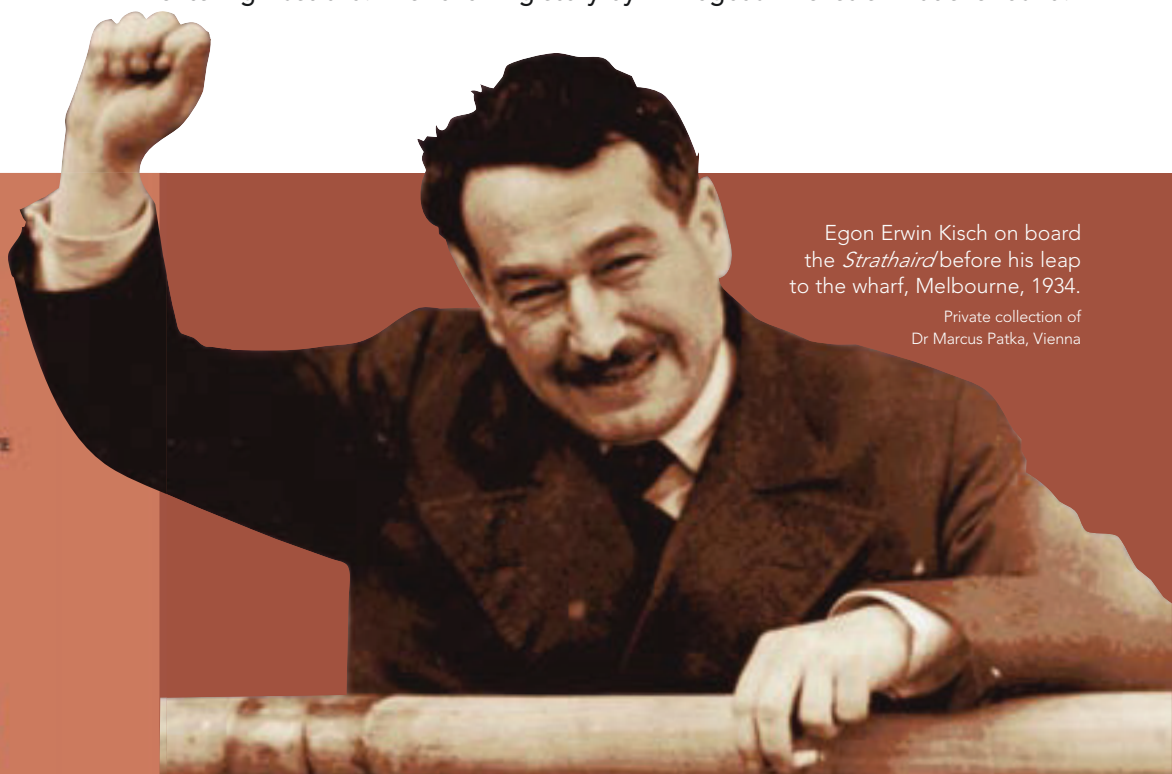


# Kisch must land

Dr Heidi Zogbaum is a research fellow at La Trobe University where she also teaches central and east European history. Born and educated in Germany, she came to Australia in 1972. She has published widely on European and Mexican history. In her latest book, *Kisch in Australia: The Untold Story*, Dr Zogbaum draws on records held by the National Archives of Australia to uncover the reasons why the Lyons government attempted to ban Egon Erwin Kisch from entering Australia. The following story by Dr Zogbaum reveals what she found.

**KISCH**  
**PROTEST MEETING**  
**STADIUM**  
DUDLEY STREET, WEST MELBOURNE  
**SUNDAY**  
**NOV. 18**  
at 7.30 pm.  
**KISCH MUST LAND**



Egon Erwin Kisch on board the *Strathaird* before his leap to the wharf, Melbourne, 1934.

Private collection of Dr Marcus Patka, Vienna

In November 1934, Czech writer and journalist Egon Erwin Kisch made his spectacular entry into Australia – and into Australian history – by jumping overboard from his departing ship onto the Melbourne dock, breaking his leg in the process. Kisch had come to Australia to speak at a peace congress at the invitation of the Movement Against War and Fascism, a pacifist, communist front organisation. Although he had a valid visa stamped by the British Consul in Paris, upon arrival in Fremantle, Kisch was prevented from landing on the grounds that he was a ‘dangerous communist’. His ticket and passport were confiscated and he was made a prisoner on the *Strathaird* to be sent back to Marseilles.

Kisch first came to the attention of the Australian government after the Investigation Branch – the forerunner of ASIO – saw an advertisement for the peace congress in a Melbourne newspaper and began to investigate the two overseas delegates, Gerald Griffin from New Zealand and Kisch from Paris. Based on information sent from Special Branch/MI5 in London, the outgoing Minister for the Interior, Eric Harrison, signed a ban on Kisch entering Australia. According to a mysterious British agent codenamed ‘Snuffbox’, Kisch had been refused entry to Britain the previous year because of ‘subversive communist activities’. Recently appointed Attorney-General Robert Gordon Menzies reconfirmed the ban.

When the *Strathaird* docked at Fremantle en route to Melbourne, customs officers searched Kisch’s luggage hoping to find communist propaganda material but only found travelogues from the public library of Paris. Besides speaking at the peace congress in Melbourne, Kisch was intending to stay a further two months to collect material for a travelogue on Australia to join his other famous books on the USA, China and the Soviet Union.

