

The Rudolf Steiner Group in Chicago

from **Henry Barnes** book "**Into the Hearts Land, Rudolf Steiner's work in North America.**"

The study of the lectures and books of Rudolf Steiner in the homes of devoted members of the Anthroposophical Society, was the dominant activity of the small groups that carried Anthroposophy in its early days in Chicago. Ida Bilz was the first to lead such a group, and the description which Henry Monges gives of her stresses her utter devotion to Steiner, the Spirit of Christ, and the first Waldorf School. It is hard not to think that the later history of Anthroposophy in Chicago reflected the emphasis that Mrs. Bilz imparted to it. Meetings in her home on Sundays probably began in 1917 and included mainly German-speaking immigrants and especially Mrs. Kohler. Her group took the name of St. Mark in 1918 and came to the attention of Henry Monges almost immediately and to Dr. Marie Bergen in 1921.

A second small study group began in the home of James and Alice Gregory in 1922 and included Miss Schott, Mr. Steinway, Mr. and Mrs. DeRosett, and others. The memoirs that tell of these small groups mention that the devotion epitomized in Ida Bilz was to be found in many of the early followers of Rudolf Steiner and extended often to a willingness to commit all one's financial resources (however meager) to supporting Anthroposophy. It is important to recognize that the trust fund set up by the Gregory's for the Anthroposophical Society in America and the Rudolf Steiner Group provided the economic basis for all the many activities that arose in the latter in the second stage of its development.

It was through the support of Mr. Gregory, an official of the Northern Trust Bank, that an office at the Republic Building in downtown Chicago could be used for the study of Steiner's writing. It was this small group that attracted the attention of Dr. Hoffman in the early 1920's. He and Mr. Shirley Gandell became its leaders and gave it the name of the Rudolf Steiner Group in 1925. It is difficult to grasp the significance of this deed, as more than one visiting lecturer has pointed out, but to the early members of this group it seemed natural. By the early 1930's this group included Richard Stadler, Paul Trunsch, Paul Reiland others. Peter Demay became a member in 1931 and was shocked to learn that one did not have to be an initiate in order to join.

A fourth group started in the home of Mrs. Alma Ulrich in the 1930's. She and her two sons (Carl and Homer) and daughter (Miriam) had attended meetings of Ida Bilz in 1917 and those of the Rudolf Steiner Group as well. She formed the Michael Group which included Jean Thomason and others. Mr. Miebold often joined it during his visits to Chicago and brought much to the group life in the process. Both the memoirs of Dr. Hoffman's daughter and Mrs. Ulrich's son speak about their experience of being in the presence of an initiate.

With the gathering storm on the horizon, leading Anthroposophist's came to America, and some made their way to Chicago. Wachsmuth Pfeiffer, Hiebel, and Poppelbaum did so and were warmly welcomed by the members of the above groups. The onset of World War II, however, had the effect of dampening Anthroposophical activity. When Dr. Hoffman moved to Iowa in 1942, Peter Demay took over as President of the Rudolf Steiner Group. His hope was to bring the small groups together and to do so formally by incorporating them as the Rudolf Steiner Group. The effect of his effort was the opposite of his intention. Peter read the words of Rudolf Steiner to an empty room many times over the next few years.

With the deaths of Mrs. Bilz in 1945 and Gandell in 1946, an offer by Mrs. Ulrich was forthcoming, to have meetings of the Rudolf Steiner Group in her house. The end of the war also brought with it new members such as, Ed Brennan, and the renewed activity of older ones, such as George Waylett,

and Alice Gregory. Visiting lecturers such as Zeylmans, Barasvalle, and Harwood came to 529 W. Grant Place and inspired all who heard them. The fruit of this activity was the founding of the Christian Community Church in 1950. The religious needs of these pioneers of Anthroposophy in Chicago could now be met.

The process that resulted in the formal incorporation of the Rudolf Steiner Group seems to have lasted about three years. Members purchased Mrs. Ulrich's house in 1956, and by 1958, thirty-three years after its founding, the Rudolf Steiner Group was officially incorporated in the laws of the State of Illinois. The home of Anthroposophy is in the soul of man, but now a physical home in tune with the ideal of the study of Anthroposophy was a reality. In addition, the expenses of the Rudolf Steiner Group to care for and nurture its home and the activities therein were met by the generosity of Alice Gregory, as mentioned above.

Three leaders emerged during what may be called the heyday of Anthroposophy in Chicago. Peter Demay took on the task of guiding the Members Group which convened on Mondays. He took up the study of various cycles of Steiner's lectures and lectured on the Three-fold Social Organism, but his special talent was unfolding the deeper meaning of the basic books. On Fridays, Ed Brennan led the New Members Group with style and enthusiasm. The following year George Waylett began his group meetings which involved a scientific approach to Anthroposophy. It was also Mr. Waylett who became the reader when regular meetings of the First Class were first held in 1972.

The memoir of Dr. Traute Page, who came to Chicago in 1953, gives an interesting picture of this growing center of Anthroposophy. The individual striving of the Troika (as they were called) led each group upward toward the being of Anthroposophy imagined as a big dome encompassing both these groups and the other activities which flourished there. Visiting lecturers appeared regularly, often through the efforts of Dr. Page. Eurythmy performances were held with the assistance of Hildegard Bucher. Conferences were arranged, and by the 1970's council meetings and national conferences often met at 529 W. Grant Place. The celebration of the festivals became an important part of the life of the group, and the lectures of Dr. Rudolf Kohler, the Christian Community priest, on such occasions, were especially note-worthy.

The Rudolf Steiner Group grew in membership as well. Extensive remodeling of the building was carried out under the direction of Masha Emling, the group treasurer.

The third ideal of the early Anthroposophist's also began to take shape. After naming the group after the founder of Anthroposophical Society and establishing a Christian Community Church, it was now time to bring Waldorf education to Chicago. The Waldorf School Association was formed in the early 1960's. Attempts at a Waldorf summer school and then a kindergarten were made in the ensuing years, and finally in 1975 the first grade of the Chicago Waldorf School was opened. The school expanded to a full twelve grades in 1995 and presently has an enrollment of over 350 students.

With the advent of regionalization in 1979, Chicago was recognized as one of the leading centers of Anthroposophy in America. In the early 1980's the national council of the Anthroposophical Society in America chose Chicago as the place to relocate its national office. Prior to the actual move of the headquarters in 1986, the Rudolf Steiner group changed its name to the Rudolf Steiner Branch (though not on the incorporation papers). The hope was that the idea of being an official branch would spur members to form various kinds of groups and increase Anthroposophical activities. Like Peter Demay's hope for incorporation, this idea seemed to have the opposite result of the intended one. The coming of the national office to Chicago drew many members into administrative and clerical tasks and further dampened down local group activity.

The sale of the home of the Rudolf Steiner Group signaled the end of the second stage of the development of Anthroposophy in Chicago. The discussions about finding a more accessible location to give Anthroposophy a more public face and inspire the lagging group activity began in the early 1990's, about thirty-three years after incorporation. The sale itself and the subsequent move to the Fine Arts Building in downtown Chicago occurred in 1994, while the actual relocation of the national office to Ann Arbor didn't take place until a year later.

Next, a building on North Lincoln Avenue was purchased and is the present home of the group. Institutions working out of Anthroposophy, such as the Paulina Medical Clinic (with Drs. Ross and Andrea Rentea) and Arcturus (a Waldorf teacher training school) along with the Christian Community Church and Chicago Waldorf School, continue to be successful.

The branch hosts a variety of guest Speakers, lectures and workshops, and the Festival life at the branch, as well as study groups, flourish.