

REFLECTIONS ON WRITING A BIOGRAPHY OF A LIVING HERO: GISELA KONOPKA (1910-)

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The following narrative describes the unique friendship that developed as the author researched the background of her subject.



Introduction

I am writing a biography of the life and legacy of a living hero, social group worker Gisela Konopka. She is someone I have admired since I was a young girl growing up in Minneapolis, the city she and her husband fell in love with in the 1940s. Her name is known, not only to the professional community in

which she was a professor of social work and an administrator at the University of Minnesota for over 30 years, but also to citizens of the world whose life she has affected. She has been, for over 90 years, an advocate for the disenfranchised, voiceless, and powerless among us all. When I think of her legacy and work, I have the ambivalent response of knowing that I must do more and, at the same time, realizing that I can never begin to accomplish what she has.

Her prolific writing career has been matched by a consuming desire to teach throughout the world about the philosophy of social group work and work with youth. Her writing and teaching have been equally matched by active "doing" – facilitating groups, discussions, meetings with individuals, consulting, and leadership in dozens of organizations to promote her philosophy of "justice with a heart." Konopka's philosophy has helped me to be a more compassionate

social worker and to understand the interplay between one's personal and professional existence. It is not just that the "personal is political." It is far more about "walking the walk" than any understanding of the interrelation among various systems. The concept underscores every belief held by Konopka in her personal life as well as her professional life. For her, there are no boundaries between the two lives. It speaks to compassion, understanding, acceptance, and, most of all, the absolute belief "that no one is superior to anyone else. Period." It absolves no one from responsibility, but it places responses in a compassionate context.

Her work led me, as a 20-year-old college student, to choose social group work as a career. I embraced her philosophy of unconditional regard for all people as I embarked on my own social work career. Over the years, I had some indirect contact with her and her work. In more recent years, as a member of the Minnesota Chapter of the Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups (AASWG) I had direct contacts with her. In the mid-90s, she assisted me in locating social workers to interview regarding the impact of McCarthyism on social work. I formally interviewed her for the first time in 1998, when she was 88 years old, for an article I was writing on the critical periods in the history of social group work. We sat on the large, front porch of her home on a half-acre hill of prime land in a prestigious neighborhood of Minneapolis on a warm,

summer day and we gazed out over Lake Calhoun as we talked. I knew, by the end of that interview, that I needed to know the woman in totality. That evening, in fact, she called me to share that she believed we had bonded (something, she added, that seems to happen so seldom). I agreed.

From that beginning, we slowly developed our relationship. I responded to her when she needed help as the result of an injury. Because she needed hospitalization, she asked me to give an address for her at a state conference that afternoon. While waiting to be admitted into the hospital, she had me read the address to her because she wanted "to make sure it is read with passion." From that period on, we occasionally had lunch, after which we would sit upstairs in her study quietly talking and looking out over the lake – a stunningly peaceful and mesmerizing view. We would talk about philosophy, spirituality, and politics. She wanted more from me than just a listening ear. She expected that I could engage with her about these topics. When she mentioned a scholar or a book, I quickly made sure I read something about that person or that perspective. I found it so stimulating that I felt wired after every visit and unable to concentrate on anything else. This irony of feeling excited or "wired" during such contemplative and softly spoken discussions left me hungering for more.

By summer 1999, we first began talking about a book about her that I would write and discussed what it would emphasize about her life. We met in her large living room with the massive stone fireplace and sat on chairs that her husband, Paul, built. A table with cookies and coffee sat between us. Having just read a biography of radical African American poet Langston Hughes (Berry, 1997), Gisa asked me to read it also so that we could discuss it. I devoured it and saw how Hughes' struggles and the beauty of his poems were interrelated with who he was and what he wrote. I noted that the biography was

written in an academic style and wondered, knowing Gisa's propensity for writing "stories," if she would like that style. We agreed that it read too much like a dissertation and that her story should be less academically-oriented and more focused on the total person. She is most proud of her personal life, particularly her life with Paul, her beloved husband, now deceased. She would want any biography about her to focus on her personal life as well as her professional life; in fact she said: "And I am not *just* a social worker."

She told me how important Hughes and his poems were to her when she first arrived in this country in 1941. She actually met him while she was an MSW student at the University of Pittsburgh when he was invited by the social work faculty to read from his works. He signed a book of poems (*The Weary Blues*) for Gisa and Paul. His poems have always spoken to her. She has always identified with his life and death struggle and his demand to be treated with dignity.

