

BOOK REVIEWS

Monika Seifert. Pädagogin der antiautoritären Erziehung (Monika Seifert, a teacher of anti-authoritarian education)

A biography by Wilma Aden-Grossmann

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Review by David Gribble, Independent Scholar

This book, as yet only available in German, tells the story of a young woman disabled by polio who in the 1960s set up what she called a “repression-free” nursery which strongly influenced the creation of hundreds of similar nurseries and kindergartens all over Germany. It falls roughly into four sections: an account of her early life, an exposition of her educational principles, the story of what actually happened in her school and a short section about what happened to her after she left it.

Monika Seifert was twelve years old when the Second World War ended, so she experienced Hitler’s dictatorship with the threat of extermination of the disabled and the extreme poverty of the war’s immediate aftermath. She contracted polio in 1938, was unable to go to school and spent years in plaster, ending up with a curvature of the spine and one leg shorter than the other.

Her parents were divorced and her father had little to do with her. Her mother was a doctor, and owned a hidden set of Freud’s works, which were banned by the Nazis. Monika was educated at home, and after the war, received private lessons from a teacher who had been a member of Hitler’s Nazi party and was therefore not allowed to teach in an ordinary school.

When she was nineteen, she had to undergo another year in hospital. As a result the only further education she was sufficiently qualified to take was in cosmetics. She worked as a cosmetician for six months and then went to Paris for a year and got a diploma in the study of French civilisation. Then she went to a liberal high school which did not require the conventional qualifications for entry, and qualified for university entrance at the age of 26. She went to Frankfurt University where she studied sociology.

Her diploma was an intensive investigation into the causes for the emergence of authoritarian character structures. She believed that authoritarian education had been essential for the Nazis because it ensured that so many ordinary German people accepted their doctrine.

She became a political activist, and met her future husband, Julius Seifert, while protesting against nuclear armaments. They married in 1960. It was thought strange that the handsome

Julius should choose to marry her in spite of her disablement. They welcomed left-wing friends to meet at their home in Frankfurt; one participant commented that: "In this salon Monika was simply the queen, and what is more, a queen who could cook."

In 1964 she became pregnant, and against medical advice insisted on keeping the baby who was eventually safely born by caesarian section.

Around this time she discovered the work of Wilhelm Reich, whose books had been banned by the Nazis.

In 1966 she came to London to attend the Tavistock Clinic and studied under, among other people, John Bowlby. Her daughter Anna went to the nursery at the libertarian Kirkdale School, which she much admired. She also read *The Free Family*, by Paul Ritter, which she eventually managed to get published in German. She read that the object of education was that the children, when they grew up, should have the will and the ability to lead a fulfilling and rational life. Ritter believed that this was clearly indicated if the children felt at ease. Among the consequences of this were liveliness, adaptability, perseverance and concentration as well as the ability to feel love and sympathy, to develop understanding and the confidence to face new situations and to find joy in play and in learning.

In 1967 she went back to Frankfurt and needed a kindergarten for Anna. It was the end of the 1960s, and her ideas, influenced by the writings of Reich and her experiences, were taken up enthusiastically.

She taught that the family was an authoritarian structure, and that small families were particularly bad. Children needed to be free from their mothers. At this time the practices in ordinary nurseries were abominable. Children would be tied up in cots at rest time, and potty-training was conducted in a similar way. As soon as they could walk, they would be put on their pots and tied to table-legs and left there until they performed. The requirement of the state was that the children should learn, and Seifert saw that the needs of society were being valued more highly than the needs of the child. She developed the idea of anti-authoritarian education; although she acknowledged that universal happiness was unachievable, she argued that we could at least avoid creating unhappiness. The conventional view was that children must learn to control their own needs: children could only learn about eating, sleeping, sexuality, social behaviour, playing and learning if they were compelled to conform. Seifert denied this.

She found a few families who shared her views so she set up a nursery in her own house for her daughter and four other children. They met twice a week. Then, when more parents were attracted to the system, Monika and her husband, together with a friend, bought a house with four floors and a small garden. They lived on the top floor while the school, which was open from nine till four used the rest of the building and the garden.

She stopped calling her system repression-free education and called it non-authoritarian education. "When I allow a child to express its frustration," she said, "the child feels that I am on its side."

This aspect of Seifert's approach is illustrated by a number of anecdotes. One parent reported seeing her pick up her daughter Anna, who was madly angry about something and kept on hitting her mother on her hump. That seemed to this parent to be crossing the boundary of what is acceptable, but Seifert showed no pain and just let her carry on.

The school provided craft materials, reading books, Montessori equipment, Correll learning to read machines, and space to play. Things got lost, or were deliberately broken. On one occasion a child pulled the ribbon out of a typewriter and others joined in and eventually destroyed the machine. The staff had neither the time nor the money to replace things. They were untrained and there was sometimes chaos.

Seifert was against imposing boundaries, because she felt that children already suffered from plenty of restrictions, such as small flats, no space to play and danger from traffic. She argued that instead of discussing boundaries for children, adults should ask themselves why they are so aggressive towards children.

There was some dispute about Seifert's dominance. Parents sometimes accused her of being dogmatic when she passionately defended her educational views. She had more power than they did, as she was not only a parent and a staff member but also the resident, the owner of the property and the employer of other staff.

Most of the parents had been children during the war, and remembered bombing, fleeing, being subject to harsh discipline and their fathers being killed or taken prisoner. They did not want their children to suffer in the same way, but there was criticism from the political left because the school charged fees, albeit on a sliding scale.

In spite of these problems, the kindergarten flourished. Sepp Binder, a journalist who spent two days at the school, wrote: "I came from a world that commands and forbids, into a kingdom of freedom in which no one is punished, antisocial behaviour is ignored, no one is forced to do anything or to stop doing what they are doing. And in spite of that, it seemed to me that the little anarchists were really regulating their own needs. Over and over again they crowded round the reading machines and logic blocks, tried out their skill at combining concepts and illustrations, showed joy and understanding about colour, shape and quantity. They invented new games, and learned without pressure as they played."

The method was much imitated in the 1970s. The first such schools in Berlin, where the political aspects were taken more seriously, were called Socialist Child Collectives, but soon changed the name to Kinderladen (Children Shops) because the only suitable buildings available were often former shops.

In 1971, due to various complications, the Seiferts had to move out of their house. They managed to find another place for a year, but Anna was now six years old and they were looking for a suitable primary school.

There was at time widespread dissatisfaction with primary schools and there were demonstrations demanding, among other things, that classes should be reduced from 30 to 20. This was actually made law.

About this time the Glockseeschule in Hanover was founded, which took older children, but based much of its practice on Seifert's ideas, as did the Freie Schule Frankfurt. Both of these schools are still active today.

The Kinderlaeden movement has not been much documented, but it has contributed to changes in educational objectives, the routines of family life, the abandonment of gender stereotypes, and the establishment of places of education which are not dominated by the church.

When she left the school Seifert tried to find a job teaching psychology, but was not accepted for many years because her academic training had been in sociology. She finally got a place at Kassel University in 1982. She died in 2002.

This brisk overview gives a little impression of the wealth of theory and incident in the book. If your German is up to it, I recommend reading it in full. Otherwise you can find more justification for “repression-free” nursery schools in *The Self-Respecting Child*, by Alison Stallibrass, available in several different editions, which describes her own similar work with children in a “repression-free” nursery in the UK in the 1950s and 1960s.

Reviewer details

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