How Does Our Life Bear Fruit? The unfinished story of the Rosenstock-Huessy Huis in Haarlem

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In 1971 four married couples bought a complex of medieval buildings in the center of Haarlem, an ancient Dutch town. Here they started a community called the Rosenstock-Huessy Huis. The foundation of this community was an historic event in line with the foundation of the work camps in Silesia, Germany, in the 1920s and Camp William James in Vermont, USA, in the early 1940s.

The Rosenstock-Huessy Huis still exists today but in a totally different shape. It is therefore worthwhile to look back at the original intentions of the founders and try to see what this community of people living and working together accomplished over time.

What inspired these people to undertake this daring project which turned their lives upside down and in many cases profoundly influenced the people who had the privilege of living in the House for a shorter or longer time? The House became a refuge for countless people who needed help for all kinds of reasons, be it social or psychological.

I should not keep hidden that I am part of this story myself. My wife and I lived in the Rosenstock-Huessy Huis from spring 1976 until the autumn of 1979. Two of our children were born here and I will never forget how it felt to be part of this community which counted in total some fourty inhabitants, some fourteen adults living there permanently with their children and a group of guests which usually stayed for a period of one year.

Indeed, I will never forget how it was to return from work in the evening and enter into the noisy Dinner Room. It felt like diving into a swimming pool rather than a cozy homecoming.

The permanent inhabitants coped not only with problems like organizing the life of the community, but also of tackling the numerous problems of the temporary inhabitants, the technical state of the building itself, the continuous pressure from the authorities which partly subsidized the House and at the same time almost killed it by pressing an ever increasing set of rules on it. Until the subsidies stopped and the House had to find new fundings.

In the 1990s the character of the Rosenstock-Huessy Huis changed totally. Most of the founders left and the goals were redefined. But the name remains unchanged.

Some backgrounds

The Rosenstock-Huessy Huis as it existed in the last three decennia of the twentieth century could be called a commune, although it differed in many respects from both the traditional religious communities and the numerous new communes which were established during the hippy age of the 1960s and 1970s. In order to avoid confusion, I will therefore use the term *community*.

In terms used at the time of its establishment, the House could be called a countercultural initiative. The idea was to change society by sharing the daily life, taking care of fellow citizens who, mostly because of psychological problems, were not capable of living independently, and by developing political action in the field of the environment (anti nuclear energy), peace (anti nuclear weapons) and social justice.

The Netherlands have a rich tradition in the field of such secular socially active communities. Based on the teachings of Geert Grote (1340-1384), the *Brethren of the Common Life* (*Broeders des Gemeenen Levens*, also translated as *Confraternity of the Common Life*)formed communities of laymen in towns like Deventer and Zwolle. There were both groups of women and of men living together as in a monastery, but without ordination. These communities were active in their social environment, for example by taking care of the poor and by educating the youth.

The Rosenstock-Huessy Huis was definitely not a commune in the sense of *Walden*, an agricultural settlement of people with a socialist orientation and partly based on the highly romantic ideas of Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862). This commune in the town of Bussum, north of Utrecht, was founded in 1898 and ended in chaos in 1907.

The fact that it was a totally secular initiative and that is was founded not by young but by middle-aged people made the Rosenstock-Huessy Huis quite unique, both in The Netherlands and abroad.

Rosenstock-Huessy

The question rises what the Rosenstock-Huessy Huis has to do with Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy (1888-1973). The founders of the House were well aware of his work and knew him

personally. Some of them had met Rosenstock in the summer of 1958, when he was giving classes at the University of Münster, Germany. This meeting can be traced back in one of his books, *Die Gesetze der christlichen Zeitrechnung*, (*The secrets of the Christian Measuring of Time*, not translated), which contains the lectures which were recorded on tape and transferred into readable text by the late Rudolf Hermeier and by Jochen Lübbers.

'Today we have some guests from Holland', Rosenstock-Huessy says in the beginning of his seventh lecture, adding: 'You may have noticed the beautiful Dutch car'. That may have been a humorous remark. The story goes that he once drove with a Dutch friend on the highway and impatiently urged his chauffeur to drive faster. The Dutch car factory DAF, for example, was known for its production of extremely small and dull cars.

