

Gerti Blumenfeld

When I heard about this symposium I wondered what Karl Wolfskehl would have made of all this, of the funding provided by the Goethe Institute and the Thyssen Foundation. I am sure he would have appreciated the former but am doubtful about the latter; also that generations of students would study and analyse his works but after listening to you these three days I realise he is in good hands and he would be very proud to know his contribution to both German and Jewish literature will not be forgotten.

Leonard Bell in his lecture on Frederick Ost referred to the status of being just a refugee as well as trying to become a citizen of the quest state.

This word refugee, in German 'Flüchtling', means a person 'auf der Flucht', running away. The German word for their own people who had to leave territory which would become a part of Poland for instance is 'Vertriebene' expellees being expelled or banished from one's homeland. I think we were both 'Flüchtlinge' as well as 'Vertriebene'.

Karl Wolfskehl too saw himself as both a refugee and an expellee, he was after all, as we all were, 'staatenlos' stateless, a person without a passport and here I quote Kurt Tucholsky who wrote in *Der Mensch* 1931 "Jeder Mensch hat eine Leber eine Milz, eine Lunge und eine Fahne. Sämtliche Organe sind lebenswichtig. Es soll Menschen ohne Leber, ohne Milz und mit halber Lunge geben; Menschen ohne Fahne gibt es nicht."

Karl Wolfskehl really believed he was as a refugee and expellee to be here only temporarily, that it would be possible to return to a civilised and purged Germany after the war. I think it was only after 1945 - when the full horror of the holocaust became known, his only brother, Eduard, was a victim - this together with the refusal of the German people to accept responsibility for their crimes, that he realised that a return from his refuge was impossible so you can imagine his joy and pride in receiving New Zealand citizenship, becoming a New Zealander in 1946.

I first met Karl Wolfskehl on the 2nd February 1944. How do I remember that date? Easy. I arrived in Auckland on the 31st January to attend Teachers Training College. In Auckland I was a boarder in the Blumenfeld household at 38 Grange Road, Mt. Eden. When I returned from the College that afternoon a very tall broad man came towards me, took one look at me and said "Aha,

ein Mädchen in blau". I was wearing a light blue summer dress. So here I was an eighteen year old totally unsophisticated girl, straight from school in Opotiki which was then and still is today the back of beyond in New Zealand and which makes Buxtehude sound like the centre of civilisation. Actually when we visited our daughter in Hamburg in 1994 I was quite amazed to find a road sign pointing out the direction to Buxtehude. Till then I had always believed it to be an imaginary place. I came from very small town Germany to even smaller town New Zealand having spent two years in suburban London which did not really contribute to a wider outlook.

The beginning of 1944 was still a dark part of the war. Although it was post Stalingrad, D-Day had not yet happened and closer to New Zealand the Japanese invasion became a real threat. Any form of optimism was in short supply. Actually mutual friends of both Wolfskehl and the Blumenfelds, Ruth and Eric Hoffmann, had their rucksacks packed, bicycles at the ready to make off into the bush in case of an invasion.

I spent happy years between November 1939 and February 1944 in Opotiki trying to change from a refugee to a true Kiwi. I was there with my parents and my younger brother. My father had a small ironmongery shop there and we made every attempt not to speak German. We had nothing from Germany except the clothes we arrived with. There were no German books. Anyway anything German became an anathema.

So here I landed in the Blumenfeld household, financially dependent on boarders, Mr Kurt Blumenfeld not well with extremely bad eyesight was trying to make little boxes and things in a small workshop, his wife Fanny an extremely talented seamstress the cook, cleaner and general factotum then already in her mid-sixties, beautiful Maja the photographer and handsome Konny, and then Karl Wolfskehl, he was always addressed as 'Herr Doktor'. Can you imagine in 1944 this very tall and broad man with long grey locks an open-necked shirt with a cravat loosely tied round his neck. This is what I noticed immediately. Then his nose rather on the large side and very thick-lensed glasses. In the Blumenfeld living room he always sat in the same chair which Mr Blumenfeld gave up for him. What was also striking, his beautiful hands long slim-fingered and lovely nails. There the Blumenfelds sat with the Herr Doktor who came every two to three days to collect his mail - 38 Grange Road was then his Auckland address - have a cup of tea, coffee was mostly unavailable, and sometimes to stay for a meal.

