

80 Years of Camphill

by James Sleigh

Renate Sleigh, 89, looks out of her window, over her lawn to where an angel in her garden stands at the head of a water feature. The sound of cascading water joins the scent drifting from freshly cut roses in the room. Renate sits elegantly dressed in a white jersey, a turquoise scarf, pinned with a silver brooch.

Could she have imagined as a nine-year-old girl, 80 years ago, I wonder, while taking refuge with her mother and three younger siblings in a humble building in the north of Scotland – with no electricity or running water – that her family and the people that she was with would pioneer an organisation that would extend across the world and touch the lives of millions of people?

Eighty years ago this month the start of the Camphill movement hung in the balance: a home had been purchased for the first Camphill school, near Aberdeen in Scotland. The König family and a few pioneers, together with some children with disabilities, were living in a temporary residence waiting to move into their new home and start the initiative that Karl König and some of his followers had been planning. But just a few weeks before the move marking the official start of the movement, all the men were rounded up and interned on the Isle of Man for a year. They were all foreigners and, as the Battle of Britain had started, the British forces were ensuring no foreigners could supply any information to the enemy.



The handful of women had a choice: wait until the men returned, or make the move and start the first Camphill without them. They decided to make the move...



And so, in 1940, these strong women built the first Camphill, and were joined by the men when they were released a year later. The school developed and a village was started. As they started to meet the demand for an organisation that not only cares for people with disabilities, but empowers them in all areas of their lives, more and more villages came into being.

At the time, in Europe, people with disabilities were the most vulnerable people. Back then the only places of care for people with intellectual disabilities were large asylums. Hitler ordered the killing of anyone with a disability as he regarded them as 'impure', so anyone with any disability in a country run or conquered by the Nazis

was hidden for fear of being killed.

The need for an organisation like Camphill spread into Europe after the war. From there, the pioneers took the Camphill movement to Africa, America, Scandinavia and, more recently, Eastern Europe, Russia and Asia.

Today, there are 120 Camphills worldwide.



Not only has the Camphill movement cared for people with disabilities, it has provided communities where people live and work together and, in the process, recognise and understand themselves better practicing brotherhood and a new type of economy.

Most Camphills have undertaken to care for the earth and build up the soil in their farming. They produce products free of pesticides and chemicals, and grow wholesome produce to feed and nourish their Camphill communities, and also their wider communities.

The seed of Camphill, planted 80 years ago, has grown and flourished around the world. The book 'Candle on the Hill' describes this first Camphill in Scotland as the mother candle, from which, now 80 years later, lights around the world have been lit.

Of that original pioneering group in Scotland, only Renate and her brother Andrew, who now lives in Canada, are still alive. It was Renate, with her husband Julian and a few other pioneers, who brought Camphill to South Africa.



To look out over beauty that you have created and know that your work has touched the lives of millions of people, is probably one of the richest feelings anyone could have –and one of the greatest senses of fulfilment one could wish for. Yet Renate remains modest. She knows and loves each resident at our Camphill. She treats them with utmost respect, reads to the older ones, and knows about the wellbeing of each one of them. She truly is still the mother of Camphill, and one of the mothers of the greater Camphill Movement.

Back when Camphills were struggling in South Africa, the founding women in the various Camphills bonded, each growing roses in a silent show of support for one another. As I smell these roses in Renate's room, I imagine these strong women, cultivating their roses in harsh conditions, with faith that from these dry and thorny branches, more roses would keep appearing.



The image of the rose feels symbolic of Camphill – this beautiful rich nurturing space that has been created from one of the thorniest and most spiky times in history.