

Anton Bernhardt Julius Lemmer

For 45 years Julius Lemmer was the principal of the Nelson School of Music but during World War I his German birth put him at the centre of an anti-German campaign, despite his son Adolf joining the New Zealand Army and being killed during active service in France. Julius Lemmer was born Anton Bernhardt Julius Lemmer in Hamburg in 1871.¹ At the age of 18 he became legally obliged to enlist in the German Army and to escape this and to continue his music studies, he moved to Australia. In Sydney he married in 1895. In 1899 Lemmer, his wife Amy and infant son Adolf Julius moved to New Zealand where he had been appointed the principal of the Nelson School of Music. Lemmer also taught music at Nelson College, writing the music to the school song.² The Lemmers had a second son, Max, in 1903.

In 1913 Julius travelled to London on a year's leave to study at the London Academy of Music to become an Associate of the Royal Academy of Music. He was in Hamburg in 1914 for a short visit but when war became imminent he quickly made his way back to London. From there he wrote a letter to his wife Amy in Nelson, the contents of which she offered for publication to the *Nelson Evening Mail*: "I am safely back from the Land of the Iron Fist...In Germany people are giving one the impression that they realise the seriousness and injustice of their Government's mad act...[but] I cannot think this war is going to last more than a month or so..."³

After being questioned by authorities in England and cleared as a naturalised British citizen, Julius was allowed to return to New Zealand in January 1915. Anti-German sentiment was building and upon his arrival he immediately offered to resign if the trustees of the Nelson School of Music were in any way concerned his presence as principal would disadvantage the school. The trustees publicly endorsed him, despite rising calls for Germans in public positions to be removed.

Up until 1915 Julius Lemmer had always been referred to in the newspapers as 'Herr' Lemmer but from April the German honorific was dropped in favour of the more British 'Mr' Lemmer. However Herr continued to be used in anti-Lemmer correspondence published as letters to the editor in local newspapers. Although her husband was the target of a hate campaign, Amy Lemmer became a dedicated patriotic fundraiser for the Red Cross, regularly collecting money from streets in her neighbourhood throughout the duration of the war.⁴

In the wake of increasing opposition, Julius gave permission in October 1915 for his oldest son Adolf, a bank clerk, to voluntarily enlist in the New Zealand Army, despite him being under the legal age (he declared his age at enlistment as 20).⁵ Adolf embarked from Wellington for Egypt on 12 February 1916.

In 1917, a concerted campaign in Nelson to remove Julius Lemmer as principal began. It started in spring when letters in the *Colonist* attacked all Germans, even Nelson's long-established Moutere settlers.⁶ In October the school of music's secretary and trustee, F.G. (Fred) Gibbs wrote in his diary that he had to write a "strong letter to Harry Field re stories about Lemmer which he has been repeating".⁷

By the beginning of 1918 after three and a half long years of war, anti-Germany hysteria was at fever-pitch. Throughout the country, public meetings, petitions and newspaper reports demanded the removal of all Germans in Government offices. The discovery of mines in Cook Strait in March led to panic and an explosion of mines off Farewell Spit was linked to Julius Lemmer. Gibbs wrote: "agitation against Lemmer due to the discovery of mines off C.

Farewell and also to articles in *Truth* and *John Bull* [a jingoistic paper] continues very strong.”⁸

The Truth, a weekly newspaper, ran a snide report in February about Lemmer, stating that “Nelson, generally, is not now too keen on its Hun music –teacher” and calling on the school trustees to not “antagonise British feelings” by “countenancing a German Principal”.⁹ The local campaign against Lemmer included several influential citizens who argued he should be removed as principal of the school¹⁰ and be given “a long holiday”.¹¹ One of the main letter writers was H.G Berryman of Tadmire-Kohatu. He demanded in February that his daughter, a pupil at Nelson College for Girls, be taught music by Mr [John] Tait (who had established a rival music academy in Nelson) because “...I object on principle to be compelled to contribute towards the luxurious upkeep of a notorious German, whilst my boys endure the hardships and perils of war.”¹² Berryman insisted that while he did not know Julius Lemmer personally, he “strongly objects to and emphatically protests against any German occupying any position of enrolment such as the principal of a British public institution at such times as this”...“how may Englishmen enjoy lucrative public positions in German today?” he questioned.¹³

Those against Julius Lemmer argued the fact he had been a naturalised British citizen since 1903, had been married to an Australian for 22 years, had many years of loyal service to the Nelson School of Music, and had a son fighting in the New Zealand Expeditionary Force, was no proof of his loyalty.¹⁴

While the campaign against his father was heating up Adolf Lemmer was critically injured fighting on the Somme. He died the on 6 April of his injuries and was buried in the Gezaincourt cemetery. His parents received word of his death on 15 April and were, as Fred Gibbs recorded in his diary at the end of that week, “frightfully cut up”.¹⁵ Adolf’s death was reported in the *Nelson Evening Mail’s* Roll of Honour the following day but the fact Lemmer’s son had been killed while fighting for Great Britain did nothing to diminish the campaign against him.

