



Strangers Arrive

Emigrés and the Arts
in New Zealand, 1930-1980

Leonard Bell

None of us had the faintest idea where we were going [but] during 1938-39 . . . the town [Christchurch] was made strangely interesting for anyone like myself, [with the] scattered arrival of 'the refugees'. All at once there were people among us who were actually from Vienna, or Chemnitz, or Berlin . . . who knew the work of Schoenberg and Gropius.

- Anthony Alpers, 1985

From the 1930s through the 1950s, a substantial number of forced migrants – refugees from Nazism, displaced people after World War II and escapees from Communist countries – arrived in New Zealand from Europe. Among them were an extraordinary group of artists and writers, photographers and architects whose European modernism radically reshaped the arts in this country.

In words and pictures, *Strangers Arrive* tells their story. Ranging across the arts from photographer Irene Koppel to art dealer Kees Hos, architect Imric Porsolt to writer Antigone Kefala, Leonard Bell takes us inside New Zealand's bookstores and coffeehouses, studios and galleries to introduce us to a remarkable body of artistic work and to ask key questions. How were migrants received by New Zealanders? How did displacement and settlement in New Zealand transform their work? How did the arrival of European modernists intersect with the burgeoning nationalist movement in the arts in New Zealand?

Strangers Arrive introduces us to a talented group of 'aliens' who were critical catalysts for change in New Zealand culture.

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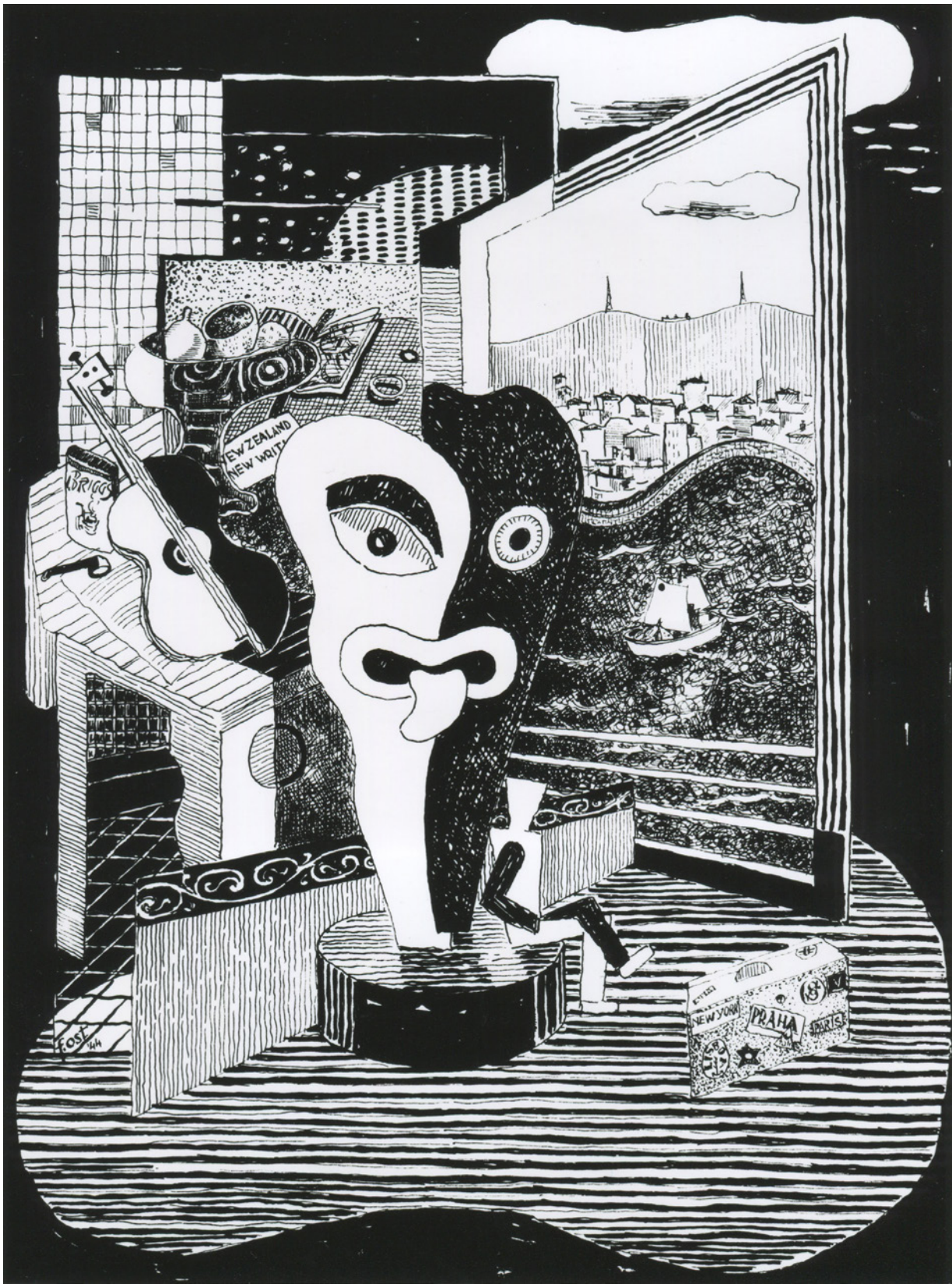
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CHAPTER ONE

