

## Putting the spiritual into practice

### Anthroposophy in the life and work of Olly and Uno Donner

The aim of this article is to examine how Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophical ideas were reflected and put into practice in the lives of the Finnish couple Olly (Olga) Donner (1881-1956, neé Sinebrychoff) and Uno Donner (1872-1958). They encountered anthroposophy in 1913 and subsequently embraced it as the guiding principle of their lives. Through a close examination of these two people we aim to shed light on how a new worldview like anthroposophy, which was gaining followers in early twentieth-century Finland, was also a manifestation of wider changes in religious culture in Europe. Our perspective could be described as biographical in the sense that it has been characterised by Simone Lässig (2008: 11) who writes that 'the reconstruction of individual life courses helps to discover more about the context - for example, about daily rituals, pious practices, or kinship relationship'. Thus, the biographical perspective serves as a tool for grasping how something as deeply personal as an anthroposophical worldview was understood and practised, not only by Olly and Uno Donner, but also by a larger group of people who in the early twentieth century were looking for new ways to make sense of the surrounding world.

#### Introduction

As we are aiming to understand and describe a wider group of people through our study of the Donner couple, the question of what group they represent is relevant. In the Finnish context, their way of life was in many ways exceptional, and they did not represent the generic Finnish anthroposophist of their time. They belonged to the educated elite of the bourgeoisie in Helsinki, which, combined with the personal freedom their financial independence granted

them, enabled a cosmopolitan lifestyle for them. This also provided the opportunity to explore diverse ways of practising anthroposophy, both within the Anthroposophical Society and in their private lives. Their social circles were European, rather than exclusively Finnish, and they were a part of a transnational network of anthroposophists. As participants of that network, they were less exceptional and represent a group of privileged, well-to-do, transnational and first-generation anthroposophists, who were crucial actors in spreading the movement to several countries.

For this study we have gone through material in a number of archives. The Donner couple's extensive personal archives are kept in the library of Åbo Akademi University in Turku, Finland. Because many of the early Finnish anthroposophists have left very scant, if any, archival traces, Uno and Olly Donner's archive provides a rare view of anthroposophy in the early twentieth-century Finland.<sup>1</sup> Their archive contains an abundance of correspondence in Swedish, German, English, French, and occasionally Russian, to family, friends, and business contacts in both Finland and Europe, together with other personal documents such as passports and calendars. Unfortunately, the letters are mostly written to the Donners, and not vice versa. The references to anthroposophy are many, but more often related to outward activities such as the organisation of the Anthroposophical Society than to matters concerning personal spiritual training and practices. The few letters where the private side of anthroposophy is

1 Kersti Bergroth is one of the other rare early Finnish anthroposophists who has been studied. See Ristilä 2011, Mahlamäki 2014 and Mahlamäki 2017.

discussed indicate that it was perceived as a personal matter which was openly discussed only with trusted friends who were anthroposophists themselves. The clear evidence of the importance of anthroposophy in their lives, combined with the apparent lack of material concerning its personal dimension, suggests that the Donners have excluded parts of their correspondence from the public archive.

In addition, we have used the archives of the Anthroposophical Societies in Finland, Sweden, and Switzerland. Through annual reports, annual meeting minutes, membership lists, and the societies' correspondence we have been able to follow the Donners' engagement in the Anthroposophical Society. Some documents have been obtained from the patient archive at the anthroposophical clinic in Arlesheim, and from the archives of the Albert Steffen foundation, both in Switzerland.

Together these archival sources provide a window through which it is possible to catch a glimpse of the forms anthroposophy took in the lives of these two first-generation anthroposophists. However, the main part of the archival material concerns the Donners' more public activities, such as their involvement in the Anthroposophical Society or interest in anthroposophical pedagogy, while their personal anthroposophical practices, beliefs, and views can be traced only through fragments of evidence. This has led us to focus the article on the anthroposophy-related practices and activities in Uno and Olly Donner's lives, rather than on their doctrinal views or spiritual experiences. Religious views can and do manifest in individuals' activities both on a personal and public level, and practice – what people actually do – is a fundamental aspect of religion, as research into lived religion has shown (Hall 1997: vii–xiii; Orsi 1997: 3–21; Orsi 2003). Through tracing the activities of Uno and Olly Donner,<sup>2</sup> we seek to study the intersections between the personal and the public, and to show how more obviously public and social activities such as engagement in the Anthroposophical Society also had personal dimensions, and how activities such as meditation, which may be perceived as something private, also had social aspects. Furthermore, this practice-focused approach is relevant because

2 To avoid confusion arising from the need to write about two people who share the same last name, we have decided to use their first names Olly and Uno throughout the text.

the spiritual and the practical are understood to be closely intertwined within anthroposophy. Hence, the practical applications of anthroposophy should not be seen as mere additions to a spiritual core, but as significant spiritual elements in themselves (Ahern 1984: 50).

The activities we discuss are related to the Anthroposophical Society, art, biodynamic agriculture, pedagogy, self-education and health. Some of them were shared by the couple, some of them were more important to one or other of them; but all are united by a common anthroposophical foundation. Although these practices were unique and personal to the Donner couple, they were also practices that reflected the dimensions and applications of anthroposophy that were developed by Rudolf Steiner, and shared by many members of the Anthroposophical Society. Therefore, examining the practices of the Donner couple sheds light not only on them as individuals, but on new ideas that anthroposophists in Finland and elsewhere were putting into practice. Because anthroposophy was one of several western esoteric movements which gained popularity around and after the turn of the twentieth century, this article also illuminates wider changes in the religious landscape in Finland and Europe.

We begin the article by providing first a short biographical sketch of the lives of Uno and Olly Donner, and a short introduction to Rudolf Steiner and anthroposophy. Then we continue by discussing the different practical aspects of anthroposophy: the Donners' activities in the Anthroposophical Society, their interest in biodynamic farming, pedagogy, self-education, and healthcare.

### **Olga Sinebrychoff and Uno Donner**

Olga (Olly) Donner was born as the only child of Nicolas Sinebrychoff (1856–96) and Anna Sinebrychoff (né Nordenstam, 1854–1944). This upper-class family was wealthy and well connected in Finnish society through both personal and professional networks. The Sinebrychoff family had earned its fortune by owning a brewery in Helsinki. Nicolas Sinebrychoff worked as the manager of the company for seven years, until he became ill with tuberculosis, and ten years later died from it. His father was the rich commercial adviser Pavel Sinebrychoff (1799–1883). His mother Anna Sinebrychoff (1830–1904) led the company after the death of her husband, and was

well known for her charity work. Anna Sinebrychoff belonged to the distinguished Nordenstam family, and as a young woman she had a position as the lady-in-waiting at the court of the Russian Czar. Her father Johan Mauritz Nordenstam (1802–82) had carried out the tasks of the governor-general in Finland, among other things, and her mother was a daughter to a Russian officer and related to both Pushkin and Lermontov.

Olly Sinebrychoff spent many of her teenage years in different schools in Europe – as her mother had done in her youth. Through her education she learned to speak five languages (Swedish, German, French, Russian and English), read the classics of world literature, practised writing poems and painting, and as a young girl was already able to evaluate the operas of Wagner. She was interested in painting, writing letters, visiting the opera and theatre, and reflecting on social questions. It is easy to see the roots of her later cosmopolitan life as having originated in the international context of her youth (correspondence between O. Donner and A. Sinebrychoff, vols 20 and 31, ÅA).

Uno Donner (1872–1958) was the son of Otto Donner (1835–1909) and Louise Donner (née Malm, 1834–84). The Donner family had a history in trade, but during the nineteenth century, an orientation towards academic circles had emerged. Uno's father was a professor of Sanskrit, a senator in the Finnish parliament, and a businessman. His mother Louise was the daughter of Peter Malm, a wealthy Ostrobothnian merchant. After the death of Louise, Uno's father married Wilhelmina (Minette) Munck (1848–1922), who was the daughter to the university vice chancellor Johan Reinhold Munck. She became the mother of in all nine children in the large family; there were five children from her husband's former marriage; one from her former marriage and three more were born from her marriage with Otto Donner. Both together and separately, Otto and Minette Donner engaged in various kinds of charity work. The Donner family was well connected to the academic, the political, as well as the economic sectors, and thus firmly rooted within the elite of the bourgeois circles in Helsinki, Finland (Dahlberg and Mickwitz 2014: 117–49, 175–80).

