

On Elsa Lindenberg and Reich

Courtenay Young

Abstract

This article explores the relationship between Elsa Lindenberg, a dancer, and Wilhelm Reich, a young psychoanalyst in the 1930s. They first met in Berlin and then moved to Denmark, Sweden and Norway. It was a difficult period, both politically with the rise of National Socialism in Germany in 1933, and personally as Reich's first marriage was breaking up, and they were both powerful and independent characters. Reich's radical views was also making him *persona non grata* in several European countries.

The significance of this relationship was that this was the first 'marriage' between psychotherapy and dance-movement therapy. Elsa had been trained by one of the first dance-movement therapists, Elsa Gindler, and, while they were living together, significantly influenced Reich in the development of his form of 'Body Psychotherapy'. She went on to develop her own form of dance-movement therapy, a form of which is still practiced in Norway today.

Introduction

This article originally emerged from an e-mail correspondence between Judyth Weaver, Michel Heller, Gill Westland, several others, and myself, immediately after the ISC-EABP Paris Body-Psychotherapy Conference, in November 2008. The discussion started around whether Reich ever had any direct contact with Elsa Gindler, as was indicated in someone's presentation. Some of this arose from an article written by David Boadella (an acknowledged expert on Reich):

"At the time of his life when he developed vegetotherapy, Reich's partner was Elsa Lindenberg, the German dancer and movement expert, and it is fascinating to speculate what influence she might have had in Reich's move towards direct involvement with the body at precisely this time in his life.

Elsa Lindenberg was a pupil of Elsa Gindler, a German movement teacher who left hardly any written accounts of her work, but who influenced a wide range of therapists.¹ ...

The work of Gindler, Selver, and Elsa Lindenberg is a work of great subtlety in which fine qualities of attention to the nuances of movement expression, and the intention qualities behind a movement are central. ...

Elsa Lindenberg was also strongly influenced by Rudolf Laban, with whom she had trained in Berlin. ...

There are many examples of dance principles being applied with psychotherapeutic understanding. Elsa Lindenberg's friend Trudi Scoop used a movement approach to help deeply disturbed children, in Switzerland. ... [Boadella, 1990, p. 9-10]

Whilst there is very little evidence that Reich ever met Gindler herself (though he might possibly have done in Berlin before 1933), there is no doubt that Reich was very influenced by Gindler's work through his relationship with Elsa. In a response to this article, David Boadella writes:

¹ Boadella had originally written here: "According to Eva Reich, Wilhelm Reich had a number of sessions from Elsa Gindler." This he recently rescinded in a personal e-mail saying that he possibly misunderstood her.

“ ... Either way, through Elsa’s contact with Gindler and with Laban, Reich certainly had an indirect influence from these body-therapists (Laban’s work later had definite therapeutic applications). For me it is not a coincidence that Reich developed vegetotherapy and his contact to bodily expression, exactly in this period of his early relationship with Elsa.” (personal e-mail, 25/11/08)

I have tried to trawl through the various biographies and references that I have available for a reasonably full account of Elsa and Reich’s relationship. Some interesting developments have emerged. Other people’s contributions are heartily welcomed.

Reich’s Perspective

The main relationship (after his marriage to Annie, with whom he had his first 2 children: Eva & Lore) that had a strong significance for Reich was the relationship that he had with Elsa Lindenberg. This lasted prior to, and throughout, his time in Norway (1934-39).

Reich had first met her in Berlin in about 1931, when she was still a dancer in the ballet of the Berlin (State/City/Municipal) ‘Staatsoper’ Opera. She was also “a dedicated, courageous political worker”, a communist and a part of the "Red Block Cell" on Wilmersdorfstrasse - a writers and artists colony - (described by Arthur Koestler in *The God That Failed*) and had heard of him before she met him. She was strongly attracted to him on a Communist march and they began seeing each other regularly from about May 1932 (Sharaf, p. 194). The affair was not a secret.

This affair started before he had definitively split with his wife, Annie. Annie and Reich had already had extra-marital affairs whilst still in Vienna together. With their move to Berlin in 1930/31, the marital relationship was basically over, even though they were still living together because of the children. But Elsa initially felt quite upset about having an affair with Reich, whilst he was still married and living with Annie. Reich assured her that the marriage was basically over, but he was having difficulty separating from his children. Elsa therefore suggested a face-to-face meeting with Annie during this break-up period in 1932, after which Annie (essentially) surrendered her hold on Reich. Reich had already had several other affairs and she realised that she could not prevent this one. Annie wrote a note to Elsa saying, “*Your happiness will be built on my tears*” [Sharaf, p. 195]. Relationships between Reich and Annie then deteriorated seriously during the rest of 1932, and they separated finally in March 1933, with Annie going back to Vienna, and divorcing in 1934.

Reich was still living in Berlin throughout this period, having moved there at the end of 1930, but life in Berlin was becoming more and more difficult. Elsa did not really want to leave Germany

but Germany was changing fast with the National Socialist take-over in April 1933, and Reich managed to get out only by the skin of his teeth. Elsa's position was slightly different, being 'employed' but she was also definitely a "leftist":

... In 1933 she was "removed" from the opera. Formal dismissal took place on 21 April 1933 on the basis of the "Law for the Re-establishment of the Professional Civil Service." She was accused of "activity harmful to the state." A warrant for her arrest was issued, but before her apartment was searched, Lindenberg and Reich had disappeared. (Karina & Kant, 2003, p 55)

Reich still had connections in Vienna, and, after leaving Germany, he had moved back there briefly to be close to Annie and the kids (who had moved back in March 1933, before Annie moved to Prague a few months later). He was also considering living in Denmark (on a temporary visa). Elsa obviously did not want to join him in a 'ménage à trois' in Vienna. Eventually, after an exchange of letters, Elsa decided to join him in Copenhagen in May 1933.

