

Charlotte Selver Biography  
by Stefan Laeng-Gilliatt

## Unfoldings in Munich

*“My cousin’s children called me Aunt Charlotte the Nude because I always walked around without clothes.<sup>1</sup>”*  
Charlotte Selver

“I went to a cabaret in Munich where I heard a man declaiming on stage: *‘Rechts sind Bäume, links sind Bäume, und dazwischen Zwischenräume. In der Mitte fließt ein Bach! Ach!’*” Charlotte and I were sitting at the kitchen table in her Muir Beach home, sorting through piles of photographs, when I asked her about the political turmoil in Germany during the 1920s. “I wasn’t very politically aware then,” she said. Although this may have been so, Charlotte was painfully aware of the assassination of Walter Rathenau, and the economy spiraling out of control. Rathenau, German foreign minister, was killed on June 24, 1922. Hailing from an influential Jewish family, he favored full assimilation of Jews into German society as a remedy to antisemitism. In spite of his nationalism, he was murdered by ultra-nationalists who resented the Weimar Republic in general and Rathenau in particular, for going along with the Treaty of Versailles. Besides, he was a democrat and a Jew. On June 29, Charlotte wrote to Heinrich, “On the same day St. John’s fires were lit in the mountains, people murdered in the country, a man was killed in the most despicable manner. I always admired Rathenau. He seemed to be above politics, someone devoted fully to a people. How reprehensibly people behave! I will always keep my distance from the shenanigans of politics. The need to denounce other views is one of the biggest mistakes all organizations tend to make. It is cowardly. If each human would recognize his own boundaries, we could avoid this.”

I had asked Charlotte about journalist and satirist Kurt Tucholsky and other artists of the time. Though she only vaguely remembered his name, she immediately recalled hearing “this man” recite his bitter poem about Weimar republic machinations. Then she laughed: “We repeated it enthusiastically: ‘To the left are trees, to the right are trees, and gaps are in-between. A brook flows through the center. Gee!’” Those lines and the people she met that night were very vivid in her memory. “That’s when I met Alf Nölke and his wife, from Norway. She suffered from tuberculosis, and he was a very interesting man.”

It was *Fasching* – carnival – in Munich, and Charlotte threw herself into it the way young people do. She returned home early on Ash Wednesday after three days and nights of partying, and then was time to reflect and write: “One sometimes has to go through things that are unbearable and ugly and make concession after concession to get to know oneself. I have been feeling awful, not at all myself, these past few days, and I realize only now what this time has been about. As a

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<sup>1</sup> Tante Lotte Nackedei

result, I feel free and unbroken, I matured a lot in just a few days. I will say more when we are together again, but for now let me say that many things you've told me that were incomprehensible at the time I feel I now understand."<sup>2</sup> The first lines of this long letter to Heinrich are mysterious, and Charlotte's account of the prior days doesn't shed much light either. But this *Fasching* clearly left a mark on her life. The partying seems to have initiated a series of meetings with people who later became important to her. "I went to this bookstore with a friend," Charlotte recalled, "and in the back of the store was a big hall where a party was going on. I heard about Enja von Hattinberg, the later wife of Karlfried Graf Dürckheim, for the first time. My friend Fritz Trammek told me the story of her travels on the Siberian Railroad and that her father had been an engineer who helped build the railroad. I did not meet her until years later at a tea party in Leipzig, when I was teaching at the university. Soon thereafter she became a Nazi. She wanted to go to Kiel with me to start a cell."

Charlotte also met the actress Tilly Wedekind, widow of playwright Frank Wedekind, that night. Tilly was a very beautiful woman and Charlotte was fascinated by her. "Her friend took me to her as 'a gift', as he put it," Charlotte wrote to Heinrich. "and she liked me so much that she wants me to visit her a lot. She introduced me to many fascinating people." Alf and Cissy Nölke might have been among them. Charlotte and they became friends and a few months later, following graduation, she joined the couple in the famed nudist health resort Jungborn near Neckertal in Saxony. "When I got to that place in the Harz, everybody was walking around naked. The couple had an open-air hut with no windows<sup>3</sup> and their children had one hut next to them. I was to sleep with the children and when it was time to go to bed, one of them told me, 'Aunt Carla, you have to take off your nightgown!' I responded, 'No, I won't do that.' 'But you have to!' 'No, I won't!' So the girl ran over to her parents' hut and called: 'Daddy, daddy, come and help us! Aunt Carla won't take off her nightgown.' Well, I finally did."<sup>4</sup> To Heinrich she wrote: "About Jungborn, I can write of childlike play in one's birthday suit; about meadows where one rests, plays, exercises; about lots of cold water to bathe in, then to dry up, only to bathe again ...; about little huts with open doors and porches, one room only, where you sleep practically outdoors. Alas, there is not much nude beauty to be seen, only here and there."