Alien Registration

None of us had the faintest idea where we were going [but] during 1938–39 . . . the town [Christchurch] was made strangely interesting for anyone like myself, [with the] scattered arrival of ‘the refugees’. All at once there were people among us who were actually from Vienna, or Chemnitz, or Berlin . . . who knew the work of Schoenberg and Gropius.

– Antony Alpers (1985)

Tikis: Impressions in black and white was published in Wellington in 1946. Its author, Frederick Ost (1905–85), a Prague-trained polymath, and his wife, Greta Ostova, a professional cellist, had landed in New Zealand via Poland and England as refugees from Nazism in 1940.¹

Tikis reproduced seven of Ost’s large black pen-and-ink drawings. One is titled *A Stranger Arrives* (1944). There are several intersecting pictures within the composition, at the centre of which is a statuesque tiki figure; a small manikin sits at its base. Otherwise we see an internally framed harbourscape (recognisably Wellington, the site of arrival), parts of other pictures (abstract, constructivist and cubist), a guitar, bits of a vase, and other objects, such as a suitcase labelled *New York*, *Praha* (Prague), *Lisbon*, *Paris*. They signal where the stranger came from. The various parts abut one another obliquely; their borders indistinct or broken. They make up an assemblage of spatial dislocations; an image marked by fractures. *A Stranger Arrives* stands as a visual metaphor of the experiences, travel and travail of ‘aliens’, as refugees from Nazism and people from non-English-speaking countries were officially classified in New Zealand. Ost’s picture also exemplifies how displacement produces new configurations.

The Palestinian-American academic Edward Said claimed that ‘[m]odern Western culture is in large part the work of exiles, émigrés and refugees’.² Creative ‘aliens’ in the mid-twentieth century contributed to cultural and social developments in Britain and America out of all proportion to their numbers.³ *Strangers Arrive* explores the cultural impact of forced migrants in New Zealand – those refugees from Nazism and the threat of war

OPPOSITE Frederick Ost,
A Stranger Arrives, 1944,
pen and ink on paper,
285 x 210 mm.

who arrived in the 1930s, and the survivors and displaced people (DPs) who arrived after World War II.

What impacts did these 'strangers' have on New Zealand's culture and society? How prominent were they as agents of change? Which of their ideas and practices were influential, which were not, and why? How were the 'aliens' received by the locals? What roles did they play in the far-reaching cultural transformations and artistic developments that occurred in New Zealand from the 1940s to the 1970s and beyond?

