

## **My schooling: a mixed bag of experiences**

Nelson's school: The Walkemühle

I had attended a Montessori Kindergarten in Berlin, but before that I had been for about 3 years, from the age of two or three, at the Walkemühle, the Nelson school, directed by Minna Specht. As I was so young my memories are dim, but of course my mother and others told me stories about my time there. One was that the children all wore aprons, to protect their clothes. I used to be very fussy, and if my apron so much as had a single spot on it, I cried until I was given a clean one. Another story was that I loved climbing trees. Climbing up is of course much easier than coming down. So from high up the tree I used to call *Willi, I can't get down, please come and fetch me*. In the 1920s Willi Eichler was Nelson's secretary and although they worked mainly in Göttingen they often spent time at the Walkemühle.

The person who looked after the young children at Nelson's school was called Julie Pohlmann, a wonderfully kind and sweet person. Julie was like a mother to all of us. In some ways the Walkemühle had a strict regime. The children's wing was separate from the Academy for adults, where people from the IJB and later the ISK were trained to be convinced and committed fighters for social justice. Their day started with physical exercises, they learned practical as well as academic subjects, and became experienced in the use of the Socratic Method. But the strictness of this experimental school also affected the children's lives. Parents were allowed to visit only once a year and the children could only go home once a year. When I tell that to people today they are horrified, sometimes even think it was barbarian towards children and parents. I think Nelson was influenced by Plato's views that children would thrive and develop their talents better if removed from the influence of their parents. Nelson had, after all, founded this school in order to develop thinking, rational, independent and autonomous adults, and the influence of parents was not always seen as supportive of such aims.

Although my mother and father had agreed on sending me to Nelson's school, it seems my father did not agree with this rule. Under their divorce in the mid-twenties my mother was given custody, but my father had the right to see me once a month. During his extensive lecture tours in Germany, he used to drop in at the Walkemühle when nearby, and demanded to see me. For this reason Minna asked my mother to remove me from the school, as it was unfair to the other children if I saw my father more frequently than they could see their parents.

Schools in Berlin

Thus I returned to Berlin, roughly at the age of five, and after the Montessori Kindergarten I attended a local primary school near where we lived, at 32 Klopstockstrasse. I was shocked to find that pupils in that school were hit for bad behaviour. At home I was never hit or given any physical punishment. It must have been some time before my mother discovered that pupils in that school were hit. We had to fold our hands in the prayer position on our desk, and the teacher then used to 'whip' us on our hands with a ruler. I was shy about telling my mother about this, but perhaps one day I did so. I do not remember ever being hit like that myself, but as soon as my mother heard about this form of punishment she removed me from the school.

Thereafter she chose a school where more progressive methods were employed. Although it meant an hour's journey on the tram, each way, at age seven I went to that school and have

wonderful memories of it. Initially someone accompanied me, but after I was familiar with the tram route, I did that journey on my own. Perhaps these were safer times even in a big city like Berlin. Nowadays I see parents bringing their young children to school and fetching them to take them home. This was probably another case where foundations for my self-confidence and independence were laid at an early age. I remember that our class had Papa Jensen as their teacher. When we arrived in the morning, we used to rush into the classroom, eager to tell Papa Jensen what we had experienced since the previous day. We all sat around him, and learnt to hear every child tell its story before lessons began.

But when we moved from the flat in Klopstockstrasse to another one in 19 Adolfstrasse in the Wedding, the journey to Papa Jensen's class became impossible, and again my mother had to look for a new school. This time she sent me to the nearby state school, which was a fully secular school without any religious instruction, as far as I can remember. (These schools were called *Weltliche Schulen*). I had only a short walk to reach the large school site with 1,000 children, although administratively pupils were organised into two schools with separate headteachers. The headteacher of the adjacent school was Fritz Schmidt, who was an ISK member. Of course I knew him, and I used to walk along the corridor to the other school to find his room. He allowed me to search his wastepaper basket for small pieces of coloured paper and cardboard, and to take them away. Being so interested in handicrafts, I always found a good use for my found treasures.