Charlotte's parents had reluctantly agreed that she could travel that summer to take landscape photographs. Come September, her father requested that she work in a studio to hone her photographic skills.<sup>5</sup> Travel she did, but once she joined the Nölkes at Jungborn a new plan emerged: Alf Nölke had asked her to come to their home in Kristiania<sup>6</sup> and look after their two small children for about six months while Cissy was seeking a cure for her tuberculosis in a

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<sup>2</sup> CS to HS: 1922-3-3 (more likely March 1)

<sup>3</sup> *Lichtlufthäuser* – light-air-houses. These little huts had indeed no windows on three sides but many had an open front side with only a light curtain to close it. Some had a door and large windows.

<sup>4</sup> CS Names and Memories

<sup>5</sup> CS to HS: 1922-7-12, traveling / Ruhrort

<sup>6</sup> present-day Oslo, capitol of Norway

sanatorium. “Mr. Nölke spends much of his time traveling abroad. In the mornings, when the kids are in school, I will work for a well-known photographer. In the afternoons, I will take care of them, an occupation I will love and learn from. I will be there simply as a friend and I will, therefore, have much opportunity to study. The nordic landscape is alluring and so is life up there. Hence I believe it to be wise to accept with their request. My parents more or less agree. Please forgive me, dear friend, to present you with a *fait accompli*.”<sup>7</sup>

It was not a *fait accompli*, nor did the parents agree. Father swiftly traveled to Berlin to meet with Alf Nölke, who was there on business. Just as swiftly he came to the conclusion that Nölke was “too interesting”<sup>8</sup> a man and that he would never accept such an adventure for his daughter. Both father and mother then traveled to Jungborn to talk with her and Mrs. Nölke. “The sun shines over this day, everything devotes itself to it as to a long-awaited gift, but under that sun, my friend, humankind speaks its own language: of limits and obligations, of tradition and morals. In short: my parents came.” Charlotte met them at the station, and they immediately got into a fight. Father wanted to leave right away, but the next train wasn’t leaving for an hour. Charlotte stood her ground while her father threatened to cut all family ties if she went to Kristiania. She would not hear from them again, she’d get her legal share and that would be the end of that. With no elderly lady in the house, there was no way he would allow his twenty-one-year old daughter to live in the house of a young man with such looks. Besides, he saw no need for her to be a nanny. Mr. Nölke would be informed of these decisions. “Then I was inundated with the usual accusations under the guise of: gratitude toward your parents, egoism, ignorance, sacrifice, etc. Father told me I could go anywhere and do anything I wanted, learn a new profession if I didn’t like mine, go to the university, anything, but not that. I was very brattish, it was unbearable. Finally – father missed the train and went to get a bite to eat – I went to Mrs. Nölke who was as horrified as I was. She said she and her husband couldn’t carry such a responsibility but agreed that it was unacceptable for my parents to just show up like this and force me into a decision. She recommended that I not talk about this anymore for the time being. We didn’t touch the subject again that night. My parents thought I had given in and we had a quite peaceful evening. Dear friend, you called yourself a soul doctor – with a sigh, I know – but this little soul comes to you today and needs advice. *Que faire?*”

Henriette Wittgenstein wrote a letter, too, that night. She had never met Heinrich in person and he certainly wasn’t the man of choice for their daughter but the seriousness of the situation called for extreme measures: “You will be very surprised to receive this letter of mine from here. We aren’t complete strangers anymore and after all I have heard about you through Lotte, I have the impression that you have a certain influence over her.”<sup>9</sup> She went on to explain the situation in detail, including the threat of her husband to cut all ties with their daughter, and implored him to convince Lotte not to go.

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<sup>7</sup> CS to HS: 1922-8-16

