

# Annie and Max Deckston

Annie and Max Deckston were born in Russia and arrived in New Zealand in 1900. They farmed in the Hutt Valley for some years, then moved to Wellington where they made a considerable fortune in real estate and from their business as pawnbrokers. They were childless, but used their wealth to bring 20 children to New Zealand from orphanages on Bialystok, Poland. They set up a home for them in a large house in Berhampore, which became an island of orthodox Jewish observance in the city.

Lachowicze is a small town in Belarus with a population about 10,000. It is 5 km from Baranovich, 107 km from Pinsk, and 150 km east of Poland. It was part of Poland until 1795, when it came under Russian rule. In 1921 it reverted to Poland and was ceded again to the U.S.S.R. in 1945.

Throughout the centuries, the area has had a certain strategic importance. Situated not far to the north of the great Pripet Marshes, it lies on the axis between Warsaw and Moscow, that runs through Brest-Litovsk, Minsk and Smolensk. It was traversed by Napoleon's armies on their vain march to Moscow in 1812. Over a century later, during World War I, it was the scene of heavy fighting between Russia and Germany.[1]

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Lachowicze was a predominantly Jewish town with 58% of its population of being Jewish. Jews had settled there by the first quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. During the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the city's annual fairs were important meeting places for Jewish merchants. Stone buildings, imposing for their time, surrounded the "Market Square", the heart of the Jewish life of the town. There was the guesthouse where itinerant preachers, cantors, travelers, Zionist speakers and propagandists could be found, and where brides and grooms would go to meet with their future spouses. Right in the corner stood the two-story house of the wealthiest Jew of the town, with a whole row of shops on the lower level. Another two-story building housed the state liquor store. Then there was another guesthouse, more modern, where landed gentry, government inspectors and other state officials lodged. Further along stood the wooden building with the tailor shop, then the hospice for the poor, and the house where the Stoliner Chassids congregated [2]. There was the imposing house of an important merchant of wax, pig's bristle and wood, and further along, the shop of the fish merchant, the furrier, and the supplier of cobblers' needs.[3]

Hirsh lived somewhere along there in the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with his wife, Zlata and their five children, two sons and three daughters. Chaya Toiba, who later became better known as Annie, was the youngest of the three girls. She was a short, slim girl, with a proud bearing. She looked like someone who knew where she was going and what she wanted from life. It was said that she was very attractive, indeed vivacious. There was probably something about her personality, perhaps an assertive streak of rebelliousness as seen in a photograph taken some years later that appealed to young men. Suitors, who came to see her sisters with a view to marriage, wanted to marry her instead, something unacceptable in that traditional Jewish world; the older sisters had to be married off first. To get her out of the way and arrange a marriage for her, Chaya Toiba was sent off to an uncle in Mogilov [4], some distance away.

