
Kay Herrmann in Conversation with Rene Saran

Dr. Rene Saran is the daughter of Mary Saran, who was a close follower of Leonard Nelson. After the death of her husband, Paul Branton, she became the secretary of the Society for the Furtherance of Critical Philosophy (SFCP). The SFCP is a registered educational charity whose trust deed dates back to 1940 and was set up to develop education and scholarship. A central method used by the Society in pursuit of this purpose is the Socratic Dialogue as developed by its twentieth century founder, Leonard Nelson.

Kay Herrmann

K.H.: What are the most important "cornerstones" of your biography?

R.S.: I grew up in a political community committed to working in society for social justice. The community was international, so from an early age I met people from different countries. Then I came to Britain (1933) as a refugee child, and yet I did not feel like a refugee, because like-minded friends in England received us and also because I was hosted by English families.

At 17, I decided not to go to University. I didn't want to be a teacher, but a carpenter! At the time (1938) no-one could suggest to me that a degree in mathematics or biology (then favourite subjects) could lead to something other than teaching. So I worked in a vegetarian restaurant instead, and later as a shorthand typist, as a secretary and a personal assistant. These experiences made me independent.

After the war (from 1946 - 1948) I had a really interesting job with Rita Hinden, who was then Secretary of the Fabian Society's Colonial Bureau. Through that job I met people from all over the world, learnt a great deal about politics, and attended evening classes, which in due course led me to study at Ruskin College in Oxford, the College for adults and in particular for people from the trade union movement. This aroused my interest in adult education and I changed my mind about becoming a teacher and entering Higher Education. So in 1950 - 53 I was a student at Manchester University and graduated in Politics and Modern History, with which I was able to start teaching in adult education. Much later I came into research, publication of and editing books.

My partnership with Paul Branton started in 1951 until his death in 1990.

Lifelong I worked as a volunteer in various organisations: Labour Party; Federal Union; Socialist Vanguard Group; Socialist Union; Tenants Association; Association for the Confederation for Advancement of State Education; British Educational, Leadership, Management and Administration Society; SFCP (Society for the Furtherance of the Critical Philosophy).

In the 1990s I was trained as a Socratic facilitator in Germany. Since then, I have facilitated dialogues on ethical, political, educational and social questions.

K.H.: How did the ideas of Leonard Nelson and the Critical Philosophy enter your life?

R.S.: Through my mother and other adults in the communities in which I lived. Much more the political side of Nelson's thinking than the philosophical. Neither my mother nor I were philosophers, but both became politically active and shared common ethical values which had their origin in Leonard Nelson's philosophy. My mother had read many of Nelson's works and in Britain checked the English translation of his work *Progress and Regress in Philosophy*.

People have influenced me more than books. Earlier in life these included my mother, Willi Eichler, Grete Henry-Hermann, Minna Specht and Gustav Heckmann, all of whom had worked with Leonard Nelson. During the Second World War, I lived in a community household in England in which Willi Eichler was the leading personality. Minna and Grete also lived there for some time. During one winter I attended weekly Socratic Dialogues led by Grete Henry-Hermann.

In the war and post-war years, when I became politically active, a range of British people became important influences. Edith Moore and Allan Flanders had both studied at Leonard Nelson's Academy, the Walkemühle in Germany. Along with George Green, Secretary of the Civil Service Clerical Association, they were important in the Socialist Vanguard Group. Rita Hinden, whom I already knew from the Fabian Colonial Bureau, became Editor of *Socialist Commentary*, and asked me to join her as Editorial Assistant.

Later in life my husband and his great friend Fernando Leal from Mexico shared many of their philosophical interests with me. Both had read Leonard Nelson's works during their youth (Paul in Palestine; Fernando in Germany), and indeed had they not done so I doubt whether I would have met either of them. Paul Branton sought the help of my mother to be demobilised in Britain from the British Navy, for which he had volunteered in Palestine. He wanted to join in the political activities in Britain of the followers of Leonard Nelson, having been aware of the activities of ISK members in pre-war Germany as a teenager in Vienna. Fernando Leal came across Leonard Nelson's philosophical works as a philosophy student in Germany in the 1980s. He had chosen to study the works of Kant in German. He met Susie Miller, German Labour historian, when he gave a paper on Leonard Nelson at a conference of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Susie then invited him to a conference where Grete Henry Hermann gave a paper on Kant, and there he met Paul Branton and others active in the Philosophical Political Academy (PPA).

