

Elsa Gindler: Lost Gestalt Ancestor

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Abstract: Attending to body experiences has been integral to the practice and theory of Gestalt therapy since its inception. This is so because of the influence of Elsa Gindler's work on both Laura and Fritz Perls. This paper explores their historical connections.

Key words: somatics, Gestalt therapy, Elsa Gindler, body awareness.

Introduction

When I began my studies in Gestalt therapy eleven years ago, my familiarity with terms such as organismic self regulation, interrupting contact, here and now, experimenting, and awareness surprised me. I had explored these ideas experientially in a different context, with my mentor in breathwork, Carola Speads. Curious to find the connections between her somatic approach and Gestalt therapy, I began an historical inquiry and discovered that the common root for both was the work of Elsa Gindler.

Elsa Gindler's Work

Elsa Gindler lived in Berlin from 1885-1961. During that time she developed and taught a method of working with people which she called exactly that: 'Arbeit am Menschen'. Although influenced by some exercise and breathing specialists of her day, including Stebbins, Kallmeyer and Kofler, she surpassed them, creating a fresh approach which eschewed rote repetition and predetermined outcomes.

In Gindler's ground-breaking work, students were guided to be curious about their own functioning, and to experiment, both in class and throughout their daily lives, with new ways of moving, breathing, speaking, and perceiving. In 1926, she wrote, 'Suddenly each student is working in his own fashion... and

begins to feel that he is in charge of himself... his consciousness of self is heightened' (Johnson, (Ed.), p 8).

Gindler was the first to use the word 'experiment' in relation to people's working with their own awareness of body sensation in interaction with their environment. She encouraged her students to notice and talk about the details of their movement and breathing. She stated, "I always advise my students to replace my words with their own... in order to avoid getting a knot in their psyche" (Johnson, (Ed.), p 6). She had them speak up during class experiments and also write reports of those experiments which they did at home, much as the students at Columbia University did with the experiments found in Part I of *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* (1951), by Perls, Hefferline and Goodman.

People from all walks of life studied with Gindler. Over the course of her long career, 1917-1960, she taught teachers, musicians, artists, psychologists, scientists, physicians, social workers, factory workers, soldiers. As her teaching assistant, Carola Speads (Spitz), has stated, "In whatever field they were, they were affected in that field. They were different; and they saw things differently" (Roche, p 22).

Gindler kept careful records of her work, including hundreds of before-and-after photos, recordings of voices, films of people moving, anecdotal records, and her students' journals. These all were destroyed in 1945 when, one week before the liberation of Berlin, her studio went up in flames. All her papers, with the exception of one essay published in 1926, were destroyed. And, more tragically, a group of Jewish students whom she was hiding in her cellar, were forced to flee from the flames, were captured and murdered. Gindler found it hard to go on working after this, but was eventually convinced to do so by her surviving students.

Many teachers trained with Gindler, helping to establish the field we call *bodywork* today. Among the teachers who carried on and extended her work were Clare Nathansohn Fenichel in California, Sophie Ludwig in Berlin, Lotte Kristeller in Israel, Lily Ehrenfried in Paris, Elfriede Hengstenberg in Switzerland, Emi Pinkler in Budapest, Charlotte Selver in California, and

Carola Speads in New York. These, in turn, have taught and inspired further generations of bodyworkers and helping professionals. Among those who studied with Gindler were both the first and second wives of Wilhelm Reich. Historian, David Boadella, has referred to the influence of Gindler's work on Reich's ideas about body armouring being a key element in character assessment. Boadella states that Reich only began to articulate these ideas after marrying his second wife, Elsa Lundberg, who energetically advocated Gindler's approach to him (Boadella, p 11).

Fritz Perls had been a patient of Reich and refers to Reich's ideas in *Ego, Hunger and Aggression*, the book he wrote with his wife Laura Perls in Capetown, South Africa in 1941. *Ego, Hunger and Aggression* was the first exploration of the theory that was later to be named Gestalt therapy. Part of the book was entitled 'Concentration Therapy', which recalls Gindler. 'The aim of my work is... the achievement of concentration' (Johnson, (Ed.), p 5). The new technique developed in Perls' book '... is theoretically simple: its aim is to regain the "feel of ourselves"... to awaken the organism to a fuller life' (1947, p 220).

Laura Perls Reflecting Gindler's Work

Central to our Gestalt heritage is the fact that Laura Perls was a student of Gindler's in Berlin in the early 1930s. It was at that time that Laura nursed and weaned her daughter, paying attention to and keeping notes on the physical and emotional details of the process, as Gindler urged her students to do.

The understandings Laura gained through her experiential study of nursing and weaning became core concepts in *Ego, Hunger and Aggression*. Laura wrote two complete chapters of that work, collaborating with Fritz on the rest of the text. The chapter "Concentrating on Eating", for example, bears comparison to Gindler's work with her students, as reported by Johanna Kulbach: "We worked on tasting and eating. We had zweibach. We took a very small bite and had it in our mouths and tried to feel what happened... I felt the texture and tasted the sweetness. A lot of sensations come through if you allow yourself time to really taste..." (Roche, p 17)

Once leaving Germany for South Africa in 1934, Laura changed her way of doing therapy, “I started to use face-to-face dialogue and body awareness...” (Rosenfeld, p 8). At that time, Fritz was still sitting behind patients who were lying on a couch. In Laura's book *Living at the Boundary*, there is a workshop transcript, sixty-one pages in length, containing twenty-seven examples of her work with body and breath awareness. This is not a “Gestalt and Bodywork” approach, but is a fully integrated, ongoing attention to body experience as part of the Gestalt therapy dialogue. As Laura says, “It's not use of the body... the point is to be a body” (1995, p 210). Laura's style was an integrated way of working where participants were encouraged to attend to their body experiences, to be 'somebody'.