Mogilov was a much larger Jewish centre, with a number of yeshivas, rabbinical seminaries. There her uncle found a boy, a young man who would be a suitable match for Chaya Toiba, a rabbinical student, a yeshiva bocher. Marrying a scholar was considered to be a great honour, the best marriage a girl could wish for. Chaya Toiba would have been no more than fifteen or sixteen and her groom not much older. Being a pious boy he had probably never looked at a girl, had kept his eyes averted in the presence of girls. He might have been well versed in the arcane arguments of the Talmud, but very likely didn't know how to talk to his young wife. They were just teenagers, but lived very different lives. It was understood that the wife of a scholar would earn a living, perhaps run her own little business, support her husband and enable him to continue to study for the rest of his life. It was an accepted view among pious Jews that there was only one achievement in life a woman could hope for – the bringing of happiness into the home by ministering to her husband and bearing him children [5]. This is how things were done. But Chaya Toiba had other ideas. She insisted that her husband should work and support her. Perhaps some modern notions on the role of women percolated through even to this remote corner of Eastern Europe. Chaya Toiba had older sisters. They must have talked about their lives and aspirations. Rachel, one of the older sisters, was to go to America. There was change and restlessness in the air. Chaya Toiba wanted to strike out on her own, live her own life. She sought a life beyond the confines of the traditional Jewish world. Soon she had had enough of her scholar husband and wanted a divorce. According to Jewish law, it is the husband's prerogative to grant his wife a divorce but Chaya Toiba's husband refused to do this. Perhaps he thought that he was on to a good thing, or the shame of parting with a wife whom he had only recently married was more than he could bear. There might have been also the important matter of the dowry, which would have gone some way towards supporting him. So Chaya Toiba threatened that unless he agreed to a divorce she would go to the Cossacks and tell them that her meek, quiet, scholarly husband was a secret revolutionary. New radical ideas were sweeping Russia. Czar Alexander II was assassinated but a few years before, and his successor was even more autocratic. Violent pogroms followed the assassination and became a regular feature of Jewish existence. Jewish young men and women were discussing the life and fate of Jews; some believed that Jewish life was doomed under the oppressive regime of the Czar, that the whole autocratic regime had to be overthrown. Others argued that there was no future for Jews in Russia at all, that Jews had to pack up and move to Palestine, the backward province of the Ottoman Empire, to the settlements that a British financier funded. Perhaps Chaya Toiba's young groom had dangerous ideas unbecoming to a Jewish religious scholar, or Chaya Toiba herself wanted a different life and was determined to move on. At any rate, she had her ways of getting what she wanted.

Leaving her husband and the scandal of her divorce behind, she took off to Yekaterinoslav, now Dnipropetrovsk,[6] the third largest city of the Ukraine. It was then an important centre of Jewish life, with the history of Jewish settlement going back to the foundation of the city in 1776. We don't know whether she moved there with Menachem Mendel Darevsky, later known as Max, or the two ended up there separately. Nobody seems to know how or where the two had met. He might even have been the cause of the divorce. Menachem Mendel, though originally from Mogilev, had family in Yekaterinoslav. A few years younger than Chaya Toiba, she fell in love with him and wanted to marry him, but the father of Menachem Mendel thought that his son could do better than marrying a divorced woman, older than him, without a substantial dowry.[7]

Menachem Mendel was born in Mogilov in 1876, son of Shlomo Darevski. He seems to have come from a relatively well-to-do traditional Russian Jewish family. On a photo that

survived he is seen sitting in front of Chaya Toiba, a handsome, sensitive young man, looking more like an earnest schoolboy than a newly married man. Chaya Toiba stands behind him, erect, confident, clearly the dominant partner. He was three years her junior.

There were Darevskys in Lachowicze. The name derived from Darevo, a small hamlet near Lachowicze, where there were Darevskys who were publicans.

We don't know what Menachem Mendel was doing in Yekaterinoslav. Yekaterinoslav was a rapidly growing city, with new industries founded or managed by Jewish entrepreneurs. Although Menachem Mendel was hardly more than a teenager, either business or educational opportunities might have brought him there. He was described later as a tailor in the passenger list of the ship that brought him to New Zealand, but we don't know whether he worked as a tailor in Yekaterinoslav. He might have had other ambitions and a glowing vision of his future.

