

***A Visit to RIE (Resources for Infant Educarers) –
Exploring Emmi Pikler’s Work in America
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In January, leaving the New England winter behind, Rena Osmer and I traveled to Los Angeles to pursue our interest in the work of Emmi Pikler. Each of us had discovered her ideas and writing through different avenues, and had become increasingly certain that this approach to understanding infants and very young children had a valuable contribution to make to Waldorf early childhood teachers. Emmi Pikler’s research on the early motor development of the child has inspired Helle Heckmann, founder of the Nøkken child care center in Copenhagen, among others.

A practicing pediatrician in Budapest, Dr. Pikler made an early mark through her deep personal engagement with the families of her young patients and her advocacy for the child’s freedom to develop the early motor stages without intervention or unnatural encouragement from well-intentioned adults. It was said that if one visited a playground in Budapest that the “Pikler babies” could be easily identified because of their fluid, graceful, and confident physical movements. Out of the recognition of her experiences in her private practice, she was invited to create an institute that would serve as an orphanage for young children from birth to three years of age. This she did, and became an intimate observer of the babies and a thorough researcher. Her studies demonstrated clearly the value of attentive care giving, unrestricted motor movements, and respect for the child.

A mother who sought out Dr. Pikler as a pediatrician for her own children, Magda Gerber was inspired by Dr. Pikler to take up child development studies. Magda came to work at the Loczy Institute with Dr. Pikler, and became a close colleague there. At the outbreak of the Hungarian revolution in the 1950’s, the Gerbers immigrated to the United States where Magda eventually found herself in southern California. Here she observed the deep need of parents for support in their parenting responsibilities and she endeavored to find a way to bring her experiences with Dr. Pikler into this new context. She eventually founded the RIE (Resources for Infant Educarers) center in Los Angeles.

Through Magda’s expertise and teaching, the RIE center began to offer parent-infant observation (sometimes called ‘guidance’) classes and a three-step training for such teachers as well as training for childcare providers. Other RIE training graduates have also taken up this work and offer parent-infant classes throughout the Los Angeles area.

We arrived in southern California only to find that we had not exactly left winter behind, but had discovered another aspect of it, as we dressed in ever more layers to meet the challenges of no central heat. But our work thoroughly warmed us, as we joined seven other eager participants in the RIE I intensive course.

Our training was given by Magda Gerber herself, who despite her age of 85 years joined us each day for conversation, questions, and sharing from her life’s experiences and the wisdom she has gathered through them. Carol Pinto, an original board member of RIE and the current president who also teaches a parent-child class at the center led our training. Carol’s own movement studies led her to Feldenkreis work that long with visits to the Loczy Institute in Budapest, has illuminated her work with Magda Gerber. Our days included lecture content on infant gross and fine motor development, the social and emotional development of infants and toddlers, and videos on each theme. In addition, we had the opportunity to view spectacular films Emmi Pikler’s work in Budapest, the Loczy orphanage, where her longitudinal

research was carried out. Our course content was supported by traveling throughout the region to observe RIE principles in action in family and institutional childcare centers as well as parent-infant classes.

The special opportunity to view the original Loczy black-and-white films was one of the highlights of our work. These old films showed the intimate caregiving routines with these infants and toddlers, and included the step-by-step developmental changes in their feeding, bathing, and diapering that unfolded as the children grew and developed. Rena and I were profoundly struck – as were others – by the qualitative motor movements of these children – full of grace, confidence, independence and fluidity of movement.

We experienced almost immediately several of the major points of divergence between RIE and Waldorf early childhood education: . Almost everywhere we went we were surrounded with plastic toys, plastic furnishings, and bright, bright colors. We felt ourselves frequently wanting to put layers of warm clothing on the children we observed, both on film and in parent-child groups. But what spoke to us more strongly by far were the deep foundations of this work in its understandings of the child's motor development. The respect that is given to each child to unfold his or her bodily capacities touched our hearts and inspired our thinking. We heard Magda say repeatedly: "Why do we not appreciate what the child *can* do, but expect what she *cannot* yet do?"

The understanding of the human will and its drive to unfold in confidence – making mistakes and finding its own unique gesture in life – lies at the heart of this work. As a result, we found ourselves brimming with new ideas and possibilities for Waldorf early childhood education in the infant and toddler years – years which for Waldorf education is just beginning to be developed in terms of our understanding for applying that which anthroposophy has illuminated for us.

RIE's encouragement to develop a cooperative, interactive approach in caregiving activity such as diapering and feeding was very powerful to observe. These moments are regarded as opportunities for intimacy between adult and child, and tenderness in handling and gesturing, along with a profound respect for the child's experience, lies at the heart of these moments. In addition to tenderness in handling and gesturing, parents and caregivers are taught to speak gently and softly to their children before initiating touch, and to wait for a sign from the child that she is attending. Our observation was that this approach cultivated adult awareness about the child, facilitated an interactive relationship between parent and child (a sympathetic dance) and focused the will activity of both child and caregiver on the task at hand.

The RIE center currently offers parent-infant observation (sometimes called 'guidance') classes and a three-step training for such teachers as well as training for childcare providers.

Another highlight of our journey was the opportunity to observe the parent-child classes of a RIE teacher of 14 years who has begun a Waldorf teacher training. Our conversations were lively – as you can imagine – as we sought to build the bridges between these two approaches. We observed in her classes where parents are taught specific guidance techniques for selective intervention, for 'noninterference' with the children's play, and her support for parents to be fully present and attentive to their children during parent-child interactions.

The areas in which Waldorf education offers an important perspective to the RIE work became clearer to us as our RIE training unfolded: our recognition and articulation of the spiritual nature of the human being, the unfolding of speech in the second year, and thinking in the third year of life, as well as the care and protection of the child's senses. Equally, we were moved deeply in learning the reverent and very specific ways to pick up and care for an infant, the degree of sensitivity of the interaction between caregiver and child, and the cultivation of observation of the child as a guide to adult child interaction.

Each of these left us with food for thought, new possibilities for program implementation, and a passionate energy for sharing what this work may offer to all of us. We recommend Magda Gerber's book, *Your Self-Confident Baby*, and her video, "See How They Move", for those who wish to explore the RIE approach. English Excerpts of Emmi Pikler's writing may be found in the bulletin of the Sensory Awareness Foundation, No. 14, Winter 1994, available from them at 1314 Star Route, Muir Beach CA 94965. RIE has a website that offers videos and print materials www.RIE.org.

We encourage you to find out a bit more about this work, and explore the ways in which it may support and extend your understanding of the children and ways to initiate new programming ideas for infants and toddlers within our understandings that flow out of Waldorf education.