

RUTH STEINKRAUS-COHEN 1920-2002
- An Appreciation -



Ruth Steinkraus-Cohen, one of the UN's staunchest champions among NGO affiliates at UN Headquarters, died peacefully at her Westport home in the early hours of 26 May just short of her 82nd birthday. Ruth represented the National Council for International Visitors at the UN, and over nearly five decades held leading positions in the American UN Association at national, state and chapter (branch) level.

Before becoming involved in UNA, she was an outstanding Juilliard trained pianist and teacher and her career included a period as a singer, editor, radio host, bibliophile and journalist.

The Second World War left a deep impression on Ruth and she did not hesitate when in 1956 her friend Eleanor Roosevelt complaining that "she was not doing enough" asked her to serve as her personal secretary on a World Federation of UN Associations mission to Warsaw, Berlin and Budapest. She never looked back.

She was born in Cleveland, Ohio to Herman and Gladys Tibbetts Steinkraus. Her father's family were émigrés from Krefeld, Germany, her schoolteacher mother hailed from New England Quaker stock. Herman Steinkraus, an executive with Bridgeport brass, and one time President of the US Chamber of Commerce, was well known for his philanthropy and support for the Arts. He founded the Bridgeport Barnum festival celebrating PT Barnum's motto that "kind acts may live forever".

It was Ruth who persuaded her father, a prominent Connecticut Republican, to serve with Eleanor Roosevelt on the Board of the American Association for the United Nations (forerunner to the UNA-USA), and he was later elected its National President. Herman Steinkraus had two other children; his son William became a famous Equestrian champion and Olympic Gold Medal winner, and his younger daughter Marjorie de Roquemaurel, a Television model and author.

Ruth attended The Thomas School, Rowayton, "a wonderful enlightened place" which nurtured Ruth's talent as a pianist. Founder Mabel Thomas often took her students to the theatre and to hear performances at Carnegie Hall and the Metropolitan Opera.

Ruth's ideas about world issues were sown during the war years at Vassar, a single sex college in Poughkeepsie, which offered young women a liberal arts education equal to that of the best men's colleges of the day. It was here that she met Eleanor Roosevelt (then First Lady) for the first time, when she joined a group from the Vassar choir to perform at the Roosevelt home in nearby Hyde Park. Ruth completed her education at New York's world famous Juilliard School headed at that time by Pulitzer Prize winning composer William Schumann. She began her working career as an editor for music publishers G Schirmer and Co. While living in New York, she struck up a friendship with Angela Diller, co-founder of the Diller-Quaile School of Music. In the 1950s they collaborated on a book together entitled "the Splendour of Music" containing theories on the teaching of music and musical technique.

Also in the 1950s Ruth returned to live in Connecticut where she wrote a weekly column for the Bridgeport Sunday Herald and had her own Radio programme on WICC Bridgeport "Music for a Sunday evening". This permitted her to indulge her passion for the musical compositions of Bach, Beethoven, Mozart and of all her favourite Operas. She also taught piano, played chamber music, and founded "Friends of Music". It was through their mutual love of music that she met and married her husband, violinist and attorney Herbert L Cohen in 1963.

While accompanying Mrs Roosevelt in Poland, the husband of one of their female interpreters was arrested for purchasing a copy of "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich by Alexander Solzhenitsyn. This disturbing incident gave Ruth an idea. Westport (only 50 miles from the UN) could be used as a base affording diplomats and politicians an opportunity to meet ordinary people and help them to stay in touch with every day life. Simultaneously she founded the

International Hospitality Committee of Fairfield County, a 23-town organisation providing a link of friendship and hospitality to the peoples of the world. In Westport itself, Ruth created jUNe Day, (to commemorate the signing of the UN Charter) an annual get together for UN staff and delegates and their families to participate in a day of sporting and recreational activities. For that day, Westport's main bridge is decorated with the national flags of each member state of the UN.

Ruth was particularly concerned that delegates from the emerging new African states were welcomed into the UN family. In 1960, the Committee entertained 60 guests from 19 new African states. A little later back in New York, these and other delegates received hate mail from the Ku Klux Klan under their hotel room doors. The Nigerian spokesman was so outraged that he called on African countries to withdraw from the UN. However, the Ambassador from Chad citing the wonderful hospitality he had experienced in Westport, argued that Americans were not all racist.

