

## -HUMAN DIGNITY- ALL LIVES ARE CONNECTED TO OTHER LIVES

By  
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To tell what social work in the United States meant to me, I have to say where I came from. I am a child of World War I, of deprivation of food and fuel--of the revolution against monarchy and class privilege. I grew up in the city of Berlin. Life was filled at that time with the struggle for justice for all people expressed in political action, literature, theatre, and the arts. As an adolescent I belonged to a youth movement that loved nature and spent days, evenings, and nights discussing how the world could be made better. Gandhi was my ideal. I had friends from many nations, various races and different occupations<sup>1</sup>. After the "Abitur" (examination for entrance to the University), I went to Hamburg to work in a factory. I learned what it meant to be unemployed, to struggle for workers' rights, to see the plight of poor mothers and to experience the boredom of factory work.

After about a year of this I entered the University of Hamburg to study education, psychology, history, and philosophy. It was exhilarating to be able to read and to learn from very dedicated and advanced thinking professors such as Will Stern. He taught us, for instance, that an IQ was not an absolute indication of intelligence but was also related to the

way in which environment impinged on the child. My field work was teaching in the working quarters of the city and seeing children who had been beaten and others who had come from parents who cared.



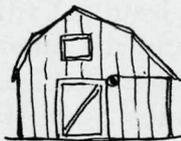
The two theses I wrote were related to history and education. One was "Education Done by the Jesuits, Critically Observed," and the other was "Church and Natural Sciences in the Middle Ages." My studies gave me a strong background in history, philosophy, and what it meant to influence young people. I also spent a summer working in a large co-ed delinquency institution which had the most thoughtful and imaginative practices in working with delinquents.<sup>2</sup>

This was not considered social work but social education. Did I know about social work? Yes, the good and the bad of it. The bad I had experienced as a child in Berlin. A social worker stood in our little store and

watched to make sure that my mother would give only staples, not enjoyable food, to people on welfare. When she left, my mother always asked the customers what they really wanted, and usually added some chocolate for the children.

The good: I had a friend who studied in the Pestalozzi Froebel School, which was a very progressive school of Social Work. She worked with children of poverty after school hours. I loved working with her, playing with children, and helping them to learn how to bake, to read, and other such things.

The Nazis came to power just when I passed my University examination. There was no hope for employment in the schools for me because I was Jewish and an anti-Nazi. We in the labor movement knew even before the Nazis came to power



about the terror that we had to expect. We had distributed leaflets against them and we worked with unions in the hope of preventing their ascension. Yet they did come to power and our underground work started. I learned about courage to overcome fear and to expect, as it seemed to us, certain death and torture.

I spent a short time in a con-

centration camp. After release, with difficulty I got out of Germany, into Czechoslovakia, and then into Austria and continued to fight against the Nazis. After the "Anschluss," I was again, for a short time in a prison in Vienna. I experienced there not only anti-Nazi fighters, but also women who were in prison only because they had no money.

With the help of the Underground, I got to France. I worked as a maid and cleaning woman (a good lesson for a future social worker). I was there during the outbreak of the war. I finally lived hidden by French farmers.

All this moving from one country to another, from one language to another, from certain customs and foods to another, was therefore not a new experience in coming to the United States. In 1941 on a slow boat, separated from everyone I loved and with no money, I arrived in the United States. I will not continue talking about the months in New York. I will only say that I again experienced social work in its good and bad aspects: very kind and thoughtful interviewers, great help with clothing, yet also a few social workers who had no understanding of what it meant to be in such a situation.

A friend suggested that since I had a university education I should continue working on getting an American degree. I thought of teaching, but the person who interviewed me about that told me that there were enough unemployed teachers in America and that they didn't need any foreigners.

Then, a friend suggested social work. Oh, no! I would not go into a profession that policed poor people- so I thought. This friend said that something new had been added into social work. It was called "social group work." It meant working with young people in youth organizations, with neighborhoods, and with delinquent children. That certainly interested me. There was a new school in Pittsburgh. There I started. The studies, teachers, and students were exhilarating.

There was Gertrude Wilson, who helped me to gain a new insight into a philosophy which did not consider concern for the individual and concern for the group contradictory, but a very important combination. Participation was a key word in this field. There was Marion Hathaway, who showed us that justice for *all* is important and that social workers can and should work on social policy. There was Ruth Garland, who taught case work with respect for the client. There was Gladys Ryland, who taught us that *talking* with people is not the only medium to help but that one can use art, such as music and painting.

My co-students were from various racial backgrounds and came from many parts of this huge continent. When my husband was drafted into the American Army after the United States joined the fight against the Nazis, I roomed with a colleague from Montana, who had grown up with Native Americans. I certainly saw the human relations problems of the United

States, especially the disastrous treatment of African Americans. Social work was definitely in the forefront against such injustice. My second year field work was with a child guidance clinic which served children of all races and backgrounds, poor and well-to-do. Langston Hughes came to the University to read his poetry, and I still have his poetry book that he signed for my husband Paul and myself.

