

CARL-ALEXANDER MIER (MIRBT)

Born 4th August 1902 - died 22nd June 1975.

Of Carl-Alexander Mier's family background and early years I know at present only sketchy details. The Mirbt family came from Silesia or Sudetenland. The Mirbts are known in the 17th century in Nieder Pilau (Silesia) where they are gardeners to the local Lord of the Manor. In the 18th and 19th century they are connected with the Moravians and the Church of the United Brethren in England.

Carl-Alexander's father was a professor of theological history and an authority on the subject in his day. Dr. Carl Theodor Mirbt had five children of which Carl-Alexander was the youngest, born in Marburg an der Lahn, on 4th August 1902. Before World War I, the family moved to Göttingen where Carl Theodor became Chancellor (Konsistorialrat) possibly in 1906. Later on in life, Carl-Alexander with his earthy humour would tell a story about those days: Fieldmarshall von Hindenburg was to visit the chancellor one day. Father Mirbt carefully instructed his son to let the fieldmarshall in, to take his coat and hat and then show him into the study. The great man arrived, the young Carl did as bidden, when, before being shown into the study the fieldmarshall patted his head saying to him he would now teach him an important lesson for life; "Because you never know when next you get a chance, always ask before going to an important event, 'Where is the loo?!'"

About Carl-Alexander's brothers and sister we know that the eldest, Heinz, was killed in East Prussia in 1915. The next brother, Herman, became a lawyer in Berlin, Rudolf, a book publisher in Munich and sister Ida married Generalmajor Hans Merkel who was killed in 1945 while in command of the Garrison at Frankfurt an der Oder.

After primary education, Carl attended the classics-oriented education stream of the "Gymnasium", leaving in 1920 at the age of 18. Physics and Mathematics had been his best subjects. He studied agriculture until 1926, when he received his diploma (Diplomlandwirt). During the first two years of these studies he worked on farms in Schleswig-Holstein. It was probably at that time that it was discovered that he had a weak heart. He had never met Rudolf Steiner, but met Anthroposophy and its Agricultural Impulse through Count Keyserling, whose scientific advisor he became. He wrote a thesis on the effects of various diets on rabbits and received his doctorate in agriculture in Berlin during 1928. It is likely that meeting Anthroposophy with Count Keyserling, he also met his future wife, Gertrude Stahlman, who was the Count's secretary. They met in 1925 and married two years later in Stade on 29th December 1927. Their first child, John, was born in 1928 while the family was still in Stade. Throughout his life, Carl felt especially grateful and connected to Count Keyserling, the death-mask of the Count was usually found in Carl's office or work-den.

In 1928, Daniel Dunlop, the then secretary of the Anthroposophical Society in Britain, arranged an Anthroposophical World Conference in London. He asked Count Keyserling to send a representative of the new agricultural movement which was later called Bio-dynamic, to speak at the conference. The Count spoke no English himself and sent Carl. Carl's lecture was probably given with his usual warmth and enthusiasm for it is recorded to have been one of the particularly successful events during the two-week conference. It was held in the "Friends! House", London. In the following year, 1929, Dunlop invites Carl for

three years initially, to start the new agricultural work in Britain. While still in Germany, Carl starts "Notes and Correspondence on Agriculture", a fore-runner of what later on became the still current regular publication now entitled "Star and Furrow". George Adams seems to have had a hand in inviting Carl too, so Carl arrives in Britain in 1929 in the same year as also Fried Geuter who started the Anthroposophical Curative Educational work with other friends who also formed an Anthroposophical community at Sunfield, Clent. Gertrude and son John follow soon. For a while the Mirbts as they are then still called, move about a bit and I am not certain about the correct sequence. They lived with the sister of Elinore Merry, Mrs. Mana Pease in Northumberland and Bray-on-Themse Berkshire, where the eldest daughter Christiane was born and worked for a while with Maurice Wood at Huby in Yorkshire (and/or Otterburn ?) About those times David Clement would write later on in Carl's obituary: " Although Carl had taken his doctorate in agriculture, his knowledge of Dr. Steiner's indications were not great. He had never himself made the manurial preparations, nor, I believe, had he seen them made. And yet, heart and soul an Anthroposophist, with a warm enthusiastic nature, he was soon making the preparations, travelling, lecturing and bringing new ideas before many people. He had a happy way of conveying his own warmth and conviction".

