

The Life Story of Ita Wegman
By Hilma Walter

On the 4th of March, 1943, at the Clinical Therapeutic Institute in Arlesheim, the center of her medical work, Dr. Ita Wegman was called away from her earthly life at the age of 67.

Thus ended a life of rich and fruitful work, and a personality whose memory will live on radiantly in many hearts left on the physical plane. This was our experience at the last gathering on seeing the numbers of her friends who wished to give expression once more to the deep bond they felt with Dr. Wegman. No wonder this was so for whoever came into human contact with her found heart filled with sunny warmth and worldwide interests. Those who came to her as patients or in need of other help were able to feel, over and above the medical advice they sought, a kind of reviving power which gave them fresh courage and a new attitude on life. In such ways the circle of Dr. Wegman's patients and friends had become very widespread and was distributed over many countries. Her rich experience and eager, progressive mind, were an ideal towards which many young doctors, and those devoted to the nursing profession, might well aspire. They received from her living and guiding impulses, for in Dr. Wegman they met one who was striving and seeking continually for a widening of knowledge in the service of healing, to cope with the needs of the times. In her they found, too, a rare courage to heal and an incomparable devotion and capacity for sacrifice where care or help could be given in small or great matters.

These impulses in Dr. Wegman grew out of the essentials of Rudolf Steiner's Spiritual Science when it is carried into life and work. It was this that gave light and meaning to her life, and many people found this light again through contact with her. Above and beyond her medical work, Dr. Wegman was a person of worldwide interests, with a keen perception of the needs of the times. Added to this was a ready sense for all that is beautiful in life and for its powers of healing. Goodness of heart was the secret of this unforgettable life and work.

The parting was an indescribable loss for countless human beings and the tokens of sympathy coming from near and far were deeply moving. This sad event showed that in Dr. Wegman an individuality whose destiny reached far beyond the personal, had left the earth. Rays from her life had shone into many other destinies and threads had been woven which will endure beyond death.

Anyone who was privileged to spend many years of her life working at Dr. Wegman's side, as the writer of this memoir, can only feel thankful to destiny! It was a schooling of a high order, in the presence of a life full of intense work and deep devotion to the medical calling, a life teeming with initiative and striving unceasingly for the right attitude to the world, for wide vision, true understanding and right action. Nobody could help admiring the courage displayed in all the circumstances of life, nor fail to realize, too, how pain and sorrow rightly understood can ennoble a human being. It was the lot of Dr. Wegman to endure many incisive experiences in her life and work – experiences which, judged from the earthly point of view, were fraught with deep pain. Looking back, however, it is clear that they were always steps along the pathway of her soul.

Ita Wegman was born in Java, Dutch East Indies, of Dutch parents on 22, February 1876, and passed her childhood and youth there. These conditions of life offered many opportunities for the unfolding of the soul. Travelling around many sided interests, while on the other hand the preparation and education for later life went forward diversely and freely.

At the age of 25 to 26, Ita Wegman came to Europe. Filled with a strong impulse to devote her life to service, her first step was the decision to take a training in curative gymnastics and Swedish massage. This was about the year 1902. Before long her path led her to Berlin where she came into contact with Dr. Rudolf Steiner and his work, and this encounter was the most significant event of her life. Rudolf Steiner's Spiritual Science at once found in her the deepest response. Rudolf Steiner became her teacher and from then onwards her life and work were rooted in Spiritual Science. Encouraged by Rudolf Steiner, the decision ripened in her to drop the Swedish massage and gymnastic work, and to train for a medical degree. For this purpose she came to Switzerland in 1905, within a year had matriculated in Zurich and then began her medical studies. In 1911 she passed her examinations and became a qualified doctor. A series of posts as an assistant medical officer gave her a thorough and practical insight into the main departments of medical work. When the writer met Dr. Wegman in 1920, she already had an extensive practice in Zurich, as well as a small private Clinic.