When I moved to the *Weltliche Schule* in Berlin, my teacher - whose name I have forgotten - was very important to me. He handled my joining the class with great skill. On my first day I was bored with the lesson, got up from my desk and wandered to the window to look out what was happening in the school playground. The other children must have looked at the teacher, wondering what he would do about my non-attention to the lesson. All he did was to say to the class: *Don't worry about Renate, she has come from a school with different rules. Leave her alone, she will soon adapt to our way of working.* How right he was and how sad we all were when that teacher was removed from the school when the Nazis came to power. That was the last school which I attended in Germany (a total of five by the age of 12). During the short interlude in Denmark there was one further school, but only for six weeks.

### The Dora Russell School

My first major task on reaching England was to learn the language. In this I received help from the Smith family whilst I stayed with them in Canterbury. During this time my mother tried to establish herself to earn her living as a lecturer in international relations. She had no degree but a lot of experience and knowledge. Teaching at the university was out, but through friends she was gradually able to secure lecturing and teaching work with labour organisations like the Co-operative Women's Guild, the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC) and the WEA. However, all this meant she had to travel a lot and was often not in London. It was thus not possible for her to look after me, and as I was only 12-years old she tried to find a progressive boarding school for me. She visited Summerhill (the famous school founded by A.S. Neil), Bedales, a school for girls and probably one or two others.

Everywhere she went, even if she liked the school, she found the school fees much too high. Eventually she landed at the Dora Russell school. Of course the fees there were also too high, but when she told Dora she could not afford to send me to her school, Dora simply said: *Just send her to us, you need not pay.* Dora was apparently known for helping refugees. She was the second wife of the famous philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell, and they had

started the school together. Their two children, John and Kate, attended the school. Later, when they divorced, Dora carried on with the school by herself.

I liked being at Dora's school. Initially the other children teased me (for example, they called out: *Renate – Tomate*) and I felt helpless because my knowledge of English was still very rudimentary. Luckily I got measles and had to be isolated for about three weeks. During this time the Matron became my friend; she not only brought me my meals but also helped me improve my English. By the time I had recovered I was able to cope with school life. We lived fairly simply, but that was no new experience for me. I remember that for breakfast a large tin of hard bread was put out for us, rather like rusks. The theory was, I believe, that we would eat less of the hard bread than if we had been given fresh bread. Occasionally the kitchen ran out of hard bread and we were then delighted because fresh bread was put out. We also had butter only on Sundays, on other days we had to be satisfied with just marmalade or honey.

Attendance at lessons was voluntary, something I had not experienced previously. So we went to the lessons we liked best. In other words, we could choose. Nothing was compulsory, very different from today when all children have to follow the National Curriculum. So I chose what I liked and enjoyed learning. In addition classes were very small and I am sure our teachers stretched and challenged us. In my case I remember loving the lessons given by the science teacher. We learnt very practical things, like the way the water supply for a house worked, including the toilet cistern. I made a diagram of the pipes running through a house, including the S bend under sinks and toilets. My other favourites were lessons in handicraft. We were able to draw, do woodwork, raffia, weave small baskets out of cane, and our imagination could run riot. These lessons took place in a small Nissen hut in the woods about half a mile from the main house.

I thought of becoming a carpenter and one night dreamt that I had made a table. The following day I went down to the hut and actually made a table out of wood all by myself. We were allowed to spend time in the hut even when no teacher was present. I was so proud of that table, which stood by my bed in the dormitory, and which I used daily. All these activities certainly strengthened my practical turn of mind. It was only much later that I turned to more academic pursuits. I read more because I needed to know something rather than because I enjoyed reading for its own sake. I have been a slow but thorough reader.

The children at the school were very politically minded and when we decided to write and act our own play for parents' day, the topic we chose was the rise of the Nazis to power. Clearly I liked acting, and this was not my first role in a play. On this occasion, my role was to act a brown shirt Nazi, an SA man, who strutted about and commandeered everyone else. My mother attended parents' day and told me later that she could hardly believe her eyes. She realised that I must have watched those Nazis closely before I left Berlin, because my impersonation was so realistic. Dora made references in one of her books to this play and my amazing acting of a Nazi.

