

Rene Saran

### **The Importance of SFCP in my Life**

Throughout my adult life I have known about SFCP as an educational and philosophical charity. This organisation became more central in my life in the 1980s, after the death of my mother in 1976. The following year I was appointed by the two remaining trustees, George Green and Paul Branton (my husband), as a Trustee of SFCP, to replace her.

SFCP is an offshoot of the Nelsonian movement, having been established in Britain in 1940, to support the school Nelson had founded in Germany and which had been closed by the Nazis in 1933. Some of the children were taken by Minna Specht, the school's head teacher, first to Denmark and then to Britain. I knew the school in both places at first hand. In Denmark I had helped Minna and my mother scrub and get the building ready for the refugee children who were coming. Then I was twelve years old. At eighteen when war broke out, I stayed for some months at the school in Wales, where it had moved from Denmark, and helped in all sorts of ways. It was important to secure the school's financial position, and initially that became the main task of SFCP. However, the Society's trust deed from the beginning provided a wider framework for its work. Research and scholarship in the tradition of the Critical Philosophy was also supported and for many years the philosophical journal *Ratio* (which for a long time appeared in English and German editions) was subsidised, as well as a series of annual philosophical conferences at the University of Bristol.

For the first three or four decades of SFCP's existence, I was not directly involved, although I knew the people who acted as trustees. Why then did SFCP acquire a greater role in my life? As explained elsewhere, I had always been active as a volunteer in various voluntary organisations, and the variety of jobs in which I earned my living were often very demanding. However, during the 1980s I retired and many of the organisations with which I had identified had ceased to exist, including Federal Union, the Socialist Vanguard Group, the Fabian Colonial Bureau, Socialist Union, and the journal *Socialist Commentary*. Some disappeared as a result of changed political circumstances (for example, the Fabian Colonial Bureau because colonial countries achieved their independence). Others also disappeared because the leading people had died and no-one was around to carry on (for example *Socialist Commentary*). I remained a member of the Labour Party, and had been a constituency party secretary in my twenties. But gradually my activities shifted more and more towards the educational field, which took me into becoming a school governor locally (initially nominated by the Labour Party) and a member of the British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society (BELMAS) nationally. My interests had shifted more towards involvement with education, initially as a teacher in adult and higher education, then as a researcher and school governor. Gradually my active involvement with SFCP as a trustee, over time holding the offices of chair and secretary, took up more of my time and attention, and increasingly linked well with my interest in Socratic Dialogue and the Socratic Method.

But there were deeper issues at stake in the commitment to the work of SFCP. I had grown up in a political environment, and once an adult, throughout life, I remained identified with the values of equality, liberty and solidarity. Living in a community for much of my life, rather than in a conventional family, strengthened these values not merely as an intellectual interest but as something one lived. SFCP was the one surviving organisation (along with the PPA in Germany) committed to Nelson's pre-war endeavours to build a better society through politics and education. The sense for social justice which my political environment transmitted to me has never left me. I have an inner drive and need to be active in the constant endeavour to translate ideals into practice. The dream of an ideal state in the creation of which I believed when younger has been replaced by a more modest view that human improvement is a constant struggle in which small victories are sometimes won but defeats are often more frequent. I came to see that my own contribution could be more effective in the educational realm than in the directly political, and that my personality was better fulfilled in that field.

Thus in the 1970s I became much more actively involved with Socratic Dialogue where as participant and later as facilitator I could influence the process of critical thinking in small working groups. As a teacher I loved seeing students set free to explore ideas and test their thinking, actively involved in their own learning. The assumption which underpins all this (and which is embedded in SFCP's trust deed) is that all human beings have the right to self-determination based on their possession of the capacity to reason and make sound judgements about their own life and the world around them. From this basic assumption it follows that all people have the right to live free from tyranny and domination – be it political or psychological. However, it is one thing to assert the right to self-determination, it is quite another to realise the right in everyday life. Although I do not believe all can be achieved through education, over time I have developed into an educationist rather than into a politician. SFCP's educational work, therefore, fulfils me and I see it as worthwhile. It would be easy to find alternative commitments – there are many other organisations in which voluntary activities would be worthwhile. But I made my choice to spend my more limited energies with SFCP, and rejected opportunities to be active elsewhere.