The founders of the House have repeatedly and explicitly stated that they found the inspiration for their act in the work of Rosenstock-Huessy. They intended to bring his ideas into practice. Some examples will be given below, but it should be brought to mind that - to my knowledge - Rosenstock never urged people to live and work together permanently.

He did of course promote temporary work camps, both in Germany and in the United States, as I described in my paper presented at the Milliken Conference in 2002.[1]

The founders never referred to any specific work by Rosenstock as the basis for their initiative, but some basic principles of the Silesian Work Camps for Workers, Farmers and Students and of Camp William James were adapted. This concerns in the first place the gathering together of people from different social backgrounds and in the Silesian case of different generations. The second element is the core aspect of Rosenstock's work, the role of speaking and listening, grammar as the foundation of our social order both in space and in time, and our being formed by speech. A new and contrasting element was that women would play an important role.

Some indications about the relation between the founders and Rosenstock's work may be found in the fact that they selected a number of texts and books written by Rosenstock and translated these into Dutch. Examples are *Planetary Service*, *Fruit of Lips*, *Speech and Reality*, *History must be told*, the German version of *On the De Magistro of St. Augustine*, and

[1] Houweling, Feico, 'Planetary Posts - The Moral Equivalent of Globalization, in Loving Memory of Bob O'Brien', conference paper for "*Planetary Articulation: The Life, Thought and Influence of Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy*", 1-4 June 2002, Millikin University, Decatur, Ill., USA.

Applied Knowledge of the Soul. This is not a complete list. It are in particular Sam Hartman and Elias Voet who should get the credits for this work.

The foundation of the House is an example of the problem of name-giving. It seems that Rosenstock himself initially was not amused by the idea of a commune bearing his name. He seems to have said to friends that he rejected this type of 'personal adoration'. But a request for permission was eventually replied to in a friendly way. It will be of interest to find and read texts from this time to understand his exact position. I was, for example, told by one of the founders of the House that Rosenstock claimed he was alive and therefore still could change his mind about the subjects he had written and spoken about.

Rosenstock-Huessy's cross of reality was often and explicitly mentioned in the House, but remarkably enough the objectives of the House were put on one axis only, inwardly the rehabilitation of the human soul and outwardly cosmopolitical action. But implicitly the time question was always present. Asked for their motivation, most of the founders would refer to disappointed expectations after the Second World War. They had hoped that society, church and politics would change, which in their judgement had not happened or at least not enough. As a consequence, the founders felt they had to fight for change, in particular in the field of social care, peace and the environment.

The founders and their motivation

In some personal documents and several interviews with newspapers and radio stations, the founders of the Rosenstock-Huessy Huis explained why they took the decision to give up their independent family life and moved to this house to live and work together. From these statements it appears that there was no specific ideology or religious motive of any kind.

In the spring of 1976 the House received a number of guests who spent a weekend in the community in order to learn to know the house better. In a brief paper, called *Our descent* (*Onze afkomst*) Wim Leenman explained his vision on Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy. A few quotes from this paper:

"How does our life bear fruit? Nobody wants to live in vain. Both our descent and our future are at stake. Neither of both is a given thing. The past can be made undone. The future can be stopped and be brought to silence. What is left for us? The present, in which we as our condition humaine have to decide what we allow to enter from the past and the future. It means choosing the balance of love between the two fires of hope and belief, the belief full of

expectation. The hope filled with known images which we understand, the power of what we already know, all of what we ordered can imagine, that is the past. Belief as the power of the future, hunting for events which are still unimaginable and full of promise."

"We need the powers which are able to create the future, which throw us out of the end of an era, to become the seed for the new era. Powers which reach further than ourselves, or personal interest, our short individual lives, as recorded in the municipal registry."

In an interview in the Dutch weekly Hervormd Nederland, December 1979, Piet en Mira Blankevoort told about their motivation. A few quotes to give an impression:

"Eight years ago we really didn't know what we were going to do. Yes, we wanted to do something sensible with our lives and we believed that the community like these one is necessary. Here we can live together with people all of whom are different, and also with people for whom initially you don't have sympathetic feelings or who don't like you. And yet we see good friendships arise. The dips are deeper but the peaks are higher."

