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My Musenalp Adventure

On my September 2019 trip to Switzerland I was unable to hike but with the help of anti-inflammatories, Arnold stubbornness and determination, not to mention the amazing transport systems: trains, buses, cable cars, chairlifts etc, I was able to scale just about every mountain in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. I felt like the eternal Asian tourist with cell-phone working like an Eveready camera, forever taking photos of the views enhanced by the clear skies and autumn's warming sun.

My brother Peter, now living in Stans, had a wish for me and my brother Kurt to see a special place, Musenalp, but as yet we had not managed to get there. My holiday was nearly at an end and we were on our farewell round. We were delivering a "Thank-you" gift to our Swiss babysitter, Margaret, who as a young teenager had in 1945 welcomed our mother Alice, a city girl, into the alpine farming region known as The Rengg. She became our babysitter whenever our mum needed her. She told us of her admiration of our mother at her willingness to come from the city, marry a farmer in the Rengg, live in a house with no running water and in need of some spit and polish.

The gift duly handed over I looked at the beautiful clear day and the panoramic view onto the Alpnachersee and in Eveready mode I asked if we could visit Musenalp today. Margaret who often goes to Musenalp with delicious edible contributions was keen as and we all moved at lightning speed to make this trip happen.

The adventure had begun. I was about to meet my 79 year old cousin Jost for

the first time. Jost's mother, Marie Barmettler (nee Arnold) and our father, Josef Arnold, were siblings and Marie married Anton Barmettler from Musenalp and became part of the 3rd generation on Musenalp. The aerial cable car takes us from Dallenwil up to Niederrickenbach. Directly left of the mountain station, where we get off, there is a blue 4-seater cable car proudly carrying its name "Musenalp". To the right the sign points to the monastery of Maria Rickenbach which has been a place of pilgrimage since the 1500s when a wooden statue of the Virgin and Child was miraculously preserved from fire. I would like to know more - perhaps next time.

While being carried by this blue 4-seater cablecar up to the lofty heights we can see north of us the well-groomed Alps on the Buochserhorn and to the south of them the imposing rocks of the Brisens. After the steepest section, the aerial cable car reaches the top of the vast light gray rockwall upon which sits Musenalp. This Alp sits 1747 m above sea level and is embedded in a varied hiking area between Klewenalp, Bisen and Buochserhorn and offers a panoramic view to visitors and workers alike.

As the cable car gently floats across the now rolling, sometimes stony, meadows to its destination Jost's wife Helen is there to meet us. Margaret has already heard that Jost is somewhere on the Alp carrying out maintenance work. Margaret, the fit mountain-loving octogenarian promptly sets out to find him as she is desperate for us to meet and given the hasty, last minute arrangements we had been unable to contact him.

While we wait we eat and talk with Helen and take in the views and admire the buildings: an old stable renovated to become a Festhuetten with rooms for rent upstairs as well as a two-storeyed house that houses the kitchen and the working family during summer season. From this building comes all the food for family and guests alike. Sandwiched between these two buildings is a courtyard where trampers, visitors and family enjoy the summer sun, the views and a bite to eat. Offset slightly there is a relatively new large building that now houses all the cows, the cheese making paraphernalia and cool store for the cheese

Finally Jost arrives and I meet my 79 year old cousin for the first time. He is a jovial rugged strong alpine farmer with a complexion that reflects the many years spent in the outdoors. I am eager to hear his story.

First it was time to hear about the history of Musenalp. In 1715 Co-operation Buochs owned the Alp, it was then privately owned by another Barmettler family until, it is assumed, the time of 1798 French invasion of Switzerland. The Helvetic Republic (1798-1803) represented an early attempt to impose a central authority over Switzerland, which until then had consisted of self-governing cantons united by a loose military alliance. It is assumed, the Barmettlers fled or were killed leaving no-one to run the alp. The history of Musenalp's ownership from 1798 to late 1800s is a bit blurry so let's fast forward to late 1800s when Jost's great-grandfather was able to purchase the two parcels of land then known as "Ober" and "Unter" Musenalp. In doing so he began what would become by 2019 a six-generation of same family working on Musenalp with my cousin Jost being 4th generation, then came his son, and now his son's daughters. There may be many more generations to come.