Not having had the family's approval, Chaya Toiba and Menachem Mendel eloped and left Russia, possibly sailing from Sebastopol. Life for Jews was becoming increasingly intolerable. There were pogroms, and new regulations kept being introduced, which limited the places where Jews could live and how they could earn their living. Their educational opportunities were circumscribed. After the assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1861, and the Polish revolt of 1863 the oppression of Jews accelerated. By the 1890s, well over 100,000 Jews had left Russia every year. Most of them headed for America, but some went to South Africa, to Britain, and to various countries of Western Europe. Chaya Toiba's older sister, Rachel might have already gone to America. Chaya Toiba and Menachem Mendel might have thought of joining her. However they only made it as far as London where they might have had some distant relatives. There they found that the foggy climate and the damp polluted air didn't agree with Menachem Mendel's weak chest. Perhaps life in Whitechapel, the impoverished, crowded Jewish quarter of London was not what they had in mind when they left Yekaterinoslav. Someone told them to move to New Zealand for a better climate and a better life. A new sanatorium had just been opened in Otaki, an old Maori settlement 70 km north of Wellington. Between Yekaterinoslav and Otaki Menachem Darevsky became Max Deckston and Chaya Toiba became Annie. They sailed to New Zealand on the Ionic, a ship that left London on 20 December 1899, and arrived in Wellington on 5 March 1900. They appear on the ship's log as Morris Dickstein, tailor, not yet Max, and Annie Dickstein, occupation none. Among the many Irish, some Scots and quite a few English, they were included with the very few described as 'foreigners'.<sup>[8]</sup> You leave Russia, you leave the world where you are known, and you can become anyone you choose to be. They went Otaki when they arrived. Otaki was a centre of market gardening. Resourceful young couple that Annie and Max were, they set up on a small farmlet, grew their own produce, had a cow and generally must have sold some of their produce, and the couple prospered.<sup>[9]</sup> Max's health improved. Soon they moved to the Hutt Valley, and leased a farm, known as Captain Mann's property, in Orr's Road.<sup>[10]</sup> We don't know why they went into farming, or how much they knew about farming. One of Annie's uncles was a dairyman in Lachowicze.<sup>[11]</sup> He had kept perhaps few cows and sold milk, cottage cheese and other dairy products. A cow in Lachowicze was not that different from a cow in Lower Hutt. Annie must have thought that there was more of a future in farming than in tailoring. There were too many poor Jewish tailors in London. By the time the lease on their farm was up in 1904, only a few years after they had started farming there, they owned 15 dairy cows, 15 heads of young stock, 1 light draught mare, 1 trap horse, a dog-cart with harness, and lots of furniture. These were the items listed to be auctioned at the end of their lease.<sup>[12]</sup> They left the farm. They were well

established, but they traveled light. They must have moved on to another farm, because in February 1906 Max Deckston was convicted of allowing cattle to wander.[13]

Annie and Max were clearly difficult and cantankerous people, or perhaps they just stood up for their rights and would not put up with insults. Recent arrivals though the Deckstons were, they went in for litigation. This was not Russia, Jews, like everyone else, had rights, and Annie and Max relished these rights. In February 1902 they charged Benjamin and Jacob Semeloff, fellow members of the small Jewish community in Wellington, with assault.[14] The Semeloffs had been in New Zealand longer than the Deckstons. They were established businessmen, pawnbrokers, auctioneers, and later building contractors and property developers. They were not averse to litigation either. It is possible that having initially fallen out, the Deckstons later learned from the Semeloffs. They both acquired property in Newtown. Max and the Semeloff brothers were also involved with the Wellington Zionists' Social Club, the precursor of the Wellington Jewish Social Club.[15]

A number of assault charges were laid by Annie and Max against various people. In August 1905 four men were charged with assaulting Max Deckston, a dairy farmer, but after hearing evidence, the bench dismissed the case. In 1910 they charged three brothers with assault. Two of them were convicted; the charge against the third was dismissed. The brothers, in turn brought countercharges against Max. Though this was dismissed, clearly there were two sides to the story.[16]

In 1906 Annie and Max were naturalised. They were very proud of their British nationality. To the astonishment of the officer who handled the matter, Annie insisted on getting her letter of naturalisation in her own name, even though being married to Max, who was himself naturalised, she was automatically a naturalised British subject. Unlike many women of her time she insisted on being treated as a person in her own right.

In 1908 Annie and Max were on the move again. They leased another farm, this time in Taita, about three miles, five km from Lower Hutt, adjacent to the Taita Hotel. There was a problem with the lease; it was executed by the Pakeha wife of a Maori. Pakehas had no authority to dispose of Maori land, but ultimately the matter was resolved and they kept the lease as long as they lived.