Even in a small country a comprehensive coverage of refugee impacts in all spheres of activity would require several volumes. *Strangers Arrive* is partial. It focuses mainly, but not exclusively, on the visual arts and on writing about visual culture: photography, painting, sculpture, graphic art, crafts, architecture and planning. I focus on some key characters: photographers Frank Hofmann, Irene Koppel and Richard Sharell; artists Ost, Patrick Hayman, Jan Michels and Kees Hos; Continental film distributor and theatrical impresario Natan Scheinwald; arts writers Imric Porsolt and Gerda Eichbaum (later Bell); architects Helmut Einhorn, Henry Kulka, Frederick Newman (Neumann), Tibor Donner, Porsolt and Vladimir Čačala. Others, more difficult to

place, have important roles, too: town planner and writer Gerhard Rosenberg; print collector and advocate Walter Auburn; artist and teacher Rudi Gopas; writer Antigone Kefala; photographers Bettina (Lily Inge Byttiner), Maja Blumenfeld and Franz Barta; craftsmen and designers Edzer (Bob) Roukema and Felix Schwimmer; architect Ernst Gerson; bookseller and writer Robert Goodman; collector and musician Ernst Specht. Probably the best-known creative 'aliens' who were active in New Zealand in the mid-twentieth century are artist, craftsman and polemicist Theo Schoon, architect and planner Ernst Plischke and poet Karl Wolfskehl. Because they have now been written about extensively it would be redundant to foreground them; nevertheless, they make periodic appearances.

The work and careers of these individuals exemplify not just the impacts of émigrés and the problems they faced, but also the tensions and complexities of their encounters with locals. A few of these 'aliens' are well known, even if little written about, but most are relatively obscure. Some might be regarded as minor. Yet close scrutiny shows that they played key roles in cultural change: as seminal triggers, as innovators in particular fields, or as inspirational figures.



Unknown photographer,
Frederick Ost and
Greta Ostova, 1950.





LEFT Photograph of Ernst Plischke, *New Zealand Listener*, 5 January 1945.



RIGHT Bettina (Lily Inge Byttiner), Karl Wolfskehl writing at his desk, c. 1945.

After World War I and the Russian Revolution the poet Osip Mandelstam observed, 'In our day Europeans have been hurled out of their biographies, like balls from the pockets of billiard tables.'⁴ With the Nazi accession to power in 1933, the *Anschluss* in Austria and Munich Settlement in 1938, and then the invasion of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, the numbers of people fleeing their countries became a flood.

About 1100 refugees from the Nazis reached New Zealand before and during World War II.⁵ They were predominantly Jewish, or of Jewish descent, and had been forced out of Europe – from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia mainly, but also from Hungary, Poland and the Netherlands. After the war and into the 1950s several thousand more survivors of Nazism, relatives of earlier refugees, and DPs from Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic States fleeing communist totalitarianism landed up in New Zealand.⁶ New Zealand governments in the 1950s also supported immigration from the Netherlands. Many of those Dutch migrants were getting as far away as possible from the trauma and devastations of the war and they, too, were registered as 'aliens'.⁷

The arrival of refugees, DPs and forced migrants, mostly from Continental Europe, changed the visual arts in New Zealand in two primary ways. The new arrivals transmitted European modernist and metropolitan ideas and practices, offering alternatives to the traditional Anglo-oriented visual arts and prevalent preoccupation with national identity. They also played crucial roles in introducing and enhancing the standing of traditional European cultural practices. Refugees and DPs' cultural baggage included a strong belief in the essential social roles of the arts and the need to balance the traditional and the modern. They were either ahead of dominant local thinking or stimulated nascent cultural developments.

'Aliens' were critical catalysts for change and innovation in New Zealand culture. Fred Turnovsky, a refugee from Czechoslovakia, a major benefactor of the arts and long-time Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council member, succinctly characterised the Central European refugees from multilingual and multi-ethnic societies as 'hybrids', the 'yeast that makes a society interesting'.⁸



Frank Hofmann, *Caducity*, 1955.

CHAPTER TWO

Taking Pictures

Just as one particular sound or smell can stand, in our minds, as a whole episode in our lives, so one pictorial detail can serve to represent a complex experience.

