

University of Canterbury

Welcomed with Open Arms?

The Experience of Refugees Who Emigrated from Nazi Europe to
New Zealand in the Years 1935-1945

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Abstract

If one considers the event of recent years, as in Syria or with the Rohingya peoples, the world is struggling to deal with refugee crises. In this age of uncertainty, perhaps looking at the examples of our ancestors may offer some guidance. In doing so we can glean knowledge of the difficulties and implications that come out of resolving such a crisis and hopefully avoid past mistakes. For New Zealand, the exodus from Nazi Europe that occurred in the years 1938 and 1939 provides a valuable perspective. It is an event which tends to get overshadowed by the rise of Hitler and World War Two but offers important insights into the response of the world to a humanitarian crisis. This dissertation examines New Zealand's role in the crisis itself and the role of humanitarian organisations within the country in looking after refugees and sheltering them from Nazi oppression. This is done through an examination of the interactions between refugees, humanitarian organisations such as the REC, the government and ordinary New Zealanders. Groups like the REC proved invaluable to the refugee effort as they aided refugees in almost every aspect of their asylum and served as important advocates for their entry. Their propaganda campaigns were pivotal in guiding public opinion to receptiveness but as war broke out New Zealanders became highly suspicious and fearful of refugees. Wartime regulations and the classification of refugees as 'Enemy Aliens' disrupted a highly effective relief effort but did not dent its enthusiasm. The REC displaying great aptitude and ability in defending refugee rights and playing a pivotal role in caring for a group that would go on and become an integrated part of New Zealand society.

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Introduction

World War Two and the Holocaust are two of the most studied events in all of history. Each has mind-boggling amounts of research on almost every aspect of them, whether this be causes, consequences, individual stories or collective responses. Much scholarship of the 1930s and interwar period is focused on drawing parallels or finding contributing factors which may have culminated to bring World War Two. This is great and many insightful revelations have been made, even in recent times, in doing so. However, the sheer scope and size of research done tends to overshadow many events of the 1930s themselves. One such event is the refugee crisis of 1938 and 1939. It is well known today that Hitler's policies were a leading factor in embroiling the world up in the maelstrom of World War Two. Much scholarship has been done on the impact of Hitler's policies and the role they had in precipitating both the war and the Holocaust as well. However, little work has been done on how contemporary Germans responded to them and what impact they had on individuals living within Nazi Germany at this time. In the years leading up to World War Two, hundreds of thousands of non-Aryans and political undesirables sought to flee from Hitler's ever more oppressive racial policies. The sheer numbers of those doing so created a humanitarian crisis on an unprecedented scale. How New Zealand reacted to this crisis and what role we had to play in the whole affair is the subject of this thesis. Did we, as the title suggests, welcome the refugees with open arms and serve as a safe haven for those in need? Or did we leave them largely to their fate and not consider it our responsibility to care for those on the other side of the world from us? This is an important question and one that bears great significance to today, particularly if one considers the events of Syria. For New Zealand a precedent has been set, so is it one we can be proud of?

Past historiography is rather mixed about New Zealand's response to the refugee crisis in Europe. Ann Beaglehole concludes that refugees were received rather well by the New Zealand community at first but as war with Germany broke out, suspicion and mistrust began to form and tarnished some individual's experiences. Despite this unpleasantness, the overwhelming sentiment was that for refugees this was a price they were willing to pay, as it was so much better than the Nazi regime from which they had escaped.¹ In *Promised New Zealand*, Freya Klier tells the stories of several refugees who made it to New Zealand and they seem on the whole, to have had positive experiences in adjusting to their adopted country.² Like Beaglehole, Klier notes that although several had difficulties in adjusting to New Zealand life, it was far better than the discrimination they had experienced in Nazi Europe.³ Both Klier and Beaglehole cover the considerable difficulty refugees had in obtaining entry into New Zealand but have different perspectives on the motivations behind it. Klier does not consider New Zealand's refugee policy to be unusual at the time and simply in keeping with historical norms.⁴ Beaglehole asserts that throughout the crisis, the New Zealand government largely sought to keep the status quo of the country and did not want to disrupt society through too great an influx of refugees.⁵ The Jewish community on the other hand, is far more critical. Both Lazarus Goldman and Thomas Chamberlain condemn the government of the time for being indifferent to the fate of Jews and consider New Zealand's efforts to aid refugees rather pitiful.⁶ Although not directly concerned with the

¹ Ann Beaglehole, *A Small Price to Pay: Refugees from Hitler in New Zealand, 1938-1946*, (Wellington: Allen & Unwin Historical Branch, 1988), 133.

² Freya Klier, *Promised New Zealand: Fleeing Nazi Persecution*, trans. Jenny Rawlings, (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2009), 9-10.

³ Klier, *Promised New Zealand*, 50-51.

⁴ Klier, *Promised New Zealand*, 52.

⁵ Beaglehole, *A Small Price to Pay*, 132-133.

⁶ Lazarus Goldman, *The History of Jews in New Zealand*, (Wellington: A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1958), 227-229 and Timothy Chamberlain, *The New Zealand Jewish Community: Its History, Organization and Politics, 1840-1993*, (Research Essay, University of Canterbury, 1993), 10-11.

response to the refugee crisis as a whole, Erin Caswell also offers an interesting perspective on the experiences of refugee doctors. Caswell considers these doctors to have suffered unwarranted discrimination due to fears of their New Zealand contemporaries facing economic competition.⁷ In all the works, there are examples of hostility towards refugees but also examples of kindness and it appears that New Zealand was simply unsure of how to deal with refugees at the time of the crisis. Given that much work has already been done on the government's policies of refugees, the focus of this dissertation will largely be on the humanitarian and aid organisations and what role they had to play in the refugee crisis. As such, the evidence base of this dissertation is based on the archival material of contemporaneous relief organisations like the REC (Refugee Emergency Committee), as well as utilising newspapers articles, government documents and accounts of refugees recorded by Klier and Beaglehole. As the REC's main efforts stem from the Canterbury region, the region itself appears to have become a hub for refugee relief efforts. Although much of the focus of this dissertation tends to largely gravitate towards this area, Canterbury as a whole is not what is important. Rather the organisations within it and the influence they had in helping form perceptions of refugees for society around them. This research will be broken up into two chapters. The first focusing before the outbreak of World War Two and the second during the war, where fundamental changes occurred in the status of refugees. The first chapter will deal largely with the events that took place before the outbreak of World War Two and focus on the efforts made to try and resolve a humanitarian crisis that was, at the time, unprecedented. Firstly, there will be a brief look at the Nazi regime in Germany and Austria and how the radicalisation of Nazi policies triggered the waves of

⁷ Erin Caswell, *"An Overdose of Refugees?": Refugee Medical Practitioners in New Zealand, c. 1930-1950*, (Hons Diss., University of Otago, 2005), 4-5.

migration that swelled into a full blown crisis. How the world tried to deal with the crisis is the next logical step to take, as it appears that New Zealand's connections with Britain and the League of Nations were ultimately what forced them to get involved. At the time there seemed to be an almost universal reluctance for nations to burden themselves with refugees and New Zealand was by no means an exception. It was extraordinarily difficult for refugees to gain entry into New Zealand and understanding New Zealand's immigration policies and the reasoning behind them is important in assessing what role we played as a nation. Although the Government's decision-making around this policy effectively controlled how New Zealand aided refugees in the crisis, many other groups also played a major role in taking care of refugees. Within the Canterbury region, prominent humanitarian organisations like the Refugee Emergency Committee (REC) sprouted up and campaigned ardently for the rights of refugees. The work of these groups and the assistance they offered to prospective refugees often proved vital in obtaining entry into New Zealand and for support beyond that. The REC and other groups took a leading role in providing for refugees once they arrived and provided many of the necessary amenities and opportunities needed for refugees to become self-sufficient. Also important, was the role such humanitarian organisations had in forming public opinion on the crisis. Unsatisfied with the Government policy, it appears that the REC collaborated with other parties to launch a highly ambitious propaganda campaign designed to put pressure in the government into raising its refugee quotas. How effective this campaign was at shaping public opinion towards the crisis will be very helpful in assessing just how everyday New Zealanders thought of and welcomed refugees.

