

Book Review

The Life and Teachings of Elsa Gindler

Review of *Elsa Gindler (1885 – 1961)*, which appeared in two installments in the *BULLETIN* of the Charlotte Selver Foundation. The first installment appeared in *Bulletin #10, Volume 1; Summer 1978*. The second installment appeared in *Bulletin #10-11 (Volume II) Winter 1981*.

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For over 50 years, Elsa Gindler's work inspired countless students. Since her death in 1961, the work of the "Ancestor of Sensory Awareness" continues to influence countless teachers, therapists, and bodyworkers. In the Rosen community, it is mentioned that she had an influence on Marion Rosen and yet when a colleague recently asked me about Elsa Gindler, I realized that I did not know much about her. Therefore, I went in search of information on her and the influence that her work had on Marion Rosen and on the creation of the Rosen Method. What I found was truly fascinating and inspiring to me, both professionally and—due to my German roots—personally, as well.

The first thing I discovered is that there is very little written in English about Elsa Gindler. In 1945, at the end of WWII, forty years of her teaching materials on her "experiments" with movement and awareness were destroyed in the bombing of Berlin, where her studio was located. In 1976, fifteen years after her untimely death in 1961 at the age of seventy-six, Dr. Friedrich Everling organized a gathering of her students in order to collect stories and direct experiences about her work. These collected accounts, many translated, were published in 1978 by the Charlotte Selver Foundation in two Journals, Volumes I and II, and simply called, *Elsa Gindler 1885 - 1961*. She herself wrote one short article in 1925, published in *Gymnastik*, the Journal of the Deutschen Gymnastik-Bund (German Gymnastik Federation). It has been translated and is included in Volume I.

From these accounts, it can be seen that Gindler's work evolved over 40 years and that those who studied with her early on had different experiences from those who studied with her later on. However, the essence of Gindler's work carries through strongly in all the accounts from the various students. Marion Rosen never studied with Elsa Gindler, but did study with Lucy Heyer, who was a student of Elsa Gindler.

Charlotte Selver (1901- 2003) worked closely with Elsa Gindler and brought Elsa Gindler's work to the United States, where she called it "Sensory Awareness." Selver, in the 1960s, influenced many people in the world of body-psychology and bodywork. Judyth Weaver (2010), Sensory Awareness teacher and Rosen practitioner, calls Gindler "the grandmother of somatic psychotherapy." Weaver writes about Gindler/Selver's influence on many people, including Wilhelm Reich, Moshe Feldenkrais, Mary Wigman, Eric Fromm, Clara Thompson, Betty Winkler Keane, Fritz Perls, Alan Watts, Mary Whitehouse, Marjorie Rand, Peter Levine, Stanley Keleman, and Marion Rosen. It is not clear whether Charlotte Selver and Marion Rosen ever met.

Gindler's early life and influences

Elsa Gindler was born in Berlin to a working class family. Her father worked as a blacksmith and then as the custodian of an apartment building. She was educated in a *Volkschule*, which was a kind of grammar school that was free for children six to fourteen. After that she was mostly self-educated.

Gindler grew up during the Youth Movement in Germany at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. The Industrial Revolution was changing people's lives and working people began to demand more humane working conditions in the factories and also the possibility of fuller lives for themselves. By 1910, the "Youth Movement" went in two directions: In the cities there were smaller and more intellectually oriented groups known as "der Sprechsaal" (the talking place) and "Wandervogel" (Fenichel, 1978, Vol. II, p. 4). Wandervogel means "The Migrating Bird" and young people from both the countryside and the city went out in the woods—without their parents—hiking, cooking food over wood fires, and talking about what interested them. There was also an interest in the development of the body towards more healthful and expressive movement. Elsa Gindler's education was in the schools that arose in response to this demand, called *Gymnastik*. [Physical re-education].

One of Gindler's students told an interviewer in 1978 that "Gindler's education was in *Gymnastik*. This is the way Gindler began; but, she soon changed the direction of study from the outer shape to inner being, from acting human to being human" (Fenichel, 1978, Vol. II, p. 5). Gindler referred to this as work on human beings ("Arbeit am Menschen") and emphasized self-observation and understanding one's individual physicality and the condition of that physicality. Simple everyday actions were explored in the classroom and in everyday life. Gindler set up tasks for her students which she at first referred to as "exercises," and later referred to as "experiments." Her experiments were not "mechanical manipulation, but an opportunity to discover what was happening in the organism in carrying out certain movements" (Holscher, (1978-79) Vol. II, p. 11). Gindler soon discovered that mental activity influences body activity. (Fenichel, 1978, Vol. II, p. 8). She was very precise about defining each experiment, but she didn't impose upon her students the "false security of memorized, repetitive form and exact rules." She offered them the possibility of "being responsible to themselves in simply finding out how it is, and how it wants to change" (Roche, 1978, Vol. I., p. 4).

