

Obituary Joan Marcus 13.5.1918 – 15.3.15

She was my Mum

My parents moved into 55 Beech Rd, Stourbridge in December 1952. They had come from Edinburgh Steiner School; with my brother Christopher age 2, to start a new life at Elmfield School. I, Mary was born shortly after they moved in during a very hard winter. The arrival of twin boys in 1956 Michael and Paul was a surprise, only one was expected! We led a very rich and varied family life with all of us going to Elmfield School where my father, Rudi Marcus (20.1.1918 – 21.3.1984) taught and later where Mum saw classes through their early years and she also had the Kindergarten for many years. She was a devoted mother and wife. Despite my father leaving the family home when we were in our teens, she never said a bad word about him. Regina Strass, one of the first au pair girls and life long friend of the family, said of Mum that she would not have been the person she was without the great bond, love and devotion she had for my father.

The richness to Mum's life was rooted in her family upbringing. Jack Bucknall, her father, was a Church of England priest who trained at Mirfield Theological College of the Resurrection, which was well known for its very strong social traditions. He eventually married Daisy Boden after being engaged for seven years. Both of them came from large families and they met because of brothers of both families being at Mirfield. Mum was born in Leeds and Morwenna my aunt, in Cornwall. Katherine was born in the East End of London and died age 3 of pneumonia and whooping cough, Mum was 6 and Morwenna 5. They both went to St Monica's Church of England School, in Warminster, as they were both bullied by the head master at the local school as he disapproved of their father's campaigns on behalf of the working classes. They lived in Thaxted during the time of Conrad Noel, a very socially radical priest, where "The battle of the Flags" took place, involving flying a red flag in church, representing "The Blood of all Nations" and mistaken for the communist flag.

Mum first met anthroposophy age 17yrs when she heard about a lecture she wanted to go to, she asked her father for his opinion, "I was reading Steiner before you were born!" was his reply. Mum visited the Steiner School when it was in Streatham, South London and was shown around by Captain Field. She was convinced she wanted to train to be a Steiner school teacher. She travelled to Germany to learn German, with William Mann, and then on to Munich to au pair for the Sandkuhler family, she had her 18th birthday there. Just before the Second World War broke out Mum returned to England in early 1938 on request of her mother, which she didn't understand at the time, as she was not aware of trouble brewing. Both sisters helped their father and uncles take food to people living in shelters during the raids in the East end of London. When the Waldorf School moved out of London to Minehead, known as Michael Hall, Mum then in her 20's ran the hostel with Molly Bould. After completing the Waldorf Teacher training at the Michael Hall School she studied music at Trinity College London. A teaching post followed at the Edinburgh Steiner School

I am getting to know my Mum more now than perhaps I did when she was alive! As I dismantle the contents of her house ready for sale and handle all the treasures of her life that have been either collected by her or given to her, beautiful objects, pictures, fabrics

pots, plants and letters, notes, note books and hundreds of cards and interesting newspaper articles, magazines and books everywhere; treasures of stones, crystals and seeds and seed-pods and feather; everything says a little something about her; she could hardly bring herself to throw anything away, everything either had or would have a purpose. She had an amazing memory, almost everything had a person and a story attached to it from the long distant passed to the present day. Her house and garden was full of rich memories of family and friends and all the people who came and went from all over the world, and mostly with a connection to Elmfield. It is as if the house and garden had in essence all these memories and all her giving and forgiving character imbedded there.

Through the people I have met and continue to meet and who have written to the Marcus family, I see another facet of understanding about Mum, as they tell me their story of what she meant to them and how they met.

She had a remarkably strong respect and a loving spirit towards all of nature, which showed in the abundance of plant life not only in the garden but on practically every window sill in the house. She poured out nurture in her garden and received back an abundance of growth and strength of spirit. She gave out joyously to people in every possible way she could and listened intently to everyone's lives, loves, joys and hurts. This seemed to nourish her as well as worry her at times. When her thinking failed prayer was her constant silent resolve and retreat. She was masterful at keeping in touch with people through letter writing and remembering birthdays.

Mum was sometimes kind to a fault, always considerate towards others. She found it difficult to say what she really felt or needed which made looking after her in her older years sometimes very difficult indeed, a great deal of understanding and interpretation was required. For instance when the paramedics arrived when she, having fallen in the bathroom and broken her hip, was more concerned about providing the paramedic with a cup of tea than the comfort of herself.

Her name to fame came with stories she would tell such as being pushed in her pram by Gustav Holst; meetings with Robert Plant; Mum and Morwenna would meet with the brother of Sir Walter Scott; Diana the daughter of Sir Stafford Cripps married Purcell Weaver who later after divorce had asked Mum to marry him but she didn't want to move to Canada; the Trevelyan family, Kitty a close friend of Mum's and my Godmother

My Mum's attentions toward everyone else sometimes seemed she wasn't all that interested in her own children and grandchildren. Having been brought up with live-in boarders, teachers, au pair girls, lodgers, all our lives, you would think such a daughter's response to be strange., although She was the "mother of all" sort of figure head and could seem to expand love everywhere, to the expense of her feelings and needs. Eventually I could consider the "family" from a wider perspective, making everyone my brothers and sisters! She always was a very practical teacher.

