

The first time I heard of Elsa Gindler was at an international youth meeting in the mid-1920's. Groups from different countries would sing their songs and dance their folk dances, and there were some inspired and progressive teachers who would talk to us and work with us during the day. One of the most interesting was a woman who had started an experimental school into which she had taken children she found alone in the streets—children who had been abandoned or whose parents had been killed. She tried to find out the best way to reach those youngsters with their so different histories.

Her name was Tami Oelfken. She worked with us in the mornings on movement, balance, and breathing—what we called at this time "Gymnastik". Watching me, she said, "You seem to have worked a lot in movement. Have you ever heard of Elsa Gindler?" I had not. She said, "If you ever go to Berlin be sure to see her. She has done wonders for me."

About two years afterwards I came to Berlin and suddenly remembered what she had said. One morning I simply decided to go and see Elsa Gindler. It was on Kurfürsten Strasse. I went through the big archway and the courtyard behind, off which was Gindler's studio. I opened the door. There was a large carpeted room; French doors at one side led to a grassy garden. The room had burlap on the walls and very high ceilings, and felt spacious and quiet.

When I came in I saw a group of intent young people. A stout woman with short-cut hair was leading the group. She had her back to me at the time. I sneaked in and sat down on a chair at the back of the studio.

They were working on jumping, I remember. I had always been very afraid of jumping. I never could get off the floor. So you can imagine how I was looking and listening.

Gindler said, "What's the use of showing you how to jump? What's the use of hearing somebody say 'Look how beautifully Clare jumps. Try to jump like Clare.' One wouldn't learn anything from that." I was amazed because that was exactly how I had been taught. After a little while she asked one of the students who had difficulty in jumping, "Do you feel from where you depart? Can you feel the floor under

your feet from which you want to jump? Do you *use* what is under you?" I thought, "*Use* what is under you? What does she mean?" She repeated, "Do you feel the floor? Do you *use* the floor?" This was completely new to me. Jumping was jumping. That there was something under me I had never realized. After awhile she said, "Do you feel the air through which you are jumping?" I thought, "What does she mean?" Her remark was a riddle to me, but it was fascinating. Every one of these questions somehow helped the students, giving them a new clue to what is involved in jumping: one jumps through the air; one uses what is under one; and so on and so on.

So the lesson went, until I had the feeling that everything I had been learning before was worth nothing. I felt I had to start all over again. At the end of the class I introduced myself to Elsa Gindler and told her I wanted to study with her, but she did not accept me, suggesting instead that I continue what I was doing, which was leading classes in "expressive movement" (Bode-Gymnastik).

At my second visit some months later I asked her why she did not want to accept me. She explained that the conditioning I had received in my previous training would make it too difficult for me to work with her. She said, "You would have to unlearn what you have learned, and that is the hardest thing in the world. What one learns is more powerful in one than one's own nature—that's very delicate underneath." But I returned again, and this time she said, "If you insist, I will accept you. But I predict you will have a very difficult time."

Now, do you think I had a difficult time? I didn't. Whatever Gindler said, it was as though she spoke directly out of my heart. I thought I understood every word. The only thing I noticed was that she always looked away from me. She always looked away, but she didn't say a word. I thought, "Everything she says is just what I feel, too." And she looked away. Finally after about a year she came to me and said, "Thank God, the first true movement!" I nearly fainted. I hadn't even noticed that I had moved. But after this I began to realize that my movements were hollow, just posed. Then began the difficult time.

Sometimes we worked on standing. I had always been under great pressure in standing—my resistance to my parents was so strong that it affected me everywhere—so I was constricted in my legs, and when I lay down I had pains in my legs, and when I was standing I had still greater pains. One day I went from foot to foot because I ached so. I probably made some grimaces. Gindler asked, “What’s the matter with you, Charlotte?” “I have such pains in my legs.” “Just keep standing,” she advised in a quiet, friendly voice. “Maybe you will find out how you create those pains.” Period. And really, by and by, in becoming more awake, I *did* find out—but not through explanation from her.

Gindler didn’t explain much: she wanted us to sense what was happening. She had unending patience herself, and this set a great example for us. We often worked on the same thing for months. She kind of lighted it up for us by coming from different angles. She gave us a task, was very precise about it, and then left us alone to find out what happened. So whatever we found out we discovered for ourselves.