Once war broke out, things appear to have gotten considerably more complicated. The implementation of wartime regulations dramatically affected the lives of refugees by

redefining them as 'Enemy Aliens' and severely restricting their rights and movements. Life as an Enemy Alien was vastly different to that as a refugee, as New Zealanders grew uncertain and fearful of this new German group inside their nation. How refugees perceived this criticism and what aid groups did to counter it, helps place the treatment of refugees in a broader perspective and articulate the confusion that many New Zealanders felt around them. Since criticism of the refugees was intertwined with the development of the Second World War, what refugees threatened also appears to have changed over the course of the war, as does the validity of such criticism. Certain groups like the Returned Servicemen's Association (RSA) appear to have maintained hostility throughout the war, though by its end, they were largely condemned for doing so. Finally, the chapter will end with refugees own evaluations of their experiences of New Zealand and discuss the merits and flaws of the efforts to relieve the refugee crisis.

Chapter One: The Crisis Begins

The road to the refugee crisis of 1938 and 1939 follows a very similar path to the events that led Europe to war in World War Two. Much can be related to the destabilising effect of the Nazi's rise to power and the uncertainty of not knowing how to deal with the events that unfolded. Although Hitler's aggressive rhetoric and policies concerned many outside of Germany (and rightly so), his internal policies proved just as destructive for those living within German borders. His discriminatory policies against non-Aryans and Jews made many individuals of these targeted groups uncertain whether they had a future in Germany. For those that decided they did not, the most effective solution was to emigrate out of Germany and seek asylum in a friendly nation. Initially the numbers of these asylum seekers were quite small and most could be considered migrants rather than refugees. This would not last. As Nazi policies became more hard-line and violent, a steady trickle of refugees started flowing into the neighbouring countries of Europe. By the start of 1938, it was estimated that between 33 000 to 40 000 refugees had fled to England alone and this number would only increase in the years leading up to the outbreak of World War Two.⁸ The annexation of Austria proved to be a catalysing motivation for many living in the German Reich, transforming the trickle of refugees into a torrent and numbers reaching a crisis point.⁹ The League of Nations eventually created a committee to discuss how to resolve this refugee crisis, but seemed slow to comprehend the scale of relief or urgency needed to do so.¹⁰

⁸ Klier, *Promised New Zealand*, 79-80.

⁹ Klier, *Promised New Zealand*, 77-79.

¹⁰ High Commissioner W.J. Jordan, "'The League of Nations': Report of the Representative of the Dominion of New Zealand on the 18th Assembly of the League of Nations, Held at Geneva in the Year 1937", (Appendix to the House of Representatives, 1938, 28), Accessed 17 October 2017, <https://atojs.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/atojs?a=d&cl=search&d=AJHR1938-I.2.1.2.4&srpos=1&e=-----10--1-----0League+of+nations+report+on+the+18th+assembly--1938>

Unfortunately for these refugees, they did not exactly meet a world willing to welcome them with open arms. Most nations expressed a general reluctance to accept such large numbers of migrants and those that did like Britain, tended to see themselves more as transitory stages rather than final destinations. Britain was a particularly important nation in trying to resolve the refugee crisis, as the League of Nations committee decided that because of its large Empire and Dominion, it should take a leading role in settling refugees throughout the world.¹¹ This had significant implications for its former colonies. Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand and their relatively low population densities were considered perfect for the settlement of refugees and much pressure was put on by Britain for them to do so.¹² Although several conferences were held to discuss how this would occur, no concrete solution was come to and no country had any binding obligation to deal with refugees.¹³ The assessments of the scale and urgency of the crisis proved to be just as misleading. The *Press* reported that following the Evian Conference in Geneva in 1938, it was estimated around 600 000 refugees from Nazi Germany and Austria would be emigrating in the next five years.¹⁴ This was woefully inaccurate. As Freya Klier remarks in *Promised New Zealand*, over 1 000 000 tried to leave in the years 1938 and 1939 alone.¹⁵ Developments within Germany intensified the crisis as well. For just as Europe seemed to march ever closer to war, the Nazi's internal policies grew ever harsher. The rampant

¹¹ High Commissioner Jordan, 'Report on the 18th Assembly of the League of Nations', 2-3.

¹² Klier, *Promised New Zealand*, 101.

¹³ High Commissioner W.J. Jordan, "'The League of Nations': Report of the Representative of the Dominion of New Zealand on the 98th, 99th and 100th Sessions of the Council of the League of Nations held at Geneva in the Years 1937 and 1938", (Appendix to the House of Representatives, 1938), 13, Accessed 17 October 2017, <https://atojs.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/atojs?a=d&cl=search&d=AJHR1938-I.2.1.2.5&srpos=2&e=-----10--1-----Onineteenth+assembly+of+league+of+Nations--1938>

¹⁴ "Homes for Refugees", *Press*, August 11 1938, 1, Accessed 17 October 2017, <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19380811.2.19.2.3>

¹⁵ Klier, *Promised New Zealand* 99. and "The Refugee Problem", *Press*, 24 July 1939, 8, Accessed 17 October 2017, <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19390724.2.48>

violence of Kristallnacht, where hundreds of Jewish stores were assaulted and vandalised throughout Germany, triggered further panicked migration.¹⁶ The Munich crisis and annexation of the Sudetenland complicated matters further, as those who had emigrated to Czechoslovakia to escape the Nazis now had to flee again.¹⁷ It was a humanitarian crisis without precedent, but also one without international unity. Each nation could effectively choose how generous or restrictive their refugee policy could be and it was up to New Zealand to decide how much of a place of refuge it wanted to be.

The response of the New Zealand government to the refugee crisis in Europe can be considered at best, underwhelming. Only a very small proportion of refugees applying for asylum in New Zealand were actually granted it and most, if not all, were hindered by the highly restrictive immigration policy. The Labour Government under Michael Joseph Savage, expressed an extreme reluctance to take on board any refugees and had to be put under considerable pressure by Britain before finally agreeing to a 1 000 refugee quota.¹⁸ This was a paltry sum even by the xenophobic standards of the day. Australia took on 18 000 refugees, Canada 5 000 and the heavily overpopulated city of Shanghai another 20 000.¹⁹ New Zealand displayed a marked aversion in accepting refugees, but this was not particularly surprising. To put things into context, New Zealand at the time was a very mono-cultural nation that followed an exceedingly cautious immigration policy, with scarcely any non-British immigration occurring since the First World War. Even by 1939, it was estimated that only 8 000 of the population's 1.6 million or 0.5%, were born outside of the British Empire.²⁰ This cultural homogeneity made New Zealanders highly apprehensive

¹⁶ Klier, *Promised New Zealand*, 98.