People and organization

The backbone of the House was formed by the four families that established the community. It may be interesting to see who they were and to take a look at their professional occupation:

> Piet and Mira Blankevoort and their three children. Both Piet and Mira had been students at Kerk en Wereld (Church and World), an institute for the education and training of social workers connected to the protestant church. Piet was director of an agency for alcohol and drug addicts (Consultatiebureau voor Alcohol and Drugs) and Mira was a social worker.
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> Sam and Elly Hartman and their three children. Sam had a technical and managerial function at a blast furnace plant (Hoogovens) and Elly worked as a teacher at a primary school.
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> Wim and Lien Leenman and their three children. Wim had studied theology and worked as a protestant priest within Hoogovens.
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> Elias and Pie Voet. Elias was an engineer with Hoogovens and Pie had worked as a nurse. Together they spent a couple of years in a development project in Zambia.

The eight founding members were all protestant, middle-aged, and received their education largely in the field of social service and theology. They had been reading

Rosenstock as a group since the late 1950s and had met him several times. In fact, there were some members of this reading group who decided not to join.

The remaining four couples decided to buy an old building in the centre of Haarlem, at no more than five minutes walking from the mediaeval Bavo Church. In bygone days the house had functioned as a pension for pilgrims on their way to Santiago di Compostella in Spain, and later it had been an old people's home. From a construction point of view, the building was in a very bad shape, but it offered an abundance of space. It consisted of two floors and an attic divided over some four wings. A beautiful nineteenth-century roman-catholic chapel was the jewel on the crown.

During a reconstruction period which lasted almost a year, apartments were built for the separate families. Rooms were built for the guests, the so-called temporary inhabitants who would be given the opportunity to stay for a year. A dinner hall for the approximately 40 to 45 inhabitants was given a central place in the building, in combination with a professional kitchen. In addition, there were rooms for playing billiard, drinking coffee, watching TV and so on.

The community started at April 1, 1972. Three of the four men and all women started to work full time in the House. Sam Hartman followed a couple of years later. Some ten to fifteen temporary inhabitants were taken in. A few other people followed suit, such as Janna de Bruyn and her three children and Harrie and Agnes Lieverse, who had been involved as volunteers in the reconstruction of the house.

The costs of the accommodation and social care of the guests could be covered partly by subsidies from the public authorities. These funds made it also possible to grant salaries to some people. Most of the younger people who joined later had part-time or fulltime jobs outside of the House and were as a consequence less involved in the daily life.

The permanent nucleus

The four couples who originally founded the house together with the people who joined later on formed a permanent nucleus of the community. It was a group of about 14 people who met every Friday evening to discuss the short term and long term strategy. These fourteen people were living together under one roof, so it was much more than only practical business which was discussed. It was the way in which the group would live together.

The original intentions of the eight founders of the house often clashed with the expectations and ideas of the newcomers, most of whom were over younger generation.

"This (the permanent nucleus, FH) group of people functions quite differently from a group of colleagues working together or members of an action committee struggling together for the right cause," writes Wil Kijne, one of the permanent inhabitants in the annual report over 1977. And she continues: "It may have something of all that and at the same time it is much more complex. To be honest, after this year I still don't know what exactly we are. Sometimes very much, sometimes very little. Much at the moments at which we are lifted up over ourselves and see with each other what we have in mind with regard to the new world where people of different generations, different temper and backgrounds complement each other, address one another and if we are being heard, there is trust on both sides."

But, so she adds, there are also the negative aspects, such as prejudices, unarticulated differences, minority feelings and people remaining silent instead of speaking out.

There is another interesting remark in this annual report. Wil indicates that the younger generation is asking for more knowledge. She mentions that she has been on a trip to the United States where Rosenstock-Huessy lived and that Harrie and Agnes had been visiting friends of the House in Germany. She asks: "Did we, who joined later, have to catch up or was it time to rethink the name of the house?"

There was however not much time to read. In these early years life was very demanding for the members of the permanent nucleus. Everyone was expected to be available the full 24 hours of the day. There was hardly any possibility to withdraw in one's own apartment. All day long there was the practical work which comes naturally when a group of more than 40 people is living in one house. Then there was the care for the temporary inhabitants. It was the administration, the social care and the psychological care.

