

Obituary

Susan Dorothea Gold (1922-2005)

Susan Gold, Assistant Secretary to the Ancient Monuments Society from 1974 until 1990, died very suddenly on 9 June 2005.

Susan Gold left her mark on the AMS and the Friends in many ways. Some were unglamorous but essential – as in the updating of the membership and administrative records in those prehistoric pre-computer days. But Susan loved people rather than systems and what will always live in the memory are the now legendary study tours organised for the AMS and also, latterly, for the Society of Architectural Historians. Some were in this country, as in the expedition to Durham in 1989 organised by Susan and Ian Curry, and that in the subsequent year to Herefordshire where so much of the work was done by Susan Dalton. What taxed Susan's essentially European spirit and her gift for languages were the foreign tours that she organised between 1980 and 1990. In that memorable decade, sometimes with two expeditions in one year, she led loyal and intrepid bands to destinations as various as Bavaria, the Veneto (where we saw virtually all Palladio's villas inside and out), Yugoslavia in both 1985 and 1990, Normandy, Burgundy, South-West France and Provence (where the tour leader was Elizabeth Cooper), Turkey in 1987, and, in Italy, Piedmont in 1988 and Sicily in 1989. The greatest Gold and Cooper triumph was a trip to Santiago de Compostela in Spain in April 1984. Ian Curry in his account of the journey in the *Transactions* of 1985, conveys much of the excitement of the climax: 'Santiago de Compostela on Palm Sunday morning was the fulfilment of a dream. The Plaza de la Quinta east of the Cathedral was thronged for the blessing of the palms by the Archbishop, surrounded by his senior clergy and the Cathedral Chapter all vested in red. Then the whole congregation moved into the cathedral for High Mass after which the great silver sensor, the botafumeiro, was swung filling the crossing and transepts with smoke and flying sparks'. It was at that sight that Susan and Elizabeth admitted to shedding a tear. The most heroic of all the visits, because it was the most poignant, was the first. In 1980 she led a group to Vienna to experience the contrasting glories of Fischer von Erlach and the Baroque and Otto Wagner and the Secession. The surreal charge uphill through the grounds of the city's largest, and active, mental asylum to reach Wagner's great chapel at the Steinhof took us to a building which was then hardly known outside Austria. Susan made many converts to the wondrous eccentricity of Art Nouveau on that day.

The poignancy came from Vienna's role as her birthplace and the city from which



Susan at her eightieth birthday celebrations in the restaurant of the National Portrait Gallery

she fled for her life. Let Mick Gold, Susan's son, take up the story in the eulogy delivered at her funeral: 'The events that brought my mother to London were as strange and funny and frightening as a film script by Graham Greene. After the violence of the Kristallnacht in November 1938, my mother knew, along with most of the other Jews in Vienna, that there was no future for her in that city. So at the age of sixteen she began to mastermind the great escape that enabled her and her mother to get away from the Nazis. Her mother owned a shop selling luxury ladies' underwear in the Tuchlauben. Pre-empting seizure by the Nazis, she removed the most valuable items by taxi, depositing them at the left luggage office of a suburban railway station. A few weeks later she succeeded in getting an exit visa from the Office of Jewish Affairs – run by Adolph Eichmann – because she had chatted up an English Quaker lady who enabled her to get the necessary documents inviting her to come to England to work in a hospital in Woking. She retrieved the luxury underwear from under the noses of her tormentors, packed up her belongings and with her mother they boarded the train to London, arriving in March 1939 barely six months before the War broke out. They left behind my mother's formidable grandmother who told the storm troopers who invaded their apartment that they were criminals and gangsters. No-one at the time had the faintest idea that this woman would end up in a terrible little extermination camp called Maly Trostinec near Minsk'. Other family members perished too. And how was she then to know that the Nazis would not follow her to England?

In Britain she became a children's nurse, and in 1942 fell in love with and married a fellow Austrian refugee, Robert Gold. After a period of internment as an alien refugee on the Isle of Man, Robert was able to move to Wembley where they lived for thirty-five years. They had three children, Katherine, Anthony and Michael. After the War, Susan and Robert became key figures in the Anglo-Austrian Society led then by Dr Harpner and Walter Foster, a conscious attempt to maintain links with the country from which they had been expelled. They organised exchanges for children and cultural events without any apparent sense of bitterness.

Susan's strength of character was forged by the slings and arrows of the outrageous fortunes of her early life and the need to adjust, as she did so well, to the realities of her new home. She knew too the misery of financial uncertainty. Again in the words of Mick Gold, 'Her beloved father saw his job in banking destroyed by the crash of 1929. My mother told me his greatest pleasure – after losing his job – was to sit in one of Vienna's great Catholic churches and enjoy the free music. But there were violent domestic arguments about money and in 1934, when Susan was a mere twelve, he hanged himself in Prater Amusement Park in the shadow of Harry Lime's giant wheel'. This was a terrible blow which had a profound effect and yet many of her closest friends never knew of this from her own lips.

