

THE DEATH OF A HERO: SOCIAL GROUP WORKER GISELA KONOPKA (1910-2003)

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Gisela Konopka, world-renowned social group work and expert on adolescence, died on December 9, 2003, at the age of 93 years and 10 months. Her friends, colleagues, and students will remember her as someone who had the ability, whether in a small classroom, a large auditorium, or a prison reception area, to create an atmosphere that convinced others that change was possible. This narrative is a reflection on an article the author wrote in 2002 for this journal on writing a biography of a living hero.

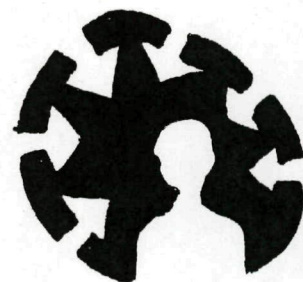
The name of Gisela Konopka has been familiar to me my entire life. From 1947 until her death in 2003, she was regularly featured in the local Twin Cities press. She often wrote letters to the editor about issues important to her. In college, after I chose social work as a career, her name took on added importance to me. I learned of her vast contributions to the profession and my chosen specialization, social group work. On several occasions, I was in the audience during one of her moving presentations and I read her classic, *Social Group Work: A Helping Process* (1963, 1972, 1984). Her presence and her message captivated me. I left each encounter, as did tens of thousands of others for sixty years all over the world, *knowing* that I could make a difference in my work.

I began meeting with Gisa somewhat regularly in 1998, and from 1999 to 2002, I spent at least a day a week in her Minneapolis home reading her personal papers and interacting with her. Occasionally, we went out to eat in a local restaurant or attended a speech, lecture, or play. Because she did not drive and was unable, because of her frailty, to use public transportation, she could not attend functions alone, so I resisted turning these invitations down. At the same time, they were interruptions in my work. After I completed my study in her home and was ready to engage in the hard work of actually writing the biography, I tried to reduce the frequency of my visits, but Gisa was not willing to let me go quite yet. As a result, I continued to visit

her home every couple of weeks and was often in contact with her by telephone. Two years ago, I wrote an article – “Reflections on Writing a Biography of a Living Hero” – that appeared in the Fall, 2002 issue of *Reflections*, in which I focused on our relationship during the time I was collecting material for a biography of her life (Andrews-Schenk, 2004).

Gisa had ambivalent feelings about the published article; she was pleased that an article about her was published, but less pleased that it had not been written under her watchful eye. The most difficult aspect of our relationship was her need to have control over my work and my need to not let her. She had signed a consent that gave me full access to her and her papers, but what that meant to Gisa was a topic of constant renegotiations between the two of us.

In an “appointment” with her shortly after the article was published (Gisa preferred to call all visits “appointments” because she did not want to appear to be frivolous or not focused on important work), she took great exception to my description of her home as “large.” It is a large home in a beautiful neighborhood of large, stately homes, but Gisa was not comfortable – and never had been – with acquired possessions. It was “ridiculous” to suggest that she and her husband Paul would live in a large house, she insisted, adding, “Don’t you remember that this house was nothing more than an unheated cabin when we bought it?” “Yes, I remember, Gisa. I



wrote about that in the article.” She laid the article aside and sat back in her recliner to tell me the story again. I settled in a chair directly across from her, taking comfort in her gentle, thickly accented voice as she spoke, as she had dozens of times before to me, about the house that came to life from her husband’s expert craftsmanship. As she spoke, I looked around the (yes, large) living room with the stone fireplace, the Käthe Kollwitz paintings on the wall, and Paul’s sculptures on every flat surface of the room.

The Konopka home—the only house Gisa and Paul ever owned—symbolized so much more than simply a place to live. For them, the house represented safety from a harsh world, a haven for others in pain or in need of rest, and a place to finally lay down roots after many uncertain years of fighting in Germany, Austria, and France, where they never had any guarantee of permanence in their lives. Paul, her partner in anti-Nazi resistance work in 1930s Germany and later her husband when they were able to marry in New York in 1941, died in 1976. Gisa remained in their home the rest of her life. In the second-floor study overlooking the lake, Gisa wrote letters in the form of a journal to Paul after he died. To Gisa, the house was her connection to Paul; his ashes were buried in the yard and she felt his presence in every room. She would never leave that home.

Gisa had other issues to discuss with me about the article. She questioned why I included in the article that she had saved so much material. Even though she’d sent 35 boxes of papers to the University of Minnesota Archives, she still had in her possession floor-to-ceiling files on all three floors of her “large” home and had file drawers of every book she had read, catalogued both by author and by subject. I am not a saver and so I said in the article that it “was beyond my comprehension that anyone could keep such an organized, documented legacy.” Gisa was concerned that readers might conclude that

she considered herself a “big shot” or too self-focused. That led to a number of additional stories, told many times before, that she had always fought self-doubt and a sense that she was a “nobody.”

