

# Gendlin in Vienna, 1996

by Lore Korbei

Translated by Marlys Mayfield

“No, this is not the first time that I have been back in Vienna since times past,” he says to me as I wait for him that morning in front of the hotel. Vienna is now clean-scrubbed, shining, and festive-blue.

Later in the car, he says: “You know, it is not the people here that I withdraw from; what disturbs me is this city – the buildings that look just like they did in the past.” For him “the past” is the year 1938.

We drive to his former school on Glasergasse by way of the boulevard Rossauerlände where the apartment in which Gendlin’s family lived still stands.

At Glasergasse a group of youths await us with questions from their study of the Fascist era in Austria. Gene is ready to answer willingly, mostly very directly, seldom academically – and he speaks in German with the accent and syntax of a Viennese Jew. It is only afterwards when we are on the stairwell going down that his feelings hit him: memories from his life as a boy in that ninth district in Vienna, a life that in 1938, came to an abrupt and horrible end. He stands for a while on the stairway, a man now deeply moved: a lanky, middle-aged, dark-haired treasure of a man.

In the following days, similar memories would return.

Next, Gene is at work speaking before 50 psychotherapists gathered in Neuwaldegg castle. Men and women, they have come to hear the master demonstrate his work with clients. He pulls out all the stops: he can be curious and reticent, demanding and attending, flashing forward and laid back – but ever attentive to the one who is there, ever allowing beingness to emerge.

In the evening at dinner, I ask myself whether conventions, such as “gatherings for meals around a table” are really necessary: for Gene, work with a Swiss colleague can almost replace eating and drinking, and he can always shorten the time needed for sleep.

Friday is museum day and in the evening there are preparations for the philosophy lecture for philosophers, to be held Saturday. Forgotten are the express mails and telegrams, the nightly calls and faxes. And it all works out with Gene now as a philosopher among Viennese philosophers.

And here too he counters all expectations. He appears not just as an esteemed professor from Chicago, but an unorthodox thinker without categorization. With Gene, the flow of process takes precedence over the fixation of concepts.

Now we are going to the WCP, the World Congress of Psychotherapy where [Gendlin is invited to be a main speaker](#). He chooses a philosophical rather than psychotherapeutic topic and delivers to a large hall full of intent listeners. The English translator is not needed, as again, Gendlin speaks in German. At the end of his talk, many rush up to the podium; a woman from India offers him sweets, and a professor from the University of Graz says that he only wanted “to touch someone so charismatic.”

Monday evening there is a private meeting with a group of therapists who call their work variously Rogerian, non-directive, client-centered, person-centered, therapies of talking and listening, Focusing-oriented, or emotion-focused. Gene denies any deeper conflict with Rogers and his therapeutic approach. He listens to us with the attitude that we are mostly talking about the same thing.

Also on Tuesday, at the city hall to receive Vienna’s honorary cross, Gendlin does not engage in the cliché of “lost son’s return to the homeland.” At these festivities he wears a pullover on loan from my husband. His indifference to convention was all too understandable in light of his past now repeatedly unfolding in his mind.

It is now Wednesday and I am alone in the conference center after his airport departure. I often remember what a natural and easy-going companionship we shared during these Viennese days at the beginning of July, 1996.

After a long silence, a letter comes from him in February that begins, “No, I have not disappeared, I have just been tied up. Today I am celebrating: yesterday I finally brought two pieces of writing to completion.”