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Swiss-Kiwi Life Stories

Family Staheli and Swisscraft

Joe, the oldest of four children, was born in 1926 in Dussnang, Canton Thurgau. His parents ran a family business from home: making Swiss Embroidery. When Joe finished school in 1941 there was not enough work at home so they searched for an apprenticeship and, though he would have liked something like design or architecture, the opportunity arose of an apprenticeship in Upholstery/Saddlery in the local village. This meant he could board at home and every Wednesday for four years Joe attended Trade School in Weinfelden, in summer on the bike and in winter by train. At the same time he learnt to play the trumpet and later became a member of the local brass-band.



Finishing his apprenticeship after the war, Joe took on a job in Aarberg before moving to Le Locle to work and learn French. He was called up for army duties with the Army Brass-band in St Gallen. After 118 days service he returned to Le Locle. In summer Joe would bike home to Dussnang via Cham, where his girlfriend Helen lived. He well remembers the time Helen had a day off and they went together to Bürgenstock by train and steam boat.

In 1949 Joe started working in Gerlafingen, Canton Solothurn, where a lot of work was done on the upholstery for first-class carriages for the Swiss Railway. During this time he continued his advanced training doing bookkeeping, calculations and drawings via trade-courses in Bern and in 1950 passed the Master-Diploma.

After getting engaged in 1951, Joe moved to Weinfelden where he started to manufacture lounge suites and mattresses and eventually started looking for an apartment so he and

Helen could get married, which they did in April 1952. Herbert was born in 1953 and Anita in 1955. During this time Joe was thinking about starting his own business but it didn't look like this was going to happen in Switzerland. Helen's brother had emigrated to America and a nearby Dairy (Molkerei) owner, the Oettlis had decided to emigrate to New Zealand, it was time to think about heading the same way.

In October 1957 the long journey began, first by train from Wil via Zurich and Basel to Rotterdam where Joe's brother Ernie, who had decided to come to NZ too, joined them having driven his right-hand drive Riley to Rotterdam. The car was shipped along with a wooden container of household goods, clothing and tools. Herbert was five and Anita two and both carried a backpack full of toys. They boarded the Dutch ocean-ship "Sibajak", later discovering it had been used as a troop transporter during World War II. They were soon to discover that there were several other Swiss people on board: Karl and Ruth Waldvogel, Bob and Friedi Keller, Family Notter with 7 children, Albert Schweizer, Werner Faessler, Elsa Egger and Ernst Wuetherich. The journey was via Southampton, Panama Canal and Tahiti, finally arriving in Wellington on 1 December. Unfortunately this was a Sunday and as no one was working they had to wait until Monday to disembark. Then waited 2 more days for Ernie to be able to collect his Riley, into which their luggage was then loaded, ready for their trip northwards. Their first destination would be Fritz Scheidegger's cottage in Waharoa as this was who had given an accommodation guarantee, a temporary arrangement until they found suitable accommodation in Hamilton. So a few days later Joe and Ernie drove to Hamilton, met up with Charlie Waldvogel who helped them to look at houses. A small two-bedroom house, on a leasehold section in Grey Street Hamilton East, was found, and as they had enough for the deposit, they became the proud owners of their first house. With Charlie's help Joe found a job as motor-trimmer and started in January after the summer holidays.

Shortly after settling into Grey Street they received an invitation to a Hamilton Swiss Club function that was held at the nearby church centre. Helen stayed home to look after the children

but Joe and Ernie went along and there they met other Swiss people: The Risi, Biland and Vonholzen Families, Louis and John Steiner, Ernie Schaeffer and Rinaldo Rust.

The first few years were fairly tough with Joe having to supplement income with some cleaning jobs and Helen having boarders, initially Swiss guys and later Kiwis. There was always lots of cooking and housework to be done. Furniture was all home-made and there was no fridge and only an old copper to do the washing. The furniture was made with the saw-bench with electric motor Joe brought from Switzerland.

After two years Joe was offered a job at the new ice-cream factory Rosco. This was arranged by Toni Meier from Matangi. During summer there was lots of overtime and Joe's wages nearly doubled. Doris was born in December 1960. During this time the opportunity arose to have Herbert and Anita's Child Benefit paid out in advance so that they could add on two additional bedrooms at the back of the house. Charlie Waldvogel was the one to do this job.