The task might have had to do with our response to gravity, to the pull of the earth. Gindler was greatly impressed by Isadora Duncan, the only dancer at that time who was consciously feeling out the effect of gravity on movement—so different from all the other dancers who were fighting the pull of the earth. Isadora Duncan worked with gravity in dance as Gindler did in everyday living. Gindler had such sensitivity to gravity that when she would just turn the page of a notebook, it was an experience for me: there was no pressure, no push, no trying to be graceful, no ceremony. She simply turned the page, in direct contact with gravity.

Another main theme in her work had to do with tonicity (she used the word *Straffheit*, which means “healthy tension”). So in sitting on the floor, for example (we usually sat with crossed legs), she asked, “How does it feel inside?” Most of us discovered we were somewhat collapsed. The chest had sunk into the pelvis: there wasn’t enough room for breathing. We discovered we didn’t feel at all free. Then she asked us to feel out how much room we needed between chest and pelvis in order to be at ease in functioning. If we didn’t feel enough room, that would mean we did not have enough inner

energy, we did not have enough tonicity.

Sometimes, when we had vacations, she would give us one task to work on alone at home. She would say, “In six weeks’ time, when we start again, let’s see how far you have come.” She gave us this occasion to discover for ourselves how to work alone outside the studio—to make our own discoveries.

I was with her for such a long time that it is difficult to remember exactly what we did in the very beginning. One thing that astonished me was that we often worked with a blindfold around the eyes. Since we had our eyes bound, nobody knew what the others were doing. Each one worked in his or her own way, for instance coming from sitting to lying or from lying to sitting, discovering the changes which were needed and allowing them as far as we could. She sometimes asked questions, and people would speak, but this was not the usual procedure. When we made discoveries, there were astonished exclamations, and somebody would say, Ha!, in the middle of something and speak it out. So when we said anything at all it came spontaneously, which is a great help. Nobody said, “Be silent! I need silence to work.” There were times, though, that were entirely silent—when we were too fascinated by what was happening to say a word.

Gindler couldn’t stand it, however, when someone just talked. I would come out with something I thought I had experienced. She would say, “I don’t understand: could you say it a little clearer?” So I would try again, and again, and she would hold me to it until often I would realize that I had hardly anything to say. She had an absolute feeling for what was true. You could never deceive her, even with the subtlest techniques: she saw through it right away. Whatever you would try to prove or to defend, she would just listen to it, and you already knew it fell flat in you when you were halfway through. But she did not criticize.

I remember when we lay on the floor and worked on letting our legs become freer. People wanted to move my leg and they couldn’t. I always held it tight to me and it was stuck in my pelvis. Gindler came to me at last. She took my thigh in her arm, and steadily but gently pulled my leg out of the hip, creating more freedom between trunk and leg. Afterwards she remarked, “That’s real work with you!” A simple

statement of fact—no criticism.

Once when we were all lying on the floor with eyes closed I fell asleep. Shortly afterwards I woke up and was terrified! But I thought to myself, "Nobody has noticed, we all have our eyes closed." I opened my eyes and there she was, standing right over me. She only said, "Was it good?", and smiled at me.

There was one thing she was dearly interested in: that we should just *sense what happened*—not judge it, but just sense it. That was how she cured herself of TB when she contracted it as a young woman. At that time there was no known cure for TB, so she began to experiment on her own: she began to "sense", though no one had ever thought of such a thing before. She gradually became able to allow changes in her breathing so that one lung could be at relative rest while the other was only working very delicately, and by and by she healed herself.

In developing her sensitivity to such a degree that this healing could come about, she had discovered that the organism is able to renew itself, how something which is not in order can come into more order, how—if we can follow *the lead of our own sensations*—we can come closer to healthy functioning. This innate capacity of renewing, of regeneration, this facility which everyone has to feel for himself, she later tried out with her students (including me) who would do anything to follow this new possibility into further and further exploration. It was a marvelous time.

But there were also difficult times. She would call it "eating dry bread." She said: "Sometimes we are going through times when we feel that we don't come a step forward, maybe we go backward, or we go around the corner. Don't worry about that: that is how nature works. You cannot have everything right away on the table. Follow what is needed, and by and by you will come to a new insight." So we just went on and on in our exploration.

In the beginning the work was clearly therapeutic. These are examples of what might happen as we learned to follow the innate tendencies of the organism to change toward the more functional: when somebody had a curvature in his back he would gradually, gradually straighten out; when somebody had a pressure or constriction here or there it would gradually be relieved. When somebody was out of balance

he would gradually come into more balance; when he was too urgent, too restless, too this, too that, he would gradually recognize that and lose it—because it did not feel good to him, because something else felt better. We followed always the lead of what was sensed until we came to *how it wanted to be*.

