

## MARY HENLE (1913-2007)

Mary Henle, champion of Gestalt psychology, prime custodian of its early genius, distiller of its enduring wisdom, relentless pursuer of clarity of ideas, intellectual conscience, illuminating teacher, died on November, 17, 2007, at the age of 94, in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania.



For half a century, in myriad research papers, essays, and edited books, Mary Henle not only kept alive the flame of Gestalt theory; she brought to it, and to psychology as a whole, a depth of understanding and felicity of expression by which our science, now and later, might better know itself. She was involved in the publication of eight books, including major source books in Gestalt theory (1961) and systematic psychology (1973). Besides editing Wolfgang Kohler's Selected Papers (1971c), she translated eight of them into English for the first time. She prepared for posthumous publication Kohler's *The Task of Gestalt Psychology* (1969), the last work by a Gestalt founding father. In 1986, she published *1879 and All That: Essays in the Theory and History of Psychology*, a selection of her writings across a wide swath of theories and problems, "exquisitely cut gems of intellectual analysis," evincing her characteristic "clarity, precision and frugality" (Wertheimer, 1990, p. 168). Her presidency of two APA divisions (History, Theoretical), as well as the Eastern Psychological Association, reflect the esteem in which she was held.

Mary Henle was born July 14, 1913, in Cleveland, Ohio, one of three children (with an older brother and twin sister) of Leo and Pearl Hahn Henle. Her father, a precocious student, had immigrated from Germany as a teen and become a businessman; her mother, on orders from her own father to enter medicine, graduated top of her class, later becoming the first woman doctor to go on ambulance calls (Henle, 1983, p. 221).

Dr. Henle's lifelong commitment to Gestalt psychology emerged during her student years at Smith College (BA, French; MA, Psychology), where she studied under Kurt Koffka and later worked as his research assistant. She describes her excitement at hearing him read aloud from *Principles of Gestalt Psychology* (1935) while still a work in progress. She completed her Ph.D. at Bryn Mawr College, under a faculty friendly to Gestalt views. Her dissertation advisor, Donald MacKinnon, introduced her to Lewinian psychology.

After receiving her Ph.D. in 1939, Dr. Henle became a research associate (postdoctoral fellow) at nearby Swarthmore, where Kohler was teaching. The psychology department, chaired by Robert MacLeod, included Karl Duncker and Hans Wallach. She attended Kohler's seminars, did experimental work with him.

Out of respectful mentorship grew a lasting professional and personal friendship. She writes, "To him I owe my greatest intellectual debt. And my friendship with the Kohlers lasted over the years, . . . we chopped down trees together, my first ride in a Jeep was with Kohler at the wheel; he named my cat" (1983, p. 224).

Henle's teaching career - in those war years, a "migratory profession" - proceeded to the University of Delaware, Bryn Mawr, and Sarah Lawrence. In 1946, Solomon Asch invited her to join the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research. Previously known as the University in Exile, it had begun as a group of ten scholars fleeing Nazi Germany, including the father of Gestalt theory, Max Wertheimer. It came to represent "the most distinguished and scholarly faculty" she had ever known (Henle 1983, 225). Visiting scholars included Rudolf Arnheim, Kurt Goldstein, Wallach, and Kohler. Dr. Henle remained at the New School until her retirement in 1983 as emeritus professor.

Along with four decades of teaching, Dr. Henle also did empirical research, initially in perception, later in human motivation, co-writing perhaps the first laboratory manual in that area (with MacKinnon, 1948). Later, turning her attention to human rationality, she did studies on the relation of thinking to logic. Over time she was drawn increasingly to the analysis of ideas, and to the history of psychology as fertile ground to explore their development. Her later work eyed the future, seeking to dispel misunderstandings of Gestalt psychology "so that later psychologists will have an opportunity to weigh the alternatives" (Henle 1983, 227).

As a student of Mary Henle, I personally feel a bottomless debt to her, first for revealing to me and my imagination a psychology freed from reductionism's prison of illogic and bad faith. Second (and here I risk committing Kohler's empiristic fallacy), it often seems she taught me how to think.

*Edward S. Ragsdale*

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