

Gerda Boyesen 1922-2005

By Gill Westland

I found my way to the Centre for Biodynamic Psychology (Acacia House) in Acacia Avenue in West London in the late 1970's by word of mouth, which was the way things happened then. I was told that they offered a three year training in something called Biodynamic Psychology, an innovative psychotherapy which centrally involved the 'body and energies.' At the time I was working in psychiatric hospitals and wanted to extend my capacity to work with those who had mental health problems.

I found the centre exciting and stimulating. It was very much part of the zeitgeist and fitted with other aspects of my life – working in social therapy in psychiatry, living collectively and being involved in community action. Other happenings at the time in London were Red Therapy, the beginnings of the Women's Therapy Centre, the work of David Cooper and R.D. Laing in the anti-psychiatry movement, and Rosemary Randall and John Southgate's experimental work with communities.

The training was intensive and totally immersing. I used to travel from Cambridge two or three evenings each week and some weekends. I came back from training usually feeling great, but not knowing exactly why. My friends said that I glowed and that whatever I was doing I should continue. It was a risk-taking training and much value was put on following intuition and finding understanding later, if there was to be any. This remains counter-cultural to this day.

Gerda had been a psychologist in Norway, worked in mental hospitals and became interested in the positive results that the physiotherapists were having with the psychiatric patients. This led her to train in the methods being used by the physiotherapist, Addel Bulow-Hansen. Gerda was also an analyst and had been in

analysis with Ola Raknes. Raknes was part of Reich's professional circle in Scandinavia in the 1930s and so she experienced Reichian influenced analysis, but came to her ideas independently from Reich. She gave much credit to her training with Bulow-Hansen, and the massage work that she did, for creating profound change in her. (Bulow-Hansen's work is called Psychomotor Therapy and is still available.) Gerda came to London in 1968 where she felt that she would be freer to develop her ideas. This proved to be true. Gerda had the freedom to experiment and spent much of her time trying to bring the different influences on her (vegetotherapy and different forms of psycho-physiological massage) into a coherent framework. She was an enormously curious and skilled observer in her clinical work. She got results, but her inquiring mind wanted to know why. She was able to be speculative and would wrestle over time with her ideas. Her unique contributions to the field of body

psychotherapy as a whole are her theories about psychoperistalsis, tissue armouring, inviting energy impinging from within and the midwife approach; and her combination of biodynamic massage, rooted talking and vegetotherapy, which bridges the complementary therapies with body psychotherapy. She was constantly revising and developing her thinking and there is a fluidity about her work which is not easily pinned down and rigidly fixed as the way to do it. In her work any universal principle always depends on the unique individuals in the therapy session. Sometimes her theory doesn't stand up scientifically and a big stumbling block for psychiatry was a central focus on energy work. There was no room for this in the 1970s as it fell into what has been called 'forbidden science'. At the time I found it refreshing that my experience was what mattered, not something that I had read in a book and it did not bother me that the theory might not be quite right. The



ABOVE: Mary Malloy, Gill Westland and Clover Southwell at the funeral

therapy seemed to work anyway.

Looking back I think that the Centre for Biodynamic Psychology was in its heyday during the time of my training (1979-1983). There was a buzz about the centre, Gerda travelled and taught internationally. This attracted students and teachers worldwide. Groups were much larger than nowadays and there was the hubbub of lots of different languages – French, German, Swedish, Danish, Spanish etc. as the 150 or so students came and went and sat around in groups in the restaurant. Gerda wanted to make her work accessible to the public and there were open (walk-in) clinics and out-reach work. Guest trainers included John Pierrakos, Eva Reich, Jim Healey, and David Boadella.

Gerda wanted to dialogue and learn from others and a memorable event was when the psychiatrist, Dr David Clark from Fulbourn Hospital, Cambridge gave a presentation at the Centre. This was the hospital where I was working and it brought together two of the worlds I inhabited. Subsequently Clover Southwell came to run some staff groups at Fulbourn Hospital and ran movement groups for patients on an acute admissions



ABOVE: Richard Cleminson and Argentina Bianconi at the funeral

ward. Mary Hare, the Chief Physio-therapist at Fulbourn became interested enough to find out more about biodynamic massage. Her successor, Patricia Caddy has carried this on and for some years now biodynamic massage has been offered at Fulbourn Hospital by CBPC biodynamic massage certificate holders. Sadly it is hard to imagine that the dialogue between David Clark and Gerda could even be contemplated nowadays.

Acacia House felt welcoming and there was an acceptance of people as human beings who wanted to find out more about themselves. Entry criteria and suitable qualifications were far less important than now and the boundary between psychiatry and non-psychiatry was quite blurred. Sometimes people were given the chance to train who would not find their way into training in today's climate. This did not always work out for the best, but at

least people had been given a chance and personal history not used to exclude.

With Gerda's travels I was less personally taught by her than students prior to this or subsequently. Gerda always held out for joy, libidinous energy and pleasure and lived a vital life often against criticism. Fittingly her funeral was a mostly joyous occasion with us listening to Piaf's 'Je ne regrette rien' and singing Sinatra's 'I did it my way.' She was not perfect and she is well known for not being good at organisation or allowing others to help her with it for long.

What I learned at the centre was that the most important elements of a healing relationship are presence and contact. The only constraint was my own lack of capacity to simply be. I know that I began to learn how to be with people in all sorts of states and to be less afraid than I was. In opening to simply being it opened the door to spiritual development and my life's work. Ever since I have continued to practise how to truly be with another human being in a room in my work.

Gerda left her husband Dan, who was a strongly supportive stalwart, her children Ebba, Mona-Lisa and Paul who carry on her work.



ABOVE: Dan Smith (Gerda's husband) and Paul Boyesen (son)