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Gretel Hinrichsen: A Life Well Lived

by Lizzie Wells

The Southwood House Estate is a triangle of pretty, post-war houses enclosing a managed wilderness of trees and shrubs beyond the individual back gardens. Hillside Gardens, the first houses of the scheme to be built - two-floors, three bedrooms - form the southern line of the triangle. Harley Sherlock, an innovative young architect in the late fifties, still retains so great an affection for 'his' scheme and its residents that he attended the Estate's 25th and 50th anniversaries and is happy to reminisce about both place and people.

The Hinrichsens bought their house in Hillside Gardens off plan in 1958 and were the first to move into the row. The house is well-known in Highgate because it has been virtually untouched by 'improvements'; even the heating system remains unaltered. Nowadays the house speaks of warmth and maturity with parquet flooring, rugs and other furnishings, richly textured and coloured; the open staircase rising from the double-height dining room is enclosed by a chunky, curving banister, rich with the patina of polish and age. Gretel talks of the neighbourliness in the early days - when residents would stroll through the communal garden, turning their heads to admire their neighbours' Heals sofas and dining tables and the Maples easy chairs. Her memories suggest a community of like-minded, 'progressive' young families, whose younger children attended St Michael's

Highgate where lifelong friendships were forged among their parents at the school gates.

Early in the sixties, Gretel and Klaus acquired number 251 Archway Road. While he pursued his entrepreneurial and business interests, the ground floor became her domain. *The Little Shop* was to become an institution in north London, appealing to a wide circle of parents who wanted better toys for their children than the plastic horrors that were beginning to fill the conventional toyshops. 'Mrs Little', as she soon became known, stocked all the standards from Galts and Abbatts. Sasha Dolls, Steiner toys, Russian stacking dolls, building blocks and Cuisinaire Rods were all IN; guns, Action Man and the despised Barbie doll were OUT. There were books - *Dr Seuss* and *Bod*, *Moomintroll* and *Pippi Longstocking* - and there were musical instruments.

Jacquie Richardson, who has the good fortune to be Gretel's daughter, has happy memories of *The Little Shop*. As a teenager she was the Saturday Girl and remembers the biscuit jar behind the door and the cups of tea with shortbread which were served to favoured customers. She laughs that her own children 'didn't realise that toys had to be bought'. Gretel was proud to have become part of a row of Highgate shops which provided essential services to the local community; her neighbours included the butcher, the newsagent, the dry-cleaner and the dairy. It remains a matter of principle as well as preference to do her shopping in Archway Road.

In the seventies, after nearly 20 years of successful trading, *The Little Shop* closed. This was a time when the long-running disputes and uncertainties over the widening of Archway Road had caused its shops and houses to be neglected

and to fall empty. Happily there are now signs of resurgence, with a smart-looking Indian restaurant and Clara Fischer's *The Red Hedgehog*, fast becoming a noted concert venue of which Gretel is 'a fervent supporter' (Jacquie again).

At the age of 17, Gretel Levy left her home and family in Pomerania to come to England in order to learn the language. She met her future husband on 2 September 1939. Seven years older than Gretel, Klaus was a cultivated young man, of dazzling talents and good-looks, who had studied Art History in his native Germany. His versatility and resourcefulness were to be put to good use when he was interned for 11 months as an Enemy Alien. It would be 1942 before he and Gretel could marry and one of the many striking objects in her house is the enlarged black and white photograph of the radiant couple coming out of the Registry Office in Hampstead.

The Internment Camps on the Isle of Man held much of the intellectual and cultural elite of Europe. Klaus was sent to Hutchinson which had its own stars among whom were many musicians, artists and thinkers; the chefs were also much-appreciated. Among his contributions to this stimulating assembly were the establishing of a 'University' and the encouragement of the artists by holding exhibitions of their works. His promotion of Kurt Schwitters, whose Merz works continue to fascinate and inspire artists, led to a friendship which lasted until the artist's death in 1948. Gretel, as well as Klaus, remained in friendly contact with Kurt's partner and their involvement was sought for events and occasions to which they were able to contribute valuable first-hand knowledge and understanding of the artist.

The Isle of Man is currently commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Camps by issuing a set of First Day

Covers. Each of the six stamps shows the work of a painter from a different camp and Hutchinson is represented by a reproduction of an arresting portrait of Klaus.

Gretel today is stylish and friendly, with a sharp mind and a ready laugh. She happily looks back over a busy and harmonious life and takes a keen, and well-informed, interest in contemporary events. She enjoys a fulfilling round of theatre (she enjoyed the National's recent *Twelfth Night*), films (Shepherds Hill Library), friends, live concerts (*The Red Hedgehog* again), outings with NADFAS, reading (*The Hare with Amber Eyes* is a current favourite), swimming (in a heated outdoor pool), Keep Fit classes (twice a week at Jacksons Lane) - even housework ('I like the exercise').

You can see and hear Gretel talking about her early life on a video at the Museum of 51 which is running on the Spirit Level of the Festival Hall until 4th September 2011 to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Festival of Britain. Hers is indeed a life well-lived.