I saw terrible injustices everywhere, but I always felt that I could fight them and that I was in a profession which confirmed the basic philosophy of the dignity of each human being. I had colleagues who worked with me. My life had not been interrupted by going from Europe to America. The basic sense of purpose in my life had been strengthened.

After my degree I worked at a child guidance clinic. Because of the demands to tell about my work and my thinking, I began to write, especially about children.

When I came to the University of Minnesota, I spent my first summer in our state delinquency institution. I saw atrocious practices, a destruction of the human spirit. Problems were not different here from other parts of the world. My experience in Europe became valuable. I worked on change, I wrote about it, and I developed a group work sequence to improve work in the community and in various institutions. My outlook was always international and interprofessional. I knew that social work alone

could not save the world but that one had to work with many others.

In the 1950's I was asked by the American Government to return to Germany for a few months. I was to help develop work with youth to counteract the horrible influence of Nazi philosophy, to evaluate existing delinquency institutions, and to help develop new approaches in work with disturbed children. In Germany I represented, to those who had been anti-Nazi all during the Nazi period, somebody who had stood up with them and therefore someone who did not generalize about all Germans. I also represented the United States and a profession that believed in respect for every human being, even though this wasn't always put into practice. For German social work, group work was an approach to human beings which allowed them to be individuals but also asked them to be part of a "whole" and to solve conflicts by respecting people with different opinions. It actually helped to change work with young people not only in social work but also in education, in corrections, and in work with very disturbed young people.

It is this philosophy that brought me all over the world by request from countries such as Brazil, India, Thailand, Korea, and Japan. My articles and books became widespread and translated into many different languages. In the United States my basic philosophy, which stressed respect for everybody, open-mindedness, and courage to stand up for rights for all

people, was not only accepted, but actually, a large part of my new profession appreciated it and welcomed my contribution.

I did not feel alone. I was part of a profession and a movement. Besides the vast international endeavor, I tried to widen social group work contributions into other fields, such as child welfare, and especially institutional treatment, student governments in universities, and prisons.

In social work education I ventured to strengthen the teaching of philosophy and history.<sup>3</sup> My special concern for adolescents drove me to start an interdepartmental, community, and university related Center at the University of Minnesota, the Center for Youth Development and Research. In moving from Europe to America, my life, at least professionally, was not interrupted. Its basic aim and connections were deepened and I was allowed to share them with others.

There have been changes over the years. Some parts social work--from my view--have lost the great tradition of "philosophy translated into practice," have narrowed it to "technique," and have sometimes turned a mistaken "professional" approach into treating people like puppets. But we can still combat this.

I would like to end this short view of my professional life by repeating the comments I made a few years ago in receiving the Martin Luther King, Jr., Humanitarian Award in Minneapolis: Alan Paton, who often stood often alone against apart-

heid once wrote, "It is my own belief that the only power which can resist the power of fear is the power of love."

Fear is the base of hate and we have to help our young people not to be afraid. If their life is only grey and ugly, fear mounts. We have to let them see that variety in people is enjoyable. It enriches life. How awful it would be if we had only one kind of flower, one kind of tree, one kind of bird, etc. How boring it would be if all people looked alike. Variety gives life the vibrance we need. But we also know that all human beings have much in common.

Let us be gentle with our young ones instead of constantly criticizing and chiding them. We will have less violence. Let us give our young people joy and beauty and stimulation instead of dreary places in which to grow up and no experience of the beauty of the arts, poetry, music, and dance.

And--finally--give them HOPE again. The sullenness I meet often comes from the feeling that there is nothing to look forward to. We can't lie to them about the harsh reality in which many of them live. But we can let them become strong in the knowledge that they can be part

of shaping a better future. From the day the Nazi spit in my face and I sat helplessly in a cell, I learned to say to myself, "I may die here, unknown, unsung. But I may come out and then I'll be there!" Let me say this better with the words of the great poet, Langston Hughes:

We have tomorrow  
Bright before us  
Like a flame.

Yesterday  
A night-gone thing,  
A sun-down name.

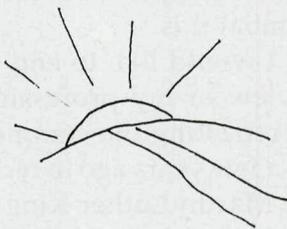
And dawn - today

Broad arch  
above the road  
we came.

We owe it to Martin Luther King, Jr., and to our future to continue building this broad arch of common humanity. □

## REFERENCES

- 1 See more in my book, *Courage and love* (1988). Beaver's Pond Press, 5125 Danen's Drive, Edina, MN 55439-1465.
- 2 See my article, "Reform in delinquency institutions in revolutionary times: The 1920's in Germany." *Social Service Review*, September, 1971.
- 3 See *Eduard C. Lindeman and social work philosophy* (1958), by Gisela Konopka, University of Minnesota Press.



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