

In Memoriam: Wilma Ellersiek

by Kundry Willwerth

A letter from Wilma Ellersiek – what a surprise! And not only a letter – a whole packet of gesture games! This was my reward for forwarding the English translations of six verses of Wilma Ellersiek’s gesture game poems. What had started only as an enrichment for my kindergarten, Wilma Ellersiek turned into a gift for the English-speaking children in the West. And so she consciously expressed it.

Already past her seventieth birthday, she took on the guidance of a German immigrant to the US who was trying to form simple German children’s verses into simple English children’s verses. In her detailed responses to our poetic efforts, she laid open the principles of her hand gesture work. (By then, my husband, Lyn, a native English speaker, had joined my translation attempts to ensure a smooth transition into English.)

Wilma was already ill when I first met her. This spread a shadow over our short visits, as she did not have the strength for conversation over more than an hour’s time. She received us several times at her home in Stuttgart and later at Oeschelbrunn. She would open the door – a slight, straight woman in a long skirt and with silver hair – to receive us. Through the glass door we could see her garden, where the sunflower grew, the “Flower in My Garden,” of which she sent us a photo.

Very soon she would share with us her concerns about the children; about the need to develop inwardly for and with her hand gesture games; and lastly, to produce translations she could “authorize.” She had words for us she had prepared ahead of our meeting, messages she wanted us to hear, directions she wanted to give. Often I left our meeting with my list of questions in my pocket unasked. When she spoke of her games, she could become very lively (though not able to hop around) in her descriptions. At my last visit, when she was already confined to her bed and had difficulty speaking, she immediately livened up when I talked about her games and how beloved they were by the children.

She emanated an atmosphere of awe and expectation. From the little I know through her letters, I saw in her someone who had lived through deep suffering caused partly by an unstable physical condition that caused recurrent illness. But the fruits of this suffering were precious works of art in the form of poetic and musical children’s games. Through us, she sent them to the West with her loving thoughts – no wonder that the children receive them with so much joy!

Wilma Ellersiek expressed her concerns in her “Call to Deeds,” a poem she hoped would strengthen the work to give their childhood back to our children. Lyn translated it on Easter Monday, 1994, after her urgently expressed plea to share these thoughts with all kindergarten teachers.