<sup>8</sup> CS Photographs

<sup>9</sup> Henriette Wittgenstein to HS: Eckertal, 1922-8-28

After her father left the next morning Charlotte told her mother, who had stayed to mend the relationship with her daughter, that she by no means had made up her mind but needed time to consider the matter carefully before making a decision. “I think she really stayed because she wanted to be closer, but also because she is afraid that I could contract tuberculosis from Mrs. Nölke, which is nonsense for someone as healthy as I. After all that had happened, it was impossible for me to open up to her, though. The more I felt her need to hear loving words from me, the colder and more shut off I became. I wanted to be friendly, but not a kind word crossed my lips. This awful sense of obligation puts me off completely. My mother is highly sensitive. She must have realized how much warmer my relationship is with Mrs. Nölke and that led to several terrible breakdowns. I don’t think I’ve told you about our family’s propensity for melancholy. It often shows up in youth and sometimes in old age. My mother has that tendency. She told me more that afternoon than she would have otherwise. She must have experienced a great disappointment in her life and, if not for her love for me, she might have left the family. She had hoped that now that I have grown up, she could find some solace in my love for her, but instead I often seemed completely foreign to her. She said she couldn’t live on with this realization. It would torture her too much, she’d either go mad or die. She said that she had lost faith in herself, that she felt like a builder who had worked on a building his whole life and when he finally finished, the foundation crumbled. I was petrified, Heinrich, I couldn’t assure her that it wasn’t so. I was devastated by her lamentations. Is it I who caused all this? Can I be accused of taking my mother’s will to live? Her expression of agony haunts me more than all the Pietàs I have seen. Heinrich, what can I do? All these disagreements, these different views of life that each of us holds, and that my parents now want to enforce so brutally: they estrange me even more. I cannot compromise. I wrote to my father that I could never be grateful for his offers because I see them with different eyes. But the question of my mother upsets me beyond words and pains my heart unbearably.”<sup>10</sup>

For all the pain this episode caused, the matter was solved quickly. Nölkes left without her and Charlotte parted from her cherished new friends, with a heavy heart and new plans. Her parents had told her she could study any subject she wanted. Earlier that year, she had met Prof. Heinrich Wölfflin, a Swiss art historian at the University of Munich and he had offered her a position as a photographer. While there, she could also take art history classes and pursue her newfound interest in gymnastics. She could eventually become a teacher of Bode-Gymnastik. “I’ve had this plan for some time, but my parents never agreed. Well, now they do. They even asked me if I wouldn’t rather do that. It would mean staying in Munich and being independent from them. Mrs. Nölke thinks Bode Gymnastik would be a good foundation for my life, much better than Kristiania. I am less interested in such practical matters than in the prospect of studying art history.”

On the day before Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, Charlotte returned to Munich. “I would have loved to spend this Sunday with you on a mountain to give the old year to the new. I want to enter the new year somewhere up high this fall, which smiles brightly for the first time today, filled with kindness and seclusion. It seems strange that we speak of the New Year. I don’t see

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<sup>10</sup> CS to HS: Jungborn, 1922-9-2

any change so obvious one could call it new. We Jews don't become new when we contemplate our deeds. We take them all with us into the New. These last weeks have shown me how connected I am with experiences of the past, often without mercy. But a morning like this is new for my heart, and I greet it and you in it. In some ways it *will* be New Year, I suppose. You and I are entering new stages in our lives: May all that is good to you bless you, my love, just as I do!"<sup>11</sup>

Charlotte and Heinrich were indeed entering new stages, seeking independence from their families and exploring what professional directions to take. In the fall of 1923, Heinrich left his family's crowded home in Chemnitz, quit his job as bookkeeper for his brother's business, and moved to Leipzig. He had been considering this for some time. What he was going to do there wasn't immediately clear. He wanted to live near his close friend Hellmuth, and he wanted to study. Because he did not have the necessary credentials, his options were limited, a consequence of having been forced out of school in Chemnitz at the onset of the war in 1914 as a citizen of an "enemy country". Charlotte urged him to go back to school and fulfill the requirements so that he could get a degree at the university. She spoke from her own experience. She was about to take classes at the University of Munich and was lacking credentials for a degree too, albeit for different reasons. Charlotte didn't care about acquiring a PhD herself but she knew that Heinrich obtaining one would eventually matter to him. He didn't heed her advice until years later, though he did study philosophy.

Getting married or even living in the same city was not on the agenda for Charlotte and Heinrich, for both practical and personal reasons. "My parents wouldn't even sit at a table with Eastern Jews," Charlotte once told me. Her parents' disregard for Eastern European Jews<sup>12</sup>, though, was probably not the only reason. Moving in together was not an option in those years, and living in the same city was not practical because of their differing professional interests. But there must have been more to it. For all the passion Charlotte and Heinrich had for one another, they seemed deliberately to keep their distance. When Charlotte first mentioned her plan to go to Kristiania she wrote to him: "I have had the wish to be separated from you for half a year ever since our walk around the lake. And now that you are going to be with Hellmuth in Leipzig, you will devote yourself to your studies and to Hellmuth, just as you have always wanted." When Charlotte remembered this friendship later, she wondered if Heinrich and Hellmuth had ever been more than friends. "Hellmuth Winkler had a girlfriend, Charlotte Weist, and the four of us were together a lot. Heinrich would often stroke Hellmuth's thigh and say, 'This is my bride.' I didn't understand what he meant, but now I wonder if they were lovers. Whenever we were together it was all about Heinrich and Hellmuth, while Charlotte Weist and I seemed to be – I don't know what – secondary." Heinrich rarely visited Charlotte in Munich. He may have had personal reasons, but traveling in postwar Germany was difficult. He was not a German citizen and would have needed permits and a passport. It also became prohibitively expensive as inflation spiraled out of control due to Germany's crushing war debt.