She, too, had spent the last several years in life and death struggles in Europe as an anti-Nazi resistance fighter in Germany, later Austria, and, finally, in hiding in France until she gained entrance into the US. While she identifies with everyone who feels demeaned or marginalized, she has always felt a special affiliation with African Americans who, she believes, through slavery and other forms of institutionalized racism, were, like her as a Jew in Germany, classified as less than human and without rights.

Her struggles during Nazism, I learned, foreshadowed the contributions she would bring to the fight for human justice in this country and around the world. Her name and work are recognized worldwide through her years of writings and lectures on almost every continent. Her books have been translated into 13 languages. Her book *Social Group Work: A Helping Process*, first published in 1963, with later editions in the 1970s and 80s, is a classic used around the globe to teach

social group work.

Her 300 published articles remain classics and are often cited in the literature. She is considered the “mother of social group work” in Germany (Kalcher, 1995.) Her name is associated with work with youth and as a pioneer in making scholarly knowledge about youth available to practitioners. Her legacy continues through the Konopka Institute for Best Practices in Adolescent Health at the University of Minnesota, a collaborative effort of the Schools of Medicine, Nursing, and Public Health. Each year since her retirement in 1978, there has been a “Gisela Konopka Lectureship” (first sponsored by the School of Social Work; later, by the Adolescent Health unit in the Medical School; and now by the Konopka Institute) to honor her for being “the moving force behind numerous innovative methods in practice and research in social work and youth services” (1978, Lectureship Brochure). I realized that it was mandatory to share her life with others.

My visits to the large home on the hill continued for the following months. We had coffee, sometimes a lunch, and quiet afternoons together as we watched the Minnesota weather shift through the seasons on the lake. Symbolically, the lake has had great meaning to her personally. Her private writings always refer to it and the seasons passing over it. She and Paul wanted a home on a lake and were pleased when Paul found an old, rundown cabin with no heat that they could afford. This home became a passion to them as they rebuilt it; Paul’s beautiful work as a carpenter and sculptor came to life in that home. The large porch he built across the front of the home on both floors became a gathering place for people from around the world to sit and discuss philosophy, politics, and issues of the day as they viewed the lake and the changing seasons the Konopkas loved so much. The home became a concrete testament to their drive to find a safe place where they could permanently live and thrive

and share their good fortune with others. I came to understand that the beauty of her home and the lake continued to give her sustenance through joyful as well as painful times to come. When Paul died in 1976, his ashes were buried in the yard of their home. His artwork dominates every room – his presence is very apparent.

In January 2000, my university notified me that, effective fall, 2000, I would be provided with generous course releases for three years to write a biography. Gisa and I celebrated on a bright, extremely cold—far below zero—Sunday afternoon. In celebration, she served chicken and vegetables in wine sauce with rice and beans. The rest of the afternoon was spent looking at the material she has in her home and discussing the Konopka Collection at the University of Minnesota Archives as well as the Konopka Institute for Best Practices in Adolescent Health. Gently, we pulled out her very private and personal journals, which she has kept in English since arriving in this country. No one else had ever seen them. Since Paul died in 1976, the diaries have taken on the form of letters to him. She pointed out a file of every holiday letter she sent from 1954 onward, a file on her sister Ruth who died in 1940, another on the very early letters sent and received in the early 1940s, and a folder on Paul. We explored shelves after shelves on three floors of her home. I felt overwhelmed, not up to it, inadequate, yet, exhilarated. How could I possibly ever pull this all together?

How did she know, so early in her career, I wondered, that she should save absolutely everything? Not only had she saved every letter she received, but also carbons of the letters she sent to others! She had floor to ceiling files on all three floors of her large home (and 35 boxes had already been sent to the University of Minnesota Archives!). She even had file drawers of every book she has read, catalogued by author and subject! What did

she know about herself and her future that everything became so important to her to save? It was beyond my comprehension that anyone could keep such an organized, documented legacy.