On 26 May Gibbs recorded in his diary that he had spent “much time at weekend over most disgraceful anti-Lemmer attack”¹⁶.

The Nelson School of Music’s AGM on 1 August 1918 attracted record numbers and the first ever contested election of trustees. It was clear the four men standing for election against the four sitting, long-standing trustees, were anti-Lemmer and desirous of replacing the old loyal guard and removing him from his position. But philanthropist Joseph Cock, who had also lost an aviator son on active duty, had worked hard to garner support for Lemmer and, after a heated meeting, all four sitting trustees won re-election by a clear majority.¹⁷ It was the last attempt to unseat Julius Lemmer.

The post-war years saw him continue his role at the school of music and as the musical director of the Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society but as early as 1934 he began discussing his retirement. However Fred Gibbs persuaded him to stay on this and several other occasions. In 1940 Lemmer again tried to retire but World War Two made it difficult to find a replacement, so he agreed to stay on until one could be found. It wasn’t until December 1944 that he was finally able to hand over the reins, with the appointment of T.J. (Thomas James) Kirk-Burnnand. Lemmer had been at the helm of the Nelson School of Music for 45 years.

Lemmer’s wife Amy died in 1950 and on 17 September 1957, Julius himself died.

This Biography was researched and compiled by Karen Stade, Nelson Provincial Museum, in 2014.

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- ¹ Most information comes from: Shirley Tunnickliff, *Response to a Vision*, Nelson: Nelson School of Music, 1994.
- ² Max D. Lash, 'Julius Lemmer', in *Nelson Notables 1840-1940, A dictionary of regional biography*, Nelson: Nelson Historical Society, 1992, p.95.
- ³ 'A Nelsonian's Experiences, Letters from Herr Lemmer', *Nelson Evening Mail*, 3 October 1914, p.5.
- ⁴ See *Nelson Evening Mail* Red Cross collection reports throughout the war.
- ⁵ Shirley Tunnickliff. 'Lemmer, Anton Bernhardt Julius', from the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography. Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 30-Oct-2012
URL: <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/318/lemmer-anton-bernhardt-julius> and 'Nelson Reinforcements', *Nelson Evening Mail*, 21 October 1915, p.5.
- ⁶ Shirley Tunnickliff, *Response to a Vision*, Nelson: Nelson School of Music, 1994, p.71.
- ⁷ F.G. Gibbs, diary entry, 14 October 1917. Nelson Provincial Museum: AG85 / 593.
- ⁸ F.G. Gibbs, diary entry, 3 March 1918. Nelson Provincial Museum: AG85 / 593.
- ⁹ 'A Music Teacher Who Was Made in Germany', *The Truth*, 16 February 1918, p.5.
- ¹⁰ Shirley Tunnickliff. 'Lemmer, Anton Bernhardt Julius', from the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography. Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 30-Oct-2012
URL: <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/318/lemmer-anton-bernhardt-julius>
- ¹¹ H.G. Berryman, letter to F.G. Gibbs, Nelson School of Music, 1 March 1918. Nelson Provincial Museum: AG 85, Box 1, Folder 3, Correspondence and clippings about Herr Lemmer, NN2014.113.
- ¹² H.G. Berryman, letter to Mr W.T Brundell, Secretary Nelson School of Music, 22 February 1918. Nelson Provincial Museum: AG 85, Folder 3, Correspondence and clippings about Herr Lemmer, NN2014.114.
- ¹³ H.G. Berryman, letter to F.G. Gibbs, Nelson School of Music, 1 March 1918. Nelson Provincial Museum: AG 85, Folder 3, Correspondence and clippings about Herr Lemmer, NN2014.113.
- ¹⁴ Shirley Tunnickliff, *Response to a Vision*, Nelson: Nelson School of Music, 1994, p.73.
- ¹⁵ F.G. Gibbs Diary extract, 21 May 1918. Nelson Provincial Museum: AG85 / 593.
- ¹⁶ F.G. Gibbs Diary extract, 26 May 1918. Nelson Provincial Museum: AG85 / 593.
- ¹⁷ 'Nelson School of Music Annual Meeting of Electors', *Nelson Evening Mail*, 2 August 1918, p.4.