Late 1962 Rosco Ice-Cream went into receivership so the time seemed right for Joe to start his own business. So they traded in the car for a van. A trip to Auckland, saw the purchase of a new industrial sewing machine and some trade materials. They were able to rent a small workshop in Galloway Street and Joe started doing re-covering work with Helen doing some of the sewing work while the younger children were in the play-pen. Christine, their youngest child was born in early 1963. It didn't take long before the little workshop became too small so a quarter-acre section with an old house was bought in Colombo Street, Frankton. After knocking out a few walls this became the factory and soon work came in from the

Education Board and Munro Caravans in Otorohanga. In 1965 they were able to afford to buy their first new van and Sunday family outings would often be delivering squabs to Otorohanga and then having an ice-cream as a special treat.

In December 1967 Joe and Helen had their first trip back to Switzerland. This was to be the first of 9 trips over the years, the last being in 2005.

It didn't take long for the old factory-house to become too small and Joe decided to build a new workshop on the back section. They had taken on their first apprentice, employed one tradesman, one lady machinist and a young labourer. Everything was moved into the new workshop and the production of new lounge-suites took place. It was at this stage that they decided to call the business Swisscraft Ltd. Two years later the old house was pulled down with stage two of the workshop being built. They started making their own frames in the back building and Albert Trutsch was employed to do this. Erika Bolli also started around that time cutting fabric for the lounge-suites. They decided on Swiss names for the lounge-suites such as Interlaken, St Moritz, Bernina, Geneva and Zurich etc. In 1969 their son Herbert left school and joined the family business.

In 1972 Joe and Helen took their three daughters on a trip back to Switzerland via Los Angeles to visit Disneyland. The highlight of their stay in Switzerland was attending the Congress for Swiss Abroad in Bern, an organised trip to the Jungfrau and the next evening a visit to the Kursaal for a dance or two and it was there where their oldest daughter Anita met Walter. Herbert remained in New Zealand to help out in the business and look after the family home.

A lot of hours were spent in the family business and often on a Saturday

morning or in the school holidays the whole family would be at the factory doing various chores such as cleaning, varnishing chair legs, cutting foam, office work etc. For many years Helen would travel by bus, from their home in Hamilton East to their factory in Frankton, taking along the children and then doing sewing and cutting as well as having boarders to look after at home.

In the early seventies their close friends Ernst and Therese Rust bought a section in Whangamata and this prompted Joe and Helen to buy the section behind them. They built their first holiday home there but sold this after a couple of years so that they could build a new family home in Hillcrest. After six years there they decided to move to the Hamilton Lake where they eventually had a new house built, again by their close friend Charlie Waldvogel.

Herbert met Willetta and they married in 1979. Herbert owned the old house next to Swiss-craft and in 1981 the factory was again getting too small. The house was removed to make room for the new premises. It was around this time that Joe and Helen had another trip to Switzerland where Joe checked out the latest upholstery trends and negotiated patterns to start doing diamond-buttoned leather lounge-suites. At the peak of the business during the late eighties and early nineties they had up to 30 staff.

It was in the mid-nineties when Joe and Helen handed the business over to Herbert and Willetta and slowly retired, working half days for a few years. Herbert and Willetta have continued with the business and in 2000 their son Peter joined them and served his apprenticeship. Peter now runs the day to day organisation and has a part-share in the company. The business is now over 50 years old and looks as if it will continue for some time yet.

Joe has recently celebrated his 90th Birthday, Helen her 89th Birthday and in the same month of April also their 64th Wedding Anniversary. Their four children are all close by as well as their 10 grandchildren apart from one living in Perth and one in Switzerland. They now have five great-grandchildren and are always interested to know what they are all up to. Joe and Helen keep very good health and are kept busy card-playing, gardening and walking.



Throughout their life in New Zealand Joe and Helen were always a big part of the Hamilton Swiss Club and were active members in the committee, as well as the Trachtengruppe. Helen was and still is renowned for her big selection of Swiss baking. They love keeping in touch with all their family and Swiss friends.

Compiled by Anita Zuber (daughter)

