

Stefan Laeng-Gilliatt has begun work on a book on the life of Charlotte Selver. He estimates it will involve about two years of research, interviews and reviewing past transcripts and audio recordings. The SAF is pleased to support this important effort and now has a way that tax-deductible donations can be made to the SAF earmarked for this specific project.



Report from the Charlotte Selver Oral History and Book Project

By Stefan Laeng-Gilliatt

Thanks to a generous group of supporters, among them the Sensory Awareness Foundation, I have the great privilege to realize a dream I've had for many years, a Sensory Awareness exploration of a different kind, namely to document Charlotte Selver's life. I embarked on this adventurous journey, which is projected to take about three years, late last year. The main goal for the first year of the project is to record memories from longtime students, family and friends of Charlotte. Now, a few months into the endeavor, I'd like to share with you some of what I have experienced and let you hear from three of the 23 people I have interviewed so far.

What has been most rewarding is to experience the warmth with which the interviewees have received me. Clearly, for most people it is as gratifying as it is for me to remember and share their "life with Charlotte". And I am always thrilled when the conversations go beyond the biographical to include an exploration of the significance of the practice of Sensory Awareness in our personal and professional lives.

One of my trips brought me to Santa Barbara, where Charlotte, together with her husband and colleague, Charles Brooks, started to offer workshops at La Casa de Maria in the late 1960s. For a catholic retreat center to host Sensory Awareness was at that time controversial. Don George was director of La Casa for much of the time Charlotte worked there: "When Charlotte was coming with her work, no one was doing that. It was so different from any other kind of learning we were being exposed to. When you see there are possibilities of doing things differently, that's really significant. And there are not that many things that come along that can hit you on the side of your head and say, wait a minute, here is a whole another world of being. Charlotte was a gem, and I admired her so much, but it was also that the work was altering the way we were being in our learning and, yes, in our spirituality even. I know she said it is not spiritual work, but it is. Today, we understand so much more of Gaia and the whole connection, but Charlotte had it back then and just didn't call it what we might call it today."

In Santa Barbara I also met with June Christensen. Her eyes sparkled with life when she opened the door to greet me. What a warm, immediate welcome! June, now in her eighties, was a dancer when she met Charlotte. Charlotte's relationship with dance, with performance in general, was complex and she often gave dancers a hard time in her classes when she sensed that they were performing and not exploring. I look forward to finding out more about this in the course of my research and writing. June: "Charlotte was very hard on dancers. Don't do any performing for her! She was the Germanic master when it came to that. But I learned how to put the spirit in the dance. Later, I gave up teaching dance and became very interested in learning, in education itself. I ran an alternative school looking at how kids learn, rather than what they're learning. [I was offering] a lot of movement along with that, honoring that many people actually learn kinesthetically. I did that and then I became a consultant for a couple of years, and then I started working with adults. And all that time I was doing sensory awareness classes off and on too, which Charlotte gave me permission to do. I clearly remember that experience: We were exchanging rocks, we each had a rock and we were walking around and exchanging. And in the reporting afterward I just said that it had come to me that giving and receiving were one thing". And June recalls Charlotte's response: "Now! Teach that! But don't tell your students, make them discover it for themselves."

Some interviews I conduct from my home in Santa Fe by phone: A few weeks ago I spoke with Sensory Awareness leader and psychologist Robert Kest in Montpelier, Maine. Among many other things I asked him about the relevance of Sensory Awareness for his professional life. Robert: "The issue of character was always an integral part of sensing for me. The first time I noticed this was in an experiment [moving other students' arms]: To just feel how totally different every person was, and to feel their whole life! Charlotte would ask the question: 'Are you working with an arm or with a whole person?' And moving their arm I could almost feel what their relationships are like with the world. Krishnamurti once said that we only have one relationship and that's our relationship with life, and we do it everywhere. The way someone walks, speaks, is with their breath, is in lying – their whole life is right there and in a given moment it can all show. Sensing really helped that sense of the whole person. So many people were talking about trying to integrate mind and body and spirit, but Charlotte was saying that's a misunderstanding. You're not integrating it, it's the same thing."

