

John Graham

Ultima Thule. A Reminsicence

It is one thing to put down on paper the recording of times spent with a very dear friend and quite a different thing to stand up and speak of those times to a gathering of relative strangers. But having said that, I hope at the end of this, we may be less of strangers to each other.

Memory has a habit of distorting and altering the reality of a time that one wishes to recall. Much is lost in the process of growing old. A full recollection and recovery of the hours spent during episodes that took place over fifty years ago is not possible. All that remains are the salient features and incidents that have been indelibly imprinted on my memory. It will be these features that I hope to share with you.

I have selected this from essays written over the past forty years. Some of what I now present appeared in the publication in 1960 by Castrum Peregrini Press, of *Kalon Bekawod Namir*; also from an essay in *Landfall* in 1969, and recently again by Castrum Peregrini part of a translation of a manuscript yet to be published in English. In 1944 I was living in Wellington. I had a friend who was working in a refrigeration warehouse in Taranaki Street. Working with him in a small office was a woman named Gerda Eichbaum. My friend and I had decided to live in Auckland and before we went Gerda Eichbaum gave us the address of Karl Wolfskehl. She knew that we both had a general interest in literature, and she no doubt thought we would be interested in meeting him.

I vaguely remember the tram ride up Mt. Eden Road to where he lived in a house in St. Andrews Road; a bungalow type of house indistinguishable from all the other houses in the street.

When he came to the door I was greeted by a huge man dressed in dark clothes. He seemed to tower above me as I stood there wondering how to introduce myself. He looked down at me through thick highly magnifying spectacles that seemed to frame his marble like features that had been carved in another world. I had met the person who was to open for me so many doors that would lead me into the world that had made him. He invited me in and thus began a dialogue of friendship between two people from two diametrically opposite ends of the earth. Karl Wolfskehl from

the salons of Schwabing and European intellectual company; and myself from a provincial colonialism as far removed from the traditions of Europe as it was possible to get.

I consider that I was greatly privileged in knowing him and being accepted as a friend. Through him I was able to find a direction in my otherwise rather chaotic life.

It is true that I carried with me a fair degree of the romantic; this being at odds with the mores dictated by the New Zealand accepted social fabric, placed me on the outside of the world into which I was born. I didn't know where I belonged, nor did I know where I was going.

Karl Wolfskehl, by his presence alone, made me realise that exile has many shapes. He in an Antipodean back water of Mt. Eden, and myself in the same milieu into which I was born. Hence the sense of togetherness that prevailed in our relationship.

His vast knowledge of literature and the arts was shared with me. He spoke of people he had known in Europe; his only contact with them was by correspondence. Many had suffered the same fate and were scattered throughout the world. His interest in many fields beyond his immediate work, was never dismissive or cursory. His enthusiasm for small things was almost childlike. Everything he touched and saw was of importance to him. He was writing a great deal of poetry and he spoke of the period as being his most prolific. I remember him working on the *Job* or *The Four Mirrors* sequence and his attempts to translate it for me.

A small episode one evening illustrated for me the almost impossible task of translating faithfully the poetic nuances from one language to another. Karl had been reading to me part of the Second Mirror sequence he had been working on that day. The blinded Samson had been brought up from the dungeon and was placed before the rabble who were baying for him to perform. They cried out, and what they cried out was translated by Karl as "Sock him on the jaw." I remarked to him that I didn't think that the line was poetry, Karl's reply was. "But isn't that a good colloquialism." I said it was but ... I cannot remember the line in German. I do not know whether that New Zealand colloquialism has entered the German language.

I sometimes wonder at the incongruities of the human condition, and those meaningless dictates of history that add blind cruelty to lives already over burdened with trying to remain alive and above despair. It was such a dictate of history that placed Karl at the far

end of the earth. The small suburban world of Mt. Eden was a far alien call from Darmstadt and Munich, Stefan George and Hofmannsthal.

In this world of his exile he often remarked on the incongruity of the symbols that reminded him of his European past; the fig tree growing on the lawn outside his window, a cypress trimmed to fit between a wall and a fence; the Bavarian pines standing as exotic intruders in the indigenous green of the New Zealand forest.