Max and Annie had lived rather isolated lives for some years in the Hutt Valley, far from the Jewish community, yet they kept an observant, kosher Jewish home. They would have traveled to Wellington whenever they could to participate in Jewish life. In 1908 Max was given the honour of finishing the writing of the Sefer Torah, the Torah scroll, presented by J. E. Nathan to the Wellington Jewish community.[17]

Max and Annie appeared to have prospered; however in 1913, they decided to sell up, give up working on the farm themselves because Max's health had suffered. They sold their chattels, which included by then, among other items, 25 cows, three horses, and a five-bedroom house with a piano.

They kept the lease of the land, but after that the farm was worked by hired hands.

Annie and Max moved to Wellington, bought a place right in the middle of the city at 32 College Street, and they had some money left to invest. It is likely that they took their time finding their bearings, talking to people, and gathering ideas. Perhaps they met up with the

Semeloff brothers, Benjamin and Jacob, and sounded them out on how to make best use of their capital. The Semeloffs had been in business for many years.

Annie and Max were sensitive about being seen as foreigners. A letter in the Evening Post in December 1913, soon after their move to Wellington, alleged 'that a good deal was heard about foreigners being responsible for the waterfront strike ....' The writer of the letter said that he himself was working on the wharves and was thankful for being granted the rights and liberty of a British subject, that he had some land and property that he got through hard work, and that were the Red Feds allowed to win the strike nobody's property would be safe. Annie, and again, Annie and not Max, called on the newspaper to explain that 'her husband was much concerned, because some people were accusing him of being the author of that letter. He had been, she stated, in no way responsible for it. He never wrote and never asked anyone to write it. It was true that her husband was a naturalised Britisher, and had bought a little property out of his savings, but he had never worked on the wharves, and had never given expression to the sentiments contained in the letter.[18]

In 1917, a while after leaving their farm, Annie and Max bought a pawnbroker business at 50 Courtenay Place, opposite the Paramount Theatre.

This, or similar advertisements appeared in the newspaper weekly if not daily. They advertised that they were 'Buyers of New and Second-hand Clothing, Boots, and Musical Instruments, etc.' and 'had Money to Lend on anything'. There were a number of Jewish pawnbrokers in town. In June 1920, a thief, who specialized in stolen overcoats, was caught. He sold one coat to Spolski in Taranaki Street, another to Brickman in Courtenay Place, yet another to Mrs. Levy in Manners Street, and one to Mrs. Nausbaum, also in Manners Street, all well known identities within the Jewish community.[19]

Annie and Max also invested their money in properties. The city grew rapidly during the years after the First World War. Buying residential property in College Street, Vivian Street, Courtenay Place, Newtown and Berhampore, parts of the city that were soon to change from residential to commercial areas, proved to be good investment. Most of the properties were in Annie Deckston's name, though there were some in Max's name too. They didn't own property jointly. But being landlords and owning properties were not without problems. Annie bought the lease on seven houses situated on the corner of Vivian and College Street, with a view to demolishing them and developing the site, but because of the housing shortage after the First World War, she could not evict the tenants, nor could she increase the rent.[20] Collecting the rent was at times also risky. One of her tenants, a war veteran, tried to start a taxi business, but the business failed owing a good deal of money. When he was declared bankrupt Annie Deckston was his largest creditor.[21]

Always a businesswoman, Annie explored other business opportunities as well. She decided to manufacture Matzot, Passover bread. She agreed to purchase second-hand biscuit making machinery from a business that went bankrupt, but found that these would not serve the purpose. She was not prepared to pay for them, and wanted to renege on the deal. The seller of the equipment sued, and after numerous adjournments, the Court found in favour of the plaintiff. Annie probably thought that there was a principle at stake. Getting money from her was not easy.

Annie and Max kept their interest in the farm in Taita, and acquired other farms, but these also proved troublesome. The ownership of some land Annie leased from native owners was

in dispute. The argument about who was entitled to share in the rent ended up in court [22]. In another instance she tried to eject a tenant for failing to maintain the property.[23] Again the matter had to be resolved through litigation. Annie was a tough landlord and didn't hesitate to sue to assert her right.