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<sup>11</sup> CS to HS: 1922-9-22

<sup>12</sup> CS More Memories

After returning to Munich, Charlotte had some time before her lessons at the Bode School and lectures at the university commenced. She used it to work on the landscape photos she had taken during the summer and to spend time in the Bavarian Alps. Charlotte loved the outdoors and went as often as she could. In many a letter to Heinrich she wrote in delightfully poetic language about her experiences in nature, revealing the care and sensitivity that would later guide her Sensory Awareness students through experiences of their “own” natures. Her description of nature often stood in curious contrast to the ways she objectified her own “body”, a term she never used when I knew her. “There are these delightful hours of knowing how the body willingly yields to the gentle forces of the soul,” she wrote to Heinrich. My body doesn’t bother me much. I even love it sometimes because it seems to be inseparable from me. At other times I don’t feel it at all, when other events make it vanish. This is not to put it down. It needs its hour too.”<sup>13</sup> Charlotte would later strongly disapprove of such language because it posits a false dichotomy between the experience of what we call ‘body’ and ‘I’.

Sometimes her sense for the interconnectedness of all life forms seemed to collide with what to this day is a very common – and problematic – use of language: “I don’t worry much about my body, it takes care of its well-being by itself, I only care about its hygiene. The way back from Neureuth to Tegernsee was filled with the mood of the winter’s farewell. A sweet shimmer of spring was in the air. The firs, still loaded with snow and melting into the mist, stretched their greening tips dreamily into the twilight of the evening. Not a person in this expanse, deer tracks in the forest and: silent fir trees, mountains sinking into the fog, a lake, dulled by ice. I have no words for the colors of this forest, for the mysterious shapes of snow-covered stumps and for the silence it all created in the human heart, this absolute silence, which has something in common with the silent firs and with the earth their roots have embraced.”<sup>14</sup>

Another quality of Charlotte’s later teaching began to shine through as well, namely her great sense of humor. “A battle was raging inside me yesterday as I travelled through the Spessart: a battle between obligation and inclination. The trails laughed at me for riding the train. They looked so fresh from the rain, and I could feel just how one could hike over this hill and that one. The rushing water was competing with the clouds, the wind so delightful, as I sat in the train breathing locomotive steam instead of the fresh earth.”<sup>15</sup> And back in Munich: “I’m studying for the exams, sinner that I am, instead of going to the mountains.”<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, Charlotte was becoming excited about studying art history with Professor Wölfflin and some of the other luminaries at the University of Munich, even though she couldn’t get a degree. “I really enjoy studying, but my life is too much that of a woman to disregard that something else fulfills me completely. Once a woman has surrendered to love, it is her fate to be completely possessed by it and to see everything through its eyes.” Her passion for Heinrich

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<sup>13</sup> CS to HS: Munich, 1922-3-9

<sup>14</sup> CS to HS: 1922-3-3 (more likely March 1)

<sup>15</sup> CS to HS: 1922-4-20

<sup>16</sup> CS to HS: 1922-5-7

didn't stop her from pursuing her studies, though, and even though she was tempted to help him decorate his newfound room in Leipzig, she preferred to stay in Munich and prepare for the lectures. Whether he would have wanted her help is another question. Charlotte sensed that he was very much focused on his own development and suspected that he wanted to keep all women at bay. She mused that he did not really understand the nature of woman and wondered why he didn't have that same reverence toward her as he had toward images of the Madonna: "I really wonder why you adore them so much, as in my view, they are the embodiment of the female." Angrily she wrote in response to a letter from Heinrich, "What I can't stand, dear friend, is this: I am not an object that can be done up just to please the stylist. I often try to put myself into your shoes to fully understand you, but I will always be myself. Anyone who dares to violate who I am, even you, I strongly advise to stay away from me."<sup>17</sup> What could Heinrich have written to have infuriated her so? Whatever it was, his next letter quelled her anger and she again trustingly asked for his advice on university matters and elaborated on her love for Gothic art.

