

10 YEARS ROSENSTOCK-HUESSY-HOUSE - Sam Hartman, Haarlem, January 1982

When the invitation for the conference arrived here and with it a call for papers, there were some fears that the whole would assume the academic character that we, on our side of the ocean, had learned to fear so much. On the other hand, this would scarcely be thinkable with people who are indebted to Eugen! Well, we soon learned that not presentation of theses but discussion should be central and this dispelled our fears. It did not however make the task lighter: how to present the experience of a group of people living and working together in such a way that it becomes transparent and can be discussed by others, thousands of miles away?

"Rosenstock-Huessy-House was founded in 1971 by four married couples.

In the memorandum of association it is stated that 'the community, with the two focal points of cosmopolitical activity and soul-rehabilitation, aims at shaping structures of living together that differ from those that are current, and so respond to the challenge of the coming era, that of one unified mankind'.

For this purpose a large old house in the centre of the town was purchased. The founders, besides shared experiences, hopes and delusions had in common that they were very much indebted to Eugen for his life and works, knew him and had been studying his books for quite some time. Therefore, they wanted to name the community after him, to which request, after some hesitation, he agreed.

We now live in this house with about 40 persons. The original group of eight, of which my wife and I were members, is still complete, but we were joined by others. This group constitutes the more or less constant factor. It now numbers 17 adults and 7 children.

Along with us we have the aged father of two of its members and his mentally retarded daughter living here.

In addition to this we have living in the house a constantly changing group of about 10 persons who are in some kind of trouble, psychically or socially and who stay with us for about one year with the aim of regaining their balance. In this respect we are something between a psychiatric hostel, a halfway-house and a group-home. Finally, we always have one or two guests and 2 volunteers or students doing practice. From the beginning we have taken a lively interest in external issues such as nuclear disarmament and housing and planning problems of the neighbourhood."

Thus, in the words of the abstract sent some time ago, a general outline, not unlike the introductions we give to people visiting us: groups of young people studying for some kind of social calling, adults interested in alternative ways of life or actively in search of a possibility for themselves. Usually we show the house after having given the introduction and then they can put questions. One of these always is the relation to Rosenstock and his theories or ideas. Now we have always held that his works are not meant to provide practical rules for a situation like ours. There certainly is a relation, but we never start with elaborate lectures on the teachings of Rosenstock. Mostly we give only a brief outline of his life and explain in detail about the life and organisation of our community from which, we think, something can be sensed of how he has influenced us.

Hoping to achieve the same here, I will now mention some salient points to you. The discussion will reveal how far I have succeeded.

-Firstly, the promise and challenge of the third millenium and the planetary household of mankind, has been an important factor. It made us choose for a form in which the inner life of our group would not be the sole criterion. We try to stay aware of what is going on outside: nuclear disarmament campaigns, anti-repression movements, to mention a few examples. This attitude stems from the knowledge that there is meaning and purpose in what is going on and that what we do should be an answer to imperatives and challenges. This was one of the reasons we started this undertaking: in order to make our lives fruitful we had to leave the isolated settings in which we were functioning and to relate ourselves to a common goal.

-Another consideration which distinguishes us from other groups is that diversity in age, profession, background etc., is much more important than close friendships based on shared opinions, age, common worksituations etc. Whoever wants to be a member has first of all to be willing to share our lives and experiences (but this in a very concrete and practical sense) and to contribute his or her faith and hopes. This means that we make a very heterogeneous set and that there are members who are deeply versed in Rosenstock against others who practically never read a letter of him. It has also generated a sizeable amount of dissent. This means that if we do not want to lose each other a great effort is needed. But the name and promise that stand above us have always yet overcome mutual misunderstanding

-Furthermore, we insist on consensus: on important issues everybody has to agree. In practice this can entail a certain amount of indecision. Mostly practical points are no problem but important questions sometimes cannot be solved in one sitting of our weekly meetings but have to lie dormant for some time. But we know we will see each other again next week, so things can ripen!

-The people in difficulties who come here for a limited time are a very important factor in the whole. The atmosphere, ways of working and living are deeply influenced by the presence of this group of about 10 persons. From the beginning we have avoided a "therapeutic" setting. Our motto is reciprocity. It will be evident that this is an ambitious goal and that we inevitably fall short of it more often than reaching it. We who have begun here, with our long experience, status in the house and authority have so many advantages over these people with their emotional and social problems that it seems almost absurd to speak of reciprocity. What then are we trying to achieve?

Firstly, we live together in this house. This means that everybody is held responsible for the well-being of the whole. We avoid featherbedding people because they are "patients". Everybody has to participate and lend a hand in the running of the house. Secondly, we have found that talks and relations with these persons can only be fruitful if we shed all authority we have or suppose to have and they, from their side give up their reserve and distrust. And so for real success the partners depend on each other! In such a situation there grows an atmosphere where life-stories, hopes and fears can be exchanged.