Reich said (later) that Elsa was one of the few people he really loved. He had started going out with her sometime in about May 1932, and then living with her from the time when he moved to Denmark (May 1933) to when they finally separated over his move from Norway to America in 1939. It was a complicated relationship, which had started quite badly, was never totally stable. Elsa was a very clear and independent person, and very different from his first wife, Annie. Their relationship was also complicated by Reich's clearly unresolved conflicts around his mother's "betrayal", her suicidal death, and his 'role' in the unfolding disaster, the death of his father, and the subsequent break-up of the family estates with the 1st World War: the details of this are quite well reported elsewhere. (viz: Boadella, 1973; Sharaf, 1983)

A bit of background history

Having met Elsa in 1931, Reich was in a sort of existential crisis that had started in about 1932. Despite later rumours, he was definitely not psychotic, but he was under severe stress. He had moved from Vienna to Berlin in the fall of 1930, partially because of his worsening marriage, partially to get analysis with Sandor Rado, partially because the German psychoanalysts seemed more open and advanced, and partially because the Communist Party there seemed to be more welcoming.

In 1931, things seemed to be going very well for him. He was lecturing extensively, giving courses, writing, and meeting people. He had started up a broad-based youth movement, trying to discover (practically) what communists and fascists had in common. And in the "Sex-Pol"

(sexual-political) field, he was working to combine many of the organisations devoted to supporting sexual reform, birth control, legal abortion, etc. There were about 80 of these organisations, with about 350,000 members in total, but all were in disarray and in conflict with each other. Reich wanted to unite these groups, and, with the initial support of the German Communist Party, he travelled extensively to many parts of Germany (Dusseldorf, Stettin, Dresden, Leipzig & Charlottenburg) throughout 1931, meeting youth groups, starting up clinics, and leading discussions (see Boadella, 1973, pp 82-3). This was the period when he met Elsa. But the Communist Party functionaries began to feel threatened by the inclusion of his emotional and psychological views and started to create problems for Reich, so he withdrew from a leadership role and tried to set up pilot schemes [Reich, 1994, xix].

He was also writing a lot at this time. In March 1932, he had started his own publishing house, *Verlag für Sexualpolitik*, which almost immediately published 4 books; one for adolescents, one for children, one for mothers (written by Annie) - all on demystifying sexual matters; and an extraordinary, revolutionary ethnographic book by Reich, *The Origin of Sexual Moralism* (later re-published and re-titled *The Invasion of Compulsory Sex-Morality*), initially well reviewed by Erich Fromm. There was good initial support from the German Communist Party, who distributed thousands of his books on youth sexuality, but, by December 1932, the wider political situation had changed radically and they banned his books from their lists.

His analyst in Berlin (Rado) for whom he had nominally moved to Berlin “to determine whether there were any neurotic motives behind his scientific conflict with Freud” [Sharaf, p. 193], had left for America for a short trip at the end of 1931, but then had decided not to return, because of the worsening political situation with the rise of National Socialism. Reich was also increasingly involved with his sex-pol activities and (according to Rado) wrote that he was stopping analysis because (these) responsibilities were so time-consuming. Rado later told Annie that Reich was suffering from an “insidious psychotic process”. Reich thought that Rado was jealous of Reich dancing with his wife [Sharaf, p. 193]. Anyway, the therapy didn’t work out and, as a result, Reich had no background analytical support, nor (apparently) regular time for self-reflection.

Reich was also still in an increasingly bitter intellectual, professional and scientific conflict with Freud back in Vienna, that started around the publication of *The Function of the Orgasm* in 1927, continued with his fairly radical views on marriage and the family, *Sexual Maturity, Abstinence and Marital Morality* (published in 1930), and his work in sex clinics and with the communists sealed the split.

His relationship to Annie was also seriously breaking up; by all reports he had had a couple of affairs (at least) but he still felt very attached and committed to the children. He had started a sexual relationship with Elsa in 1932, and, whilst pleasant, this was causing extreme emotional difficulties.

Politically, things were also becoming complicated for him as his 'communist' activities were making things increasingly difficult for him in Germany. The police had intervened and closed down the 'SexPol' movement in 1932. Finally, professionally, whilst there was a very strong ground-swell of support for his (SexPol) views and activities and great interest from people wanting to work and train with him, the more conservative Psychoanalytical Associations were beginning to cold-shoulder and reject him. So, all in all, 1932 was not a 'good' year.

In 1933, Germany became politically impossible for Reich, especially after the take-over by the Nazis, (the Reichstag Fire, 28th February 1933 happened the night Reich had just returned to Berlin from a trip to Denmark) and he was also aware of possible reactions to his (plans for the) publication of *Character Analysis* and *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (both were published in German in 1933: the former in Vienna; the latter via his own publishing house, technically (by then) based in Denmark). He moved briefly back to Vienna in March 1933, with the break-up of his marriage to Annie and her return to Vienna with the children, but the psychoanalysts there were quite hostile towards him.

He wanted the relationship with Elsa to continue, but (seemingly) on his terms. "*Between March and May 1933, Reich bombarded Elsa with letters urging her to join him in Vienna. He also persuaded mutual friends to encourage Elsa to join him there. Eventually, she joined him in Copenhagen in late May.*" [Sharaf, p. 196]

At that point, he had been invited by Tage Philipson (and others) to come to train people in Copenhagen, and so moved there in April-May [Boadella, 1973, p 89], presumably on a temporary 6-month visitor's visa. He was obviously busy, starting to train people and continuing with his therapy work and writing. Elsa had started some additional training that would help lay the foundations for her future career. There is little published material about this Copenhagen period. During this period, Reich began to develop his Character-Analytic Vegetotherapy work, and there is no doubt that Elsa (and her awareness of the body through her training with Laban and Gindler) influenced him strongly.