Charlotte's thoughts shed light on much more than art, however. She was writing about her life's work, albeit unknowingly and with the "expressionist effusiveness" of the day. "I can feel it very clearly: the classicist is more secure in himself. A classic statue is complete in itself. But how much more life emanates from a Gothic statue, which no doubt was born from anguish a thousandfold stronger. The Gothic sculptor's life radiates into the earth and the atmosphere. The figure's center is not in itself, it is in process. Classic architecture seems to be conscious and centered in itself. The Gothic artist, on the other hand, is driven by passion not by willpower. His works retain a restlessness, a force still unfolding. Heinrich, it is good to live in this world, it is wonderful because I feel myself in it. It doesn't matter what I do – music, arts, photographs, gymnastics. It is always I who absorbs and expresses. Everything flows into and out of me and finds its form in me. There is no fight. My inside always decides!"<sup>18</sup>

Charlotte seemed particularly interested in the religious foundations of art but was surprised by "the lack of need for the New Testament in Munich." She asked Heinrich for advice on finding a book on how the Christian faith was represented in art through the ages, and she wanted to check out a Bible at the library so she could get "fully acquainted with the passion and the gestalt of the Nazarene."<sup>19</sup>

Lessons at the Bode School began on October 9, 1922, and they were arduous. Charlotte was glad her classes at the university didn't begin until November, and when she learned that she wouldn't get the job at the university because of the inflation, she seemed relieved. In addition to gymnastics, she took piano lessons, harmony and ear training at the Bode School. When a classmate stepped on Charlotte's foot and she was forced to rest, she welcomed the chance to immerse herself even further in art history. It took several weeks until an x-ray revealed that her little toe had been broken, which meant weeks more of lying prone.

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<sup>17</sup> CS to HS: 1922-11-8

<sup>18</sup> CS to HS: 1922-11-22

<sup>19</sup> CS to HS: 1922-10-19

Around that time, Charlotte mentions for the first time that she was doing handiwork and that she had no money. Her parents continued supporting her, but the inflation began to affect even affluent families. She asked Heinrich for gloves from his brother's company and was hoping for warm socks too. Soon, Charlotte would begin to produce and sell blankets to make ends meet. For now, while nursing her broken tow, she knitted Christmas presents for her family. For the first time in Charlotte's life, her gifts would not be placed under her parents' Christmas tree, but sent by mail. Heinrich and she had decided to spend Christmas together and with their friends Hellmuth Winkler and Charlotte Weist, and also to visit Heinrich's family in Chemnitz. Charlotte had made the same plan the year before but gave in at last and went to Ruhrort. This time she didn't – and she kept her parents in the dark about her plans. It wasn't until after the New Year that she finally sent her gifts and wrote about her whereabouts. The gifts were not well received. "I have to tell you," wrote her mother in response, "that the joy your gifts and well-wishes gave us were outweighed by the sorrow you caused by your behavior. Father can't bring himself to write to you. You'll have to see how you can live with that. Money has been wired to your bank." "The juxtaposition!!!" Charlotte wrote to Heinrich.<sup>20</sup> To her parents she responded angrily and threatened to cancel Heinrich's first meeting with them if they didn't come around. Heinrich had finally planned to see them in Ruhrort but he felt uncomfortable doing so under these circumstances. As it turned out, the rift between Charlotte and her parents was not easily mended this time and Heinrich did not meet them until the spring of 1925.

In Munich, Charlotte decided to move into a quieter apartment, or, she felt, her noisy landlady would be "her death." That was not easy when housing was in short supply and inflation made it nearly impossible to find something suitable. "Though painful, it is important to experience how outer circumstances, like the weather or a rejection, can rattle one's ego."<sup>21</sup> Charlotte decided to share a room in a pension with her newfound friend, Herta Maria Karpowsky, also known as Big. "The moldy odor in the hallway is the worst of it. It's a primitive hotel room but with 'potential', Karpowsky says".<sup>22</sup>

Charlotte had met Big when she briefly worked as secretary of Alfred Kronheim, a distant cousin who sold artisan fabrics. Big, an artist and designer, worked for him. Charlotte took the job because Kronheim, a traveling salesman, told her he had apartments all over Germany and she could stay there whenever she wanted. "I wanted to get a free ride to Berlin but it turned out that he wanted to sleep with me. I remember washing his feet, but when I realized what he was after, I snuck out of the hotel we stayed at that night. Early the next morning I took a train and went to my parents' home in Duisburg."<sup>23</sup>

Seventy-seven years later, in Barra de Navidad, Charlotte recalled that time: "I was eager to become independent from my parents. I became friends with Big, and we decided to live

