

Stefan Otto Schmeltz 1931 – 2013

Stefan Schmeltz died, after a long illness, on 19th February 2013. He was born in Vienna in 1931, the only child of Hans and Elisabeth Schmeltz. Stefan left Vienna shortly after Adolf Hitler annexed Austria in March, 1938. Although his departure was hasty and those distant memories faded, he could still recall vividly how his school had to replace all religious pictures and icons with images of the Führer and swastika. Each morning, instead of prayers the pupils had to salute these new emblems. He remembered crossing Europe by train and arriving in Southampton, whence he was brought to Dundalk to be fostered by John and Mary Hamill. Stefan always referred to Dundalk as home, the Hamills as his family and Mary Hamill as mother. His own mother moved to America and his father to Argentina where he died at a relatively young age. Sadly, Stefan never saw his father again and he met his mother only twice - once when she came to Ireland and again later when he travelled to America with his wife Phil.



Stefan received his early education in Dromiskin National School, near Dundalk, Co Louth, while his secondary education was completed at CBS Dundalk and Rockwell College, Cashel, Co Tipperary. He also completed an extra mural Diploma in Social Science at UCD in 1971. It is worth noting that Stefan, who could speak only German when he arrived in Ireland, quickly became proficient in three new languages – English, Irish and Latin. He entered Avondale Forestry School in 1951 and completed his forestry course in 1954. He spent his practical year in Burncourt, Co. Tipperary and in Dungarvan and Cappoquin Forests in Co. Waterford. Stefan joined the Society of Irish Foresters in April, 1952 and remained a life-long member.

His first assignment as a forester was at Avonmore Workshop, where he helped develop the prototype of the timber-clad forester's house. Between 1955 and 1958, he served at Avoca (where P.J. Morrissey was the Forester-in-Charge), Aughrim and Rathdrum Forests in Co. Wicklow. In June 1959, Stefan was promoted to the grade of Forester-in-Charge of the new forest at Edenderry, Co. Offaly. Under his stewardship Edenderry forest expanded hugely - from a mere 200 ha in 1959 to 1,550 ha when he retired in 1990. It was in Edenderry that Stefan met his future wife, Philomena O'Kelly, whom he married in August 1960.

Stefan's love of forestry was evident to all but he had a particular fondness for broadleaf trees. He was particularly proud of the extensive oak and beech plantations he nurtured at Rahin and Killinthomas woods. He valued these plantations so highly that he rarely allowed anyone other than himself to carry out thinning and tending. Stefan tended his beloved broadleaves with great care and the wonderful oak and beech plantations that remain to this day at Rahin and Killinthomas are testament to his careful stewardship.

Although he adapted very well to his adoptive country, Stefan could scarcely be described as a typical midlands forester. In his initial interactions with people he was somewhat distant and in conversation his replies were generally monosyllabic. He was a man of few words - his philosophy appeared to be - why use three words when two would do! Indeed his trademark signature (*SOS* for Stefan Otto Schmeltz) was further evidence of his verbal economy as was his approach to memo-writing. A “Stefan” memo rarely exceeded three sentences, yet it always delivered a clear and concise message no matter which of his newly acquired languages it was written in!

However, as one got to know Stefan, one discovered a man of the highest integrity, who was caring, kind, and compassionate. His wife Phil, who predeceased Stefan, was renowned in forestry circles for the restorative qualities of her “mug of soup” which helped to revive many a tired and hungry forester on a cold winter’s day. After settling in Edenderry in 1960, Stefan became an active member of the community. For many years he was a member of the local Golf Club and he and Phil shared a keen interest in Bridge which they played weekly with the local club.

Stefan was a truly remarkable man. He overcame trauma, upheaval and separation to succeed against the odds in developing a comfortable and secure life in his adopted country. To the Hamill family of Dundalk, who were indeed his family, and to his in-laws, the O’Kelly family of Edenderry, we offer our sincere sympathy.

Möge er in Frieden ruhen.

Aiden McGuire