After a few months together in Copenhagen, they had to leave. Reich clashed with Danish officialdom in the fall of 1933 (over the renewal of his visa?) [for more details, see Boadella, 1973, p. 110] and in November he had been formally excluded from the Danish Communist Party (which he had never joined) [Ibid, p. 90]. So he moved across to 3-mile wide straight to Malmö in Sweden. This enabled his many Danish training candidates and students to commute across to see him and for Elsa to commute back to continue her dance work in Copenhagen.

However, in December 1933, he also took a holiday to investigate London as a possibility to live (but he didn't get on with Ernest Jones, the leading British analyst), then he visited Paris, Zurich, the Tyrol (for Christmas with Annie and the children), some communist friends in Vienna, and then travelled through Germany (already potentially dangerous for him) with a short stop-over in Berlin (where he met up with Elsa who had been visiting family and friends in Berlin whilst he was travelling) and they returned together to Sweden, back to their life in Malmö. Apparently Reich did not like Malmö much, but it was “better than a concentration camp”.

“Philipson, Leunbach and other Danish students travelled on alternate days for training. Students were referred from Oslo. It was an extra-ordinary situation. Malmö was like a big village. The police on both sides of the strait were aware that strange events were taking place. A secret service agent was set to watch the boarding-house where Reich and Elsa Lindenberg were living. Students were intercepted on their arrival and taken to the police headquarters for questioning. There was co-ordination between the two Copenhagen psychiatrists and health officials in Sweden. The Danish and Swedish police co-ordinated their activities. On the same day in April Philipson's house in Copenhagen was searched, whilst he was away studying with Reich, and Reich's room was searched by the Malmöan police, without a warrant. ... No charges of any kind were raised against Reich or any of his students. But his residence permit was not renewed.” [Boadella, 1973, p. 111]

With the help of Reich's students, Elsa had been commuting (back) to Copenhagen, where she spent several days a week continuing her dance work for a while, returning to Malmö for the weekends. She had been developing studies *“that influenced her work as therapist in body movement and as teacher in contemporary dance, using the principles of Reich's theory of muscular armoring.”* [Ollendorf, p. 26]

Elsa's Story

Elsa had started studying dance:

“... with a scholarship in the “gifted class” at the Helene Lange school on Berlin. In 1925 she enrolled in the Laban school of Herta Feist and completed her diploma there in 1927. From 1927 to 1933 she danced as a group dancer in the Municipal Opera of Berlin.” (Karina & Kant, 2003, pp 54-55)

As mentioned, her life was then caught up with Reich's, first in Berlin, then in Copenhagen, then Malmö, and finally in Oslo, until Reich's departure to the USA in the summer of 1939.

Sharaf paints a very different picture of their time in Malmö, possibly gleaned from Elsa's viewpoint: "*(They) found Malmö to be a quite unpretentious place, where "civilisation could sleep in 'law and order.'"* At night adolescents walked to and fro in the streets, separated by sex, and giggling at each other." But by June 1934, when Reich's Swedish visitor's visa expired, they had to leave and spent the early part of the summer illegally in Denmark (with Reich using an alias). They then travelled by car on a camping trip, across Europe, to Lucerne in August, with Reich's children: His daughter Eva remembered this trip as idyllic, with Eva "*dancing with Elsa, the smell of honeysuckle all around them; of free bodies exercising, and of bathing in the nude; of Reich being tender to Elsa in a way Eva rarely remembered his being with her mother.*" [Sharaf, p. 200]

By contrast, the 13th International Congress of Psycho-analysis in Lucerne, the nominal reason for the trip, was a professionally devastating event for Reich. Ernest Jones, the then President, had essentially manipulated his expulsion from the International Psychoanalytic Association, though there had been an increasing 'coldness' from the Berlin Association. However a "*special meeting was called, under Anna Freud's chairmanship, to 'hear Reich's case'. At this meeting Reich was again asked to resign. He refused to do so, and restated the reasons why he felt his work to be a consistent development of psycho-analysis and in no way contrary to its basic clinical findings. He also asked that if he were to be expelled the reasons for his expulsion should be published by the International Association.*" [Boadella, p. 114]

In a following 'closed' executive committee meeting, without him being present or being given an opportunity to respond, Jones and others attacked Reich's work and reputation. He was later 'allowed' to give the scheduled lecture he had prepared (believing he was still a member) which was a consistent development of his character-analytic work. This was actually a seminal piece of work and laid the basis for the development of his therapeutic Character-Analytical work. As it was, instead of with acclaim, he left the conference "a saddened man". There are about 2 months relatively unaccounted for after this point (end of August, 1934).

By November 1934, he and Elsa were living together in Oslo, where they basically stayed for the next 4.5 years. There is some published correspondence and journal entries of Reich's that comes into usefulness here. *Beyond Psychology: Letters and Journals: 1934-1939* was published in 1994

from the archives of the Wilhelm Reich Infant Trust, edited by Mary Boyd Higgins. It was followed in 1999 by *American Odyssey: Letters and Journals: 1940-1947*: both were published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

A conflict and a question

After 2 months, Elsa, rather surprisingly, went back to Berlin for several weeks in January 1935. Things had obviously been quite difficult between them, as Reich writes a personal note (on 20 January 1935):

“So Elschen is going to Berlin – I am faced with miserable loneliness. What sacrifice this mess requires| She thinks she will be back soon. No, it’s too difficult here with me. And I can’t stand lukewarm relationships. Either the contact goes without saying or ... In a way I am very angry that she is leaving me. I demand too much. We, E. and I, were living outside time! E. has escaped back into time. All this is gibberish. I am simply afraid of tying myself down to an unhappy situation – can neither let E. go nor chain her to me completely.” [Reich, 1994, p. 23]

On 28th January 1935, he writes: *“If only Elsa would get well!”* [Ibid, p. 24] There then follows a couple of letters written directly to Elsa (on 3rd & 5th February) that indicate a conflictual relationship, the possibility of her leaving him, and where he writes about her having analysis in Berlin. But ... nothing much else!