SFCP is nowadays the one organisation in which I still make an active contribution (alongside with PPA, the sister organisation in Germany). In the 1990s, Pat Shipley, long time SFCP colleague, and I came to work in closer collaboration. In 1999 we managed with difficulty to get together an inter-disciplinary conference on "Ethics in Practice in the twenty-first century", held at Eynsham, near Oxford. It was a huge effort to get 30 people together to exchange ideas about the topic. There were academics, recently retired people from the police, medical and legal practitioners, administrators. But we felt, for SFCP, it was another milestone, and several of the participants afterwards took part in a Socratic Dialogue, organised at their request. Proceedings were published and included "A Four Factor Eynsham Conference Declaration" which stated:

- *There are immense ethical problems facing us all in the 21<sup>st</sup> century;*
- *We are ill-prepared to meet them;*
- *A fruitful way forward in tackling ethical problems is through interdisciplinary collaboration;*

- *Opportunities, such as this interdisciplinary, participative conference involving both practitioners and academics, are valuable for sharing these problems and for overcoming the isolation they create.*

Around the year 2000, I experienced a period of ill health and recognised that stress was the probable cause. It became clear to me, despite the elation of having organised a successful event, that I had been overdoing it, and my body was rebelling! So at that time I gave up many activities to which I had made major contributions: I resigned my two school governorships after about 30 years; from the BELMAS Research Committee, which I had chaired for twelve years; and lastly, from the Tenants Association Committee in my large block of flats, which I had chaired for at least a decade, possibly even for two. Gradually I rebuilt my strength, although I have had to accept that I need to rest more and do less. A very difficult message for me to enact!

During all this time SFCP continued to hold my interest and more than any of the other organisations embodied the values which had shaped my whole life. I well remember a conversation I had in my kitchen (the great talking place in my flat) with Muriel Green. Muriel had known and loved my mother, she had met many of our friends, whilst a student at Hillcroft College, and then at Reading University, probably in the late sixties. So she was well briefed about our political past, the importance of the ideas and values which underpinned our activities, the thinking of Leonard Nelson. Muriel was a really wise person, had been professionally active as a teacher in her home island Trinidad, followed by work as a counsellor for young people, and then as director of the Trinidadian counselling service. Having also been active in politics, particular in the women's movement, she was nominated as a Senator and served in that capacity in Trinidad's Second Chamber until her well-earned retirement. Anyway, this wonderful person came and supported me during and after Paul's last terminal illness.

In that conversation in the kitchen with Muriel she said to me: *Rene, what are you going to do about SFCP? It is now the only organisation left, and it is not very active. How can you get it going, revive it to do something significant? You can't let it die!* Now it was over to me. I said to Muriel: *It's very difficult to know how to start up new SFCP activities. It is a small organisation, not many people know about it, it is not centre stage even for those who do hear about it. And some of those see us as a bunch of cranks!* Muriel responded: *You have to find a way - how about writing to all Philosophy Departments at British Universities publicising a SFCP grant for an extended essay or to finance a research project.*

That was the seed sown in my mind for a new approach. To commemorate Paul, who had been the Secretary of SFCP for some years, the trustees (two of whom were relatively new – Pat Shipley and Morva Fordham) decided to offer a substantial grant for research, and to publicise it mainly in University Philosophy departments. This was the announcement: “The Paul Branton Research Fellowship in the Ethics of Everyday Practice”. And Muriel had been right. Offering this fellowship opened up new possibilities, and in due course SFCP initiated other activities like the international conferences (the first of which was held in 1996) jointly with colleagues from the PPA in Germany and from the Socratic Network in the Netherlands. We started small –

attracting 25 people to the conference from four countries. Gradually the international conferences attracted delegates from more countries; by 2000, when the conference took place in Germany, there were 100 participants from twenty countries.

One of the spin-offs of this was closer contact with colleagues in other European countries, particularly in some of the former Communist countries in Eastern Europe. Indeed, following the 2002 International Conference held in Birmingham, I received invitations to conduct Socratic Dialogues first in Lithuania (from the British Council, but on promptings from a participant in our conferences). The second came from Sofia in Bulgaria for a Socratic Dialogue for students at an English language secondary school. I had felt very alone in Lithuania. The students (school, college and university teachers) were lovely people, but at the four-day residential seminar they disappeared in the evenings – probably because they felt the need to converse in their own language. Talking English all day was a strain for them. So I was left on my own after supper, trying to work out strategies for the next day's work. That particular seminar turned out to be quite difficult to facilitate. So when I went to Bulgaria it was a great help to stay with my hostess (instead of being in a hotel), and to have Dieter Krohn around at the same time – who was working with another group at the German speaking secondary school. It meant I could compare notes and talk about my difficulties in my group at the end of each day.

Aneta Karageorgieva, Professor of Philosophy at Sofia University, had been in my Socratic group at the 2002 international conference in Birmingham. This was the beginning of a closer relationship between SFCP and a group of Bulgarian educationists, under Aneta's leadership, so that by 2008 about ten of them signed up for a training course in Socratic facilitation, which is now (2009) in its second year and running very well. In fact four of them are attending the 2009 International Conference to be held in Chichester, at which, jointly with trainees in facilitation from the UK, they will present a workshop on their experience of the training course in their respective countries, and what lessons might be learned for similar programmes in the future.