¹⁷ Klier, *Promised New Zealand*, 93-95.

¹⁸ Caswell, *An Overdose of Refugees*, 4.

¹⁹ Klier, *Promised New Zealand*, 100-101.

²⁰ Caswell, *An Overdose of Refugees*, 14.

of foreigners. At the time of the crisis, it was very difficult to even enter the country, let alone migrate to it. During the inter-war period, Germans weren't even allowed entry into New Zealand until 1928!²¹ The relatively recent experience of the Great Depression played heavily on the mind of the current Labour Government. This hardened the country's already restrictive immigration policy as migration provided unwelcome competition to its voting constituency.²² With such hostility to immigration, it would be unrealistic to expect the New Zealand government to welcome with open arms any influx of refugees. The fact that these refugees came from Germany complicated matters further, as many New Zealanders still saw Germans and Austrians as the enemy and wartime legislation barring Germans entry into New Zealand had only recently been overturned. Discriminatory legislation such as the Immigration Restriction Amendment Act 1920, meant that any non-British citizen required a permit administered by the Minister of Customs, before entering New Zealand.²³ Not desiring to have refugees burdening the state in any way, during the crisis, the Ministry of Customs made it exceedingly difficult to obtain these permits and reserved the right to deny entry at any time.²⁴ Furthermore, it was expected that any potential refugee had to be able to support themselves financially before gaining a permit.²⁵ This was done through obtaining an offer of employment, securing guarantors willing to pay or providing evidence of having enough liquidity or assets to support oneself.²⁶ Along with financial independence, the Minister of Customs Walter Nash, considered it of paramount importance for any potential refugee to be able to adjust to New Zealand culture stating "The refugees coming

²¹ Caswell, *An Overdose of Refugees*, 15.

²² Klier, *Promised New Zealand*, 100.

²³ "Immigration Restriction Amendment Act 1920", New Zealand Legal Information Institute, 79-80, Accessed 17 October 2017, http://www.nzlii.org/nz/legis/hist_act/iraa192011gv1920n23429/

²⁴ "Immigration Restriction Amendment Act 1920", 80.

²⁵ Beaglehole, *A Small Price to Pay*, 35.

²⁶ Beaglehole, *A Small Price to Pay*, 18-19 and Klier, *Promised New Zealand*, 76.

to this country must be of a type easily assimilable. For the sake of refugees themselves this must be a prior consideration.... We must never create a situation where there is any antagonism whatsoever to refugees who have come to our shores."²⁷ In sum it was a highly selective refugee policy, one not so much motivated by charity but self-interest. Rather than viewing the refugee crisis as a humanitarian disaster, it was something from which to pick and choose the best candidates for living in New Zealand. This may have served New Zealand's interests but it did not serve the interests of refugees. Any applicant seeking asylum in New Zealand faced an uphill battle to gain entry.

This would have been hard enough at the best of times, but for those trying to escape Nazi rule, it was a much direr situation. As well as having several bureaucratic hurdles to overcome to gain a permit for entry into New Zealand, potential refugees also had to deal with discriminatory legislation in Nazi Germany that was designed to strip Jews and other emigrants from their wealth. In 1935, the Nazis introduced the Law for the Protection of German Blood and disenfranchised most non Aryan citizens through the Reich Nationality law.²⁸ These laws made it much more difficult for Jews to gain the required paperwork to get out of Germany and often they were deliberately hindered in their attempts by Nazi officials. Ingrid Klein, one of the few who succeeded in getting to New Zealand, recalls "They tortured people with red tape and regulations impossible to fill. To get a passport you might have to stand in queues all night, then the S.S. would come and make you go to the end of the line again."²⁹ When this discrimination was compounded with the already restrictive immigration policies conducted by New Zealand, the lengths one was required to go to gain

²⁷ Beaglehole, *A Small Price to Pay*, 16.

²⁸ Caswell, *Overdose of Refugees*, 11.

²⁹ Beaglehole, *A Small Price to Pay*, 27.

entry bordered on ridiculous. When one examines the papers of Max and Mitzi Frankel, who were aided in their attempts to escape Nazi Germany by their brother Otto, it is possible to gauge just how difficult emigration was. In order to even apply for a permit, the Frankels also had to pass several standards and provide several documents of supporting evidence. As well as the typical age, date of birth and nationality, Max and Mitzi each had to provide their intended place of permanent residence, health status, languages spoken, a certificate of evidence of good conduct and make their case for wanting to settle in New Zealand.³⁰ For proving their health status, each had to provide Medical Certificates both for physical and mental health that testified that they were not defective in any way.³¹ The certificate of good conduct had to be signed by the Prefecture of Police in Vienna and the British Consulate.³² Even once embarking on their journey, the paperwork did not stop, with the Harbour Police requiring them to register as Aliens upon entry to New Zealand.³³ After these papers were acquired, often there were further obstacles that made it difficult for refugees to escape with means to support themselves. By late 1938, the Nazi's had put into place extractive 'departure' taxes which stole most of the refugees wealth and possessions and made it difficult to pay for the 200£ fare to reach New Zealand by ship.³⁴ Without outside help it was almost impossible to make it to New Zealand.

Fortunately, refugees did not have to do everything alone. Throughout New Zealand and most prominently in the Canterbury region, many aid and assistance groups sprouted up to

³⁰ Permit to enter New Zealand, Legal Documents(Austrian), Pass Book, 1916-1970, Herzberg Frankel Collection (MB 575, ref 78720,78721, 78722), Macmillan Brown Library, Christchurch, New Zealand.

³¹ Permit to enter New Zealand, Legal Documents(Austrian), 1916-1970, Herzberg-Frankel Collection (MB 575, 78720,78721), Macmillan Brown Library, Christchurch, New Zealand.

³² Permit to enter New Zealand, Legal Documents(Austrian), Herzberg-Frankel Collection (MB 575, 78720, 78721).

³³ Permit to enter New Zealand, Legal Documents(Austrian), Herzberg-Frankel Collection (MB 575, 78720, 78721).

³⁴ Beaglehole, *A Small Price to Pay*, 1.

try and help alleviate the refugee crisis in whatever way they could. These provided vital lifelines for those trying to escape Nazi rule. For the nation as a whole, Ann Beaglehole remarks that humanitarian organisations like the Friends Committee and Jewish Welfare Society (JWS) provided essential services for newly arrived refugees and served as tireless campaigners for the rights of refugees.³⁵ Within the Canterbury region, much of the humanitarian work was done by the Christchurch Refugee Emergency Committee (REC). Along with the JWS, the REC was perhaps the most prominent advocate for refugee concerns within Canterbury and played a pivotal role in almost every aspect of the refugee relief effort. Aiding the REC was their high profile, as they had enough clout to garner direct response from the Prime Minister for their proposals and maintained routine contact with the Minister of Customs.³⁶ Despite their prominence, the REC did not choose to work alone in Canterbury and ended up collaborating with several other smaller organisations working towards the same goal. This collaboration meant the REC was at least in part, involved in almost all of refugee settlements in Canterbury and were one of the most significant players in the refugee effort as a whole. Furthermore, the Canterbury chapter of the REC actually ended up expanding to most major centres throughout New Zealand; each subordinate to the Central Coordinating Committee in Christchurch. Chapters were established in Timaru, Dunedin, Hamilton, Palmerston North, Auckland and Wellington and allowed the REC considerable scope in what they were able to do to aid refugees.³⁷ Although the activities in these regions do not necessarily concern this thesis directly, they are important to mention

³⁵ Beaglehole, *A Small Price to Pay*, 63.