We found out that such changes are closely related to changes in our attitudes; in fact, we found out they are the same. When a person changed in his "physical" balance, he also became more balanced as a person. When someone was able to give up his "physical" overdoings he became more peaceful and open as a person. In other words, there was nothing that would not work in both directions at once within oneself. Gindler became more and more interested in that, and by and by she began to give up working just on "physical" symptoms. All the time I was studying with her she kept reminding us that we were not working on parts but working to become more reactive *altogether*.

We would work on our attitudes in daily living: while brushing our teeth, for instance; while combing our hair; while washing our dishes; while cleaning our apartment. In reading we found to which degree we were open for what we read, and if it had any consequences for us. There was a time when we gave our attention to speaking. We worked for hours and hours on one sentence so that it actually came to life. We had to give up our tendencies to "perform" or be mechanical. We became conscious that when we spoke we often did not mean what we said: we covered up what we actually meant. Then we gradually began to permit more of what we really wanted to say: we took heart and became truer to ourselves.

In class we discovered various phenomena in our actions: working too hard, making efforts that were not necessary, exaggerating something, being artificial in something, just "going through the motions", and things like that. Gindler asked us to find out whether we could detect similar attitudes *in our daily life*. We wrote them down for her—and also wrote down what happened when we detected them.

We often started by reproaching ourselves, saying: "I shouldn't have done such and such." But we would write it all down as honestly as we could and send it to her, and then we would work at it the next time in class. Much of our

past showed up in our attitudes and gave us rich material to feel out and to share. Gindler would not rest until we became so awake in our daily activities that we could put our finger on it exactly: "This same thing happens to me when I clear the table, or when I open the door for someone. And when I discover it, this is what happens. . ." So there was always the possibility of becoming more conscious, more responsive, more awake, more participating. There was no reason to become self-accusing, rather we were grateful for the fact that we could feel it. Gindler insisted that it was no use to work on something in the studio, no matter how good we were at it, if we did not change in our living. "Daily life is the playground of our work," she would say.

I was moved when she revealed that one of the greatest incentives for her work was the question, "Why are little children so beautiful and why do we adults change so much to the opposite? How does the innate drive to explore get lost in us?" Her work was an inquiry into why this happened, and what could be done to remedy it.

She made us keenly aware of the politics and culture of the time. That was when psychology and psychoanalysis were becoming better known, and people were reading Marx and Engels, Rilke and Steiner. "We must know about all that is happening around us," she said. She would send us to meetings when she was too busy to go herself. But she never hesitated to speak out when she felt it necessary.

I remember one time when she gave a talk before a huge group of teachers of dance and physical education which had its convention in Munich. She had slides which she projected. These slides, together with what she said—and without her making any big claims—were simply devastating. She showed what happens when children are forced into positions, the stiffness which comes over them, and the anguish when trust vanishes. She showed the mannerisms of schools of movement, the exaggerations they taught which robbed people of their naturalness. Then she showed the opposite: people sleeping; children; animals; athletes who were just fully functioning; dancers who were truly expressive—the difference between conditioning, poses on the one side, and naturalness on the other. How many in the audience must have

been thinking: "What did I give my life to? How many efforts and years of working did I give to come to what I am doing? And here she is showing that it is all senseless!" When Gindler was finished she went out right through the middle of the crowd, and there was *dead* silence. Afterwards she said to me: "I didn't think I would come out of there alive!"

But it was terrific. She was so quiet and firm in it—as she was in all the things she did. There had been nobody there to introduce her and make the crowd be still: she just stood in front of the people very quietly and they became quiet as in church. Then she began to speak, in a low but clear voice. She did not believe in speaking up very much. She trusted that when somebody was interested he would hear her.

During the Second World War Gindler stayed in Berlin—through the bombing, through the terrible, terrible time with Hitler. She refused to go to Switzerland where she was invited to live: she wanted to work where she was most needed. People would come to an unheated studio after walking long distances in order to have sessions with her, always under the threat of a new air attack or being stopped by the Gestapo. It was forbidden to teach Jews or half-Aryans, but she continued to do so. She also hid persecuted people underneath her studio, and she and her students shared their meager rations of food and clothing with them. Her Jewish students and the people she had hidden from the Nazis were eventually caught and killed. "In the end," she said, "I became very sick. I didn't know any more whether I wanted to continue to live—it was too terrible. But I saw I could do something for people, so I gradually recovered and continued to work."