Gindler was also influenced by Mazdaznan, but was not a member (Holscher, 1978-79) Vol II., p. 11). "Mazdaznan is a religious health movement based on Zoroastrian and Christian ideas with special focus on breathing exercises, vegetarian diet and body culture. It was founded at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century by Otoman Zar-Adusht Ha'nish, born Otto Hanisch. Mazdaznan is educational and religious and contains nothing dogmatic in its teachings ... no instruction by coercion (Ha'nish, 2010). Gindler was impressed by Dr. Hanish's writings on breath and, being a vegetarian and in the spirit of Mazdaznan's teaching by "no coercion," she refused to advertise her classes and all applications for study had to be voluntary and free from suggestion or influence. "She responded to what felt appropriate to her and abandoned the rest." She kept experimenting to find out how to be a "responsive instrument for living" (Roche, 1978, Vol. I., p. 4).

Gindler met Heinrich Jacoby, a musician and voice teacher who came to similar conclusions about how to work with the body, the voice, and creative expression in general. They collaborated from approximately 1923 to 1933. Mary Alice Roche, editor of both Vols. I and II, speaks of the connection between the Jacoby and Gindler philosophies: "Inherent in the practice of both was the realization that intent (image) is the first step toward the creative rather than imitative movement; that the power of the intent arises out of the capacity for clear sensory experience of the situation; that spontaneous functioning (intent/action) can be hindered by interfering reflection (such as the thought, 'Is this right? Is this the way the teacher says it should be?')." Roche says that Jacoby's premise is that "unthought-of capabilities are innate in all of us; they are merely hindered and can be freed and developed." Says Roche that this is "the same understanding to which Elsa Gindler had come in her own work from and then beyond *Gymnastik*." (Roche, 1980, Vol. II, p. 23).

Gindler's character and strength

One of Gindler's students, Alice Aginski, speaks about the context that existed in 1925 for Elsa Gindler's work. In Berlin, "people were interested in the discoveries of Freud, Adler, Montessori; a wind of freedom and humanism was stirring, a new pedagogy was being created." Adds Aginski, "Being a Gindler-trained teacher was not based on knowledge or tests, but on the way of being or working of the person; in his or her per-

sonality, sensitivity, and way of making contact with others, and flexibility of mind." Gindler had her students study anatomy as well as tend to the experiential and individual body knowing. "Her research and taste for discovering never left her, she always retained her freedom to evolve and change. This attitude prevented her from formulating her work for publication" (Aginski, 1978, Vol. II., p.15).

Selver says that "[Gindler] 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, [Gindler] said" (Selver, 1977, Vol. I., p.30).

When the Nazis came into power, Elsa Gindler stayed in Germany and helped people survive the horrors of living under the Nazi regime and helped them stay calm during air raids. She harbored Jews in her studio and apartment, helping them in any way she could. Dr Henrich Gold said, "Elsa Gindler worked with us chiefly on the possibilities of regeneration and on facing fear" (Gold, 1978, Vol. II., p. 31). There is a story of her seeing a Jewish store being looted and standing up on a wall and saying to the looters, "Yes, you despise the Jews; but they are good enough to steal from. The looters lay down their plunder and crept away" (Pincus, 1980, Vol. II, p.33). "Only when one has some idea of what life was like then can one understand at what risk, and with what courage, compassion and uncompromising honest this outwardly passive woman put her life on the line" (Monjau, 1979, Vol. II, p.30).

After the war, Gindler continued to teach, explore and learn and influence others. Selver and others came back to Germany to study with Gindler. Gold says that "After the war, I also received through the work...greater openness, greater freedom, and joy in 'unfolding'; -- a more careful and conscious choice as to what to apply myself to; a more concentrated capacity for working; a greater tranquility, and—not to forget—a greater power of enjoyment" (Gold, 1978, Vol. II., p. 31).

After her last course in 1960, Gindler wrote, "My work here in Berlin comes to a close at the end of Easter, and I am glad I was able to do it once more. Much has become still clearer, so that I can bring the work to a close with a more tranquil mind."