However Sharaf gives us a very different picture, gleaned from Elsa in an interview in 1977:

“The three years between the fall of 1934 and the fall of 1937 were among the happiest in Reich’s life. His relationship with Elsa Lindenberg continued to be a very satisfying one. Reich was supportive of Elsa’s work, acting on his belief in marital partners’ exercising their independence.” [Sharaf, p. 245]

He also writes:

“In addition, his highly sensuous relationship with Elsa, their shared common interest in bodily expression and movement heightened his sensitivity to variations in emotional changes as they manifested themselves in differing color, temperature and expression. Finally, he felt freer to break two strong psychoanalytic taboos – the taboo against touching the patient and the taboo against seeing the patient undressed.” [Ibid, p. 234]

But Sharaf also writes that Elsa told him that she became pregnant with Reich in 1935, but he (Reich) decided that she had to have an abortion and this was arranged for in Berlin [Ibid, p. 245]. This he reiterates on page 336: *(We recall that in the mid-1930s he had insisted that Elsa Lindenberg have an abortion.)* And this is where there is some confusion.

In the letters to her in February 1935 when she was in Berlin, Reich writes about analysis and about their relationship, and there is absolutely no mention of a pregnancy or abortion (though this

could be because of delicacy, or because it was illegal). However Reich states he wants a commitment from her. This conflicts with Elsa's (much later) account.

This is what Sharaf writes, taken from his interview with Elsa in 1977:

“In the early Oslo years at least, there was less reluctance on Elsa's part. When she became pregnant in 1935, she was overjoyed to have a child with Willy. Initially, he too was thrilled by the prospect and bought clothes and furniture for the coming infant. But then doubts set in. He felt that the future of his work was too unsettled to provide the right kind of environment for a child. To Elsa's great sorrow, he insisted on an abortion. They decided to have the abortion in Berlin, where Edith Jacobson, still practicing analysis and now also in the German resistance movement against Hitler, helped arrange the illegal operation.” [Sharaf, p. 245-6]

There are a couple of possibilities for the total lack of any of this material mentioned in Reich's letters to her in Berlin in February & March 1935. Either, there were taken out or lost, or the editor, Mary Boyd Higgins, has cut out this material, all of which is quite unlikely, as a later abortion (with Ilse Ollendorf) is mentioned in an added footnote. Alternatively (the explanation I prefer), Elsa may not have actually informed Reich of her pregnancy (then) and had just understood from him that he was clearly not at all open to having a child at that moment (Nov. 1934 – Jan. 1935), so she went off and decided to have an abortion whilst in Berlin without telling him. Her later (1977) memories may therefore have been 'adapted' by their later relationship or 'idealised' in some way.

There are several subsequent letters in *Beyond Psychology* from Reich to her whilst she was in Berlin where he states that he loves her deeply and would like to have children with her (March, 1935) [Reich, 1994, p. 35-6]. This would have been so totally insensitive as to be unbelievable if he knew that she had just had an abortion. If he didn't, it would probably have come over to her as very poignant, and it might also help to explain her subsequent independence and distance.

Elsa returned from Berlin in March 1936, and things seemed to have settled down for a while. But in the summer of 1936, Elsa had been invited to Dartington Hall, in Totnes, Devon to teach ballet at the summer school. Reich went with her. Dartington, in 1936, ... *“was one of the liveliest cultural centres in Europe, full of poets, musicians, dancers, and every type of craftsman. The latter included an attractive young Norwegian textile designer named Gerd Bergersen, who was in charge of the Dartington textile mill.”* [Wilson, 1981, p. 200-1]

There follows a fairly long, 'exclusive' section, in Wilson's book, on Reich's relationship with Gerd that was based on tapes sent by her to Wilson. But there is little other substantive evidence, so any details of this relationship have to be left with a question mark alongside them. There is

(perhaps) little doubt that there was some relationship, but the content, as described by Gerd, doesn't totally ring true. Reich's writings over this period do not mention her at all.

"2 August – 5 September, 1936: Alone by car: Oslo, Copenhagen, Gdnia, Kattowitz, Prague, Marienbad, Linz, Grundlsee (where he met with his children and Annie), Innsbruck, Zurich, Paris, Dieppe, Newhaven, Totnes, London, Elsbjerg, Copenhagen, Oslo!!

It feels good to be back again. Laboratory, work, home! Another 6,100 kilometres, another chapter closed. A new one is beginning."[Reich, 1994, p. 70]

He writes on 11th November: *"Elsa's reactions are severely neurotic: she impedes my work, is jealous of coworkers. And still, could I have done better? ... There is no solution. I want a child by Elsa and myself. It is so idiotic, now that I have everything I need to be happy. ... I love Elsa, her realness, but actually everyone is magnificent and it's only the plague that makes them the way they are."* [Ibid, p. 72]

In November 1936, he writes to Elsa as if he is distant and in a tone of betrayal in that she does not 'support' his work: *"You decry Sexpol as a bunch of neurotics. You insult them as "bourgeois," as rubbish. As a founder of the Sexpol movement I must protest."* [Ibid, p. 75] After this, she stays away from the Sexpol meetings. He also writes as if the relationship is over: *"How I loved Elsa! How sensitive I was to her. How her illness destroyed everything. How I preferred her to all other women. Fate?"* [Ibid, p. 82]

Despite his vacillations, he was committed to Elsa. *"In Norway, she was engaged as a choreographer at the National Theater in Oslo. Elsa Lindenberg became Reich's second wife, and although the relationship never was legalized, it was a binding, marital relationship to their eyes and to the eyes of the world."* [Ollendorf, p.27] She became involved in choreography for a "red revue" at the Arbeidersamfund and worked temporarily from 1935 to 1939 for the Arbeiderteatret (Workers Theatre). However, it was not easy. Elsa suffered the common fate of emigrants in foreign countries in those days. She wrote a letter from Oslo in April 1936 to Aurél von Milloss, with whom she had studied:

