

PRELUDE

H.W.A.—The man and his marriage

Why doesn't Heinz have a gong? The question had come up many times. It did seem odd that my father hadn't received an honour at any time in his distinguished career. So about 2001, a group of people decided to put his name up. Eminent people lined up to be referees. Former heads of Foreign Affairs, government ministers and prominent academics—the list was impressive.

Nothing happened. Finally, Heinz confessed to me that he had had an offer but had turned it down. What's more, he mentioned that he had had an even more salubrious gong proposed by the Fraser government many years earlier but had said no to that as well. The reason? Ruth didn't approve of such baubles.

Ruth Arndt was a formidable woman. That was always part of the attraction for my father. Her feisty nature was apparent well before they met, when she stood up to the Nazis as a schoolgirl, which ultimately led to her escape from Germany. By the time they were introduced at a party in London, she had endured some tough years working as an *au pair* before landing on her feet through a scholarship to the London School of Economics. There the tall, attractive brunette studied hard but also greatly enjoyed a lively student social life, with female students outnumbered 10 to one by their male colleagues. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Ruth had little interest in getting involved with anyone from Germany, but Heinz persisted, and she eventually succumbed to his charms.

They became quite a team: the elegant, rather stiff young academic with his warm, forthright, immensely capable wife. Within six years, they were in Australia, Heinz having accepted a lectureship at Sydney University when it became clear that despite making a splash with his first book, it would be difficult for a German academic to further his academic career in Britain.

But it still wasn't easy. Economist Noel Butlin had to pretend the couple was Danish to persuade their landlady to allow the Arndts into their shared accommodation. The young couple never spoke German to each other. They were keen to distance themselves from their origins and in years to come would often express irritation at aspects of the German character. 'I don't know why German politicians always have to shout!' Heinz once grumbled to my brother Nick.

While Heinz settled easily into his university community, it was Ruth who had the harder task of creating a new home for her family. ‘I don’t know how your mother kept her courage and determination having come so far to a place that wasn’t the least bit welcoming,’ comments Noel Butlin’s widow, Joan, describing Ruth’s extraordinary capacity to befriend people and make the most of her situation.

From the beginning, it was a very modern marriage. Heinz, who often appeared formal and reserved, was a very involved husband and father ‘He did all the washing up! That was unheard of,’ comments Joan. ‘And he was a wonderful father. Unashamedly demonstrative which was quite rare in those days.’ Joan remembers vividly Ruth’s decision to return to Europe to see her parents in 1949. She had barely seen them since her escape 16 years earlier and had been saving every penny to pay for the trip. When she discovered she was pregnant, the couple decided she should go ahead. It was Heinz’s attitude that astonished the Butlins: ‘He supported her going off by herself. He didn’t say, “Over my dead body”, as many men of that time would have done.’

The result was that I was born in England, with my pregnant mother travelling on her own with her two young sons and returning eight months later with the three children, including a six-week-old baby. Despite caring for two young boys on a ship crowded with Australians, many of whom were far from friendly to a young mum with a foreign accent, Ruth wrote to Heinz almost every day of that difficult journey—twice on the day I was born.

It was in Canberra that Ruth really came into her own. Heinz had a chair at Canberra University College, which later merged with the ANU, but she was the one who connected them into the community through the lively migrant education classes she held in our home. There would be 20 to 30 people crammed into our tiny living rooms—Dutch, Germans, Poles, Latvians, Italians. Few of them were able to talk to each other but they had Ruth as a conduit, with her remarkable capacity to connect with people, even if she couldn’t speak their language. A friend recently remembered watching Ruth at a long lunch with two Japanese women who could speak only a few words of English. Ruth knew no Japanese but sat there cheerful and unfazed, chatting away, making do with a mixture of sign language and a few friendly words.

Ruth became the unofficial social worker and confidante to the entire community and Heinz would drive our tiny Ford Anglia—one of the first

cars in the area—ferrying pregnant women to hospital and accompanying bewildered migrants to deal with government bureaucracies. Ruth was always right in the thick of it, helping out families and gathering a collection of what Heinz always called ‘Ruth’s lame ducks’, who needed extra care. So when one of her Polish students had all her clothes burnt by a jealous husband who wanted to ‘try to keep her at home’, Ruth was the one who found her something to wear and forced the man to come to his senses. At the time, Ruth and Heinz and their three young children were living in a fibro prefab with no electric appliances, only woodchip water heaters and a fuel stove. Running such a household was hard work but their home was always filled to the brim with people and alive with sing-songs around the piano, led by Ruth belting out everything from hymns to nursery rhymes to encourage her students to practice their stumbling English.

And so it was that Heinz was dragged far from his cultured, academic background into the real world. Yet he remained very much the cultured European, making strenuous efforts to keep up his knowledge of languages. After he died, we found in his wallet a hand-drawn graph giving a rigorous self-assessment of his competency in reading, comprehension, speaking and writing in English, German, French, Italian, Indonesian, Latin, Dutch and Spanish. He added a postscript noting some knowledge of Chinese, Polish, Turkish and Japanese, but sadly too little for formal rating.