In 1931 the family moved to Stechford, Birmingham, where his second daughter Dorothea, and Martin the second son, were born. By that time an agricultural association with Carl as secretary was already established, probably only later on named "Bio-dynamic Agricultural Association". In 1933 the family moved to the cottage on Broome Farm, Clent, acquired by David Clement. In July of that year his youngest son Yartin died, Carl tried hard to maintain German as the language spoken within the family, but it isolated the children somewhat and caused problems, possibly even resentment among the farm workers (some of whom had been in World War I ?). Carl was an academic advisor, did not work on the farm himself, probably another cause for resentment on the farm. But his enthusiasm could kindle enthusiasm in others and made many, some quite important and "high up" connections. Among the latter was Lawrence Easterbrook, a journalist and farmer, "a doyen of agriculture" David Clement called him, who wrote in the "News Chronicle" and other papers. In the Journal of the Soil Associating April 1964, Lawrence Easterbrook speaks of his meeting with Carl and his own conversion to organic farming. Enthusiasm and interest were Carl's strengths, his ability to make connections with important people and to get them interested in his subjects. Over the years these were, first, Bio-dynamic Agriculture, the earth as a being and the world of the stars in relation to it, then, the new threefold social order and community, and later, adult education as a kind of people's university. His wife Gertrude assisted and complemented him on the theme of the earth and the stars and made her own particular contribution about nutrition and herbs. Carl was "at home" in his "den" or office, always full of stacks of paper in an apparent disorder in which Carl always knew where to find a particular item. His office was more often than not filled with smoke, his lips and fingers yellow with nicotine, for he was quite a heavy smoker, anti-smoking campaigns hadn't been heard of then! He remained an academic, his work confined to advising, lecturing and writing. There was probably only one exception, later on during his time in Botton Village when for a while he made beeswax candles. He had difficulties in maintaining friendships. The connections he made were rather between people and his subjects than himself personally. But, by the beginning of World War II, the Bio-dynamic Association was established with sufficient "connections" to take a Memo into 10 Downing

Street, with advice on food production in the U.K. during the war, to Morrison (Minister of Agriculture and Food?) at Downing Street.

Possibly because Carl had been resident outside Germany for ten years and international tension was rising, the German Government refused to renew Carl's passport in spring 1938, by August he naturalised British. During approximately seven years from 1933 to 1940 the family had lived either at the Home Farm of Sunfield or at Broome and Cottage Farm, all at Clent. During this time the Bio dynamic work grew alongside the then very much community-based work of Curative Education, around Fried Geuter and the Wilsons at Sunfield. Ita Wegman was a frequent visitor there much encouraging this development. In 1940 the family moved to Cambridge where Carl-Alexander worked as consultant to Frederick Hyams Ltd.,

It was at that time that the family changed its name from Mirbt to Mier. In 1942 Carl was appointed agricultural advisor to the Murray-Usher estate based in Gatehouse of Fleet, Dumfriesshire, for about one year. During the remainder of the War years, though medically unfit for military service, he was directed to the BBC Monitoring Service at Caversham near Reading. There he was mainly concerned with the German Government Teleprinter Communications, making translations, reports, evaluations on agricultural and economic activity in Germany and German occupied territories, in the East, During most of that time the family lived with Ralph Brocklebank's parents in Warminster, Wiltshire.

