# On first looking into Loewe's papers

**Michael Piggott**

In an obituary for the June 1974 issue of *The University Gazette*, 'D.J.' noted that Fritz Loewe 'founded this University's department of Meteorology' and for 25 years he 'helped train many present well-known Australian meteorologists, conducted research into both glaciology and meteorology (he was a co-discoverer of the Southern Tropical Jet Stream), and achieved international recognition for the department.'[1]

What follows aims to profile one of our most important collections and the man behind that obituary's masterly summary. Who was Loewe; what is in his collection; why is it significant; and what is its contemporary relevance? Finally, I want to share some reflections, if not a Keatsean sonnet, prompted by looking systematically into the 70 or so boxes of the Loewe collection in the University of Melbourne Archives.

## Life

If the name Fritz Loewe[2] is recognised at all (and not confused with the composer of Broadway fame), most likely it would be because of Greenland. In particular, for his part in a famous and tragic expedition crossing western Greenland in 1930–1931, and to a lesser degree for his before and after involvements there,

Johannes Georgi, Photograph of Ernst Sorge and Fritz Loewe in their ice cave at *Eismitte* station in Greenland, Christmas 1930, photographic print, 16.7 x 11.0 cm. UMA 88/160 (oversized items), Loewe Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.

In *Greenland journey* (p. 195; see note 4), Sorge, a Berlin secondary school teacher and *Eismitte's* glaciologist, describes this minus 10°C scene as follows: 'Christmas was celebrated in simple fashion but with sincere feeling. A box was set up beside Loewe's bunk and three candles set on it served for Christmas illuminations, while cheerful colour was provided by artificial flowers and two-coloured prints and boxes of sweets, confectionery and fruit. We gave out Christmas letters from our people, gave each other presents of small books and read aloud.' The sleeping bag under Loewe is also in the University of Melbourne Archives.

the 'practice run' in 1929–1930 and as adviser in 1932 to the movie based on the previous expedition, *S.O.S. Eisberg* starring Leni Riefenstahl.[3] This was based on the real life story of the 1930–1931 expedition which was led by Alfred Wegener, the German meteorologist whose exploration and research 'launched a revolution in the earth sciences' including development of continental drift theory,[4] and whom Loewe temporarily replaced as leader after he perished. Loewe was the expedition's meteorologist, an expertise which belied a classical and legal education and formal qualifications in physical education, geography and physics (the basis of his Doctor of Philosophy awarded in 1923). The features of those Greenland involvements—strenuous physical and often dangerous engagement to collect scientific data for subsequent scholarly reports—had already been evident in expeditions and travels in the 1920s in the Atlantic, central Anatolia and Iran.

After the early 1930s, Fritz Loewe's life (as well as those of his wife and two young daughters) was dislocated, beginning with dismissal as a Jew from the German Meteorological Service, employment with the Scott Polar Research Institute, Cambridge, and appointment in 1937, initially as a senior lecturer in meteorology, to the University of Melbourne's Department of Natural Philosophy. Even during his tenure there, until his retirement in 1960 he was often on the move. For example there were three expeditions to Antarctica, two representing Australia on French research trips, and a major UNESCO sponsored consultancy to Pakistan's meteorological service. After so-called retirement, there were several more visits to Greenland, further research papers, and a long association as a visiting professorial fellow with the Institute for Polar Studies at Ohio State University.

## The collection

The Fritz Loewe collection in the University of Melbourne Archives comprises seven accessions, the transfer of the most important negotiated by the Archives with Loewe's family in the decade following his death in 1974. Collectively the accessions include all the formats traditionally found in the papers of a prominent academic in an era before email, excel spreadsheets and digital cameras. They include letters, postcards, cablegrams and aerograms, and a few copies of replies; hand-written and typed drafts of verse, articles and lectures, some with glass slides to illustrate them; photography of considerable variety including prints, negatives and 35mm slides; diaries and notebooks; research data, again of considerable variety; personal documents and certificates; printed and near print material including offprints, theses, tourist brochures, maps, newspapers and newsletters; and a small number of objects.

