

LESSONS FROM AN ÉMIGRÉ PHOTOGRAPHER, FRANZ BARTA

Max Oettli



Figure 1: The Franz Barta signature on a presentation box (courtesy of the Hocken Library).

ÉMIGRÉ PHOTOGRAPHER AND MID-20TH CENTURY STUDIO PRACTICE

Franz Barta was active as a photographer in Dunedin from 1944 to 1975, and we have the privilege of having a substantial archive of his work in the Hocken Library. This archive is of interest on two levels: Franz Barta as an émigré photographer and concerning studio practice mid-20th century.

Firstly, the archive provides us with a very clear reading of how an émigré photographer established himself in this country. Born in 1907, Barta was of Hungarian-Austrian origin, and arrived here in 1939. He acquired an established Dunedin Studio Esquilant in 1944, and started a practice as a portrait and general commercial photographer. He would be identified as a “foreigner” and émigré photographers are a significant and important group within this category in New Zealand. Marti Friedlaender comes to mind, and more specifically Frank Hofman, Irene Koppel, Inge Byttiner, Gregory Rhiethmayer and maybe Theo Schoon.¹

These photographers have all left their traces on history’s whiteboard, and brought a precious asset to our country,

broadening it culturally, and to some extent modifying the practice of the art of photography. Barta, whose background was partly Jewish, left Austria after the Nazi invasion, and was subsequently joined by his fiancée Hedy. His enthusiasm and experience as a mountaineer stood him in good stead. So, although being a “friendly enemy alien” under police observation he found work as a guide on the Fox Glacier; they called him the “Swiss Guide” complete with (somewhat incongruous) Lederhosen! He and his wife set up a darkroom there and photographed clients on the mountains.

Secondly, looking at the archive in the Hocken Library we are able to get a very clear reading of how a commercial studio worked at this time, the kind of work and clientele a busy photographer would be dealing with and the kind and quality of the production through his day to day activity. Given the crisis photography has gone through since then, this aspect of the collection is in itself worthy of study on the level of the history of the practice.

Hedy and Franz (then with two children²) moved to Dunedin in 1944 and purchased a Victorian-era Studio Esquilant.³ There was plenty of scope for updating. Barta rapidly acquired a reputation as a fine photographer, specialising in portraits in the manner of the Canadian Armenian Yousuf Karsh who sought a psychological depth and verity through a careful set up of lighting and a patient understanding of his subject’s intelligence and presence.

Franz’s studio, at the corner of Princes and Dowling Streets, soon became something of a landmark. His distinctive sweeping signature was on the outside of the building where the studio occupied the top floor. His staff included the then usual team of darkroom personnel and retouchers that formed part of a mid-20th century photography business. In later years, his wife looked after the reception, selecting sizes and frames, dispatching, and accounts.

Portraiture was the foundation of a reputation that extended throughout Otago and beyond. A portrait by Franz carried a certain premium in the days when professional photography was highly valued.



Figure 2: Two studio portraits from negative scans (courtesy of the Hocken Library).

This format was rather more suited to males, though in this case the woman’s independence and self-assurance is well highlighted by it. The originals were 4 x 5 inch, and the prints would, of course, be considerably richer on chloro-bromide (gold toned) paper.

In my arrogant 1970s youth we called the Karsh style "Stuffed Owl", and looked at a more spontaneous and quicker portrait style exemplified by Kertesz, Brandt, Newman, even Cartier-Bresson. We dreaded the must and dust and hot tungsten atmosphere, the fine rendering and the concentration of these "Dickie Bird watching Dead", as Dylan Thomas called them in *Under Milk Wood*.

Barta's best known portrait is probably of his countryman Sir Karl Popper, the famous philosopher who was already a friend when he also immigrated (first to Christchurch) before the war. Now Popper, as a quick Google search demonstrates, was no stranger to photo studios and countless photographs of him exist, as befitted his importance as a major contributor to the course of the last century's philosophical study. Contemporaries in exile, and friends over a long period, he and Barta would have chatted in German during his studio session and the two large prints that are in the Hocken show a relaxed, slightly ironic pose on the part of the subject, which the man behind the lens captures perfectly. Why aren't these in a databased archive?