In one exchange, Laura explains that in working this way, she “observes and deals with small things or what is usually taken for granted, what is called obvious, because it is in the obvious that resistances and difficulties are embedded” (1995, p 180). Laura said that “Resistance was assistance”, reminding us that interruptions in contact had practical, self-preservative origins. These interruptions include muscular retroflexions and disruption of breathing patterns.

Similarly, Gindler “I have tried to show to what a great extent constriction is bound up with disturbances in breathing and these, once again, with disturbances in the psychic realm” (Johnson, (Ed.), p 12). Laura did not suggest that clients in her workshop “improve' their breathing, but rather be more aware of it.” She continued, “... any strong manipulation I would reject, because it tends to break through, to hit through a resistance without seeing that there is sufficient support when it is done” (1995, p 172). Again, Gindler: “Any correction made from without is of little value...” (Johnson, (Ed.), p 14).

Both Gindler and Laura Perls helped clients become aware of how they were interrupting themselves, with Laura taking the work further by helping clients discover what meaning interrupting had for them. Laura pointed out that support must be present for contact to take place. Here is Gindler on support: “For real standing, we must feel how we give our weight pound for pound, onto the earth...” (Johnson, (Ed.), p 13).

Language In Common

In reading the workshop transcript, I noticed that many of Laura's expressions echoed ones I had heard from Carola Speads when I studied the Gindler approach with her in New York from 1963 to 1995. Carola had been Gindler's teaching assistant from 1925 until 1938. In a published interview, Carola describes attending a workshop given by Gindler in 1955, after they had not seen each other for seventeen years: "I got there, and it was as if I had never left... After all those years, I found that she used the same comparisons and examples that I had come to use in my work in New York" (Johnson, (Ed-),p33).

Here is a list of some expressions Carola used in class in New York when teaching the Gindler approach:

- * What are you aware of right now?
- * Be curious about the details of what you are feeling.
- * Be interested not only in what you do, but in how you are doing it.
- * Let change occur on its own.
- * Simply notice what is.
- * How are you doing that right now? (In response to a student reporting muscle cramping.)
- * It's an experiment; be open-minded.
- * Accept what is available.
- * No expectations.

Here are some expressions of Laura's from *Living at the Boundary*.

- * No expectations.
- * Are you breathing right now?
- * Awareness of what is.
- * What are you in touch with now?
- * Take it as it comes, start with that.
- * You experience yourself as a body... When you don't have that, you easily experience yourself as nobody.

- * Paying attention....
- * I work with the obvious.
- * We can experiment

Fritz Perls' Awareness of Gindler's Approach

In 1947, Fritz Perls, having recently arrived in New York from South Africa, was trying to start a practice while at the same time taking lessons with Charlotte Selver, a former student of Gindler's. Selver is quoted in Jack Gaines' book, *Fritz Perls: Here and Now*: "He started to take private lessons with me... he asked me to work with him. He wanted me to take his patients before him and kind of open them up for what he wanted to work on with them later... a collaboration... I did not want to work his way"(1979, p 34).

In that same year, Fritz addressed the William Alanson White Institute in a talk entitled *Planned Psychotherapy*. In this speech, he said, "I recommend as necessary complementary aspects of the study of the human personality at least three subjects: Gestalt psychology, semantics,, and last but not least, the approach of the Gindler School" (1947/1979, p 22).

This remark was made four years before the publication of *Gestalt Therapy*. Laura states that Fritz already had part of the manuscript with him when he came to the United States. Here are the names of some of the experiments from Book 1 which strongly recall the work of Elsa Gindler: Attending and Concentrating; Sharpening the Body Sense; Contacting the Environment; Technique of Awareness.

Richard Kitzler described the process of group experimenting and discussion which led to the writing of die final manuscript of *Gestalt Therapy* during the early days of the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy. Although Laura Perls' name does not appear as co-author on that book, he states that she was significantly involved in the discourse which led to its writing.

Here is a quotation from Paul Goodman's writing in Book 2 of *Gestalt Therapy*: "The complex system of contacts necessary for adjustment in the difficult held, we call 'eself'" (p 373). This sentence implies that self is ongoingly created by

contact between organism and environment, and that self is experienced as activity. Not too different from that is Gindler's sentence written twenty-five years earlier. "... by that I mean consciousness that is centered, reacts to the environment, and can think and feel... For me, the small word *ěÍ* summarizes all this" (Johnson, (Ed.), p 6). Gindler's 1926 statement was unusual for its time because it included environment as an essential part of experiencing "I" or self. To put it in contemporary words, both writers describe self as co-creation of organism and environment.

Conclusion

Work in somatic awareness, specifically that which was developed and taught by Elsa Gindler in Berlin in the 1920s and '30s, is an important part of the ground from which Fritz and Laura Perls developed Gestalt therapy. I have endeavoured to illustrate how Gindler's method of guiding people to experience themselves and to speak about their experiences, revolutionary in its day, was fundamental to the way Gestalt therapy emerged. It is my hope that, along with phenomenology, Gestalt psychology and existentialism, "Arbeit am Menschen" will now be understood to be an essential part of Gestalt therapy's historical ground.

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