The work of writing a biography took its daunting start. The setting of my work needs to be understood: I sat at a desk, Paul's desk, facing Gisa's desk, in the second floor study. Bookshelves line three walls; the fourth is full of windows overlooking the lake. Artwork, which abounds throughout the house, even in the basement, is on any open wall space and beautiful wood sculptures (done by Paul) are displayed on the desks and cabinets. I brought a laptop computer and kept a scanner at her home that she had me store away each time in a cabinet so that it would not clutter the desk when I wasn't there. Often, she sat at the desk directly across from me, reading.

I read her annual letters first to get a context, and then moved on to her diaries. They were handwritten and difficult to read. Her English, even in her early years in the U.S., is very good, but the handwriting was faded and unclear. I found later that languages come easy to her. She is fluent in French, German, English, and, to some extent, Dutch.

The more I read, the more I realized the extent of Gisa's lifelong sense of despair and self-doubt, something that she openly discusses. She has never felt good enough. She tries to solve all pain in the world, but, of course, she can't and she returns to despair. Even in the early 1940s, while she was in school and Paul had been drafted and was gone, she traveled by train or bus to speak out about Nazism and its horrors to any audience who would listen. She actively tried to find where others from her resistance movement were, where family was, and she tried to help them get out. After the war, she and Paul sponsored many refugees and helped find sponsors for others. For years, she and Paul sent half their income back to Europe to help others. They sent care packages of food

and other goods to relatives in Israel and Germany. To this day, she remains dissatisfied with what she has done, because she has always hoped to do more.

Her Childhood

I learned that she was born Gisela Peiper in 1910 to parents who had emigrated from Poland to Germany to escape the pogroms. Her parents owned and operated a small, kosher grocery store in West Berlin and the family, including her older sister Hanna and younger sister Ruth, lived in two rooms attached to the store. While they had little money, her father's love of books was instilled in all of the children and each one completed Gymnasium and University. Gisa was a somber child who did not feel as pretty as Hanna. She was particularly close to Ruth.

She often helped her father with grocery deliveries and they discussed politics and philosophy. She felt her father saw her as his "boy". Yet, she was a rebellious spirit who questioned her father's strict adherence to religious beliefs. She could not identify with any one spiritual philosophy. Her early orthodox Jewish training taught her a sense of justice and community; yet, she opposed the rules and rituals. Her father had come out of the socialist movement in Poland, and Gisa agreed with his political views. To her, socialism focused on a sense of justice and a collective resentment of inequality.

She was attracted to the philosophy of Walter Gropius and to the progressive Bauhaus movement and to writers and artists whose political beliefs drove their art. She was enthralled by the work of artist Kate Kollwitz and appreciated the works of George Grosz, Ernst Barlach, Ernst Toller, Kurt Tucholsky, Heinrich Zille, Bertolt Brecht, all of whom reinforced her feeling that she must work for a better world.

As a teenager in the German Youth Movement, "Wandervogel," she attended lectures and argued politics and even

psychological theories. There were pro-Freud factions and pro-Adler factions and the two often debated. She chose the Adler camp because she was attracted to his anti-authoritarianism and his knowledge about the environment, and she liked that he was a member of the socialist movement in Vienna. Her participation in this movement, and the freedom from authority it afforded her, profoundly affected her life and is an important link to her later work in Germany as well as in the U.S. She experienced first hand both the positive influences of group dynamics (in her socialist youth group) as well as the negative influences of group dynamics (as a result of the Nazi movement) while a young woman.

The youth movement of the 1920s focused on independence, rejection of societal values and norms, and a questioning of standard political and economic positions. Both men and women rejected traditional dress and wore sandals and loose clothing. They carried guitars and sang and read poetry. They rejected alcohol as the drink of the bourgeoisie (Gisa has never tasted alcohol.) They rejected social class differences. It was a radical spirit to which Gisa was profoundly drawn and in which she first met her soul-mate, Paul Konopka. Paul, a non-Jewish German a few years older, became the love of her life despite years of separation and times when one did not know if the other was still alive. Paul was the jovial, often smiling and joking complement to Gisela's serious, worried, more despairing manner.

Gisa was just finishing graduate work in philosophy, history, and education in Hamburg when Hitler came to power and she found that, despite being an honors student, she would be unable, because she was Jewish, to teach and live a professional life. She and Paul joined the resistance movement leading to life and death involvement in underground work. Both were imprisoned at various times (she was seized in 1936 and put in the

Hamburg-Fuhlsbuttel concentration camp) and, eventually, had to flee the country. Paul, hunted by the Nazis, escaped in 1936 and made his way to France. Later, Gisa went to Austria to do more underground work, but, after another imprisonment, fled to France where she eventually connected again with Paul where they lived in hiding. During this time, she occasionally wrote articles in Anti-Nazi magazines (Konopka, 1942).