Uno Donner was first intended to have an academic career, but because of his poor health, he switched from the university to an education as an engineer and a businessman. This included studies abroad, and in the spring of 1899 his studies brought

him to Dresden, where he met Olly Sinebrychoff. They seem to have fallen in love immediately and their marriage took place in Vevey near Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1900. Uno Donner forged a career in the spinning industry and among other things founded the first spinning company for combed wool in Finland (Dahlberg 2014: 301–3; printed card dated 27.5.1900, Grand-Hôtel du Lac, Vevey, stating the wedding dinner menu, vol. 48, ÅA).

The couple led a cosmopolitan lifestyle. They always had rooms in Helsinki at Bulevardgatan 40, a building owned by the Sinebrychoff family,<sup>3</sup> or at Norra Kajen 12,<sup>4</sup> a building owned by the Donner family, but they travelled widely in Europe and spent several months abroad every year. Even when they spent time in Helsinki they often stayed at a hotel. From around 1914 until 1921, they lived in Sweden. In Finland, they owned the manor at Gerknäs in Lohja from 1928 until 1946 and, from 1926, they also had a summer villa called Grantorp in Karjaa (Donner 1959).

The Donners did not have any children and instead of family life, they devoted their time to various other interests. Anthroposophy was an interest they shared, and one can see reflections of this anthroposophical core in many of their other activities. Uno ran his business affairs from wherever the couple stayed at the time, but apart from that, he worked actively with organising the first Anthroposophical Society in Finland. In addition, he both practised and taught anthroposophy within the society, studied painting, eurythmy, and was the first to experiment with anthroposophical biodynamic farming in Finland. Olly Donner expressed her anthroposophical views in her many novels, but also practised Steiner's pedagogical and health-related ideas in her home for disabled children and in the school and summer camp that she supported financially. Furthermore, they both practised anthroposophy as a way of spiritual training and self-education.

3 Today the building is known as the Sinebrychoff Art Museum.

4 The building was commissioned by Otto and Minette Donner, and planned by the architect Magnus Schjerfbeck (brother of the painter Helene Schjerfbeck), according to sketches by Sebastian Gripenberg (Dahlberg and Mickwitz 2014: 188–189).

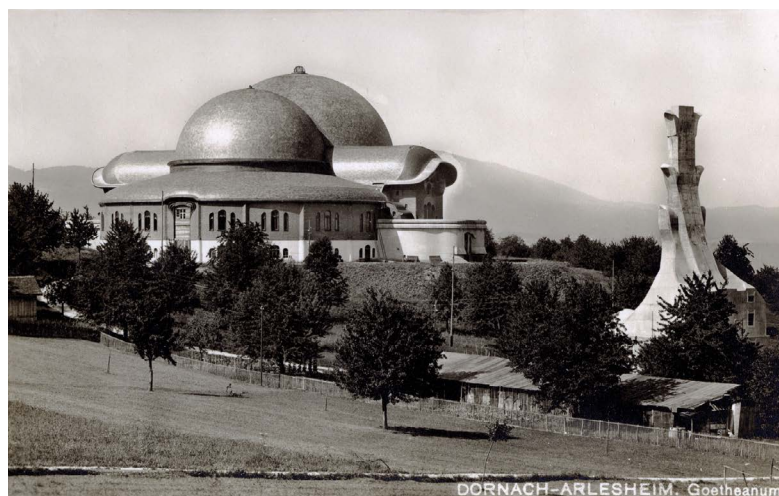
## Rudolf Steiner and the Anthroposophical Society

Anthroposophy was the invention of Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925). He was born in the village of Kraljevec in the Austrian Empire (present-day Croatia). During Steiner's childhood the family moved often because of his father's work as a telegraph operator, but later the family settled down to ensure Rudolf a good education. After high school (*Realschule*) Steiner studied mathematics and natural sciences, as well as German idealistic philosophy at the Vienna Technische Universität, and then embarked on an academic career. From 1882 to 1897, he worked as the publisher of Goethe's scientific writings and in 1891 he graduated as a Doctor of Philosophy from the University of Rostock. After this, he deviated from the academic path (Zander 2008, Band 1: 122–3).

In late nineteenth-century Berlin Steiner became acquainted with the literary circles and bohemians, but it was in the theosophical circles he found an audience that was interested in his thoughts. He soon became the general secretary of the German section of the Theosophical Society, and held the position from 1902 until 1912. Gradually Steiner's usage of European traditions and Christian mysticism in his teaching, and his reluctance to accept Jiddu Krishnamurti as the World Teacher led to tensions with the leader of the Theosophical Society, Annie Besant. Ultimately, in 1913 Steiner and the German section were expelled. He immediately countered this setback by founding his own Anthroposophical Society, which gained around 2,500 members, most of them having been theosophists earlier who now decided to follow Steiner instead (Zander 2008, Band 1: 123–4, 151–67).

As a thought system anthroposophy is built on an array of ideas that come from different historical currents. During his theosophical years, Steiner was thoroughly acquainted with western esoteric thought, as well as the eastern Hindu and Buddhist influences that were incorporated in theosophy. This theosophical influence is clearly visible in Steiner's thought, although he preferred to be critical of it himself.<sup>5</sup> Steiner's original contribution was to westernise theosophy by including elements from Christian

5 For example, Steiner wrote several of the books, that are considered central readings within anthroposophy, during his time as a theosophist: *Theosophie* (1904), *Wie erlangt man Erkenntnisse der höheren Welten* (1904), *Die Geheimwissenschaft im Umriss* (1910).



The first Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland. The construction work started in 1913 and the building was destroyed by arson on New Year's Eve 1922/3. All pictures are from Uno and Olly Donner's picture collection, ÅA.

mysticism and Rosicrucianism, as well as incorporating a good deal of German *Naturphilosophie*, such as Goethean thought (Ahern 1984, Lejon 1997).

Steiner's extensive activity left the world with an enormous body of published lectures on a multitude of topics, which makes it difficult to summarise his central ideas. This short sketch is only meant to present the main aspects that are central to Uno and Olly Donner's activities. Steiner believed that spiritual skills can be developed in the same way as other skills, so that anthroposophy centres on the idea of developing one's consciousness in an attempt to join the spiritual in the human being with the spiritual in the universe. Steiner's cosmology is a complex construction of an evolutionary model encompassing the original state of the spirit over vast eras of time developing into a state of materialisation, and then returning back to the original spiritual state. His own time Steiner regarded as the turning point from materialism towards re-spiritualisation. The path towards higher levels of spiritualisation spans several human lives, through a process of karmic rebirth. The human being that strives towards spirituality has, according to Steiner, four different aspects: a physical body, an etheric body, an astral body, and an ego.<sup>6</sup>

6 For a more detailed description and analysis of Steiner's anthroposophical thought, see Geoffrey Ahern, *Sun at Midnight* (1984) and Zander 2008, Band I & II; for Steiner's own description, see *An Outline of Occult Science (Geheimwissenschaft im Umriss)*, 1909).

In addition to this theoretical structure, an array of practical anthroposophical applications were developed following Steiner's 'indications': esoteric training through meditative exercises, the arts (eurythmy, speech formation, painting, sculpture, architecture); Waldorf education (also known as 'Steiner education'); extended medicine; biodynamic agriculture; and, concerning societal organisation, 'The Threefold Commonwealth' (Ahern 1984: 50–64). Geoffrey Ahern accurately describes these practices as 'meditative applications, or applied meditations' to point out how closely bound the spiritual and the practical are understood to be within anthroposophy (Ahern 1984: 50).

### The Donner couple and the Anthroposophical Society

We do not know how Olly and Uno Donner first encountered anthroposophy, but during a visit to London in 1913, their interest had certainly been aroused. Through their friend Harry Collison, a central character in the British Anthroposophical movement,<sup>7</sup> they came into contact with other anthroposophists. The novelty of anthroposophy as both term and movement is visible in the choice of words in the letters. In 1913 Collison still wrote about 'theosophists' (H. Collison to O. Donner 27.4.1913, vol. 10, ÅA), while Olly Donner's mother used the word 'anthropos' in her letter to Olly (A. Sinebrychoff to O. Donner 11.12.1913, vol. 22, ÅA).

Through Collison, the Donners were introduced to other anthroposophists, such as Alfred Meebold, leader of a London group (H. Collison to O. Donner 8.5.1913, vol. 10, ÅA), and the Finnish-Danish baron Carl Alphonse Walleen-Borneman, a true cosmopolite who worked for the anthroposophical movement in all the Nordic countries as well as Germany, England and France (Forschungsstelle Kulturimpuls, Biographien Dokumentation, Walleen-Borneman, Carl Alphonse). During the winter of 1913, Walleen-Borneman was in London, and Olly and Uno Donner appear to have followed several of his lectures (Oxford University Calendar, vol. 106, ÅA).