When in October 1999 I wrote a report for SFCP trustees on "Activities of SFCP 1994-1999", it was clear that compared with twenty years earlier, SFCP had blossomed and become better known. Muriel would have been thrilled! The Report covered SFCP's international links, conferences, Socratic Dialogues, publications and grants. By 2005, SFCP had established its own website, essential for an organisation in today's world, through which as Secretary I receive enquiries from interested people and we are able to present our ideas and activities. Furthermore, we had become more planning conscious and had adopted forward-looking development plans from 2002 onwards. This no doubt reflected the fact that Tamsyn Imison, as a trustee, brought to SFCP her experience gained as headteacher of a large London comprehensive secondary school (Hampstead School). In that field working out and adopting such plans had become part of good professional practice. As one of the school's governors I had shared in this experience, and had presented our school's development plan at outside meetings.

An important component of our development plan has been the extension of Socratic Dialogue, especially among teachers in schools, colleges and universities. Needless to say, we started quite small. I was very much aware that in order to extend Socratic Dialogue we desperately needed Socratic facilitators. There were very few in the UK, so our priority clearly was to train facilitators. I had witnessed our German colleagues going from strength to strength. In the 1990s they had established the GSP (Gesellschaft für Sokratisches Philosophieren – translated: Society of Socratic Facilitators), which I joined once I had trained as a facilitator under the GSP scheme. The facilitation at the 1996 International Conference was my first experience and luckily it was very positive. It seemed that in next to no time the GSP had increased in size to well over the dozen with which it started. Nowadays there are between 30 and 40 Socratic facilitators in Germany.

I became good friends with one of the newly trained German facilitators, Kirsten Malmquist. She had attended the first international conference in 1996. In her teens she had spent a year in Britain and learnt to speak fluent English. In due course I shared with her my ‘dream’ of training Socratic facilitators in Britain, to which Kirsten’s response was: *Perhaps I could help you in realising that dream.* Indeed, that is precisely what Kirsten did. In 2004 SFCP launched its first course in the “Socratic Approach to Learning and Teaching”, which was repeated in 2005. She developed the plans for these two courses and delivered them jointly with Nigel Laurie, who had trained as a Socratic facilitator in the late 1990s. I was reminded by Nigel later that he had first heard about Socratic Dialogue from me in the 1990s, when I ran a workshop about SD at a London conference at which the English translation of *Sophie’s World* was launched and at which the Norwegian author Jostein Gaarder was a speaker.

The students of our two courses were mainly teachers, about half coming from a collaborating school. I participated in the three linked weekends in 2004 and 2005, and was greatly encouraged to see how the training opened up new teaching approaches for some of the participants. Two examples are still vivid in my mind. A newly qualified physical education teacher had had severe disciplinary problems with a group of girls during PE lessons at her comprehensive school. As a result of our course she gave these ‘difficult’ girls responsibility for organising, in groups, their contribution to the lesson. The disaffected girls rose to the challenge by working out their own group gymnastic demonstration. Many months later this teacher told me she had never again had any problems with this class of girls. By contrast, a very experienced teacher of geography had learned not to keep on talking to fill the silences in class, when no-one answered her question. Instead she remained calmly silent, waited, giving her students time to reflect. This had resulted in more active involvement of her students in the lessons and improved their contributions.

By 2006, in response to demand from some who had taken the 2004 or 2005 course, Kirsten and I were able to recruit a small group all of whom wanted to learn how to facilitate Socratic Dialogues. Together we developed a part-time pilot course in Socratic facilitation, which was delivered by Kirsten. She met with the group and together they planned three to four residential weekends and a similar number of one-day workshops

during 2006-07. This was later extended to 2008. By 2009 all from the initial group were facilitating weekend Socratic Dialogues, and some even managed a whole week. SFCP is on the point of considering a larger group for a second round of training in Britain, when we hope to engage two trainers so they can support each other. This pattern of having a larger group with two trainers has proved successful in Bulgaria during 2008 to 2009, where Dieter Krohn (Chair of the GSP) joined Kirsten in exporting and adapting for Bulgaria the training model she had developed for Britain.

So I think we have got past the stage of being considered a small bunch of cranks! This despite the fact that only three years ago (in June 2006) in a review document for the trustees on “Overall Aims and Direction of SFCP”, I still argued that “we need to convince people that we are not cranks, a small sect or clique or subversive”! New people began to be willing to join us. We now (April 2009) have six trustees instead of a mere 3 or 4, and four new recently trained Socratic Dialogue facilitators.