³⁶ Executive Committee Minutes Book, General Committee Minutes Book, Balance Sheets, B.N.Z. Bank Account Statement, 1938-1945, Refugee Emergency Committee Collection (MB 145, 78809), 4-5, Macmillan Brown Library, Christchurch New Zealand.

³⁷ Executive Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection (MB145,78809), 8,25.

because through these connections, the REC was able to do more effective relief work in the Canterbury region as a whole.

The REC was initially set up by Karl Popper (himself a refugee who migrated in 1937) and other prominent lecturers at the University of Canterbury but soon expanded its membership dramatically. At its peak, it included members from the Home Science Department, Y.M.C.A., Wheat Research Institute, Farmer's Unions and even a representative from the Chamber of Commerce.³⁸ The purpose of this impressive group was to aid those refugees whose lives were deemed to be at risk by trying to obtain their entry into New Zealand.³⁹ They were primarily funded by donations and seemed to have considerable support in Christchurch. A public appeal in the *Press* garnered an impressive sum of £490 (equivalent of \$52 000 today) and was supported by churches, businesses, wealthy donors and even the mayor, who appealed on their behalf at a public outing.⁴⁰ The executive committee decided that the most practical way to aid refugees was through trying to ease the process of getting a permit. As previously elaborated, this was no simple feat and in order to maximise success, the REC only took up very strong cases in which to campaign to the government to grant an entry permit.⁴¹ This was done both through appealing to the Minister of Customs directly and by trying to increase the eligibility of refugees by finding guarantors to support them financially.⁴² Even so, success was by no means guaranteed. A report from July shows that of 143 permits which the REC advocated for, only 35 (for a total of 65 people) were granted with 81 (for 154 people) declined and a

³⁸ General Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection(MB145,78809), 1-2.

³⁹ Klier, *Promised New Zealand*, 101 and Executive Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection(MB145,78809), 9

⁴⁰ "Jewish Refugee Fund", *Press*, 18 April 1939, 16. Accessed 17 October 2017, <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19390418.2.140>

⁴¹ Executive Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), 6-7.

⁴² Executive Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), 11-12.

further 27 (for 67 people) pending.⁴³ Even those who had somehow acquired a permit still had difficulties in making it to New Zealand and often required further aid. Many refugees found that they could not afford the 200£ fare for making it to New Zealand or that they had to leave family behind.⁴⁴ This was the case for Hans Grossman who had obtained both a permit to New Zealand and guarantors to stay but could not pay for passage further than Batavia (modern day Indonesia).⁴⁵ To remedy this, the REC worked in collaboration with the Friends Committee to supply Grossman with a loan that enabled him to make it into New Zealand.⁴⁶ Despite being able to help many refugees in this way, the REC felt that progress was painfully slow. The frustrations around gaining permits and entry into New Zealand prompted the REC to embark on a propaganda campaign and lobby for the government to accept more refugees.⁴⁷ The REC (along with many other refugee advocacy groups) felt that the government's current immigration permit policy for refugees was too harsh and campaigned actively along with the JWS to try and extend this. This campaign was rather extensive and was targeted initially at high level MPs and leaders of other prominent organisations with a broader public campaign in the works. Following discussion with the German Emergency Committee in London, which was perhaps the main broker for refugees to New Zealand, it was decided that swaying over the public was the best way of pressuring the government to accept refugees.⁴⁸

Before any such campaign took place however, the REC had to do its best to take care of those refugees who had made it to New Zealand. Once refugees arrived in New Zealand,

⁴³ General Committee Minutes Book, 11 July 1939, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), 32.

⁴⁴ Beaglehole, *A Small Price to Pay*, 1-3.

⁴⁵ Executive Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), 16-17.

⁴⁶ Executive Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), 16.

⁴⁷ Executive Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), 21-27.

⁴⁸ Executive Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), 29.

many groups wanted to ensure they were well looked after and preparations for their arrival were often done long in advance for any refugee arrivals. The Jewish Welfare Society (JWS) and REC seemed to work in tandem to do this, each being particularly helpful to the other in providing support for refugees. As refugees first arrived off the boat, members of the JWS greeted them, making sure there was at least one German speaker with every group and handed to them leaflets made by the REC, which detailed important information to know about living in New Zealand.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the JWS offered to act as guarantors for any new refugees the REC was able to secure permits for.⁵⁰ The role of a guarantor was to provide income or employment for any new arrivals in an attempt to make them self-sufficient as soon as possible.⁵¹ The offer of the JWS to do so was a great relief for the REC as it meant that they could campaign freely to try and secure permits for as many individuals as possible without worrying about how these refugees would be looked after.⁵² This was not done so much to look after the refugees themselves, but rather increase their chances of obtaining permits. The JWS also aided refugees financially and provided religious services and support for what they assumed would be devoutly Jewish migrants.⁵³ Unfortunately for the JWS, the majority of refugees from Nazi Europe appeared to be rather nominal in their faith and although they appreciated the sentiment of the JWS, they were unlikely to join the local synagogue.⁵⁴ The REC did not try to act as a social conduit for refugees but instead focused their efforts on economic and political concerns. Although there is evidence that some social events did take place, correspondence suggests that they

⁴⁹ Beaglehole, *A Small Price to Pay*, 63 and Executive Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), 21.

⁵⁰ Executive Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), 11.

⁵¹ Beaglehole, *A Small Price to Pay*, 62.

⁵² Executive Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), 21.

⁵³ Goldman, *The History of Jews in New Zealand*, 229.

⁵⁴ Beaglehole, *A Small Price to Pay*, 64.

were small scale affairs and were deemed to be entirely inappropriate once war broke out.⁵⁵

The pastoral work of the REC was largely done through by a subcommittee called the Work and Employment Committee.⁵⁶ This committee concerned itself with helping refugees gain financial independence. Often this was done through helping them gain direct employment, but also involved training and upskilling programs. The REC funded and ran an English course for new arrivals but also offered loans and lobbied for those that wished to do tertiary study.⁵⁷ The REC's wide connections often proved invaluable for the Work and Employment Committee, as they were able to use their contacts to secure employment for refugees nationwide. For example, the Wellington branch of the REC Committee was able to use their connection at the Fruit Growers Association to secure jobs for Messrs, Eisner, Lehman, Baer and Allerhand.⁵⁸ There were also occasions where the REC went above and beyond. This was the case with a certain Mr Zucker, who suffered an extraordinary run of bad luck upon his arrival to New Zealand with his wife being struck down with serious illness.⁵⁹ The REC paid for his wife to stay at a nursing home whilst she recovered and provided Zucker with a job at a company called Unwins.⁶⁰ He lost his job as Unwins burned down in a workplace accident soon after his employment but the REC quickly found another job for him at the M.E.D., all the while paying fees for his wife at the nursing home.⁶¹ Not all refugees had employment experiences as colourful as Zucker but it showcases the extent of and the willingness and compassion certain New Zealanders had to aid refugees during this time.