—Frank Hofmann, *Photographics New Zealand* (1961)

Georg Simmel argued that ‘strangers’ who come to a society from elsewhere often favour the ‘intermediary trades’, such as photography.¹ Enhanced by the ease with which the medium crossed geographical and cultural boundaries, camera work attracted many émigrés and refugees.² If you were German-speaking with Central European qualifications in 1930s–40s New Zealand, it was much easier to set yourself up as a photographer than as a lawyer or doctor. Refugees who either were professional photographers in Europe or became so in New Zealand include Frank Hofmann, Lily Inge Byttiner, Maja Blumenfeld, Hans and Nina (Annemarie) Golding, Irene Koppel, Richard Sharell, Theo Schoon, Carlotta Munz, Marianne Haiselden (née Opel), Hannah Easterbrook-Smith (née Henkel) and Franz Barta.³

Hofmann, Koppel and Sharell, in particular, were key figures in the transmission of ideas and practices from Continental European ‘New Photography’ into New Zealand during a period when most photography here was traditional or pictorialist. Photo-historian Bill Main, for example, called Sharell a ‘pioneering photographer . . . in this country, who brought European approaches to photography’ that were otherwise unknown among most local practitioners.⁴ Main added that his work (and this applies to Hofmann’s and Koppel’s also) ‘will serve to remind us how insular we were in the period between the two World Wars, when the “Modern Movement” in photography held sway’: ‘Professional portrait photographers and photo-journalists’ here, in contrast, ‘were ‘hogtied to tradition’, resistant to new methods.⁵ Luminaries of New Photography, such as László Moholy-Nagy, André Kertész, Herbert Bayer, Man Ray, Albert Renger-Patzsch, Karl Blossfeldt and Werner Mantz meant nothing in New Zealand.⁶ Interwar New Photography embraced several kinds of innovative work, notably ‘street’ photography and constructivist formalism. Advances in camera technology, especially the invention in Germany of the small Leica, enabled candid,

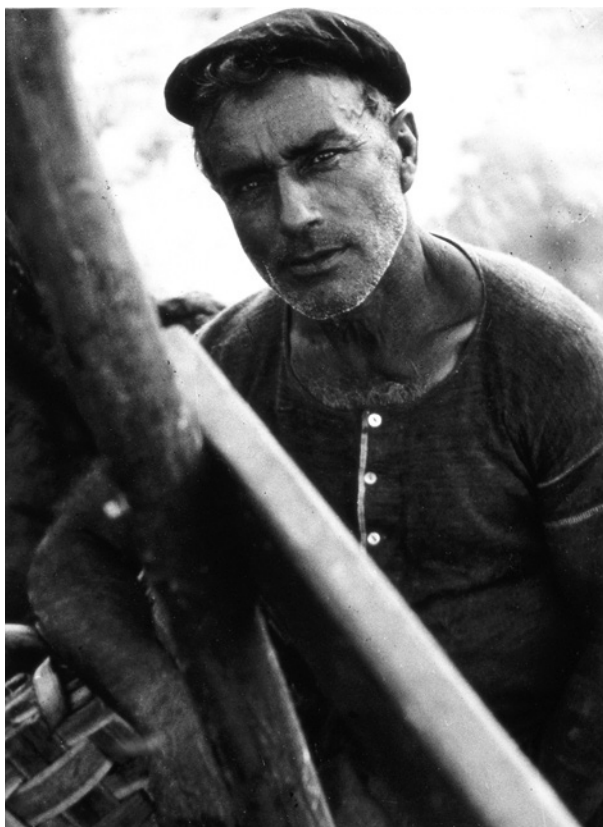


rapid, informal, socially realistic street photography, which revolutionised photojournalism and portraiture in Central Europe from the mid-1920s, and in Britain and the USA from the 1930s. Constructivist formalism involved explorations of the medium's 'language': structure, striking graphic design, pattern, the play of light and shadow, unusual angles.⁷ Refugee photographers, informed by New Photography, had a profound impact, especially on photojournalism, architectural photography, portraiture and art photography, indeed the very recognition that art could be made with a camera.