It has not always been plain sailing on this Alp - in 1940s Musenalp was close to passing to others again as Jost's grandfather was in his 70s and there was a reluctance for any of his family to fill the breach, perhaps the work for the small return was too much. After some soul searching Jost's father stepped in to carry on the family name. During the early years it was a harsh life in the alps - the buildings were a shambles. At one point Jost's great grandfather was building a new shed and the old one collapsed before the new one was finished. The collapse of the building revealed the way buildings had been constructed from materials that the Alp could provide such as local stones, which were used as much as possible. Jost's father was 15-16 at the time and used to tell the story of the collapsed shed often.

Laughter filled the air when I asked how all the building materials were brought up pre-transport days: On the backs of the owners and helpers.

In the 1950s the need to erect a house meant a rock crusher would need to be brought up to help break the calcium stones that can be found everywhere and debate remains whether the emergency cable that is purported to have existed pre cable car was used to get it there. Every summer the family would gather from their various valley abodes and helped to erect the buildings. The burden eased when in 1952 the first



Jakob Barmettler

Eigentümer und Senn der Musenalp ca. 1900

actual cable car on Musenalp was built. This provided tremendous help in transporting agricultural materials to the alpine farmers. Forty years later, on June 8, 1992, the gasoline engine that served as drive caught on fire. His son Jost, then 23 years old, had called "Dadi, the engine is burning" and then things went very fast with everything ending up in ashes and rubble. Lots of thought was given to different options to provide access to Musenalp. It soon became clear that a road to Musenalp was out of the question for technical and financial reasons.

Thanks to the great support of the local and cantonal authorities, it was decided to build a new cable car. The local company Niederberger, Seilbahnbau in Dallenwil, was awarded the contract. The new aerial cable car transported the first person to the Musenalp on May 30, 1994. This 25-year-old privately owned cable car is still the heart of the magnificent alpine farm. It provides for agricultural needs as well as food supplies for the Beizli and it also transports guests who indulge themselves in the Alpeizli with local food and drinks.

Every year at the beginning of summer 50 cows from five farmers arrive on foot from the valley below to spend the summer on this 80ha alp of which 60ha is lush alpine meadow. The alp is open from mid-May to early November and during this time they employ a cheesemaker, who makes 7 1/2 tonnes of cheese: Musenalpkaese, Muetchli, Bratkaese and alpine butter and 800-1000 kilos of the Bratkaese are used by the Musenalp restaurant and small Muetschli and Bratkaese are sold to trampers and visitors and deliveries are made to 3-4 local stores in the valley. Jost is quick to emphasise that they do not deal with the large supermarkets. Some of the cheese is held in cool-

storage over the winter months so that it has truly matured by the time the next summer comes.

The first 8 1/2 litres a cow gives is the grazing fee and whatever is above that the owners of the cows are paid 1CHF per litre, which Jost tells me is double the amount the valley farmers are paid. The farmers who own the cows do not get any of the cheese their cows' milk produces - they are welcome to buy some, Jost adds with a smile. Up until 10 years ago the milking, cheese making process was labour intensive but 10 years ago a large herd-home stall (barn where cows are milked, fed, and sleep) was built and since that time the milk has gone via a plastic hose directly from the cow into the cheese making vat - no more handling buckets etc.

While he was showing me this building I could smell the sweet hay that had been housed here in the loft and see the massive wooden trusses used in building this new stall, this reflects the weather extremes this building needs to withstand. Sometimes the snow-fall is so massive that some of the guttering sags, but this year they will underpin the guttering to make sure that this does not happen again.

Farm subsidies are a topic I came across often while in Switzerland and in a nutshell my understanding is that Switzerland has 3 zones and farmers are paid subsidies according to land owned and what height zones they live in, but for Jost it is different - he gets a per cow subsidy. He was quick to point out that he would be "Steinreich" (very rich) if it was on per hectare and elevation instead he contends himself with being Steinreich with Stein (rocks).

The Musenalp enjoys great popularity, and the summers are always busy with

trampers, visitors and family enjoying the hospitality of Musenalp and Jost senior is very much part of the inventory so to speak and willingly goes up every summer to help out wherever he can. Finally the time has come to leave and as I depart in the Cable car I blow a kiss to Jost and wish him well. Another fabulous day spent in my birth country. By the way readers, did you realise that with more than 44 mountain cog railways/cable cars, that Nidwalden and the surrounding area has the largest cog railway/cable car density in the world???