The correspondence, easily numbering several thousand letters and many in German, covers a number of subjects impossible to list here. Broadly however it is divided between scholarly associations and the private sphere, the former revealing the span of Loewe's academic and scholarly networks. His correspondents included many of the world's leading scientists and research institutes specialising in glaciology, meteorology, geography and polar studies. Most, in the collection at least, were received after his Melbourne appointment in the late 1930s until well into the 1960s. They feature long sequences with colleagues who became life-long friends, including Alfred's brother Kurt Wegener, and the German meteorologist Johannes Georgi, a fellow member of both the 1929 and 1930–1931 Greenland expeditions and with whom he shared an ice cave at the *Eismitte* station. It was while there that Georgi, without anaesthetic

Loewe in the observer's seat about to take off in an open, metal-clad, World War I vintage Junkers monoplane, 1926, photographic print, 11.8 x 16.4 cm. UMA 88/160, box 70, Loewe Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.

Between 1925 and 1928, as scientific leader of the air division of the Prussian Aeronautical Observatory, Loewe made more than 500 research flights to over 20,000 feet, studying atmospheric conditions but also supporting the Meteorological Bureau in supplying forecasts for air traffic.

and using only a pocket-knife and tinsnips, amputated nine of Loewe's badly frostbitten toes to prevent gangrene.[5] Among Loewe's Australian correspondents are such renowned Antarctic names as Sir Douglas Mawson and Dr Phillip Law; his colleague (then successor) in the Department of Meteorology and coincidentally one of the 'Dunera Boys', Dr Uwe Radok; and the so-called 'father of long-range weather forecasting in Australia', Inigo Jones.

Born into a Jewish legal family in Berlin in 1895, Loewe's childhood and education are well covered in the collection through photographs, certificates and printed material, while his private life is revealed essentially through family letters, spread over many decades and quite numerous given that he was often separated from his kin for long periods. They provide a view of those personal relationships which often go unrecorded because the parties are living or working together and have no need to write to each other, particularly with his wife Else and mother Hedwig. One can also glimpse instances of his religious beliefs in action as a liberal Jew through correspondence with Rabbi Dr Herman Sanger of Melbourne's Temple Beth Israel, in letters to the Melbourne Jewish press, and in his championing of particular Jewish refugee cases during and after World War II.

The collection has dozens of small gems for the diligent researcher, each in its way as remarkable as the many sidelights of Fritz Loewe's life. Thus there is correspondence with Dr Fritz Wagner, a meteorologist with the armed merchant cruiser *Kormoran* which sank HMAS *Sydney* in 1941. Wagner was subsequently interned at Tatura Detention Centre and Loewe arranged with him to conduct weather research of value to local fruit growers. Another correspondent from Tatura, Dr Radok, was to become on release his technical assistant and eventually successor as head in the Meteorology Department. Thirdly, there are papers about Loewe's measurement work as an official 'wind steward' at the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne.[6]

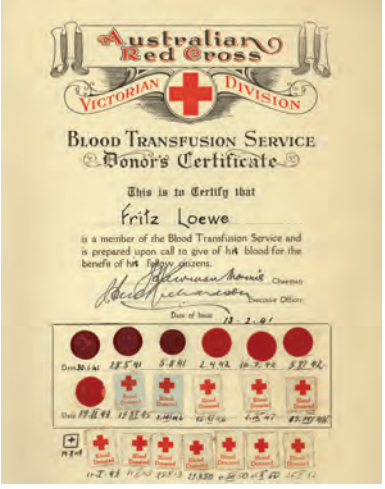
## Significance

The importance of the Loewe collection rests firstly on the depth to which it documents his astonishing life and career and associations.

Central to these is the polar involvements already mentioned and for which he received the highest British and German honours, the Polar Medal and Karl Weyprecht Medal; his World War I experiences in the German army, and for which he received the Iron Cross First Class; and his suffering of dismissal and internment as a German Jew in the mid-1930s. Based purely on the German component of the collection, in 2006 the Alfred Wegener Institute for Polar and Marine Research (Bremerhaven, Germany) assessed the collection as an 'immense inheritance' and 'of outstanding significance, in a general historical (political, social, cultural) as well as in a scientific-technical sense (evolution of meteorology and polar research)'.[7]

Loewe's Australian associations equally tie him to major historical developments, including his recruitment to Melbourne as a Carnegie Fellow by the then new Vice-Chancellor Raymond Priestley to found the Department of Meteorology, as well as his direct involvements in policy politics regarding the funding and research roles of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, the Bureau of Meteorology, various Commonwealth government departments and the Australian National Antarctic Research Expeditions in its early years.