Personally, I have no contacts with the local dancers and theatre people, whoa re all terribly afraid of the competition ... and I have only been able to appear on stage as a guest here, although I want to work permanently ... (quoted in Karina & Kant, 2003, p. 55)

She developed her work and eventually built a new career in Oslo, independent of Reich's work, so much so that, when things began to deteriorate (from the vicious newspaper campaign from September 1937-November 1938), Reich began to see her work as 'outside' his and thus her as *"representing the outside world that was attacking him, and so all his reaction to the outside world was unleashed against her."* [Ollendorf, p. 45]

As mentioned, there is a lot of speculation about how much Elsa influenced Reich. Heller writes:

“Before Reich met Lindenberg, he had focused on behavioural patterns. However, like Braatøy with Büllow-Hansen, after he met her, he began working on breathing and movement as spontaneous expressions of deep psycho-organic forces such as those that can be experienced during orgasm.

According to Helen Payne (2006), Reich learned how to understand movement with Elsa Lindenberg and Elsa Gindler (1995). She taught him to perceive the more subtle variables of movement (Johnson, 2000). Elsa Lindenberg had been trained to acquire a broad knowledge of what could be done with breathing, posture and movement. In Oslo, she worked as a choreographer, participated in the development of Reich’s vegetotherapy, and created her own form of dance psychotherapy, which is still taught in Norway.” [Heller, 2007b, p. 83]

There is no doubt that Reich and Elsa created something of a ‘golden circle’ in Oslo in those pre-war years. Gerda Geddes, who later introduced Tai’Chi into Britain, recalls her time then as a young Norwegian woman:

“Amongst those who were drawn into the Reich/Lindenberg circle were A.S. Neill, the Scots-born educational pioneer who went on to create Summerhill, the laissez-faire ‘free’ school in Suffolk where children made their own decisions about their education. Other members of the circle were Ola Raknes, Gerda’s therapist, and Gerda herself.

“The analysis certainly released my pent up energy. I threw myself into a two year dance course and attended every lecture at the Faculty of Psychology at Oslo University [where Reich taught], read anatomy and philosophy, took singing lessons, and attended seminars with Reich’s girlfriend, Elsa Lindenberg. I also fell in love again, this time with a beautiful dancer, painter, and dress designer. Life was really swinging. I had lots of lessons with Elsa Lindenberg. She taught movement, not exactly dance although she was a dancer and came from the Berlin opera. She had been in the Berlin Opera Ballet. She was trained in ballet but she changed it into Reichian ways of movement. It was also very avant-garde and I was in the front of this movement.”” (Woods, 2008, p. 70)

The rest of the story between Reich and Elsa is quite well documented in *Beyond Psychology: Letters and Journals 1934-1939*, [Reich, 1994] with some of the final letters between them (once Reich was in America) in *American Odyssey: Letters and Journals 1940-1947* [Reich, 1997]. These also outline a number of different relationships, particularly the increasingly difficult one with his (then) almost teenage daughter, Eva. There had been a long emotional separation between Reich and Eva that was extremely painful to them both. They had met in the summer of 1935 for an annual visit, with Eva then wanting to come and live with Reich in Oslo. She then didn’t meet with him for Christmas 1935, nor in the summer of 1936, nor apparently throughout 1937 and into the summer of 1938. In March 1938, after Hitler had annexed Austria, Annie and the 2 girls emigrated to America, arriving there in July. Eva wrote to him from America in August 1938. Much later, Eva felt that Annie and Berta Bornstein (Eva’s analyst) had “brainwashed” her into feeling that her father was seductive and sick. He was certainly the former, but not necessarily

towards her.

Sharaf's perspective of Reich is generally quite admiring, but also quite unsympathetic. There are also significant and quite 'different' perspectives of the relationship between Elsa and Reich in Sharaf's book. He had interviewed Elsa in 1977 for his biography on Reich, *Fury on Earth*, and had also interviewed a number of other people connected with Reich. Reich himself had, of course, died from a heart attack in prison in 1957.

During their time in Norway, Reich was practicing Vegetotherapy and was becomingly increasingly obsessed with his scientific 'Bion' experiments. Elsa was not interested in this area of his work and intellectually they began to drift apart. The next significant set of events that happened in Norway was the vicious newspaper campaign that started in late 1937. Elsa and his close colleagues noticed a distinct change in him.

"Hoel commented that after the campaign Reich ceased to be such a good therapist: "He began to take out his anger on his patients. He never did that with me, but he did it with others. I saw him crush several people. That was unforgivable because he was the strongest one in the group. Unforgivable!" [Sharaf, 1983, p. 253]

Sharaf also gives an account of Reich being seduced by one of his patients about this time. He was becoming more distant from Elsa and many close friends. His scientific work with the 'bions' was obsessing him, and taking him further away from the shared knowledge base that those around him had. As the newspaper campaign intensified into 1938, the changes in Reich's persona became more noticeable. Sharaf writes, *"Reich's most striking symptom during this time was his jealousy towards Elsa. Until 1937, he had been supportive of her career; now he wanted her closer to him, sharing his life and work entirely, without other distractions."* [Ibid, p. 254]

He describes a jealous reaction of Reich's to a composer colleague of Elsa's where he blacked the composer's eye.