Steiner himself happened to be in London giving lectures in May 1913 (Schmidt 1978: 200), and it seems Uno and Olly Donner met with him personally. The mediator was Harry Collison, who in letters dated around the end of April told Olly that he had

7 For details on Harry Collison, see Hawkins 2011.



Olly Donner on a trip to Switzerland in 1900.

'arranged an interview with the Doctor' and advised her on what to ask Steiner (H. Collison to O. Donner 27.4.1913 and a letter dated 'Saturday', vol. 10, ÅA).

After this encounter with Steiner's teachings the Donners continued to study anthroposophy both through Steiner's writings, by following his lectures around Europe, and by spending time in Dornach, Switzerland where the Anthroposophical Society's centre, the 'Goetheanum' was being built. Their interest in finding like-minded company is well exemplified in Collison's letter of 27.4.1913, in which he invites them to Munich with the words 'Here you would find plenty of friends, artists & theosophists, who would not bore you with tea table gossip, which you have discovered to be all sham' (H. Collison to O. Donner 27.4.1913, vol. 8b, ÅA). In June 1913 Uno and Olly Donner were convinced enough to both enrol as members in the Anthroposophical Society (membership lists, GD).

### The years in Sweden

During the First World War, the Donners settled in Sweden. First, from around 1914 until 1916, they lived in the countryside manor of Beateberg in Uppland, north of Stockholm, and in 1917 they moved to an apartment on Hjorthagsvägen<sup>8</sup> 7 in Stockholm. The war made travelling difficult and cut them off from the European anthroposophical circles. This distressed them, and in 1918 Uno Donner wrote to Alfred Meebold that ‘not being able to hear Dr. S. speak in such a long time pains us daily, and we often discuss the possibilities to come to Dornach’<sup>9</sup> (U. Donner to A. Meebold 30.1.1918, vol. 8b, ÅÅ). The Donners did, however, find the local Swedish anthroposophical circles. It is unclear how or where they first made contact with the Swedish anthroposophists – it might have been in Dornach as well as in Stockholm – but, from 1917 when they moved to Stockholm, they became active members of the local community.

As on many occasions later on, they used their financial means to advance the anthroposophical movement. On 17 March 1917 Uno Donner wrote to Gustaf Kinell, the general secretary of the Swedish Anthroposophical Society, to offer the society an apartment in a newly-built house at Rådmansgatan 14 in Stockholm. The offer was to let the society use the apartment for meetings, lectures, festivities, and other purposes for at least the two following years. Uno Donner promised that he together with Olly would take care of all costs. These included not only the rent, but also the costs for heating, cleaning, light, furniture, necessary tableware, and other utensils, which would all be given to the society as a gift. The Donners’ only wish was that it would remain a secret to the members of the society who was behind the gift. Kinell and the chairs of the groups gladly accepted the generous offer. Later correspondence reveals that the Donners extended the original offer of two years, and provided the society with the apartment from October 1917 until October 1921 (board meeting minutes 25.3.1917 and 31.8.1921, ASS).

On 20 May 1919 both Uno and Olly Donner were registered as members of the Stockholm group that was founded on the same date, and thus became

8 Today the street is named Erik Dahlbergsallén.

9 ‘Täglich thut es uns weh diese lange zeit Dr. S. nicht hören zu können und überlegen wir uns oft die Möglichkeiten nach Dornach zu kommen.’



Uno Donner on the porch to Beateberg manor in Sweden.

members of the national Swedish Anthroposophical Society (membership list 1913–1931, ASS). Both participated actively in the meetings of the Stockholm group, and, in addition, Uno Donner also gave lectures and beginners courses in anthroposophy (A. Ljungqvist to O. Donner 1919–34, vol. 17, ÅÅ; calendar of 1918, vol. 106, ÅÅ). Even after they had moved back to Helsinki, he gave lectures for the group members during visits to Stockholm (Sigrid Henström to U. Donner, April 1925, ASS). On the 30 December 1923, a few years after the Donners’ return to Finland, they were both accepted as members of honour in the Stockholm lodge as an acknowledgment of their services for anthroposophy in Sweden (membership list 1913–1931, ASS).

The Donners also became close friends with some of the members in the Stockholm lodge, especially Mrs Anna and Gustaf Ljungqvist<sup>10</sup> and Miss Helene

10 Gustaf Ljungqvist (1852–1922) and his wife Anna Ljungqvist (1865–1935) were members of the

Flodin<sup>11</sup>, and kept in touch with them after they moved back to Helsinki. In their letters, they often plan trips and meetings in Dornach or elsewhere in Europe and send their regards to mutual friends in various locations, which reveals that the anthroposophical network of Uno and Olly Donner was above all transnational (A. Ljungqvist to O. Donner 1918–34, vol. 17, ÅA; H. Flodin to O. Donner 1918–35, vol. 12, ÅA).

### The return to Finland

After their return to Finland by the end of 1921, the Donners did their best to further the anthroposophical movement there. They were not, however, the first to present anthroposophy in Finland, because Steiner's reputation had already spread through the theosophical circles. His work had already been translated into Finnish in 1910 by the Theosophical Publishing House in Finland and books were available at the theosophical library which had opened in Helsinki in 1897. Since 1910 there had been lodges within the Theosophical Society in Finland that focused on Steiner's teachings (documents of the annual meeting 16–17.4.1911, FTS). Steiner had even visited Helsinki twice, for the first time in 1912 giving lectures both for members of the Theosophical Society and for the public. During the second visit in 1913, he no longer was a member of the Theosophical Society, but the founder of the new Anthroposophical Society, which during the same year gained around 150 Finnish members (Pohjanmaa 1937: 48, 60; documents of the annual meeting 21–24.6.1914: 10–11, FTS).

Uno and Olly Donner stepped into the picture when the Finnish Anthroposophical Society was founded in 1923. The timing was not a coincidence, but related to a larger reorganisation of Steiner's Anthroposophical Society. Up until then Steiner had chosen to stay outside the official organisation of the society and taken the role of spiritual leader

only. In 1923, he decided to reshape the organisation and officially take the lead himself. His need to take tighter control over the society has been explained by its rapid growth which had caused different branches to start quarrelling with each other and drifting apart over the years. In addition to internal struggles, anthroposophy encountered opposition also from the outside. This culminated in an arson attack on the newly-built headquarters in Dornach on New Year's Eve in 1922/3, which is likely to have fuelled Steiner's thoughts on the need of restructuring and strengthening the society. He wished for the national societies to be organised and united under the central organisation of the new General Anthroposophical Society which was founded at the annual Christmas conference in 1923/4 in Dornach (Lachman 2007: 209–12; Lejon 1997: 118–21).

When the Finnish Anthroposophical Society was founded in December 1923, it was designed to be one national society that would unite all anthroposophists in Finland, but divided into Finnish- and Swedish-speaking sections. This division was made for practical reasons, to accommodate the two language groups of the members. Uno Donner was elected as both the society's first chair and general secretary. The task of the general secretary was to take care of the international communications of the national society, most importantly to act as the contact person between the national and the General Anthroposophical Society. The minutes from the founding meeting are not preserved, so we do not know if there were other candidates for the position, but as Uno Donner was not the only one to have been in contact with Steiner and the headquarters in Dornach personally, there might have been other interested candidates. Edvard and Aline Selander had been in contact with both Rudolf Steiner and Marie von Sivers when arranging Steiner's two visits to Helsinki (Selander's correspondence with Marie Steiner, RSA). Johannes and Ellen Leino (née Relander) had met with Steiner already in 1908 and apparently were on friendly terms, judging from their correspondence with Rudolf Steiner and Marie von Sivers which continued from 1910 to 1947 (J. and E. Leino's correspondence with Marie von Sivers; Marie von Sivers' obituary of Johannes Leino, RSA; Kiersch 2006: 91). Nevertheless, later correspondence between the central board in Dornach and the Finnish Anthroposophical Society reveal that electing Donner as the general secretary was the explicit wish of Steiner himself (R. Steiner and Ita

Theosophical Society in Sweden 1908–13. Gustaf was vice chair, and in 1909–10 the chair of the society. They became members of the Anthroposophical Society in 1913, and Gustaf was a board member of the Swedish A. S. 1913–22 (Forschungsstelle Kulturimpuls, Ljungqvist, Gustaf).

11 Helene Flodin (1875–?) was a drawing teacher, an art historian, and a member of the Anthroposophical Society of Sweden since 1913 (membership list: Hufvudmatrikel 1913–31, ASS).

