

## Elisabeth von Grunelius: the first kindergarten teacher

Prof. Dr. Tomáš Zdražil



A long line of outstanding educators shaped the early years of the Waldorf School, some of whom have been featured in *Erziehungskunst*, while many others deserve their own tribute.

These include Pastor Johannes Geyer, who worked as a class teacher; Rudolf Treichler, who was the first foreign language teacher and later became a class teacher; Robert Killian and Christoph Boy, who brought their experience of progressive education from the Landerziehungsheim in Haubinda and the Odenwald School; the painter and craft teacher Max Wolffhügel; the handicrafts teacher Hedwig Hauck, the mathematician Hermann von Baravalle, the gymnastics teacher Fritz Graf von Bothmer and others. To conclude this series of articles on the founding teaching staff, we would like to portray another lady who was there from the very first school year but is often forgotten because of her unobtrusive presence: Elisabeth von Grunelius.



At Easter 1920, the task was to set up a kindergarten on the school grounds. This was for a large group of children who were due to start first grade after the summer holidays. A room was sought for the kindergarten, apparently in vain, because in May 1920, after a brief temporary arrangement, the attempt was abandoned.

Rudolf Steiner had invited Elisabeth von Grunelius to be the kindergarten teacher. She was a delicate young woman whom he had known since 1914, when she had come to Dornach at the age of nineteen to help with the wood carvings for the first Goetheanum. Born in Kolbsheim in Alsace, she had completed the Comenius Kindergarten Seminar in Bonn in 1914 with the desire to study psychology later. After a year and a half, she took a leave of absence in Dornach to do a year of practical training in a kindergarten, after-school care and social welfare in Berlin and to obtain a diploma as a youth leader at the Pestalozzi-Fröbel Seminar, which also qualified her to train interns. When she returned to her

homeland, which had become French after the war, she received Rudolf Steiner's request. She came, but only stayed at the school for a short time as a substitute teacher. In the second school year, Elisabeth von Grunelius assisted Leonie von Mirbach in class, with von Mirbach teaching the first hour of the main lesson and Grunelius the second. When her class of 52 pupils was divided into two in the third school year, she took over one half, but did not teach them for more than a year. When there was still no sign of a kindergarten being established, she went to Dornach to study eurythmy and painting.

It was not until 1924, thanks to the energetic efforts of Herbert Hahn, that the outermost corner of the sports field was obtained for a kindergarten barrack, which was built in 1926. Elisabeth von Grunelius established the kindergarten on Uhlandshöhe, founded the international Waldorf kindergarten movement and, without direct advice or guidance from Steiner, laid the foundations for Waldorf education in the first seven years of life in an original and independent manner. She ran the kindergarten until it was closed by the National Socialists in 1938.

In 1940, she moved to the United States, where she founded a Waldorf kindergarten in Kimberton Pennsylvania in 1941 and another in Long Island, New York, in 1948. In 1950, her Waldorf classic 'Early Childhood Education and the Waldorf School Plan' was published, which has been reprinted in several editions and languages. In 1954, she returned to Europe, founded a Waldorf kindergarten in Paris in 1954 and lived in Dornach as a consultant from 1970 to 1988. She died in Schopfheim in 1989 at the age of 94, the last member of the original teaching staff.

---

*Prof. Dr. Tomáš Zdražil is a teacher and lecturer at the School of Spiritual Science in Stuttgart, member of the Hague Circle -International Council for Steiner/Waldorf Pedagogy.*

*With kind permission of the author. This article was first published in the magazine Erziehungskunst.*