Beginnings in the U.S.

Gisa and Paul emigrated to the U.S. in 1941, Gisa three months earlier than Paul, and married three days after his arrival in New York. Within weeks, they were in Pittsburgh where she became a group work student at the School of Social Work at the University of Pittsburgh and he found a job in a factory. Gisa chose Pittsburgh after meeting in New York with Clara Kaiser who recommended that Gisa talk with social group worker Gertrude Wilson, a professor at Pittsburgh. Her lifelong study of philosophy attracted her to the field of social group work where she was excited to find a philosophy of life similar to the one she had embraced as a young woman in Germany. During her studies, she was impressed with the degree of racial integration in the MSW program but began to realize that this did not represent the rest of the country. She committed herself to continue the fight begun in Germany against any unequal or inhumane treatment to anyone.

She and Paul found friends in the labor movement in Pittsburgh, a movement in which they had been active in Hamburg. Gisa wrote her master's thesis on a labor union topic, "Workers' Education in Pittsburgh." Paul was soon drafted in 1942 and left for the war. Alone again, Gisa poured all of her energy into her studies and her field placement at the Pittsburgh Child Guidance Clinic. Upon graduation, she was hired by the clinic as its first group worker. She immediately was immersed into publishing, speaking, and

advocating a philosophy of caring. One of her first published articles was co-authored with Wilson in 1944. By 1949, she had written her first book, *Therapeutic Group Work With Children*; a second, *Group Work in the Institution: A Modern Challenge*, followed in 1954.



Gisa in the south of France, 1941, shortly before she came to the U.S.

She accepted a teaching position at the School of Social Work at the University of Minnesota in 1947 where she redeveloped the group work concentration. She immediately became active in the community and in the larger university. In addition to the Urban Leagues of both Minneapolis and St. Paul, she was involved with the American Association of Group Work and the National Association of Social Workers where she chaired the committee that developed the working definition of social work. One of her favorite associations was the Orthopsychiatric Association in which she served as national president, one of the first social workers and

the first woman to hold that position. She found herself flying to professional meetings several times a month, teaching full-time, actively engaging in scholarship, conducting workshops, training, and lectures around the world throughout the year, and maintaining a home life of social exchange with a diverse group of visitors and friends. The arts were central to the Konopkas, who regularly attended the theatre and art shows.

The Konopkas sponsored many refugees to the U.S., many of whom lived with them for long periods of time; their home was always bursting with people. They took in troubled adolescents, some of whom now comprise the core of loyal Konopka helpers whom she now considers her "*Wahlverwandschaften*" (family by choice).

She returned to school in 1954 for a DSW degree at The New York School of Social Work (later, Columbia University) to study the philosophy of Eduard Lindeman. Her dissertation, *Eduard C. Lindeman and Social Work Philosophy*, was published in 1958. Her dissertation committee was composed of Nathan Cohen, Henry Commager, and Gordon Hamilton. This book is a treasure, containing a thorough articulation of a social work philosophy that focuses on the philosophy of understanding humans rather than the techniques of intervention. She embraced what she was learning about avoiding an either/or stance regarding philosophy. One evening in her apartment, she pondered in her diary:

I have so many thoughts about life; for instance I always have been bridged: Polish and German Jew, Jew with Christian ideas, Europe-USA. Perhaps it is good, perhaps this makes for understanding. Social workers should have done a lot of living. (2-7-55)

She appreciated Lindeman's ability to bridge differences. Like Lindeman, she has steadfastly insisted that human problems cannot be separated from philosophical consideration, and she has fought throughout her career to see that social work did not separate the two. In the book, she reflected on the social work profession's lack of focus on philosophy:

Without more seminars in philosophy (which must be in the form of inquiries, not dogmatic teaching), social work will continue its unstable swing from one extreme to another and its tendency to indoctrination. Schools of social work must offer thoughtful, free, and conscious investigation into philosophy related to social work.

