

# Karl Wolfskehl

Karl Wolfskehl (1869-1948) was a German Jewish poet, author and intellectual. He was in his 70<sup>th</sup> year when he arrived in New Zealand, a war refugee forced to start a new life at a time when most people can retire comfortably. Wolfskehl found it difficult to acclimatise to the relatively less developed cultural and intellectual environment in Auckland and yet he continued to write and to write in German, eventually producing some of his best work here. Upon his death in June 1948 he had arranged for his grave inscription to read “*exul poeta*” to signify his Jewish, Roman, and German roots.

These two words, *Exul Poeta*, a poet in exile, chiselled into his tombstone at the Waikumete Jewish Cemetery, describe the last years of Karl Wolfskehl in Auckland. A poet in exile, a poet whose tools are words, in exile from his language, what a terrible fate. But Karl Wolfskehl was not only a poet. He was a Jewish poet proud of his Jewish as well as of his German heritage.

Karl Wolfskehl was the son of a Jewish patrician family which had been resident in Germany since the days of Charlemagne. His father was a well-known lawyer and banker in Darmstadt, who succeeded in the symbiosis of being both Jewish and German. For some years he was President of the Darmstadt Jewish Congregation. He was instrumental in the development of a building society for worker accommodation, became President of the Darmstadt Chamber of Commerce and was a city councillor as well as a representative in the Hessen State Parliament. Among his many philanthropic contributions, mention must be made of a home for women teachers and a home for the physically handicapped. Today the name of Wolfskehl is remembered in a Wolfskehl Street and a Wolfskehl Park in Darmstadt, but above all in the poetic work of his son Karl.

Karl was educated in this liberal atmosphere, first in the Grammar School in Darmstadt then at the Universities of Glessen, Leipzig and Berlin, completing his PhD on German literature. Of independent means, he could now devote his life to his love of words. Soon after he had completed his studies he met the poet Stefan George and became one of his closest friends and an intimate of his circle.

When I read of his life up to 1933 I was completely overwhelmed at the fullness and richness of his activities. Living in Auckland it seems impossible to conceive that one man could have known personally so many famous people – artists, musicians, writers – and could have been on warm friendly terms with them; men and women, among them Albert Schweitzer, Paul Klee, Franz Marc and Rabbi Leo Baeck, who formed the artistic and literary world of Germany between 1890 and 1933.

He was a man with a passionate love of books who, over the years, had built up a very large and select private library. These books, however, did not give him companionship and solace in his years of exile; they gave him the means to pay for his board and lodging in Auckland. The books were sold to Salman Schocken, the founder of the Schocken Department Stores in Germany.

Salman Schocken was not only a businessman. He was also a passionate bibliophile who worked tirelessly to further Jewish culture in Germany. In 1931 he founded the Schocken publishing house which concentrated solely on Jewish writing. Schocken was also an ardent Zionist who became the President of the J.N.F. in the early 20s and in 1929 founded the research institute for the Hebrew language in Berlin. The meeting of Schocken with Wolfskehl was arranged by Martin Buber. Buber and Schocken had worked together since

1915 and Wolfskehl had met Buber for the first time at the 6<sup>th</sup> Zionist Congress in Basle in 1903, and from that time a close friendship developed between them. It was Schocken who published the works of both Buber and Wolfskehl. When financial difficulties made it imperative for Wolfskehl to sell his library, it was Schocken who bought the 8000 books in return for a lump sum for Wolfskehl's wife and children, a small lump sum for Wolfskehl, as well as a monthly pension of 20 Palestine pounds. The Wolfskehl library as well as the Schocken library were both able to be sent to Jerusalem, where Erich Mendelssohn, the famous architect, built a library in which they were housed till 1975 when the books were auctioned by the Schocken heirs and are now scattered all over the world.

In 1898 Karl Wolfskehl married Hanna de Haan, the daughter of a Dutch musician, conductor of the Darmstadt Chamber Orchestra. There were two daughters of this marriage, Judith born in 1899 and Renate in 1901. Hanna and the daughters did not accompany Karl Wolfskehl into exile. Their letters however testify to the strong bond between them and to their dignity, courage and humanity by which they could live untainted in Nazi Germany.