Her final criticism surprised me. I talked about her despair and self-doubt in the article, but Gisa felt it was not an important enough issue to warrant inclusion. Yet Gisa had always been very open with me about her serious bouts with depression over the years, and had shared with me her private diaries where she had chronicled some very difficult times in her life when she did not believe she could go on. Throughout her life, her emotional pain often surfaced as unexplained physical pain and illness. As well, she had shared with me a situation in which her marriage had been threatened and almost destroyed. She wanted the book I was writing to be a full story of her life, including the joys and the pains, but now I felt confused. We sat quietly for a long time with occasional comments from one of us. By the end of the afternoon, she was tired. I tucked an afghan around her, kissed her, and left.

During my next visit, I noticed that Gisa had several copies of the article on a table in the living room to give to visitors who came to see her. Apparently, she was pleased enough with the article that she wanted to share it with others. Later, I learned that Gisa gave the article to a close friend who taught at a college in southern Minnesota. The friend assigned the article along with Gisa’s autobiography, *Courage and Love* (1988), to a class of students. After reading about Gisa, the students sent letters to her about their reflections on her life. Gisa loved getting these letters. We never spoke of any issues she had with the article again.

During the final year of her long life, Gisa became more frail and thin. She had little interest in food other than good chocolate, hard cheese, and crusty bread. Gisa had experienced many physical ills during her long life,

but had been blessed with a brilliant mind that stayed sharp – except for periodic episodes of short-term memory loss – until the end of her life. She kept her calendar filled with visitors, but she seldom left the house. On December 6, 2000, she called a friend because she had a severe pain in her stomach. She was hospitalized, expecting to be released home in a few days. Tests showed no specific reason for her pain and friends began to prepare for her return home. On Tuesday morning, December 9, she began to peacefully slip away and within two hours she died. She was only two months shy of her ninety-fourth birthday.

The following Sunday, a small, private memorial service was held at the Minneapolis Institute of Art. People throughout the room told poignant “Gisa stories,” some from years ago, most from the recent past. One young adolescent, Zack, said tenderly, “She didn’t care what you’d done in the past. She always saw something good in you.” I read a poem Gisa had given me a couple of years previously with instructions to read it at her funeral. Coincidentally, I had read this same poem to my graduate students the previous night in my History and Philosophy of Social Work class (only hours before Gisa died). Written by Rosa Zagnoni Marinoni (1936), it expressed Gisa’s lifelong search for a place where she could belong:

*Who are My People?
My people? Who are they?
I went into the church where the congregation
Worshipped my God. Were they my people?
I felt no kinship to them as they knelt there.
My people? Where are they?
I went into the land where I was born,
Where men spoke my language...
I was a stranger there.*

“My people,” my soul cried. “Who are my people?”

“My people,” my soul cried. “Who are my people?”

*Last night in the rain I met an old man
Who spoke a language I do not speak,
Which marked him as one who does
not know my god.*

*With apologetic smile he offered me
The shelter of his patched umbrella.
I met his eyes... And then I knew...*

On January 9, 2004, a public memorial service was held at the University of Minnesota. Gisa’s close friend, Father Larry Johnson, gave the invocation and Bob Blum and Judith Kahn, from the University’s Konopka Institute for Best Practices in Adolescent Health, recited the Mourner’s Kaddish. There were several brief eulogies interspersed with Gisa’s favorite music. A string quartet played Mozart’s “Ave Verum Corpus,” Grieg’s “Solveig’s Song,” Handel’s “Largo” and Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy.” Most surprising, a soloist sang “The Rose,” a song popularized by Bette Midler. As I listened to the words, I realized that the song expressed Gisa’s belief in the fundamental need for and power of love:

*It’s the heart afraid of breaking that
never learns to dance.*

*It’s the dream afraid of waking that
never takes the chance.*

*It’s the one who won’t be taken who
cannot seem to give,*

*And the soul afraid of dyin’ that never
learns to live.*

*When the night has been too lonely and
the road has been too long,*

*And you think that love is only for the
lucky and the strong,*

*Just remember in the winter far be-
neath the bitter snows*

*Lies the seed that with the sun's love
in the spring becomes the rose*

Words and Music by Amanda McBroom
(1979)



At the end of the program, a Senior Vice President at the University stood to announce the establishment of the Paul and Gisela Konopka Chair in Adolescent Health and Development (with a one-million-dollar contribution from Gisa shortly before her death). It was an awkward ending to the service full of beautiful music and warm eulogies.

Gisa left a long legacy of service, not only in the United States, but also throughout the world. She wrote hundreds of articles and seven important books. Her first book, *Therapeutic Group Work with Children* (1949) was one of the early group work texts published in the country. In the 1950s, she wrote two more books: *Group Work in the Institution* (1954) and *Eduard C. Lindeman and Social Work Philosophy* (1958). They were followed with three editions of her group work text, and two books specific to adolescent girls: *The Adolescent Girl in Conflict* (1966) and *Young Girls: A Portrait of Adolescence*. Her last and most personal book was *Courage and Love* (1988), published when she was in her late seventies. She gave workshops, seminars, and classes in many countries, had leadership roles in the major social work organizations, while at the same time maintaining a full-time job at the University of Minnesota and, before that, at the Pittsburgh Child Guidance Clinic. As busy as she was, she and Paul provided temporary housing for many troubled youth and a place to find rest and recovery for many friends. Gisa and Paul never had children but were sur-

rounded by the children of friends and colleagues, many of whom looked on the Konopkas as foster grandparents.