Only if this content is added to the social work curriculum and if the profession is free to open inquiry based on respect for basic ethics will the social worker become, as Lindeman hoped... something more than a skilled craftsman, something more than a well-meaning idealist. (Konopka, 1958, pp. 201-202)

Back in Minnesota, Gisa thrived at the University – particularly, as time went on, outside of the School of Social Work – and built an international reputation, not only as a social group worker but especially as an expert on youth. She visited institutions throughout the world, helping staff humanize the institutionalized experience of the young residents. A prime example of how she transported her notions of humane treatment and justice to others is her post-World War II work in Germany. Beginning in 1950, she made a series of visits to the country from which she had fled in the 1930s, offering a

message of the centrality of humans to any issue. As German group worker Jurgen Kalcher (1995. Translation by Peacock, M.) noted:

Her answer was not to turn away from the German people who had humiliated her and had forced her to flee...but turning toward helping them. Her humanistic stance was responsible...in developing West German social work and in preventing it from falling back to barbaric conditions of social inferiority.

In the late 1960s—with a couple of hundred publications; travel to teach in Cyprus, Brazil, Jerusalem, India, Japan, Netherlands, and Thailand, more trips to Germany and many other countries; as well as continued teaching in the social work program—she wrote a book on adolescence that outlined her view on the need for compassion and understanding of the issues of adolescence. The book, *Adolescent Girl in Conflict*, was released in 1966.

In 1968, she was appointed to the post of coordinator of community programs at the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, and in 1969, she was appointed special Assistant to the Vice-President for Student Affairs. She was instrumental in working with student leaders and activists during a turbulent year at the University. Students believed in and trusted Konopka and the University administration was willing to listen to her as she helped them understand the students' issues. The 1969-70 student body president explained her role as a buffer between the two groups:

[The] upper administration people weren't combative, but needed reassurance. Gisa provided that. She reflected back on her own

youth movement and stressed how important it had been to her. She helped them understand that students were making choices – that different choices had different consequences. [Her message was] always nonjudgmental. Her core message was: these young people are speaking about a better world. (Gilsenan, 2000)

In 1970, she became the director of the Center on Youth Development and Research. With a large grant from the Lily endowment, she was able to conduct a major two-year study on adolescent girls. Many articles as well as a book, *Young Girls: A Portrait of Adolescence* (1976), resulted from the study. Paul died unexpectedly in 1976. Now alone, she retired from the university in 1978. She continued a busy schedule of papers, presentations, consultations, travel, and work with organizations around the globe. Today she has, at age 92, slowed down. She still welcomes visitors and loves a good dialogue.

My Work Continued

I continued to learn about her story as I spent a day a week at her home during the summer/fall, 2000 and winter/spring 2001. Gisa always served coffee and cookies or, if she didn't feel I'd eaten enough, she wanted to cook something more substantial. She reminded me that when she was working on her doctoral dissertation she spent entire days at the home of the family whose papers she was studying. "They never once offered me as much as a glass of water despite the fact that I spent the entire day there. I was poor and would have appreciated it."

Often while I was reading, she would be talking to me or reading her mail out loud. Other times, she took a nap or a bath. (She realizes that someone should be in the home while she bathes in case she can't get out.) Occasionally, we looked through her photo

albums – the photos bring back memories. One day we saw a photo of Paul diving into a lake, taken on a vacation just before he reported for duty in the Army. She put her finger gently on his image and slid it along his back; she whispered, "Look at him, oh, look at him."

Another day, Gisa told me that it is what we have in common as humans that holds us together. Emphasizing differences to the exclusion of commonality only separates us and leads to misunderstanding. "That's what group work does; it creates a setting where we can help each other and understand each other," she insisted. I listened to her, but was also reading a diary entry made a few months after Paul died in which she wrote, "I really am not a whole person, I am a wound, slightly covered, but a wound... Why live? What is the use?" A few weeks later she wrote to Paul in her diary, "My sweet, the tulips you planted begin to bloom – the amaryllis has four stalks with four blossoms each, but you can't see it! I don't know what to do with my feelings. I think I did not take good care enough of you – but I tried, did I not?" Once, after I finished reading love letters from Paul written when she was studying in New York in the 1950s, I suggested to Gisa that she might want to read



The cottage the Paul rebuilt, 1949

some of them. I left them on her desk. When I returned the next week, she told me to file them away. She could not bear to read any more. Every letter brought her to tears.

