

Jewish Doctors in New Zealand 1933 -1945

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During my research into the Registration of doctors in New Zealand for a paper presented to the Wellington Medical Historical Society in 2003, the sequence of events for doctors applying to come to New Zealand as a result of Hitler's persecution of the Jews became clear.

I had a particular interest because my parents Dr. Georg Lemchen and Dr. Ruth Lemchen (geb.Mai) had arrived in New Zealand with 2 small children in 1935, leaving behind the Nazi regime which would not allow them to practice medicine, and all the rest of their families.

In 1933 in Germany, Hitler began the first discrimination against Jews. This included denying Jewish doctors the right to health insurance practice. This meant they had no access to the hospitals (except for Jewish ones), and they were unable to study medicine. Those who COULD began to leave Germany. Some went to Edinburgh where a special one year course had been set up. 500 left Germany in the first year. Dr. Alfred Sternberg was one of those. According to an interview with him in Wellington, New Zealand the Dominion newspaper on December 24 1934 reports that 100 went to Great Britain, 200 to Palestine, and the rest to France, Italy and Switzerland. Some applied to come to New Zealand. The first one, in 1934 , came in under the 1924 Act (the NZ details will be spelled out a little later), and was asked to sit the final examination in Dunedin, as were all foreign graduates who came to NZ. Then came several with the added Edinburgh degree which was accepted in New Zealand. Dr. Sternberg was one of those. He registered in New Zealand in 1935.

The next three European doctors who came between 1935 and 1937 could go to Dunedin to do the full 6th year of study and then sit the final examination. Dr.Georg Lemchen was one of those.

None of the refugees who by then were applying to come to New Zealand had qualifications which would allow registration in New Zealand or Great Britain.

The doors were closing fast on Jewish doctors in Europe, as on other professionals as well. The lawyers had already gone, as had the architects. Now the German Jewish newspapers were expelled from membership of the Reich Press Chamber, Art Dealers were ordered to sell out, and the Pharmacists were forced to leave.

At the end of 1935 the German Jews were deprived of citizenship, except for those doctors who were World War 1 veterans. They were still acceptable. However by September 1938 even they were unable to work. This meant another 4,000 doctors were looking for somewhere to go. The borders were closing and for many the chance to leave had been delayed too long.

Recently I heard a survivor from Auschwitz telling of the very public toilet buckets they had to use. The people who emptied those buckets were the Jewish doctors.

It is important now to look at the situation in New Zealand at that time, particularly the registration of doctors.

The first doctor noted to have settled in New Zealand arrived in 1838 (Dr. Joseph Crocome). Among others was Isaac Featherston who came as ship's surgeon in 1841 and became an editor and businessman.

The first evidence of the need to define and regulate medical practice came with the passing of the New Munster Ordinance in 1849, followed by Wellington Provincial Legislation in 1854, then Otago Provincial Legislation in 1864 (with 2 amendments in 1865)

The first Medical Practitioners Act for New Zealand was passed in 1867. It made provision for a Medical Board and the holding of a Register of Doctors. To be registered a doctor required at least a 3 year period of study, within the Her Majesty's Dominions or not. It also required that the doctor attend in person an interview with the Board.

This was replaced in 1869 by The Medical Practitioners Registration Act 1869, followed by The Medical Practitioners Act 1908, then 1914 and then The Medical Practitioners Amendment Act 1924. By now there was a Medical Council, a requirement for 5 years study, foreign graduates could be accepted if their country would be likely to accept the New Zealand qualification AND if the doctor "shall pass an entry examination in medicine and surgery to be prescribed by the Senate of the University of New Zealand." There were also disciplinary powers.

The next changes came in The Medical Practitioners Amendment Act 1949 where the Disciplinary Committee rules are spelled out and there is no specific comment on foreign doctors.

In 1950 the Medical Practitioners Act required 6 years study and the requirement that doctors be on the register in their own country unless they can show good reason for not being on that register.

To consider now the Education of Doctors in New Zealand

The first ships arrived in Otago in the 1840s. Otago became a Province in 1853. The Gold rush started in the 1860s. The University of Otago started in 1869. It was open from the beginning to both sexes, all religions and all nationalities. It encompassed Arts, Medicine, Law and Music.

In May 1875 an embryo Medical School was established in Dunedin, Otago. The first 2 years were done in Dunedin and the next 2 years in Britain, usually Edinburgh. In 1882 the University Senate approved the degree of MB. ChB(NZ) and by 1885 the whole 4 years could be done in New Zealand. (The first woman to graduate, in 1891, was Emily Siedeberg - she was Jewish).

