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“Greet Me the Homeland!”
Marguerite Nerny-Stäger—The Oldest Swiss Canadian Turns 110 Years

by Susann Bosshard-Kälin

She emigrated 86 years ago because of Eugène. At the end of June 1929, the Vaudois Marguerite Stäger was traveling by herself on the Empress of Australia to Canada. Love for her betrothed from Yverdon, who years before had found work as a baker in Montreal, gave her unshakeable confidence. She dared to face an uncertain future in a foreign land. Today, the oldest Swiss woman abroad in North America is living in a retirement home about an hour outside of Montreal. In the company of Maurice, her 83 year-old son, a short visit of Marguerite became possible. On 28 July 2015, the graceful and calm petite woman with alert blue eyes had indeed become 110 years of age.

“A visit from Switzerland!” she exclaims. “Greetings to the homeland! Although I am Canadian, I am proud of my Swiss roots.”

It is nearly miraculous that shortly after World War I, Marguerite Stäger, a native of western Switzerland, had survived the “Spanish” influenza. Physicians had already given up on the thirteen year-old and advised the desperate parents to grant her whatever she wanted. Then already Marguerite knew what was good for her: she ordered the red Aigle, a wine from their own vineyard, and voilà—she recovered. If someone had told her then that on 28 July 2015 she would celebrate her 110th birthday...

Doyenne with Five Generations of Descendants

Marguerite rallies a large family around her—some forty...
rect descendants are living in North America. She herself had seven children in Canada, and in February 2015, Zoé, the youngest in the fifth generation of the clan, has entered this world.

"I had truly a good life," Marguerite observes. "At times I think that God has forsaken me. He doesn't seem to remember that I am still in this world."

Her son, Maurice Nerny, a retired Protestant pastor, movingly cares for his mother and is visibly proud of her. "Maman is simply great, a strong personality, focused and to the point. She is not a woman of many words, but kind and cordial. Still today she cannot be unsettled. She lives for her family, we are her center. Recently she mentioned that it was strange that her children were so old! Indeed, my sister Jacqueline is 85, my older brother Jean-Jacques is 84, I myself am 83, Gisèle is 80, and my youngest sister is turning age 70. Maman had lost two of her babies suffering from pneumonia, but because of it she never abandoned trust in life. She knew, she was responsible for her other five children—for the family."

Two “Romands” in Aarau

In 1921 at age sixteen, Marguerite Stäger who grew up in a carpenter’s family in Aigle was sent to Aarau to learn German. What a coincidence that a young baker apprentice named Eugène Nerny from Yverdon daily delivered fresh rolls to the house! Soon the two met on Sundays in the Protestant Église Française. Maurice Nerny remarked: "You catch your fish when you can!" There were but few "Romands" (from French-speaking Switzerland) in Aarau, and the two met and fell in love. Having completed his apprenticeship, Eugène decided to emigrate. He wanted to get away from Switzerland, the relationship with his stepmother was not the best, and the offer of a baker col-
league came as if on cue.

“Mother mentions often,” Maurice Nerny explains, “that at that time she felt being too young to leave home. With a heavy heart she let him go. But before he departed, they got engaged and swore eternal love.”

Their love letters back and forth were to cross the Atlantic for five years. “Mother wanted to save money for her emigration and knew that Eugène was the right one.”

All Alone to the New World

In the midst of the Great Depression of 1929, Marguerite, then age 24, followed her beloved to Canada. She knew that she was leaving forever. And the journey itself signaled it. The authorities in Cherbourg claimed that she had an eye ailment and without ado sent her back to Aigle. A month later she tried again, once more traveling by herself via Paris to the Atlantic. It meant extra expense that strained the savings of the young woman. But the joyful anticipation of embracing her fiancé after five years made her forget all troubles, even the seasickness on the high seas. In spite of difficulties, it was as if she were in a hotel where uniformed attendants served her: “I felt like being in Hollywood. And when one morning I overslept, I was served breakfast nevertheless on a small table.”

Because of icebergs in Newfoundland, the ship arrived in Québec City one day late. No trace of Eugène. He was already working in the bakery. Marguerite entered the new continent all by herself. After the train ride, nobody met her at Montreal’s Windsor Station. A porter helped her to put the heavy suitcase into the taxi.

“I thought that I was in Africa,” she reminisced, “all the porters were black.” But on a small piece of paper she had noted down the address “4739 Rue St. Antoine.” There, in Montreal’s working class section her Eugène rented a room in a modest boardinghouse. “The flat roofs bothered me,” Marguerite admits, “I was used to chalets and thought that the houses looked terrible, like heads without hair.”

Some weeks after her arrival, Eugène and Marguerite got married on 27 July 1929, the day before her 26th birthday. “We were but six in Montreal’s French-speaking Protestant Church,” she recalled, “the couple Calame with their son and the Swiss pastor who married...
us. In the afternoon, our wedding trip consisted of visiting the Île St. Hélène outside the city for a few hours. Fini! The next morning Eugène had to be at work again.”

“Mon beau Pays”

Marguerite was often homesick for Switzerland, but work and after a year, the birth of the first child left little time for homesickness. The Nernys lived simply. Maurice reminisced: “We lived the life of a worker’s family. But my father was a nice guy. And he had work, not a matter of course in difficult times. I remember that people lined up for getting food. Father being a baker, we had always enough to eat. Until the 1970s, most of the Montreal bakers and confectioners were actually immigrants from Switzerland. Father was hard at work and mother organized family life. He was in demand as a baker and therefore not drafted in World War II. I know that Father never missed a day’s work, leaving the house a quarter to five in the morning and coming home at three o’clock. When we children returned from school, he was asleep. He would get up for supper, then go to sleep again. Thus, mother was in charge of us children.

She often sang with us and knew all the songs from her time in Switzerland, such as “Mon beau pays” and “En haut sur la montagne.” We grew up in a Swiss atmosphere. Like us most of our friends hailed from French-speaking Switzerland, and we met them in the Church St. Jean. That church was very important for us; it was our social center. And I think that it made me become a pastor, in the 1950s I even
studied in Geneva."

Marguerite has been widowed for 35 years. As Maurice Nerny reports: ”A few days after mother’s 75th birthday, on the First of August, father died suddenly. The dust from the bakery that he had breathed-in for years caught up with his lungs. But mother did manage by herself. She is a role model for all of us. Until age 102, she lived in her home, now she feels comfortable in the retirement home. And we, our large family, we are always at her call.”

“Esprit Suisse”

Maurice Nerny observes: “Maman has always lived with the “esprit Suisse,” an attitude that is shaped by a sense of responsibility.” Marguerite is radiant and loves the Switzerland-Canada pin that upon leaving we attached to the collar of her dress. And she says, “I have lived a happy life in Montreal, although it was not always a simple matter to be Protestant in Catholic Québec Province. But you know, I have always come to terms with truly everything; 110—mon Dieu,
ouï!... Saluerez la Suisse pour moi! Et aussi Aigle! C’est beau par là ... au Lac Léman!—My god, yes! Greet Switzerland for me! And also Aigle! It is beautiful over there ... at the Lake Léman!”

A short version of the portrait of Marguerite Nerny was published in the Schweizer Illustrierte, 27 July 2015.

~ Translation by Leo Schelbert

Credit for pictures: Annina Bosshard.