He used these symbols of exile and transplantation in many of the poems he wrote during his last ten years. He would read them to me in German and together we would translate them into spoken English. The theme of isolation seemed to dominate the works that he read to me. I believe it was his strength of spirit that sustained him during the ten years of his exile. The Europe he knew was in the grip of a mad man, and no matter what the outcome there, there could be no returning for him. He accepted his exile as an inevitable conclusion to his historic destiny.

I used to visit him mainly in the evenings. I cannot describe those visits in any great detail, nor can I remember the exact words we spoke, nor how the hours passed. I only remember the exhilaration I felt when I left him as I ran down the hill to the tramline. It was as if I had partaken of a heady wine. But then all we had drunk during those evenings was Liptons tea.

Perhaps the poet and novelist Hans Carossa has expressed it better when he said "whoever has spent one hour with Karl Wolfskehl will admit that he went from him in a noble way disquieted, and that he learned through a new mode of discrimination, and took on his way a longing such as one feels for the depths of the universe."

Although, like the fig tree, having been transplanted to an alien soil, he carried with him the genetic language and culture of two great races, German and Jewish. I believe that neither dominated his personality, but that he combined the essence of both, and in so doing, created the man whose memory we are commemorating tonight.

I can not apply any critical assessment to what transpired between us during the meetings I had with him. All I know is that there was an understanding between us, disparate as we were in respect of scholarship and background, that defied analysis. It was only much later, when he was no longer alive, that I realised how much he had given me, and how much of him I took with me throughout all the years.

I am not a scholar, nor am I fluent in the German language. Others have written their treatises on his work. My involvement in his life was one of friendship, and that friendship was of greater importance to me than any academic approach I may have been able to make had I been skilled in the German language. I can only speak of him through an understanding that is above and beyond any form of outright expression.

The war years dragged on and I marked time with them. We did not discuss the war, nor did we speak of politics. The horror that had engulfed his home country seemed for a while forgotten as we joked and laughed about good Teutonic words. I think I was able to divert him for a time from living in the depths of his exile. He was able to tell me that New Zealand was now his adopted country, He was grateful for the asylum that had been offered him. And it as here he told me that he was doing his best work.

He must have been astute enough to realise where the political machine in Germany was heading. In 1933 he left for Italy where he lived until 1938. Realising that the fascist regime there would not long tolerate his presence he took out a map to find the country furthest from Europe where he might find refuge. In numerous letters to friends abroad he spoke with gratitude of the country of his exile.

Before he left Germany he had purchased a large vineyard and mansion (he referred to it as his Schloss) at Kiechlingsbergen where he left his Dutch born wife and daughters knowing they would be safe from persecution. Accompanying him to New Zealand was his faithful and devoted companion, Margot Ruben, who remained with him until his death in 1948. Perhaps not enough has been made of her role during those years. Without her his life would have been much more difficult than it was. The income from the sale of his library before he left Germany was soon exhausted, Margot Ruben's income from her teaching position was able to sustain them both, although at a frugal level.

Memory has been modified by the years. Therefore I cannot claim any great accuracy in respect of some of the details of that period which seems now to be passing like cloud shadows over a foreign field. But emerging from those shadows there are sharply delineated features that stand as signposts on a long journey.

Karl Wolfskehl knew from the history of his people what the human animal was capable of. He saw what had happened to his world as a denouement of an evil play. The last ten years of his life

were spent in virtual isolation. Apart from a few people in Auckland with whom he could converse, and the contact he maintained through correspondence with dispersed friends all over the world, he was alone. In Munich he had been king in his circle, here he was just another foreigner. New Zealand in general did not know who had arrived on these shores.

One of my last memories of him is in a small room in a house in Coronation Road. Outside his window was tethered a racehorse, an investment of his new landlady. In the small cramped room were some of the relics of his past. It was a hot summer day and a heaviness hung over the afternoon. He was looking for a book to give me. His near blindness, coupled with a natural clumsiness made his presence in that room akin to that of a trapped creature. The price he paid for finding that book was a broken lampstand and a smashed teapot.

How he worked and produced his poetry under such conditions might be a lesson for those who aspire to be writers, but who have an eye on a flat in Bloomsbury, or a safe house in Menton, or in a university sinecure.

