

Remembering Tante Anna by Leslie Brent

Although I was at Bunce Court school for only three and a half years the care, love and education I received there profoundly shaped the rest of my life. I became very close to Tante Anna (who we all called T.A.) in her old age and frequently read to her when she was virtually blind. And, on her death in 1960, her sisters asked me to give the oration at her cremation.

It would be remiss of me not to thank, on behalf of all present here, the current owners and residents of Bunce Court, Julia and George Miller. It was their enthusiastic and loving support that allowed this event happened. We are massively grateful to them, and also to the other residents of Bunce Court.

T.A. was a very remarkable woman. She had spent the years of World War I in Wisconsin, where she obtained her Master's Degree, and where she had come under the influence of the Quakers. On her return to Germany she worked for the Quakers to provide food and clothing to thousands of starving and neglected children. By creating her co-educational boarding school in Herrlingen, near Ulm, she introduced the concept of "Reformpädagogik" into the German educational system, which had been incredibly rigid. Her school was run on very liberal, child-centred lines that had much in common with the schools of A.S. Neill's Summerhill School in Suffolk and Dartington school in Devon. Rules were kept to a minimum and a high degree of self-discipline was expected of the children. The relationship between children and teachers, who were often called by their nicknames, was highly informal.

T.A. was a very farsighted woman - unlike the great majority of German Jews who, like my parents, thought of the Nazi regime as fleeting phenomenon. On the day in 1933 on which she was required to fly the swastika flag from her school building in Herrlingen, she decided that it was no longer possible to educate Jewish children in such a hostile environment and made her mind to move the school to England. Having found an 18th century manor house with extensive grounds on the North Downs of Kent, she moved the school with

many of the teachers and pupils. So as not to excite the interest of the authorities children travelled in small groups and eventually met up before crossing the Channel. It was a bold and far-sighted decision. And so Bunce Court school came into being.

Not all the children were from the continent and Jewish, for some English parents with left wing views thought of the school as absolutely right for their children. Harold Jackson, who is happily here with us today, likes to remember his bewilderment when, early in the war, he found himself surrounded by the enemy! Augustus John's granddaughters were also in the school.

An important aspect of T.A.'s educational approach was to engage the children in practical work of one kind or another, from work in the kitchen and wood workshop to gardening and housework. In Bunce Court this became absolutely essential as the school, which was constantly short of funds, couldn't employ professionals.

In late 1938, after Kristallnacht and the panic-stricken organisation of the Kindertransports, T.A. was asked to help in the setting up of a reception camp in Dovercourt, near Harwich, and especially its educational facilities. This she did with the help of one of her most senior teachers, Hanna Bergas, and a few of the older children. She took into her school in Bunce Court some 50 to 60 children from the camp, enlarging her school buildings by the erection of wooden huts - the boys' houses - which accommodated some of the older boys. I was one of the lucky children she selected.

T.A. was very stout and incredibly short-sighted, and some children were frightened of her. She did not have much of a sense of humour and therefore came over as stern. One day she happened to open the door of an outside toilet and found a boy sitting on the seat. Her reaction was to say: "Sit up straight, boy!" Strangely, sex education, at least for the boys, was minimal or non-existent. T.A. told a group of us on one occasion: "If you ever feel the urge upon you, boys, take a cold shower". Hilarious! She sensibly insisted that

only English should be spoken, a rule that was frequently broken but never in her presence. She introduced the custom of holding hands when sitting at the dining tables before a meal, and her advice on more than one occasion was: "Children, if you cannot love one another, than at least tolerate each other".

She did not involve herself in teaching but was the organisational genius who ensured that, despite never-ending financial crises, the school remained solvent.

But equally important was the fact that the school remained true to her ideals. She was unquestionably the leader who had a clear vision of what the school should be, and she appointed the staff. She was well supported by her two sisters, Tante Paula, who was a trained nurse who was in charge of the school sick bays and also looked after some of the smaller children in what was known as "the cottage" at the bottom of the hill. Her sister-in-law, Frau Kahn was responsible for the linen cupboard and all washing arrangements, a thankless but essential role.

The staff were partly German refugees themselves and were mostly hugely overqualified. For example, Helmuth Schneider had been the head of a small coeducational boarding school in Germany, and a gifted pianist: he worked in the garden! Adolf Prag, who taught maths, was a brilliant mathematician until he left for a public school in London. The boiler man had been a well known theatre director in Germany, who of course organised some wonderful school plays. Lotte Kalisher, a gifted violinist, taught music. And so on. And Hannah and Hans Meyer were popular teachers: their son Joseph was born in Bunce Court! They had a cottage not far away near Doddington, where later reunions of O.B.C.'s were held in their extensive garden.

But other staff were English and often conscientious objectors, prominent among them Norman Wormleighton, known as Wormy. He taught English brilliantly and had a good tenor voice, so that he was able to take the part of Papageno in a production of part of the Magic Flute, which was so successful

that "the Red Dean of Canterbury" had it performed in the chapter house of Canterbury cathedral.

A special mention must go to Gretel Heidt, a non-Jewish woman who has joined the school as its cook in the mid-30s. She was a lovely but temperamental woman and helping her in the kitchen was considered to be a privilege, even though the occasional frying pan was sent flying through the air when things went badly.... She was highly popular, with both staff and pupils, and was a sort of earth-mother to some children. (She sent me food parcels when I joined the army....) She had the option of returning to Germany at the outbreak of the war but opted to stay with the school. When she was interned on the Isle of Man the standard of meals dropped dramatically until her return.....

One of T.A.'s great achievements was to move the school to Shropshire when she was given 10 days' notice by the military authorities as the school was located in a sensitive military zone. To find a suitable building, Trench Hall near Wem, so quickly was incredible, even though some makeshift accommodation such as the former stables had to be used of the older boys. Then, soon after the end of the war, she moved the school back to Bunce Court, despite the fact that major repairs had to be carried out to make good widespread damage inflicted by the army occupants.

By this time T.A. was virtually blind and it is extraordinary that she had the courage to move her school back to its home on the North Downs. There she took in a number of boys who had been in concentration camps or in hiding, and helped to restore their faith in humanity. Alas, money was in ever increasingly short supply, it became difficult to recruit teachers in such an isolated spot, and I suppose much of the *raison d'être* of the school had disappeared. An attempt to find a successor foundered on T.A.'s stubborn unwillingness to have someone with somewhat different educational ideas take over, and the school closed in 1948.

Whilst a few children were, almost inevitably, unhappy - separated from their parents and living a communal life some found difficult - the great majority found in Bunce Court a safe haven, a home and caring society on which they were able to build successful lives. Some, like the painter Frank Auerbach and the cartoonist and raconteur Gerald Hoffnung, achieved national fame, but I don't know of ANYONE who didn't find his or her feet in later life.

T.A.'s achievements were indeed formidable, and it is wonderful that we have at last been given this opportunity of acknowledging this.

Interestingly, T.A. is far better known in Germany than in her adopted country, and three schools have been named after her. (The school in Berlin also has an annual "Anna Essinger Prize" for pupils, teachers or parents who have done something out of the ordinary for the school or community relations.) Hans-Joerg Greimel, a former teacher in one of these schools and who has done much to have the name of T.A. remembered in the Ulm area, is happily here today to represent Ulm.

Leslie Brent, 25 June 2018