"Following this outburst, Elsa refused to return home with Reich but went to stay with a friend. Reich followed her there and, at first, continued his jealous accusations. Somehow or other, they finally made up and went home together. But for Elsa the relationship was scarred. This kind of incident made Elsa less committed to Reich. Shortly after the tumultuous evening, Reich asked her if she would emigrate to America with him. She replied: "No," though she admitted: "It was the hardest 'no' I ever had to say." She felt she had to get back to herself, to protect her independence against Reich's demands, and to consider calmly whether she really wanted to continue their relationship." [Ibid, p. 254]

Sharaf then continues:

"Reich's jealousy must have been all the more painful to Elsa because he himself had been having an affair quite recently with a young Norwegian textile designer named Gerd Bergersen. This relationship, more serious than the one with the actress-patient,

came to light in the late 1970's, when Gerd sent tapes describing her involvement with Reich to Colin Wilson, who was working on (his biography)." [Ibid, p. 255]

Apparently Reich had met her in 1936, and 'Reich pursued her': *"There was no suggestion that any effort was made to conceal their relationship from Elsa even when it became a sexual one. ... At one point Elsa became hurt and disturbed by their growing intimacy. She was now in the same position – that of the injured wife – to Gerd as Annie had once been to her."* [Ibid, p. 255]

However, as mentioned, Reich does not mention her in his writings and (perhaps) this relationship was something considerably less than made out by Gerd: the only evidence she seems to provide is her own account on tape. Wilson's book has other inaccuracies.²

Reich was finding it increasingly difficult to stay in Norway. There was the newspaper campaign; he was having difficulties with his licence requirement to practice therapy; he was having difficulties with his colleagues; he feared a German invasion; and then there were all these complications in his personal life. Reich eventually decided to leave Norway for America in the spring of 1939, and soon after that decision, Elsa separated from Reich and found a place for herself. She had definitely decided not to go with him, but that did not completely rule out the possibility of her joining him later. He wrote to her on 18th April, and met with her around 21st April.

Because of several delays with his visa, Reich was waiting in Oslo throughout June and July 1939. On 4 August, he wrote: *"Tonight Else was with me. (We both knew that the separation is both necessary and tragic.) There is a part of me that she understood better than anyone else. Her morals are those of a beautiful wild animal that acts in accordance with its nature."* [Reich, 1994, p. 228]

He sailed on 21st August: *At sea. Today I made a woman happy, but I wanted Elsa. Can't free myself of her."* [Ibid, p. 229] He wrote to her from the ship on 23rd August, describing how he had cried a good deal on the trip, how he missed her, and wanted her to join him. Here he is reminiscing about their time together:

"And even deeper, and far more exciting, the small blond sister. And over it all, embodying everything, there is Elsa with the slightly dreamy eyes – blond, beautiful, in the middle of some dry studies on character neuroses and cancer – nothing but nasty subjects. Through you I was connected in Berlin and then with the great catastrophe I

² viz: "Elsa Landenberg" twice on p. 9

experienced, with so much loss of energy. Then there was Drammensvejen – the new beginning, the first blossoming of my own scientific research. With it is associated our physicality, which I will probably never find again.

If finally I have thanked you so copiously, it is because I am moved by a vague emotion that only now is capable of being expressed in words. ...

Elsa, I loved you very, very much – very much indeed. Farewell.” [Ibid, p. 230]

War broke out on 3rd September, ten days after he sailed. He wrote long letters to her from New York on 8th & 17th September and, after a letter from her, again on 16th October, starting “*My dearest, darling Elsa,*” ... However, in a private note on 25th October, he wrote:

“Life is amazing! In the evening I sent a telegram to Elsa, and two hours later I found myself close to falling in love with Ilse Ollendorf. She seems very compatible. Poor Elsa! Or didn’t she write because she has found someone to comfort her? How fervently I wanted to prove that a Jew can be perfectly happy with an Aryan woman!”

[Ibid, p. 246]

On 27th October, he wrote: “*Without being entirely aware of it, she (Ilse) is very clever, pretty, and she has a body that reminds me of Elsa, except that she is brunet. Actually, I am extremely happy that she is with me and that I am no longer alone. She could easily become my wife. And now, what about Elsa? Will allow matters to take their natural course.*” [Ibid, p. 246]

On 28th November, he wrote: “*Whether Else or Ilse is to become my wife here in the USA. Have a feeling that Elsa would not be able to cope with the situation and am constantly growing closer to Ilse. She’s very dear.*” [Ibid, p. 249]

By Christmas, he had decided to marry Ilse. “*I still love Elsa but I wish her what she wishes for herself – that is to be able “to live.” There is no “life” here. I wish her much, much happiness.*”

On 30th December, he wrote: “*Ilse is pregnant – 6th-8th week. Wasn’t able to conceive for years. Now what? Elsa? Guess that settles matters. This could be cause for great joy, but in reality it’s an enormous tragedy. Elsa will commit suicide.*” There is a telling footnote: “*This pregnancy was aborted.*” [Ibid, p. 249]

In the beginning of 1940, even though he was now living with Ilse Ollendorf, he was privately mourning Elsa. “*Still suffering about Elsa – poor girl! But she would not be able to stand it here. How dearly I love her! How cruel life is! If I could have her with me for just one evening – but we are forced to be power politicians.*” [Reich, 1999, p. 12]

Elsa recalls: “*that he wrote her a letter about this time that revealed his sense of personal despair and hopelessness more fully than she had ever seen before. He no longer blames Elsa but himself for the failure of their relationship. He wanted Elsa to be happy and he believed that he brought*

knowledge to the world but not happiness. He did not believe in his personal future but his downfall – he would die alone like a dog. He would not experience any rest or peace. He did not want Elsa to share this fate. Elsa belonged to another world of which Reich had dreamed all his life – a world of peace, joy, sunshine and companionship. Reich could not give her this in return. It hurt him terribly, for Elsa was among the very few people who understood him.” (Sharaf, 1983, p. 274)

In contrast, Reich wrote on 3 March 1940: “*A possible letter to Elsa:*

My Elsa: Your short letter was shattering. You wrote that I had ruined your happiness. No, not I, but it ruined your happiness. I still feel as though blocked, cannot find my old path or regain my previous temperament. Did I lose it – along with you? I don't know. ... You yourself wrote that you would be destroyed if I were suddenly to leave you. However, I would not do that, but it would. And therefore it cannot be. Elschen, please keep on loving me just a little. I have so few friends and I would like you to be one of them.” [Reich, 1999, p. 12-13]