Because Charlotte lived such a long life, many – in fact most – of the people who knew her, are long gone. Thus, in researching her life before the 60s, I will largely depend on archival materials. But then there is serendipity too: A few weeks ago, a violinist from Germany contacted me because she needed information about a somatic practice for a paper she's writing. My brother, who is also a musician, had given her my address. So we had a conversation in which I told her about Sensory Awareness. A few days later she contacted me again to let me that know she had told a fellow musician about Sensory Awareness and Charlotte Selver. It turned out that this musician is the granddaughter of Erika Donner, who was a student of Charlotte in the 20s and later became colleague and friend with whom Charlotte kept in touch until the end of her life. I had known about her but assumed, rightly, that she was dead. I knew she had a son but wasn't sure if he was still alive and how I could find out. Well, this woman is his daughter and Dieter Donner is still alive and eager to have me visit when I go to Germany this summer. He already sent me an account by his mother, in which she wrote about her life and Charlotte. Learning more from Mr. Donner will be very helpful in shedding light on Charlotte's early years.

If you want to learn more about Charlotte's life and hear and read excerpts from interviews, go to www.CharlotteSelverBiography.org. There, you can also find out how you can support the Charlotte Selver Oral History and Book Project.

You know the way.

By Hannes Zahner

(A long time student of Ruth Matter writes about his impressions of her. Ruth studied with Heinrich Jacoby who next to Elsa Gindler was Charlotte Selvers' most influential teacher)

Hannes writes: "I send you a little story about my time with Ruth Matter in Switzerland. I did work for many many years with her.. She did not work with groups and so it was a very intensive experience to work alone with her. May be you have to correct a bit the language-errors. Mit ganz herzlichen Grüßen, Hannes."

Editor's note: since I don't know German I took a few liberties to adjust some of the language for clarity, attempting not to diminish too much its heart felt charm

"You know the way". This is what Ruth Matter often said to me when I once again left my individual session with her with open questions. She handled words sparsely and carefully. Just like her suggestions and directions, nearly primitive: "lift a foot. Feel how the hand weighs on the thigh, lift her and let her sink again. And repeat – no: do it once more, new".

Simple was the law . This was also reflected in her vocabulary: "Weight, pull, gravitation. "Let affect fade away.", " and get ready" . "Get ready to lift a finger." Often in an experiment for one hour nothing, for one hour, nothing but getting ready to lift a finger two millimeters and let it sink again. And then the experience, that in these two millimeters the wholeworld moved.

Her conveying of the work was persistent and seemed to flow in a logical progression From time to time there was, when I looked at the death mask she had on her piano,

a hint to the Swiss educator Pestalozzi*, This death mask of Pestalozzi was a heirloom from Heinrich Jacoby.

"You know the way!" The way for Ruth Matter was 'the Work' and she did not like to give long explanations on it. 'The Work of Heinrich Jacoby' was a declaration of love for her. She embodied this phrase with every part of her being; in the dignity of her person, in her alert and authentic interest. It was in her warm presence, which she showed during my time studying with her, it was in the soothing patience to leave something not yet in tune as the best at hand for now. Then from time to time she would give me a handshake that took a little longer than usual, indicating that something had changed in this session.

Sometimes she asked me to be passenger in her car when she drove on Saturdays to Kölliken. Well into in her eighties she didn't want to drive alone any more. At the steering wheel her normal leisureliness left her and the speedometer climbed above the allowed speed. With child-like pleasure she took shortcuts when there were too many cars; and her eyes had a young glow, when she talked about her first Mercedes cabriolet, at a time there where only two of them in the country.

Later I had the privilege to be her driver – sad to be not any more in the open Mercedes – on excursions to the favorite spot of Heinrich Jacoby. In memory this was a little nostalgic, but you could feel it was a good time for Ruth Matter as she remembered driving to a cosy seaside restaurant with Heinrich Jacoby to listen as he talked about 'the Work', listening, as now I did to her.

*(Editor's note on Pestalozzi from wikipedia.com : "His method is to proceed from the easier to the more difficult. To begin with observation, to pass from observation to consciousness, from consciousness to speech.")