Wegman to U. Donner, 27.6.1924, GD). With Steiner's support Donner had a mandate that would have been hard, if not impossible, for the others to challenge.

Although Steiner clearly trusted Uno Donner, there are no sources that reveal more details of their relation. The one letter from Uno Donner to Rudolf Steiner, and the letters between Uno Donner and Marie Steiner that are kept in the Rudolf Steiner Archive, are all official in their tone and do not hint at personal relations. Perhaps Steiner was convinced by the time Uno Donner had spent in Dornach and his commitment to anthroposophy; perhaps it also mattered that Uno was well connected both in transnational anthroposophical circles and Finnish society, and perhaps there were other reasons, too. In any case, Uno Donner kept the position as both chair and general secretary of the Anthroposophical Society in Finland from 1923 until the annual meeting in 1931.

During his time as chair and general secretary, Uno Donner strove to realise Steiner's ideal of one national society. However, shortly after the Finnish Anthroposophical Society was founded, disputes surfaced, and in 1924 three groups even broke loose from the society. First, the Finnish-speaking members decided to found their own, independent society under the leadership of Johannes Leino. Then a small Swedish-speaking group followed the example and set up a group called the Swedish Section of the General Anthroposophical Society, and chose Edvard Selander as their chair. In addition, a group of Vyborg anthroposophists under the leadership of Mrs Wally Homén decided to carry on their anthroposophical work independently (annual report 1925, ASF).

The fact that the national society broke down into four independent groups that Uno did not manage to reunite was a bitter disappointment for him. He tried to convince Leino, Selander, and Homén to stay within the original society by means of negotiations both by letter and face to face. His efforts were, however, unsuccessful and seem instead to have convinced the others that cooperation was impossible (correspondence between U. Donner, W. Homén, J. Leino, and the board of the General A. S. in 1924–5, GD). Some of the reasons behind the schism lay in the tensions between Swedish and Finnish speaking members, which reflected societal debates of the time, but personal disagreements also played a role (W. Homén to the board of the General A. S. 5.10.1924 and 4.6.1925).

In spite of the disagreements, the anthropo-



Uno Donner captured Olly writing in one of his sketches.

sophical work went on, and Uno Donner worked intensively 'for the world-mission of the anthroposophical movement', as he put it in the society's 1925 annual report<sup>12</sup> (annual report 1925, ASF). Among other things, he was a generous patron for anthroposophical work. To help the society organise meetings he provided it with an apartment at Berggatan 3 in Helsinki, for which he paid the rent during his entire time as chair for the society. In addition to this, he took care of varied costs during the years to ensure that the Finnish society received updates from the anthroposophical centre in Dornach and could keep up its work (annual report 1931, ASF).

Uno Donner also regularly gave lectures and beginners courses in anthroposophy – mostly for the members only, but sometimes also for the public

12 '...arbete för den antroposofiska rörelsen världsmission.'



(annual reports, 1925–30, ASF). In addition to his own lectures, he saw to it that international anthroposophists visited Helsinki. These visits to Finland were part of extensive, and expensive, lecture tours that were usually organised as joint efforts by the board in Dornach and several national societies. The guests were eminent anthroposophists such as Marie Steiner and her eurythmy group (in 1928), Dr Frederik Willem Zeylmans van Emmichoven<sup>13</sup> (in 1925 and 1929), Doctor Karl Heyer (1925), Erich Trummler<sup>14</sup> (in 1929), Roman Boos<sup>15</sup> (in 1930), and Ernst Uehli<sup>16</sup> (in 1930) (annual reports 1928–30, ASF).

For many years, Uno Donner's anthroposophical work within the society continued peacefully. He was unanimously re-elected repeatedly, as was the rest of the board, with some minor alterations. In 1931 one member, Olga von Freymann, together with some other members of the First Class,<sup>17</sup> wanted to invite Marie Steiner to Finland, and asked Uno for assistance with this. This somehow escalated into a problem and resulted in severe misunderstandings and differences of opinion between Uno Donner and Miss Freymann. Because of the internal quarrels Marie Steiner eventually declined the invitation. This seems to have cost Uno Donner the trust of the majority of the society's members, because at the next annual meeting in 1931 he was not re-elected

as chair (annual meeting minutes and annual report 1931, ASF). Instead, the members elected Donner's long time vice chair, the painter Werner von Hausen. From the next year, Miss Olga von Freymann chaired the society until 1951 with a few breaks, in total for 13 years.

This was a severe blow for Uno Donner, who from his own point of view had been committed to the task of advancing anthroposophy according to Steiner's wishes, but now suddenly found himself pushed out of his own society. He reacted with a complete withdrawal from the Finnish Anthroposophical Society, including the immediate withdrawal of the apartment he had so far provided the society with (annual report 1931, ASF). The personal difficulty he had in coping with the situation shows also in his refusal to meet and talk about what had passed with his trusted friend and former vice chair, Werner von Hausen. In several letters, von Hausen pleaded with Uno Donner to meet with him and tried to convince him that his experience and input was indispensable to the anthroposophical movement in Finland. Donner's response was to indicate that they could meet only under the condition that they would not speak a word about the society (correspondence between W. v. Hausen and U. Donner 1929–32, vol. 8a, ÅA).

Shortly after the breach with his society in 1931, Uno met with Albert Steffen<sup>18</sup> in Dornach to discuss the events that had passed in Finland. In his diary notes on their meeting, Steffen described Uno as an opponent to Mrs Dr Steiner, but the reasons for this remain unclear. During their meeting Uno must also have brought up the personal dilemma the break with the society had placed him in – what should he now do as an anthroposophist? Steffen's answer was to not forsake anthroposophy. According to him, it was also possible to work for anthroposophy without a society.<sup>19</sup> (Albert Steffen's diary 2./3.3.1932, ASS)

Uno and Olly Donner seem to have taken Steffen's advice and shifted their focus to practising anthroposophy in their personal lives rather than within an institutional framework. The break with the Finnish Anthroposophical Society was fol-

- 13 F. W. Zeylmans van Emmichoven (1878–1954), medical doctor, general secretary of the Netherlands A. S. (Forschungsstelle Kulturimpuls, Zeylmans van Emmichoven, Frederik Willem).
- 14 E. Trummler (1891–1983), married to the Norwegian Ruth Kaurin, active both in the General A. S. and in the Vidar-group in Kristiania (today Oslo), Norway (Forschungsstelle Kulturimpuls, Trummler, Erich).
- 15 R. Boos (1889–1952), writer and jurist, active in many anthroposophical enterprises (Forschungsstelle Kulturimpuls, Boos, Roman).
- 16 E. Uehli (1875–1959) active anthroposophical writer and lecturer, Waldorf teacher (Forschungsstelle Kulturimpuls, Uehli, Ernst).
- 17 The First Class was the esoteric school of the General Anthroposophical Society. Committed members of the society could gain access to it after two years of membership in the society, but even then only through the recommendation of a more experienced member of the First Class, usually the chair of a working group or national society. This rule was, however, not always applied to committed first generation anthroposophists (Lejon 1997: 48–50; Kiersch 2016).

- 18 Steffen was a poet and a writer who became the chair of the Anthroposophical Society after the death of Rudolf Steiner in 1925.
- 19 In Steffen's own words, he told Uno: 'Ich sage ihm, man kann für Anthroposophie eintreten auch ohne die Gesellschaft.'

lowed by a withdrawal from the General Anthroposophical Society too. During the years 1931–2, they did not even pay their membership fees, although they returned as members in 1936 (the membership lists, GD). Also Olly's correspondence with her anthroposophical friends peters out in the 1930s. Uno and Olly also stopped visiting Dornach for eight years and travelled elsewhere, mostly Aix-les-Bains and Grasse in France, and Lausanne in Switzerland, when they did not stay in Helsinki or at Gerknäs Manor. There may have been also other than purely personal reasons too to avoid Dornach. The General Anthroposophical Society was marked by internal power struggles that followed Steiner's death, and the atmosphere in Dornach was far from harmonious. The Donners' following longer visits to Dornach – or actually the nearby Arlesheim – did not happen until the 1950s after the inner schisms of the board in Dornach were overcome (Lejon 1997: 141–5).

### Exploring the spiritual through art

Art was one of the ways in which anthroposophy stayed as a part of Uno and especially Olly Donner's life. Neither one of them was a famous artist, but both cultivated a long-term interest in art, Olly mainly in writing and Uno in painting. Although their interest in art preceded their interest in anthroposophy, it harmonised well with anthroposophical conceptions of art and was connected to their anthroposophical worldview.

