
GREAT TEACHERS

Alice Salomon

Joachim Wieler

Alice Salomon was one of the founding mothers of professional social work, and particularly of social work education. In her long teaching career, she published 28 books (including *Education for Social Work*, which she wrote in English in 1934) and about 250 articles in professional journals and newspapers, mostly on policy analysis, education, and international and intercultural social welfare. She personally knew virtually every major international figure in social work education between 1910 and 1945, but when she died in her tiny apartment in New York City in 1948, she was almost immediately forgotten. She deserves better.

At the turn of the century, social work training courses were springing up all over Europe and the United States. Salomon started and headed the first full one-year course in 1899. Simultaneously continuing her own academic studies, she wrote a controversial dissertation titled "Unequal Payment of Men's and Women's Work," a systematic study of the comparable worth issue still vigorously debated today. Despite strong opposition, she was awarded the doc-

Joachim Wieler, PhD, Professor, Evangelische Fachhochschule, Zweifalltorweg 12, Darmstadt 6100, West Germany.

Charles Guzzetta assisted in writing this article and bears full responsibility for its literary shortcomings. The scholarship was entirely the work of Dr. Wieler.

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torate from the University of Berlin in 1906. Two years later, she founded in that city the school of social work, now the Fachhochschule für Sozialarbeit und Sozialpädagogik.

Already active in international organizations, Salomon became a pioneer in the world women's movement. Her work took her to many foreign countries. She came to the United States in 1909, returning periodically throughout the rest of her life. During one of those trips, she was impressed by Mary Richmond's work in seeking to create a theoretical basis for social work practice and, taking back a copy of *Social Diagnosis*, she translated it into German, with notes to make it relevant to the local scene.

In 1917, Salomon established the German Conference of Schools of Social Work, a precursor of such confederations elsewhere, and the spiritual ancestor of the Council on Social Work Education.

Even while taking major leadership responsibilities in social work education, Salomon never rested her efforts on behalf of women. She was an activist for world peace and at the close of World War I, was associated with Jane Addams in the peace and disarmament work for which Addams later received the Nobel Peace Prize. It was Addams who arranged an invitation for Salomon to address the International League for Peace and Freedom at The Hague. Later, the Institute for International Relations in London made Salomon the first German and first woman invited to address that distinguished forum. Her work was so celebrated that the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a special passport making her a sort of travelling diplomat of goodwill. In 1923, she was back in the States as the invited keynote speaker at the 50th anniversary celebration of the National Conference of Social Work meeting in Washington. Throughout her life, she sought to demonstrate that social work required peace for its most successful efforts, and emphasized the importance of peace issues in the training of social work practitioners.

Salomon's labors on behalf of social work and social work education included close ties with religious groups. A member of a distinguished Jewish family, she had converted to Christianity in 1914, but maintained a place of prominence in Jewish social service. Drawing on her powerful connections and growing reputation, she founded the Women's Academy in 1925, expressly to qualify

women for higher administrative positions in the social welfare system. The Academy enabled experienced practitioners to do social work research and theory-building. Through the Academy, gifted practitioners were recruited to teach social work practice. The significance of this achievement cannot be overestimated. General acceptance of the principle that practice experience is important for the teaching of social work was a significant step in public recognition of social work as an established profession.

In her mid-50s, Salomon took her talents even more heavily into international social work education development. In Paris for the world-wide social welfare organization congresses in 1928, she led a section on social work education. The work of this group evolved into the International Committee of Schools of Social Work (now the International Association of Schools of Social Work – IASSW), of which she was promptly made president. The committee held numerous planning sessions and sponsored well-attended study courses on international social work, held each off-year between the biennial congresses. A major objective of the committee was the creation of an international school of social work, but these plans were thwarted by economic and political events of the time.

On her 60th birthday, Salomon was acknowledged as a major world leader in social welfare and social work education and was accorded high honors for her work. Among these recognitions was a rarely-awarded honorary doctor of medicine degree for her work in social hygiene. At the same time, the school she had started in Berlin was officially named the Alice Salomon School of Social Work. Letters poured in to praise her work as leader and teacher. Many began: “You will not remember me, but you gave direction to my whole life,” and not a few added, “Your influence changed not only my own life, but the lives of my children.” Salomon was at the pinnacle of her career. She was a renowned and charismatic social welfare leader and an inspirational teacher with disciples all over the world. And at that moment, her life took a dramatic and tragic turn.

Just months after Salomon received the acclaim of a proud profession, a grateful nation, and a developing international community, Hitler came to power. Everything for which Salomon had stood and worked fell under attack.

Despite her early conversion, Salomon was a Jew under the law and what was worse, from the Nazi point of view, an active internationalist. Her work on behalf of peace and disarmament antithetical to the country's military aspirations. Her struggle for women's rights conflicted with the Party's position respecting the proper role of women. Her status as an intellectual gave her dangerous authority and high visibility. And perhaps worst of all was her position in social work and social work education. Part of the Nazi ideology held that the nation was weakened by inferior races and populations, such as the mentally ill or retarded, the handicapped and the poor. These and other "inferior" people were the very ones on whose behalf Salomon had concentrated her reform efforts, her teaching skills, and her leadership capacities. For all these reasons, she was quickly made a subject of careful surveillance and great pressure.

