

Frank and Alice Briess

My parents, Frank and Alice (Lizzie) Briess, left their home in what was then known as Czechoslovakia in March 1939, the day before Hitler marched in. After six months as refugees in London they finally received permission, after three applications, to come to New Zealand on the condition that a bond of £2,000 be posted.



They kept a diary of their experiences by keeping carbon copies of their letters home. These letters have been translated from German and give a warm and articulate account of their activities, their hopes, achievements and disappointments from 1939 to 1944.

Lizzie's father was a doctor, the only educated one of 16 siblings. Frank's family had been in the spice and grain business in Moravia for many generations. Lizzie studied medicine at Prague University but married Frank just before sitting her finals. She never returned to medicine. Adele Briess, Frank's mother, was the only close member of the extended family of over 60 who survived the Concentration Camps and she eventually came to New Zealand in 1947. She spoke seven languages.

When I asked my father why he chose to come to this country he always answered that he turned the globe upside down to show which country was the most distant from Europe and chose that country as the place he wanted to come to. When they left Europe Frank was 31, Lizzie was 27. The letters began when they boarded ship:

Here is an example of the letters they sent to their families:

6th September 1939, 6.30 a.m. Where I don't know, somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean, heading approximately south.

Dear Mama, Dear Martuska,

I don't know if you received the last postcard we sent from European ground, which we posted on embarkation in Southampton. Most of all of course, we are glad to have our two tickets, but were upset two days after we left to see the telegram on the ship's notice board advising that war had been declared...

It must be a terrible feeling to have children heading for the other side of the world, without being able to get in touch with them. We have been on board now for six days and feel really good. The first few days we were seasick as the boat rocked quite a bit, but today the sea is quieter and we're getting used to it. The ship is 15,000 tons, carrying 200 passengers; the rest of the space is for freight. Food and service are very good and if we weren't worried about

our family we could be very happy. We get the news over the radio though broadcasts are sparse. On board there are almost all English, Australians and New Zealanders. People are generally very nice, friendly and approachable. We will be celebrating Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur on board ship for the first time in our lives... On Friday they had the usual fancy dress party on board. It was wonderful, but we weren't dressed up, though most people were. We would never have imagined that English people would be so pleasant and gay. We must say we've had wonderful experiences. We finished up by going to the Captain's cabin with 13 other people. It was really great fun and we forgot our troubles. Altogether, it was like one big family. We feel accepted and are pleased that we are not treated as outsiders, rather as equals. Perhaps we are a little interesting, everyone asks question about our homeland. People only have a vague idea about it...

We have had two days of terrible storm but weren't seasick at all. The waves were as high as a house, the ship, despite its great size was tossed around like a rocking horse. Today, 9th October, we arrived at our destination, happy and excited and I am writing this letter from the hotel room. I cannot tell you how happy we are to have arrived. We remain, sincerely, with kisses, Yours L & F – Your children.



On arrival in Auckland they decided to go farming. Without any experience of farming, they took over their 42 acre farm, at Massey, just at haymaking time. They were impressed with the help provided by their neighbours and enjoyed the informality of life in New Zealand. Their letters contain many lovely anecdotes of farm life, recalling also their former lives...

In Europe Frank and Alice had had a cook and maids, so life was very different. They were determined to make a successful life for themselves here, but always at the back of their minds was the intention of bringing as many of their family here as they could to escape the dangers in Europe and live in peace. In fact, only my father's sister and her husband and daughter, of their immediate families, managed to leave Czechoslovakia in time.

At the beginning of 1942 Frank and Lizzie received advice that due to a change in the regulations governing aliens, following Japan's entry into the war, they had to sell the farm. Frank records his feelings in an undated letter...

Then at New Year we received the well-meant but firm notification that we had to sell the farm. This hit us like a thunderbolt! I can't repeat the exact state of affairs – I'll only be able to tell you after we've won the war. I saw all our hard work of the past two years with all the effort, love, enthusiasm and energy that went into building up our lives topple down like a house of cards. Now, we've already come to accept the standard often repeated New Zealand expression 'She'll be right!' So we went like obedient citizens to list our farm for sale with various land agents. I had my hands full, trying to cancel the building materials, poultry, plants and seeds that I'd ordered and where we had already taken delivery, to send the goods

back. As things stand at present on the sale of the farm, we should not only get back what we paid but perhaps the capital we invested as well. We don't know yet when we will have a sale. We don't want to go farming in the back country or in the bush so we'll head for Auckland and start up there with something new. I'm not worrying about it yet. I'll take life easy for a bit...