People in Perth who knew of Kisch’s arrival, and were waiting for him on the dock, were outraged at the high-handedness of the Lyons government. They alerted their friends in Melbourne, and the International Labour Defence – the Comintern’s (Communist International) legal arm – took

(right) Kisch (left) and fellow-delegate to the Melbourne peace congress Gerald Griffin (right). Under investigation like Kisch, Griffin missed his speaking engagement at the congress; he was given the language test in Dutch and sent back to New Zealand.

Private collection of Dr Marcus Patka, Vienna



(below) The writing on the wall.

Private collection of Dr Marcus Patka, Vienna



up Kisch's case. Joan Rosanove, a barrister with Communist Party connections, lodged a *habeas corpus* action on behalf of Kisch, and must have impressed on him that it was vital to stay in Melbourne to await the outcome of the case. Kisch decided to jump overboard in order to be arrested. This was courageous in a man nearly 50, a chain smoker and somewhat overweight. But instead of being hospitalised or jailed in Melbourne, Kisch was picked up from the dock, the *Strathaird* was recalled and he was bundled off to Sydney without medical attention. As it turned out, the court in Melbourne decided against him anyway.

Joan Rosanove arranged for the Kisch papers to be driven to Sydney. The case was heard before the High Court and Judge Herbert Vere 'Doc' Evatt decided

that there was no case against Kisch. He made the crucial point that it had not been established that the information against Kisch came 'through diplomatic channels' in the British Empire, as the Immigration Act required. The ensuing Kisch legal saga revolved around the fact that the Australian government could not and would not reveal that their knowledge on Kisch all came from 'Snuffbox', who did not qualify for diplomatic status.

Kisch was finally allowed to land in Sydney, but his freedom was short-lived. On the dock, police were waiting to whisk the injured man off to undergo the 'living language' dictation test – part of the Immigration Act aimed at keeping those regarded as undesirable out of Australia. Kisch, like most central Europeans, spoke

half a dozen languages, but a fail-safe way was found to exclude him: he was administered the test in Scots Gaelic. Kisch's Sydney legal team, headed by AB Piddington, also known as the Red KC, challenged the validity of the language test and showed that even the administering officer himself did not understand it. When asked to translate the dictation, the officer stuttered: 'As well as could benefit and if we let her scatter to the bad'. To the amusement of the court, Piddington then read the correct translation: 'Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil'. The language test never quite recovered from this ridicule.

In the face of such embarrassment, and in order to make a solid case against Kisch, the Lyons government knew they



needed to produce more information on why Kisch had been banned from entering Britain. They were unable to and in February 1935, Thomas Paterson, Minister of the Interior, found himself pushed into a legal corner from which he could not extricate himself. Paterson agreed to pay Kisch's court costs if he would leave Australia.

The Kisch case became a public relations disaster for the Lyons government because Kisch, a master journalist himself, became the darling of the Australian press and the general public. Many ordinary Australians could not understand why Kisch, who came to Australia with a message of peace, was so relentlessly persecuted.

Kisch was one of the first journalists to reach stardom in Europe as a writer of incisive travelogues. An advocate in the fight against fascism, he also worked directly with Willi Muenzenberg, the propaganda chief of the West European branch of the Comintern, in his vast, international publishing empire. Kisch knew everyone worth knowing between Paris and Moscow, and he, in turn, was

widely known. And Kisch always used his fame wisely. A compassionate and committed man, he spent much of his time defending others, often through the International Labour Defence, which came to his aid in Australia. After he escaped Hitler's clutches because he had a Czech passport, Kisch spent months in Prague trying to help colleagues who were still trapped there.

It is unlikely that Kisch was a 'dangerous communist' as the Attorney-General claimed, although he was a foundation member of the Austrian Communist Party in 1918. After the horrors of World War I, he saw communism as the only guarantee for world peace, as did many other intellectuals at the time.

Despite having grave doubts about Stalin, Kisch remained a communist until his death. The Moscow show trials and party purges of the 1930s and Stalin's pact with Hitler in 1939 betrayed everything Kisch thought communism stood for. But, although he tried, Kisch found that he could not leave the party. Younger colleagues like Arthur Koestler and Manès

Sperber who had only joined in the late 1920s could still imagine life outside the party and shrugged off the label 'renegade'. But to Kisch, his whole life was bound up with the party. According to his biographer, Dr Marcus Patka, Kisch viewed the world with the eyes of a poet, hoping that better times would soon arrive. But they did not. Had he not died of a massive heart attack in March 1948, shortly after his return to Prague, he would have been strung up next to his close friend Otto Katz in Stalin's last 1952 party purges of the newly acquired East European satellite states.

Although the Australian episode was only a brief one in Kisch's nomadic life, it is better documented than any other. The Attorney-General's Department files held by the National Archives of Australia are an invaluable source. They contain a number of Kisch files, some of them hundreds of pages long. The records include official correspondence, secret service missives, newspaper clippings and several massive folders of letters in support of Kisch from the general public. A few key documents are missing, such as Kisch's immigration file, letters of support from friends abroad, and some of the secret service correspondence. However, the Archives has more open access records on Kisch than any other English-speaking country.



(left) Kisch (on crutches) and Griffin posing for the media in Australia. Private collection of Dr Marcus Patka, Vienna

SECRET

50

DECIPHER OF CABLEGRAM TO SNUFFBOX, LONDON, 20.11.34.

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Reference to your telegram November 11th Kisch detained on arrival ship but released under writ Habeas Corpus. Later given dictation test and failed and will be charged on November 24th with being prohibited immigrant. Government very anxious to know for official use only if speeches or actions referred to in your telegram quoted were subversive or questionable.

(right) A cablegram from one of the many files on Kisch in the Archives' collection. NAA: A6119, 24