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<sup>20</sup> CS to HS: Munich 1923/1/9

<sup>21</sup> CS to HS: 1923/1/31

<sup>22</sup> CS to HS: 1923/2/4

<sup>23</sup> CS Photographs



together. We had nothing. I didn't want support from my parents because I didn't want them telling me what to do. We used potato crates for chairs. Big painted a cathedral window on parchment, and we covered the window that faced a wall across an alley. It was very beautiful. Getting to know Big was so great for me. We did everything together, and each thing was exciting. We had no money, so we'd eat whatever we could get our hands on. We stole apples from carts, went fishing and ate boiled potatoes. One day a relative came with a huge package of wonderful foods. He spread them out, and we were just delighted. But he didn't know what to do with Big. Who is this woman? Big took a cigarette, put a drop of perfume on it, and said to me, 'Would you like to have this, darling?' My relative jumped up. 'Oh, that's what you are!', he said, took his hat and left." Charlotte laughed heartily: "And we had all the beautiful foods he'd brought."

To make ends meet, Charlotte and Big started their own business. Big designed blankets, table cloths, and sweaters. "We crocheted, made big blankets and all kinds of things. Then we hired women to do that work for us, and I went to the big hotels at night to exhibit these artworks. People bought many of our wares. There were some touching and amusing moments. A man who was interested in what I showed – and probably also in me – asked me to come into his hotel room. He asked about my life and was nearly in tears hearing our plight. He wanted to help, but I was too proud to accept anything, so he gave me his business card and said, 'If you ever need anything, turn to me.' In one family, the husband did not want to let me into his hotel room because his wife and daughter had spent so much time admiring our things in the lobby. When I knocked, he opened the door just a little to slide a few dollar bills out – my first dollar bills! That was great." A couple of dollars were worth a lot to them. Though Charlotte's father continued to wire money, by the time she got it, because of the inflation, "it was just pieces of paper, nothing, nothing."

Santa Barbara, November 1996: Charlotte had just given a workshop at La Casa de Maria retreat center and we were about to drive up to Big Sur, to begin the next workshop in Esalen. As we were leaving, Charlotte asked me to stop at her favorite thrift shop. Thrift shops were Charlotte's clothing store of choice. I never saw her purchase new clothes. Everything in her wardrobe was either decades old or purchased second-hand, mended many times and hemmed to fit her shrinking frame. We had little time to get to Esalen. I didn't want to stop, nor did Jill Harris, who was co-leading the workshops, and Marlene Zweig, another long-time student and Sensory Awareness leader, our two companions on this trip. Thrift store shopping with Charlotte was among my least favorite activities. She could browse to no end, delighting in all those things awaiting a second owner and not going to waste. She usually bought something she really didn't need, simply because it was cheap. But Charlotte insisted, and so I parked the car. Marlene declined to go in, and Jill left the store after a short time. I was probably a bit pushy, trying to get us out of there quickly. When we all sat in the car again, ready to head north – I had stowed away the lampshade Charlotte had scored for a dollar – Charlotte's mood was dark. She didn't say much as we drove off, but when I made a joke about the lampshade, Charlotte exploded. She found my mockery inappropriate, reprimanded Jill, who was probably wearing second-hand clothes, for her apparent disdain for such, and generally derided what she perceived as our preference for things new. She went on to tell us that we had no clue what it meant to be poor

and to live with only boiled potatoes and stolen apples to eat, accused us of indulgence, and so on. When I finally reached my limit, I stopped the car and refused to go on until Charlotte stop her tirade.

Though I largely share Charlotte's views and am not a stranger to second-hand clothing myself, I had a hard time taking seriously her claim of having experienced material hardship. Charlotte was well-off when I knew her and grew up in a well-to-do family. Though I had heard her stories about sitting on potato crates and eating stolen apples, I took them as romanticized anecdotes from a period of voluntary simplicity for the sake of adventure, and because Charlotte was quarreling with her parents. I was doubtful that these events could have had such a lasting impact on Charlotte's life. Reading her letters now and having a broader understanding of the impossible plight of the German people in in those years, I am humbled by what then seemed to me largely the quirks of an old woman.