He wrote a long letter to her in November 1940 [Ibid, pp. 39-41] where he is chiding her for being inconsistent. He also says: “*I live without love and I am not prepared to give myself to someone else as I once did. I will be happy if you can establish your life again here, if I have the chance to see you again. But I cannot satisfy your wish that I should tell whether and how there can be anything between us. You will not possess me in the way you did in the past, although you still live on inside me.”* [Ibid, p. 39-40]

His last letter to her in this collection was dated 14 May 1945 and is almost business-like, with virtually no emotional content. [Ibid, pp. 280-281]

There are a couple of photographs of Elsa, taken in 1932, in Sharaf's book, and, in *Beyond Psychology*, one of her and Reich skiing in 1934, and a radiant full-page photo of “Meine Elsa” taken in 1939. There is also an interesting photo attached to an article on Reich, by Alan Cantwell, on a website; showing Reich and (probably) Elsa wrestling together on a beach, semi-naked.³ It is also possible to view an interview with her on DVD (Marcovicz, 2004).

Some other snippets appeared as well in Boadella's and Ilse Ollendorf's biographies and in Placzek's *Record of a Friendship: The correspondence between Wilhelm Reich and A.S. Neill*. There is also some subsequent information from correspondents. Some of these are revealing:

³ <http://www.heyokamagazine.com/HEYOKA.3.WILHELM%20REICH.htm>

One bit of the jigsaw missing so far is the connection with Clare and Otto Fenichel.⁴ Otto Fenichel was a fellow medical student, who developed a close friendship with Reich at university from about 1919. Both were interested in sexual politics, sexology, Marxism, Freud's work in psychoanalysis, and body language; both later studied psychoanalysis and Fenichel referred Annie Pink, (who Reich had met before but who later became Reich's first wife) to Reich as a client and he was even best man at their wedding. Fenichel then moved to Berlin in 1922, several years before Reich did. Clare Fenichel trained with Gindler since about 1915, and, in those early days in Berlin, Reich's daughter Eva remembers the many Sunday picnics with their close friends, the Fenichels, where her father would assiduously question Clare about Gindler's work (Weaver, 2008). So these influences all pre-dated Reich's work with the body and also his relationship with Elsa Lindenberg. In 1932, Fenichel seemed to support Annie in her break-up with Reich and, subsequently, Reich felt let down by Fenichel in 1934, feeling that Fenichel had not supported him properly in the Berlin Psychoanalytical Society and at Lucerne. However, the big break-up between them came at a meeting in December 1935, described well by Sharaf (pp 246-8), where Fenichel, then also living in Oslo, sided with the more conservative Freudians, which therefore made him seem *against* Reich. Reich felt very betrayed by Fenichel, who had also seemed to suggest (as others had done) that Reich was somewhat psychotic, though the break-up of the relationship affected them both deeply. Fenichel then moved to Prague, and, in 1938, to Los Angeles, and they never met again. Lore Reich (his 2nd daughter) wrote an article showing that the villain in this story was Reich's psychopathological mistrust, while Fenichel remained a wounded 'best friend' until he died in 1946. He organized a secret 'Rundbriefe' series of 119 letters that kept Marxist (and other) psychoanalysts in touch between 1934 and 1945, many of these dealt with Reich's expulsion from psychoanalysis.

Others who write about Elsa include Reich's third 'wife', Ilse Ollendorf:

"All through his life Reich idolized his mother. No other woman's cooking over the years, for example, could ever reach her perfection. Elsa Lindenberg, Reich's second wife, told me that she was never able to make apple strudel just like his mother used to make, and no matter how hard I tried I could never produce a special cabbage dish that he liked exactly the way his mother had made it. I once came very close to it when I slightly burned the cabbage, and ever since I have had my private doubts about Mrs Reich's perfection as a cook." [Ollendorf, p. 3]

"To save her own work, her integrity, Elsa chose in the beginning of 1939 to leave Reich and not to accompany him to the United States, painful as this decision was for both of them."

⁴ I am grateful to a personal e-mail from Michael Heller (25/11/08) for this section. I have used some of his material as well as material gleaned from other sources (Sharaf, 1983; Boadella, 1973)

I found very little bitterness in Elsa's recollections of her life with Reich, but much sadness and a ready acknowledgement of the insights gained. The only bitterness that I could discern had to do, again, with money matters. When Reich and Elsa separated there was no financial settlement involved. Reich felt that a woman able to earn a living had no right to alimony payments, and he always compared such payments to some kind of prostitution. ... Elsa was earning a fair amount at the time of the separation. But after the German invasion she lost her job, had to go underground, and eventually fled to Sweden. Absolutely penniless, she overcame her pride and wrote to Reich for help. He sent her twenty-five dollars. ..." [Ibid, p. 45-6]

The 2nd World War started in September 1939 with the invasion of Poland, and Germany invaded Norway in April 1940. In a personal note on 15th Jan 1940, Reich writes: *Poor Elsa! She made a very stupid mistake.*" And in a letter from Reich to Neill in Nov 1940:

"Elsa is still in Norway and struggling to come over here, that means to accomplish a matter a matter which she could have easily a year and a half ago. But this comes from the misinterpreted 'Selbstständigkeit' [independence]."* [Placzek, p. 42]

The footnote reads: * *"Reich means that she could have come with him, presumably either as his assistant or as his wife. They broke up shortly before he left Norway for the United States."*

Sharaf paints a different picture, almost certainly 'coloured' by Lindenberg:

"Elsa herself was hurt and angered when Reich wrote to her breaking off their romantic relationship; she fought hard to win him back. His desire to reunite would well up from time to time and he would invite her to come to America to "see" in person how things were after all the inner changes that had occurred. Then, in April 1940, Hitler invaded Norway. Though Reich was prepared to do everything he could to get Elsa a visa, the chances were now very slim. Moreover, Elsa had little heart for coming to America not as Reich's mate. She preferred to stay in Oslo, despite the suffering she faced from the German occupation. She was never arrested but on several occasions had to flee to Sweden; the war years were also a time of severe financial and emotional hardship for her.

