
Pioneers

Remembering Dr. Helmut von Kügelgen: Pioneer, Guardian and Protector of Young Children

— Nancy Blanning

The year 2016 marks the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Dr. Helmut von Kügelgen. He was born in Estonia on December 14, 1916, after his father, a German journalist in St. Petersburg, and family were expelled from Russia at the beginning of the First World War. The family's refugee journey took them to Finland, Germany, and Romania during his childhood.



Finally settling in Germany, Dr. von Kügelgen finished his schooling as a journalist and editor. The beginning of the Second World War coincided with the conclusion of his professional training. Conscripted as a war correspondent, he spent seven years covering the war and was ultimately taken as an American prisoner of war. His biographical reflections express gratitude that, since he was a correspondent, he never had to use weapons to harm another human being.

After the war he needed to find a livelihood. A new and different wish awakened, to “become a teacher and work with children, with young people. In the face of ruins everywhere, could there be something of greater importance today than human beings themselves?”

His introduction to Waldorf education came through his wife's family and meeting his wife's former teacher, who had been a student at the first Waldorf school in Stuttgart. The resolve was clear.

From the age of thirty, he spent the next thirty years as a class teacher and took four classes from grades one through eight.

As a gifted and dedicated Waldorf educator, his life path led him on further wanderings, along with his wife and five daughters. He traveled to North America, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Peru, and Chile to mentor Waldorf education. Further trips took him to South Africa, Namibia, Egypt, and then Australia and New Zealand.

When he retired from class teaching, he turned his attention to fostering and protecting the welfare of young children. He guided the founding of the International Waldorf Kindergarten Association (now known as IASWECE—International Association of Steiner-Waldorf Early Childhood Education). In “To the Workers, Parents, and Friends,” published upon Dr. Von Kügelgen's passing, colleague Jürgen Flinspach remembered this of his work in the International Association: “The work in the Board of Trustees of the International Association of Waldorf Kindergartens was especially intense. The inner work of this group was distinctively molded by his contributions, which he communicated to those present like a vision concerning the future tasks of the Kindergarten Association. He then called on us to work for it. It was always his special concern that Waldorf education be practiced not just as a method, but that its spiritual roots be seized by the educators and are worked out in the smallest actions each day, so that especially during the first seven-year period the children can develop through imitation of gestures, of language and of thinking.”

Dr. von Kügelgen was also a very active teacher in the Early Childhood Teacher Training Seminar in Stuttgart. For the yearly festivals and for the study for the day, the week, the month and the year, booklets came into being directly from his lessons at the Seminar. These booklets he revised, expanded, and edited as *The Little Series*. These valuable writings appear like a legacy. The contents of the booklet “Spiritual Gifts for the Educator,” published as *Spiritual Insights* by WECAN (1999), were a particular concern for him for the work of educators in kindergartens worldwide.

Joan Almon, co-founder of WECAN with Susan Howard, had much opportunity to interact with Dr. von Kügelgen over the years. Joan describes him as “much loved as a man of great spiritual insight. His lectures were stirring and the way he helped Waldorf’s roots go more deeply into anthroposophy was especially inspiring.” At the last Whitsun international kindergarten conference he was able to attend, “he spoke with immense power about the spiritual world. He said, ‘You must realize that the spiritual world is not somewhere far away. It is right here!’ These were the words of one who was near the threshold of death and sensed the spiritual all around him, but they were also the words of one who intimately knew that the spiritual world is in each one of us.”

In 1989, Dr. von Kügelgen was one of the European “greats” of early childhood who came to Pine Hill, New Hampshire, for a North American early childhood conference. In the company of Freya Jaffke, Margret Myerkort, Elisabeth Moore-Hass,

Bronja Zalengin, and Werner Glas, he spoke about angels and our relationship to them. Whether we are aware of their presence or not, the angelic world is there—always—to help us. Those privileged to hear his lecture were embraced in his human warmth and sincere caring for humanity—young children in particular. Perhaps even more important than that was experiencing with him his absolute certainty in the inspiring and guiding presence of the spiritual world. When he spoke of this, one could see joy shining from his eyes. ♦

Nancy Blanning, *Editor of Gateways Newsletter*, is honored to have known Helmut von Kügelgen during her many years as a Waldorf teacher in early childhood and beyond.

Resources:

- Joan Almon, “In Memory of Helmut von Kügelgen”; Jürgen Flinspach, “A Memorial to Helmut von Kügelgen”; and Helmut von Kügelgen, Claudia McKeen, trans., “Eightieth Birthday Address”; from *Love as the Source of Education: the Life Work of Helmut von Kügelgen by Helmut von Kügelgen, Susan Howard, Ed. (Spring Valley: Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America 2016).*