In a letter to Heinrich, Charlotte wrote: "I can never thank you enough. It was only mail – but what was it for me? I feel shame just trying to explain. I had to cry. The joy I felt completely robbed me of my poise. You couldn't have known, when you wrapped it, what your parcel would mean for me. You probably felt a joy similar to Big's when she opened the box and encountered all those marvelous things. With a gleaming smile she kept saying: 'Today is my birthday!!' Alas, all these emotions were betrayed by the fact that we – barbarously – proceeded to consume all that was edible!! Soon, nothing will be left but the thought. Again: I can't possibly tell you how I felt, but I would have loved for you to see Big, who kept saying, 'I've become a millionaire!'" Charlotte's effusive style aside – and it is considerably toned down in my translation – this letter is a clear statement that the two women's situation was dire. The 50'000 German marks she was about to receive from her parents was the equivalent of about \$5, months later it was a few cents. The situation was especially challenging in major cities like Munich. Heinrich, with his family ties to Chemnitz, had easier access to food. He had also made friends with the family of Pastor Jäger in Kiebitz, not far from Leipzig, who had a marvelous vegetable garden – and two beautiful daughters. Heinrich spent much time there over the years to learn the art of gardening in preparation for their life in a kibbutz in Palestine – and, Charlotte suspected, for other reasons as well. He may well have sent produce from that garden to Munich. Goods came also from Ruhrort: *Kommissbrot*. Charlotte's father had access to this hearty bread made for military provisions, thanks to his service in the German army.

Charlotte spent the summer with Charlotte Weist on the island of Rügen in the Baltic Sea, where "Life is incredibly cheap, about the price of two cups of coffee in Berlin." When Hellmuth joined them later on, Charlotte was shocked by his appearance. He looked emaciated, unable to face the demands of life. Though she suspected his hypochondria to be part of the problem, she was sufficiently worried to spend "every hour of the day with him and to sleep in his bedroom to keep an eye on him." She admonished Heinrich to make sure Hellmuth was cared for properly the coming winter. "You have to make sure you both eat well. Let your family send you food every week. You have a rare gift, my friend, to ruin your health in no time, just as has happened

with Hellmuth. It wouldn't be hard for you to get enough food from home for the two of you, so you both can eat healthily."<sup>24</sup>

Charlotte and Big kept their knitwear business going through the period of the great inflation and Charlotte's time in Munich. They seemed to have been fairly successful, sending blankets to the Rheinland and Berlin and doing business with the company of Heinrich's brother in Chemnitz, "Max Selver & Co. Export and Import, Manufacturing of Stockings and Gloves." Charlotte became a traveling saleswoman whenever opportunities arose, and when she'd sold enough blankets to pay for a train ticket: "We have twelve blankets worth 20 Million Marks ready to send off. If I sell some here, I can join you." They were able to outsource much of the work, which freed them up for their main occupations: Big still had her job and worked out of her own art studio, and Charlotte pursued the Gymnastics training with Bode.

Charlotte's friendship with Big had a big impact on her views on gender. Much like the women photographers who inspired her to study photography, Big became a role model, though her apparent freedom from inner turmoil was foreign to Charlotte. "She is almost like a miracle to me, though a distant one, to which my path doesn't lead." Other women friends became important as well: Hellmuth's girlfriend, Charlotte Weist, and Erika Grossmann, an illustrator, who Charlotte had first met as the girlfriend of classmate Heinz Iffland in photography school. Back then, Erika had taken a job as a maid because she was determined to live without the financial support of her parents. Now, two years later, Erika looked her up and Charlotte was delighted. "I am amazed to meet women like them in such a short time period. Each of us has a hugely different take on life and a different purpose, so much so that I have completely revised my view of women."<sup>25</sup>

Late night conversations with Charlotte Weist on the Island of Rügen in the Baltic Sea that summer led Charlotte to the recognition that "one cannot be woman by 'being human' but human only by 'being woman'." Weist was to her the embodiment of the 'ideal woman'. "I have a lot to learn from her. She is a mature free person, a mature free woman. Solid, clear, real; austere and generous at once."

These ideas were a step forward from the discussions about race and gender Charlotte had had with her friends photography school. Weininger was still a factor in Charlotte's reflections, but soon he would be left to collect dust on her bookshelf. Charlotte met "*neue Menschen*" with new ideas for a complete transformation of society. The term "new human" had an almost sacred ring to it. Much as in the 1960s, when a "new generation" would seek to transform mankind at the dawn of a "new age", Charlotte and her friends saw themselves as the "nucleus of a new society." "We young people should unite, but not as a community in the usual sense. Each of us being *ourselves* should be the foundation upon which to build community."<sup>26</sup> Such *neue Menschen* could be found in Hellerau, where Émil Jacques-Dalcroze had taught before the war.