Olly Donner had already been actively looking for her means of expression during her youth and early adulthood, and as a member of the Sinebrychoff family, she had opportunities to do so. When visiting a school in Dresden, she took lessons in painting at least in the years 1897–8 (A. Sinebrychoff to O. Donner 9.10.1897, 21.1.1898, 29.1.1898, 1.3.1898, vol. 20, ÅA). Later, in 1911, she experimented with sculpting and took lessons in Rome. Olly's profession, however, came to be writing. She discovered writing and anthroposophy one after another – her first book was published in 1911 and she developed an interest in anthroposophy around 1913. During her lifetime she published 32 books; novels and poems for adults, and plays and stories for children. Her first manu-



Uno Donner enjoyed painting wherever the couple stayed.

scripts were in Russian, and later she wrote one book in French, but most of her work was in Swedish (Olly Donner's manuscripts, ÅA).

Uno Donner, for his part, was an amateur painter, who tried all his life to achieve a balance between being an artist and being a businessman. He studied painting on many occasions, at least in Paris and probably also in Rome (A. Sinebrychoff to O. Donner 21.11.1909, 24.3.1909, 7.3.1911, 13.1.1913, vols 21–2, ÅA) and always painted wherever the couple spent their time. Whenever they resided somewhere for a longer period, he usually also provided himself with an atelier. During the years in Stockholm he rented one at Vattugatan (Lublin & Co Aktiebolag to U. Donner 25.3.1918, vol. 45, ÅA) and Olly's mother furnished one for him in her summer villa in Björnholm, Espoo (A. Sinebrychoff to O. Donner 1.4.1909, vol. 21, ÅA).

Within anthroposophy, practising art was regarded as central. The task of the artist was, according to Steiner, to bring forth the spiritual aspect that already exists in everything that is sentient. He thought that art enabled the connection between the material and spiritual world and worked as a counterforce to an increasing materialism. Subsequently, every art form was considered to be in touch with one part of the human being; architecture with the physical body, sculpture with the etheric body, painting with the astral body, music with the ego, poetry with the spirit-self and eurhythmics with the life spirit (Ahern 1984: 60–1). When making or experiencing art, one was thought to be able to live in those

different aspects of one's being and even communicate with the cosmos (Steiner 1913–14).

Olly Donner's books as well as her comments on her own writing reflect her anthroposophical thinking and anthroposophical art theory in many ways. In the books she discussed themes that are central in anthroposophy; questions of humanity and the spiritual growth of human beings, death, and other existential issues. Often the characters and events of the books seem to exist somewhere in between a fairy tale and the real world. It is clear that the material world is not the only thing that matters in her books – it is more like a thin curtain that hides the things that are much more important. Olly herself said about her writing:

But consciously or unconsciously the writer is always a discoverer[.] If his [the writer's] temper is more melancholy-choleric, his quest leads to the depths. He is trying to find the key to what is 'hidden in existence'. To try to understand what is hidden behind the illusion becomes the thrilling adventure.<sup>20</sup> (Olly Donner in *Vasabladet*, 13.5.1951, trans. Jasmine Westerlund)

For many literary critics the anthroposophical background of Olly Donner's books was not obvious. They only saw the surface, which to most of them looked confusing. Some critics regarded Olly Donner as a 'teller of fairy tales' (*Aftonbladet* 31.5.1940), even when she was writing for adults. Others mentioned the peculiar, self-made vocabulary of her writing and judged the books to be trivial, artificial, and hard to understand (*Svenska Dagbladet* 4.4.1941; *Nya Dagligt Allehanda* 12.6.1927; *Stockholms Tidning* 24.1.1946; *Svenska Pressen* 28.12.1932). Nevertheless, many critics admitted that Olly Donner's books were not mere mass products and described them as interesting, touching, and compelling (*Stockholms Tidning* 24.1.1946; *Dagens Nyheter* 6.3.1944; *Svenska Pressen* 28.12.1932; *Östra Nyland*, 23.11.1950). Some regarded them as too modern, mentioning the

20 'Men medvetet eller omedvetet är författaren alltid en upptäckare[.] Är hans sinnesart mera melankolisk-kolerisk, letar hans sökare på djupen. Han söker nyckeln till det "förborgade i tillvaron". Att söka fatta det som döljer sig bortom "skenet" blir för honom det spännande äventyret.'

burlesque humour (*Nya Pressen* 27.9.1951). Also the reactions of Olly's family to her books were mixed. They were often confused and uneasy, and it is possible that Olly did not publish one of her books, or at least postponed the publication, because of the critique her mother had given it. Later Olly's mother found some positive things to say about the books; she read them again and discovered new and interesting things in them. Also a family friend, Olga Juslin, liked some of the books very much and used to keep one on her table (A. Sinebrychoff to O. Donner 15.2.1914, 6.2.1919, 9.5.1919, vol. 22–3, ÅÅ; M. Kjöllfeldt to O. Donner 18.3.1953, 11.12.1953, vol. 16, ÅÅ).

Some critics were, however, able to recognise the esoteric aspects of the books, and described Olly Donner's fairy tales as coming from the spiritual world (article from an unknown newspaper, 12.10.1939, vol. 97, ÅÅ). One critic noticed between the lines 'the existence of the spiritual world' (*Nyland* 6.7.1940) and another wrote that for Olly Donner 'existence is religious mysticism'<sup>21</sup> (*Nya Dagligt Allehanda* 12.6.1927). The only ones who praised her books were friends who were either anthroposophists or artists themselves (H. Flodin to O. Donner 9.2.1926, vol. 12, ÅÅ; Ina Lange to O. Donner 19.12[?].1918; 20–25.1.1928, vol. 17, ÅÅ; Ilmari Hannikainen to O. Donner 18.7.1927, vol. 15, ÅÅ).

In Olly Donner's plays for children the fairy-tale world is, naturally, even more visible. There is an inseparable link to pedagogy in this, because the ones who performed the plays were young school- and summer camp children from Gerknäs. The 'Gerknäs fairy-tale theatre' also performed plays in Helsinki. These plays, as did the children's books, got a good reception. The critics acknowledged that Olly Donner was able to understand children's states of mind (*Svenska Pressen* 28.12.1932) and they praised the atmosphere and richness of her imagination (*Hufvudstadsbladet* 8.12.1941) as well as the nuances and details in the plays (*Svenska Pressen* 28.5.1938). The plays that were performed in 1941–2 especially got an extremely positive reception: there were not enough seats for everyone who wanted to see the plays, the children performed admirably, and the costumes, set and the casting were praised (*Svenska Pressen* 29.12.1941; *Nyland* 30.12.1941; *Hufvudstadsbladet* 13.1.1942; *Svenska Pressen* 19.1.1942). Many of these

21 '[T]illvaron som en religiös mystik.'



Uno Donner's exhibition in gallery Strindberg in Helsinki in October 1915.

praises were addressed to Gunnel Wahlfors, the painter who worked as the director in the plays, but Olly's contribution as a scriptwriter was also acknowledged. The plays were said to have the appropriate humour, morals and atmosphere, to be artistically of a very high level and 'picturesque and able to address the mind of a child' (*Hufvudstadsbladet* 21.4.1941; *Svenska Pressen* 29.12.1941; *Hufvudstadsbladet* 29.12.1941). Olly also composed songs for some of the plays, at least in 1941–2. In the few existing critical mentions, her melodies are said to be good, partly full of spirit, partly brisk (*Svenska Pressen* 29.12.1941 and 19.1.1942). The Christmas plays were 'legend plays' made in the medieval spirit, and said to be joyful and even burlesque (*Svenska Pressen* 29.12.1941; *Nyland* 30.12.1941). Although the critics hardly made the connection, these plays clearly did have a connection to Steiner's mystery dramas, which often are described as 'medieval mystery plays'.

Uno Donner's artistic activity was less public than Olly's writing career, but in October 1915 he did have one exhibition in the Strindberg art gallery in Helsinki. *Helsingin Sanomat* (23.10.1915) wrote that Uno Donner's debut was a surprise – the only thing commonly known was that he had studied art in Paris and Rome. The critic concluded that Uno Donner was an 'art-making dilettante' to whom art was more an amusing hobby than a 'force that comes

from the depths of the soul' and that his pictures were made for the cultivated surroundings, where everything was supposed to be 'neat and smooth'.<sup>22</sup> *Hufvudstadsbladet* (8.10.1915) was more sympathetic and the critic noticed the elegance and the light colours of the paintings. Uno's paintings reminded him of the small art salons in France, but represented past times without offering anything new. *Dagens Press* (8.10.1915) echoed *Hufvudstadsbladet* and described Uno Donner's art as 'amateur' in the proper sense of the word, admitting that the paintings were skillfully made. In other words, Uno Donner's skill and a graceful style as a painter was generally recognised, but artistically he was considered old fashioned – a memory from times gone by and from a lifestyle that had almost died out. Nevertheless, the exhibition was a kind of success because eight paintings were sold during the first day (*Helsingin Sanomat* 9.10.1915).

