



DIASPORA BY DESIGN

Jewish Refugee Architects and Wellington City



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In the 1930s, New Zealand received a wave of highly trained artists, architects and musicians as well as others fleeing Nazism. Many of these people, often Jews, came to Wellington and revolutionize Wellington into an urban culture complete with cafes: a regular part of any modern Wellingtonian's life. It is simply impossible to chronicle the impact of every Jewish refugee in shaping the Wellington and wider New Zealand arts scene. This research report will look at six influential architects from the period. Helmut Einhorn, Ernst Plischke, Frederick Newman, Henry Kulka, Maximilian Rosenfeld, and Robert Fantl arranged on a quantitative basis, influenced Wellington's architectural landscape, and modernized New Zealand culture.

These architects had worked all over Europe, from Paris through to Moscow, and led educated lives in which they were all politically active. Einhorn managed to escape from Berlin, the heart of Nazism itself, while Plischke and Newman both came from Vienna, and were active in the socialist movement. Kulka, Rosenfeld and Fantl all came from Czechoslovakia. Both Kulka and Rosenfeld were influenced by the left wing ideologies in Czechoslovakia at the time also believing that the architect's purpose is to serve the people. Fantl, on the other hand, escaped as a child and came to be highly influenced by the Jewish architectural modernists in New Zealand. There were, of course, other Jewish architects, such as Imrich Porsolt an important architectural writer during the period. This research report has focused on six of the most prolific architects to Wellington's cultural life, and is by no means intended to be an exhaustive list.

In 1933, the National Socialists came to power in Germany with policies that targeted Jews, homosexuals, Roma and Sinti, the disabled and socialists.¹ This policy did not stop in Germany, as the *Anschluss* (annexation of Austria) and other invasions across Europe saw the start of the Second World War. Jewish professionals and others found themselves subject to strict regulations including who they could and couldn't marry.² Many attempted to flee, as was the Nazi plan, but found immigration options increasingly cut off from them.³ New Zealand, like most other commonwealth countries, had a strict and highly stringent immigration policy stemming from the 1920 Immigration Restriction Act, which favoured white British immigrants rather than 'race aliens'.⁴ Those let in were expected to be 'of a type that is easily assimilable'.⁵ In fact, during the 30s New Zealand had neither quotas for refugees, nor professional guidelines as to what 'merits' were in an application.⁶

In hindsight, this policy had tragic consequences for potential refugees. In 1938, the year of the *Kristallnacht*, only 223, and 151 permits were issued to each country respectively.⁷ The current economic situation of the great depression cannot be overlooked in importance in securing and justifying these viewpoints. Anybody who even had a hope of getting a permit had to have guaranteed

¹ See "Nazi Population and Resettlement Policy," in *the Holocaust: A reader*, ed.s Simone Gigliotti and Berel Lang (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005), 87-91.

² See "The Nuremberg Laws", in *the Holocaust: A reader*, ed.s Simone Gigliotti and Berel Lang (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005), 82-83.

³ Ann Beaglehole, *Refuge New Zealand: A nation's response to refugees and asylum seekers*, (Otago, NZ: Otago University Press, 2013), 31.

⁴ Ann Beaglehole, *A small price to pay: Refugees from Hitler in New Zealand 1936-1946* (Wellington, NZ: Allen and Unwin Historical Branch, 1988), 14.

⁵ Walter Nash to Mrs. J Hall New Zealand Labour Party, 21 March 1939, Archives New Zealand, Nash 1311/0607, found in 'Views of Walter Nash, Minister of Customs, (First Labour Government) on Jewish Refugee Immigration 1938-1939', "New Zealand a sought after country", at *The Holocaust Centre of New Zealand*, accessed 1st December, 2014.

⁶ Beaglehole, *A small price to pay*, 15.

⁷ F.A Ponton, 'Immigration Restriction in New Zealand: A study in Policy from 1908-1939,' Submitted to the University of New Zealand (Victoria), M.A in History, 1946, 114, in Ann Beaglehole, *A small price to pay: Refugees from Hitler in New Zealand 1936-1946* (Wellington, NZ: Allen and Unwin Historical Branch, 1988), 15.

employment. Jewish applicants received letters explaining that a 'fair amount of unemployment in the Dominion' was the reason behind why the New Zealand government was not encouraging immigration.⁸ Approximately only 1100 Jews were admitted to New Zealand from Europe during and immediately after the Holocaust.⁹ It is therefore a testament of the skillset, determination, and reputation of these architects that they managed to gain entrance. Once in New Zealand, these Jewish refugees from Hitler found a mixed response to their presence. All refugees were classified as 'aliens' and subject to investigation via the police.¹⁰ Much like the rest of the world, New Zealand in the 1930s did see a rise in anti-Semitism, grounded in a 'Jewish financial conspiracy', espoused by certain political parties, such as Social Credit.¹¹ There was however, an acknowledgement on behalf of the police investigating these 'aliens' that their 'Jewish race' was an important factor in determining their anti-Hitler sentiments.¹²