In late 1936, Alfred Eisenstadt, a German-Jewish photojournalist and founding photographer for *Life* magazine, wrote to Irmgard Koppel (1911–2004) in London.⁸ He invited her to send genre pictures and newsworthy images to his Pix Publishing Inc., the New York photo agency that he and two other refugees, Leon Daniel and Cecile Kutschuk, had started. Eisenstadt spelt out terms of payment and assumed that Koppel's work met his publishing standards on the basis of reports from London.⁹

Koppel did not send any photographs to Eisenstadt, since she may well have just left for New Zealand. Irmgard became Irene in Wellington, and her surname changed (except for her photography) after marriage to local journalist Leslie Verry in 1943. Koppel was an active professional photographer from 1937 until the early 1960s. Her portraiture, architectural photographs and photo-journalism appeared in a wide variety of magazines and newspapers. From the mid-1950s, with changing family circumstances, Koppel restricted her work to portraiture. Soon her photographs were forgotten – surprisingly, given their high quality.

Irmgard Koppel (Irene Koppel), glassware, c. 1932.



LEFT Irene Koppel,
Naples, 1935.



RIGHT Irene Koppel,
Otto Fein (London),
1934.

Koppel, her father a doctor and mother a painter, had trained in the studios of two professional women photographers in Hamburg.¹⁰ State-sponsored anti-Semitism forced her emigration to Britain in 1934, sponsored by the Quakers, with a visa for domestic service. Initially she worked for the Warburg Institute, the prestigious art-historical research centre founded by Aby Warburg, which had shifted from Hamburg to London in 1933 along with six of its personnel and library.¹¹ There she photographed book-plates and mediaeval manuscripts. This was part of the project of another refugee, Walter Gernsheim (brother of the celebrated photographer, historian and collector of photographs, Helmut) to document manuscripts and prints in public collections. What became the Gernsheim Photographical Corpus of Drawings was a seminal tool for art-historical research.¹²

At the Warburg Institute, Koppel and her mother, Katarina, knew Fritz Saxl, the director, and Gertrud Bing, the assistant director. Bing advised Irmgard about job possibilities in New Zealand. Interestingly, Bing herself was strongly attracted to the idea of a New Zealand 'as far away as possible'.¹³ The institute incorporated photographs into its work much more comprehensively than did other academic institutions. Consequently, photographs were a primary means of connecting scholars, disseminating research findings, enhancing fine arts appreciation generally, and educating students. Koppel played a small part in this important development. She trained further with Otto Fein, the institute's photographer and book-binder. Koppel's picture of Fein in extreme close-up, face cropped, viewpoint oblique, is a classic Central European New Photography portrait. The works of modernists such as Man

Ray, Florence Henri, Germaine Krull and, especially, Lucia Moholy come to mind, while Koppel's work overall manifests close knowledge of several kinds of innovative modernist work.¹⁴

László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946), the Bauhaus multidisciplinary artist and theorist of New Vision (see Chapter 3), observed that '[t]he Photographer can scarcely find a more fascinating task than that of providing a pictorial record of modern city life'.¹⁵ Many leading photojournalists in London were Central and Eastern European refugees from Nazism – Kurt Hübschmann (later Hutton), Hans Baumann (later Felix H. Man), Wolfgang Suschitzky, Cyril Arapoff, Bill Brandt, to name a few. Moholy-Nagy also worked in this mode in London – for instance, in his *Street Markets of London* (1936). *Picture Post*, the most important British pictorial periodical of its day, was founded in 1938 by Stefan Lorant, the 'godfather' of photojournalism, and yet another refugee from Nazism. He had previously started the *Weekly Illustrated* in London in 1934.¹⁶

Imgard Koppel's work exemplified street photography. Her photo-narratives of street and park life, in London's Caledonian Market, Trafalgar Square and Hampstead Heath, show all sorts of people in these places in the manner of Weimar Republic pictorial journalism. From a 1935 trip to Italy, her photographs of buildings, squares and streets, as well as close-ups of ordinary people in streets, markets and harboursides in Naples, Capri and Sicily, exemplify New Photography. Her work was also informed by constructivist formalism. That her photographs were modern was often signalled by the very choice of objects – as in her photographs of Bauhaus-like glassware, in which simple, light, modernist forms, rather like laboratory glass, are set, or float, against a dark ground.