In 1947, the family moved back to Clent, where Gertrude managed the Guest House at Clent Cottage, former home of Michael Wilson's parents. Carl worked further for the Bio-dynamic Association and had a study over the stables, from which he published and issued study material and lectures, typing and duplicating on a Gestettner himself. Together with Gertrude he held study week-ends and worked with the Experimental Circle and the Goethean Science Foundation. These were the years of flowering of certain specialised activities arising from Anthroposophy and the community at Clent; Curative Education around Fried Geuter, Colour Science around Michael Wilson and Ralph Brocklebank, Projective Geometry and plant growth dynamic around George Adams and Olive Whicher, Bio-dynamic agriculture with Carl-Alexander Mier and David Clement, Art with the Morrisons, also the Sunfield wood-workshop and pottery were then at their peak. Afterwards these initiatives began to spread and disperse, fructifying much Anthroposophical work elsewhere in Britain. but decline at Clent as a burgeoning thriving community. Carl seemed to withdraw into reading and his social relation with local colleagues became problematic. Carl, excellent in raising interest and starting things found it difficult to maintain them, he was impulsive and had a bit of a temper and could be rude. There seemed to be an air of frustration around him, an unsatisfied longing for something. He wanted something more than the aesthetic of Anthroposophical Free Spiritual Life could give. Once, after visiting a Dominican work he admitted that he felt at home there. Perhaps what he was looking for was something of the discipline of an order, a discipline which in line with his own aims would help him to form and order his own will and activity. Perhaps he was also looking for somewhere, some connection he could be more part of, rather than stand out from. In some ways Carl was self-effacing, even shy. Seeing him with important people or members of the aristocracy one was struck by an incongruousness of the situation which was only the more emphasised by the fact that usually they got on well with each

other. Again, in thinking about it, it seemed not so much a meeting with Carl, but with an impulse which Carl was serving and mediating.

In the mid-fifties, about 1954/55, Bio-dynamic work, hitherto Carl's main concern and work emphasis was giving way to another. The impulse for a threefold social order as a society/community-building element would now come to the forefront of his work, for the next seven years or so. This would remain one of the important issues of Carl's life to the end even after he added yet another later on. Dr. Karl König had been made aware of Carl-Alexander's situation at Clent and called him and his wife, together with the young family of their daughter Kitty, to join a new social experiment. They became co-pioneers of the Camphill Village Movement, which began with the formation of The Camphill Village Trust Ltd. in 1954 and the work which started at Botton Village in 1955. They joined Rev. Peter Roth and his wife Kate, and others who came from Camphill Scotland, as new people not previously connected with the Camphill Community, giving birth to the by now worldwide movement of "Residential and working communities with handicapped adults". Ita Wegman had not only been concerned with the growing curative educational movement and community at Clent, she had also sent Dr. König to Scotland who had founded the Camphill Community there. At Botton Village something of both these social endeavours began to flow together. Peter Roth OBE, its founder brought the religious, sacramental and pastoral element of the Christian Community, Carl and Gertrude the Agricultural, Nutrition and care for the Earth and were united in their determination to form the new village community to be, with the aid of Rudolf Steiner's social ideas.

To begin with the "new society" at Botton Village had the immediate benefit of Carl and Gertrude's experience in running study groups. The community's land included three run-down farms, a small-holding and woodlands, no proper roads or paths, but lots of mud, diesel generated electricity in the main house only, no mains water. So the three constituent groups of pioneers: Camphill co-workers who had hitherto been curative teachers, a few new people like Carl and Gertrude, their daughter Kitty, a nurse and her husband a banker now turned farmer, Helen Murray a forester and the group of mentally handicapped adults, faced an immediate and urgent task together: To turn to the earth and soil, to change landscape and general climate, to improve existing houses to provide more hospitable conditions for a growing community of people and their families. Very much encouraged by Peter Roth Carl and Gertrude held weekly "Earth Evenings". At the same time these became first steps towards "Adult Education" for everyone. These were open to all and brought so that percepts and concepts could weave together in imaginations through which the being of earth, plant, animal, man and the stars would come alive to the listeners, whether co-workers or handicapped fellow workers. Carl's "Star Courses", rather than explaining the stars and their movement out there' objectively, first of all related them to one's own standpoint and personal experience, making the relationship with the stars more accessible and personal. In these days there was a kind of democracy in learning together, a partnership of pioneering work together on the land and in the workshops, a fellowship in shaping social life together as expressed in the home, the neighbourhood and the village as a whole. All this based on Steiner's idea of a threefold structure to society, coupled with an enthusiasm to achieve some measure of a self-sufficient economy, not dependent on subsidies. This was before the then 'Ministry of Labour. Deficiency Grant, which, though recognising the work element (rather than client-based care) did bring an