Susan was not one for gloomy introspection. She had a great hunger to learn. Her first interest, again a surprise to many who did not know her well, was for ornithology. The really lasting passions were for music which she shared with Robert and, from the 1970s, historic buildings. She enrolled in the Open University and obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree. It was that which stood her in such good stead when she applied in 1974 to become Assistant Secretary to the Ancient Monuments Society, then based in the spare

bedroom of (Dame) Jennifer Jenkins, the then Secretary. As the bedroom was barely big enough for the floods of paperwork generated by casework, Susan worked for many years from her kitchen table at Wembley, coming in every week to pick up correspondence, cheques and messages. After about five years Ivor Bulmer-Thomas found the space that was even more eccentric in the tower of the Wren church of St Andrew by the Wardrobe in Queen Victoria Street. By then, Robert and Susan had moved to the Barbican. Their professional, social and cultural lives were very much rooted in the City of London.

I was in the upstairs room above which the bells were suspended, Susan being in the room below where the bells were rung. Eccentricity was unfortunately accompanied by insecurity. Susan had her handbag and other possessions stolen on three occasions. Churches tend to attract the desperate as well as the unscrupulous and on occasions I would hear her combine generosity with worldly wise diplomacy and give a pound or two to a tramp to persuade him to move on. On at least one occasion she and I had to manhandle someone comatose through drink on the nave floor prior to locking up the building. Both she and I had to perform tasks that were both unexpected and character building. It was in many ways unfortunate that the move to the completely secure, much more suitable and delightful Vestry Hall took place barely months before she retired.

An abiding image of Susan is stamping out 2,000 addresses in a primitive hand held press, enough to deafen the ear and weaken the wrist. But she was determined to go beyond administrative drudge. The study tours were for her a means of sharing her cultural passions but also deepening her own knowledge (as well as making the many friendships which she so valued). And much of the knowledge gained bore permanent fruit in major articles in the *AMS Transactions*. In those for 1978 and 1982 respectively she wrote up the Europa Nostra conferences in Hamburg and Strasbourg where she represented the Society, but she was capable of much more than summary, albeit in lively English. Hers were the most important articles in this country on the work of the grandiloquently named but gifted Hetzendorf von Hohenberg and Johann Blasius Santini-Aichel. The former, recorded by her in the *AMS Transactions* of 1986, emerged from the pages as rather cantankerous and in his propensity to clear churches of troublesome monuments positively iconoclastic. I think it was Santini-Aichel who appealed more to Susan's endorsement of the unconventional and the culturally hybrid. His was an architectural language which combined, like no-one else, the Gothic and the Baroque, the former apparently from his Czech roots, the latter from his Italian. My personal view is that Susan's most important article as it was so completely in command its sources, both English and German, was her definitive account in Volume 29 (1984) of the 'Reredos which slipped through the net'. To find, and write up so accurately, a Wren reredos unknown to Gerald Cobb, Robert Harrison, Pevsner or Summerson was quite an achievement. It captures well in the opening sentences the excitement we all felt as we climbed into a taxi to make the journey to Dalston where the reredos dating from 1673 had been re-sited in the unlikely setting of a roguish Gothic church of 1876. She adopted its cause with panache and it was partly her personal lobbying which led to the decision to save the reredos by transplanting it to the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Many people used the word 'fearless' in connection with Susan. Never burdened by ill health – she was only taken to hospital once – she spent her decade of widowhood in

adventures that would make younger women blanch. The most intrepid was a trip for thirty days on a banana boat to Costa Rica. The day after she died she was due to go with Katy on a cruise to the Arctic Circle to see the midnight sun.

Once again let Mick explain her final days – ‘I often felt my mother’s life was like a work of art. She was so discriminating – she was so beautifully organised. The final week of her life was no exception. She went with my sister Katy to hear Leonard Bernstein’s Mass performed at the Barbican and was thrilled by the interaction of Catholic Mass, rock music and spiritual crisis. She had dinner at my house and talked to my wife Margaret and my daughters Katrina and Imogen about their plans. And, very fittingly, the last day of her life ended with a night at the opera. She went with my brother Tony, his wife Heidi, and their sons Jeremy and Gregory to see Verdi’s ‘Macbeth’ in Holland Park. After an exciting performance of this blood-curdling drama, she climbed into her car. It seems she then had a massive heart attack and never regained consciousness’.

Susan’s complicated character embraced a certain restlessness but in her final year she acquired a perceptible sense of repose. How grateful she would have been that that was never tested by an old age of intellectual decline.

MATTHEW SAUNDERS
(with help from MICK GOLD)