

Lili Ester Peller - Ein Nachruf

Dr. Peller, Varda, friends of Lili,

We are joined here today – months after Lili's death – to think of her in sadness and in joyful memories and to pay tribute to her.

As I tried to concentrate on how to put my feelings into words, ...

Nuschi Plank, Assistant Professor of Child Development, School of Medicine,
Western Reserve University Cleveland, Ohio

**IN MEMORIAM LILI ROUBICZEK PELLER
1898 - 1966**



**DISCIPLE AND CO-WORKER OF DR. MONTESSORI
IN THE VIENNA "HAUS DER KINDER" 1922/34**

L I L I E. P E L L E R

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MEMORIAL

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Waldorf Astoria

New York

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We are joined here today - months after Lili's death - to think of her in sadness and in joyful memories and to pay tribute to her.

As I tried to concentrate on how to put my feelings into words, I had in front of me a picture of Lili as a young girl, may be 16 years old: serious, serene, remote, and beautiful. It showed the daughter of an upper class family of Prague, the Roubiczeks, who by background was expected to be well educated, but not independent. Her father, a successful textile manufacturer, loved her but left her education to the mother, a beautiful society lady who had little understanding for Lili's goals in life, so different from her class and time, and found more joy in the older son, Kurt.

Like in a Southern American family of that time, the real care of the child was given to a "Fraulein", a warm and dedicated woman. Lili learned Czech from her and they remained very close to each other until Kosicchen's death in Prague as an old woman.

Prague at the turn of the century was prosperous but tense. It was the city where Rainer Maria Rilke was raised, where Franz Kafka was just on the threshold of adolescence when Lili was born. The German speaking minority formed the top layer, though the independent history of Prague until the 17th century was as distinguished or indeed grander than Vienna's. Formerly a seat of empire, Prague has the oldest Central European university - which Lili entered, to study biology.

Her interest in the study of life then became more specific and she turned to the study of the child and its tool: education. Could it be that her interest sprang from her wish to have been better understood as a child herself? She left home to be independent and went to Vienna where she studied psychology with Karl Buhler, who stimulated her interest in the development of language. This field was to become one of the major areas of exploration in her later years. But the real opportunity came when she decided, in 1921, to study with Dr. Montessori in London.

After returning from London, Lili Roubiczek, then 24 years old, started the "Haus der Kinder" - the Vienna Montessori School - and the Arbeitsgemeinschaft of five of us, then 16 to 18 years old, who helped in running it.

This was a peculiar beginning of an educational movement - in one of the drabest working class districts of the city impoverished by World War I, but full of the hope for the young republic which Austria had become. It was for us a time of serious dedication, but also of hilarious incidents, which give the real flavor of Lili at that time.

A day care center built during the war for children whose mothers worked in nearby factories had been remodeled by two English people, who - as so often with relief workers after a war - fell in love with Vienna and its potentialities. They and Lili had attended the Montessori course in London and planned to open the new school together.

Not only in my eyes, but for anybody who cared to look, this new school was a most unusual setting. The large hall - der Saal - was skillfully decorated and furnished, not only with Montessori materials but with everything that children needed to manage their lives independently during an eleven-hour day. Plates and bowls for the meals had been ordered in Dresden, in the right size, to be added to, a few years later by cups from the famous Bauhaus, a gift from our sister school in Jena. The furniture had been superbly built by a neighborhood Czech carpenter in his small basement shop. Lili - her legacy from Prague - conversed in Czech with Mr. Knize.

These perfect surroundings opened for 25 children, but the British people had returned to England and left no money for the operation of the school. The only income was a monthly allowance from Prague for Lili. I don't know whether the idea of the Arbeitsgemeinschaft would have developed, had there been money to pay salaries to workers; but it emerged as the plan that those of us who wanted to train as Montessori teachers would first have a year of practice in some area needed to maintain the school. I started in the kitchen.

I remember one incident that showed both Lili's imagination and our mode of operation. We lived mainly on potatoes and raw cabbage dunked in oil. Lili invented a kind of pressure cooker to save gas, by having a tight-fitting wooden lid built - but we forgot to put a safety valve in. My potatoes landed on the ceiling.

At the same time, we had small rolls baked for us of Graham flour, which one of us fetched by streetcar and knapsack from the finest bakery in town - I guess the allowance from Prague paid for it, too.