⁵⁵ General Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), 40.

⁵⁶ Executive Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), 22.

⁵⁷ Executive Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), 28-29, 49

⁵⁸ Executive Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), 28.

⁵⁹ Executive Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), 32.

⁶⁰ Executive Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), 35.

⁶¹ Executive Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), 35.

While the Work and Employment Committee was focused on helping refugees directly, the Executive Committee preoccupied itself with running a propaganda campaign. This campaign ended up to be highly successful and by 1939, more and more pressure was being put on the government to accept greater numbers of refugees. Utilising their connections in Wellington, the REC worked alongside the New Zealand Peace Pledge Union to distribute over 120 copies of 'You and the Refugee' to MPs and leading Trade Unions, as well as a further memorandum to the Prime Minister⁶² 'You and the Refugee' seems to have been a rather detailed leaflet advocating the reasons why the government should accept more refugees whilst arguing against the potential drawbacks of doing so.⁶³ As well as making the typical humanitarian appeal of aiding upwards of one million individuals in terrible plight, there are some rather interesting points made that were harder for the government to ignore.⁶⁴ These included that increased migration would be of great economic benefit to a resource rich, extremely underpopulated country such as New Zealand and that the government had a moral obligation to help those from Czechoslovakia as they had (under the British Dominion) sold them out to the Nazis.⁶⁵ In their official response to this memorandum, the government was altogether unconvincing and this greatly aided the cause of the REC and other refugee groups. In his official interview with the media, the acting Minister of Customs, Mark Fagan, refused to articulate what the Government's policy on refugees actually was and simply argued it was 'too complex for ordinary New Zealanders to understand'.⁶⁶ This proved to be quite the blunder on his part, as all his words

⁶² Executive Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), 27 and "The Refugee Problem."

⁶³ "The Refugee Problem", Executive Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), 23.

⁶⁴ "The Refugee Problem."

⁶⁵ "The Refugee Problem."

⁶⁶ "The Government and Refugees", *Press*, 12 July 1939, 10, Accessed 17 October 2017, <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19390712.2.66>

achieved was to arouse interest in the plight of refugees and led many newspapers and individuals to adopt their cause. The *Press* was highly critical of the secrecy of the Government and argued that if it needed to hide something from the public's eyes, it was unlikely to be particularly savoury.⁶⁷ Furthermore, if matters were 'too complex' for the ordinary New Zealander to understand, why couldn't they at least try to explain what was so complicated?⁶⁸ All in all, the *Press* found the government's official rhetoric rather unconvincing and became an ardent campaigner for the rights of refugees. Throughout 1938 and 1939, it went out of its way to disprove the popular conception that these refugees would steal jobs and provide unwelcome economic competition, which was seen as the main barrier to accepting more refugees. A survey was done in Australia where it was found that rather than stealing jobs, refugees were more likely to create more industries that provided Australians with employment.⁶⁹ The *Ellesmere Guardian* also found that refugees had provided an additional 15 000 Britons with employment since their arrival.⁷⁰ The Government's arguments that their hard-line policy was in the best interests for New Zealanders, were disproven by this evidence and many became critical of the restrictions of entry on refugee workers when the nation had perceived labour shortages.⁷¹ Criticism began to start coming from within the government as well, as the Wellington Chamber of Commerce passed a resolution urging the government to 'take a more liberal and farsighted attitude' to the refugee problem.⁷² This call was echoed by the trade unions, manufacturers

⁶⁷ "The Government and Refugees", *Press*, 20 July 1939, 10, Accessed 17 October 2017, <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19390720.2.42>

⁶⁸ "The Government and Refugees", 20 July 1939.

⁶⁹ "Absorption of Refugees", *Press*, 29 August 1939, 16, Accessed 17 October 2017, <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19390829.2.102>

⁷⁰ "Absorption of Refugees", and "Refugees from Europe", *Ellesmere Guardian*, 26 May 1939, 7, Accessed 17 October 2017, <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EG19390526.2.44>

⁷¹ 'The Government and Refugees', 20 July 1939.

⁷² "The Government and Refugee", 20 July 1939.

associations, churches and of course the REC, but ultimately it would be a call that was ignored by the government.⁷³ This not necessarily due to unwillingness to change, but simply because New Zealand became embroiled in World War Two. The outbreak of war meant that security considerations became paramount and that humanitarian concerns, like refugees, became less important in the eyes of the public.

⁷³ "Admission of Refugees", *Press*, 27 July 1939, 5, Accessed 17 October 2017, <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19390727.2.23>

Chapter 2: War breaks out

War in Europe adversely affected the refugee crisis and stalled all major efforts to accommodate refugees. The commencement of hostilities between belligerent powers closed borders and blocked most direct routes to asylum for refugees.⁷⁴ However, in the short term, the crisis continued. Thousands remained lost or stuck in transitory places like Switzerland or London, where although they had been admitted entry, they were not allowed to stay.⁷⁵ Many refugees had fled into neighbouring countries like Poland and the Netherlands and when these nations were invaded by the Nazis, they were forced to try and escape again.⁷⁶ With new crises triggering all over Europe, the demand for permits to places like New Zealand remained as high as ever. For the REC, it was largely business as usual. They continued to advocate for refugees and doing many of the same tasks as beforehand, albeit with a greater sense of urgency. Although the government told the REC that it had decided to restrict immigration during wartime, it articulated that “‘exceptional’ cases would still be allowed.”⁷⁷ These cases tended to involve children or students stranded in neutral countries whose parents were unable to look after them. The plight of these children captured the hearts and minds of New Zealanders during wartime and appears to have been ‘exceptional’ enough to pass the government’s restrictions. The REC made use of this public sentiment to gain a permit for a 10 year old called Ruben and appeals were launched in the *Press* to find foster parents for further candidates for migration.⁷⁸ There

⁷⁴ Executive Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), 37.

⁷⁵ Executive Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), 40,44.

⁷⁶ Klier, *Promised New Zealand*, 112.

⁷⁷ Executive Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), 37.

⁷⁸ General Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), 39 and “Refugee Children from Britain”, *Press*, 11 June 1940, 9, Accessed 17 October 2017, <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19400611.2.78>

was much talk of accepting larger numbers of children but it seems wartime developments, (such as the German Blitz and Japanese expansion southwards) stopped these initiatives in their tracks.⁷⁹ By 1942, even exceptional cases had dried up and all refugees able to do so had already arrived in New Zealand. Rather than campaign forlornly for more permits, the REC decided to refocus its efforts by supporting those refugees already in New Zealand.

Many needed reassurance as war broke out, most having relatives trapped behind in Europe and the implementation of wartime regulations heavily disrupting the process of integration into New Zealand society.⁸⁰ Although the refugee crisis had effectively ended, there was still much work to be done.

The outbreak of war was highly significant for refugees in New Zealand, as the implementation of wartime regulations and policies redefined the relationship they had with society as a whole. With most refugees technically still citizens of Germany or Austria, emergency regulations reclassified them as 'Enemy Aliens' for originating from a hostile country.⁸¹ For many this was highly distressing and represented a change in identification eerily similar to the Nazi discrimination they tried to escape from. Hannah Arendt remarked "In daylight of course, we became only 'technically enemy aliens'-all refugees know this. But when technical reasons prevented you from leaving your home during the dark hours, it certainly was not easy to avoid some dark speculations about the relation between technicality and reality."⁸² In the first few years of the war, an Aliens Commission was set up and every refugee was re-interviewed by police, then registered and classified according to

⁷⁹ Executive Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), 43.