Although Uno's paintings did not have overtly anthroposophical themes, painting was an activity that had an important, maybe even identity-defining role in his life. He discussed art with his friend, the poet Albert Steffen who became the president of the Anthroposophical Society after the death of Rudolf

22 'Uno Donner edustaa meillä taiteilevan diletantin tyyppiä', 'sielun sisimmästä lähtevää paloa', 'siistiä ja sileätä'.

Steiner. Steffen recorded one discussion in his diary in 1932: 'He [Uno Donner] was a painter, then a businessman, and now he leaves both behind, he must "polarise" himself'<sup>23</sup> (2/3.3.1932, AS). This discussion took place shortly after the breach with the Anthroposophical Society in Finland, and the passage clearly indicates that artistic activity had a significant role in Uno Donner's life – leaving it behind was conscious decision and step towards something else.

Uno and Olly Donner's interest in art also reflects how prevalent and essential artistic activity was among anthroposophists. Because making and experiencing art were seen as ways to be in touch with the spiritual side of oneself, arts from sculpture to poetry were commonly practised, as were the explicitly anthroposophical forms of art such as eurythmy, speech formation, and mystery plays. This spiritual view on art also made anthroposophy attractive to many artists both in Finland and elsewhere in Europe, and some of them, like Andrei Belyi, Vassily Kandinsky, Hilma af Klint, and Edith Södergran, became nationally or internationally known as original and innovative artists (on Södergran, see Häll 2006; on Hilma af Klint, see Almquist and Belfrage 2015).

### **Biodynamic farming at Gerknäs Manor**

In 1924, Uno Donner, among 560 other people, took part in Steiner's agricultural course in Koberwitz/Breslau (Frei Verwaltung des Nachlasses Rudolf Steiner. Personenregister). This was the first course in what later became known as biodynamic farming, and it was arranged at the request of the farmers (Ahern 1984: 58; Lachman 2007: 218–20). Julia Dahlberg and Joachim Mickwitz (2014: 309) write that the Donners had owned several countryside manors<sup>24</sup> that they had let go after a short period because of disappointment with the results, which suggests that Uno had an earlier interest in agricul-

ture. From 1928, he started experimenting with the biological-dynamic method, as it was then called, at the newly-acquired Gerknäs Manor in Lohja, Finland.

Biodynamic farming was a response to the changing situation in agriculture, which in the 1920s was becoming a profit-making industry with a strong scientific orientation, which worried farmers. Steiner's agricultural ideas aimed at returning from the 'mechanical-materialist' way of farming to a more 'spiritually illuminated' one (Hurter, accessed 1.9.2017). On the surface Steiner's agricultural ideas have many similarities with organic farming – industrial fertilizers, for example, are not used – but differs from it in the emphasis on spiritual aspects. Steiner thought that a farm with its crops, plants, and animals should be seen as a living organism that should be able to operate as a self-sufficient microcosm (Ahern 1984: 57–8). He recommended using especially designed preparations and magical practices that are intended to 'dynamise' nature by directing forces related to the seasons, the phases of the moon, the stars, and the planets to enhance growth (Lachman 2007: 217). With these practices, Steiner switched the focus from a profit making industry to a larger, even cosmic context.

As Uno Donner was the first person in Finland to follow Steiner's ideas on farming, his methods probably provoked astonishment among the local people. He nevertheless continued farming successfully until the Second World War and managed to both increase the profit on the crops and enlarge the herd of bulls to 130 by 1940. The Anthroposophical Society in Finland made a note of Uno's venture in their annual report of 1929, although it was something he undertook privately (annual report, ASF). The word spread, and Norway's Consul General Hans Olsen,<sup>25</sup> who was interested in Kirjola Farm in eastern Finland, contacted Uno Donner to learn more about the possibilities of biodynamic farming in the Nordic countries (correspondence between H. Olsen and U. Donner, 1930, vol. 8b, ÅA). Uno's answer shows that being a pioneer was not always easy and that he had difficul-

23 'Er war Maler, dann Geschäftsmann und gibt jetzt beides auf, er müsste sich "polarisieren".'

24 Esbo gård, Finland, Beateberg, and other properties in Sweden; additionally, we have found out that they owned Noor castle in Knivsta a few months 1918–19, and Skönabäck mansion in Skåne at least 1918–19 (Anna Sinebrychoff to Olly Donner 1.8.1918, 8.9.1918, 21.11.1918, 29.11.1918, 10.12.1918, 14.12.1918, 28.2.1919; Holy Saturday 1919 [19.4.1919], 11.6.1919, vols 22–3, ÅA).

25 Olsen (1859–1951) had been the head of the Nobel brothers' oil company in St Petersburg, and became Norway's Consul General in 1906 in Sweden. In his old age he settled in Sweden and in 1928 he became a member of the Swedish Anthroposophical Society (*Norsk biografisk leksikon*, Hans Olsen; membership list 'Hufvudmatrikel 1913–1940', ASS).

ties finding a suitably trained farmer for carrying out the practical work, but that he in spite of this already had preliminary results that he was satisfied with (U. Donner to Hans Olsen 28.6.1930 and 21.7.1930, vol. 8b, ÅÅ). Olly also engaged in the farm's affairs and often wrote to her mother about the crops and animals (O. Donner to A. Sinebrychoff 20.12.1939, 9.8.1940, 25.2.1941, vol. 32, ÅÅ).

H. W. Donner (1959) describes the years Uno and Olly Donner spent at Gerknäs as the happiest ones in their lives. Their contentedness with the place is visible also in Olly's letter to her mother, in which she describes herself and Uno as 'countryside people' who seldom visit the city (O. Donner to A. Sinebrychoff 5.2. [no year], probably 1941, vol. 32, ÅÅ). It was a time of vibrant anthroposophical activity for both of them. Apart from the farming, Uno combined his technical and artistic skills to design the terraces and garden that today surround the main building, while Olly wrote and elaborated upon her pedagogical interests. In 1944, the land cessions caused by the war forced Uno to give away all but 60 cows and sell such a great proportion of the territory that it became pointless to keep the property (O. Donner to A. Sinebrychoff 25.2.1941, vol. 32, ÅÅ). In 1944, the family acquaintance Marshal

Carl Gustaf Mannerheim bought Gerknäs, and the Donners moved permanently abroad (Dahlberg and Mickwitz 2014: 309–11).

### Olly Donner's pedagogical interests

Pedagogy was, besides literature, closest to Olly Donner's heart. She visited Steiner's lectures on pedagogy at least in April 1923, when Steiner conducted an 'educational course for the teachers from Switzerland' in Dornach (Olly Donner's notes 15.4.1923, 16.4.1923, 17.4.1923, vol. 100, ÅÅ; Rudolf Steiner Archive, translated lectures by Schmidt Number). The couple did not have children of their own, but they did affect many children's lives in Finland.

Olly Donner financially supported a school for small children in Gerknäs. The school was a private Swedish-speaking school financed also by the state, but it had a hard time trying to stay open with its small number of pupils. It was meant for 6–8-year-old children in the first grades. The school had existed before the Donners bought the manor house at Gerknäs, but during their time, the impact of Waldorf pedagogy was clearly visible in the curriculum. Newspaper articles about Gerknäs reported children painting with the 'wet on wet' technique, which is a key fea-



Gerknäs manor in Lohja, Finland.

ture of the first grades in a Waldorf school even today. Articles also mention aspects that were not common in the Finnish schooling system in the 1930s and 1940s, such as the children's 'unforced will to create', 'the experience of joy and freedom', and the aim to teach the children to see 'beauty in its different forms' (article from an unknown newspaper 21.3.1939, *Nyland, H:fors bladet, Svenska Pressen* 30.8.1942, vol. 97, ÅA).

Rudolf Steiner's interest in pedagogy had been triggered in his youth when he had worked as a teacher for a hydrocephalic boy. His pedagogy was rooted in his view of human development, which he believed to happen in stages that, reflecting cosmic cycles, last about seven years. He thought that humans develop different sides of themselves during different stages, and arranged education to support this development and to help the child to fully realise his/her potential. In addition, the idea of the four temperaments, the role of the imagination and art are significant components of Waldorf pedagogy. The name 'Waldorf pedagogy' derives from the first school that was founded according to his pedagogical principles, for the children of the workers of the Waldorf Astoria tobacco factory in 1919 (Ahern 1984: 62–3).