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<sup>24</sup> CS to HS: 1923-7-9 [the letter is wrongly dated 7.9.25]

<sup>25</sup> CS to HS: 1923-2-4

<sup>26</sup> CS to HS: 1923-7-9 [the letter is wrongly dated 7.9.25]

Tami Oelfken, for example. “Tami picked orphaned children up from the streets and took them in. It was a time, when new thoughts were exchanged and people completely changed their ways. A very interesting time.”<sup>27</sup> Tami Oelfken was an educator, writer and at the time a member of the *Bund entschiedener Schulreformer* (Association of Determined School Reformers). She later founded her own school in Berlin, the “Tami-Oelfken-Gemeinschaftsschule.”<sup>28</sup> She rejected neatly defined lesson plans and introduced mixed-age classes to further collaboration. The school was closed in 1934 for its “pacifist, communist, and *judenfreundliche*” tendencies.<sup>29</sup>

Heinrich’s interest in the activities in Hellerau seems to have been just as significant as Charlottes in those early years. Sometimes they went together, but they both also went on their own to attend seminars. We don’t know Heinrich’s particular interest, but he likely picked up inspirations for his later calling as a teacher from Tami Oelfken, the radical school reformer A. S. Neill, who went on to found Summerhill, Heinrich Jacoby, and other educators who taught there.

About a visit to Hellerau in June 1923, Charlotte wrote enthusiastically, “My language is too coarse to describe how skillful Tamen is with children. When I took part in her lessons, I became a child myself. I have never seen anyone so masterly coax out of children what she deems best. With complete trust in the children, she helps them become aware of their actions and thoughts at all times. Many a battle is fought in these little hearts, but the children find solutions through the clarity, power, and responsibility that is in each of them. When they write a composition, only other children critique it, and sharply at times. When Tamen throws in a word, it has meaning and is cause for scientific or ethical conversations. Tamen sits at a table with them. It is just as I imagine school would be in a fairyland. A bright room surrounds them, decorated by the fantasies of the children. Everything is illumined by the spirit of Tamen.”

“She invited me to her home for coffee. A sick boy lies in her room and she nurses him most touchingly. She irons the children’s things, sows them blouses, knows about every shoe, every thread the children have. I was awestruck. Even though she is always engaged to the fullest, she always remains herself, always has time, and time doesn’t have her. All the while she can give her full attention to something else, for example to me. This is someone who could be my teacher.”<sup>30</sup> In the months to come, a close if complicated friendship developed, especially after both Big and Erika moved to Hellerau. In October, Charlotte returned from a visit to Hellerau “disappointed by the way Erika and Big live there. There is nothing more difficult than living without duties! Big is looking to find work in the mornings. She says she needs that challenge, so that she can enjoy her freedom even more. Erika is like a shadow. Both of them smoke all day and hardly eat anything. The atmosphere in Hellerau is strange. Tami has fallen in love with Erika, and there is tension between Big and Tami. Hellerau, it appears to me, has become

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<sup>27</sup> CS Photographs, April 2000

<sup>28</sup> Tami Oelfken Community School

<sup>29</sup> Sources: <http://www.literaturatlas.de/>; <http://www.tami-oelfken-schule.de/>

<sup>30</sup> CS to HS: 1923-6-6

volcanic. Erika has no money and lives with Big, though their relationship has become much more casual. I don't belong there and I turn away from it all.”

Although Tami Oelfken did not become Charlotte's teacher in any formal way, Charlotte did meet another educator in Hellerau who, in time, would play a pivotal role in Charlotte's professional life: “Jacoby: When you take a lesson with him, you wouldn't recognize him as the man we met. It would be useless to write about it, you have to experience it yourself.”<sup>31</sup> At the end of Charlotte's June stay in Hellerau, Oelfken invited Heinrich and her to come to a seminar later that summer, “an international conference for music, pedagogy, philosophy, art history, and so forth, with famous ‘new humans’ at the helm. Music: Jacoby; Pedagogy: Tamen. It is by invitation only, and she invites us both.”

It is not clear whether this conference happened or not. There isn't any mention of Heinrich Jacoby again until late in 1924. But Charlotte wrote about a new gymnastics teacher, Elsa Gindler, whose teaching would quickly become the road map for the rest of her very long life. The first time Charlotte mentions her in a letter to Heinrich from Berlin is November 8, 1923, and almost in passing. In a note in the margins, she wrote: “We're supposed to write a wish list for Elsa Gindler, write down what is most important to us in gymnastics. I see my ideal in the figure of the youth we saw on the clay vase.” This simple introduction of Gindler stands in contrast to the story Charlotte would later tell her students, and so does the timing.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. In 1923, Charlotte was in training to become a teacher of Bode's Ausdrucksgymnastik and this required all her attention.

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<sup>31</sup> CS to HS: 1923-6-6