He always retained his distinctive English accent, that he somehow passed onto his second son. Anne Booth met Heinz when she arrived in Canberra in 1971, back from a spell in London to become a research student in Heinz’s department. ‘I thought at the time (and the thought was to strike me on many occasions in Australia and South East Asia over the next three decades) that there was very little in Heinz’s manners, speech or style of dress to suggest that he had ever spent a week in Australia, let alone most of his working life,’ she says, mentioning the line in *My Fair Lady*: ‘His English is too good which clearly shows that he is foreign.’

The man was rarely seen without his coat and tie, even on the beach or at picnics, which he always greatly enjoyed. He loved Canberra, delighting in the surrounding countryside and particularly the birdlife. He was a skilled landscape painter and had a great love of music, with very distinctive tastes. A friend vividly remembers him complaining: ‘One forgets how vulgar Beethoven can be!’ He had a huge collection of records but when the ABC started its FM classical music program, he stopped buying records and was very happy to listen to music with his tinny little transistor radio

held to his ear—to the irritation of his wife and children. His son Chris made strenuous efforts to improve the quality of his listening experience by buying him expensive CD players, but he always reverted to the little radio.

The Arndt Sunday lunches were famous, as visiting academics were entertained over the renowned Arndt roast and *apfelstrudel*. Ruth had perfected the art of the grey roast in her British *au pair* era—a culinary skill that was later to bring her into conflict with her son Nick, who married into a French family. Nick mentions one occasion when Heinz was carving the roast and he noticed it was still a little pink in the centre. He asked Ruth to put it back in the oven for another 20 minutes, but luckily one of the guests offered to take the offending portion, bravely admitting he preferred it that way.

It didn't matter. Lively conversation was a far more critical component in the Arndt home entertainment, with Heinz always delighting in holding forth to a captive audience but Ruth adding cheerfully to the mix. She remained, all her life, a staunch social democrat committed to bettering the lives of underdogs. This meant she was singularly unimpressed by pomp and circumstance, by honours and titles. This professor's wife was undaunted by even the most intimidating of circumstances. Heinz would often come home from dinner parties shaking his head in amazement at the confidences she had managed to extract from eminent dinner partners during the course of the evening.

This was a woman never afraid of voicing her opinion and indeed of telling others what was good for them. After the Arndts moved away from the migrant community in Ainslie, Ruth turned to teaching evening German classes. In the 1950s, her students included Max Bennett, an ex-sailor whose wife, Shirley, was secretary to another ANU professor. Ruth asked Max about his job. He explained that he was working as a radio announcer. 'You can do better than that!' came the blunt response. 'In later years I realised she was right,' says Max ruefully.

When Peter Karmel was appointed to the ANU as Vice-Chancellor, Ruth contacted his wife, Lena. 'She had a little talk to me because she thought I was going to say the wrong thing as a Vice-Chancellor's wife,' said Lena, adding, 'I did say the wrong thing quite often, sometimes deliberately.' The two became very close friends.

Despite her prodigious energy, Ruth, like many women of her generation, constructed her working life around her family and ended

up with a messy, unsatisfying career, shifting from migrant education to teaching in a private school to some rather difficult years in the public service. She was never able to practise her profession because her social work qualifications were not recognised in Australia, which was a bitter disappointment. Heinz left 350 boxes of papers to the National Library. Ruth destroyed all her papers except for half a dozen items, including a letter from the government informing her that her British qualifications were insufficient.

Given Ruth's unwavering commitment to her left-wing political beliefs, she was far from happy when Heinz did an about-turn and shifted his political allegiance. She never forgave him for resigning from the Labor Party over Gough Whitlam's uncritical support of China. Politics became an increasing source of tension between them.

For a man who adored leaping into the fray and participating in public debate, this wasn't easy for Heinz. Whenever some major public issue was in the news that Heinz felt strongly about, he would yearn to toss off a letter to the editor or write a newspaper opinion piece. Sometimes he wouldn't be able to resist and would whip something off, put it in the mail and then spend days in agony, knowing he was going to be in the doghouse when it was published.

Margaret Easton, his secretary of 35 years, remembers one such occasion, when he was longing to express an opinion on some issue that was bound to annoy Ruth. After days of agonising, the letter appeared—published under Easton's name. He had persuaded her to sign it.

In their last few years together, Ruth was increasingly immobilised due to various ailments. Her steady stream of visitors was often subjected to lectures on a variety of topics from Heinz, who so hankered after an audience. As the visitors left, Heinz would show them out and a carefully chosen few would receive a brown paper bag containing a copy of *Quadrant* magazine containing one of his articles, discreetly delivered just outside the front door.

I vividly remember one occasion when I took him to task for allowing Ruth to constrain him from indulging in his favoured role as a public intellectual. He was indignant. 'That's what I love about her. Her strength, the passion of her convictions,' he said. In the weeks after she died, he told me he had often turned around, sensing her presence in their Deakin home. 'I even dream she's still nagging me,' he said, a little wistfully.