Over the years Annie and Max accumulated considerable wealth. Once they moved to Wellington they became involved in the Jewish Social Club. In 1919, Max, by then clearly wealthy and happy to show off his wealth, offered to the Club a portion of his land in Vivian Street on which to erect a suitable building. This offer was however turned down, the cost of the building was estimated to be approximately £7,000, well beyond the resources of the Club, but later the Club bought a property at 86 Ghuznee Street for £3,000. Max was co-opted, together with his former adversary Ben Semeloff, by then a builder and property developer, on to the building fund committee.

By the 1920s Annie and Max had become established, well off, and they decided to find out what happened to the families they had left behind in Russia and what was by then, Poland. In January 1923, the Deckstons auctioned off all their stock. They were leaving.

They clearly dealt in a great variety of merchandise.

They had been in New Zealand, cut off from their home for over twenty years. It was said, by people who remembered her, that Annie could neither read nor write, certainly not in English. Girls of her generation, growing up in the traditional Eastern European Jewish world, were taught practical skills, such as running a home and a business. Reading and writing and the study of the holy books were left to the men. Annie was a shrewd businesswoman, but she could not write letters home to her family. She knew that she had a sister in America. To find her she and Max went to Chicago in 1924, called on the Landsmanschaft (Society for Expatriate Compatriots) who helped her to track down Rachel, her sister. When Annie turned up on her doorstep, Rachel didn't recognise her. She was suspicious. She had not heard from Annie all those years and could not be sure that she was still alive. Annie managed to convince her that she was indeed who she said she was by showing her an identifying birthmark. From her sister, Annie found out that her younger brother and his wife were alive and living with their family in Bialystock in Poland. Annie and Max went to visit them and persuaded them to move to New Zealand. She held out to them the prospect of a better, more prosperous life. Ultimately more of her nieces and nephews came to join them. Max got in touch with his sister's family in Russia. Some, who had lived comfortable middle class lives before, had a hard time after the Bolshevik revolution. A number of these were also persuaded to move to New Zealand.[25] Annie and Max paid for the passages of many of their relatives. They brought, over a few years, 40 members of their family to Wellington [26]. These formed a significant Russian Polish Yiddish speaking sub-group within the local Jewish community.

Annie and Max perhaps hoped that having a large extended family around them would break down their isolation. Somehow things didn't work out well. Annie was a strong-willed, domineering woman, spiteful, according to one of her nieces. She knew how to get by in New Zealand. She could tell her greenhorn newly arrived relatives how to live their lives. Some of the relatives resented that they were put to work on the farms or in one of the shops that Annie and Max had an interest in, a fruit shop among them. Perhaps they thought that they had not given up their more comfortable life style in Poland to do menial work here. It is possible that some expected more help from their wealthy benefactors. They deferred to

Annie and Max, called them Auntie and Uncle, they visited them in their spacious large home on the hill in Hataitai, but could not help but compare that with the small simple homes that they themselves lived in.

Annie believed in hard work, frugality, and making money. She didn't approve of higher education. When one of the nephews wanted to go to university and study medicine she refused to help. Marrying off their niece was something else; in the world they grew up in providing for the bride was a mitzvah, a meritorious act, a religious obligation. Annie and Max put on a lavish wedding with 300 guests for one of the newly arrived nieces. The wedding was as much a celebration of the opulence of Annie and Max as a celebration of the marriage of a couple starting a new life together in a new country, but having a photographer take pictures at the wedding was in Annie's view, a frivolous waste of money. The couple resented this petty penny pinching. Annie was insensitive to the feelings of others.[27] Over the years Annie and Max fell out with many of the relatives whom they had brought out from Russia and Poland. If they had hoped to surround themselves with a warm loving family they were disappointed.