One day Gisa read portions of *Markings* to me by Dag Hammarskjöld (1964). She keeps the book by her bedside (and now a copy of the book is by my bedside as well) and often reads it in the middle of the night when she cannot sleep. She read the following passages to me:

But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone – or something – and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal. (p. xii)

Why this desire in all of us that, after we have disappeared, the thoughts of the living shall now and again dwell upon our name? Our name. Anonymous immortality we cannot even escape. The consequences of our lives and actions can no more be erased than they can be identified and duly labeled – to our honor or our shame. (p.44)

Courage and love; equivalent and related expressions for your bargain with Life. (p. 160)

She looked up at me, grinning. “You mean I stole that phrase?” she asked sheepishly. I laughed because I knew she was referring to the title she chose for her autobiography *Courage and Love* (1988).

On a particularly cold winter day, I was reading in her study and Gisa was resting on the back porch where there is no heat but much warmth from the sun. I tucked her in with an afghan she crocheted many years ago.

When she was an active writer, she did needlework while she spoke into a tape recorder. When she complained to Paul that she did not believe she was saying anything of importance, he said, “But, you are making something beautiful with your hands; that’s important.” Gisa was restless and called me to her sun porch to talk. She was wondering why I had not queried her about why she and Paul never had children. Actually, I had picked up some sense of why from her diaries and other writings. But, I asked her to tell me. She explained that both she and Paul saw their mission on earth to be dedicated to the movement for justice. That’s where their passion was. Before Paul left for the war, she tried hard to become pregnant because she was afraid that Paul might not come back. After the war, she continued trying but was now in her mid-30s, old in those days to get pregnant. So, it just didn’t happen and they made peace with it. Adoption was never seriously considered because they often were taking care of so many people and children in their home. When they were around 60 years old, they became foster parents to Patty, a Korean adoptee who was in her teens and struggling. This has remained a very strong relationship. Patty, now in her 40s, takes Gisa shopping bi-weekly and considers Gisa her mother.

I spent 2001-2002 academic year completing work at the archives and finishing reading her private material in her home. This resulted in a difficult transition as our visits became less frequent and less focused on the book. By summer 2002, I found myself with mountains of material and a sense of being besieged with it all. Most of my interviews were completed. Some interviews were purposely left to the end of the project because they would provide more current information. Material was organized chronologically and chapters were developed.

Visits To the Konopka Home By My Students

Spending a day a week with her in her home and another day a week at the University of Minnesota Archives resulted in my constantly framing issues through her lens, talking about her in my classes and with my colleagues and with my friends. Two student groups from my university asked if they, too, could spend time in her home and meet with her.

The Radical Student Social Work Association, an MSW student organization, visited Gisa on a lovely Saturday afternoon. I was worried because Gisa was not feeling well (the arthritis in her neck was very painful) and, as a result of the pain, she had been miserable all morning. But, when the students arrived, she was totally transformed. She had combed her hair, put on lipstick and a fresh, lovely blouse, and was "on." She was gracious and welcoming. How does she do it? We sat around a large table in her front porch. The students brought snacks and juice.

She interacted easily with them, telling them she likes the word "radical." She told them about the socialist youth movement in which she was active during the 1920s in Germany. It radicalized her and, as a result, she refused to continue going to the temple. She told the students how this caused enormous conflict with her father whom she loved very much. The more she studied during adolescence, the more she concluded, "all religions have many similar values...I don't like just one religion." When they asked her what her current spiritual beliefs are, she wondered aloud what the term "spiritual" means. She explained that she is not, by nature, a joiner; she has never "fit in" to any specific religious group. For years, she considered herself a Unitarian but never actually joined any congregation. Her reluctance, she explained, is because she does not want to abandon her Jewishness, not the religion, but the identity as a "discriminated

Jew." Yet, she added, "I would be nothing if I didn't believe in the possibility of the good." She brightened as she told them about one of the most important men (after Paul) in her life, a Catholic priest, Father Tom Setten. (This very strong friendship began after Paul died; unfortunately, Tom died a few years later. At his Catholic funeral, Gisa delivered the eulogy.) Tom, over the years, encouraged her to consider God not as a harsh, male figure, but as "total, unconditional love." Smiling, she concluded, "I can accept that kind of God."