⁸⁰ Executive Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), 35.

⁸¹ "Annual Report of the Police Force of the Dominion", (Appendix to the Journals of the House of Representatives, 1940), 7, Accessed 17 October 2017, <https://atojs.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/atojs?a=d&cl=search&d=AJHR1940-I.2.3.2.20&srpos=6&e=-1935---1945--10-1-----Onemy+alien+registration-->

⁸² Beaglehole, *A Small Price to Pay*, 90.

the potential threat they represented to the nation.⁸³ The status of Enemy Alien also had a number of legal attachments to it that restricted refugees' freedom of movement. As an Enemy Alien, whenever they left their home they were obliged to report when, where and how long they would be going for to the police and were also subject to a curfew.⁸⁴ Any complaint made by a member of the public was legally required to be investigated and an Aliens Tribunal was established as a separate court system through which to judge the refugees.⁸⁵ Following the entrance of Japan into the war, Emergency Property regulations also adversely affected the life of a few individual refugees who had happily set up roots in New Zealand, by barring any 'Enemy Aliens' from living on property close to any military installations.⁸⁶ Frank and Hannah Breiss were forced to leave the farm that they had built up since their arrival, as according to new wartime regulations it was too close to Whenuapai Air Force Base.⁸⁷ Although they manage to find new life and obtain a flat at Auckland, the change was devastating at the time.⁸⁸ In this period, the REC and JWS sought to reassure refugees and emphasised the importance of complying with regulation to prevent more drastic measures being taken; the JWS distributed flyers articulating the best course of action to take.⁸⁹ The fears of such groups were not unfounded. Australia for example, interned the majority of its refugees in camps throughout the wartime period and many

⁸³ "Annual Report of the Police Force of the Dominion", 1940, 7-8.

⁸⁴ "Alien Emergency Regulations 1940", New Zealand Legal Information Institute, 953-958, Accessed 17 October 2017, http://www.nzlii.org/nz/legis/num_reg/aer1940270/

⁸⁵ "Aliens Emergency Regulations 1940", 951.

⁸⁶ Klier, *Promised New Zealand*, 90 and "Enemy Emergency Property Regulations 1939", New Zealand Legal Information Institute, 681-685, Accessed 17 October 2017, http://www.nzlii.org/nz/legis/num_reg/eper1939398/

⁸⁷ Klier, *Promised New Zealand*, 131.

⁸⁸ Klier, *Promised New Zealand*, 131-132.

⁸⁹ Executive Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), 38.

demands were made for similar measures being implemented in New Zealand.⁹⁰ This is not to say that internment did not take place in New Zealand, just that it was done on a far smaller scale. During the registration of Enemy Aliens each refugee was categorised into different classes (from A to E) which regarded their potential danger to the state.⁹¹ Class A Aliens were interned on Somes Island off the coast of Wellington, although it was emphasised that this was purely done as a precautionary measure rather than punishment for any wrongdoing.⁹² This was reflected in the conditions in the camp. Rather than serving effectively as a prison on the edge of the desert like camps in Australia, effort was made to make the interned refugees at least feel comfortable with cooking amenities, games rooms and music all provided.⁹³ Although many refugees were disheartened by the severity of the restrictions placed upon them, regulations in New Zealand were much more lenient than most other countries at war. If anything, these restrictions were placed on the refugees not for any fear of wrongdoing but more to assuage the fears of a paranoid public caught up in wartime hysteria.

This paranoia and a lack of understanding about the refugee crisis as a whole, led to a heavy backlash of public opinion, as many New Zealanders were apprehensive about the idea of Enemy Aliens living amongst them. The REC decided that the best way to counter these fears was to educate the public and explain that the refugees hated Hitler just as much, if not more so than New Zealanders and had several reasons to do so.⁹⁴ Their messages did

⁹⁰ Executive Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), 38 and "Aliens Rounded up", *Evening Post*, 6 June 1940, 12, Accessed 17 October 2017,

<http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19400606.2.79.8>

⁹¹ Klier, *Promised New Zealand*, 130 and "Control of Aliens", *Press*, 12 November 1940, 8, Accessed 17 October 2017, <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19401112.2.51>

⁹² Klier, *Promised New Zealand*, 113-114.

⁹³ Klier, *Promised New Zealand*, 114.

⁹⁴ Executive Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), 41.

not always sink through however and many refugees had the upsetting experience of having their neighbours reporting them to the police and experienced various criticism in the press and their daily lives. Certain groups like the Returned Servicemen Association and British Medical Authority (BMA) were particularly critical in their assessment of refugees and maintained a highly discriminatory stance against them throughout the course of the war. The BMA did not cause much of a stir in the Canterbury region, but put in place many obstacles to prevent refugee doctors from practicing their trade in New Zealand by forcing them all to reacquire their medical qualifications.⁹⁵ The REC's Employment subcommittee faced considerable frustration and opposition from the BMA, who repeatedly thwarted attempts in trying to enable refugees to practice medicine or reacquire their qualifications. Miss Fillenz for example, repeatedly applied to register as a medical student but faced continual opposition from medical authorities. Even with REC support it appears she was still being denied entry in October 1942, despite her first attempts occurring in September the previous year.⁹⁶ Despite the obstructionist tendencies of the BMA, the most concerning behaviour was seen in the actions of the RSA, who were highly hostile to refugees throughout the war. As soon as war broke out in Europe and emergency restrictions were put in place, the RSA loudly protested against their leniency and made persistent calls for the internment of all enemy aliens.⁹⁷ In the RSA's eyes, these refugees were an unacceptable security threat who "loved Hitler and desired him to do well."⁹⁸ As such, there was no valid reason not to intern them. Prominent individuals like Allan Moody, the chairman of Auckland Hospital, endorsed this sentiment and claimed that "There can be no

⁹⁵ Caswell, *An Overdose of Refugees*, 5.

⁹⁶ Executive Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), 47.

⁹⁷ "Enemy Aliens", *Evening Post*, 22 May 1940, 10, Accessed 17 October 2017, <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19400522.2.111>

⁹⁸ "Enemy Aliens", 10.

doubt that there is a hidden danger to this country.”⁹⁹ Certain newspapers such as *Truth* and *Dominion* also began publishing anti-immigrant rhetoric accusing the refugees as spies and security threats.¹⁰⁰ Although this could not be further from the truth, many New Zealanders believed them and placed the government under pressure to accede to their demands.¹⁰¹ This was upsetting both for refugees and groups trying to aid them. The REC resolved to try and counter such rhetoric immediately and attempted to act as defenders of refugee interests throughout the war.¹⁰² Other individuals sought to combat this vitriol through letters to the editor, defending refugees against such treasonous accusations. J.S. Burns wrote in the *Evening Post* that ‘as one who had had a great deal of contact with aliens in recent years I must protest against the carping and sneering tone to recent letters to your paper... The vast majority of recent arrivals came here in reaction to Nazism violating their liberty-Are we then going to uphold the same cause of liberty by again persecuting them violently?’¹⁰³ Letters like Burns were not as frequently published as the hostile calls for internment made by the RSA but they are representative of a country that did not know quite what to do with refugees and was bitterly divided over how best to treat them in wartime.