Among the first government acts against Salomon was to strip her of her offices and public honors, and to remove her name from the school she had founded. She was pressured to resign her presidency on the International Committee of Schools of Social Work. She complied with the demand, but was immediately reinstated by the international board. Each time she was forced to resign, she was reinstated by unanimous action of the board.

As the Nazi regime grew increasingly violent in suppression of proscribed activities, Salomon joined social workers in other countries to assist colleagues in escaping to the outside and becoming established there. Many of these young German and Austrian refugee professionals were able to begin what developed into distinguished careers in the universities and social welfare systems of the countries to which they fled. In the United States, a leading group of social workers helping refugees from totalitarianism called themselves: "Hospites." Salomon became part of their network of contacts. A major figure in this group was Joanna Colcord of the Russell Sage Foundation. With a research grant from that organization, Salomon compiled and published, in 1937, the first international survey of social work education.

The same year the survey appeared, the American Association of Schools of Social Work sponsored Salomon on a speaking tour of the United States. When she returned to Berlin, she was summoned

by the Gestapo to answer questions about her continuing international activities. The hours of interrogation ended with a blunt ultimatum: within three weeks, she would be out of Germany for good, or she would be in a concentration camp.

Even though there was no real choice, Salomon was ambivalent about leaving. Her family had lived in Germany for generations, under a special dispensation issued in 1765 by Frederick the Great. Moreover, she had done nothing criminal. Nevertheless, she went to England, and later to the United States, arriving just as her passport was about to expire.

In the United States she had friends and contacts of many years' standing. But things did not go well for her. Occasionally, she was invited to give a lecture or present a class or conduct a study, but no permanent teaching position materialized. She was no longer young, and academic recruitment did not favor 65-year-old refugees. The greatly-expanded public welfare sector could have benefited from her experience; her earlier introduction(s) of German social policies had been published in *The New York Times*. But she was not a U.S. citizen and therefore ineligible for public employment. Besides, the job market was extremely tight, and a refugee had little chance for a position with qualified Americans available. Meanwhile, the German government continued its campaign to make her a non-person by cancelling her German citizenship and revoking her degrees. She was a victim of many of the problems besetting social work refugees and described by Colcord in a special issue of *Social Work Today* about that time.

For a while, Salomon received some support and was widely honored. Eleanor Roosevelt invited her to the White House. The International Club of the New York YMCA gave her a special award for humanitarian service. Six women's organizations sponsored a special recognition of her contributions. Newspapers and professional journals added their commendations.

Nevertheless, she could not find a secure position in American social work. By 1940, fear of a German "Fifth Column" extended even to those who formerly had been above suspicion. When asked to join in denunciations of the Nazis, Salomon's response was considered weak and equivocal by some, further alienating her from the field. It was not known until years later that her reticence may have

been motivated by well-founded fears for family members still in Germany. She was to learn later that two of her closest relatives were deported to concentration camps, where they were murdered. Another, reduced to desperation, committed suicide. And by then, many of Salomon's influential social work comrades had themselves passed from the scene, leaving her with fewer colleagues to rise in her defense.

Salomon's circumstances became more and more bleak, until she was even forced to share her cramped little apartment in order to be able to pay the rent. Finally, after more than three-quarters of a century of service to and with throngs of people, Alice Salomon died so alone that even the exact time, date, and cause of her death were never established. Her death was announced in the press, with impressive obituaries, but the woman who had helped, protected, and taught countless social workers, championed the rights of women and created an international awareness and structure for social work education, went to her final rest with four people in attendance. There was no ceremony.

Salomon's enormous work and prodigious writing are only now beginning to be appreciated. The Nazis destroyed as much as they could, and much of the rest was widely scattered. Probably no living person has ever read all her writing. But these manuscripts and journal articles have been the subject of scholarly pursuit for the last several years, and she may yet receive her due. Slowly, social work is beginning to recognize her insights into the mutual influence of international and intercultural matters in practice and social work education. She is being studied anew and being found to be highly relevant to present matters.

Throughout her life, Salomon was involved in many controversial issues, and such activity always receives mixed responses. As a social work educator, she held a place of honor; as a teacher, she was revered mostly by individual students. She was determined and aggressive in fighting for her beliefs, which may partially explain her isolation in later years. It was claimed that she "was not always easy to get along with" (who is?), and that her "pride" interfered with chances to make a personal accommodation to the American scene and to her changed circumstances in exile.

Whatever her shortcomings, they did not prevent Salomon from

exercising a pervasive influence on social work education, nor did they hinder her ability as a leader and teacher. As recently as the 1980s, a scholar conducting research on her life received a letter from a 96-year-old former student, describing tender recollections of Salomon the teacher. Her power to inspire; her strength in standing fast in the face of opposition and even personal danger; and her devotion to the cause of social work and its place in modern society, all were part of Salomon's life and teaching.

She held that "the most fundamental law in human relations is the law of interdependence." It is a law by which she lived. Alice Salomon, great social work teacher to the world, deserves in this 40th anniversary year of her death to be reconciled to social work education, to which she gave so much. And, as the Talmud teaches us, "Remembrance is the foundation of reconciliation."

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