad attended college with the aim of a "Matura" but abandoned this due to lack of interest in languages. Instead, he engaged in an apprenticeship to become a draftsman. This was followed by three years' study at the Technical Institute (Technikum) in Winterthur, where he qualified as architect. After two years of working in St.Gallen, he embarked on his journey around the world, the aim being to end up in South America. On his way, he visited New Zealand where his brother lived. He was by then married to Amelia from Italy whom he had met at the Technikum and they had one daughter, Carmen. He decided to take on work in Hamilton and Palmerston North. In 1963, he joined a firm in Auckland that specialized in designing and building grandstands such as the ones in Ellerslie, Hamilton, Matamata, Te Aroha and Wanganui.

While working in Hamilton, he was discovered as an excellent skier and won many races for the Hamilton club. He became club captain and helped build the ski lodge. Because he was a champion skier in New Zealand, they named the club Christiana after the ship that brought Hans and Lia to New Zealand. Hans often joined Hans Enzler on his hunting expeditions in the forest near Ruapara.

Later, he bought a house in Epsom, in Auckland. A few years later, this was followed by the purchase of a section in Darwin Lane, where he built what was the beautiful family home until recently.

After about three years as an employee in Auckland, Hans decided it was time to go out on his own. In order to be recognized by the governing body at the time (the Architects' Institute), he had to complete a degree at University. This was viewed more as a formality – he was way ahead of the students in his class. His intellect, his cold calculating logic and his don't-take-no-for-an-answer spirit really started to come into their own, as soon as he embarked on the new venture of constructing factories: Architects were not supposed to be running building firms.
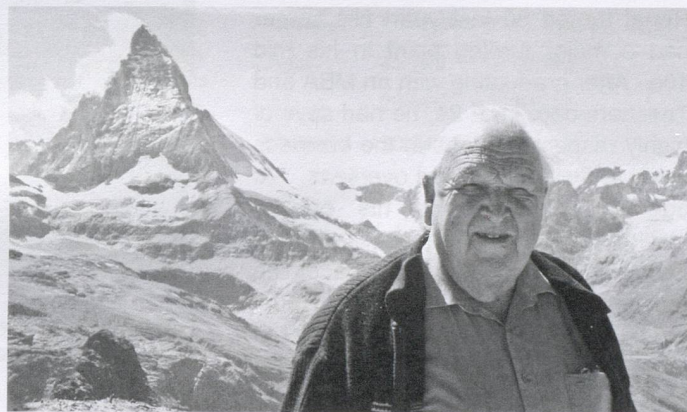
But out of necessity, when good builders were hard to find, Hans did, against the norm, and was threatened with eviction from the Institute of Architects. He was in effect the innovator of the build/design concept now common practice in the industry. This can-do attitude has come to the fore in every project he took on.

In 1964, he took his family (by then there were two daughters, Carmen and Sonja, and a son, Karl) to Switzerland for a six-month period on a mission to build a retirement house for his parents. Against his brother's skepticism, he used his school contacts and a personally picked gang of bricklayers from Italy. He started building within three weeks of presenting a design, prepared on a drawing board set up in his bedroom, for permission to the council. When they were ready to return to New Zealand, the house was nearly finished.

His Auckland business thrived during the buoyant times of the 60s and 70s, and he soon bought a sizeable piece of land on the South Head of the Kaipara Harbour. The land was inhabited by wild deer, the product of Hans' next challenge: He fenced them in with the idea of farming them. This idea was a thorn in the eyes of the Agriculture Department, as deer were considered a pest then. Hans again withstood threats with counter threats, teamed up with other interested parties and within a few years, promoted deer farming as a legal – AND entirely tax free thanks to a loophole in the law – activity that attracted many successful business people in need of hedging excess funds.

His farm became a breeding ground for such folk, and he soon expanded from 80 ha to 800 ha, with 5000 animals being kept. Export of venison to Germany initiated another first: An on-site deer slaughtering facility, sanctioned by the German and New Zealand Governments. To seek advice on the use of deer velvet for medicinal purposes, Hans led a delegation comprising representatives from the Deer Farming Association and the New Zealand Government to China. The visit culminated in an opera performance, ending with a Swiss song accompanied by Hans himself, where he gained roaring applause and an invitation to sing on stage (which he so humbly declined).

Deer farming also expanded into the United States, where the challenges lay in the import permit of farmed deer meat. Over dinner with Captain Nobel from the U.S. Wild Game Department, Hans was advised to simply take out an American deer farming licence and start farming in New Zealand. This would entitle him to use the number tags necessary for the import into the States. A stunned New Zealand Government investigated this practice and promptly followed suit. Hans also co-pioneered the well-known "Denver Cut", a meat cut which includes the rump, topside, silverside and knuckle, with all fat and silverskin removed.

As the leader and foundation member, he took the Swiss Kiwi Yodellers to the Yodel festival in Switzerland every four years, following a very successful premiere in Brig in 1987. Thanks to their lead singer Peter Arnold, they won 1st prize in many competitions. On their way, they often stopped over and connected with various other Swiss groups in Korea, China, Australia, Hongkong, Japan, Malaysia and Singapore, mostly thanks to the good relations maintained by Hans.

What a blessing that the Fitzis lost the need to travel further. By the way, New Zealand citizenship was granted to him on the merits of his skiing successes.

The Helvetia Team thanks Hans Fitzi for generously sharing his story. Article prepared by Trudi Fill Weidmann, based on an interview conducted by Peter Deutschle. Thank you both.