The meeting took place in Dornach. In response to a request made by doctors and medical students, Dr. Steiner had expressed his willingness to give a series of lectures showing how medical work can be enriched by Spiritual Science. Twenty lectures of unprecedented compass and scope were delivered, followed later on by other courses. New ways were indicated for a broadening and extension of the art of healing. In order to create a center where methods of healing, enriched by Spiritual Science, could be developed and practiced, Dr. Wegman decided to transfer her practice to Basle and at the same time to start a private Clinic near Dornach. The need for cooperation in establishing this work brought an inquiry to the writer. She was at once prepared to join, for being in the fortunate position of not being tied to a practice of her own, it was her deepest desire to share in such work.

Thus in June, 1921, the Clinical Therapeutic Institute in Arlesheim was opened. Since then our paths were linked together by devotion to medicine and therapy widened and enriched by Spiritual Science. Other doctors, too, gradually came to join in the work. Outwardly it was a very modest beginning, but a close cooperation between Dr. Wegman and Dr. Steiner in the sphere of medicine had been initiated. Dr. Steiner visited the Clinic regularly and it gave him great joy to see the work gradually developing.

It must be left to other friends to describe in fuller detail the extent to which this work has grown in the course of the years as the result of Dr. Wegman's untiring initiative and her readiness to encourage and support others. From these small beginnings the work soon spread beyond the borders of Switzerland and only an outline can be given of all that gradually came into being.

Preparation of the medicaments according to the wider knowledge opened up by Spiritual Science at once became an urgent question. A small chemical laboratory already in existence – it had previously been used to produce colours for painting the first

Goetheanum, then approaching completion – was available for this purpose. Within the first year, however, because of the close cooperation with Dr. Wegman and the Clinic, the growing demands required more space, and a house nearby was taken. This was the beginning of what became the Weleda Company, with its various branches abroad.

Already after a year it was necessary to extend the Clinic. For the accommodation of patients who needed convalescence only, the property Sonnenhof was acquired. This also provided opportunity for agriculture work on a small scale. In 1924, a country house called the 'Holle', close to the Sonnenhof, was taken as a Home for a number of children, physically or mentally in need of special care. Besides cultivation of the soil, a private bakery working according to special principles of dietetics was started. Soon, however, the number of children increased to such an extent that it became necessary to turn the Sonnenhof into a Home for them. The Clinic itself had to be enlarged by adding adjacent buildings and, in 1926, by considerably extending the main house.

Thus in the course of time, the Clinic, together with the Sonnenhof, became a center where young doctors could be introduced to these particular methods of healing. It is also become necessary to arrange Training Courses for those who wished to take up nursing and curative educational work; for as the years went by an increasingly number of doctors, largely from other countries, especially Germany, desired to join in this wider medical activity. Foundations with the same aim also sprang up in other countries, especially in connection with Curative Education. This expansion of the work subsequently necessitated journeys, for example, to Germany, England, France and even Iceland. Other journeys were undertaken for the purpose of study, especially also for the study of 'geographical' medicine in which Dr. Wegman was deeply interested.

In July, 1926, the journal *Natura* was started with the aim of helping to promote a wider understanding of the methods and possibilities of healing opened up by anthroposophical Spiritual Science. A supplement issued to doctors and medical students published articles and notes on the practical experiences already obtained. In connection with the clinical work, a research laboratory was established, which following suggestions made by Rudolf Steiner, worked out new methods for preparing the medicaments. Valuable research work was also carried out in the early diagnosis and treatment of cancer.