At an institutional level, things were a lot more unified. Following the registration of Enemy Aliens and the evaluation of the threat each refugee offered to the state, the Government and police seem to have been satisfied that these refugees did not pose a genuine threat to security. The REC reports that the Government actually spoke out in defence of refugees

⁹⁹ “Internment of Aliens”, *Press*, 17 May 1940, 13, Accessed October 17 2017, <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19400517.2.90.1>

¹⁰⁰ Beaglehole, *A Small Price to Pay*, 92.

¹⁰¹ Beaglehole, *A Small Price to Pay*, 90-93.

¹⁰² Executive Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), 41.

¹⁰³ “Aliens in N.Z.”, *Evening Post*, 16 October 1941, 8, Accessed 17 October 2017, <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19411016.2.31>

when the calls for internment were made.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, although the police were legally obliged to investigate every complaint made about refugees trespassing the law, this appears to have been done largely by going through the motions rather than any real attempts to enforce regulation. When Karl Wolfskehl, a 70 year old German refugee was found out wandering after curfew, the Police Commissioner Bennet simply got a friend to drive him home rather than use a police vehicle as “he did not want to upset the venerable old gentleman.”¹⁰⁵ Not every New Zealander was so accommodating. On other occasions, police activity could be the result of something more sinister. The Rothmann family reported “The neighbours were very friendly but also suspicious, one week I was on the roof doing some soldering, the next day the police came asking if I was looking at shipping movements in the harbour. On another day a refugee in a New Zealand Army Uniform came to visit me, the next day the police came asking “Who was that soldier?” On a third occasion took a photograph of my daughter, again the police came asking me about me about my camera... It was a very unpleasant experience.”¹⁰⁶ As well as being unpleasant for refugees, having to investigate the reports of overzealous neighbours was also very time intensive for the police themselves, who were dutifully diligent in their task. In the 1942 Annual police report, it was noted that “much time is taken up in connection with aliens but it is time well spent. A lot of wild rumours and stupid reports are circulated from time to time. All these have to be investigated and probed. Nothing is left to chance.”¹⁰⁷ Although most refugees were not seen as security threats and it was realised that almost all accusations would be

¹⁰⁴ Executive Committee Minutes Book, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), 41.

¹⁰⁵ Beaglehole, *A Small Price to Pay*, 102.

¹⁰⁶ Beaglehole, *A Small Price to Pay*, 110-111.

¹⁰⁷ “Annual Report on the Police Force of the Dominion”, (Appendix to the House of Representatives, 1942), 3, Accessed 17 October 2017, <https://atojs.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/atojs?a=d&cl=search&d=AJHR1942-I.2.1.9.16&srpos=146&e=-1935---1945--50--101---bySH---OPolice+annual+report-->

unfounded, it was seen as important to go through such motions to reassure the public during wartime and help them realise the refugees were not a genuine threat. As time went on this approach appears to have been successful and refugees started to become more integrated parts of New Zealand society and the war effort as a whole.

As the years progressed and World War Two took a more positive turn for the Allied Powers, conditions appear to have gradually improved for refugees. A better outlook in the Pacific calmed fears of invasion and New Zealanders became less convinced that refugees were a hostile or suspicious group. Unfortunately, this did not mean the end of discrimination, as groups like the RSA simply shifted their anti-immigrant rhetoric. The claims of refugees being hidden dangers to the country were discarded for the more traditional accusations of refugees stealing jobs and depriving New Zealanders of income. In August 1944, the RSA criticised the Minister of Justice for not advising useful regulations at this stage of the war for dealing with enemy aliens in business.¹⁰⁸ They claimed that it was not fair that a British subject who could lose his life overseas, had to take his chances when he came home of whether his business and other interests could survive or not because of the unwanted competition from refugees.¹⁰⁹ In order for 'fair' treatment of returned servicemen to take place, it was recommended that the establishment of further businesses be prohibited for refugees during wartime and that upon their return, for those businesses currently running to be closed down and the assets and money given to said servicemen.¹¹⁰ Although perhaps not as extreme as the RSA, the New Zealand Manufacturers Federation also met in Christchurch in 1944 and suggested to the Government that restrictive measures

¹⁰⁸ "Position of Aliens", *Press*, 14 August 1944, 6, Accessed 17 October 2017, <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19440814.2.69>

¹⁰⁹ "Position of Aliens", 6.

¹¹⁰ "Position of Aliens", 6.

be imposed on the business activities of certain aliens to protect the interests of New Zealand servicemen both during the war and in the subsequent period.¹¹¹ Rather surprisingly given New Zealand's historical suspicion of migrants, there seems to have been a strong pushback against groups such as the RSA, at least within the Canterbury region. Many felt that the RSA's criticism of refugees prospering whilst servicemen fought overseas, was unfair and one letter to the editor of the *Press*, pointed out that many refugees had actually requested to serve in the armed forces for New Zealand but had been denied in doing so by the wartime restrictions.¹¹² The argument of the RSA also falls apart when one takes into account that several of the wartime businesses set up by refugees actually produced military necessities for the war effort, like the Chemical Manufacturing Company (CMC) that supplied the naval forces with a steady supply of grease.¹¹³ Where things became really heated however, was when the RSA demanded the expulsion of all Enemy Aliens once the war ended, along with the effective confiscation of their wealth; they were only allowed to take with them what possessions they brought into New Zealand.¹¹⁴ Several letters to the editor condemned the RSA's proposal and even the Christchurch branch of the RSA chose to dissociate itself and advocated for an alternative approach to expulsion.¹¹⁵ In letters to the editor, H.J.B. criticised the RSA for adopting the same doctrine of racialism as Hitler and P.F.B. found it "most regrettable that the kind and generous character of New Zealand's population had been disgraced by the crude mentality of a few who unguardedly

¹¹¹ "Influence of Aliens in Business", *Press*, 29 May 1944, 3, Accessed 17 October 2017, <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19440529.2.36>

¹¹² "Protest against Aliens", *Press*, 15 August 1944, 6, Accessed 17 October 2017, <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19440815.2.73.5>

¹¹³ Beaglehole, *A Small Price to Pay*, 76.

¹¹⁴ "Expulsion of Enemy Aliens", *Press*, 10 July 1945, 4, Accessed 17 October 2017, <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19450710.2.45>

¹¹⁵ "Expulsion of Enemy Aliens", 4.

follow fascism.”¹¹⁶ In many ways, the proposal to expel Aliens post-war was an unveiling of the RSA’s racist hostility to refugees and they were ruthlessly criticised for it in the final months of the war. One of the most effective criticisms of their ideology was a satirical poem written under the alias of Whim Wham, which succinctly demonstrated the hypocrisy and illogic of the RSA’s ideas:

Let’s put the alien in his place,

Lets’ show him, who’s the master race.

Hitler, alas is dead and gone:

But heil his soul goes marching on

...

An Alien’s skill or industry

May earn his keep? Don’t talk to me!

Each case he treats, each lathe he turns,

It is MY MONEY that he earns,

...