What of Wolfskehl's work? It is too rich, too manifold to chronicle here. I shall confine myself, albeit briefly, to his Jewish works. It has falsely been assumed that Wolfskehl only turned to Judaism after the catastrophe of 1933. This ignores one of his earliest works, *Saul*, published in 1905 – a play concentrating on the decline of Saul, the first Jewish king, Saul's successor – the future King David – and the High Priest as the intermediary. As Wolfskehl himself said:

Meine Stellung zum Judentum, mein Bekenntnis zur jüdischen Idee, zur jüdischen Wirklichkeit ist so alt wie ich selbst. (My attitude towards Judaism, my declared belief in Jewish ideology, in Jewish reality, is as old as I.)

His collected poems first published in 1903 contain a cycle *An den alten Wassern*, a cycle which both begins and ends with a psalm. Wolfskehl in a letter to Siegfried Guggenheim dated 19.9.1947 (*Briefe aus dem Exil*, p.348) points out that he had met Theodora Herzl before the turn of the century and that after the publication of Herzl's *Der Judenstaat* in 1896 he became one of the co-founders of the Munich Zionist organisation in 1897. The cycle, he writes, is a direct rendering of the Zionist idea into poetic language.

His main Jewish themes are however contained in his later works, above all in *Die Stimme spricht* – 'The voice speaks – a poem sequence 1933' first published by Schocken in 1934 with an extended edition in 1936. It is the voice of the Almighty speaking to us. Here is one poem from that cycle.

Setting Forth

Do not look back,

What would you see!

What was is gone

Like smoke, and free

You ride the dawn.

Be deaf to pasts,  
Their call corrodes.  
What was has died,  
The Word will guide  
From foul abodes.  
Do not think back,  
What was is cleft.  
One refuge fair  
And ripe is left,  
The refuge: There!  
No dreams for pasts!  
Now grip you staff.  
What was is hail  
On frozen trail  
Where north winds laugh.  
No love for pasts!  
What was is cracked.  
The days when you  
Were vision-racked  
Grew faint and few.  
No grudge for pasts!  
What was – forgive!  
Fling out your hands  
To sunset lands  
And stride and live!  
Reject return!  
Spring stirs the clods.

What was is gauds,  
Is death. You wear  
The wanderer's garb.  
To go – what pain!  
To go – what joy!  
Do not remain!

(English translations by Carol North Valhope)

One can imagine how important these verses were for the Jewish refugees in particular, and for all refugees in general.

The zenith of Wolfskehl's creativity was achieved, however, during this 10 years of exile in Auckland. His major work *Hiob oder die vier Spiegel* published posthumously in 1950, is a work in which Wolfskehl identifies with Job. In his letter to Kurt, an old friend in Germany, 13<sup>th</sup> September 1946, Wolfskehl says:

From the very day when the ship set forth from the European port, I have known the sign, I have lived it, expressed it, sobbed it out and sung the sign under which my life, the last phase of the earthly journey, has stood ever since. This sign is more than an image; it is the eternal compulsion of Jewish destiny. And I, flinching and almost reluctant, but obeying, I the co-adjutor, the co-guardian of the German spirit, feel called upon to represent the living, even the creative symbol of this destiny. Since that moment everything that I am and that I do stands under the eternal name of Job. Since then I am, I live, I experience Job.

His poem *An die Deutschen* published in 1947 expresses forever his hurt at the betrayal of the Jews, and of humanity, by the German people. It states the reason why he, Wolfskehl, could never return to Germany.