During the war she got heart trouble. In a summer workshop which took place in Switzerland a number of years later we worked in a castle on the hill, but all of us were living down in the valley. Some of us had cars and invited Gindler to ride with us, but she said no. We asked: "Why don't you let us take you?" "This is the way to prepare for the session," she answered, and continued her walking. We were puzzled and told her so. She smiled and said: "You can get heart trouble by climbing a mountain, but you can also get over heart trouble by climbing a mountain. It depends on *how* you climb.

Gindler's development went on to the last: she never stopped. I have never seen her hesitate to say she was wrong, but she took every pain in the world to get clear answers, and when she wanted to find something out it didn't matter how long it took. In addition to the work in class, she continued to work for herself, alone, every day between 2 p.m. and 4 p.m. We all knew it and never called her at that time. She had the capacity to bring all the threads together—really feeling a situation in its entirety. I would call her approach that of a first-class and holistic scientist. There was nothing abstract about her work at all: she called it *Arbeit am Menschen*, work on the human being.

Her compassion and patience showed up on so many occasions. One day there was a woman who sat next to her and whenever Gindler made a statement the woman would shout out her approval, slapping Gindler's leg with great force. We all were horrified, but Gindler said nothing. After class I went to her and asked how she could put up with this. "Can't you see that this woman is sick?" she asked me. "By and by she will change." And she did.

Once an engineer, builder of the Dnieper dam in Russia, came to a workshop. He was very tall, with a big head, eyes glowing with intensity, and very long thin legs which appeared to be nothing but bones. One morning Gindler asked him to stand up beside the wall and bring the heel of one foot gently up from the floor and let it come gradually down again. Just that, nothing more. Gindler encouraged him again and again to take time for each movement. He did this for what seemed like hours and, as we watched, we saw the leg change. Slowly it came to life; we could see the muscles beginning to appear. The color of his leg turned from ashen to rosy: it became a leg, while the other one was still a stick.

Presently Gindler asked him: "How does your leg feel now?" He paused, then shook his head. "Do you feel any difference between your two legs?" she asked. He took a moment and said: "No." Imagine! One leg so full of life, the other so dead, and he felt no difference. "What will Gindler say?" I wondered. She was silent awhile, then smiled and said: "Not yet. . .not yet." For me this was one of the greatest moments in her teaching.

She did not allow anything to disturb the work. I had a little flirtation with this engineer, and Gindler became ice-cold. Years afterward she said to me: "I still see you leaning against the knees of —." I asked: "Why not?" "It disturbed the work," she answered. And in a way it did, but I did not understand that at the time. Class was a place for work, not for flirting.

Each one of us was invited by Gindler to come to her at least once a year, and we stayed with her about three hours. She had a way of coming close, of sharing—really sharing—which was wonderful. It was more than other people gave you in days and days and weeks and weeks. When I went away I had the feeling that she really understood me.

She was a wonderful cook; she made beautiful casseroles of vegetables. During a vacation course in Bavaria or in Switzerland she would go to the market herself, and I still remember her coming back with her basket full of fresh greens and herbs, letting me see them and smell them, before she went into the kitchen to prepare them herself for our salad.

She loved to eat, too. On one occasion we had a long climb to the place where we worked. We started out right after breakfast and when we got there were all breathless—and the first thing in the morning was a breathing session! Gindler looked at us. "I don't know what's happened with you," she said. "What did you have this morning for breakfast?" "We had coffee—and cream—and fresh bread—and butter—and jelly—and eggs," we reported. "No wonder you are not able to breathe!" she remarked. We were all embarrassed. After a while one student dared to ask: "Now Elsa Gindler, what did *you* have for breakfast?" And she said: "Coffee—and cream—and fresh bread—and butter—and jelly—and eggs!" "But Elsa Gindler," we exclaimed, "you have had the same as we!" Gindler laughed: The difference is that I know what to do with it."

She did. In spite of her weight she could do almost anything. She was as flexible as a cat. She could do the "split", turn as many somersaults as you would like. And there was such an appearance of equilibrium and freshness in her walking. Her skin! The tissue was so marvelous that when she raised her hand you could almost see through it! And she had beautiful color. She looked somewhat like a farm woman

with her straight, dark blonde hair, clear blue eyes, broad, well-sculptured forehead and wide cheekbones. She almost always wore blue or black, with a little white collar—snow white.

