

Emmi Pikler and Elfriede Hengstenberg The Budapest - Berlin Connection¹

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Emmi Pikler met Elfriede Hengstenberg² in 1935, after hearing about her work from her sister-in-law, who had been living in Berlin for some time. Having had one lung removed, she was attending classes with Elsa Gindler³, who was Elfriede Hengstenberg's teacher. Emmi noticed that when her sister-in-law returned to Budapest, she had changed, which Emmi attributed to the influence of Elsa Gindler. It seemed as though Elsa Gindler's convictions were similar to her own.

Emmi Pikler invited Elsa Gindler to work in Budapest. In her place, Elsa Gindler sent her pupil, Elfriede Hengstenberg, who gave courses there over three consecutive summers.

The work Emmi Pikler did with healthy infants, Hengstenberg's with older children, who had various degrees of difficulties, and that of Elsa Gindler and Heinrich Jacoby⁴ with adults was all based on the same principle: that by the law of nature, that with which we are endowed will, given the opportunity,

¹ This article is a revised version of the chapter *Hengstenbergkurse [Hengstenberg Courses]*, in *Emmi Pikler - Mehr als eine Kinderärztin [Emmi Pikler - more than a pediatrician]*, P. Zeitler Verlag, 2015, Munich. pp. 57-62 Translation, Peggy Zeitler

² Elfriede Hengstenberg was a trained and experienced gymnastics teacher, when she came to work with Elsa Gindler in 1917 and with Heinrich Jacoby at the beginning of the 1920s. She belonged to Gindler's inner circle of friends. She devoted her life to applying the Gindler- Jacoby approach to her work with children and finding ever new ways of answering their needs. (from: Strub: *Entfaltungen - Bilder und Schilderungen aus meiner Arbeit mit Kindern.*)

³ Elsa Gindler was a teacher of Harmonic Gymnastics in the 1910s. Her teacher, Hedwig Kallmeyer brought the work to Germany after studying Dynamic Breathing and Harmonic Gymnastics with Genevieve Stebbins in the U.S.A. From the 1920s onwards Gindler taught in her own name. She met Heinrich Jacoby, with whom she began a lifelong collaboration and together they went on to become pioneers in their holistic approach with widespread influence beyond the borders of Germany in many fields including among others gymnastics, physical therapy, dance, education and psychotherapy.

⁴ Heinrich Jacoby was originally a musician, composer and conductor. "1919, with the beginning of normal international relations at the end of the war, I presented my experiences and method of working in lectures and concert tours to a growing circle of people from all fields of study." He postulated, "[...] I was convinced at an early age, that what we so lightly call 'untalented' does not necessarily mean 'lacking in talent'. That 'not being able to do something despite great effort' should not be equated with 'having no talent for something'". (from: Jacoby, *Musik - Versuche - Gespräche [Music - Experiments - Discussions]*, 1986, Hamburg)

always strive to realize itself.

Based upon her meticulous observation of the abilities and needs of infants and toddlers, Emmi Pikler evolved the idea of a carefully prepared environment, which would constantly be adjusted to the state of the children's development at any one moment.

"With imagination and insight", Elfriede Hengstenberg "offered children things to do and objects to work with, so that they could explore the world around them and get to know themselves either in a quiet position or in motion. There was a certain consistency in what they experienced, since all objects, being subject to the laws of nature such as the earth's gravity, will react in the same way. Therefore, the responses they received to whatever they were exploring were predictable and reliable, influencing their reactions in a way that words could not."⁵

Elfriede Hengstenberg, like Emmi Pikler, "recognized that a child's need to do things on its own was an essential characteristic of its development. A toddler, in a secure and caring relationship with parents or caretaker, will be able to find inner balance, while searching for equilibrium in confrontation with the force of gravity. Children and teenagers, whose bad habits or poor posture are often evidence of disrupting influences in their development, find a new sense of orientation, when encouraged, in an understanding atmosphere, to explore with balance on their own."⁶

Gindler and Jacoby offered their adult students opportunities to experience their biological make up and development potential. "Instead of wanting to apply formal or aesthetic ideals to 'correct' the body through exercises on command or rhythmic stimulation, the emphasis in their educational concept was on becoming aware of oneself and allowing the *self-regulating* and regenerative processes of the body."⁷

In a letter to her "diligent Budapestester", Elfriede Hengstenberg describes what the perception of one's own functioning and reactions can lead to. "In the many experiments during this and last year's summer courses, you experienced repeatedly how various problems in daily life can be met with greater vitality and therefore more 'effectively' - solely by becoming more aware, more interested and more receptive to that which the moment demands of us."⁸

Little experiments demonstrate how the body reacts in new ways to our constantly changing environment, when habitual responses can be given up and contact allowed. "Do you remember the situation, in which we were able

⁵ Ute Strub in the foreword of Hengstenberg, Elfriede: *Entfaltungen – Bilder und Schilderungen aus meiner Arbeit mit Kindern. [Unfolding - Pictures and Descriptions of my Work with Children]*, Strub, Ute (ed.), 1991, Heidelberg

⁶ Ib.