The American German language paper *Aufbau* was passed round from refugee to refugee family and very often it was read to Karl Wolfskehl. I had to take my turn reading to him which at first I found quite daunting as I had not read a German book since I left Germany in January 1937. To my amazement I could still read quite fluently though I did have a major mishap when he asked me to read to him Heine's 'Die Schloßlegende' which I pronounced die 'SchlöBlégende' which made him really laugh and of course compose one of his Schüttelreime. Unfortunately I can't remember it. I must also confess that at that time I really did not appreciate this giant man of knowledge and wisdom I had the privilege of knowing.

When Karl Wolfskehl stayed for a meal his companion Margot Ruben would join us after work. Everyone talked politics. Sometimes Karl would doze off in his chair his thumb and forefinger supporting his nose. After a short snooze he would open his eyes then invariably saying 'Hab ich lang geschlafa?' When we read the *Aufbau* to him there was a regular column by Pen who reported on the doings of the exiled writers, actors, artists. This was always exciting because often Karl would call out 'den kenn ich' or 'die kenn ich' and then tell us all sorts of stories of their private and not so private lives.

While we sat and talked Konny's mother and Margot would be darning socks or stockings, then a precious commodity, and mending. Margot did all the darning and mending for Karl. Sometimes Margot had to leave earlier as she had marking to do from her work at the University Coaching College. With time as I became more familiar with Karl Wolfskehl, he would ask me to read English poetry to him, also sing English songs, at that time I could still sing in tune. One of his favourite poems-songs was 'Drink to me only with thine eyes' by Ben Jonson.

We listened regularly to the news though we couldn't get shortwave as that was sealed off for the 'enemy aliens'. This was understandable and I would just like to add here that I never experienced any of the antisemitism and anteforeignerism as it is described in the novel *Live Bodies* by Maurice Gee.

Often in the evening Konny and I would take Wolfskehl home. This entailed quite a steep walk up Grange Road, waiting for the tram to take us to Watling Street and walking from there to Wolfskehl's home. Home for him when I knew him was a furnished room, very basic pre-war New Zealand furniture, a single bed with a

wirewove base, a kapok mattress, the bed was too short so Konny's father made him a sort of footrest box the height of the bed so he could at least stretch his legs. There was a large desk under the window, a table lamp and a standard lamp as well as a large bookshelf which was made for him by Mr Blumenfeld. Our daughter Nina now has the bookshelf.

I can remember Wolfskehl telling us he had been to Dominion Road browsing in the second-hand bookstores and describing to us his wonderful finds. Though he had been forced to sell his great library, he had collected a considerable number of books here and one could tell how much he loved books by the way he handled them, stroked them and smelt them.

When he did not come to collect mail he would ring up to find out where the mail was from. I remember the occasion when the letter arrived with the news of Hanna's death and how upset he was. When Konny's father was taken to hospital in June 1945 he hurried to Grange Road. I met him at the tram stop and he was just in time to say goodbye as the stretcher was lifted into the ambulance.

After D-Day when the end of the war became a possibility there were endless discussions what should be done with Germany. I think we were all too naïve to foresee the Cold War. Then the photos from the concentration camps arrived, everyone was in a state of shock, all were trying to locate missing family and friends. For Karl Wolfskehl it seemed to me to be the beginning of the end; he was so totally devastated.

He continued to come to Grange Road till April 1947 when we moved to Grey Lynn and his mail was redirected. By then the mail was also more regular though airmail was still exotic and expensive and sea-mail took 5 - 6 weeks. Wolfskehl came to visit us in our new home several times and we visited him but once he was hospitalised we did not see him again. We joined Margot and his friends at his funeral in the home of Rabbi Astor.

Now with every year I grow older I appreciate more and more the good fortune to have known such a man.