The ideas of Waldorf pedagogy were connected to a larger wave of reformatory movements directed at the educational system in Germany after the First World War. These movements sought to update the traditional hierarchical education to meet new needs and also to better support and the development of all an individual's abilities, not just theoretical knowledge. Some of these movements targeted the state's educational system, while others targeted the pedagogical methods. Steiner's Waldorf pedagogy belongs to this second group of movements (Lejon 1997: 99–102). It was a success in the sense that it spread quickly. By 1930 there were Waldorf schools founded in Germany, England, the Netherlands, Hungary, Portugal, Norway, Austria, Switzerland and the United States (Freunde der Erziehungskunsts Rudolf Steiners). The first official Waldorf school in Finland was opened 1955 in Helsinki, where it is known as a 'Steiner school'. The school in Gerknäs did not officially practise Steiner's pedagogy, but it was nonetheless a pioneer when it comes to Waldorf pedagogy in Finland.

Olly Donner did not only support the school financially, but was interested in the everyday life of the school as well. The teachers wrote her detailed

letters about how the children were doing; who was attending the school, who was sick, the circumstances in their homes, the preparations for festivities, their nourishment, and so forth. Although living in hotels around Europe, Olly Donner monitored the school closely, and for example approved the timetables. She also wrote manuscripts for school plays and sent sweets and other small things to the children, who often sent her drawings in return.

Olly Donner was also responsible for a summer camp for children that was held in Gerknäs at least in the 1940s. The aim of this summer camp – as of many other summer camps in Finland – was to give to the children living in cities an opportunity to enjoy clean air, good food, freedom, and outdoor activities in the countryside. After the camp, which lasted two months, the children were expected to return home rounder, brisker and nicely tanned. The children of the summer camps were the usual actors in Olly Donner's 'fairy-tale theatre', which celebrated its 10-year anniversary in 1942. The children's play, which was prepared together with the children of the summer camp and the children living in the village, was the big event of every summer in Gerknäs. It took many weeks to prepare the costumes and the set and to practise the lines (see *Dagens Nyheter* 14.4.1940; *Svenska Pressen* 30.8.1942; O. Donner to A. Sinebrychoff 30.7.1940, 9.8.1940, 12.8.1940, vol. 32, ÅA).

#### Curative education for the mentally disabled

Olly Donner had yet another pedagogical project in Gerknäs: the 'Gustafsberg' nursing home for mentally disabled children that was opened in 1928. The model for this nursing home was 'Sonnenhof' in Arlesheim, near Dornach. Steiner and the anthroposophical medical doctor Ita Wegman had founded the Sonnenhof commune only four years before Gustafsberg, in 1924. It was a school and a rehabilitation centre for disabled people, especially for children. At least one boy from the Gerknäs area was sent there in 1931 and was still living there in 1937 when the Donners visited the place – by then he had grown up into a brave young man, speaking fluent German (O. Donner to A. Sinebrychoff 10.4.1937 and 17.4.1937, vol. 31, ÅA).

The anthroposophical basis for curative education is Steiner's idea that the mind of every person is intact and sane, but that it can be trapped within a sick body, which according to him was what happened with those who were commonly described



The children performing in one of Olly Donner's popular plays in the Gerknäs fairy tale theatre in the 1940s.

as 'mentally ill' (Steiner 1923). In terms of practical treatment this meant that mentally disabled persons were treated with respect and that the curative education was always individually designed to support the individual development of each patient (Lejon 1997: 102–5). The anthroposophical idea of gradual personal development through reincarnation further supported the view that there are no 'lost cases', and that disabled persons too can develop and thus benefit from curative education.

In an advert 'Gustafsberg' was described as a home for mentally disabled children from 3 to 12 years. The treatment consisted of medical care that was supervised by Doctor John Blomstedt<sup>26</sup> from the medical section in Dornach, therapeutic eurythmy, massage, and many forms of art therapy. To some extent, primary school teaching was also included. The kitchen is mentioned to be almost completely vegetarian, which illustrates the value put on nutrition (Gustafsberg advert, ASF). The nurses Karin Molander and Helga Pethman, who were in charge of the daily care of the children, were trained at the Arlesheim clinic near Dornach. According to

26 John Blomstedt (1878–1950) was a Finnish medical doctor who completed his degree in May 1908, and subsequently worked as a doctor at different locations in southern Finland. He was a member of the Anthroposophical Society from 1925 and the chair of the Anthroposophical Society in Finland in 1939 (Degerman 2014: 55).

Olly Donner's wishes, Molander and Pethman kept her informed about the advancements the children made. They wrote to her about the children becoming more active, calm or brave, and noticed improvements in their paintings, speech, and movements (H. Pethman's and K. Molander's letters to O. Donner 31.1.1928–24.4.1929, vol. 18, ÅÅ).

The home was closed after only three years, at least partly because of the financially difficult and uncertain times (K. Molander to O. Donner 6.8.1931, vol. 18, ÅÅ). During its short existence it nevertheless earned a good reputation. In 1928 Thyra Albrecht<sup>27</sup> wrote to Olly Donner that the Gustafsberg nursing home started to be known 'in wide circles' because the counsellor for education (*skolrådet*) Mandelin had wanted to discuss it with the nurse Helga Pethman. In addition, a Mrs Viljanen who was working to start another nursing home for mentally disabled children had been interested and delighted that Gustafsberg was organised entirely according to Dr Steiner's anthroposophical principles (T. Albrecht to O. Donner 2.4.1928, vol. 9, ÅÅ).

In the early twentieth century, this kind of home was an exception in Finland, where a law concerning the sterilisation of disabled people was passed in 1935 in order to save the nation from degeneration. According to the law of compulsory education of the

27 Thyra Albrecht (1875–1959), was one of the founders of the Anthroposophical Society in Finland and the founder of the library of the society.



year 1921, a child could also be freed from education because of 'idiocy' or 'weak understanding', and between 1935 and 1936 about 12,000 children were freed from compulsory education (Leppälä 2014: 30, 45).

### Looking for an individual spiritual path

Practising spiritual training is considered to be a fundamental aspect of anthroposophy. In order to accomplish this, one needed to study anthroposophy, and, and even more importantly, one was supposed to develop one's consciousness by means of different exercises and meditations given by Steiner (Ahern 1984: 51–4). The numerous travels to Dornach and other locations where Steiner lectured, the active participation in group meetings in Stockholm, Helsinki, and other locations, the reading of Steiner's lectures, and the preserved notes from many of these lectures, together demonstrate that Uno and Olly Donner devoted considerable time to studies in anthroposophy. Their notes concern issues such as the cohesion between planets, colours and numbers, as well as the cohesion between different eras and parts of the human being, and testify to their profound interest in anthroposophy (see, for example, the notes in vol. 100, ÅA). Their actual spiritual exercises are less well documented and therefore harder to trace, but there are several sources that indicate they were equally devoted to actual spiritual practices.

There are many anthroposophical, so-called 'basic exercises' that are meant to train thinking, willing, and feeling, and that are open to everyone. Besides these, Steiner also provided people with personalised meditations. If he was too busy or too far away from the person requesting a meditation, he gave it without meeting the person, based only on his or her name. In the Åbo Akademi University Archives there is a small, undated note with a meditation and a text informing us that it was given to Olly Donner by Rudolf Steiner in London 1913 and that she read it every evening until the spring of 1951. The meditation is 'The Gospel of John, chapter 1:1–5'. That Olly used to read it every day almost until the end of her life illustrates her commitment to Steiner's 'path of knowledge' (undated note, after 1951, vol. 100, ÅA).

The best source to Olly's, and probably also Uno's, meditative practice is the correspondence between Olly and Anna Ljungqvist that stretches over the years 1919 to 1934. Unfortunately, only Anna's letters

are preserved, but even they alone convey a picture of regular spiritual practice. In her letters, she often mentions her meditations, and the kinds of experiences or visions she had during them. She mentions, for example, visions of the Madonna, the signs of the zodiac and words of Paracelsus. The familiarity of these accounts suggests that Olly probably had similar visions, or at least that visions were a common experience during meditation. In one of her letters Anna wrote about a meditation 'of the golden calf',<sup>28</sup> that should help a student of anthroposophy to get rid of attraction to the material world. She described herself having had 'wonderful feelings' after it and recommended it warmly to Olly. Olly also suggested meditations for Anna, and their way of exchanging experiences suggests that meditation was, if not a daily, at least a very frequent practice for both of them. However, it was not always easy. Anna also writes about being too sick, too tired, or finding it hard to concentrate. Sharing these experiences with a trusted and understanding friend, shows both the individual freedom to enhance one's spiritual abilities that anthroposophy granted its practitioners, and the determination with which they approached these new skills (A. Ljungqvist to O. Donner, undated, vol. 17, ÅA).

