



SUBRITZKY FAMILY HISTORY

This is the beginning of a page describing the wanderings of the Subritzky family, as they travelled from Germany to New Zealand, to Australia, then back to New Zealand. It is largely drawn from Mike Subritzky's excellent book 'The Subritzky Legend', a remarkably lucid description of how his family came to live in New Zealand, and the legend that supposedly links them to the house of Jan Sobieski, the famous Polish king.

Since then Mike has made great strides in tracing likely family threads and now has firmer data connecting the original 'Zubrzycki' family name back in Polish history to when the Asian Golden Horde thundered in from the east. When the family search was begun it was not realised that the original 'Rheinhold Subritzky' was in fact a Germanic simplification of 'Romualdus Zubrzycki', a distinctly Polish name. It may have been an advantage in the troubled times that prevailed in what was not yet what we know as the country of Germany to blur the name.

As a consequence it must be understood that the Subritzky Family history as related here is based on the modern variant, for the family were known in Hanover, Nelson and in South Australia as 'Subritzky'. Indeed, as far as we know there are no other family members not branching off this one important genealogy.

THE SUBRITZKY FAMILY OF NORTHLAND

New Zealand's First Polish Family

by Mike Subritzky

Historically the Subritzky (Polish spelling = Zubrzycki) family can trace direct descent from the ancient Tartar Princely House of Subotai (Golden Horde). In 1495, King John Albert of Poland ennobled an ancestor "Fiedz the Tartar", into the Polish nobility and awarded his descendants the everlasting right to bear the Polish coat of arms "Kusza" (On a red shield, a silver crossbow pointing downwards). One of Fiedz the Tartar's offspring settled in the Minsk district and was called "Obdula Zubr" (Obdula the Buffalo). His children were baptised and became Christians, and from then on were called Zubrzycki (a monogenetic nickname, 'Zubr' is the Polish word for European Bison). They owned several villages in Northern Poland including the villages of Subocz and Zubr, which are located in the Minsk district, near the Russian border (now in modern Latvia). Romualdus Zubrzycki-Kusza and his brother Jan, are said to have joined Napoleon's Grande Armie in the war of 1812, and after the defeat in Moscow they were unable to return to their home town, and so instead struck out for the relative safety of the Kingdom of Hanover. On the 25th December 1843 when Sophie and her children signed onboard the '*St. Pauli*' their surname was entered onto the shipping register as "Subritzky" and in New Zealand it has been spelt as such to this day. The ancient history of the Subritzky family is well documented and appears in numerous Polish armorials. (The Subritzky family also have a strong oral tradition of being descended from the Polish noble family of Sobieski-Janina).

After Europe...

For the purposes of our narrative the beginning of the modern story is when the family emigrated to New Zealand from Germany in December 1842. They left in the ship '[St. Pauli](#)', a 3-masted ship-of-war converted for colonisation work.

The family consisted of Sophie Subritzky, widow of Romualdus Subritzky (Zubrzycki) of Kurlandia, in the Commonwealth of Poland, and her children Ludolph Johann Heinrich (Louis), Heinrich Wilhelm (Henry), Johannes Anton (John), and Sophie Dorothea (Doris). Doris was married to Johann Hermann Frederick Spanhake on board just before the ship sailed, although she had earlier the same year given birth to a son Otto who on the voyage died of convulsions on the night of the 20th January 1843 and was buried at sea.

Also in the group was the widow Sophie's brother Heinrich Körber (said 'Kirber'), his wife Maria and their two sons Jurgen and Johann. All had signed up for a colonisation scheme in New Zealand set up by the New Zealand Colonisation Company, who originally intended to set up a German colony on the Chatham Islands, east of New Zealand.

The Agent for the company was also on board. Herr Johann Beit proved an arrogant, greedy and vindictive man and was the cause of much trouble on board and later, in Nelson, New Zealand. The ship sailed to Nelson as an alternative to the Chathams as it had been discovered that the original plan was in fact illegal, and so Nelson, on the northern tip of the South Island of New Zealand was chosen, an area where the New Zealand Company partner in the venture was able to allocate land to the new arrivals, including those on a later ship. The land and passage package involved pre-payment for blocks of land (of at least 50 acres), berth on the ship, and rations aboard.