Special mention must here be made of the medical book *Fundamentals of Therapy an: an Extension of the Art of Healing through Spiritual Knowledge*. This book was the combined work of Rudolf Steiner and Ita Wegman. Its publication is evidence of the closer and closer cooperation with Dr. Steiner into which Dr. Wegman was being called. Meanwhile Dr. Wegman was nominated by Rudolf Steiner as Recorder (Schriftfuhrer) within the Executive (Vorstand) of the newly founded General Anthroposophical Society and was entrusted with the leadership of the Medical Section as part of the School for Spiritual Science at the Goetheanum. This was at Christmas 1923. Further medical works were to have followed, but this, unfortunately, was not possible. The first volume was just printed when Dr. Steiner fell ill. For six months Dr. Wegman was his doctor and nurse. Besides the grave responsibility, it was a time of intense activity for her. Even during his illness Dr. Steiner was untiringly active, as far as his physical condition allowed. Without interruption his contributions to the *Goetheanum Weekly* and the *News Sheet* appeared as before, including

the regular continuation of *The Story of My Life* (Rudolf Steiner's autobiography). But his physical strength was already spent, and on 30th March, 1925, Rudolf Steiner left the physical plane.

Just as the loss of the first Goetheanum through the fire on New Year's Eve, 1922-3, had been a deep and tragic experience, so now Dr. Wegman had to bear this other indescribable loss. And only too soon, much else followed which cut no less painfully into her life and work. All the more intensely, however, her outer activities gave expression to the spiritual bond for which death is no barrier. Years of intense work and responsibility followed, although severely handicapped from outside by misunderstandings, and clouded by the necessity for perpetual struggle.

In the spring of 1934, Dr. Wegman herself became seriously ill, taking many months to recover. With great thankfulness, however, she was able to look back to this period as a time of enrichment and deepening. Again there were years of intense work, through in a somewhat different form. As she was released from some external duties, more time and strength remained for inner deepening, and the fruit of this was that blessing flowed from her still in greater measure.

The last institutions were La Motta, the Children's Home in Brissago (Tessin) and, as a dependence of the Clinical Therapeutic Institute, Casa Andrea Cristoforo, the Curative and Convalescent Home in Ascona. Dr. Wegman dearly loved the Tessin and knew from her own experience the value of its climate as a factor in healing. It was there, chiefly, that she spent her last years, having first gone for convalescence after a serious accident (4th September 1939).

The accident and the outbreak of the war happened to coincide. Once again Dr. Wegman's outer activities were to a certain extent, curtailed, yet besides the medical work, the following period was one of increasingly preoccupation with the needs of these fateful times; it was a period, too, of spiritual labour and further deepening. This did not mean any diminution of activity but an even greater intensification of the inner life. The fruit of this seemed to impart to others the poise and strength they needed in those tragic days to maintain a true foothold in the midst of their duties and destinies. Everyone who sought it from her, found stimulus, enrichment, or loving, helpful understanding. Dr. Wegman's whole life was one of devotion and sacrifice, in great and little things alike. Pain and sorrow, experienced from sharing the sufferings in the present day world as well as in individual destinies, brought to ripeness qualities which, in this earthly life, had their beginnings in the meeting with Rudolf Steiner. Quite obviously, this meeting was one brought by destiny. It had roused into consciousness the longing so deeply rooted in the soul of Ita Wegman which then came to blossom under the light of the Spirit that had shown into her life. From stage to stage it unfolded, like a plant which, striving upwards, surrenders its forces to the blossom. There were periods which demanded great sacrifices, and yet gave shape and direction to her life. Side by side with this went inner metamorphoses of the soul. The strength and blessing streaming from this life of devotion increased until, finally, it had reached fulfillment.

The passing came during a period still fully of activity. As often before, duties necessitated a short visit to the Clinic in Arlesheim; Dr. Wegman went there on 21st of February, 1943, the day before her birthday. Urgent affairs made immediate and heavy demands on time and strength. The morning of Thursday the 25th, had begun with an early consultation. But soon symptoms of acute physical disability became apparent, necessitating complete rest and immediate medical attention. The heart showed symptoms of considerable weakness but this temporarily very disquieting condition slowly improved. In the course of the day, however, high fever set in, accompanied by acute neuralgic pains moving about the body. The condition caused grave anxiety and the heart required strict care and constant strengthening. To being with, however, no localized organic trouble could be found. This was still the condition on the second day, when the writer arrived from Ascona to help with the medical care and nursing.