By 1923, 870 doctors were practising in New Zealand, 297 of these were Otago graduates.

By 1931 it became evident that the increase in the number of medical students was stretching the facilities to teach them.

In 1937 the 6th year students began to go to the other metropolitan hospitals in New Zealand to extend their experience i.e. Christchurch, Wellington and Auckland.

In 1940 there were 100 students in each 2nd year intake.

In 1943 there was an urgent request to Government to increase the intake. Increased to 120 at the end of 1943.

However at the time the first Professional examination was so tough that it was not until 1958 that there were more than 100 students in the clinical classes.

So we can see that increasing numbers of doctors were trying to come into New Zealand at a time when the Medical School itself was having difficulty coping.

To look at the plight of the Jews

First they had to have an entry permit for New Zealand. The political difficulties of that are well documented elsewhere.

The first doctors who came wanting to work as doctors had to do a full year of study in Dunedin, the only Medical School in New Zealand, and pass the examination, unless they had a degree acceptable here. That in itself was a big hurdle, as these men and women had families who either had to go to Dunedin or be cared for elsewhere. They also spoke little or no English. Because the German degree incorporated Dentistry several opted to do that instead.

In 1936 the Medical Council began to be very anxious about the number of refugees who MIGHT arrive. The Minutes of that meeting are not available but thereafter 3 years of medical study in New Zealand were required prior to taking the examination.

In a statement made in 1938 at the Medical Council meeting by Mr. Drake (the Secretary) "in the case of foreign doctors it had been the practice to inform inquirers who were Jewish refugees that in the event of their obtaining a permit from the Minister of Customs, the Council would be prepared to consider allowing them to qualify for registration here by undergoing a 3 year course of study at the Otago Medical School and passing the second professional and both sections of the final professional examination. In regard to all other foreign inquirers it had been the practice to inform them that if they wished to obtain medical registration in NZ it would be necessary for them to undergo the full 6 year course of medical study in the Dominion."

As this was deemed to be likely to lead to anomalies it was decided that in future each case should be referred to the Medical Council and considered separately on its merits.

At a Council meeting in March 1939 there was disquiet regarding the large number of foreign doctors applying to come to New Zealand. There was a suggestion that at least a fifth of the refugees were doctors (not true).

Later figures show that 34 doctors came to New Zealand out of a total of 1100 refugees. In fact 68 doctors were granted permits but some did not arrive and some could not take up the challenge to go back to Medical School.

At the start of the 2nd World War all those who had not been naturalised were declared to be Enemy Aliens. Alien Control Emergency Regulations restricted possessions and the ability to move about freely away from home. There was also much disquiet around the acceptability of enemy aliens in public positions e.g. hospitals, Health Department posts and school health services, and even whether they should be registered here at all. It must be noted that not only Jewish doctors but also other foreign doctors were caught in this difficulty.

The names of Jewish doctors registered in New Zealand at that time can be found in the NZ Gazette.

Included among them are Anna Lewin; B. Monheimer; A.B. Sternberg; G.Lemchen; E.J.Fischmann; J.Slucki; A.Dreifuss; J.Weiser; D.V.Kallman; Olga Semon; F.Kral; B.Friedlander; W.Katz; K.Erber; J.Rosenbaum; H.Nelson; H.L.Hersch; K.Koplowitz-Kent; M.Reichman; Catherine Newman; H.Schmidt; A.Heppner; O.Einstein; P.Kurzweil; D.Levinsohn; P.Oestreicher; J.Segal; L.Bieder; Hilda Fleischl; S.Hass; C.S.Meyer; Rachel Munk.

There were others, for instance my mother Ruth Lemchen who with two small children and a household which included a doctor husband and his and her parents, was not able to take up any further retraining.

To go from the general to the particular

My parents Georg and Ruth Lemchen were a typical young Jewish couple from Berlin. Georg was born in Czarnikau (Germany till Posen ceded to Poland in 1919 and then German speaking in Poland) and brought up in an Orthodox Jewish household. He studied Medicine in Berlin. There he met Ruth Mai a bright Jewish Berlin medical student who had little Jewish education. Her father was a sophisticated European Hofantiquar and her mother had been an educated woman too. Jewish, but not religious.