The trip lasted 176 days during which time four young children had perished, seven couples had been joined in Holy Matrimony, one baby had been born and two passengers had jumped ship at a reprovisioning harbour. This was the first of two shiploads of German settlers to Nelson and the descendants of many of these families are still to be found in the region to this day.

It is worth noting that to sail from Europe to Australia and New Zealand it was apparently the practice to first cross the Atlantic, and the common reprovisioning port was Bahia, in today's Brazil. From there ships sailed on a long reach SE to the Cape of Good Hope, then farther south again, even into the beginnings of ice floes before looping northwards to the intended port. In South Africa there was (is yet?) an annual yacht race on the main transatlantic leg. Apparently the '[St. Pauli](#)' took this same route.

When on arrival in Nelson Herr Beit refused to honour the land allotments the new settlers were in trouble, for they were at the vanguard of the first surge of colonisation in the area, and much of the land was already allocated to earlier English migrants. They therefore suffered several problems, for to integrate they had to learn English, and the only land they could independently obtain was in the poorer, marshier areas. In addition, they had arrived at the beginning of a period of conflict with the local Maoris who were only just beginning to take action to evict settlers from what they knew to be their ancestral lands, for the original land deals with the colonisation company were very suspect.

By 1844 many of the Germans had had enough. The second German ship, the '[Skiold](#)', had on a previous voyage been to the fledgling settlement of Adelaide in South Australia, and had in fact carried the last of the German Lutheran immigrants of a group who had moved to a new country to practice their religion without official interference. It is probable that many of the newer arrivals to Nelson knew people who had gone to South Australia, for they had been waiting at the same port in Germany at the same time, and for the most part came from the same province of [Mecklenburg](#).

As a result of this or perhaps because they'd simply had enough, in 1845 quite a few of the Germans took passage on the ship '[Palmyra](#)' to the Port of Adelaide, via Hobart, Tasmania.

The Subritzky, Körber and Spanhake families were not long settled in Adelaide, probably in or around [Hahndorf](#), when gold was discovered in the neighbouring state of Victoria. Along with just about the entire population of Australia the Subritzky's took part in the "rush" of 1851. They remained on the "diggin's" for several years, and then later decided that it would be far more profitable to move into the business of supplying the diggers, and together they set up various business enterprises in and around the town of Maldon. While in Australia Ludolph and Johannes Anton Subritzky married and began families, Heinrich was to marry much later in life after returning to New Zealand.

In 1859, the Subritzky brothers were made aware of the intended sale of Kawau Island in the Hauraki Gulf of New Zealand and also the opening up of the Mangonui area in the Far North. Ludolph and Heinrich crossed the Tasman aboard the (steamer) '*Prince Alfred*' arriving in the port of Auckland on the 17th January 1860. They were beaten to the purchase of Kawau Island by Governor George Grey, so instead purchased the estates of Ohore (Houhora) and Awanui. The original buy was more than eight thousand acres and shortly afterwards they leased a further twenty five thousand acres from the central government. They were the first European settlers north of Kaitaia, their nearest neighbours being the Matthews and Puckey families at the Kaitaia Mission Station.

At the heads of Houhora harbour, beneath the shadow of Mount Camel, they built the Subritzky Homestead which still stands to this day.



The homestead was built in the style of European farmhouses of the period but using local materials, and is the oldest European residence on the Aupouri Peninsula, bearing testimony to the courage and resilience of the original members of this pioneering family. The flooring was constructed using swamp [kauri](#), as was much of the other timber, whilst the walls were constructed using lathes of manuka that were affixed to split swamp kauri using hand made nails. The walls of the homestead were 'musket proof' being filled with rock shipped from Mount Camel across the harbour and then cemented into place by mortar mixed with sand from the beachfront and lime-cement, which was made by burning shells gathered off the beach.



The homestead was constructed between April 1860 and June of the following year, after which time they moved into business and began trading with the local Maori, first using a 27 foot whaler, and then later with the small schooner the *'Isabella'* which was to become the first of their many ships. In 1862, Ludolph returned to Australia and there chartered the 135 ton schooner *'Montezuma'* which he used to bring his wife and children to New Zealand. Later that same year Sophie ('Old Sophie' as she is known in the family) joined them, and in 1868 Johannes Anton and his family sold up the brother's business interests in Maldon and sailed to New Zealand aboard the (barquentine) *'Prince Alfred'*.