We all lived at the school. We slept on the children's cots and had everything put away to open an immaculate school by seven in the morning. Within a year we graduated to a small apartment. Water and toilet were of course outside in the hallway, as typical in a proletarian neighborhood at that time - a far cry from the comforts of Prague.

The way we lived, and our dedication, is very reminiscent of some peace corps workers of today - the same hope that what we did really mattered and would help build a better world. Evenings, we studied Montessori's books, learned Italian, so we would be prepared to understand her lectures when our turn came to go to one of the international training courses.

Dr. Montessori came to visit us about two years after work began. She trusted Lili explicitly - I think she was the only one of her students who could experiment and broaden the system. Lili accompanied her often on her travels, as catalyst and interpreter. Her dedication to Dr. Montessori at that time was limitless. Mario Montessori wrote me the following:

"The war scattered us who belonged to the heroic epoch of the Montessori movement (especially you girls in Vienna) and I lost track of Lili. I wrote her once after the

war--she hardly answered. I had the impression she had become indifferent. But my feelings towards her, made of great affection and admiration never changed. I wanted to thank her (and you all) for the courage, abnegation and devotion you had shown for the Montessori movement in a period which was especially difficult."

Within two years, the group of us young people had grown to 8; later to 14; but something even more important had occurred: Educators and social workers in Vienna had taken notice of our work, seminars began for kindergarten teachers working in the day care centers run by the city. A year or two later they were formalized into a two-year training course in the Montessori method which culminated in 4 months study with Dr. Montessori. Students came from many parts of Europe. It may be of interest to this audience that Erik Erikson was one of our students. Lili became a consultant to the Child Welfare Department of the City of Vienna, which planned for more than 10,000 children. The Montessori Verlag, producing equipment and furniture, manning exhibitions, and finally publishing a translation of articles of Dr. Montessori in book form as well as pamphlets of our own, came into existence - all through Lili's efforts. She wrote for progressive education magazines as well.

An even more helpful sign of recognition came when the City Welfare Department gave us a subsidy to operate the school. It is

almost incomprehensible how Lili achieved the recognition and active support from public sources within such a short time. None of us had any of the official credentials then. As a matter of fact, we despised the formality of prescribed training. But the exposure to learning, though within our own group, was tremendous. I want to mention particularly Siegfried Bernfeld's influence. Biology, dance, graphic art, as well as architectural planning, and finally psychoanalysis, were integrated into our learning through Lili's intoxication with them.

Many outstanding teachers in this field shared their enthusiasm with us. I want to single out two: Robert Walder who taught us Child Development: and Trude Hammerschlag, who inspired us teachers as well as the older children (by that time we had twelve five-to-ten-years-olds) by opening the door to creative art to us. She was a student of Franz Czizek, the first to recognize the genuine expressiveness of children's art.

We also had contacts with the Bauhaus and with architect Franz Schuster who was to build our new school a few years later. He spent two years drawing and patiently revising plans with us. Today - 36 years after it was finished - this school for young children could hardly be planned better.

The most fruitful exposure, though, for most of us came in the late 'Twenties when psychoanalysis and its meaning for educators and education opened up for us through Lili's vision. We had biweekly seminars with Anna Freud where we learned how

to observe children and to report for consultation. Some of us took the sequence of training for teachers at the Vienna Psychoanalytic Institute and had the good fortune to have the foremost analysts (now in England or the US) lecture to us or lead reading and other seminars.

Lili's own analytic training started with Bernfeld, and after he left for Berlin continued with Dr. Nunberg. Psychoanalysis first as it clarified the role of the educator and later as a therapeutic tool became her consuming interest. She was invited to participate in the seminar on child analysis which Anna Freud started as the training platform for the first child analysts. Lili's hope to interest Dr. Montessori in psychoanalysis did not succeed, though. This probably was the beginning of the loosening of their bond.

This, then, was the unusual about Lili in the European years: tremendous energy, knowledge, and imagination, which encompassed a wide variety of fields, and which showed itself also in dealing with the powers that be. She had no need for self-glorification. In looking through old materials I found my first publication, written when I was 19. It is a report on our summer camp, with some observations on the children's reaction to it. There was no senior author, or even any mention of Lili's name- though she had, of course, urged me to write it and arranged for its publication. I am sure many of you here could tell of similar incidents. In contrast to her later years, when Lili impressed me as having retained her youthfulness, she seemed then mature beyond her years;