Secondly, the collection's subject matter, fundamentally, is about what is one of today's defining and critical issues, climate change. Loewe's life's


Australian Red Cross
Victorian Division
Blood Transfusion Service
Donor's Certificate
This is to Certify that
Fritz Loewe
is a member of the Blood Transfusion Service and is prepared upon call to give of his blood for the benefit of his fellow citizens.
Chairman
Executive Officer
Date of Issue 13.2.41

Australian Red Cross Blood Transfusion Service, donor's certificate, 1941–1952, 25.5 x 20.2 cm. UMA 88/160, box 67, Loewe Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.

work was focussed on weather and climate, and on understanding the record of past changes locked beneath the ice sheets and finding patterns in the endlessly changing spheres far above them. Its key moment was Wegener's Greenland expedition and its search for answers about the depth of the ice, and its climate and weather. The collection, including its hard-won research data, is thus part of a critical area of the history of science.[8]

## Using the collection and a plea for biography

Scholars approaching the Loewe Collection would face a number of challenges. It is not completely under physical and intellectual control. In addition, many documents, including lectures and letters, are handwritten, not always legible, and over half in German, some in the older *Fraktur* lettering. Nevertheless, those who bring to them appropriate language skills and deep contextual knowledge of 20th century European and Australian history, culture, education, exploration and science will be amply rewarded.

A biographer facing the collection would be particularly blessed, additionally so because the University of Melbourne Archives holds complementary material of the key people behind Loewe's appointment to Melbourne—Vice-Chancellor Raymond Priestley and Chancellor Sir James Barrett—as well as the official archives of the University's Council, central administration, Meteorology Department and Faculty of Science. Elsewhere in Australia, there are for example relevant files in the National Archives of Australia and the Mawson collections of the University of Adelaide, while Loewe is strongly represented in the renowned collections of the Alfred Wegener Institute for Polar and Marine Research. Most importantly, the Institute holds the original of his 1930–1931 Greenland diary, while the University of Melbourne Archives recently received a transcription.[9]

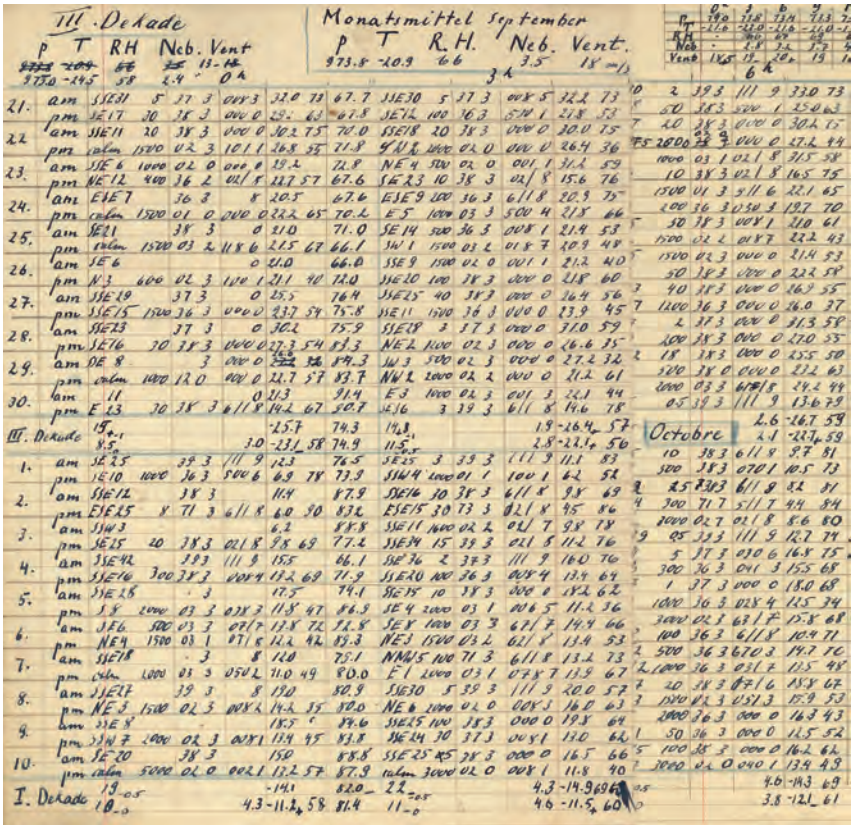
Loewe was one of a group of immigrant men and women who joined the University pre- and post-war—think of Walter Boas, Fritz Duras, Sophie Ducker, Leonhard Adam, Erich Heymann and Frank Knopfelmacher—whose life stories, genuinely fascinating and revealing well beyond the life of the mind, mostly await full biographies. Loewe was also one of Australia's most eminent among the 'freemasonry of the frozen', yet few could name even Dr Phillip Law, Sir Douglas Mawson and just maybe Sir Edgeworth David. While a number of books acknowledge particular aspects of Loewe's life and times,[10] and there are several articles dedicated to the subject,[11] none comprises a full account of his life and work. I would commend as most worthy causes the man's biography, and just as important, support for comprehensive listing of the collection on which it would depend.

