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Memories are History: Emigration in the Thirties

My good friend Sophie had told me fascinating bits from her life, and I thought they would interest the Helvetia readers, too. So I asked Sophie whether she would agree to share her memories with us – and that's what she wrote:

I was born in Feusisberg SZ as the second oldest child of nine. At the age of three my parents moved to Staretschwil AG, where I went to school until we emigrated to South America.

The year was 1936 when everybody talked about war. It was getting really bad in Germany. So my father decided to emigrate; anywhere was good enough. Some friends of his said that Ecuador was a land with a good future, and so he decided to go and see for himself.

On the 15th December 1936 my father went, via Amsterdam, to Ecuador. He returned on the 20th March 1937, with the news that he had bought a farm. The total size of the farm was 2000 ha, however, the land he owned outright was 1'100 ha, of which 400 ha was bush, and he had signed an agreement to sell the other 900 ha to Swiss people within a year. If he failed he would have to pay a penalty of 25'000 Swiss francs. He advertised in Swiss newspapers to anyone interested. Before long he had twenty-four people, including some children, who would travel with us to Ecuador.



The group that travelled to Ecuador in 1937

Prior to our departure from Switzerland we all had to have a medical examination, and the doctor told my parents that our four youngest children had signs of getting the measles, which my parents ignored.

We all left home on the 3rd May 1937. This journey was doomed from the start. We went by train to Genua, Italy. Once there, we had to wait for two days before we would sail. But by then the four youngest had the measles and were packed off to hospital. The

next day the remainder of us had to be disinfected. We sailed on the "Oracio" to our new destination, without mum and the four youngest ones. Mum had no choice but to go back to Switzerland. They sailed a month later. During our voyage I was the only one in our family to get seasick.

We travelled to Ecuador via the Panama Canal, arriving at the Port of Guayaquil at the end of May. From Guayaquil we took a train to the capital Quito. As Quito is 3000 m above sea level, high in the Andes, the trip was long, and it took us two days to arrive in Quito.

From Quito we travelled to the farm, named Los Alpes, which was to be our home for at least the next six years. Los Alpes had no house, so we had to build a bach. The original bach we built consisted of two rooms, one big bedroom with bunk beds, and a dining room. Later on we built a bigger home. We had to fetch the water in buckets from a nearby creek, water for cooking, cleaning, washing. The washing for the whole family was done by hand - we didn't change and wash our clothes as often as New Zealanders do nowadays.

The next major hurdle was to learn Spanish. It was not a problem for us children; it didn't take long for us to learn the basics, but our parents struggled.

I remember the very first time my father went to Quito on business. He went to the bank to get money for groceries and to pay the bills. He had a briefcase full of money. What he was to experience I will never forget. He never felt anything when a pickpocket robbed him of everything, money, passport and all. The police didn't do much about it. I remember it happened to me once, too, but the pickpockets didn't get more than a bus fare from me. Of course this meant that I had to walk home.

Unfortunately, the people who had come with us weren't happy. Upon arriving on the farm they decided to leave. So after a year my father had to pay the fine, as he was unable to sell the land (the 900 ha) as was required by the agreement. This of course put a financial strain on the family. Dad had nine children aged from three years to thirteen years of age to look after, and he had to start a farm, and he had lost a lot of money. All this pressure caused him to become unwell. When we emigrated my father was 72 years old.

My father's health got so bad that he made the decision to return to Switzerland just before the war broke out, and he left us behind in Ecuador. We had no communication with him until 1945 when the war ended.

In Ecuador the first thing we had to do is learn to ride a horse, as the nearest town was Aloat, 15 km away; the nearest house was 5 km away. In summer, we could reach Aloat by truck, but from autumn till spring we had to go by horse, as the tracks would get too muddy when it rained.

To be continued in next month's edition.