Barta always insisted on working in the studio, including when photographing wedding parties. Later in his career, because he found that the members of a wedding party would adopt different personae, he refused to do weddings for people unless they had previously been clients. Sporting groups, arrayed in their customary rows, were also a rarity.⁴

From the late 1950s he also did a lot of work for commercial clients. These included food processor Greggs, for whom he photographed vegetables and fruit for labels. Another significant client who had an important place in the region at the time was Fontana Knitwear. Colour was available and enthusiastically used. And, at last we see some outdoor location work: Tony Barta remembers taking an afternoon off from school only to encounter his father posing a knitwear model on the golf course.

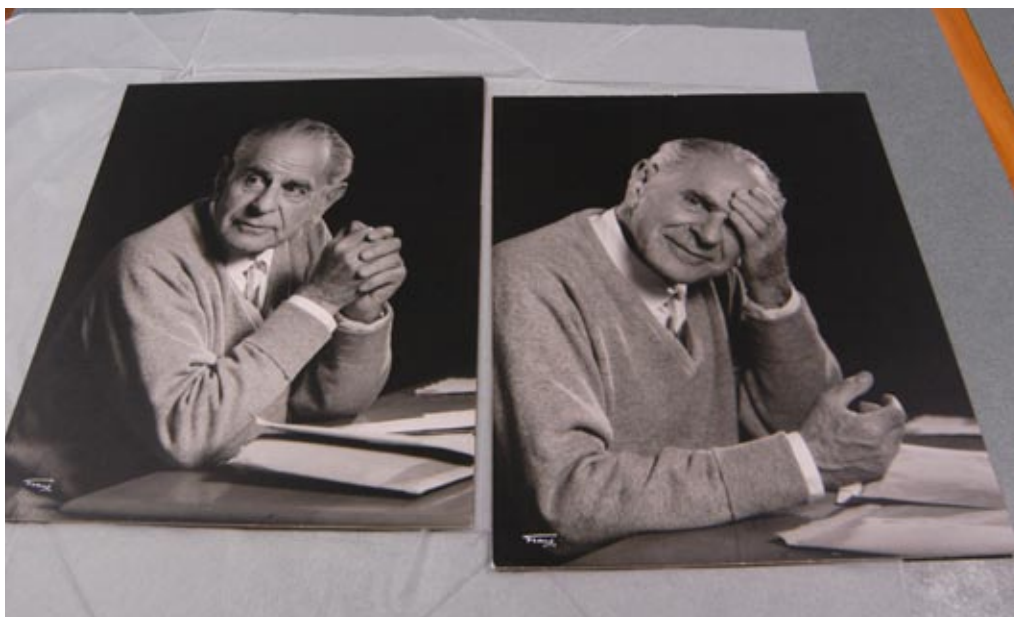


Figure 3: Sir Karl Popper, two Agfa Protriga prints (courtesy of the Hocken Library).

Barta also did a good body of work related to architecture. He seems to have cornered the market for Dunedin's grandiose Victorian and Edwardian monumental architecture. His views of the Otago University Registry building and Dunedin Town Hall with its original tower exist in countless forms.⁵



Figure 4: Alison Holst, early 1960s, on DNTV (courtesy of the Hocken Library).

Many of his photographs of contemporary buildings were for a building material manufacturer, Vibrapac, one of the pioneers of concrete block construction (figure 5). This would be a superb register for someone working closely on the history of NZ architecture.

Other work was presumably for architects and clients. There is a fine set on the Moana Pool in Dunedin with its splendid reinforced concrete structure, and also of the award-winning Te Anau Lodge. The work was usually large format with a careful correction of perspective, and with a good use of daylight and artificial light for interiors.

