

POSTLUDE

CHEZ ARNDT

In July 1970, a young Indonesian scholar arrived at a freezing Canberra airport with his wife and baby daughter. Heinz Arndt was there to greet him. The family was driven to the Arndt home and fed a hot breakfast before being taken by Heinz to their university flat. There Heinz lit a fire, left and then returned with a bag of groceries Ruth had organised for the family. 'He did all this when he was a famous professor and I a lowly research assistant,' wrote Boediono, who went on to become the Indonesian Minister of Finance, and afterwards attained the even higher rank of Coordinating Minister for the Economy.

Heinz's shift to Asian studies also brought changes to the Arndt household, with young Asian researchers now joining the steady flow of visitors enjoying Arndt hospitality. As she had done with her migrants, Ruth was notorious for mothering the young wives, finding cots for their babies and helping them find their feet in this strange new country. 'Ruth provided a haven for newly arrived immigrants and a window to Australia,' commented Professor George Zubrzycki at her funeral.

Ruth had spent a number of years teaching economics at the Boys' and Girls' Grammar schools, which also led to a steady stream of high school students visiting Heinz in the evenings for some remedial tutorials. A few years later, the Arndt living room played host to collections of foreign affairs cadets, befriended by Ruth in her new job working as a research officer at the Department of Foreign Affairs. Neither of these professional activities was particularly fulfilling for Ruth—her professional career was always a disappointment to her.

She got far more of a kick from some of her subsidiary activities, such as her membership of the governing body of the ANU. In the early 1960s, the ANU council consisted entirely of men, a cause of some embarrassment in a world increasingly sensitive to gender issues. To rectify this situation, it was decided that what was needed was a prominent Canberra woman whose name started with 'A', to put her at the top of the ballot. Ruth Arndt fitted the bill, was easily elected and went on to serve six years on the governing body, as well as becoming involved in some of the women's groups at the university.

Through all these varied activities, Ruth and Heinz acquired an enormous network of friends. They were both prolific correspondents, each day writing letters to friends all over the world. Aided by an extraordinary memory, which enabled her to retain the minutest details of the interests and personal lives of everyone she met, Ruth was renowned for her clipping service. Every day she would diligently troll the newspapers for items of interest and cut them out, to include in her correspondence.

Author Blanche d’Alpuget, who befriended Ruth when she was living in Canberra, was one of the recipients

From the time I first met Ruth Arndt in the late 1970s, she began, unasked, to supply me with cuttings about literary subjects in which she knew I would be interested—many of them also being snippets about myself that I would otherwise never have seen—and continued to do this until the last years of her life. She was the most friendly and considerate of women, truly living up to her Biblical namesake, who stands in history as the personification of friendship. Ruth never asked, and never seemed to expect, anything in return for her kindness, which made it all the sweeter.

At Christmas, the ceiling of the Arndt living room would groan under the weight of many hundreds of Christmas cards, including those from some very well-known names. Ruth was an avid reader and for 30 years was a member of a thriving book club. ‘She’d write to someone like Michael Ondaatje and these people answered and kept writing back. They responded to Ruth’s genuine caring interest,’ commented Dr Jan Appel, a member of the same book club.

Even as Ruth’s health deteriorated—she suffered a badly broken leg after a fall in 1984—she kept up the informal counselling role she had long played for many in the Canberra community. At 82, she wrote in her regular circular about her unpaid work, ‘which developed along the lines of my original training as a social worker—acquiring lame ducks who need informal help and advice, someone sympathetic to talk to’. She mentioned taking them to her regular spot in the local coffee shop and listening to stories ‘which would...now fill a handful of books—separations, divorces, death of loved ones, cancers, drugs...the list is endless’. Sometimes she would refer them to a welfare agency, ‘sometimes one can think of a remedy, sometimes just listening helps’.

When the census form that year listed her occupation as 'none', she wrote a letter to the local paper to complain.

She had quite a reputation for getting people to tell all, and the confidences naturally included a fair share of spicy sexual tales. Ruth was far from a shrinking violet about such matters. In fact, back in the 1950s when Australian censorship authorities were busy banning novels they deemed pornographic, Ruth would organise to have someone smuggle them into the country where they would be kept on the family's bookshelves. *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *Peyton Place*, *The Group*—there they all were, discreetly covered in brown paper—a great help to the growing Arndt children seeking interesting reading material.

It was hardly surprising that Ruth reacted remarkably well when her daughter suddenly burst into the public eye as one of Australia's first sex therapists. Having originally trained as a clinical psychologist, I ended up specialising in sexual problems, and then joined the adult sex education magazine, *Forum*, as consultant editor. The Arndts suddenly found themselves having to deal with the shocked reaction of some of their friends at the explicit nature of the material. Mostly they took it in their stride.