To the social work profession, Gisa brought a philosophy of living that began in pre-World War I Berlin where she was one of three daughters of parents who owned and operated a small kosher grocery store. Her rebellious spirit was nurtured as a child who felt different and misunderstood and who bloomed as an adolescent in the German Youth Movement of the 1920s. It matured during the fight against the Nazis and took hold in the United States as a lifetime commitment to ensuring that no human be treated as less equal than any other human. The greatest sin on earth to Gisa was to believe that you are superior to others. She had no tolerance for an "us versus them" mentality in any form.

While Gisa never disowned social work, she was not willing to stay within its confines. She found the social work profession's divisions by method and field too divisive and not in the best interest of social work's mission. She believed that the energy of the profession was far too directed at fighting over turf issues while people, meanwhile, were not getting served. To her, social workers – particularly academics – were engaged in a battle almost totally focused on gaining professional status. By moving to an isolationist position, where students were seldom expected to engage with ideas from other disciplines, Gisa believed that social work was becoming more and more close-minded and protectionist. The narrow, specific content – territorial claims made by one constituent or another – in most social work courses were too often intellectually sparse and not challenging to students, and they leaned too heavily on the teaching of superficial techniques. As a result, she saw students graduating from social work programs who were little more than skilled craftsmen and well-meaning idealists.

She practiced a philosophy of "justice with a heart" that underscored a belief that cruelty and punitive action can never liberate or reform troubled people. People needed to be treated with compassion and love while not being dissolved from personal responsibility. She applied this philosophy in her work with youth who responded to her true, authentic, and listening presence. Her philosophy followed no particular theory. Instead, she eagerly embraced ideas from a wide array of schools of thought and was willing to shift with varying situations and issues. She strenuously objected to any theory used dogmatically, simply or falsely. By the late 1960s, increasingly frustrated with her place at the School of Social Work, she shifted into administrative positions at the University. In 1970, she established the Center on Youth Development and Research, a center that flourished under her leadership but could not survive long after her retirement in 1978.

The concrete manifestation of her philosophy is The Konopka Institute for Best Practices in Adolescent Health at the University of Minnesota founded in 1998. It is a collaborative effort of the Schools of Medicine, Nursing, and Public Health and is in partnership with the Center for 4-H Youth Development and the Children, Youth and Family Consortium. Its sole focus is young people and their needs. It is probably no mistake that the School of Social Work where Gisa taught for thirty years is absent in this consortium. The Institute adopted as a vision statement a list of requirements for the healthy development of adolescent youth first articulated by Gisa in 1973. The statement reflects Gisa's fundamental belief in the worthiness of youth and their ability to be involved as responsible people in society. Young people needed to be able to

- Participate as citizens, as members of a household, as workers, as responsible members of society.

- Gain experience in decision making.
- Interact with peers, and acquire a sense of belonging.
- Reflect on self, in relation to others, and discover self by looking outward as well as inward.
- Discuss conflicting values and formulate one's own value system.
- Experiment with one's own identity with relationships; try out various roles without having to commit irrevocably.
- Develop a feeling of accountability in the context of a relationship among equals.
- Cultivate a capacity to enjoy life (Konopka, 1973).

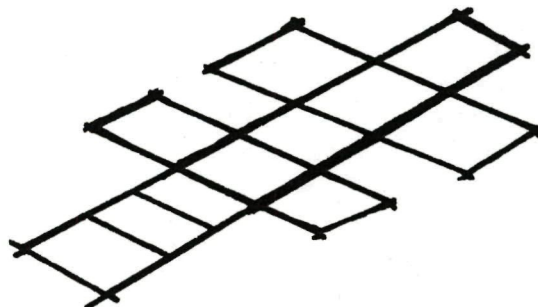
I was not able to finish the book while she was alive. I simply could not put the finishing touches on it, partly because I feared Gisa's criticism and partly because I knew I would need the distance from her that could come only after she died. Her death left me saddened at the enormous loss to all of us of this great woman, but it also seemed to clear my mind in a way that released me to finish the final chapters. The book is now done and in search of a publisher.

In a period of a few weeks, three events occurred that leave me wondering about the future. First, I went to a luncheon talk given by Eugene McCarthy who ran for President of the United States in 1968. He has become very frail, with weak legs and a soft, unclear voice. But the message was strong. Our country is in trouble. McCarthy said he wakes up every day to read the paper to find out what new piece of the Constitution has been destroyed. Shortly after that, I attended my umpteenth Peter, Paul and Mary concert. Mary had to be helped across the stage by Peter and Paul. And then Gisa's death occurred on the tail of these events. Who will speak out after McCarthy is gone? Who will sing the songs of peace, true democracy, and "Puff the Magic Dragon" after Peter, Paul and Mary are gone? And who will remind us that

“no human is superior to any other human – period” and that no matter how much the pain, there is always hope, now that Gisa is gone? I need to sit with her in that large old house on the hill overlooking Lake Calhoun and listen to her gently tell me that – all around us – there is still hope for the future.

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