They married in December 1930 after both had graduated and were working doctors. Hannah was born in 1932, Susi in 1934. The family remained in Berlin as news of Hitler began to cause anxiety. Jewish doctors started to leave including a friend of Georg, Dr Alfred Sternberg who went to Edinburgh where he gained an extra degree and then emigrated to New Zealand (although Canada was his first preference). His Edinburgh degree meant he could be registered in New Zealand. He strongly encouraged Georg to do the same, even though it would mean a year's study in New Zealand. He found the Lemchens a sponsor. Ambrose Lavin was a businessman who had property in Upper Hutt, about 20 miles from Wellington, and had already set Dr. Sternberg up in practice. Dr. Sternberg was keen to move to Wellington and so a place was available in Upper Hutt. Among the incentives was a Ford V8 car.

So the Lemchens went to Czarnikau early in 1935 to say goodbye to the family there and when the permit for New Zealand came through said another set of goodbyes to the parents and friends in Berlin. They came to New Zealand on the S.S.Remuera. They could speak very little English, Dad was seasick most of the way and I learnt to walk while at sea BUT they came through the Panama Canal, which was exciting and the New Zealanders on board seemed friendly. They came directly to Wellington arriving on May 13th 1935.

So began a new life. Upper Hutt at the time had a population of 1500 and was a farming district. House calls could be many miles away, to Johnsonville, Paremata, Whitemans Valley or Akatarawa. The need for the Ford V8 was quickly obvious as there were many metalled roads and often fords the only way across a stream. The nearest hospital was Wellington, 20 miles away, and there were small maternity units at Upper and Lower Hutt. Then there was the medical registration. As a foreign doctor Dad was expected to do the final (6th) year at Otago Medical School and pass the final examinations. He went to Dunedin in 1936 and the rest of the family stayed there too. He failed the final exam in spite of being remembered by some of his contemporary students as “very bright and very experienced”. He WAS bright, but he was just learning English. He already had a medical degree and an M.D. from Berlin. He sat the special in May and in June of 1937 was granted provisional registration.

Now he could work as a doctor. In New Zealand there was new social security legislation. The politics surrounding that is well documented. In essence he had plenty of work but in a relatively cash poor community. Sometimes payment for medical services came in the form of eggs, or “a puppy for the children” or a pet lamb, which mysteriously went back to the farmer when it got too big to be a household pet. He quickly seemed to find his way, partly because he was eternally grateful that this small community had made a place for him.

The next priorities were to rescue the rest of the family. The New Zealand papers were by now carrying the stories of the Polish problems and the further restrictions of Hitler. He was able to guarantee that he would support his parents and that they would have no claim on the state including no free hospital attention, nor any access to pensions, for at least 20 years. Julius and Adele Lemchen arrived in New Zealand in 1938. They were described later by a Government visitor who was assessing their enemy alien status as a “bewildered old couple who could speak little English, were wholly dependent on the family and were of no threat to New Zealand.” They relished the family life and as Orthodox Jews they kept the Jewish traditions alive in the family. Not so simple as Wellington was a difficult hour away by car and had the only synagogue.

Barbara was born in Upper Hutt in 1938. By now the local maternity home was accepting of Dad’s continental ways (among other things he draped the sheets differently from the NZ way) and could appreciate his undoubted expertise.

Then the Mai parents came to Wellington in 1939. Sure in their hearts that they would be safe in Berlin they had not wanted to leave. Again Dad guaranteed his protection for them.

Both families shared a house in the same grounds which Dad was renting from Ambrose Lavin. One pair Orthodox Jews, one pair secular Jews. So on those rented premises were the main house, the surgery, and a small house for the grandparents.

After war was declared we became enemy aliens. No camera, no radio. Travelling was restricted even for a country doctor who had to let the police know every time he left the town centre; those same police with whom he worked when attending accidents or sudden deaths. Nearby was the Trentham Military Camp from which the NZ soldiers left to go to war. Not easy for people to understand that we were not the same Germans who were the enemy, but victims of that same regime. Fortunately by now a positive attitude had appeared towards the refugee doctors. They were well qualified and “charming and sophisticated”. That was the opinion of patients but there were problems in the British Medical Association

and the Returned Services Association was not happy with the possible effect of these doctors on the prospects of NZ doctors looking for work.

After the war Dad applied for naturalisation for himself, wife and children. To support his letter of application and as proof of his commitment to New Zealand he revealed that he had bought over £1000 of war bonds. He was still renting a house and providing for his parents and his in-laws.

Somewhere along the line the adults must have decided to stay in New Zealand. Little was ever discussed in front of the children. Upper Hutt grew and the community prospered and so slowly did Georg Lemchen.

The broad picture is similar to that which I have heard from other doctors' families. The details of course vary. The transition from Berlin to Upper Hutt must have been huge. As years went by and first the Dutch immigrants and later a huge variety of other migrants came to New Zealand there were major changes in the way New Zealanders saw themselves and others.

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