The students asked good questions about her life and about group work. She told them "social group work is the greatest weapon against fascism." She talked about youth and how we don't understand them nor listen to them. "Adolescents are no different than before. The only difference is we now hate them more." When the students asked her about multiculturalism and identity politics, she briskly replied, "I don't like the phrase 'that's their culture'. People forget there are many subcultures. I'm an old egalitarian. People generalize and I have trouble with that." Finally, students wanted to know what she reads. She replied that she reads all poetry, explaining, "poetry is my savior for everything." She also loves fiction. Among her favorite authors, ones she reads over and over again, are Morris West, Langston Hughes, and Herbert Fast.

After discussing this visit with my undergraduate group work class, they, too, wanted to meet her. The students spent a morning at Gisa's home and, again, she was totally "on." The questions were different from the ones posited by the radical graduate students, more personal, more about her marriage to Paul and the youth movement in Germany. She was so gracious with the students and let them roam around her house looking at everything. They even walked into the room off the kitchen where there is a heated pool (installed by Paul so that Gisa could swim all year), something I'd never

done. At the next class period, a student brought in a thank you card and everyone signed it. The comments were poignant, particularly one from a Hmong student who said that she would always embrace Gisa's philosophy that no one is superior to anyone else. A Japanese student, here just for the academic year, was thrilled to meet Gisa whom she had heard about in Japan (Gisa's books have been translated into Japanese). One student wrote that she learned more from Gisa that day than could ever be taught in a classroom.

Conclusion

At this point, I don't know when the book will be published or by whom, but I do know that the experience has transformed my life. Gisela Konopka has taught me the importance of thinking about ideas, developing a philosophical stance, and always treating every person as a significant being to whom I convey respect, caring, and a certain way of showing love. Her love of social group work keeps me excited about social work. In her words, social group work is an "incredible opportunity to transmit an extraordinary theory about interaction, influencing the individual to help self and, in the process, help each other." She sees it as a "philosophy" and has seen "the excitement from working with prisons or young people in institutions." When she went to Germany, she found that the people there became "so excited" about the philosophy. She shared that, in Germany, someone said, "Where there is group work, there can be no fascism. The group helps people be themselves."

She has helped me understand that teaching has little to do with technique, but much more to do with attitudes. She recently told me:

"I always taught through examples. It is the only way I could teach. [The instructor must] bring

out of people their own capacity...Only through discussing one's practice can one really learn theory and practice a philosophy. Coursework is not unimportant but often is taught as if it is all-important."

She realizes that coursework in a history of the profession, theories of human behavior, methods, and a good understanding of existing organizations is important, but she emphasizes that its importance is only that it "informs that there are a variety of ways to work with people." I've learned from her that you can best establish a classroom of passionate learners who engage in critical thinking when you help them dialogue about their stories. Students then can connect their stories to theory and a philosophy of practice that is humane and empowering. I believe every student – undergraduate and graduate – deserves to enter a classroom where the instructor is *excited* to be there and is *passionate* about the topic. One of her former students, David Fogel, explained this well when he wrote to her upon her retirement at the University of Minnesota in 1978 (Letter to Konopka, 5-30-78) that

"[As an instructor] you didn't denigrate the technology but you did teach that upon the morality of actual practice hinged the development of the professional. You taught us hope. You taught us to praise the light not to wallow cursing the darkness.... You taught us what I never believed could be taught – passion for our profession and compassion for our clientele.... You sparked an imagery of leadership for social justice.... In a word, Gisa, 'you lit up our lives.' Anyone touched by you is today a bit more human."

I've had a very intense relationship with Gisa the past four years. Inevitably there have been times when, so immersed in my study, I wonder just what I am doing and if anything I am doing is really important. Her ideas are articulated with passion, but are they new? Will what I write about make a difference? Yet, any time I bring someone to Gisa's house to meet and talk with her, I observe anew the magic that is Gisela Konopka. More than anyone I know, she exemplifies the true meaning of not only "talking the talk," but "walking the walk." She's walked that walk for 92 years and social work is far richer for it. Old ideas take on new meaning as a result of knowing and studying Konopka. As one writer wrote after visiting her (Hartman, 1967) "Thinking about Gisela Konopka after the visit, I realized that her own warmth and conviction breathes new life into old ideas – like human dignity, freedom, mutual trust."

I know of no other social worker who has had such an international impact on social work education and practice as has Gisela Konopka.

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