Karl Wolfskehl and his companion Dr Margot Ruben came to New Zealand in 1938. Wolfskehl fled to Italy the night after the Reichstag fire in February 1933. When his beloved Italy fell under the influence of Germany and he saw the clouds of war gather, legend has it that he looked at a globe to find the furthest point from Europe and chose New Zealand. In fact he applied for a permit to Australia, came on a tourist visit to New Zealand, gained permanent residence and stayed till his death in June 1948. One of his proudest moments was when he became a naturalised citizen on July 12<sup>th</sup> 1946. In a letter to Margarete Pohl-Collin dated 23.7.1946 he writes:

For a week now...I have been a citizen of an island and therewith a small dot in the Commonwealth. It really reassures me to have found a place after eight years of (a) having been stateless and (b) of having received hospitality in a decent and truly humane society. (Translated)

Karl Wolfskehl was in his 70<sup>th</sup> year when he arrived in New Zealand, a time when most people can rest on their laurels, collect their superannuation and live in their mortgage-free home. How different were his last years. An old man, partially blind, of very modest means,

without family, forced to speak a new language, residing in rented homes and rooms, dependent on the whims of landladies in an Auckland totally different from our present city and lifestyle. His companion Margot Ruben was his only anchor point.

Wolfskehl was in all respects a giant of a man. When I met him for the first time in 1944 I was overwhelmed. This very tall and broad gentleman with a huge nose, very thick glasses, long flowing grey locks, always wearing a loose cravat and with the most beautiful hands. I have never seen anyone like him, a complete outsider in New Zealand at war, in a land where conformity reigned supreme. And yet among the budding young poets and writers he was recognised for his greatness. It was A.R.D. Fairburn who introduced Wolfskehl to modern New Zealand poetry. He also became close friends with R.A.K. Mason and his family. He met with Denis Glover, Alan Curnow, Frank Sargeson and influenced greatly the work of John Graham. With these writers he experienced both intense disappointment and intense satisfaction. His disappointment lay in his friendship with Frank Sargeson. Sargeson used to visit him regularly, supply him with fruit and vegetables from his garden and together they had many discussions on literature. Then one day Sargeson failed to come and Wolfskehl never heard from him again. Only in his autobiography, *More than Enough*, did Sargeson give a reason for his absence:

There were times with Karl Wolfskehl when I could feel myself overpowered, weighted down by so much civilisation, a feeling which I had often and keenly experienced during my time in England...and now here I was once again being overpowered by Europe, and this time in my own country.

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On the other hand, the young budding poet, John Graham, often came to him to listen, to learn and to discuss. Wolfskehl wrote of him:

Poet to Poet John Graham

(English by Karl Wolfskehl)

One I found, born for the laurel of the Greeks.

One, the Gods enamelled his forehead, his cheeks.

One is here, knowing, growing the mystery of lips,

This one found his one on solitaire's cliffs.

Because of his poor eyesight he was totally dependent on the spoken word, on works that were read to him, as everything had to be read to him. I remember well that he asked me to read to him from the *Aufbau*, a Jewish German language paper published in the United States. The *Aufbau* reported on the deeds and misdeeds of the refugee world. It was the link which kept the refugees informed and in contact with one another, be they in England, South or North America, Palestine, South Africa, Australia or New Zealand.

Whenever a literary or artist figure was mentioned, Wolfskehl knew that person and could tell us of their work or even titbits of gossip about them. My German at that time was not very good as I had not read or even spoken it during the war years. I sometimes made mistakes by accenting a wrong syllable; always he would rhyme a couplet to put me at my ease.

It was Margot Ruben who smoothed the difficulties and obstacles of everyday living for him. For the first few years in Auckland they were able to share a home, but with rising inflation his meagre pension derived from the sale of his books did not cover the rent any more, so both Margot and he had to live in rented rooms. Margot made a living with part-time teaching at the University Coaching College and at the Diocesan School. Every day she would visit Karl Wolfskehl, read to him and most importantly of all decipher the poems he had written down as he struggled with the creative process. She also took his dictation of all the letters he wrote to his friends scattered all over the globe. At the same time she was occupied with the more mundane side of life such as tidying his room, supplementing the midday meal, or darning his socks.

Gradually a small group of friends gathered round him. They took it in turns to read to him and be of assistance to him when he needed to go shopping or just to wander in the neighbourhood. Dr Alice Strauss, in particular, came to read and to learn whenever time permitted.

The feeling of Wolfskehl transported from the laughing shores of the Mediterranean to The Globe's Last Island Reef – Des Erdballs letztes Inselriff – a poem by Karl Wolfskehl is expressed in his poem Der Feigenbaum in which he compares his fate with that of the fig tree.