Koppel brought the practice of street photography to New Zealand. She landed in Wellington in January 1937, her mother following in 1938. Given New Zealand's restrictive refugee policy, she was fortunate that Lawrence Nathan from Auckland's well-known Jewish family and business sponsored her, on Gertrud Bing's recommendation.¹⁷ Koppel photographed the outstanding Nathan collection of Chinese ceramics. Hers is the sole surviving documentation of the collection, which was later dispersed, with only one piece remaining in New Zealand.¹⁸ Otherwise Koppel worked initially at Kodak, then with Spencer Digby, who ran the leading commercial studio in Wellington. She remained there until late 1939, producing studio portraits and assignment work for periodicals such as *Freelance*, *Weekly News*, *NZ Truth*, *Evening Post* and *Sports Post*. Much of her work was credited to Digby (she called him a hard taskmaster).¹⁹ That rankled, and many of her later photographs were marked 'Please acknowledge'. She shifted to a Mr Blake's studio, where she did everything, before setting up her own studio at 351A The Terrace in 1941. While there were other professional women photographers – Amy Harper in Auckland, Thelma Kent in Christchurch and Eileen Deste in Wellington, for instance – they were generally secondary



Irene Koppel,
Caledonian Market,
London, c. 1935.



TOP Irene Koppel,
Sunbather (Italy), 1935.

ABOVE Irene Koppel,
Members of the
Order of St John
demonstrating first aid,
1939–45.

players in a male-dominated profession. Setting up her own studio made Koppel unusual in New Zealand. By contrast, in pre-Nazi Germany and Austria there were numerous independent women photographers; this was a measure of the social mobility photographic work enabled, especially when coupled with the strong feminist currents that advanced professional career opportunities for women in the Weimar Republic and ‘Red Vienna’ (the city under Socialist government during 1920–34).²⁰

For her periodical assignment work Koppel photographed wedding groups, people at race meetings and government functions for the Social Page, as well as newsworthy events and social phenomena. The Karitane Hospital and its manufactory in Berhampore, evacuee children, earthquake-damaged buildings in Wellington and Masterton in 1942, the Home Guard in training, and women at work – operating trams, for example – were among her subjects. Koppel photographed parades and eminent visitors to Wellington, such as US first lady Eleanor Roosevelt and the English playwright, actor and (as is now known) British intel-

ligence operative Noël Coward, who shocked Wellington’s mayoress with his racy anecdotes. Koppel shot Coward, close to the front plane, from below, so that he stands, a tad imperious, holding forth above us. Whether acting or himself, whoever that was, is impossible to know. Otherwise Koppel’s bread-and-butter work lay in wedding photographs and portraits, such as her reverberant image of a woman caught at the races. She looks directly back at us, her slight smile a touch enigmatic, as if she has a secret. The names of many fellow refugees and their children, members of Wellington’s Jewish community and American servicemen feature in her records.²¹ She pictures Maurice Gottlieb, the prominent Zionist advocate and helper of refugees, in an intimate and tender moment with his child; a key to his nature. An astute portraitist, Koppel got a vivid sense of an individual’s being or predicament.

One of the first professionals in New Zealand equipped with a Leica, she was at the forefront of developments in photojournalism, in particular the creation of photo essays made up of spreads of multiple images, with short captions, over a page or two of the magazine, from the late 1930s into the war years. Besides Digby’s, her work appeared most frequently in the *Freelance* and *Weekly News* until 1945. Not much photo essay work was practised here





OPPOSITE Irene Koppel produced several photo essays for the *New Zealand Free Lance* of women working in formerly men's jobs such as tram drivers and postmen during the war, 1942.

TOP LEFT Irene Koppel, Noël Coward in Wellington, 1941.

TOP RIGHT Irene Koppel, Marcus Gottlieb, Wellington, 1940. Gottlieb, a leader of the New Zealand Zionist Federation in Wellington, was notable for assisting refugees from Nazism.

ABOVE LEFT Irene Koppel, Woman at races, Trentham, c. 1942.

ABOVE RIGHT Irene Koppel, Shop-window, Wellington, c. 1941.

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