I have fond memories of Dora and her kindness. I heard at a much later date that in the early post-war years she was living near our community house in Dartmouth Road in Willesden, London. Unfortunately I did not meet her then but at some point saw an interesting TV programme in which she spoke. That reminded me to send her my mother's autobiography *Never Give Up* published in 1976, the year my mother died. Unfortunately I do not have a photo of Dora, but a beautiful one was taken of my mother by a Danish photographer when she was 50, which is included in *Never Give Up*. Within two weeks Dora wrote me a lovely

letter to thank me, and it was clear she remembered us well. In her letter she referred to my theatrical appearances at her School, in one of which *'you impersonated so well the pompous Nazi investigator. You knew them from experience'* (letter dated 7 February 1986). A month later Dora died. It brought it home to me that if one wants to please an old friend one should not keep on delaying making contact.

During my two years at Dora's school I spent one year at Telegraph House in Hampshire and the second one at Brentwood in Essex. Telegraph House belonged to Bertrand Russell, and he wanted to have it back, so the school had to move elsewhere. Dora's two children by Bertrand, John and Kate, were pupils in the school and they became my friends. One summer holiday they invited me to spend a couple of weeks at Telegraph House when the great man was there. I was proud of a photograph I took of Bertrand, standing very erect on the lawn, holding a cup of tea! I remember him as a shy and awkward man, somewhat withdrawn but gentle and kindly. He was probably totally immersed in his high-level thoughts. The story was told that his third wife would find him with a brown and a black shoe on, on the point of leaving for Petersfield Station to catch the train to London. He used to withdraw to the top of Telegraph House to work. That was his sanctuary and we children were not allowed up there. I had once been to that top room from where one had a magnificent view over the South Downs and the distant sea. Much later I saw a memorable TV programme of the old man at age 90 or 91. The first shot of the film showed him from behind, reading aloud his own obituary!

Regretfully I had to leave Dora's school at the age of 14. I was the oldest pupil in the school and Dora told my mother that she could not keep me. The Ministry's inspectors would not allow it, as the school in their view did not have suitable educational provision for children over 14. So the question arose, what should I do next.

New Choice at 14, with father's help

In the autumn of 1935 my father came to the rescue. Through his interest and work in sexology, he had met Janet Chance who was Secretary of the Abortion Law Reform Society. Janet and her husband Clinton Chance invited my father to their large house in Hampshire for a weekend. During conversation they mentioned that they were looking for a girl companion for their daughter Bubs (real name: Averil). Their two older children had already left home to attend university, and Bubs felt lonely in that large country house. Did my father perhaps know someone suitable around the age of 14. *Well, he said, there is my daughter Renate. She has just had to leave Dora Russell's school and doesn't know what to do next. May be she would be interested.*

So my father returned to London and discussed the suggestion with my mother and myself. It was agreed that Max would drive me to the Chance's house so that both sides could be acquainted before making any decisions. The first encounter with Bubs was most unfortunate; she had been out riding with her father and rushed back into the house screaming: *Toby is dead!* Toby was Bubs' horse. The horse had slipped and fallen onto a rake, the spikes upwards, so that it was badly injured and had to be shot. Fortunately Bubs herself had been thrown clear of the rake and was not badly hurt.

Despite this unpromising start to our acquaintance, we all agreed that I should join the Chance family as a house daughter. My mother visited their home and once again there were discussions about my attending the same school as Bubs, St Swithun's School in Winchester. This was a public school for girls, a great contrast to Dora's progressive boarding school. The well-to-do people of Winchester, a small provincial Cathedral town, sent their daughters to

this Anglican school, where every morning our day began with hymn singing and the saying of prayers in assembly.

The Chances wondered whether my mother could pay the school fees, which she said she could not afford. The next suggestion was that she buy my school uniform. When my mother enquired what this would cost, she was told: *About £ 120*. My mother simply replied that that was the amount she earned in a year. Whereupon, just like Dora, the whole question of fees and cost of uniform was dropped, I joined the Chances for three years and my mother paid nothing. I was really treated like their own daughter. Whatever Bubs had, I was to have as well. She had her pony, but I did not want one because I associated riding with fox hunting (which Bubs and her father did together). So it was agreed that Mr Chance would buy me a pair of skates and pay for me to go once a week to skate on an ice rink, for which I had to take the train to Southampton. I had learnt skating in Berlin and loved it. But now I had lessons in fancy skating, like making figures of eight and dancing the waltz.

