

Letitia Blake, secretary of the Monte San Martino Trust, recalls her 14 years of close friendship with Keith Killby

“Meglio tardi che mai” (better late than never) were generally the first words that greeted me on arrival at Keith’s flat. In the winter time I would hold out my hand which he would take, exclaiming sympathetically: “Ooh, you ARE cold!” This summer we had a different routine: I would settle down on a chair in front of him and get out my fan, waving it energetically in front of his face. He would close his eyes in pleasure at the cool breeze and then open them to declare: “Lady Windermere’s Fan!” Followed by “mind my nose!”

My relationship with Keith began in 2004 – I went for lunch with the widow of one of my father’s co-escaper friends and she had a copy of the newsletter on her coffee table. I took an email address and found out that my office was two roads away from Keith’s flat. After our first meeting I found myself in a short space of time a trustee and then secretary of the Trust. Keith and I quickly became working partners, doing a lot of day-to-day business at his sitting-room table: creating the newsletter, reading through all the application forms to select candidates for the bursaries, writing cheques to the schools, and discussing the Annual Lunch. I experienced his encyclopaedic knowledge of PoWs who had been on the run in Italy and enjoyed learning from him about this fascinating period of history which my father (born the same year as Keith) had also lived through and survived. He introduced me to his favourite books and I consumed them all – from *To War with Whittaker* (his favourite) to Iris Origo’s *War in Val d’Orcia* and *Rome ‘44* by Raleigh Trevelyan, which I read without stopping through one entire night.

In 2006 he asked me (though not in a tone that left me a lot of choice!) to go to Italy and accompany Antonio Millozzi, the Trust’s representative in Italy, on a tour of schools in several regions to talk to the students and teachers about the Trust and the bursaries. He had done this himself for many years but, just at the point I met him, he had decided (despite the best persuasive efforts of his many Italian friends in Monte San Martino) to stop travelling to Italy where he had been twice a year for decades. Although still in good health he was walking with a stick and typically did not want to find himself being a burden on anyone in case he fell. As I travelled in Italy, coming across many people he knew, I found myself getting a picture of an incredibly energetic, indomitable person who left a strong impression on all he met and who commanded great respect, admiration and affection.

Over the years, as our friendship grew, I learned gradually about his other interests and hobbies, besides Italy and the Trust (which were always in first position). He told me that for many decades he went to the theatre or the opera every Friday and Saturday night, and he had a large collection of theatre programmes going right back to the 1940s. The one he was most proud of listed a certain Margaret Smith in the cast list – at the very beginning of her career before she decided Maggie sounded better! In later years we would sometimes pull out the programmes and go through them with him reminiscing about John Gielgud, Noel Coward, Edith Evans and Lawrence Olivier. He also loved art and in his seventies would take the Italian students on trips to the National Gallery, gleefully pointing out to them all the paintings we had purloined from Italy at some point in the past! His favourite TV programme by far was *The Antiques Road Show* and I used to sometimes get worried calls from friends or family on Sunday evenings asking me if he was alright because the phone was permanently engaged and they couldn’t get through. I was able to reassure them that as soon as the Antiques Roadshow was over he would be putting the phone back on the hook.

One of the stories which most reflected his stature and strength of personality was an encounter he had with Winston Churchill at a conference Keith was organising in the 1950s focused on maintaining

peace in Europe. As he told it, Churchill arrived late and was about to walk onto the stage from behind, not realising that a high-ranking French speaker was out there still making his speech. Keith saw what was happening, leapt up and pushed Churchill physically backwards into the corridor and persuaded him to wait backstage until the other man had finished, thus averting a very embarrassing incident. Surely only Keith could boss, and literally push, Churchill around without compunction!

His favourite adjective was “useful”, referring to people as well as things, and he was above all a deeply practical person who believed in taking action to improve the world around him. Everything he did was rooted in his deeply-held values of justice, fairness, generosity and kindness without a sliver of sentimentality. He had specified that he wanted his body to be donated for medical purposes after his death and his wishes have been carried out. A letter of gratitude from the London Anatomy Office declared: “Keith will join our ‘silent teachers’ assisting in the teaching of future healthcare professionals”. After a very long life of immeasurable contribution Keith is typically continuing to be profoundly “useful” even after his death.

I will miss him enormously but have so many happy memories of our 14 years of friendship and partnership – my life has been radically affected by knowing him and I will always be deeply grateful.