

**Friedl Dicker-Brandheis 1898-1944 – Artist and Educator, carried light and hope into the nightmare of Tereizenstadt ghetto. 1941-44**

**Although Friedl Dicker- Brandheis worked mainly with children, her way of working and the powerful positive effect of her work in horrific circumstances, can be seen as an inspiration to anyone working with artistic impulses in places of need, regardless of age.**

***"People are like stained glass windows, the true beauty can be seen only when there is light from within. The darker the night, the brighter the windows."***

Elizabeth Kubler- Ross

**Her art classes with traumatised children laid the foundations for therapeutic art work, which can inspire us and confirm the immense value of the healing power of the artistic.**

*"There is only one way to remove negative and destructive aspects from the lives of the young. All educators are obliged to show children so much beauty and truth that there is no longer room in a child's soul for hideousness and falsehood – provide the children intellectual nourishment, lead them to new knowledge with enormous amount of imagination and thought; to stimulate the child to gain new perceptions. All of those things can only be achieved by artists and educators."*

These words written by the Self-Governing Board of Tereizenstadt Ghetto, concerned with the wellbeing - in particular - of their children, ring true right into our present time, here in South Africa, where trauma, shock, violence and distress play a part in the daily lives of so many....

The remarkable educator and artist Friedl Dicker- Brandheis - trained at the Bauhaus where the practise of Art combined spiritual engagement, political idealism and activism.

Friedl made a decision to use her time in Tereizen, teaching art to the children, giving her young students both structure and freedom. Alongside the colour studies and exercises in drawing and painting are lessons of friendship and hope. She wrote these words in the midst of horrific destruction of human life in Tereizen.

*"Working with art enables the children to develop independent choice, the joy of discovery, the exploration of form. This has an impact on the child's personality enabling them to become stable and sincere. All of this ensures the road to beauty."*

The assurance of a "road to beauty" if not a physical reality, was a spiritual possibility through the art.

5000 pieces of signed artwork left behind by the children, have travelled the world in exhibitions, continuing to stun the eye and move the heart.

What can we learn and take with us in the future, from this remarkable women's work during a period of unbearable trauma and darkness?

The classes with the children were not meant to make artists out of them. They were to free and broaden such sources of energy as creativity and independence, to awaken the imagination, to strengthen the children's powers of observation and appreciation of life.

***It was not enough for Friedl to reveal the distress within the consciousness of the children. Her goal was to restore consciousness.***

Rhythmic exercises, drawing from a known fairy tale or story, model drawing, study of the old masters, and freely chosen themes – she applied all the artistic and pedagogic methods she knew. The system of her mentor Johannes Itten proved indispensable in Terezien - his theology of the battle between the sun of light and sun of darkness became all too real. Friedl made practical use of his rhythmical exercises as a device in her battle against the chaos of time and space.

She was the only artist in Terezien who chose not to represent the horror of their surroundings - there were no transports, no crowds, no soup lines, no dead bodies in her own personal paintings, nor in the work she inspired from the children. She strengthened the children's imagination and memory, clear goals and tasks were set, that helped them to rearrange their lives amidst the damaged reality of everyday life in the ghetto. She called upon the children to remember images from 'normal' life – kind people, the sky, trees, the apartment furniture from their previous life, the clock on the wall, rebuilding the connection to what sustained them. Themes for the art class were chosen to provoke reactions from the children. Some of her themes included flowers, butterflies, landscapes, storms and rainbows, the four seasons, streets, houses from inside and outside – all that belonged to the child's treasury of experience.

***Art created a belief in an internal rather than external sense of control of one's life. Individual identity could be reclaimed albeit momentarily through art. Art, music and performance transformed fear into freedom. It helped sustain hope, a sense of will to live.***

The theory that art can heal trauma evolved in part, from the work of a student of Friedl's – Edith Kramer – "Art as therapy with children."

Her work has relevance for us all, regardless of age.

Today so many are challenged by their life circumstances and carry within them unresolved conflicts and pain – the death of a loved one, family trauma, separation and divorce, crime, and illness ( to name but a few).

Friedl's work in the most extreme circumstances stands as inspiration for, and testimony to, the enormous power of **ART** available to strengthen, sustain and engender hope in all who receive it.

***“ Art is not an enclosed garden for the talented few. It is the garden of Life for us all”.***

Gladys Meyer.