Bubs and I shared a room, and we had another room in the house where we did our homework and pursued various other activities. The three years were a happy time. I came to know life in a well-to-do family (Clinton Chance was a trader on the Stock Exchange in London) and went to a formal British public school for girls, wearing the school uniform. There was something unusual about the school uniform from which I greatly benefited. Girls who kept a good posture for a term were placed on the 'good position list'. They then wore a yellow and navy girdle the next term instead of one in navy only. Once on that list I stayed on it for my time at St Swithun's. I was proud of my yellow girdle and kept it whilst at the school. It contributed to posture awareness, which stayed with me, so that I still walk upright in my nineties. All these things were new to me. At school I experienced for the first time an academic atmosphere. But in my spare time my practical bent continued to assert itself. I remember taking my bicycle totally to pieces for cleaning, ball bearings and all! Today it seems to me a miracle that I managed to reassemble it and then ride it again.

A 'public' school for girls: St Swithun's, Winchester

However, there were some initial hiccups about my acceptance at St. Swithun's. They were pretty horrified that I had attended Dora Russell's school. They were probably afraid that I would corrupt and mislead the girls from these well-to-do families in Winchester. I surmised this from what transpired during the journey between Waterloo Station and Micheldever, the railway station before Winchester, near which the Chances had their country house. Mrs Chance fetched me from London, and during the train journey explained a few things to me. St Swithun's had accepted me initially for six weeks 'on approval', and after this period would decide whether they would offer me a permanent place. Mrs Chance cautiously advised me: *Renate, you won't swear at St Swithun's, will you?* Clearly I had little idea of what she meant, saying: *Does that mean I mustn't say 'bust'?* Mrs Chance did not know what to say, she probably thought that this girl knows no swear words – which was true! I explained to her that the previous day Lola (one of my mother's friends) had told me I must not say 'bust' because that was slang for 'burst' or 'break', and I should avoid using slang. The assumption must have been that at Dora Russell's 'free' school the children were unruly and swore all the time. True, on hot days we ran around in the garden in our birthday suits, but as far as I remember our behaviour towards each other was always reasonably considerate. Anyway, my acceptance at St Swithun's was confirmed in due course.

I have much to be grateful for, both to the Chances and to St Swithun's. Attending that school for three years and working for my school certificate probably helped me improve my

English so much that later I was often asked *Where did you learn your Queen's English?* Actually, when at 27 I went to Ruskin College in Oxford we were all given a writing test, on the basis of which I was put in the English class. So perhaps St Swithun's was not the only educational institution which helped me improve my English. Much later, when my first book was accepted by the Clarendon Press in Oxford, I was very proud of the fact that the publisher's editor did not change a single word. Admittedly, my mother and I had been through the manuscript, ruthlessly using the red and blue pencils to mark mistakes and correct the language. There must be something to my English, since students and others have often commented on the clarity of my speech and my writing. Perhaps in this connection the long involvement with the Nelsonians and with Socratic Dialogue also made a contribution to speaking and writing clearly. Nelson required people to speak clearly and loud enough to be understood – language after all exists to communicate!

There was one other hiccup at St Swithun's. As an Anglican school, all girls attended Assembly where we sung hymns among other things. I really enjoyed this and sung hymns with gusto. As a child brought up without any introduction to Christian practices this was entirely new to me. Of course all girls also attended Religious Education (RE) lessons. Parents had the legal right to withdraw their children from RE, and my mother – a humanist – wished to do so. The headteacher, Miss Finlay, was really upset. No other girls were withdrawn by their parents, and she wanted me to attend the RE lessons. *Renate will feel out of things*, she said. In the end a compromise was struck. My mother agreed that I attend the lessons, but the school agreed that I would not be required to do the homework. The result was that the teacher used to write on my RE report that *Renate is a good listener*. The other girls envied me!

(Excerpts from Chapter 5 of Rene Saran's autobiography *Rene's Tree of Life*.)