The first Labour government elected in 1935 headed by Prime Minister Michael Savage had begun a strong socialist housing program to combat the devastating effects of the Great Depression. It was estimated that some 20,000 more houses were needed, and so the Department of Housing was established in 1936.¹³ This would become a major employer of Jewish refugee architects during the war period under Francis Gordon Wilson who was Chief Architect.¹⁴

The New Zealand modernist movement goes back as far as the late twenties with the translation of architects' work such as Le Corbusier. However, these refugees would give this movement an important burst of urbane oxygen to fuelling these embers into a functioning movement.¹⁵ Many would work alongside renowned New Zealand architects, such as George Porter and John Cox, to establish the Architectural Centre.¹⁶ The value of town planning, the relationship between engineering and architecture, and the need for affordable and quality housing were espoused values of the Centre and shared by the following Refugee Architects. Ultimately, we are all indebted to this Centre and the enormous impact it had in modernizing Wellington.¹⁷

⁸ 'Standard Reply received by Jewish Applicants,' 'Appendices,' Ann Beaglehole, *A Small Price to pay*, 144

⁹ Leonard Bell, "Introduction," *Jewish Lives in New Zealand: A history*, eds. Leonard Bell and Diana Morrow, (Auckland, NZ: Random House Publishing, 2012), 17.

¹⁰ Ann Beaglehole, *Refuge New Zealand*, 35.

¹¹ Paul Spoonley, "Anti-Semitism at the end of the world: The Politics of Prejudice in New Zealand," in *Jewish Lives in New Zealand: A history*, eds. Leonard Bell and Diana Morrow, (Auckland, NZ: Random House Publishing, 2012), 223-227.

¹² Almost all of the 'Alien Registration' files note the Jewish aspect as a reason for being genuine refugees. For an example, see 'Aliens: Maximillian Rosenfeld, Martha Rosenfeld (Czechoslovak),' AAR493 Box 76, 1941/50/1116, C 553 940, Archives New Zealand /Te Rua Mahara o te Kāwanatanga, Wellington Office.

¹³ Lewis E. Martin, *Built for Us: The Work of Government and Colonial Architects, 1860s to 1960s*, (Dunedin, NZ: University of Otago Press, 2004), 164.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹⁵ Julia Gatley, and Paul Walker, *Vertical living: The architectural centre and the remaking of Wellington*, (Auckland, New Zealand: Auckland University Press, 2014), 5-7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 22-24.

Conclusion:

The impact of the six refugee architects on Wellington's cultural and architectural life was tremendous. They played an integral role in modernising a British colonial city into an international one. For these architects Architecture was a matter of social need, but this did not negate the role and necessity of design. The leftist political ideals of the later thirties with the establishment of the Ministry of Housing gave Einhorn, Plischke, Newman and Fantl a place to express their ideas, while Fletcher Construction allowed Kulka and Rosenfeld to achieve similar goals situated from an Auckland environment.

Those architects based in Wellington would become integral people in the Architectural Centre, choosing to see opportunities rather than obstacles: architects, such as Einhorn, believed 'everything was possible!'¹⁸ The Centre Gallery of which Einhorn and Fantl were actively a part of, brought international art to Wellington, and displayed controversial artists.¹⁹

Perhaps due to their own experiences of being disconnected and disenfranchised from their homeland, many of these architects expressed concern about the situation for Maori within New Zealand. Einhorn was concerned that nobody was helping to eradicate the poverty for Maori.²⁰ Rosenfeld acknowledged that the architect had an active duty to make modern homes more fitting for Maori who tended to value Whanau. Fantl also expressed that 'Whanau needs more space' but acknowledged that the architectural elite of the time were 'trying to impose European standards onto a different culture'.²¹ Newman believed that Maori symbols and history should be included in New Zealand architecture and art, although he removed this from his final manuscripts, perhaps due to prevailing New Zealand attitudes. The focus of this report was not on the relationship between Refugee Architects and Maori culture, and further research into this area is needed.

Many of these architects found that the Department of Housing and the wider New Zealand public simply were not ready for their ideas. As the prevailing political attitudes increasingly favoured liberal free markets, the influence of socialist housing decreased, and the role of private commissions for their designs increased. Without their huge contribution, it is hard to imagine a modern Wellington today.

¹⁸ Ester Einhorn, Interview by Robert Fantl, OHInt-0773-05.

¹⁹ Robert Fantl, interview by June Bastings, OHInt-0773-06.

²⁰ Ester Einhorn, Interview by Robert Fantl, OHInt-0773-05.

²¹ Robert Fantl, interview by June Bastings, OHInt-0773-06.

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