In 1967, after his children were grown up, he moved his business to a roomy house in Pitt Street, still under the name "Franz Studio", expanding the space on the ground floor to enable the business to have the room it required for displaying examples of his portraiture in the foyer.⁶

THE HOCKEN LIBRARY ARCHIVE

This archive is housed in some 30 boxes and contains, at a rough estimate, some 40 – 60,000 objects, mainly photographic negatives and prints, mostly boxed and sleeved. Some of the prints are obviously "second run" from orders.⁷ The negatives, from the late 1940s to May 1975, are mainly 4 x 5 inch cut film with a few glass plates, and some colour works starting in the late 1950s as far as I can date them from the boxes they are housed in. There are some 5 x 7 inch items, mostly in colour, and some 120 rollfilm negatives.⁸ There is no 35mm work.⁹

When it comes to the archive¹⁰ of Franz Barta's work, we are looking at a fairly typical production of a portrait and general studio of the post World War II years anywhere in the world. But the collection has a strong local flavour and should be a valuable research tool. We are fortunate that the collection boasts a handwritten index of exemplary clarity referring to the names of clients, obviously compiled at the time the work was done and filed in two "number" books. Assuming that almost all of the clientele was local, some kind of transfer of this to a simple database would be an enormous storehouse of memory for the population of Dunedin.



Figure 5: *Vibrapac Paradise* (courtesy of the Hocken Library).



Figure 6: *Moana Pool* (courtesy of the Hocken Library).

Max Oetli lived in New Zealand for 20 years. He studied at the University of Auckland and taught at Elam School of Fine Arts. He was an important New Zealand photographer in the 1969-75 period and then spent 32 years in Geneva, teaching mainly Architecture students. He is now principal lecturer in Photography at the Otago Polytechnic School of Art.

- 1 The best general work on German (and Austrian) immigrants in New Zealand in the 20th Century would be James Bade's compilation *Out of the Shadow of War: The German Connection with New Zealand in the Twentieth Century* (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1998). An article by Leonard Bell mentions Koppel, Byttner (whose Bettina studio was still active when I arrived in Auckland), William Sharrel (Schascherrl), and Gregory Rhiethmayer whom I had the privilege to know. Friedlaender is well documented; Frank Hofmann is mentioned in William Main and John B Turner, *NZ Photography from 1840 to the Present* (Auckland: PhotoForum, 1993) and in the more recent work by David Eggesston *Into the Light: A History of New Zealand Photography* (Nelson: Craig Potton, 2006). Theo Schoon has been looked at by Francis Pound in *The Space Between, Māori Motifs in Modernist NZ* (Auckland: Workshop Press, 1994), and extensively written about by Michael Dunn, notably in *Art New Zealand 1992-1994*.
- 2 I am very grateful to Marie Hinkley-Barta and Tony Barta who were kind enough to read through a draft of this text and make valuable corrections as well as providing some personal reminiscences.
- 3 It would seem that some of the Esquilant negatives were part of the acquisition; the Barta holdings in the Hocken archives contain work from the 1880s to the 1920s.
- 4 Early on, Franz made the mistake of sending an account to a rugby club that thought he would be glad to do the team photo for its public relations benefit. New Zealand sport culture takes a bit of learning, ask any European immigrant.
- 5 Notably in the John Stacpoole and Peter Beavan book *Architecture 1920-1970* (Wellington: Reed, 1972), the totality of photographs of Otago buildings are laconically credited to "Franz".
- 6 Tony Barta adds: "There were also display cases at the entrance to the City Hotel, then the classiest establishment in Dunedin."
- 7 These would be the only documents whose state of conservation gives rise to some worry as some photos have a very strong acid smell, and could contaminate work around them.
- 8 Tony Barta again: "In this format he experimented extensively with 'stereo' photography to be viewed in 3D, particularly for Arthur Ellis Ltd, makers of sleeping bags for the Everest expedition and feather quilts for suburban homes. These were photographed on a special camera with two lenses, now a great rarity."
- 9 Again according to Barta's son: "There exist hundreds of slides (recording holidays and travels) loaded into magazines for family viewing. He was an early admirer of the very small Rollei and Olympus cameras."
- 10 The archival numbers for the images used courtesy of the Hocken Library in this review are S08/087 a, b, c, d, e, f, g. I gratefully acknowledge the Hocken Library for usage of these images.