

Speech given by Letitia Blake at MSMT/Fontanellato Lunch

8th November 2018

When I was asked to talk about Keith Killby, the Trust's Founder, today, two things went through my mind: first of all, I thought about how Keith used to plague me with the question: Who's the speaker for the Lunch? I would dread meeting him (before we had a speaker confirmed) as I knew he would immediately ask me who it was. So I wish he was here so I could say to him – "Keith, it's ME!!" But of course if he was here, I would not be speaking to you today. The second thought I had was this – it must be very unusual to be talking about a significant friendship with someone who was 88 when that friendship started.

Keith's indomitable character meant that that were quite a number of things up with which he would not put. Among these were disrespect, injustice, inefficiency and laziness. Nick Young, our chairman, and I have found hundreds of letters of complaint in his flat. He taught himself to touch-type and used to pound the keys churning out a huge number of letters and he kept two or even three copies of each one. I'd like to give you two examples: the first is addressed to an EDF Energy Manager ten years ago:

"Dear Sir, You are very good at writing letters and sending them but seem incapable of reading them. I have written to you many times explaining that at over 90 I do not wish to have my meter changed while I am still in residence here.....If I am further bothered in this matter by your letters or your representatives calling concerning that meter I shall take the matter elsewhere.

Yours truly

J Keith Killby."

Another one concerned the Trust and was written about postal problems to the Chairman of Royal Mail. It ends:

"I do not want a few stamps to be sent to pacify me but a service given by which this Charity can be run efficiently.

Yours *very* truly

J.Keith Killby

Keith's nephew Malcolm recently described him to me with admirable restraint: "He could be very direct and single-minded". Well yes, and even bloody-minded at times! We often accused him of being "testardo" (stubborn in Italian) and he accepted this quite proudly. I had a few minor run-ins with him but always came off the worse for wear.

Keith had no respect for people who were in positions of authority without true leadership qualities. There are many amusing and alarming episodes in his book which illustrate this. He also had a great respect for leaders doing their job well and it was mutual. If he did a job he always did it thoroughly and to the highest standard and he expected the same of others.

I am grateful to Trust supporter Julia MacKenzie who recently came across a report at the National Archives written by Corporal S. Dowland of the SAS who was with Keith in a PoW camp and on the run. It is dated 8th November 1943, exactly 75 years ago today, and I would like to read you the final paragraph which in fact is about a quarter of the whole report:

“That is all except to say that I should like to mention that Killby, the Medical Orderly who I believe was the first one to be sick, did his duty extremely well, attending to us at all times, and he speedily learnt enough Italian to dispense with interpreters. At Maddalena he had a queue of sailors at the window all day, bringing him cigarettes, bread, and news which he always divided fairly among us. He also treated our guards when they were sick. At Villagrande he made every one of the party a Medical Report to be presented to any proper Medical Officer when and if we met one. I think that the other number of the party will agree that we are all indebted to him in no small way.”

Keith could appear serious and somewhat daunting but this rather forbidding exterior hid an excellent sense of humour – very dry and understated. He found many things entertaining and had a way of half-closing his eyes and shaking with mirth – a sort of laughing without smiling. One of his favourite stories was about his parents. He took after his mother Dorothy who was a tall well-built, large-boned lady. His father Percy on the other hand was short and small in stature. One day his mother got stuck in the bath and after much exertion his father finally managed to get her out upon which she declared: “I should have married a strongman.” Percy, exasperated, came back in a flash with: “You should have married a crane!” Much shaking always followed the recounting of this story.

Keith had a gift for friendship – he had friends all over the world, in Thailand, Australia, New Zealand, Russia as well as the many in Italy. He loved languages and was always learning new ones so he could speak to people and make connections. He was constantly trying in the war years to get hold of books to help him. When he was in a German camp at the end of the war he managed to get possession of a book called: “Tausend Worte auf Russisch” and learnt some rudimentary Russian from it. When he was a boy at boarding school he was not academic and was, at one point, put into a class for less clever boys and taught...German! He always said this proved to be a great help when he was on the run.

Our friendship began in 2004 – my father (born the same year as Keith) had died the year before and I went to have lunch with the widow of one of Dad’s fellow-escapers. She had a copy of the Trust newsletter on her coffee table and I took a contact number and phoned up Steve Sims, who was Secretary before me. We met for a drink and it transpired that my office (I was working fulltime for a charity) was two roads away from Keith’s flat in Swiss

Cottage. I went round for the first of many meetings over tea and coffee cake at his dining-room table and found myself very quickly a Trustee, Secretary and colleague. I was always greeted with a long list (in his spidery writing) on the back of a used envelope, including inevitably: "Speaker for Lunch?" I think he quickly realised that I was quite "useful" (his favourite adjective) and appreciated a fellow do-er. He was an inveterate "volunteer" of other people and I needed to watch out not to find myself taking on too much. I was amused recently to find amongst his letters one he wrote to Nick around this time in which he says: "I suppose Letitia with her charity experience may have some idea of what she is in for" – well, not really, Keith, no!