For the next 25 years the Subritzky family ran a vast business empire in the Far North of New Zealand, the hub of their operations being the "Mount Camel Station". Within a short space of time they either owned or controlled almost all of the Far North, from Awanui northward. The township of Awanui was built by the Subritzky's as a safe port for their many ships, sited as it was in the tidal head of the Awanui Harbour. There they ran the Post Office and Hotel and owned the General Store and several Gum Stores, all built on land the family provided. They imported cattle and developed their own breed of short horn, established flax mills and began processing fibres for sale and export, and they were also heavily involved in the Kauri Gum industry. The Subritzky's developed a shipping link with Auckland, then later expanded across the Tasman and up into the South Pacific Islands.

Another more discreet family enterprise of the time was smuggling. The Subritzky's formed a tight, self-contained little community, although they still maintained contact with the outside world with their own ships. These ships would occasionally come direct from overseas to Houhora, which was actually the first available port in New Zealand for any vessel arriving from Australia, and no doubt the family saw no reason to do the extra sailing on to Mangonui to declare their own goods... The original Subritzky's were proud, haughty, self sufficient men, accustomed to independence, and they saw no reason to search the country for excise men so they could pay duty on their own imports.

On one such occasion it is said that the family schooner *'Greyhound'* made a voyage to Australia. On the return journey Johannes Anton brought back a car - one of the first privately owned cars in Auckland and the first in Northland. It was a 1902 Oldsmobile and the locals nicknamed it "The Queen Street Greyhound". This car and its owner Johannes Anton (Captain John Anton Subritzky) has the colourful distinction of participating in the first 'drag race' along Queen Street in Auckland; he was aged about 74 at the time. There is no record of him beating his opponent, but both gentlemen were taken to Court and fined ten pounds each for racing down Queen Street and endangering public safety. He also had the first recorded automobile smash in Auckland when his car collided with Tram Number 40 on the 12th October 1904.

At the end of the 19th century, New Zealand was in the grips of a severe depression and this saw a considerable decline in the family fortunes. Crippling land taxes were imposed on the large estate owners and this forced the breakup of the majority of the Mount Camel Station. In 1898 the homestead was sold to Ludolph's married daughter, Louisa Wagener and has remained ever since in the care of the Wagener family. In 1991, the Subritzky Homestead was named a National Historic Place. The Wagener family are referred to in family circles as "Double Subritzky's" in that they have descent from the original Subritzky family in both their Paternal and Maternal lines.

Nowadays the Subritzky family flourishes from Auckland northwards, where they have strong blood ties with the three most northern Maori tribes; Ngapuhi, Te Rawara and Te Aupouri. Their descendants, both Pakeha and Maori number more than three thousand, and as unbelievable as it may seem, all are known to each other - the family even today is very closely knit. In 1993, almost all returned to a large family gathering held at the old Subritzky homestead to celebrate their 150th anniversary in New Zealand.

They are prominent in shipping, seafaring, farming, the legal profession, the military and also the tourist industry. The Subritzky, Spanhake and Wagener families are now almost legendary in the Far North, and as well the Subritzky's in particular are a well known and respected family in the Auckland region. Their settler forebears of the original family have now passed into the pages of history.

Romualdus Subritzky is buried in the Church of Saint John, in Lüneburg (now modern Germany). Old Sophie lies in the Subritzky family cemetery on the slopes of Mount Camel across from the family homestead. Ludolph and his wife Maria lie together on Sophie's right in unmarked graves; while to the left of Sophie in a ruined grave lies her son in law Frederick Spanhake. Doris Spanhake (Frederick's wife and Old Sophie's daughter) died in childbirth in South Australia and lies buried in the Barossa Valley; she was aged 31. Heinrich and his wife Mary-Jane are buried side by side at California Hill cemetery, Awanui. Johannes Anton and his wife Elisabeth are buried together in Saint Saviour's churchyard at Kaitaia.

In 1999, the Subritzky family was one of eight families chosen to be representative of the spirit of the true New Zealand pioneering family and were featured in several 'Millennium Projects', including the official television series "New Zealand - Our People, Our Century", and the official history publication.

Little did the widow, Sophie Subritzky realise when she set sail for the Antipodes all of those long years ago; with three small sons, and a married daughter, that she would become the matriarch of a dynasty that would play such a significant role in shaping the history of northern New Zealand.
"Kia Ora!"