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Beaglehole, A. (2025). *How to be an Alien. A sort of memoir*. Fraser Books, 251 pages. ISBN: 978-1-99-1-116448-3

Reviewed by David Pearson*

This engrossing memoir provides a deeply personal reflection on the life of a New Zealand historian whose previous books on refugees in Aotearoa (for example, Beaglehole, 2013) are familiar to migration scholars. Complementing that work, this book relates Beaglehole's intimate experience of reliving traumatic departures and discomforting destinations—journeys that highlight the tensions between attempts to repress memories and a perceived need to remember them, which, in turn, highlight the perennially contested subject/object questions in her own and cognate disciplines.

As the eight-year-old offspring of Jewish Hungarian Holocaust survivors fleeing further persecution from Soviet forces in the 1950s, the author initially recounts how she and her family experienced the ordeal of leaving Hungary and arriving in New Zealand, a destination her parents decided would be a relatively more peaceful choice than Israel for Ancsika, their daughter. This proved prescient, but the caveat of relativity immediately evokes the double meaning of 'alien'. On the one hand, it denotes how the State legally defines you; on the other, it reflects how you are perceived and treated in the society that you have been forced to move to. Jewish refugees were not always welcome in New Zealand, and those who were allowed to enter under UNHCR agreements met a mixed reception of kindness, indifference or unfriendliness, despite being White and European (Beaglehole, 2013).

Beaglehole very successfully conveys how an uneasy process of seeking to fit in was managed by different members of her family, peers and the migrant community, and how this affected her, especially when her own views or actions conflicted with others. Her parents saw their new abode generally positively and considered themselves lucky to escape the privations they remembered in Hungary under the Nazis and then Soviets. But this past always coloured the present and their anxieties about the future, especially their worries about the author's prospects. Her grandmother, who joined the family soon after their arrival, felt less disposed to hide her feelings about the perceived gulf between a cultured lifestyle in Budapest and Wellingtonian shortcomings. These generational differences pose questions about personality, socialisation and sociocultural forces that pervade this memoir. As Beaglehole (2025, p. 211) ponders, understandably indecisively: "You can't inherit trauma and pass it on to future generations. Or can you?" This theme recurs in a series of chapters in which the author takes us through her early and later school days and adulthood. She deftly captures how difficult it was for a self-described, somewhat nerdish and quietly assertive foreigner with little interest in sports to become fully accepted. This discomfort flowed into later life and was heightened by her views about Jewishness.

"We hardly do anything Jewish in our family", Beaglehole (2025, p. 97) wryly notes, stressing that her parents' lack of orthodox adherence extended back generations in Hungary. This secular stance was cemented in New Zealand as, like many other refugees, they chose to keep their heads down for fear of

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reprisal. Yet Beaglehole has an abiding interest in being Jewish that extends from reading *The Diary of Anne Frank* in primary school, through a brief, and sometimes fraught, acquaintance with Habobin (the Jewish youth group), to later volunteering at the Holocaust Centre, and taking her children and grandchildren back to Hungary to revisit their roots.

Several chapters discuss how her views have been affected by local and international events. In a heartfelt postscript that postdates the Hamas attacks in 2023 and Israel's response in Gaza, she despairs of any peaceful resolution to a labyrinthine historical conflict that, for her, defies any facile taking of sides (see also, McKinnon and Beaglehole, 2024). This results in a difficult plea for compromise that, as one of her Jewish friends reminds her (Beaglehole, 2025, p. 171), is likely to incur the wrath of both right- and left-wing critics, especially in fractious debates about postcolonialism (see, for example, Veracini, 2006), Zionism and antisemitism (see Mazower, 2025). While the author firmly rejects a tendency to conflate hostility towards Israel and Jews in general, she believes there is a cultural imperative not to forget an obligation owed both to those who survived and to those who did not. Beaglehole's words are testament to that.

This book challenged my involvement and detachment (see Elias, 2007). As someone who knows the author and her parents, and has family who converted to Judaism, Beaglehole's strikingly honest narration provoked sorrow, laughter and anger in equal measure. How might less personally engaged readers of this journal approach this book? *How to be an Alien* is an apt example of how memoir could be employed in sociological explorations of emotions and the construction of selfhood within the fields of migration and ethnic and national identity (see, for example, Ariza, 2024; Nelson, 2024). What these thoughtful and accessible reflections convey are the intricate layers of family, belief and politics that contribute to Beaglehole's sense of being Hungarian, Jewish, and becoming Kiwi.

Being 'white' and acquiring a new name that disguises ancestry might offer possibilities for 'publicly passing' in majority terms. Yet, as this book shows, at the level of private emotions, there is no escaping who we and others are amid a set of local and global influences that enmesh all of us in webs of belonging and rejection. Reading this book alongside other memoirs—Ngahuia Te Awekōtuku (2024) and Alison Jones's (2020) recent reminiscences come to mind—we can compare Indigenous and migrant lives of resilience and uneasiness coexisting in Aotearoa. So, are we all aliens to some degree? This absorbing memoir prompts much-needed thought and sociohistorical reflection on this question in these troubled times.

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