Economist Graeme Dorrance remembered trailing around Perth with Heinz, as he went from newsagent to newsagent, trying to find a copy of *Forum* to show off to him. After I had spent my early life being asked if I was Heinz Arndt's daughter, Heinz was now bemused to find he was being asked if he was Bettina Arndt's father. He coped well, although he did like to grumble about the fact that speaking publicly about sex was so much more profitable than talking about economics.

Heinz's sister, Bettina, who became an eminent art restorer, once visited Canberra to give a lecture at the National Gallery. She was less than amused when she was introduced before her lecture as 'Bettina Arndt's Aunt Bettina'.

There were, however, a few sticky moments. 'My mother never told me anything about sex!' was the unfortunate headline of an interview I once gave to a newspaper. I had been asked by the journalist whether I received my sex education from my parents and I truthfully replied that I didn't remember any birds-and-bees talks. I received a plaintive note from Ruth: 'I told you everything but you forgot.'

That might be true, but I now know it isn't uncommon for children not to turn to their own parents, however liberal, for this type of discussion.

Despite the fact that my mother was confidante to half of Canberra regarding their love lives, I kept mine carefully hidden while I was still living at home. As a university student, I travelled halfway across Canberra to visit a GP I had found in the Yellow Pages, in order to obtain the contraceptive pill. I walked into the waiting room and there was our next-door neighbour. Sure enough, she promptly reported the visit to my mother. Not that I should have worried. Years later, Ruth told me she had known I was using contraception. Her reaction: 'I was pleased you were so sensible.'

So *Bettina Arndt's Guide to Lovemaking* ended up proudly displayed on the Arndt bookshelves, which by this time also included highly technical papers on geology. Both my brothers became geologists—Chris working most of his career for BHP, before managing the development of an enormous copper and gold mine in Pakistan, while Nick became an academic. He is now a professor at Grenoble University, having married a French geologist. Heinz always enjoyed trying to get his head around his sons' subject areas, displaying a curiosity that stemmed back to his teenage years. He often told the story of the Sunday lunches that were held at his father's home during the years he lived in Istanbul. When the food was finished, Professor Arndt Senior would give a lecture—invariably on recent developments in chemistry. 'I really looked forward to those lectures,' Heinz commented. 'They were always so interesting. My father explained everything so well.'

Heinz and Ruth took great delight in the progress of their nine grandchildren, with Heinz spending long hours on the floor with the younger ones playing tiddlywinks and later chess, while Ruth carefully quizzed the teenagers to try to find out whether they were behaving themselves.

Ruth died on 20 March 2001, on the morning of her eighty-sixth birthday, from medical complications after a fall. Immediately after her accident, we were swamped with flowers and cards from all her friends. Yet she insisted on no visitors. I tried to talk to her about it, asking if there was someone she would like to see. 'It is not a zoo,' she said firmly.

Her funeral presented difficulties. She had left us a note with instructions for her funeral: 'No religion, no speeches.' The latter we ignored. At the memorial service, Heinz quoted the American writer H.L. Mencken

writing about his marriage: 'I can recall no single moment during our years together when I ever had the slightest doubt of our marriage, or wished that it had never been.'

After recovering from the shock, Heinz regained much of his usual good cheer. 'Heinz's happy spirit was unquenchable,' comments Maree Tait, who was involved in publishing journals with Heinz for more than 30 years. In his later years, his morning routine always started with a visit to Maree and the APEL staff who worked on his journal. Concerned about his health, Ruth had tried to keep him from dashing off to the office first thing in the morning. Once he was living alone, he revelled in his new freedom and set off at the crack of dawn to his office and then to check in with Maree and her staff, often carrying roses or sweet peas from his garden.

Increasingly frail but mentally alert, the 87 year old greatly enjoyed one last visit to Indonesia, where he was fêted by old friends and colleagues and was excited by the prospect of a trip to the Philippines, to visit his close friends, the former Philippine Ambassador Delia Domingo Albert and her husband, Hans. On a visit just before Heinz's death, Ross Garnaut noticed a French-language book on the side table: 'I need to brush up on my French,' Heinz told him.

The death of his close friend Leslie Melville came as a great blow. Three days later, on the morning of 6 May 2002, Heinz made his usual round of ANU visits and then set off in his car to deliver Leslie's eulogy. Driving past the University Chancelry, he appeared to suffer a blackout and slumped down. His car accelerated and ran into a tree. He died on the corner near his beloved Coombs Building, where he had worked for much of his career.

The shocking accident made news around Australia and led to a flood of tributes: from Prime Minister John Howard and many of his parliamentary colleagues, academics, ambassadors and business leaders from around the country. And from overseas came glowing eulogies from former students, now high-ranking officials and political leaders across Asia, and eminent academics and other heavy-hitters from across the world. Heinz would have been tickled pink.