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Life Story

Building a New Life in New Zealand: Karl and Ruth Waldvogel

Born in 1926, the youngest of four children, Karl spent his early years in Herriberg, on the northern shores of Lake Zürich.

After secondary school, aged 14 ½ years, he began his cabinetmaking apprenticeship in a Bau und Möbelschreineri in Wilchingen, Kanton Schaffhausen. During this time he completed trade school, his love of wood grew and he learnt a variety of skills including practical wood work, design, drawing, calculations and plans and he developed his particular flair was for finishing work in wood.

In 1945 at the age of 18, after his 6 month obligatory stint in the Military Service which included bases in Frauenfeld, Kaserne Zurich and Schwägälp, he was employed at a medium sized joinery in Zurich making furniture, wooden windows and doors, as well as kitchens and fittings.

A keen football fan, Karl regularly followed Schaffhausen FC, and when possible attended both home and away games on Sundays. One such away game in the late 1940s took him to watch a match against Baden FC whose home ground was actually in the next village, Wettingen.



Here he popped into the local bakery – Meiers Bäckerei – indulging in his favourite Nussgipfel – where he was graciously served by a bubbly young lady called Ruth. As it happened, Ruth's father Otto who ran a wrought-iron business in the town, was a Baden FC fan!

Ruth, the younger of two daughters, was born in Wettingen, where she spent her childhood. At the time of serving Karl she was completing her apprenticeship in the bakery. She then spent then 18 months in Biel working and learning French, after which she planned a trip to England to learn English. Her travel plans ran parallel to Karl's who by this time had heard through a former workmate,

Louis Geisser, all about New Zealand. In January 1951 Lou and his wife had emigrated and wrote enthusiastically to Karl about New Zealand, and how they loved the big open, uncrowded spaces, the nature, the friendly people and the new opportunities. An intrigued Karl didn't need too much prompting and followed him eight months later, leaving Naples on the brand new Italian ship, Oceania, Lloyd Triestino, travelling via the Suez Canal to Sydney, then crossing the Tasman on the well-known old trooper/ im-



migrant ship Wanganella, and arriving in Auckland in late 1951. Karl's first port of call was Louis Steiner's farm in Tatanui near Morrinsville, from where he had been given the necessary address and accommodation requirements for a visa. Karl spent two weeks there looking for work before being employed as a worker for Foster Construction, building state houses and schools. There he learnt the tricks of the NZ building trade, having to adapt his knowledge of Swiss building to the New Zealand style - light timber frame construction with little insulation, weatherboard or brick cladding and corrugated iron or concrete/decrastic roofing tiles. Single, reliable and flexible, with an aptitude for finishing work with wood and an attention to detail, he was soon promoted to foreman, and given a new Hillman pickup to carry out his duties.



At Fosters, Karl learnt the tricks of the NZ building trade, having to adapt his knowledge of Swiss building to the New Zealand style - light timber frame construction with little insulation, weatherboard or brick cladding and corrugated iron or concrete/decrastic roofing tiles.

During this time, Karl's accommodation included lodging with a NZ family in Heaphy Terrace, Hamilton, where he shared a room with a bricklayer. The most memorable dish served up here on an almost daily basis was boiled silverside with watery cabbage, something he struggles with to this day! Karl soon became "Charlie" amongst his New Zealand friends.

Karl's older brother Heinrich followed him to New Zealand and arrived in 1952 with his wife Tildi. They settled nearby in Tokoroa, where he worked at Kinleith as an engineer, and raised a family in the following years.

Karl's free time was spent hunting on the Schuler farm in Tokoroa, and learning to play Jassen!

After 3 years, Karl began contract work in partnership with Ernst Schefer and together they built a woolshed and a big farm house. By late 1954 Karl branched out on his own, building his first house for a Mr Bollard in Hillcrest Road; a farm house for Tua and Shirley Matthews; and a new home for Mr Henry, a local solicitor. They all became lifelong friends. He also purchased a section and built his first own home in Rumney Street, Hamilton.

In 1956 the Hamilton Swiss Club was born and along with Arnold Biland, Walter Risi, Christine Staheli and Leo Rust, Karl became a Founding and Lifelong Member. His duties included a stint as Treasurer. He was a keen participant in Kegeln and shooting events for a long time, and still enjoys Jassen to this day.

Karl returned to Switzerland for 6 months in April 1957, met by a now well-travelled Ruth at Zurich airport. Ruth had spent a year as a nanny in Brighton, England, followed by nearly three years in Concord, Boston, Massachusetts from February 1954 to December 1956. A proposal was accepted, and on Ruth's



birthday in July they announced their engagement. On Karl's birthday on 1 October they were married in Wettingen with a reception at Erlenbach, on the Lake of Zurich. The young couple set off a few weeks later on 25.10.1957 on their honeymoon to New Zealand. They departed from Rotterdam on the Sibajak via the Panama Canal. By all accounts, separate cabins made for a very interesting journey! They made life-long Swiss friends on this journey and landed in Wellington on 1 December 1957.