Finally, to be confronted with people who suffer has prevented us from

becoming introvert and making our clashes and problems too central. It has made us conscious of our limited powers, but also of the fact that sometimes, unexpected and unforeseen, ways can open up.

-When we started, about ten years ago, we gradually grew into the house. There was a huge amount of practical and technical work to do in order to make this old and neglected building fit for inhabitation and we did very little thinking- ahead on how life should be regulated. Very soon after the first of us moved in we had people applying for help and we were at high sea without rules. Now this was not entirely due to oversight. During the preparatory phase we had found that too much fixating of things beforehand and too much very principal and theoretical discussion was of no use. The acid-test for people wanting to join us was the fitness and willingness to carry stones on Saturdays. But of course you need rules if you want to live with 40 people without perishing in the dirt. But we developed rules and agreements only when the need was apparent and once we had them we tried to stick to them. And now fresh people are amazed at the pattern of commissions, times, and structured communication that has grown over the years! However we always stress that all this is important as an aid for an ordered and peaceful life here, but not as such. The rules always can be changed when they no longer serve their purpose.

-The original group of four married couples who started with the plan had been studying the works of Rosenstock for more than ten years. We had formed no plans or ideas as to how this would function in everyday life once we lived here. The above has shown, I hope, something of how his life and works went into what we did. He was in our minds and thoughts very much, but implicitly. Furthermore, we were joined by others who mostly did not know him and had no large desire to do so.

Still, those who knew him were not finished with him. And so the tradition of the Rosenstock-circle grew: Once every month we read one of his books, mostly in German, and translate sentence by sentence. We do this with those who are interested, also a few people not living in the house. Up till now, we simply tried to understand what was meant, without too much discussion. Quite recently we decided that we would try out other forms.

Another activity in this field is that some of Eugens shorter essays or lectures were translated in Dutch and that in the last three years "Speech and Reality" and "Fruit of Lips" were translated. The circle of readers is, alas, still very limited.

A further activity to be mentioned are the lectures on specific topics as seen in the light of Rosenstock's thoughts that were given by Wim Leenman over a period of two years.

Summarizing, these explicit activities have not yet succeeded in giving Rosenstock widespread public acceptance. Personally, I of course regret this as his works hold the keys to many problems of our time. But I also am convinced that he is not lost. One of our problems or, I should say, my problem is that I am so impressed by the originality of his thoughts that I find it nearly impossible to "translate" him. And we have to translate him! Up till now we have done so mainly implicitly. How long will it last until a new speaking becomes evident and is recognised as such? Some day it will happen; we are not finished yet, also not as a community as long as we know this. Tomorrow will be different!

-The last point I want to mention is that of the feasts and celebrations . If the above has given you the impression of a rather lean spiritual life in our community, you are right. We have no other liturgy than the daily or weekly returning ~~returning~~ services of cooking, cleaning, talking and listening. We encourage each other by pointing to the signs that things are changing: 400 000 people afoot in Amsterdam protesting against nuclear warfare! We do not need to change the world all alone! But in the life of our community we have to live by a few extraordinary occasions that give us fuel to go on. Of these I mention here, as very important, the Pentecost-weekends, held each year from 1975 onwards. Sometimes with friends, sometimes only with the inmates of the house, we have discussions, play games, go for picnic and do a great number of other activities. Always a topic selected before is the element linking everything together. Always yet the start was made on Friday evening by reading one or a few shorter pieces without discussing them and then going into town to look at the flower-market that is held each year on that night. Always yet, the discussions headed for a crisis or breakthrough in which we heard ourselves or others say new things. Always this is food for talks afterwards, also because the experience has been that not everybody is able to fully join in what is happening, which can make you feel very unhappy. Relations with many of our present friends have begun on these weekends.

So far about our community as it has grown and lived over the past ten years, during which we became settled and accepted. We received recognition from many sides for what we did for helping people and for the unique combination with other activities which made that our house was open to many groups and activities. We became settled. But at this present time we are in a very crucial phase of our existence. A big part (about 70 %) ^{7- of our revenues} comes from subsidies etc. connected with the help we give to the temporal inhabitants. Now that economic conditions are getting worse and worse, the government wants to normalise and prune this kind of activities. This means that strict rules have been set up, financially as well as for the organisational aspects. And so they want to impose on us a managerial organisation with qualified personnel as well as a number of rules and regulations to make us fit into the picture of professional organisations they have drawn up for themselves. After a long and trying period of discussions we concluded that this would finish us off. We considered bending to force for the sake of appearances and meanwhile carry on in our own way as good as possible. But we concluded that this eventually could not prevent institutionalisation. As we could not come to terms with the bureaucrats, we asked an audience of the Minister himself. Just as I am typing out the last part of this paper, a letter of him has arrived. Without even referring to the request for an audience this socialist gentleman flatly announces that our proposals are rejected and that recognition on which payments to us are based is withdrawn as from the date of writing! What will happen next is still unclear. We have always said that even in a case like this we wanted to continue in some way or other. No doubt we can tell you more in June.