It is surely unusual to die at the age of 102 and leave behind so many friends. Keith had no children of his own but he had a large family of friends, many of whom were 30, 40 and even 50 years younger than him. In his final years of old age he was looked after by people who knew and loved him: his friend Maurizio Pittacolo came over regularly from Rome and cooked him amazing meals, my fellow-trustee Omar Bucchioni lived with him for many years when he was just still mobile and took him shopping every single Saturday, and his closest friend Luigi Pighetti lived with him and cared for him for almost all of his final two and a half years. We called ourselves Team Keith in Olympic style.

Of course, some of his oldest and most precious friends lived, and still live, in his beloved Monte San Martino. I was on holiday there recently and I heard from one of these friends Vittorio Barchetta, the retired postman of Monte San Martino the story of his first encounter with Keith in 1961. He was a young boy and was excited to see a coach arriving in this remote area – he watched as a tall man came down the steps of the coach stooping in order to not hit his head. He approached Vittorio and said to him in Italian: "Cerco Maria Levi" (I am looking for Maria Levi). (Maria was the woman who first waded across the river with a pot of pasta on her head to offer to Keith and his fellow-escapers when they were on the run in the countryside near Monte San Martino). Vittorio replied: "E' la mia zia" (she's my aunt) and he pointed down a grassy track towards her house. Keith walked down the track to a warm and emotional reunion. This was the beginning of his enduring relationship with Monte San Martino, which he visited twice a year for 42 years, and his many friends there, including Antonio Millozzi, the town clerk, who helped him set up the Trust in 1989.

To come back to my relationship with Keith – as we worked together our friendship grew and I became his right-hand woman. The year I met him was just after his final visit to Italy – he was walking with a stick by that time and typically did not want to have an accident and be a burden to his friends there. I therefore became his rep – travelling over to Italy to do activities that he could no longer manage such as touring the schools with Antonio to talk to students about the bursaries. On my return, full debriefing reports were required and I can see and hear him now sitting at the table with the coffee cake nodding with interest as I recounted the people and places I had visited: "Ah yes! Good, good."

He missed Italy and his friends terribly and I like to think that in some small way I was able to lessen the pain of this separation by conveying news and messages and presents between Swiss Cottage and “La Mia Valle” (my valley) as he always referred to the Tenna valley, where MSM is situated.

Keith was a warm, kind, generous friend. The other day I read again his dedication in my copy of his book, “In Combat, Unarmed”:

“To Letitia, with thanks for all her work for the Trust and patience with this member of it!”

What struck me for the first time was the fact that he described himself as a member of the Trust not its founder. And this reflects another aspect of Keith’s character – he never pushed himself forward, he was not interested in the limelight. He had to be persuaded to accept the OBE; he was honoured to be made a Cavaliere Ufficiale but what really mattered to him by far the most was being made an honorary citizen of Monte San Martino. He hung his beautiful certificate in his sitting-room on the wall opposite his armchair so he could always see it.

Sometimes people would ask me if I had a fatherly or grandfatherly relationship with Keith but it really wasn’t like that at all. We were colleagues, fellow-Italophiles, great friends, he was my taskmaster, my history teacher, in the end I was one of his carers and at the very end I had overall responsibility for his welfare. He always called me Letizia for reasons we could never really understand but I think this is very apt as Letizia means happiness in Italian and my relationship with him was one that brought me a huge amount of happiness.

My colleague, John Simkins, earlier mentioned the recent Radio 4 obituaries programme, “Last Word”, where I was asked to speak about Keith’s life, and I would like to share with you the last words I spoke to him and the last words he spoke to me. On Friday 7th September I received a call from Nick, Christine English and John who had arrived in Fontanellato and were calling to say they missed me and to ask how I was and how Keith was. They asked me to give Keith their love. A few hours later I was speaking to Keith and I said to him: “Nick, Christine and John send you their love and I spoke to Luigi this morning and he sent you his love. There’s a lot of love coming to you today from Italy!” I kissed him on the forehead, said “see you tomorrow” and left the flat only to be called back a few minutes later by his carer telling me he had just died. A short while later I heard from Nick that many of you in this room today were giving him a rousing three cheers in Fontanellato at almost exactly the same time. Little did I realise quite how much love was coming to him from Italy at that moment.

Twenty-four hours earlier his carer and I were leaning down towards him as he lay in bed trying to tell us something. His voice had become very weak and it wasn’t easy to understand. We heard the word “lunch” which seemed strange as it was 6.30 in the evening. He kept pointing to each of us in turn, looking into our eyes. Then suddenly a light

bulb went on – I asked him: “Are you inviting us to be your guests at the Lunch, Keith?” He nodded, looking satisfied and lay back on the pillows. It was the last word he ever spoke. I think it is incredible that even with his dying breath he was thinking about the future of the Trust and generously inviting people to be a part of it.

Keith, I miss you enormously. I’m so grateful to you and my life has been immeasurably enriched by having you in it. And I can honestly say, from my heart, that I, and we, are all indebted to you in no small way.