Each guest could stay for one year. During that year he or she would be connected to one of the members of the permanent nucleus. Both the guest and the permanent inhabitant would then choose another person and together they would form a quartet which was supposed to meet each week and discuss all matters which were relevant for the guest, including both practical, social and psychological matters.

The agenda was full of such meetings. The days started with an informal general meeting. On Monday evening there was the plenary assembly of the house, which could last from 20.00 to 22.30 hrs. or even later. And then there was the weekly reading group, a small group

of some 10 or 12 people who would read a certain text, not necessarily written by Rosenstock-Huessy, and discuss the text together. On Saturday morning all inhabitants of the house were expected to show up for a cleaning hour.

On Sunday morning there was coffee. Regularly there were political actions, participation in demonstrations and other joint activities of all kinds. In order to organize the daily life in the house there were various committees, such as a household committee and a food committee. Not to mention the average of fourty to ninety birthday parties per year.

For those people who had a full-time job outside of the house there was hardly any time left for a personal life. There was also very little time for the younger children and the babies which were born. In general, the heavy claim the House made on the available time of the inhabitants was one of its most burdensome aspects. Some people left because they felt they did not get the opportunity to build a family life or because life in general was too demanding for them.

But on the other hand all families had their own apartment, which made it possible to have a private life. The work load was discussed and attempts were made to divide the tasks evenly among all permanent inhabitants. The problem was evidently that there were too many tasks. It also appeared difficult to involve the guests in the work which had to be done and in general the opinion was that these guests should not be put under too much pressure. Thus the permanent inhabitants put the burdens more on themselves than on the guests.

The guests

A brochure written in the 1980s gives an impression of the organization of the house and the place of the guests. It is an instructive text meant for the guests to prepare them for life in the House. Equality combined with responsibility to each other is essential, the text reads.

“Together we are responsible, we show responsibility to one another and to the outside world, as a unity and individually. If you have to live together each day, at your meal together, drink coffee, coke, do all kinds of services within the house, argue and make peace again, celebrate, talk, have meetings and discuss, you learn to know each other well.”

The essence of speaking and living together is explained in this brochure. The quartets are called characteristic for the House.

“In a quartet everything can be discussed, not only this or that woman or man, but life and the history of all who are involved can be part of the conversation. We hope to have also the

mutual aspects appearing in order to break through the relationship between the one demanding help and other offering help (object – subject). You don't always have to be giving one and you cannot be that, and neither can you always receive."

Furthermore, the text says that the community intends to be a place of exercise, a mirror of society, where people deal with each other intensively and feel involved in the ups and downs of the world and their immediate surroundings.

All guests needed some form of reconvalescence or rehabilitation. One of the ways to obtain this were the many occasions where the guests could speak out and discuss their problems. But another way was giving a regular schedule for daily life. Each day at 9.00 hrs. the inhabitants of the house were expected for the daily morning meeting followed by cleaning up the house and coffee at 10.00 hrs. Then it would be lunch at 12.30 hrs, tea at 15.30 hrs, dinner at 18 o'clock in the evening coffee at 20.00 hrs. all inhabitants were expected to participate in the dish washing and regularly also in the preparation of the meals, for which a professional cook was hired in.

It's interesting to read what these guests thought about life in the House. In the annual report over 1977 four of the guests wrote an article with their impressions and experiences. They write:

> All beginning is difficult. In spite of attempts of the other inhabitants to make you feel at ease, you feel lost when you enter into such a big group. You don't get the feeling that you belong to the group, because you don't yet have your roots here. First you will have to conquer your own place with the help of others. Only after that has succeeded, a very demanding thing, then it is possible to let words like 'home' and 'our home' pass your lips.

Life in the house has a contradictory aspect for these temporary inhabitants which may be connected with the aforementioned attitude of the permanent inhabitants towards the guests. In the annual report 1977 the four guests write:

> You enter into a community which at the same time has caretaking and helping temporary inhabitants as its goal, which means that at the same time it is an institution which is giving help. That is a somewhat contradictory situation. The question which arises from the beginning is what is central in this community, giving help or living together?