Ruth arrived to her own home in Rumney Street, built by her husband - one of the lucky brides, an event even reported in the local newspaper! With her English language and retail skills Ruth quickly found work at H&J Courts



Department Store in Garden Place in the Handbags and Jewellery department. She worked there a job until she was 7 months pregnant in late 1958.

The Good Life followed, bringing out the best of the Swiss-Kiwi pioneering spirit - a lot of hard work, mixed with meals and events shared with the tight-knit community, including the experimental making of fondue with cheddar cheese and dry sherry (didn't quite hit the spot). The Black and White Coffee Bar downstairs in Ward Street became a haunt - the first coffee bar in Hamilton which served freshly-brewed coffee. This was a real treat at the time. In November 1958 Carmen arrived, and Karl and Ruth's family expanded further with Odette in 1961, followed by Christopher in 1962. During the first nine years as new homes were built, the family shifted house ten times.

1964 saw a 6 month break with the young family's first trip back to Switzerland. How nice it was to taste gourmet food again! The opportunity arose to take over Ruth's father's engineering business back in Wettingen but the New Zealand lifestyle and Karl's preference for working with wood influenced the decision to permanently return to NZ.

The K.Waldvogel Limited business

was established, and for this purpose Karl built a workshop in Riverlea Road. He became a registered Master Builder, and the architecturally-designed homes he built provided a showcase for Karl's craftsmanship with wood.

In total, Karl was involved with the construction of over 70 houses, both spec and commissioned, supplemented by additions and renovations during leaner times. He managed all aspects of building work, including design and planning, quoting for contracts, and overseeing projects from start to completion.

As well as construction skills, building involved a lot of varied physical labour - digging drains, mixing concrete, cutting timber frames, laying corrugated iron or tile roofing and sometimes landscaping. Today concrete is delivered in mixers, timber trusses are pre-made, and entire homes may be pre-cut.

A past-time Karl particularly enjoyed was deep-sea fishing, usually off the Whangamata or the Coromandel coasts, with Bert Flühler, Walter Unternährer, Werner Fischer, worker Barry Bond, amongst others.

On one such fishing trip the fish weren't fooled and didn't bite at all, but during a "quick" stop at the tavern on the way home, he "caught" the first prize in the raffle, and so presented Ruth with an old frozen broiler chook on his return (good for soup apparently but not much else)! Ruth proved to be a very proficient stay-at-home mum until the early 1970s, when she began part-time work at Windsor House, in Victoria Street. Regular visits across the road to Butlers Delicatessen led to ownership for three years from 1977-1979. After an intervening trip to



Switzerland, she became Manager of Delicut Food Delicatessen, before becoming Manager of Boulangerie Croix du Sud, an authentic French Bakery in Ward Street, Hamilton from 1982-1992.

Needless to say, Swiss cuisine has been a central theme and persists in their daily lives.

Trips back to Switzerland have been frequent, most recently in 2015, visiting five grandchildren who have currently

settled in England. It was a treat to see family and friends and breathe the Swiss alpine air again, but both Karl and Ruth were happy to return to their home built in New Zealand. Very recently Karl reached his milestone 90th birthday, proof that his New Zealand home is built on very solid foundations!

Compiled by daughter Odette.

<http://www.renovate.org.nz> and <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz>



Following the Depression years of the 1930s and the war in the 1940s, New Zealand continued to experience a housing shortage. Building materials such as copper, steel, zinc, electrical cable and paints were all made available for the war but limited for house construction. Only essential construction for families was allowed. A shortage of skilled labour compounded the problem.

The first labour government elected in 1935 established a "Department of House Construction" to provide workers housing of good quality. Every house would be on their own plot of land with differing floor plans, elevation and materials, although joinery and fittings were kept the same to minimise costs.

When Karl first arrived in New Zealand, State Housing dominated the building industry. These were (and still are) considered of more solid construction than other New Zealand bungalows. They were timber framed with brick cladding, with clay or concrete tiles, corrugated iron or asbestos cement sheet roofing.

Four to five houses were built per acre, about 80% were standalone and 20% semi-detached, with 2-5 bedrooms. The first state house was completed in 1937 and during the 1930s around 40% of new homes were state homes. The number reduced in the 1940s to around 28% and by the 1950s, when Karl arrived, only 20% of new homes were state houses. In total approximately 30,000 state rental units were built during this time, helping raise the standard of housing for New Zealand workers.