Apart from my husband Paul, it was Fernando Leal who has told me most about the Critical Philosophy, especially since Paul's death in 1990. Through Paul's interest in Fries and Nelson's works I learnt something about the philosophical developments stemming from Kantian ideas. Over many years I have visited Fernando in Mexico for a month over the Christmas-New Year vacation. On early morning walks we often discussed aspects of Nelson's theories as well as his use of the Socratic Method in education, which has been an abiding interest for me. Some years ago Fernando and I spent a week at a mountain resort writing together 'A Dialogue on Socratic Dialogue' (see www.sfcp.org.uk). Fernando also gave papers at the SFCP/PPA International Conferences about the link between Socratic Method and the Critical Philosophy.

K.H.: What are your links with SFCP and PPA?

R.S.: My awareness of SFCP goes back to its foundation in 1940, although my active involvement was much later, after my mother's death in 1976, when I became a trustee. My husband had already become a trustee of SFCP in 1971, after the death of Allan Flanders. When my mother died, Paul took over the duties of Secretary and was also invited to become a member of the PPA, replacing my mother as the link person between the British and German organisations.

After Paul's death in 1990, this dual role fell to me. In addition I acted as Secretary and Chair of the trustees of SFCP, until new trustees were found and in due course, in 1995, Tamsyn Imison became the Chair. So from 1995, I concentrated on the Secretary's role.

Since 1996, I have been involved in the organisation of the SFCP and PPA sponsored International Conferences, the sixth of which will take place in the UK in 2009. Over 100 people from around 20 countries attend. At these the Critical Philosophy and Socratic Dialogue in particular have figured on the agenda and one outcome has been the publication of *Enquiring Minds: Socratic Dialogue in Education* (Ed. Rene Saran and Barbara Neisser, Trentham Books, 2004), in response to requests for literature in English on Socratic Dialogue. Many participants in our international activities are unable to read German but wanted to develop Socratic Dialogue in their own countries. Examples are Belarus, Bulgaria, Japan, Australia, Scandinavia.

The SFCP has recently developed training mainly for educationists in the Socratic Approach to Learning and Teaching, and in Socratic Facilitation. In these courses some Nelsonian theoretical background is included. SFCP has produced an Ethical Code for Socratic Dialogue (see www.sfc.org.uk).

So in recent years SFCP activities have focused on the international conferences, developing international links with post-communist Eastern European countries, with initiating Socratic Dialogue training in Britain. We have also supported a number of research scholars and developed publications (especially the *Occasional Working Papers in Ethics and Critical Philosophy*, proceedings of international conferences, and *Enquiring Minds*).

K.H.: What are the Aims of SFCP?

R.S.: SFCP has been a registered educational charity since 1940. In broad terms the aims are set out in the 1940 trust deed and embrace scholarship and education. Originally the Society supported the refugee school, led by Minna Specht, but this was closed when many of the German teachers, themselves refugees as opponents of the Nazi regime, were interned by the British authorities. As it was never possible to re-establish the school (Minna Specht returned to Germany after the war as Head of the Odenwald Schule), the reference to 'a school' was removed from the trust deed. However, this left intact the wider aims: to further develop the Critical Philosophy through scholarship, and to support education which develops critical thinking and independence of mind so that people are able to make reasonable judgements as autonomous independent persons and citizens, especially about significant ethical issues affecting individuals and societies.

K.H.: 'Critical Reason' is Nelson's basic concept. Could you give a modern definition of Critical Reason? Which role could Critical Reason play in international politics and for the solution of global problems (like the environmental debate)?

R.S.: As a non-philosopher I am not able to answer the wider questions you posed about Critical Philosophy, but I can briefly indicate what its role is in the work of SFCP, already indicated in answer to the previous Question above.

The Critical Philosophy came from Kant via Fries and Nelson into the work and outlook of SFCP. The main impact of this philosophical tradition on SFCP in our own time is in the field of ethics. After Paul Branton's death, SFCP awarded fellowships in "The Ethics of Everyday Practice". Such support for scholars has resulted in investigations of ethics as they occur in contemporary life, e.g. in industry and the education and health services.

SFCP's training of Socratic facilitators rests on the expectation that participation in Socratic Dialogues promotes critical thinking about ethics as applied to people's practical life both at the individual and wider social and political level.

K.H.: Do you have a dictum of your life?

R.S.: Yes! Taken from the book title of my mother's autobiography: *Never Give Up*.



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