

This is not an academic talk. These are rather reminiscences and observations of those years during which my family and I had the privilege to have known Karl Wolfskehl. I am speaking of course of the period from late 1938 to 1948.

My first meeting with him was in the Mt. Eden shopping centre in late 1938 where after a short conversation with my sister Maja and me he invited us to come to his flat at 45 Esplanade Rd. He was accompanied at the time (which was usually the case) by his companion, Margot Ruben. I think that they may have thought at the time that my sister and I were on our own in N. Z. My sister was then 19 and I was 17 years old. We had arrived here in Auckland on the 8th August of that year together with our parents. We had both heard of the poet Karl Wolfskehl who had written *Die Stimme spricht*. We had brought a copy of the book with us to N. Z. from Germany. It had been published in 1934 and was to act as a clarion call for the Jews of central Europe during those times of degradation at the beginning of the Nazi era. These things then were vivid in our minds when we were now face to face with the author.

When we then went on our first visit to 45 Esplanade Rd. we saw a fairly small flat which took up part of an old bungalow. The living-room had dark-stained beams on the ceiling and the bookshelves and other fittings were also dark-stained. There were some books of K. W. on the bookshelves and I think some others as well. Only later we were to hear that his very valuable library had been taken over by Salman Schocken, the Jewish philanthropist and publisher in return for a small pension which allowed K. W. to lead quite a frugal life here in Auckland. I cannot recollect what the conversation was about on this our first meeting, but I am fairly sure it would have been rather about everyday affairs and no doubt about our family and on his part what made him come to N. Z. during the conversation it became clear that my sister and I were not on our own but lived with our parents at 38 Grange Road in close proximity to 45 Esplanade Road.

From then on the visits of K. W. mostly accompanied by Margot R. became quite frequent. My parents were of a liberal, rather unconventional disposition, who had befriended people of a slightly eccentric, non-conforming type while they lived in Germany. My father was an amateur poet who in his youth had written some poetry and later wrote the appropriate poem for every suitable oc-

casion. K.W. called my mother once "a wise woman".

Maybe it was these attributes together with the fact that both K. W. and Margot R. felt that here was a fairly close-knit family, which they were both missing, that brought us together.

On the numerous occasions on which we were together K. W. was always the centre of attention. Whether he talked of his time in Munich, of the famous people he knew or of present day problems he was always a pleasure to listen to. He was the most perfect raconteur one can imagine. His sense of humour was highly developed and comments about people were extremely discerning. A lot of the time he spoke in his Darmstadt dialect. Sometimes he would introduce *Schüttelreim*, usually in a most humorous vein. In spite of his poor eyesight he was most discerning regarding small art objects. When we showed him one of these on some occasion, he would remove his strong glass, hold the precious article close to his eyes and then pronounce details of age, type of design and anything else. Books were of course his special love and I remember how he had acquired quite a rare edition at a certain second-hand book-shop and how he would tell us all about this great find. On some evenings which we spent together we would read passages from books which K. W. would favour. One of his favourites was Martin Buber's *Chasidic Tales*, which we had in an edition of the Schocken Bücherei. Once we read excerpts from Hauff's *Märchen*.

Sometimes on Pesach and Yom Kippur we read the appropriate verses from *Die Stimme spricht*. If Margot was the reader she would read in the prescribed way in a slow almost monotonous manner, not emphasising any particular word or syllable but giving everything the same value and significance. This idea was of course also evident in any writing that was executed in the Georgian way where capital letters did not exist so that every word had the same weight.

For several years we celebrated New Year's Eve together. I shall here quote what Margot Ruben said in 1976 about those evenings in a talk she gave in Bonn called Karl Wolfskehl *Exul Immeritus Erinnerungen am Neuseeland*:

Occasionally we spent an evening with friends. For instance with the Blumenfeld family of four where the daughter, Maja, a talented photographer, had taken a portrait of Wolfskehl under the fig tree, which gave rise to the poem. New Year's Eve was spent with this

family when K.W. went through the ritual of brewing a punch in the kitchen to a secret recipe, with everybody being out of bounds.

I remember these occasions well and I am still puzzled what actually went into the famous punch but it certainly had no ill effects. Sometimes when K. W. was with us I had some of my friends visiting. It was interesting to watch how a discussion developed between him and us who were in our early twenties. The age barrier did not seem to matter.

Another event still firmly in my memory, the 17th September 1939 when we celebrated his 70th birthday at our place at 38 Grange Road. I cannot remember who was present on that occasion, except that there were certainly no more than 12-15 people present. I think the lawyer Louis Phillips spoke a few words.

After K. W. left Esplanade Road he and Margot Ruben and then later on he on his own lived in quite a number of places, most of them not of a high standard. This of course was not conducive in helping him with his work. It is surprising then that he was able to write such a major part of his work during those years. When he came to see us he would tell us how he had been working on certain writings and how Margot had put it all down on paper for him. He also mentioned who had been in touch with him from overseas. Often he was quite anxious when it took so long for mail to arrive. It is surprising how much correspondence there was as is evidenced by the volume published by Margot Ruben in 1959 and the two volumes published by Cornelia Blasberg in 1988.

As with most outstanding men his mood would often change and varied between being quite elated, particularly when he was pleased with the writing he was able to undertake and also when he was satisfied with the world around him. Of course there were other occasions when he complained bitterly about people and his condition and then his comments could be quite biting. In his general demeanour he was never domineering or overbearing. At no time one had the feeling that he was trying to talk down to you. To our family K. W. was a friend. I consider it was a great privilege to have known him during those early years of my life and I feel sure that this has influenced me in my outlook and my interests throughout the rest of my life.