Mary Rawson ne Marcus

A cup of tea with Joan

It was hard for me to put our friendship into words and though I have tried, this writing has become something more of an expression of what she was to the Elmfield community and to her “wider family”, as Mary (her daughter) put it so well at the memorial event.

Joan was able to see Elmfield School from her window; during the Marcus family’s early years, since 1952, at 55 Beech Road, Stourbridge, Joan and her family could walk across farm land with sheep and across land still belonging to the school. Though that land was sold, and became two different housing estates, and though her children completed their education at Elmfield and moved on each in their individual lives, the bond that linked Joan with the school was never broken. To the end of her life she was visited by members of the Elmfield community, past and present, always welcoming and grateful to see people and would always share her warmth and wisdom; almost to the end of her life she would come up to school for coffee time every Tuesday morning. She would attend every festival she could manage to get to, even when she could no longer hear much of what was being said or sung, she would never-the-less absorb the spirit of what was going on and would not easily have missed an event. Nevertheless, as her physical presence waned, the spiritual connection between her house and the school became more powerful. She watched over Elmfield, not only holding the memory of what Elmfield had been in its early days, but also remaining the steadfast guardian of what it ought to be.

I only knew Joan in her retirement. I first met her in 1989 when she was still playing the piano for Eurythmy lessons, and she kindly invited me, a trainee-teacher, around for a cup of tea. When I returned to Elmfield to be a class teacher in 1995 I presumed to renew our acquaintance, and came to her house for many more cups of tea over the next twenty years.

It became an established weekly routine. I would call in every Friday, on my way home at the end of the school week, just when Joan would be awakening from her afternoon nap. She would already have a little tray of tea and biscuits ready, which we would take through to the front room. Sometimes while we talked her canary would flit around us, even perch on Joan’s chair or finger. As the years passed, and her afternoon nap got longer, I took on the responsibility of making the tea, and bringing some biscuits. Latterly, I would have to rouse Joan by ringing the chimes from her hall-way, and wait to hear the whirring sound of the chair-lift; to be sure that Joan was on her way. She liked to have a cup of peppermint tea, usually only a fleeting dab of the tea bag, which would be saved and used again, together with a dash of milk. Going by what was left in the cup when I made it, she aimed for a very particular combination of tastes, which I rarely caught precisely!

Somehow there was always so much to talk about, and the time passed quickly and congenially. Joan loved to hear news of school, and of what I was endeavouring to do in the classroom. She had the rare gift of truly listening, so that one felt heard and understood. She would often console me with wise words about teaching based upon her own experiences, and cheer me with a funny anecdote that put in perspective the perennial trials and joys of working with children.

When I came to understand what a rich life she had led, I loved to ask her questions, too. I tried to piece together a biography: she had experienced Nazi Germany before the war, and was present at the closing of the first Waldorf School at Stuttgart; she helped run soup kitchens in London during the Blitz. She nurtured and treasured a rich store of memories of so many people who had become friends and acquaintances. She had known so many of the founding figures of Waldorf education, in Edinburgh, Stuttgart and at Michael Hall, but was also equally full of appreciation of her neighbours in the street.

To the end of her life she liked to keep abreast of the news; she sought out stories of people who were striving to do good in difficult circumstances, would think deeply of them, and frequently supported them financially too. She was always ready to help, with a cup of tea, a meal, and even a place to stay, for people needing a temporary sanctuary at some hiatus in their lives. She wasn't blind to people's failings, but wouldn't flinch from helping them sort out their problems. She looked with eyes of compassion, and always calmly sought out the positive in every situation.

I think what most bound us together was the two weeks we spent in Greece, together with her beloved sister Morwenna, in 1997. She would often go back over this foreign escapade in later years, and talk with such relish of all the things we had seen and done, and the adventures we had. For me it was such a privilege to accompany them, and to experience the richness of both their own lives and the enduring warmth of this, the longest friendship she had in her life. Even after Morwenna's passing, Joan felt her presence near to her.

So many of us will have our own memories of Joan because she made herself available for each of us in the way we needed her. Although she was certainly strong-minded, highly-principled and steadfast in her anthroposophical convictions with a strong Christian faith and commitment to the Christian Community, she was not above strong statements of her preferences and prejudices, she was also remarkably open-minded, tolerant and understanding. She had that genuine humility that made her think more of the people that came to her than to dwell on what qualities it was in her that attracted them. Knowing you were in her thoughts made you strive to live up to her estimation! I always went home after my Friday cup of tea feeling refreshed and restored. She helped me feel a better person: I feel honoured to have been known by Joan.

Martin Gulbis