Gindler's students were dedicated to following the spirit of her work along whatever paths they had chosen, whether in their personal lives or in their professional fields. Elsa Gindler is spoken about as a uniquely-gifted teacher whose presence and curiosity created a new learning atmosphere, the effects of which are still being felt today. Elfriede Hengstenberg said of Gindler, "The manner and means in which she understood the nature of situations, the courage and resoluteness with which she approached difficult circumstances: all this revealed to us the natural gifts which raised her way of working to the extraordinary" (Kohrke, 1977, Vol.1, p.41).

Gindler and Rosen Method connections

Throughout the two volumes of *Elsa Gindler 1885 - 1961* can be found an array of comments that illustrate the connections between Gindler's work and various aspects of the Rosen Method.

On Breath and Relaxation:

"For [Gindler], breathing was a teacher: simply being attentive it is a way of learning how things are with one, of learning what needs to change for fuller functioning—for more reactivity in breathing and thus in the whole person. She did not teach others what they "ought" to be, but only to find out how they were" (Roche, 1978, Vol. I, p.2).

"[Awareness of the breath] brought about an inner change toward the ability to wait, to let things happen in me, the sensing of what is happening in me, the listening to it, and entering into the quiet of inner peace...

and

"She had come to the realization that relaxation ... must comprise a state which extends through the

whole person...in addition she was not content with the search for absolute quiet. If this restorative condition could be arrived at in rest, ... then this inner relaxation could be in every activity, throughout every moment of daily life. This was the intent of Elsa Gindler... thus we can experience an increase in strength; thus we retain our capabilities to respond and act..."[T]he task is to become aware of the tensions in order to become more clearly conscious of how they feel ... only then can we allow these tensions to abate (Durham, 1978, Vol. II, p.17).

On Awareness, and on the Origins of "Holding" in the Body:

"You learn to sense where you hold, where living processes are not permitted to function. And when you are aware of the holding—where you are not allowing yourself to function—then it's possible to let go. But you have to sense it" (Kulbach, 1977, Vol. I., p. 15).

"Thus we learned to reeducate our senses: how to see, hear, feel, touch, eat, rediscovering our instincts, which from the earliest years had been repressed by our upbringing and education" (Aginski, 1978, Vol. II, p. 15).

"If we can follow the lead of our own sensations - we can come closer to healthy functioning." "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 about it." "It was not what we did, but how we did it. There was nothing to "teach, she maintained; there was only discovery" (Selver, 1977, Vol. I, p. 29-30).

On Mind, Body, Spirit, Emotion Connections:

"The unity of mind, body and spirit was much discussed at that time. There, in Gindler's classes we experienced it in practice. And a clear consciousness of this has never left me" (Nörenberg, 1977, Vol. II, p.20).

Alice Aginski spoke about Gindler's use of anatomy and finding references to her own while she studied Greek texts and noticed the connections between the statement, "Hector felt sad in his diaphragm" and her work with Gindler. "This abstract statement became alive and real in our work with breathing and relaxation. With Elsa Gindler we were reeducating our sense of quality in movement, discovering the difference between superficial movement and one that was deeply felt, becoming aware of a movement in which the whole personality is expressed....[and] transforms the person's state of mind as well as his physical form" (Aginski, 1978, Vol II, p. 16).

Gindler created situations over and over again where Durham learned that "I AM MY BODY." Durham learned "to listen to the messages of her senses without interference, responding to them without interference and learned that she was better able to function, be alive, be well, be harmonious, and to respond to the present situation. "[Gindler] wanted transformation from the core." "Her goal was for each of us to be our own guide, standing through our own feet, functioning through inherent strength, experiencing ourselves as human beings" (Durham, 1978, Vol. II, p.17).

"Elsa Gindler investigated these things on the one hand with intuitive feminine sense for feeling things out and on the other hand, with wholly rational thinking based on experience" (Wilhelm, 1961, Vol. II, p. 35).

On Words:

"Although Elsa Gindler was not drawn to the written word, she talked a great deal in class—as she led her students toward the wordless moment of experiencing." "There were spoken words...arising in response to the situation of the moment; they would pass— like the situation of which they came—to be remembered in each listener only as he heard them" (Veselko, 1979, Vol II, p. 3).

These words from Fenichel could have been spoken by Marion Rosen: "I'm interested in how I really live. Not in how I *should* live, but *how* I live" (Fenichel, 1978, Vol. II, p. 5).

I think that anyone who works with bodies and with sensory awareness will appreciate the inspiring stories and thought-provoking ideas in the two 44-page volumes of "Elsa Gindler 1885 - 1961." Rosen Method bodyworkers, especially, will feel resonance with the story of Elsa Gindler, and will benefit from learning more about the life and work of this amazing teacher.

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