Fearless homes campaigner had escaped Nazis

by TOM FOOT

MONIKA Caro – interior designer, theatre lover, housing activist, deaf community champion and cat lover – devoted years to standing up for council tenants and protecting her patch of Swiss Cottage.

Known as "True Grit Monika", she has died aged 81.

Friends and campaigners at the Camden Association of Street Properties (CASP), which she chaired in her final year, recalled fond memories of her Christmas parties, her love of her garden and animals, and as "no shrinking violet" who always spoke her mind.

Born into a Jewish family, several of her relatives were murdered in concentration camps in Germany during the Second World War. Her parents came to this country in the early 1940s after fleeing Hitler's regime.

Petra Dando, a long-time chair of CASP and a close friend, said: "Listening to Monika speak about this part of her life really brought home to others the absolute horror of this period in history. Initially, the family were fairly comfortable, with Monika's mother earning her living as a talented tailoress for many well-to-do clients.

"Some of her designs even made it onto early Paris catwalk shows, and many of her mother's drawings were proudly displayed on the walls of the family home in Maresfield Gardens.

"Unfortunately, due to some unwise financial decisions, the family then fell on extremely hard times. Like many families during this time, life was hard and much of the focus was on making sure there was food on the table."

She added: "In 2005, Monika joined and became a prominent member of the Camden Association of Street Properties (CASP) and would spend years campaigning for the rights of residents who live in council-owned street properties. Monika chaired the Association for the last year of her life and will be remembered by many members as somebody who was fearless and outspoken.

"The late editor of the local paper gave Monika the title of 'True Grit Monika' in one of their articles, a title which she truly relished."

Ms Caro, who went to St Richard of Chichester School in Prince of Wales Road, lived in her family home up until her death earlier this month.





Monika Caro on one of her many housing campaigns with Petra Dando; inset: Binkie the cat

She had for many years a partner called Peter and later shared her home with Binkie, a cat who has survived her aged 19. A collection was raised for the Village Vet who has found a foster owner for her.

As a young woman she had hoped to become a professional dancer, until an accident ended her dream.

A keen actress, she went on to set up the amateur dramatics group The Moonlight Players, which performed in venues around Hampstead. She was also part of a murder-mystery musical troupe.

After studying interior design at college, she set up Caro Designs.

Andrew Pierce, a friend of 18 years, added: "Christmas for me will be so different from now on. After Christmas lunch, via the telephone, we would open our respective presents so it did not seem as if we were alone.

"Monika wrapped hers up beautifully and numbered them so I had to unwrap them in a certain order."

Mr Pierce added: "She loved all animals, and once when she asked me to catch a spider (of which she was scared), I caught it and was going to kill it. She went mad, insisting I take it outside and let it go."

"Although small in stature, she was no shrinking violet and would speak her mind, always doing what she felt was right without hesitation."

On top of her work with CASP, she was also co-chair of the Save Swiss Cottage Action Group, campaigning against the 100 Avenue Road development.

David Reed, who was with her in the group opposing a tower block of luxury flats, said: "Monika Caro was a formidable person but, fortunately, I only saw the positive side of her: battling for good things and against bad ideas and people.

"With Monika's knowledge of the council and its officers, as well as local councillors, we managed to get the idea rejected by Camden Council. But, British planning law being what it is, that was just the first battle.

"Monika was with us all the way. Despite her physical limitations, she battled hard and, thanks to her deep knowledge and understanding of how Camden Council and its officers work, many of the proposed changes were stopped."

In a speech praising her work with the deaf community, read out at the funeral on Friday, Jeremy and Joyce Yankey said: "Monika was a fearless advocate for residents in Camden and for the deaf community.

"She fought for years to improve access and inclusion, never backing down from the challenges. Her work touched many lives, and her legacy will continue to inspire us.

"She was not just a colleague. She was a friend, a leader, and a light in our meetings. Her love, humour, and strength will be deeply missed."

Conservative group leader Steve Adams and Liberal Democrat councillor Nancy Jirira paid tribute to Ms Caro with special mentions at Monday's full council meeting in the Town Hall chamber.



New Roundhouse chief revealed

THE head of the English National Opera has resigned from the illustrious post – and will instead be at the helm of the Roundhouse next year, *writes Dan Carrier*.

Jenny Mollica *(pictured)* was appointed as the ENO's chief executive in May 2024, but this week it was announced she had successfully applied to front the Chalk Farm venue and arts college.

Long-standing chief executive Marcus Davey is stepping aside after 27 years and this week the venue announced Ms Mollica has been handed the reins.

Ms Mollica joined ENO in 2020 from the Barbican and Guildhall School of Music & Drama, where she had experience joining together education and the arts – a key facet of the Roundhouse's work.

She said: "The opportunity to shape the future of an organisation that I have long admired for its deep roots in artistic innovation, social impact and sector-leading youth engagement is, quite simply, too irresistible a calling not to answer."

She said she had been "privileged" to lead the ENO through what she called a "significant period" of its history: under her guidance the ENO sought to take opera to other venues across the UK and not always produce shows at the London Coliseum.



Current CEO Marcus Davey said he had known Ms Mollica well for many years.

"I couldn't be more delighted to be handing over the reins of the incredible Roundhouse organisation to someone," he said.

"I have long admired Jenny's commitment to the arts and to nurturing creative talent is inspiring and she will bring great vision, energy, and passion."