Reciprocity seems to be lacking. The guests continue:

> It isn't an easy thought to ask other people for help without having a relationship (of trust) with them, which makes it possible to rise above the role of someone who is demanding help. We understand that this is a sensible issue because this may also touch the one who is giving help, who is on the other side of the line and has the same problem. Is it possible for these people to grow over the role of helper? We think that this question gets more opportune when people are living together for a longer period of time. You learn to know each other better and you can hide less for each other. But can you as a helper allow yourself to communicate your own problems? If you only would be able to say that you don't have time for someone else, because you yourself are in trouble or you are too busy.

The four guests conclude that it is not enough to find a new form of collective life. "The essential thing is to have the possibility to grow and become the human being which you in essence are. For this you need time and space, people who help you recognize yourself, and the environment in which you feel at ease, where you can take your responsibility for your own behavior. (…) we think that this very important in a community where a lot of people are living, in which you have many relations in many sorts, where the impressions are many and sometimes overwhelming and where it often is difficult to distinguish between your own interests and those of others."

The hurdles and the end

The Rosenstock-Huessy Huis had a specific meaning to people in The Netherlands, Germany and the United States with an interest in the work of Rosenstock. From 1975 to 1980 some five or six times guests from abroad were invited to celebrate Pentecost in the House. This feast was chosen deliberately and was in line with Rosenstock's opinion that speaking is the unique central element in human history. Among these guests were Freya von Moltke, widow of Helmuth James von Moltke who was executed in 1945 for his work in the German resistance, her son Konrad von Moltke, Rosenstock's sister-in-law Lotte Huessy, Anka Wittig, widow of the roman-catholic priest and author Joseph Wittig and many others.

One of these guests, Clinton Gardner, who visited the Rosenstock-Huessy Huis more than once, wrote about it in his book *Letters to The Third Millennium, An Experiment in East-West Communication*. He describes the House in its context of planetary service with special attention for Pie and E Voet's involvement in Mozambique.[2]

[2] Argo Books, Norwich (VT), 1978, pp. 202-07, 219, (ISBN 0-912148-12-8)

Plenary sessions where all who were present could freely speak out were a central feature of the Pentecost meetings. These sessions were usually multilingual with immediate translations. They served to get to know each other better, but appeared often to also a kind of catharsis for the problems of the House. There were accusations, declarations of love and sometimes tears and laughter.

Hoping to solve some lasting internal problems, the members of the permanent nucleus also held separate sessions with experts in the fields of psychology and organization. In the longer run a number of such problems appeared to be too heavy for the founders to cope with. One of the conflicts arose during the 1980s. It was that between the 'old generation' of the founders, idealistic and well aware of what Rosenstock had written and said, and a younger generation which largely was socially very active, but not acquainted with Rosenstock and who had no plans to read his books. Another aspect of this generation gap was the wish of the younger generation for more privacy, something the older generation had deprived themselves of.

In a newspaper article dated 21 February 1998 the four founding couples explained their situation. Lien Leenman says in the article about the younger members of the permanent nucleus: "The did not want to be active after working hours and withdrew." Mira Blankevoort: "Many years we have tried to withdraw and to hand over the leadership of the house to younger people. It did not work. And why didn't it? They reproached us for granting them too little room. And we found that they didn't take enough initiative."

Sam and Elly had by that time left the house as a consequence of the ongoing conflicts. During a house meeting, Sam had been accused by the group of younger inhabitants of being 'a danger for the community'. Piet and Mira Blankevoort also decided to leave the House. Pie and Elias Voet already had a house of their own adjacent to the main building. Wim and Lien Leenman moved to a house directly neighboring to the House and remained involved but less intensively.

In 1998 the complex was sold to a new foundation which took as its goal to maintain the building and its historic function in the field of social care. This would be done by giving room to a community of people and socially active organizations. The name of the House was to be maintained. The people living in the House choose to focus on organizing group life and strengthening mutual ties internally.

The presence of Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy in the Rosenstock-Huessy Huis seems to be limited to a monthly reading group and regular meetings of the Dutch association Respondeo. There came no answer from the group presently living in the House to my request to meet and discuss this paper. But this is no judgment. In the evening hours someone in the House might for example explore Wikipedia to see who this strange-named guy was, whose name this House in the centre of Haarlem is now bearing for almost fourty years. As long as the House keeps bearing this name, the story does not end.