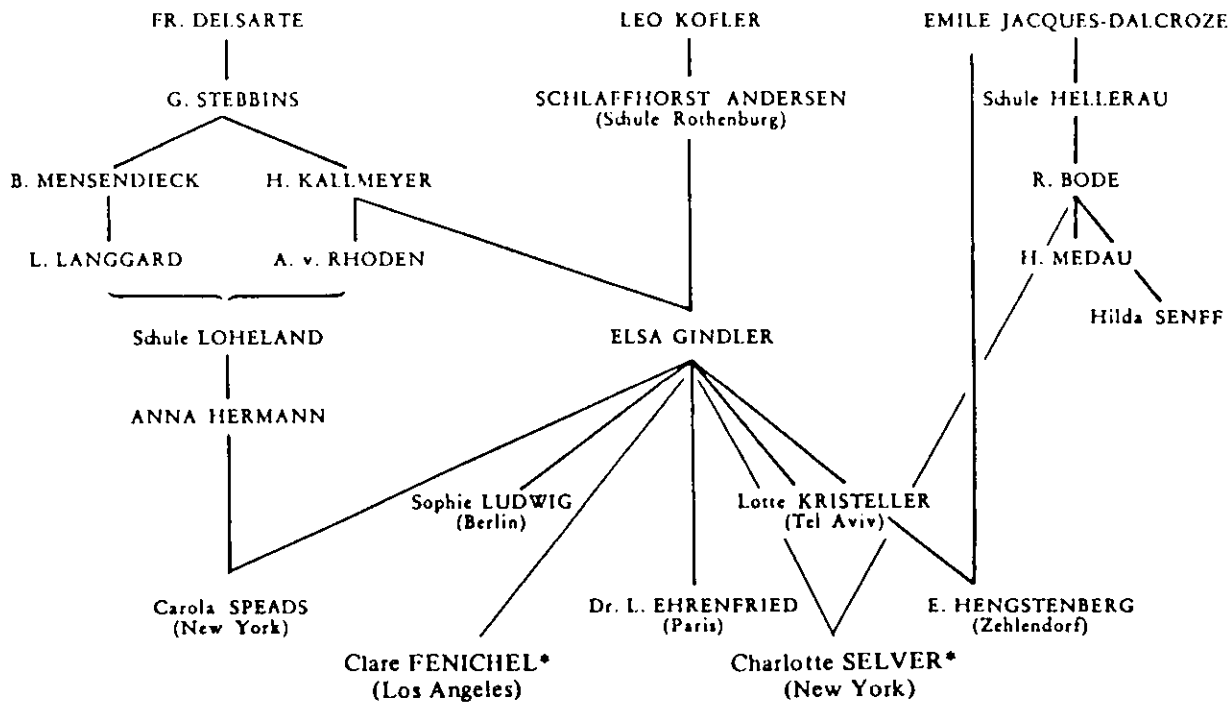
She had an immense impact on everyone who came in contact with her. There was a brightness about her—so positive, quiet and alive. One of my students, an artist, who had never seen Elsa Gindler, went to Switzerland to work with Gindler's colleague and friend, Heinrich Jacoby. One day when my student visited him she suddenly became aware of something very light at the top of the stairs. That's how she described Gindler to me: "I had the feeling of light coming down the stairs."

I saw Gindler for the first time when she was about forty and for the last time when she was seventy-two. During all the years from forty to seventy-two, each time I came to her she was different, and she worked on something differ-

ent. I could never stop wondering how this woman could have such a capacity for renewing herself and for renewing her approach.

Her work was not a discipline like ballet, Yoga, T'ai Chi, in which there is a certain way of doing it, in which certain movements, certain forms or gestures are taught from generation to generation. Her work was an exploration, a way of following up what we discovered in the process of sensing. It was not *what* we did, but *how* we did it. There was nothing to "teach," she maintained; there was only discovery.

The work of Gindler offers the possibility of waking up, and when one wakes up the consequences come of themselves—in each person in his own way. That was how she worked, and that was how she lived. She stood in the midst of life, and in that she was for me the greatest of teachers.



*Editor's addition with permission from the author.

The above chart is from *Körperliche Erziehung zum seelischen Gleichgewicht* by Dr. Med. Lily Ehrenfried, 1957 Westliche Berliner Verlagsgesellschaft Heenemann K.G. French edition: *De L'Education du Corps a l'Equilibre de l'Esprit*, Les Editions Montaigne, Paris 6^e, 13 Quai de Conti, France.