## Reflections

In his article on Loewe in the *Australian dictionary of biography*, Mark Richmond wrote, '"Most learned, tolerant, and kindly", Loewe was tall, with a domed forehead, prominent teeth and a goatee, and recognizable in later life by his awkward gait.'[12] A contemporary at the University, the geographer Arthur Wilcock, lamented 'that undergraduates from other Departments, absently noting the tall and somehow unmistakably German figure, with head thrust forward and a clumping heavy-booted walk, never got to know the story of the man'.[13] From even a limited acquaintance with Loewe via his papers, one can not help liking and deeply admiring him, untroubled as he was by the standard dichotomies of science and religion, C.P. Snow's two cultures, and career and retirement. Typically, he died in his mid-seventies returning home from research at his old

Detail from Loewe's handwritten meteorological data ANARE, from exercise book, 1950–1952, 25.5 x 20.2 x 10.3 cm. UMA 88/160, box 66, Loewe Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.

Loewe was the official Australian observer with two French expeditions of the *Commandant Charcot* to Port Martin in Adelie Land, Antarctica.



department where he was working on two scientific papers. It is hard to imagine he had an enemy; in the Archives' own files is a lovely 1992 letter of thanks from a researcher to the University Archivist Frank Strahan which ended, 'As an aside, I remember with some fondness looking out the window of 187 Collins Street (where Antarctic Division used to be) and watching Dr. Loewe chaining his battered and squeaking old bicycle to a lamppost near the Athaeneum. He was a regular visitor to the Division way back when.'[14] In 1976 the University named a lecture theatre, located in the McCoy Building in the School of Earth Sciences, in his honour. Loewe regarded the world from a richly educated European perspective. The opening paragraphs of his scientific papers often demonstrate a very broad historical knowledge. He loved mountaineering, skiing and flying; he spoke German, English, French and Danish (and could read Italian, Norwegian and Swedish);[15] he wrote poetry … and he was a meteorologist!

Thus his valedictory reflections of November 1960 are especially interesting,[16] and of added interest in light of the University's new 'Melbourne model' curriculum. Loewe points to the mixed benefits of democratisation of higher education, laments the narrowing of his discipline (especially the widening gap between meteorology and geography) and the decline in the number of scientists volunteering for expeditions, and feels that something has been lost as less and less scientific measurement is done by direct human involvement. His address reads now as a wonderful 'grumpy old man' summary of the state of his discipline, which begins by acknowledging, 'Meteorology is today forging ahead with enormous strides' and ends 15 pages later, typically, by quoting Goethe's *Faust*. At one moment he describes his own secondary and

higher education experience, simultaneously illustrating the depth-and-breadth logic of the University's new curriculum. 'My school years', he says,

> gave me access to the roots from which most of the branches and flowers of our society and our culture spring, and this feeling of 'rootedness' has given me throughout my life much personal satisfaction however little my work in meteorology may have profited from it. It is this wider outlook which European schools tried to give which we find lacking in the majority of our university students.

**Michael Piggott** recently retired from his roles as Manager, Cultural Collections Group and University Archivist at the University of Melbourne. Before joining the University in 1998 he worked in Canberra in a variety of positions at the National Library of Australia, the Australian War Memorial and the National Archives of Australia.

**Notes**

1 'D.J.', 'Obituary. Dr Fritz Loewe (1895–1974)', *The University Gazette*, vol. 30, no. 2, June 1974, p. 11.