After their return from Europe Annie and Max were preoccupied with the farms that they leased. Even if Annie and Max no longer worked on their farms they continued to be actively involved. They also had their city properties to manage, with all the problems these entailed. There were fires; there were tenants who could not pay their rent. The Deckstons embarked on property development, and called for tenders for the erection of a brick and concrete building in Vivian Street [28]. Such developments were welcomed. The housing conditions had greatly improved as the result of the commercial development of the city, and among the examples cited were Deckston's warehouse. These buildings had resulted in the demolition of very large numbers of small and dilapidated house properties and the erection in their place of up-to date commercial premises [29]. Annie also dabbled in other enterprises whenever the opportunity presented itself. She had a small parcel of shares in a taxi and trucking company [30]. Notably, it was Annie and not Max who owned the properties and shares. A fire occurred in one of the properties in her name in Adelaide Road, which also slightly damaged the adjoining building described in the newspaper as belonging to Mr. Max Deckston. Annie took the trouble to get the newspaper to correct this, and print that she owned both properties. Max's role was to be Annie's husband, a well-known identity in the city whose large American car was widely recognised, partly because of his insistence that the usual traffic and parking rules didn't apply to him.

In 1932 Annie and Max returned to Poland for a visit. There they were shocked by the plight of some Jewish children in orphanages. Poland was hard hit by the depression and it impacted especially on Bialystok, a major centre of textile manufacture. Poverty was evident everywhere. Some families could not support their children and handed them over to orphanages, others were beset by tragedy and could no longer care for them. But unlike orphanages in other parts of the world, including some in New Zealand, many orphanages in Poland were benign, caring, humane institutions.

On their way home to New Zealand Annie and Max met an eight-year-old orphaned daughter of a relative in London and adopted her. They now had an adopted daughter. They also decided to bring some orphans from the Jewish orphanages in Bialystok to New Zealand and provide a home for them. Annie described, probably quite inaccurately, how she saw the lives of orphaned children in Poland in an interview with the Weekly News: 'They have had no homes and they have been searching the streets of the towns for food. ... There is no room

for them in the homes and orphanages and there is no scheme of relief wide enough to benefit more than a few of them.’[31]

Being the practical, “can-do” people that they were, they applied for entry permits for these children. They got the president of the Wellington Jewish Community to lobby on their behalf;[32] Annie herself called on officials and thumped their desks until she got what she wanted. They arranged for the immigration of at first eight children in 1935 and in 1937 brought out a further twelve, 20 altogether.

They tried to bring out a third group a while later, but by then the NZ Government placed insurmountable obstacles in their way and these children were left to their fate in Poland.[33] Some of these were children of relatives. Each group was accompanied by a couple related to Annie. Annie and Max bought a large property in Berhampore, and set up a Jewish orphanage, where all the kosher dietary laws were observed, and daily prayers were recited. It was a little island of Jewish observance. Annie and Max were now aunt and uncle to a large family of children.

There were little girls who sorely missed the homes they came from, unruly teenagers who felt out of depth and bewildered, some resented that they were rescued while their brothers and sisters, the rest of what was left of their families were abandoned. There was a lot of bitterness within this large, chaotic home. Annie and Max didn’t know how to manage children, they had never had any of their own and being in their sixties they didn’t have the patience that bringing up children required. Some of the children remembered Annie with little affection, as a tough woman. She beat them, locked them up as punishment, and she was frugal to the point of meanness. Max was kind to the girls, but tough on the boys. He tried to provide them with a rudimentary Jewish education. He taught them harshly, demanding attention and application as probably he himself had been taught. These children had to learn to survive in two different worlds; in their secular schools, where they were probably bewildered not only by the language, but also by the strange customs of New Zealanders, had to cope with subjects new to them, play sports and games unknown in Poland, and they were probably bullied, picked on, ridiculed, then back in the orphanage they had to face the harsh regime imposed on them by their elderly guardians and the strict uncompromising Jewish observance of the home. It was a hard life for these children. The orphanages in Poland they came from were probably enlightened institutions, influenced by the teachings and example of Janusz Korczak, Polish-Jewish educator, children's author, pediatrician and director of a Warsaw orphanage. But if life was tough for these children, it was no worse, and might have even been better, than life in other orphanages in New Zealand in those days. Although at the time Annie and Max could not have realised this, by bringing these children to New Zealand, they also saved them from the Holocaust.