⁷ Jacoby, Heinrich: *Jenseits von "Begabt" und "Unbegabt" [Beyond "Gifted" and "Non-Gifted"]*, Christians Verlag, 1991, Hamburg, p. 19

⁸ Hengstenberg, Elfriede in a letter: *An meine fleißigen Budapestester [To my diligent Budapestester]*, 1936.

to let a downward movement of the torso become a true experiment for the first time? When the only intention you had, sitting on the stool and bending over, was to wait for what wanted to happen, allowing the organism to take over with no conscious interference.

How clear the experience that day, that following the desires of the organism leads to unexpected discoveries and previously unimaginable experiences! What exactly happened? For everyone it was different, but for all of you it was meaningful. You felt how, under certain circumstances, you come to life. It happens all by itself. It wants to happen - without pressure, without making demands - a liberating sigh of relief. In our habitual way of living, however, we seem to be going to quite some trouble to inhibit our vitality and the function of regeneration!"⁹

In a later article we read, "What I notice the longer I study: the *Gemütlichkeit*¹⁰ with which the body does its job, forever wanting to tidy up, given the time and opportunity."¹¹

From Lili Edelstein, who also attended the Budapest summer courses: "Our experience with Hengstenberg had an impact on our everyday lives as well as on our work with children. From the moment we met Hengstenberg, we stopped giving orders like 'raise your arms, one, two, now lean over'. It was no longer a matter of leading rigid gymnastic exercises. Instead we encouraged the children to play an active role by contributing their own ideas to gym classes. We made suggestions and saw how the children used their imagination to enhance a class. When appropriate we picked up on their lead and developed something further. In this way new ideas occurred to us more and more often."¹²

For Emmi Pikler, meeting Elfriede Hengstenberg coincided with the period in which she was beginning to build her own practice. Hengstenberg, who had been working with children since 1915, came to Budapest with a wealth of experience and a series of photographs of the many children she worked with.¹³

Elfriede Hengstenberg, with her extraordinary ability to see the quality of children's movements, the harmony and the coherence of their motor activity,

⁹ ib.

¹⁰ The German word "*Gemütlichkeit*" is finding its way into English usage, there being no appropriate equivalent for it. The English expressions, "make yourself comfortable" or "make yourself at home," translate directly into German using the adjective form "*gemütlich*": "*Machen Sie sich gemütlich.*"

¹¹ Hengstenberg in: Zeitler, Peggy (ed.): *Erinnerungen an Elsa Gindler – Berichte, Briefe, Gespräche mit Schülern. [Memories of Elsa Gindler - Reports, Letters, Conversations with Pupils.]* 1991, München, p.92

¹² Interview with Edelstein, Lili: 1994, Budapest

¹³ A selection of material from Elfriede Hengstenberg's work was published by Ute Strub in 1991 under the title, *Entfaltungen - Bilder und Schilderungen aus meiner Arbeit mit Kindern. [Unfolding - Pictures and Descriptions of my Work with Children.]*

reinforced Emmi Pikler in her discoveries, which she was attempting to realize, against the prevailing ideas of the time, in caring for the families who came to her.

Elfriede Hengstenberg, on the other hand, saw with her own eyes in Budapest what being allowed to move independently meant for healthy children from the earliest age. This in turn influenced her work with parents, whom she encouraged not to interfere in the motor development of their infants and young children, right from the beginning.¹⁴

Working with Hengstenberg during the Budapest summer courses resulted for many in a fundamental change in their attitude towards life. It also had a lasting influence on Emmi Pikler. She experienced what a difference it makes in an interaction to 'be in contact' with the other, to be fully present and responsive to the other. The expression, 'to be in contact' with the other or with whatever you are doing, became a saying with her family and the people around her.

In Berlin, Elfriede Hengstenberg translated Pikler's book "Mit tud már a baba?"¹⁵ for Elsa Gindler using the French edition. Elsa Gindler, in her letter of thanks to Elfriede Hengstenberg, wrote: "That sounds as though we could have written it. Every mother should be given a copy."¹⁶

Emmi Pikler and Elfriede Hengstenberg met in later years two more times; once when Hengstenberg visited Budapest in 1968, and again in 1983 when Emmi Pikler visited Berlin.

¹⁴ Interview with Ute Strub, 1994, Berlin

¹⁵ Since Emmi Pikler rejected the shortened French version of the book that Hengstenberg had used for her translation, it was not published. A newly translated version first came out in Germany in 1982 with the title, *Friedliche Babys - zufriedene Mütter [Peaceful Babies - Contented Mothers]*

¹⁶ Interview with Ute Strub, 1994, Berlin