If an attempt is made to give some account of the following days, it arises from a feeling of gratitude to a destiny which allowed the writer to be among the few, who, during these last days, stood at Dr. Wegman's side, trying to help. The account is also given in the certainty that there are many friends who long to share, even if only in this way, in the memories of those last few days.

Dr. Wegman herself was fully aware of the seriousness of her condition. She and those around her realized that this attack again meant a deep break in her life and that, at the best, a long convalescence would be necessary. Dr. Wegman thought about her illness quite objectively, more than once expressing the opinion that this illness no longer quite corresponded to the usual forms of illness; she also said that now and in the future, as a result of the war, new forms of illness would more and more have to be reckoned with. All the medical and nursing help received her gratitude and support. She felt safe and sheltered in the atmosphere of her own Clinic and repeatedly expressed satisfaction with the work carried on there. At the same time her eyes rested with thoughtful concern on those around her. As far as her strength allowed, she wanted to be informed about the events of the war. In such moments one seemed to realize how strongly her destiny was linked with that of humanity. At other times, brief remarks spoken at intervals indicated that other states of consciousness were already setting in. she spoke now and then of vivid experiences connected with the realities of Time and Space; at other moments she spoke of difficulty in finding the transition quickly from supersensible experience to that of the world of sense. From the physical point of view, of course, these were signs of an advanced stage of loosening from the etheric body.

On the third day, complications appeared in the lungs, involving a greater strain on the heart, although again the next day, the acute danger seemed to have lifted. After a relatively goodnight, on the morning of the sixth day, the condition showed even further improvement, and the abatement of the fever raised great hope. Dr. Wegman would so thankfully have received from destiny the chance of recovery; for there was still much for her to do, so she believed, and we with her. But further crises soon set in, one following another, each more difficult to deal with. These, too, were taken by her with complete calm and readiness for whatever might ensue. Although every new crisis meant a decrease of physical strength, she listened gladly to news of friends and their greetings.

The last evening came. It was already when we were able to give her news from Ascona and to convey the warm greetings of the friends there. But she received them with the consciousness that the time might have come to take leave of the physical plane. This was indicated in the urgency of her wish to send greetings to all her friends. More than once she followed up the message with the words: 'to all, all...' Her thoughts hurried to everyone who had been near to her in life, but she was now too weak to mention them by name. Yet we saw that she was comforted by the thoughts that her message was understood in this sense.

Then night fell – a night of never to be forgotten hours for those who lived through them by her side. Outside, all was peace and tranquillity. Among the friends who were caring for her, hope still survived, although it was becoming less and less. But when morning broke the hour of parting was felt to be very near. Once again came the question – such a natural question from the human point of view: 'Frau Doctor, can you not stay with us?' Unhesitatingly she answered: 'But why not?' These words were full of love and consolation for they were spoken out of the certainty that death means no separation and that the friends left behind would be united with her in Spirit.

And so on the morning of 4th March, shortly before ten o'clock. Ita Wegman went away from us. The day had begun radiantly and an indescribable kind of magic seemed to be abroad in Nature – as though Nature were rejoicing to meet the departing soul; and soon it seemed, as the Springtime sun increased in strength, that the one who had been so dear to us was turning with the blessing of her love from the spiritual world to those of us now left behind. An atmosphere of solemnity prevailed in the midst of the deep and natural human sorrow. And this mood of solemnity continued as a sustaining power with which to carry further – as was now our task – the great and far-reaching work of Dr. Wegman.

This obituary was written during the months that followed, while the impressions were still strong and vivid. And today, after the passage of more than two years, this may be added: All those upon whom the task had fallen to take Dr. Wegman's work upon themselves, have continued to feel the spiritual bond uniting them in their work. And sustained by this consciousness, they have been able to carry on their duties in such a way that, in spite of the difficult times of the war, the work has grown and developed fruitfully.