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Standing in the Sunshine

A HISTORY OF NEW ZEALAND WOMEN SINCE
THEY WON THE VOTE



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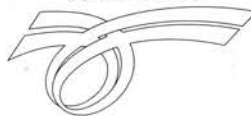


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This book is dedicated to my mother
Doris Margaret Pearce (born Doris Morgan)

Sandra Coney June 1993

WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE
WHAKATŪ WĀHINE
AOTEAROA • NEW ZEALAND
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Zealanders, are very much aware of the responsibility which rests on our shoulders.' Most of their children, it said, had arrived when very young and had 'known no other country'. But if the mothers naturalised, these children would become disadvantaged for the rest of their lives. The petition begged her to remedy the situation.⁸

Dame Hilda Ross suggested Hanny have a meeting with a Department of Internal Affairs naturalisation officer,⁹ but this only ended in a heated argument. Although the officer assured Hanny people would not lose their citizenship with the stroke of a pen, she was not satisfied.

'I said it was a matter of principle, there should be no discrimination and the law should be amended. Otherwise people would retain

their own nationality and form little islands of aliens, as it were.'¹⁰

The issue was taken up by the Canterbury Council for Civil Liberties and in newspaper correspondence columns.¹¹ Hanny said she even heard that some Dutch people withdrew their applications for naturalisation because of the campaign. The Minister of Internal Affairs tried to dampen criticism by claiming that the low number of Dutch applying for New Zealand citizenship was because most did not have the required period of residency to apply.¹²

Hanny kept up the campaign through regular correspondence to the Department of Internal Affairs and by speaking to the members of the local Dutch Club. The hard work paid off in 1959 when the British Nationality and New

Zealand Citizenship Amendment Act was passed, removing the second-class status of naturalised New Zealanders. Hanny was pleased with this success though the event had an unexpected implication for her.

'I didn't think that they would immediately expect us to get naturalised. But we got a letter from Internal Affairs saying that now the law had changed we expect you would like to become citizens.'¹³ In 1960 Hanny obtained her New Zealand citizenship.

As a New Zealand citizen Hanny was no longer subject to the restrictions placed on the employment of 'aliens' in the public service. From 1963 until her retirement in 1978 she worked for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, mainly in the overseas aid section.

THE FIGHT OF MIRIAM SOLJAK

New Zealand-born, but 'Alien'



Defined as an 'alien' because of her marriage to an immigrant Yugoslav, Miriam Soljak took up the cudgels on behalf of all women in her situation. Soljak was an outspoken left-wing woman, who told her daughter 'If you've got your housework done, dear, it's a sign you're neglecting the movement.' Soljak's daughter, Connie Purdue, campaigned for equal rights for women in employment in the 1960s.

Connie Purdue collection

After Miriam Bridelia Cummings married Austro-Hungarian Peter Soljak in 1908 she discovered she had forfeited her New Zealand citizenship. No longer deemed a New Zealander, she was forced to register as an alien during the First World War.

This was the fate of all New Zealand-born women who married foreign men. New Zealand had adopted the British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act of 1914 which stated that 'the wife of a British subject shall be deemed to be a British subject and the wife of an alien shall be deemed to be alien'. This Act was intended to cover the whole Empire, creating a common nationality.¹

Miriam was born at Thames in 1879, of Northern Irish parents 'of strong but divided principles who brought their two sons up Protestant, their five daughters Catholic'.² After leaving school she became a pupil-teacher and then taught in sole charge Maori schools in Northland, learning to speak Maori fluently and developing a life-long commitment to the welfare of the Maori.

But her community contribution counted for nothing when she went to register for a bed in a Tauranga nursing home preparatory to the birth of a child. She was turned away because she was a foreigner.

By the time the register was drawn up, Peter Soljak had been in New Zealand for twenty years and he was known to have left his homeland to avoid conscription into the army of the Austrian empire.

In the 1920s, when the family moved to Auckland, Miriam Soljak joined the Auckland Women's Political League (later the Auckland Women's Branch of the New Zealand Labour Party), through which she frequently raised the issue of independent nationality for married women.

The British Act was only able to be amended with the agreement of the Dominions. British women's organisations, fighting to remedy the injustice, called on their counterparts overseas to support them on the issue. When a lecturer in international law at Canterbury College passed the opinion in 1926 that no law change was needed because 'a woman who of her own free will marries a man of alien nationality can hardly complain if she is required to take on herself the same nationality', National Council of Women stalwart Christina Henderson lambasted the out-dated view 'that husband and wife are one and that one the husband'.⁴

After years of lobbying by women's organisations in Britain and New Zealand, in 1934 the Government conceded with a Bill that allowed the New Zealand wife of a foreigner to retain her British nationality as long as she stayed in New Zealand. However, she was not entitled to protection overseas.

Miriam Soljak was unhappy with this restriction and continued her campaign through the Labour Party. Her husband had been finally naturalised in 1928 and her voting rights restored. But even after she and her husband were divorced in the late 1930s, she still retained his nationality for international purposes. She travelled to England in 1937 on a British passport marked 'New Zealand born, wife of alien, now naturalised' and had to report to Scotland Yard every three months.

During the Second World War the indefatigable Soljak took a deputation to the Minister of Internal Affairs, protesting the hardship of British-born wives of aliens, but it was not until 1948 that separate Dominion nationality came into force thus giving women their own independent nationality.

During the First World War alien registration was introduced as a war-time security measure. When the Auckland Register of Electors asked her to justify why her name should not be removed from the electoral roll, Soljak took her case to the Prime Minister and was assured this clause would be removed immediately the war ended. She also publicised the problems of New Zealand-born women married to aliens in newspaper correspondence.

In 1919, pregnant with her seventh child, she registered as an alien, but only when it was made clear that if she did not she would go to prison. Miriam insisted the Tauranga police constable endorse her certificate with the words 'I certify that the applicant has registered under protest'.³