

## **Renate Simpson, born 17<sup>th</sup> November 1923**

Renate Simpson was ‘a political animal’ as she liked to call others who took the world seriously, who understood that changes were made by people working together to make decisions, good or bad. Her perspective was socialist from an early age, based in an antifascist commitment demonstrated to her by her siblings and her parents in the 1920s and 1930s.

Those same influences, family and thoughtful struggle to improve our world, also led her to value the written word and research that could make the written word persuasive. She devoted a substantial amount of her time to investigate the origins and development of Higher Education, leaving publications of lasting influence in three continents.

She will be remembered by those who knew her, above all for her close listening and conversation, always interested and encouraging, seldom without a supportive question or suggestion, for which she has been much loved by very many.

Renate was born in Berlin in 1923, the sixth and last child of Robert Rene Kuczynski and Berta Kuczynski. Her father was by then a renowned independent economist and statistician who had chaired an unsuccessful campaign to nationalise the Kaiser’s property after the First World War. An early Jewish target of the Nazi government, he fled from Germany when the Gestapo knocked at the door in February 1933. The youngest children, still at home, were exiled with their mother in February 1934 when the family reunited in London. Her father was employed in the first university post for demographic research, at the London School of Economics, while her brother Jürgen, nineteen years older, was already writing extensively on economic history, especially on working conditions.

Renate never gave significance to her Jewish heritage in religious or cultural terms. Ironically it was the Nazi government’s reaction to that heritage that played a part in her early formation as an exile clearly standing within the anti-fascist struggle in the years leading to the Second World War. Her family actively supported Republican Spain, its British volunteers, and child refugees from Basque country, for whom Renate proudly remembers being mistaken on occasion. Her brother was a political leader of the Free German Youth in London and interned with other Germans in 1940. Her elder sister’s sympathies against the Japanese invasion of China where she lived in 1929, led her to provide support for the communist nationalists. Two of Renate’s other sisters had joined the communist party by the time of the Second World War, as Renate also did, remaining an active socialist all her active life. Her understanding and involvement at a young age perhaps allowed Renate to cope with evacuation of her school to Tintagel in 1939, followed by her return to London early in 1940 when no German of any age or behaviour was allowed to remain living near the British south coast.

Despite the evacuations, in 1940 Renate passed the matric exam at age 16 and entered the London School of Economics at the same age to study Economics. She remembered those days as an exciting mix of friends – where many life-long friendships formed – and learning. The LSE had been evacuated to Cambridge, where the depleted students could attend the classes of either institution.

Renate was elected to the National Union of Students executive in 1942, and worked for the NUS after her graduation in 1943. She recruited students to the ‘Land War’ to harvest crops during college holidays, and

toured Britain to recruit smaller colleges to the union, working under the guidance of its national secretary Margot Kettle.

In Cambridge she met Arthur Simpson, whom she married in London in 1945, soon moving to Lowestoft and subsequently to Conway in North Wales and Maldon in Essex, all close to government fisheries laboratories in which Arthur worked.

Renate enjoyed family life to the full, both with her siblings' families in London – Sabine, Brigitte and Barbara – and with Arthur and their three children. They also ventured on family camping holidays in Britain and Europe, as well as three-yearly trips to the German Democratic Republic where her two oldest siblings had returned to Berlin. In contrast to her own mother who employed a nanny, Renate looked after her children until the youngest was at school.

During those years – the 1950s and 1960s – she continued to be 'a political animal'. Active in the communist party and fundraising for the Daily Worker, she took on numerous branch administrative duties, and served on the East Anglia District Committee. Outside of party and newspaper political work, she interpreted at international Peace Congresses in Helsinki (1955), Colombo (1957) and Moscow (1963), campaigned for nursery places, was a member of the co-operative education committee, and became particularly involved a campaign against one of the Beeching rail cuts, the Maldon-Witham branch line, that was axed as a passenger line in 1964.

In 1959 she began secretarial work supporting Lou Hitchins, the new Principal of the Chelmsford Further Education college (whose family became valued friends and neighbours in Maldon), where she later taught occasional classes in German and in Social Studies.