Under the Alien Control Emergency Regulations of 4th September 1939, every person over 16 who had been the subject of an enemy state had to register with the police, thereby acquiring a certificate to be produced on demand. Any change of address had to be notified. Aliens were subject to certain restrictions regarding possessions such as maps, cameras, etc., and permitted occupations and places of residence. No distinction was made between refugees from Hitler, and Nazi sympathisers. The Aliens Emergency Regulations of 1940 and the Aliens Land Purchase Regulations 1942 further restricted the position regarding aliens. The particular veto which affected Lizzie and Frank was that aliens were not permitted to own land within a 15 mile radius of an airport. It was their misfortune that their farm came within this limit and therefore they were forced to sell up and move. About that time New Zealanders' paranoia about foreigners reached a peak, particularly with Japan having entered the war. New Zealanders were afraid that refugees might be spies, or that they would be successful and deprive New Zealanders of jobs and many were subjected to discrimination and even harassment.

In 1942 Frank and Lizzie moved into Auckland to a flat in Mt. Eden and for some time Frank worked at the freezing works. Lizzie did piece work, like many of the refugee women. They were always on the lookout for ideas for things they could make to earn a few extra shillings. Later during the war years they, together with another couple, directed by the Manpower Office, operated a restaurant in Queen Street, 'The Centreway'. This was frequented by American soldiers and their girlfriends. The restaurant was sold in late 1944.

After the war the naturalisation of foreigners, which had been suspended during the war, resumed. In December 1946 my parents were naturalised and at last felt as if they belonged. In 1947, the year that I was born, Grandmama Adi came out from war torn Europe, having survived the years in a Concentration Camp.

My aunt and uncle and only first cousin arrived also in that year to make their home in Auckland.

During the final years of the war Frank learnt the butchery trade and after the war he acquired two meat shops in Karangahape Road, so beginning his own business.

My father's eternal optimism stood him in good stead and he often remarked that he was one of the few lucky people whose work was also his hobby. Frank had a lifelong interest in sport especially soccer which he followed avidly. He skied at Mt Ruapehu long before the first chairlift was installed and the family joined a ski club in 1957. Frank was involved in the local tennis club for over 30 years as a club official and for many years he coached the juniors on Saturday mornings. He last played tennis not long before his death in 1979 at the age of 71 years. Bridge was his particular passion and he was a keen and active club and committee member. His interest was also directed to the B'nei B'rith Lodge of which he was a foundation member. His enthusiasm and easy relaxed manner enabled him to fit in wherever he went.

Lizzie worked in the business with Frank during the formative years, less later on. She put her considerable energy into homemaking and into transcribing books into Braille for the blind. She was a great reader and always maintained an interest in the theatre, concerts and

the arts generally. For the last 20 years of her life she struggled with Parkinson's disease. Moving out of the St. Heliers home which she and Frank had built in 1945 was the last straw and she died in 1986 after a two year stay in a geriatric hospital.

About the author

Claire Bruell is the only child of Frank and Alice (Lizzie) Briess and was born in 1947. She grew up in Auckland, completing her education with a B.A. in History and Languages from The University of Auckland and a Legal Executive's Certificate from the Auckland Technical Institute. Her husband is Peter Bruell.

First published in more detail in "Identity and Involvement: Auckland Jewry, Past and Present" edited by Ann Gluckman published 1990 by Dunmore Press

[Extended family of Frank Briess](#)

Extended family members of Frank Briess who perished in the Holocaust

Click on image to view this table:

Name of relation	Relationship to Frank Briess
Viteslav Briess	Father
Alfred Briess	Brother
Rudolph Briess	Uncle
Paul Briess	Cousin
Theodore Briess	Uncle
Paula Briessová	Aunt
Mathilda Briessová	Aunt
Mrs Grätzerová	Aunt
Hertha Grätzerová (nee Briess)	Cousin
Friedl Grätzer	Cousin
Otto Grätzer	Cousin
Soi Grätzer	Uncle
Thereza Friedová	Aunt
Augusta Friedová	Aunt
Liza Repperová & 2 boys	Cousin
Josef Kipperl	Uncle
Oscar Schimmerling	Uncle
Otto Schimmerling	Uncle
Julie Schimmerling	Aunt

[Extended family of Alice Briess](#)

Extended family members of Alice Briess who perished in the Holocaust

Click on image to view this table:

Name of relation	Relationship to
Martha Lowyová	Mother
Hermine Subaková with 3 daughters	Aunt / Cousins
Arnold Fischer	Uncle
Grete Fischerová	Aunt
Joseph Berger	Uncle
Rudolfina Bergerová	Aunt
Alfred Wolf	Uncle
Josefina Wolfova	Aunt
Jan Wolf	Cousin
Stepan Berg	Cousin
Grete Bergová (with 3 children)	Cousins
Adela Loefflerová	Aunt
Rudolf Broll	Uncle
Ludvik Broll	Uncle
Hella Brollová	Aunt
Alfred Broll (with 2 children)	Uncle / Cousins
Mella Lachs, a blind lady	Aunt
Regina Schoenová (with 5 children)	Aunt / Cousins