When Annie was interviewed after the arrival of the first set of eight children she said “I knew what it was like for them years ago and I know what it is like for them today. I know what it has been for my people, the children and the grown-ups. I have had a sorrowful life,” [34]. The interviewer assumed that she was thinking of the hard life of Jews in Poland, but who knows, perhaps she was also thinking of her 35 years in New Zealand, where she struggled to earn a living and make enough money to be able to help her family, perhaps she thought of their isolation in this country where they stood out as being different, where Max faced assaults repeatedly, though possibly he invited these assaults, where they were too foreign, too Jewish not only for the New Zealanders around them, but also for the local,



largely British Jewish community. Eastern Jews, Polish Jews, were a source of embarrassment to the assimilated Jews of the colony.

Annie died in 1938, on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, aged 67, Max died a year later in November 1939. The orphanage was neglected, mismanaged by a series of unsatisfactory matrons. It was put in the care of trustees, who assumed responsibility for it until all the orphans grew up and left the home to live independent lives of their own. Most of them left New Zealand; moved to Melbourne where there was a large community of people from Bialystok, some became very successful entrepreneurs, businessmen, they all got married and brought up families.

When in the end there were no orphans left to justify keeping the orphanage going, the property was sold, and the considerable estate of Annie and Max Deckston, which comprised of numerous properties around Wellington and some farms in the Hutt Valley, was used to establish a Jewish old age home, in Naenae. To this day it is called the Deckston Home, though it is no longer a Jewish home that provided kosher meals and Jewish pastoral care for its few Jewish residents.

Annie and Max were not much loved in their lifetime, and they are scarcely remembered in the annals of the Wellington Jewish community. There is a street named after them in Taita, Lower Hutt, but few know who the street was named after. Yet Annie and Max cast a very long shadow and their legacy continues to this day, many years after their death. The wing of an old age home bearing their name is no longer needed for Jewish residents, but their substantial legacy is used partly to assist elderly Jewish people in Wellington, partly and very appropriately, to further Jewish education in this remote part of the world.

Two months before Max Deckston died, war broke out, and the Germans occupied Bialystok on September 15 1939, the city of the 20 children whom Annie and Max rescued. After two weeks, as a result of the Hitler / Stalin Non-aggression pact of 1939, the city was ceded to the Soviet Union, but the Germans reoccupied it on June 27, 1941. Bialystok was a predominantly Jewish city. At the time it had 50,000 Jewish inhabitants, 350,000 in the province. On the day following the German occupation, known as "Red Friday", the Germans burned down the Jewish quarter, including the synagogue, incinerating at least 2000 Jews, who had been driven inside [35]. The family of one of the Deckston children was among these. Other similar events followed in rapid succession: on Thursday, July 3, 300 of the Jewish intelligentsia were rounded up and taken to a field outside the town and murdered. The Germans embarked upon the liquidation of the Jews on February 5-12, 1943, when the first Aktion in the Ghetto took place. In July the united Jewish underground called upon the Jews to fight. They engaged in an open battle with the Germans. The Ghetto fighters held out for another month, and night after night the gunfire reverberated through Bialystok. A month later, the Germans announced the completion of the Aktion in which some 40,000 Jews were deported to Treblinka and Majdanek. [36] Three boys from one of the orphanages hanged themselves as an act of defiance. Even the German soldiers who witnessed it were moved. It is believed that one of these boys was the brother of a girl in the Deckston orphanage.

## Footnotes

[1] Lachowicze, Belarus

<http://www.familytreeexpert.com/fte/countries/belarus/lachowicze/lachowicze.htm>

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- [13] Evening Post 14 February 1906
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- [15] A standard for the people: the 150th anniversary of the Wellington Hebrew Congregation, 1843-1993, edited by Stephen Levine, Christchurch, N.Z.: Hazard Press Publishers, c1994, p.168
- also Evening Post, Volume LXVII, Issue 26, 1 February 1904, Page 5
- [16] Evening Post 23 September 1910 P.2
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