Dear spokesman of the R.S.A.,

Will not your members feel dismay

To hear you ignorantly shame

¹¹⁶ “Aliens”, *Press*, 26 June 1945, 6, Accessed 17 October 2017, <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19450626.2.66.2>

The cause they fought for, in their name.¹¹⁷

In the final years of the war, it appears that despite promoting some rather concerning proposals, the anti-refugee rhetoric of the RSA was not taken seriously. Those refugees who had emigrated to New Zealand to escape the Nazis had eventually become accepted parts of New Zealand society. Although many had experienced various forms of discrimination, particularly during the first years of the war, many also experienced kindness and hospitality and this helped shape their perspective of New Zealand. Alice Newman recalling “I loved New Zealand, I always felt welcome here and seemed to have a rather positive experience even during wartime.”¹¹⁸ Others like the Helmut and Ester Einhorn did not escape hostility but their predominant recollection was that “even during the war, we felt safe here.”¹¹⁹ Safety was considered more important than any discomfort or even resentment that refugees might come across, as enduring Nazi rule tended to put things into perspective. Peter Brandt remarked that it was not so important whether New Zealanders disliked foreigners, or were anti-German or anti-Semitic but whether or not they acted out on those tendencies and whether they showed them to refugees.¹²⁰ Generally, he felt, they did not.¹²¹ Although the New Zealand public as a whole tended to have a mixed response to refugees, groups like the REC and JWS did not. They maintained their humanitarianism and displayed generosity and kindness throughout the years of the war and even beyond. In 1946, when the REC was all but disbanded, G.E. Roth wrote a tentative letter requesting aid, explaining that he was fortunate enough to secure a landing permit for

¹¹⁷ “Alien Ways” *Press*, 23 June 1945, 6, Accessed 17 October 2017, <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19450623.2.43>

¹¹⁸ Beaglehole, *A Small Price to Pay*, 113.

¹¹⁹ Beaglehole, *A Small Price to Pay*, 114.

¹²⁰ Beaglehole, *A Small Price to Pay*, 114.

¹²¹ Beaglehole, *A Small Price to Pay*, 114.

his mother who survived the war in Vienna but needed funds to secure her a passage.¹²² The REC provided the money almost immediately and after securing his mother's transit, he wrote back expressing heartfelt gratitude for the immeasurable kindness that he had received from the REC.¹²³ The willingness of groups like REC to go the extra mile for refugees demonstrated the best that New Zealand had to offer. Obviously it was not a sentiment shared by all but it set an impressive benchmark for New Zealanders to follow.

¹²² G.E. Roth to Professor Sutherland, 2 May 1946, REC Collection, (MB145,78809), Macmillan Brown Library, Christchurch, New Zealand.

¹²³ G.E. Roth to Professor Sutherland, 22 May 1946, REC Collection, (MB145,78809). Macmillan Brown Library, Christchurch, New Zealand.

Conclusion

The rise of Nazi Germany and the anti-Semitic policies that it enacted upon its population, helped generate one of the largest humanitarian catastrophes that has ever occurred. Over 1 000 000 social undesirables and political refugees sought to escape the oppressive Nazi regime to a world that simply wasn't ready for them. New Zealand's highly restrictive immigration policy served as a formidable obstacle for any potential refugee but given the uncertainty of the time, this was neither abhorrent or unusual. The historic xenophobia of New Zealand and legacy of the Great Depression weighed heavily on the thought of the Labour Government who was unwilling to open its doors to refugees. The highly restrictive permit policy in which one had to be approved by the Minister of Customs was compounded by discriminatory Nazi policies and meant that it was almost impossible to get into New Zealand without outside help. All of this led to the paltry figure of barely 1 000 refugees making it into New Zealand. Fortunately for those refugees that made it to New Zealand, public opinion was considerably more humanitarian than that of the government. Although it would be a gross exaggeration to say New Zealand welcomed the refugees with open arms, many humanitarian groups like the JWS and REC did all they could to aid refugees in obtaining passage and ease their integration into society. Within the Canterbury region, these groups provided vital assistance and funds for those trying to obtain permits and entry to New Zealand and once these refugees arrived, they did all they could in order to ensure that they had the best chance to succeed. This was done through providing loans, training, financial support, work and perhaps most importantly advocacy. In becoming advocates for refugee rights the REC helped spark a propaganda campaign that swept across the country and demanded that the Government accept more refugees. Through the

collaboration with other organisations such as the Chamber of commerce and New Zealand Peace Pledge Union, the main arguments against accepting refugees were disproven, leading to the public and press coming on board and building ever more pressure on the Government. Tragically the outbreak of World War Two cut down such an appeal in its tracks. If peace had remained there was every chance that the Labour Government would have acceded to the demands of the REC and the public at least in part, as with the support of manufacturers associations and various unions, it was facing the prospect of internal revolt from its voting constituency.

War did break out however and this adversely affected decision-making regarding the refugee policy. Although many refugees lay stranded in places of transit like Switzerland and London, the vast majority remained trapped behind German borders where it was almost impossible to leave, let alone gain a permit and travel to a hostile nation like New Zealand. This severely hindered the ability of the REC to operate and New Zealand's own wartime policies hardly favoured refugees either. For those refugees who had made it to New Zealand, war with Nazi Germany meant a transformation in their everyday relationships and interaction with New Zealanders. Emergency wartime policies redefined these refugees into 'Enemy Aliens' who were severely restricted in their freedom and movement. As distressing as this was to the refugees involved, this can also be seen as a sign of generosity of the New Zealand Government. Although the restrictions were harsh, they were by no means oppressive. Regulations seemed to be largely put into place to sate the fears of the public, rather than target refugees specifically. The same cannot be said for Australia where the vast majority of refugees were interned and held in camps at the edge of the desert. Although the Government may have appeared to have followed an anti-refugee policy in the years leading up to the war, they by no means continued it and it seems more likely that

New Zealand, like much of the world at the time, simply did not know what to do. Once war broke out, the New Zealand Government was very clear and consistent in its policy towards refugees. After a comprehensive assessment of the risk each refugee posed to the state, the Government refused to budge on any aspect of its policy towards refugees despite vocal and hostile sentiment being expressed by groups such as the RSA. This anti-refugee rhetoric expounded by these groups is perhaps the most alarming feature of this period as wartime hysteria seemed to blind substantial groups of the population into viewing refugees as a suspicious and dangerous threat. Many refugees had the unpleasant experience of being reported to the police by neighbours and colleagues for innocuous activities but this improved as war went on. Although the RSA was as vitriolic as ever in their anti-refugee rhetoric, their views faced ever mounting opposition with New Zealanders becoming increasingly disturbed by the similarities RSA demands had with Hitler's racist policies.

Despite many refugees having rather unsavoury experiences during wartime, the overwhelming consensus is that compared to Nazi Germany they felt safe and for them that was all they really needed to make New Zealand home. Although New Zealanders may have harboured anti-refugee sentiment this was not entirely unexpected and what mattered most was that even if they shared such sentiment they did not act on it. New Zealand at its worst was good enough. Thus the trials of the journey and any accompanying persecution could be tolerated. Fortunately, refugees did not have to see New Zealand only at its worst. Groups and individuals like the REC and Police Commissioner Bennet welcomed the refugees with open arms and spared no expense in helping these refugees adjust to New Zealand society. Bennet went out of his way to protect vulnerable refugees like Wolfskehl and the REC provided invaluable support to refugees like Zucker who experienced great adversity in attempting to start a new life in New Zealand. Although it is hard to argue that

New Zealanders as a whole welcomed the refugees with open arms, there were certainly those groups and individuals who did and in doing so they left a legacy that future generations of New Zealanders can be proud of.

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