In 1946 I went to Japan, and for twelve months I was only able to correspond with him. I had joined the ranks of those other friends of his who were scattered around the world. When I returned, my visits to him continued for a little while. I had brought back with me some presents of small carved wooden boxes which I gave to him. His delight was almost childlike as he fondled them, tracing the outlines with his fingers, and holding them close to his eye. He had aged a great deal since I had been away and was far from well. As I sat with him I could see that some of his great strength had gone. He told me that he was still writing but that he was finding it difficult to get enough done each day.

When I told him I had booked a passage to England he was silent for a long time. Then he stood up and paced about. He turned and smiled and said "that is wonderful. For you that is the right thing." He then went to his table where he had been working and picked up a piece of paper and gave it to me. "Here is my four liner for you." It was headed "Dichter dem Dichter". He had also translated the German for me. I think those four lines expressed most succinctly the relationship I had with him. He then gave me a photograph of him standing before a large kauri tree. Inscribed on the back in large writing was "to Jack and always together" and signed K. W. Later that afternoon I took leave of him not realising that I

had seen him for the last time.

In 1988 I was able to visit his home city of Darmstadt, where I attended a reading of his poetry and letters by Paul Hoffmann and Christian Bech. Although I could not understand fully the language, I could hear the lyricism, the music of those words, and I wondered how much of what I was hearing had been spoken to me all those years ago in Mt. Eden. I visited the Wolfskehl Garden, where I wandered through the grounds where his father's house stood before it was bombed to the ground in 1944. There is a children's playground now where the house stood. Through the trees stands the summer house; all that remains of the home where Karl Wolfskehl may have visited. I wandered where I believe he may have wandered, and as I walked through the garden on that warm summer afternoon I could almost believe that I felt the presence of an old friend by my side.

The theme for my address is contained in the Latin words Ultima Thule. Thule according to Polybios, the Greek historian was a land six days sailing north of Britain. Ultima Thule in the legends of Europe came to mean the extreme limit of travel and discovery, the highest or uppermost point or degree attained or attainable.

Karl Wolfskehl, in order to survive the horror that had engulfed his country, looked at a map of the world and chose New Zealand as the place where he might find refuge - the remotest place, the furthest, that which was attainable - his Ultima Thule.

ULTIMA THULE

You saw the grey green land historic fate
had urged you claim as being furthest removed
from a Europe shadowed by death.

You saw the scrub shaded hills roll down
to pencilled lines of sand limned
harshly under Capricorn.

You walked the streets of an alien city
peopled by strangers in the afternoon
and awoke in the morning with memories
of other dreams.

You found this house in a street of boxes
with concrete ribboned lawns and standard roses
set like slaves beyond the gate.

And freedom meant so much to you.

You met some people who'd read Verlaine and Wedekind
and gave you tea and wine and spoke
of growing pains in the Antipodes,
and who forgot to refill your glass.

You saw the fig tree and the cypress trimmed to fit
between your window and the fence.

And in the backyard grew the alien corn.

Transplanted too, but needing not this soil
to give you words or roots. (Your roots in other lands.)
Yet knowing the one sun, feeling the one
all embracing wind.

Measured time needed no clock to mark the days
you spent writing above the tick-tock sleep
of a land not yet touched by time.

You lay within the sound of alien surf
surging back to other lands.
and minutes stood like hours, and sleep
was not enough.
"Aber genug ist nicht genug."

Trembling to read with tired eyes dimmed
by seeing so much of a worlds sorrow,
but seeing some hope in the friends
who never forgot.
Letters from America, Palestine, and Switzerland.

And Munich meant so much to you.

You spoke of Hofmannsthal and Stefan George
To those who might have cared, might have known
the fig tree on the lawn was not a native
from the native bush.

And all this while friends were dying
before their time,
nailed to an iron cross.

Then in the main street of your exile
the bands played our heroes home.
It was over then. Only tears in the eyes
of those who cried to the liar dream
knowing no catharsis could be reached.

Now resting quiet in soil not alien now,
but embracing in its darkness, yielding now
all it withheld when sun shadowed your steps
not silent yet, but echoing where you trod.