When I interviewed Elsa Lindenberg in Oslo during the late 1970s, she was seventy years old, strikingly attractive and vivacious. She could still show great emotion when she recalled Reich's jealous rages, his affairs, and above all what she believed to be his abrupt termination of their relationship after his passionate letters during the fall of 1939. She spoke of Reich with a mixture of tenderness, passion, humor, and criticalness that revealed a deep, genuine, and unsentimental love. ... After Reich, Elsa never had another serious relationship with a man, although she was only in her early thirties when they parted.

Although Elsa truly loved Reich, she did not especially love his work and could not follow the natural-scientific research. For a few years after World War II, she taught a form of dance therapy that was much influenced by his psychiatric concepts. Today, she is a much respected teacher of the Gindler method in Oslo." (Sharaf, 1983, 274-275)

Elsa's life in Norway under the Nazis, albeit that she was safer than many was however not easy. According to a different source, Ida Korswold, a close collaborator and the administrator of her estate:

“As a result of Gestapo investigations she had to contract a “marriage of convenience” with a Norwegian. By 1944 she was on the list of wanted people and fled to Sweden, where she hid until the end of the war. After her return to Oslo in 1945 she was persecuted because she was German. Later the Norwegian government rehabilitated her and she was awarded a state pension.” (Karina & Kant, 2003)

I doubt that we will now ever discover the full details of the relationship between Reich and Elsa, though it is for sure that they had a powerful influence on each other, and whilst they both loved each other deeply, their different histories and interests predicated an almost inevitable end to their relationship, cemented by overwhelming historical events. With respect to the ‘history’ of Body-Psychotherapy, it now seems certain that Reich’s development of Vegetotherapy was more than just strongly influenced by Elsa Lindenberg and the work that she had done previously with Elsa Gindler and others on movement therapy: Lindenberg was central to this development. However, it is still all too easy to see Elsa’s life and work as a reflection of Reich’s work. What I have tried to indicate is that it is more than possible that Reich was deeply influenced by Elsa and that the practice of Vegetotherapy has its roots in her work, as much as his. However, her own legacy in dance-movement therapy, in Norway, is profound.

There is a very illustrative section in the biography of Gerda ‘Pytt’ Geddes (Woods, 2008, pp. 56-85). She was the person who later brought Tai’Chi to Britain. However, her own therapeutic work grew out of a combination of influences, particularly from the character analytical psychoanalysis (Vegetotherapy) that she had, initially from Ola Raknes and later from Tage Philipson, and the dance movement work that she did with Elsa Lindenberg, in Oslo in the late 1930s and early 1940s and later from Birgit Aakesson, in Sweden. By the end of the war:

By now Gerda was almost thirty. She had survived the war, turned her exile in Sweden into a constructive opportunity that had furthered her development both in dance and in psychotherapeutic skills, and had worked through the problems with her mother in a way that had enriched and deepened their relationship. Her job at the cutting edge of contemporary drama was fulfilling and she used her abilities to the utmost, and she had private patients with whom she practiced psychotherapy. Life was almost complete ... (pp. 84-5)

The perceptions that Gerda developed stayed with her throughout her life. This is just part of the legacy of these two brilliant people, Wilhelm Reich and Elsa Lindenberg, that helped to create ‘The Golden Age of Body Psychotherapy in Oslo’ as well as a foundation for Dance-Movement Psychotherapy.

References

Boadella, D. (1973) *Wilhelm Reich: The evolution of his work*. London: Vision Press.

- Boadella, D. (1990) Somatic Psychotherapy: It's roots and traditions. *Energy & Character, Vol. 21, No. 1.*
- Johnson, D.H. (2000) Body practices and consciousness: A neglected link. *Anthropology of consciousness, 11, pp 40-53 (Mentioned in Heller, 2007b)*
- Heller, M.C. (2007a) The golden age of body psychotherapy in Oslo I: From gymnastics to psychoanalysis. *J. of Body, Movement, Dance in Psychotherapy, Vol. 2. No. 1.*
- Heller, M.C. (2007b) The golden age of body psychotherapy in Oslo II: From vegetotherapy to nonverbal communication. *J. of Body, Movement, Dance in Psychotherapy, Vol. 2. No. 2.*
- Karina, L. & Kant, M. (trans J. Steinberg) (2003) *Hitler's Dancers: German modern dance and the Third Reich.* Oxford & New York: Berghahn Books
- Marcovicz, D. (2004) *Wilhelm Reich: Viva Little Man.* (DVD)
- Ollendorf, I. (1969) *Wilhelm Reich: A personal biography.* London: Elek.
- Placzek, B.R. (ed) (1981) *Record of a Friendship: The correspondence of Wilhelm Reich and A.S. Neill.* London: Victor Gollancz.
- Payne, H. (2006) Tracking the web of interconnectivity. *J. of Body, Movement, Dance in Psychotherapy, Vol. 1. No. 1.*
- Reich, W. (1994) *Beyond Psychology: Letters & Journals 1934-1939.* New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Reich, W. (1999) *American Odyssey: Letters & Journals 1940-1947.* New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Sharaf, M. (1983) *Fury on Earth: A Biography of Wilhelm Reich.* London: Andre Deutsch.
- Weaver, J. (2008) Sensory Awareness — The Heart of Somatic Psychotherapy: From Sensory Awareness to Somatic Psychotherapy: retrieved 25/11/08 from <http://www.judythweaver.com/sensory-awareness-the-heart-of-somatic-psychotherapy/>
- Wilson, C. (1981) *The Quest for Wilhelm Reich.* St Albans: Granada.
- Woods, F. (2008) *Dancer in the Light: the life of Gerda 'Pytt' Geddes.* Aberdeen, Psi Books.