To meditate was also a way to keep in touch with friends even when they were physically far away from each other. Anna Ljungqvist often felt Olly's presence when meditating, and tried by meditation to help friends who were ill (A. Ljungqvist to O. Donner, undated, 27.11.[no year], 12.10.[no year], 1.10.1919, 15.10.1919, 19.1.1920, 4.8.1921, vol. 17, ÅA). Olly and Uno also used to think of each other every evening at the same time when apart, and Uno often felt Olly's thoughts when thinking of her (U. Donner to O. Donner 21.10.1919, 29.2.1920, 27.9.1922, 3.10.1922, vol. 10, ÅA). This could be interpreted as a similar kind of meditation, and demonstrates how a practice that was conducted in private, actually had a social function.

The focus on individual spiritual exercise was not characteristic only for anthroposophy. The esoteric

28 In this meditation, one is supposed to imagine oneself standing in front of Moses, asking him how to get rid of the ties to the material. Then Moses calls for images about the golden calf. If needed, Moses burns the calf and gives the ashes for the pupil to drink (A. Ljungqvist's undated letter to O. Donner, vol. 17, ÅA).

movements of the time generally had an inclination towards self-reform and 'the spiritual journey of the individual' (Treitel 2004: 68) that was connected to the bourgeois self-consciousness (Owen 2004: 114–16). In anthroposophy, this feature was taken further than in some other movements because Steiner parted with the theosophical emphasis on universal brotherhood, and instead aimed his anthroposophy explicitly towards individual development (Treitel 2004: 97–101).

### The appeal of natural medicine

According to anthroposophy, it is not only important to cultivate the mind; also the body needs to be taken care of. In anthroposophical or 'extended' medicine, the aim is to bring the person back into balance by using medicines, homeopathic preparations, art therapies and massage. It was developed by Doctor Ita Wegman together with Rudolf Steiner at Klinik Arlesheim, today the Ita Wegman Institute, which was founded 1921 in Arlesheim, a nearby village to Dornach.

Uno and Olly embraced this side of anthroposophy too, and treated many illnesses at the clinic in Arlesheim. Uno Donner's patient meeting from 1922 tells us that he was treated with warm wormwood bandages, massage, and therapeutic eurythmy in order to cure an imbalance that caused constipation, problems with the throat, and difficulties with sleeping. The eurythmy included forming the letters L and T with the feet apart, the letter D with bent knees and the letter R while standing (the patient meeting with Dr Steiner, 1922, IWI). He improved quickly and left the clinic after four weeks, but came back again at least in 1924–5, 1927, 1928 and 1932. His later treatments included mistletoe injections and different kinds of homeopathic products. The use of mistletoe indicates cancer and it is still today used as an anthroposophical treatment for it.

There are not many mentions about Olly at the clinic, but she visited it as well. According to the patient meeting from year 1922 or 1923 she suffered from knee pain, headache, tiredness and poor digestion, and was prescribed arnica and formic acid as well as massage, among other things. Steiner gave medical as well meditative prescriptions, and he prescribed Olly Donner baths with different medical essences. Unfortunately, they did not have any impact, and 1925 she was in a worse condition than before, now suffering also from fever and swollen feet.

The effect of further treatments remains unknown because there are no mentions of Olly Donner in the clinic's records after this, but she probably continued visiting it together with her husband.

The interest in natural medicine and healing was not typical only for the anthroposophical movement, but for esoteric movements of the time in general. Corinna Treitel (2004: 51, 154–61) connects this growing interest in natural healing to a larger German *Lebensreform* movement. According to her, the focus on health had been a visible ingredient of the German esoteric movement from the start. As anthroposophy was born in the German context, it is not surprising that health as a theme was incorporated into it. Through anthroposophy vegetarianism and other aspects of natural healing spread to a much wider circle than the German part of the world. In Olly's nursing home, the kitchen was almost entirely vegetarian, and already in the 1920s it was possible to buy anthroposophical medicines in several apothecaries in Finland, to name just a few examples (Gustafsberg advert, *Antroposofia: Henkitieteellinen Aikakauslehti* 10/1923, 11/1923, 12/1923).

### Epilogue

During their last years Olly and Uno Donner returned to the centre of anthroposophy in Arlesheim by Dornach, and after 1955 they did not much leave the Arlesheim clinic. There they were surrounded by friends whom they had known since their first visits to Dornach (Donner 1959: 38). It could perhaps also be interpreted as a sign of reconciliation and restored relations with the Anthroposophical Society. In September 1956 Olly died at the clinic and Uno stayed there until his death in June 1958. They are both buried in the memorial park next to the Goetheanum, together with Rudolf Steiner and many other early anthroposophists.

Through their diverse anthroposophical activity Uno and Olly Donner had a significant influence on the early development of the Anthroposophical Society in Finland. They were generous patrons of many anthroposophical enterprises, and pioneers of many anthroposophical activities, such as biodynamic farming, pedagogy, and curative education – without their input these fields would likely have developed later in Finland. Although they, especially in Finland, were exceptional with regard to financial resources, social status, and the personal freedom

granted by these, their ways of practising anthroposophy does tell us something about how this new worldview was received. In the transnational anthroposophical circles they had peers who enjoyed a similar lifestyle and who were likely to have shared their ways of practising anthroposophy. In Finland, those who could not as easily dedicate themselves entirely to self-development, could also study anthroposophy through the meetings of the Anthroposophical Society in Finland and practise the spiritual exercises individually – these were not at all elitist in spirit, but meant as exercises anyone could do in between their other daily duties.

In addition to this, the Donners also had a lasting impact in the academic field due to their decision to donate their fortune to the Åbo Akademi University. Earlier, in 1921, also Olly's uncle Paul Sinebrychoff and his wife Fanny Sinebrychoff had donated their remarkable art collection to the Finnish state, and, which was the most problematic issue for the family, thus donated their shares of the Sinebrychoff company to outsiders. This was not well received by the family, and after hearing about Olly's and Uno's plans, Olly's cousin Marcus Kjöllfeldt wrote to her to persuade them to drop the idea, even directly calling it 'a betrayal' (M. Kjöllfeldt to O. Donner 29.8.1955, August 1956, vol. 16, ÅA). That Olly and Uno Donner kept to their decision and did donate their fortune to Åbo Akademi University tragically seems to have resulted in a breach with Olly's family. In the donation letter the purpose of the fund is stated to be promoting

research based on strictly scientific principles on religious and cultural history, primarily on the origin and development of different religions and cultures. No exception shall be made for the exploration of more modern phenomena within religion, philosophy, science, art and literature where mysticism and occultism have had a palpable impact.<sup>29</sup> (O. & U. Donner's donation letter, DI)

29 Fondens ändamål är att på strängt vetenskaplig grund befärma religionshistorisk och kulturhistorisk forskning, främst med beaktande av mysteriereligionernas och ockultismens inflytande på olika religioners och kulturers uppkomst och utveckling. Icke heller göres något undantag för utforskandet av mer moderna företeelser inom religion, filosofi,

In 1959, the university used the donation to found the Donner Institute, a research institute that since then has operated according to the principles Uno and Olly Donner designed in their donation. Today it houses the largest specialised library in comparative religion in the Nordic Countries. ■



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vetenskap, konst och litteratur där mystik och ockultism gjort sig kännbart gällande. Bestämmelser för fonden för Religions- och kulturhistorisk forskning, daterat Arlesheim 29.3.1956, DI.

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ASS Archives of the Anthroposophical Society in Sweden, Järna, Sweden  
DI Donner Institute, Turku/Åbo, Finland  
  
FTS Archives of the Finnish Theosophical Society, Helsinki, Finland  
GD Goetheanum Dokumentation, Archive of the General Anthroposophical Society, Dornach, Switzerland  
IWI Archives of Ita Wegman Institut, Arlesheim, Switzerland  
RSA Rudolf Steiner Archiv, Dornach, Switzerland  
ÅA Åbo Akademi University Library, Manuscript Collections, Uno and Olly Donner's collection, Uno and Olly Donner's picture collection

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