### Fig Tree

As day by day I stroll the teeming land

You spread your branches wide, thrust them afar.

My hand with tender love touches green hands,

Yours, fig tree, from Our Sea's bright azure coasts.

Chorus of cypress, rocky shores, brown breathing

Warm nymphaean grottos in the olivet:

You hold the awe of these god-trodden haunts,

My homeland's perfume that is vanishing.

How far from home you grow! Our Home! Still true

To your maternal soil, to laughing skies,

You prospered well, assured and firm your sway,

Nodding to lip and look: come, here I am!

Swelling to sweetness amid oil and vineyard

For bowed your heavy load o'er whitened gates,

The mule in peace browsed on your ample leaves.

Amante plucked you black figs for his maid.

Here you are out of place. To massive leafage  
You seem a dwarf, to lushly flowering shrubs  
A wretched tangle. 'Be content! We manage  
Without you well, you uncouth, twisted thing!'  
You are a stranger, friend! These islands' children,  
Transplanting you, dislike your crooked lines.  
You care not to conform to shaven lawns,  
Figs cannot be – how could they – to their taste!  
You suffer not alone. We both are stranded.  
Say: do we flourish? Do we live? Who knows!  
To wither in the scantiest sand of homeland  
What kinder lot! Is it not so, my tree?

(Translated by Margo Ruben)

Wolfskehl's exile was made bearable by his huge correspondence. He made every effort to keep in touch with his friends scattered all over the globe. This was not an easy task during the war years. As an enemy alien all his incoming and outgoing mail was censored and the censor was often nonplussed by his literary references. After all they could be construed to be a secret code. Also mail arrived only spasmodically and airmail was virtually impossible as well as too expensive for his means. Nevertheless, hundreds of letters from and to Karl Wolfskehl have been preserved. In 1988 a two-volume edition of correspondence to and from New Zealand was published in Germany. Dr Margo Ruben, his literary executor, gave all the available material and manuscripts to the literary archives housed in the Schiller Natural Museum in Marbach. There, together with Klaus Victor Bock, she was responsible for the editing and publishing in 1960 of the Collected Works of Karl Wolfskehl. Later she set herself the immense task of sorting and editing the letters to and from New Zealand, but sadly could not complete the work as she died in Marbach in 1980. She had, however, done an enormous amount of groundwork and had already published in 1959 Letters from New Zealand by Karl Wolfskehl. Her work was completed by Cornelia Blasberg, who has already been commissioned to publish a further volume, this time of his earlier correspondence.

When I read the 459 letters by 77 correspondents – the correspondence to and from New Zealand 1938-1948 – I can honestly say I was, as is said colloquially, hooked. I could not understand how an old man, frail and nearly blind, devoid of his library, could have so much knowledge at his fingertips. Be it ancient mythology, biblical understanding, literature in its widest sense, art, music or perception of the human mind, all are expressed in these letters.

Wolfskehl's years in New Zealand were not, in the main, happy years. Very few people realised what a great personality lived in their midst. Most of us then, as now, were and are preoccupied with the daily struggle to make a living, to raise a family and to see that no waves which can cause a disturbance are made. In many ways Wolfskehl was bitter and hurt

at the lack of support and understanding shown towards him by the population in general, and by the Jewish community in particular. On the other hand, he was intrigued by the New Zealand landscape, by the bush, the beach, the birdlife and by the many kindnesses shown to him by 'ordinary folk'.

Forty two years after his death Karl Wolfskehl is not forgotten. His work continues to be published in Germany. Some of it has been translated into English, some of it into Hebrew. In New Zealand the composer Edwin Carr has set five of his poems to music. They were sung for the first time by Ronald Maconaghie at a Wolfskehl commemoration arranged by the New Zealand Embassy in Bonn in 1977. Above all, he is not forgotten by his readers and by the people who knew him. I am proud to be one of them.

#### About the Author

Gerti Blumenfeld (née Stern) was born in Montabaur, Germany and came to New Zealand in 1939 as a child. She lived in Opotiki until 1944. She trained as a teacher and was Senior Tutor in German in the Department of Romance Languages at the University of Auckland for many years.