element of handicapped people being different from co-workers, a differentiation which unfortunately became more marked as the years went by.

In those days Carl was "the office", much enjoying to be at the point where this new social venture was in touch with the world and vice versa. "Carl's bag" used to contain brochures and product samples which he took along to talks given to social clubs, Rotarians, Soroptimists, W...s, and any other audience willing to hear about Botton Village. The establishing of Open Days, guided tours for visiting groups and literature for these occasions were another of his concerns. Stacks of old Paper and a Gestetner he brought along came in very usefully, he would spend hours over the typewriter working out necessary half-spaces to justify end of lines to give his duplicated efforts more of "print" impression. To begin with all bills were paid by the Camphill Village Trust office in London, only later was there actual money circulating in Botton Village. But right from the beginning Carl followed the movement of internal credit, later money, with great interest, trying to feel the pulse of internal financial and economic activity. His gift for making connections brought many practical donations into the village. I am not sure if this particular one was Carl's doing, but it illustrates the kind of thing that did happen. A mysteriously large parcel appeared on one of Botton's fields. When the time to open it came, it revealed an old steamroller! A very much appreciated donation to get Botton's roads surfaced and serviceable.

Eventually the village became reasonably well established, some of Carl's awkwardness came too much to the fore again, whether through lack of other people's tolerance because he came to feel he had achieved as much as he could in the situation. For a time, parted from his wife Gertrude, he worked as registrar at the Camphill Schools, Aberdeen, not too well in health. After a time he and Gertrude moved to Delrow in about 1963. This was a new Trust centre which opened to replace the Trust's London Office and centre at 122 Harley Street. This centre focussed more on people who suffered mental illness rather than handicap. Carl and Gertrude brought to it the element of Adult Education College, developing various themes on general knowledge in the morning sessions, while craft activity as therapy tended to be centred more in the afternoons, the whole day interspersed with art and special therapies. For many years Carl was secretary of a supporter's organisation, The Camphill Villages Association, which aided the growing number of adult communities under The Camphill Village Trust. Again he found his place on the threshold, where experiments and new developments within, met the world at large. Towards the end of his life, Carl and Gertrude undertook many journeys, speaking about Anthroposophy, Threefold Society, Community, Camphill, with an increasing drift to East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Poland. During the Prague Spring, Czech Television sent a team to record the work of Camphill Schools and Villages. It was never shown in Czechoslovakia, the Spring being suppressed before the viewing date. But copies in Britain were used for many years to show to private audiences.

When visiting East Berlin in 1963, I and my wife Rosalind could experience the warmth and enthusiasm engendered in groups of people by Carl's visits. Itself it became an occasion which contributed to the beginning of curative educational work in East Germany at Houte Rhoda, under the umbrella of The Christian Community.

Carl died on his way to Czechoslovakia, at Schloss Wernstein, Kulmbach. Today there is a community there around work on the land and a Waldorf school, whose members try to live consciously out of the Fundamental Social Law, One of the West Midlands' Eurythmy Association's erstwhile students is Eurythmist there and occasionally brings news of their struggles on his visit to Stourbridge.

It seems Carl's work and influence reached further and touched many more people, than his shy and self-effacing appearance suggested, or his personal traits would lead one to assume. His seems to have been a life of faithful endeavour irrespective of apparent success or failure. His warmth and enthusiasm for Anthroposophy transcending hindrances, working well into the future, sowing seeds in apparently impossible places.

(Mark Gartner, 1990)