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Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

There are few Swiss women who have achieved world fame. One of them is Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. The 59 year-old Doctor, who has been living in the United States for the last 28 years, has broken through the walls of silence, which have loomed up between the Living and the Dead, in our Age.

Her books about Death and Dying have been translated into many languages and have moved hundreds of thousands of human beings. When she appears for lectures, the largest halls are too small to hold all the people, who wish to hear and see her.

Who is this tiny, resolute woman, who being equipped with the charisma of a Diva, dresses like a peasant woman, masters the work schedule of an industrial-magnate, and between two flights still finds the time to visit a sick person who has requested her help? I made her acquaintance five years ago in Escondido, Southern California, where she used to live until recently. As I entered her house, I found her having her morning coffee, standing in front of the kitchen-bar, typing an urgent letter with two fingers. She received me like an old friend. For close to an hour, she gave me the feeling that for her I was the only human being in the world. Proudly she led me through her garden, where she had cultivated «Swiss» vegetables, which were not available there. I left her home with two gifts: a bottle of fresh home-made jam and an invitation to her Workshop «Life, Death and Transition», which commenced that same afternoon...

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross values the openness of the American society and knows that with her pioneer work, she would have encountered much more dogged opposition in most countries. When one questions her about her home-



Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her garden.
(Photo: Ch. A. Müller)

land, she states matter-of-factly: «Switzerland is a very conservative country». Of the two dozen Honorary Doctorates that have been conferred on her, none of them originate from Europe, not even from Switzerland. But that does not diminish her feelings of home-sickness nor cloud the homely picture that she cherishes of the Switzerland of her youth. She feels she is Swiss, not American. She longs for the mountains and glaciers, the familiar alleys of neat villages; she has a passion for hiking and never a Christmas Season passes without home-baked «Weihnachtsguettli».

Together with her triplet sisters, Eva and Erika, Elisabeth spent her childhood in Meilen, on the upper shores of the lake of Zurich. Early in life she went her own way. As a 13 year-old, she wrote in a school essay: «I want to be a researcher

and explore the unknown frontiers of human knowledge. But more than anything else in the world, I wish to become a Doctor». Against the wishes of her parents, she struggled through her medical studies, which she herself financed through night-employment. Directly after the war, she took up voluntary Relief Work abroad. A visit to the concentration camp at Maidanek was a decisive experience for her future. On the 20 year-old dawned an insight, which has since inspired her life: «... that in every human being there is a potential Hitler but also in each of us there exists a Mother Teresa.»

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross has set out to learn the meaning and significance of Death. «The dying are the best teachers. All that I know, I have learnt from them.» In this modest statement is hidden away the whole wisdom of a woman, who has crossed the last frontiers. With the energetic devotion of her whole personality, she has opened herself to that which the Dying experience. She has listened to them in order to understand what they have to say to her.

The worst that the Dying suffer is not fear of Death. It is the loneliness that torments them, that fearful silence, the muteness of the hearts of those who surround them. Many discover only when death is near that they have never really lived.

This knowledge that she has acquired from the Dying, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross wishes to impart to the Living. The Dying need people who are able to bestow on them their nearness. People who are honest to them and to themselves. They don't need anything else other than we all need. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross puts it in her own words: «We are on this Earth to learn to help one another.»

Christoph A. Müller