2 Loewe (sometimes spelt 'Löwe') pronounced his name 'ler-va'. Löwe is the German word for lion.

3 Inevitably there are now many websites devoted to Riefenstahl, including this film, and a vast literature, one of the most recent being Steven Bach, *Leni: The life and work of Leni Riefenstahl*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007.

4 John D. Cox, *Climate crash: Abrupt climate change and what it means to our future*, Washington: Joseph Henry Press, 2005, p. 5. Loewe's huge regard for Wegener is evident in his contribution to Else Wegener and Fritz Loewe (eds.), *Greenland journey: The story of Wegener's German expedition to Greenland in 1930–31 as told by members of the expedition and the leader's diary*, Winifred M. Deans, translator, London and Glasgow: Blackie & Son, 1939, and his 'Alfred Wegener: His life and work', *Australian Meteorological Magazine*, vol. 18, no. 4, December 1970, pp. 177–190. The expedition is covered in the main Loewe Collection, at the University of Melbourne Archives (UMA), accession 88/160, through newspaper and magazine accounts, photographs, correspondence, 1940s–1960s. See especially boxes 45–47.

5 Wegener and Loewe (eds), *Greenland journey,* pp. 176, 183–184.

6 Much of Radok and Loewe's correspondence, including letters about Tatura and the Olympics, is complemented in Radok's history *UNIMET: The Meteorology Department in the University of Melbourne 1937–1990*, Melbourne: Meteorology Section, School of Earth Sciences, University of Melbourne, 1993. Copy in Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.

7 Dr Reinhard Krause, letter to the University of Melbourne Archives, 4 October 2006. Copy in Loewe file 2007/106, UMA.

8 For the historical context of Wegener's ideas, see H.E. LeGrand, *Drifting continents and shifting theories*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. The continuing relevance of Wegener and Loewe's work in Greenland was perfectly illustrated during the preparation of this article by the announcement of the Arctic Council's decision to commission a report on Greenland's environmental trends, to be completed before the 2009 climate treaty talks in Denmark. See Andrew Revkin, 'Scientists to get down to bedrock of Greenland ice', *The Age*, 9 January 2008, p. 9.

9 UMA 107/52, Loewe Collection, UMA.

10 See for example Roger McCoy, *Ending in ice: The revolutionary idea and tragic expedition of Alfred Wegener*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006; Tim Bowden, *The silence calling: Australians in Antarctica 1947–97*, St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1997; David Day, *The weather watchers: 100 years of the Bureau of Meteorology*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2007; and Barbara Falk, *Caught in a snare: Hitler's refugee academics, 1933–1949,* Melbourne: University of Melbourne, History Department, 1998.

11 As well as a number of obituaries and studies of Loewe's career in German, the English language items include A.A. Wilcock, 'Fritz Loewe 1895–1974,' *Australian Geographer*, vol. 13, no. 5, May 1977, pp. 306–310; Mark Richmond, 'Loewe, Fritz Philipp (1895–1974)', *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 15, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2000, pp. 113–114; Peter Schwerdtfeger, 'Fritz Loewe: 1895–1974', *Journal of Glaciology*, vol. 14, no. 70, 1975, pp. 191–193; Peter Pockley, 'Snapshot: Fritz Loewe', *Australasian Science*, vol. 20, no. 1, January/February 1999, p. 46; and [author not named], 'Obituary Fritz Loewe', *Australian Meteorological Magazine*, vol. 22, no. 1, March 1974, pp. 21–23.

12 Richmond, 'Loewe, Fritz Philipp (1895–1974)'.

13 Wilcock, 'Fritz Loewe 1895–1974', p. 108.

14 Elizabeth Chipman, letter to Frank Strahan, 30 April 1992. Copy in Loewe file, Individuals/Alphabetical series, 1990–, UMA.

15 The languages are listed in one of Loewe's few extant autobiographical pieces, covering his life to the late 1930s. See [Biographical sketch], four-page foolscap typescript, n.d. [late 1940s]. UMA 88/160, box 67, Loewe Collection, UMA.

16 Fritz Loewe, *Meteorology in retrospect. Address to the Meteorological Colloquium, 24th November, 1960*, typescript, 15 pages, copy in accession 88/160, box 32, Loewe Collection, UMA.