In 1977, Ruth and Herbert "adopted" Prakash Sharma through a UN programme - an accomplished artist and sitar player, his works adorned Ruth's Westport home. Ruth's role in her new family as an Indian mother and grandmother was a source of great joy. Ruth was also a courageous political campaigner. In 1992, she challenged the Unification Church of Sun Myung Moon, following its take over of the University of Bridgeport. Ruth's husband had been Chairman of the Board and Ruth a life trustee since his death in 1983. She lost the case in the Connecticut Supreme Court on what many regarded as spurious technical grounds. Other campaigns included "A call for Action on the UN Financial crisis". The US's repeated failure to pay its back dues to the UN remained a festering sore and the bad grace with which the debt issue was eventually settled, simply infuriated her.

She won numerous awards both for her service to music and the United Nations. In 1991 She received the "Point of Light" award from President George Bush, a lifetime service award from UNIFEM in 1999 and in 2000 was chosen from just 32 people across the US nation (including Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter) as a recipient of USA Today and the US State Department's "Volunteers of the Millennium" award.

In the 1970s, Ruth and her husband took a long lease on a flat in St Martin's Lane, London, close to the Royal Opera House and the English National Opera. She soon became involved in Westminster UNA programmes and in 1982 because of her friendship with Gordon Evans and Lord Caradon, two of UNA-UK's most eminent personalities, the Westminster and Connecticut UNAs were twinned. One of her favourite projects was a schools wall planner, which in time evolved into the United Nations Calendar of Peace that we know today. The calendar records the UN's day to day accomplishments and anniversaries and is distributed free and often in translation to NGOs, educational establishments and UN agencies worldwide. Its purpose is to remind us every day of the UN's successes and to offer hope for the progress of mankind. In 2002, copies were issued to every sportsman and visitor at the Winter Olympic Games in Utah.

Ruth found inspiration in many corners, but one figure stands out, that of Hugo Grotius, the 16th century Dutch statesman, regarded as the father of international law and a pioneer of natural law. As founder of the Hugo Grotius society, Ruth did much to revive academic and popular interest in this great historical figure.

I knew Ruth for 15 years, one of her countless friends and admirers. We shared an impish sense of humour and she was always excellent company. She had a particular way of treating whomever she happened to be with as if they were the most important people in the world. She also loved to travel and was a valued participant on UN study tours organised by UNA-UK. She also made sure that visiting British groups to New York were properly looked after. Everybody loved her, she was a one-off.

Last year in an interview for Westport magazine, she explained what drove her, "I'm thinking of the UN constantly.... The UN is doing God's work on Earth". From the atom to cruelty in zoos, there's a UN body paying attention to it". Ruth was always asking herself. "How can I give back? "That's what the UN is all about. There's a universality to it. It touches the world". We were last together in January 2002. Within half an hour of my arrival at her home I was accompanying her on an ambulance en route to Norwalk hospital. There was no sense of panic. She simply grabbed hold of her papers and continued working. She was always looking to her next assignment and the pace never slowed.

When I learned Ruth had died, my first thought was to check the entry for the day in my UN Calendar. It was the anniversary of a landmark decision by the International Court of Justice in the Thailand-Cambodia temple dispute. Ruth regarded the ICJ as potentially the single most important part of the UN system.

Ruth touched everybody. "Ruth, you have changed my life" was a phrase she heard many times over. She created her very own UN outpost in Westport and maintained a huge reservoir of goodwill and support for UN throughout the state of Connecticut and beyond. She exemplified the high ideals and aspirations encapsulated by the UN Charter and lived life to the full. I believe the highest tribute we can pay Ruth is to ensure the survival of the programmes she initiated and to follow her example by continuing to work tirelessly through the United Nations in pursuit of peace, human rights for all and an end to poverty everywhere.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and his two immediate predecessors sent messages at a short memorial service for Ruth at Westport Town all on 8 June, which would have been her 82nd birthday.

Paul Mrazek