With the expansion of Higher Education, she became a research assistant to Ernest Rudd, who led the first research unit into higher education itself. Renate interviewed prospective landlords about attitudes to students in the year before Essex University's first intake in 1964, and found a niche for own future research when she was asked to write a brief history of doctoral degrees for one of the unit's publications.

Renate translated into English the second volume of Karl Marx's Theories of Surplus Value, a sequel to Das Kapital, published in 1969. She was paid by the publishers Lawrence and Wishart in roubles when visiting her daughter Ann, in 1970 studying at Moscow University.

In 1970 Arthur left UK government staff to work for the Food and Agricultural Organisation. He was based in Havana where Renate joined him in 1971, and then in Manila 1974(or 5?)-1976. In both places Renate enjoyed the social and political life of each country. She also researched and published on the development of higher education in both Cuba and the Philippines, both Spanish colonies up to the Spanish-American War of the 1890s.

Returning to Britain in 1976, Renate continued political activities and her research. In the Communist Party she was delegate to the national congress of 1977 which was a turning point in favour of those who later dissolved the party. Renate represented the East Anglia District on the congress arrangements committee which was televised, including a debate featuring 'Red Renate' Simpson and Blue Bert' Ramelson. In Maldon she was among a group of peace activists in a revived CND.

She translated from German to English her sister's autobiography 'Sonya's Report' for her family. Originally published in 1977 in the German Democratic Republic, her translation was used for the English edition published in 1991.

In her research, now independent of paid work, Renate explored the reluctance of British Universities to introduce the doctoral degree, and comprehensively documented the debate and its eventual adoption in 1917, in 'How the PhD came to Britain', published in 1983 by the Society for Research into Higher Education.

In 1984 she and Arthur moved to a flat in Bloomsbury in London, where they both led active retired lives. Renate was active in the Camden branch of the CPGB, the Marx Memorial Library London CND, Cuba Solidarity, Caribbean Labour Solidarity and the campaign to release Phyllis Coard from prison in Grenada. She was a founder member and active in two local initiatives that have become part of the regular local life of Bloomsbury, both organised with Nicola Seyd and many other political friends. For the second-hand booksale fundraisers for the Morning Star she became skilled at pricing books, and at recognising valuable donations which were either sold to dealers or became part of the Renate's 'Specials' section in the sales. She was a founder member of the London Socialist Film Club that monthly over many years has shown many dozens of independent films touching on political subjects, followed by discussions, often involving the film directors.

With educational administrators doubting the doctoral degree's efficiency early in the 1980s, Renate began to investigate a history of the same debates in the first fifty years of the PhD in Britain up to the expansion of UK Universities in the 1960s. Her independent research was to take nearly 30 years before its completion in 2009. She gained access to the archives of seven Universities that had offered the doctoral degree from its adoption in Britain, painstakingly recorded both internal committee debates as well as creating a database of individual student records with which she then calculated statistics of the how long students remained registered, and the completion rate for those from different backgrounds and first degrees in each department. Her research gave her great pleasure and her dedication and discipline for it paralleled the social investigations of her father, brother and at least one of her sisters. She joined the Royal Statistical Society, reputedly older than any other new member in its history. The work proceeded at a pace dictated by other events in her life, including the birth of seven grandchildren (the first who died as a baby), and during the late 1990s the dementia of Arthur for whom she cared at home until his death in 2002.

Tragically she herself also succumbed to dementia as she was finishing the book. She was able to take decisions helped by all three children, and enjoy its publication in 2009 as 'The anatomy of a degree: the development of the PhD in Britain, 1917-59 and since'. She was not able to enjoy the plans she had hinted at, including a better documentation of her own life and activities. Her two books on the PhD, and her active involvement in its seminars and the early work at Essex University, led her to be given an award for lifetime service by the Society for Research into Higher Education in 2010.

She did celebrate the publication of 'The anatomy of a degree', with a party to which she invited nearly one hundred academics, family and friends, all appreciative of her sustained effort of the past three decades. It was held at Coram Fields centre on November 21<sup>st</sup> 2009, birthday of both Arthur and one of her grandchildren.

From January 2011 she has lived with Alzheimer's disease in Mill View care home In Bradford.

Renate leaves her two books as standard works of reference, three children, six grandchildren and a wider family with a host of friends who admired her life and her person.