



MIRA EDGERLY KORZYBSKA

A Biographical Sketch

By Charlotte Schuchardt Read

On the 13th of July, 1954, Mira Edgerly Korzybska died. Her husband had paid tribute to her in the prefaces of Manhood of Humanity and Science and Sanity. She had reached fame in the circles into which her work had led her. The life story of this remarkable woman ranges over many parts of the world, and encompasses a unique career as well as a special place in the history of general semantics.

Mira Edgerly was born in Aurora, Illinois, in 1872, the third of three children, all girls. Her mother, Rose Haskell, was of Scotch ancestry; the family of her father, Samuel Haven Edgerly, had come some generations before from Oxfordshire, England. He was an inventor and a director of the Michigan Central Railroad.

When she was three, the family moved to Jackson, Michigan. A few years later they moved to Detroit, where she attended the fashionable Liggett's Private School. There she was reported to be a very mischievous student, but so amenable to discipline that she was quickly forgiven.

The family moved to Kansas City when she was fifteen. Then, five years later, with her mother and a sister, she went to San Francisco. There they lived in the unfinished unpartitioned basement of a girls' student home. At her father's death she had to begin to earn a living somehow. She read an article in a magazine about the famous miniature painter, Amalia Künsner, and decided on her career. She had no knowledge of color or drawing at all, but with a tin water color box not all used up, which she found in a waste basket, and some old ivory poker chips from the pawn shop nearby, she started to teach herself.

Her first contact with great paintings of the world was through Arnold Genthe, the portrait photographer. Genthe fermented her ambition to achieve high standards of portraiture. Of this mutually inspiring friendship Genthe wrote in 1936 in his book As I Remember, 'Among my friends was a young miniature painter, Mira Edgerly, who besides being a gifted artist had great beauty and intelligence. Sure that I had started something new in photography, she not only posed for me but gave me many valuable suggestions on arrangement and composition.'¹

During these years she was invited through a client to be a guest in Guatemala, with her mother and sister, at the home of a retired president of Guatemala, halfway up a mountainside above the ocean. This was a most exciting event for her.

Although she was making rapid progress in San Francisco, she was determined to eventually get to Paris. About 1900 she came to New York, where she had a studio on 35th Street. There began a lifelong friendship with Burges Johnson, who was starting out in New York in his profession as a writer. Looking back at those days, he wrote in 1944 in As Much as I Dare:

Mira Edgerly was an artist entirely self-taught, who was experimenting with miniatures in her own original fashion. . . . She made her way on the strength of real talent plus skillful self-management plus an engaging personality. . . . I do not remember how she broke into the magic circle in New York City, if I ever knew; but I do know that within an astonishingly short time a list of her subjects was a roll of the inner circle of the so-called Four Hundred. She was always wise in the management of herself; never granting interviews or encouraging the sort of newspaper publicity she would have found easy to secure.²

When Mrs. Patrick Campbell, whom she had met at a social gathering in New York, urged her to come to London and be her guest, she made her decision to go. Now she began to establish herself as a portrait painter in London, and with her resourcefulness, pluck and tenacity, she was soon winning commissions among the pre-World War I 'privileged classes'. She painted in their homes in England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales, and in Germany and France.

She learned to know her clientele intimately, and many times she was deeply disturbed about the socio-economic system of that era. Often she was able to get sums of money from those to whom it meant little, for the purpose of giving it to a friend in need. In 1913 she crossed the Atlantic to New York in the steerage of the Mauretania 'to study the poor', and in September 1914 she brought seven penniless but gifted creative workers, who would otherwise have been in the bread-line, with her from London to the United States, and helped them find work here.

For some years between 1905 and 1914 she also had a studio in Paris. There she enjoyed a friendship with Gertrude Stein, who wrote in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas:

Mildred Aldrich once brought a very extraordinary person Myra Edgerly. I remembered very well that when I was quite young and went to a fancy-dress ball, a Mardi Gras ball in San Francisco, I saw a very tall and very beautiful and very brilliant woman there. This was Myra Edgerly young. Genthe, the well known photographer did endless photographs of her, mostly with a cat. She had come to London as a miniaturist and she had had one of those phenomenal successes that Americans do have in Europe. She had miniaturized everybody, and the royal family, and she had maintained her earnest gay careless outspoken San Francisco way through it all. She now came to Paris to study a little. She met Mildred Aldrich and became very devoted to her. Indeed it was Myra who in nineteen thirteen, when Mildred's earning capacity was rapidly dwindling secured an annuity for her and made it possible for Mildred to retire to the Hilltop on the Marne [a best selling book in 1915].

Myra Edgerly was very earnestly anxious that Gertrude Stein's work should be more widely known. When Mildred told her about all those unpublished manuscripts Myra said something must be done. And of course something was done.

She knew John Lane slightly and she said Gertrude Stein and I must go to London. But first Myra must write letters and then I must write letters to everybody for Gertrude Stein. She told me the formula I must employ. I remember it began, Miss Gertrude Stein as you may or may not know, is, and then you went on and said everything you had to say.

Under Myra's strenuous impulsion we went to London in the winter of nineteen twelve, thirteen for a few weeks. We did have an awfully good time. Myra took us with her to stay with Colonel and Mrs. Rogers at Riverhill in Surrey.³

In 1914, as the war was breaking out in Europe, she returned to this country. Here she had to create contacts anew. But she had learned to accept it as a challenge to arrive in a strange city almost penniless, get a first commission within a few days, and go on from there. During the war years she painted in New York, Aiken, South Carolina (where her potential clientele kept their horses for hunting), Newport, Rhode Island, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, etc.

At the time of the Armistice she had a studio in Washington. One afternoon while chaperoning four Vassar graduates at a tea she met Alfred Korzybski. Each, with an entirely different background, immediately discovered in the other a deep intense concern for people. Mira Edgerly knew that this was the man for whom she had been searching for many years as her ideal. They were married two months later, on the 17th of January, 1919.

She has told this story of the beginning of Korzybski's formulation of his theory of time-binding. It was a few months after they were married. 'In those days we drank five to ten cups of tea a day. One day at tea time I held forth how civilization should be run, repeating the conclusions that were given every night when a group of us used to talk in the Latin quarter of Paris. I had a very clear verbal pattern of an ideal civilization, and I burst into speech, repeating

an artist's notion of running the world. Then he asked me to repeat what I said - in other words, "Do you know what you are saying?", and I did. Then with a very firm voice he said, "Dearest, that's only a private opinion. I'm very glad you have it, but until human beings become aware of the natural laws of our environment as Newton and Leibnitz did in physics, there can only be a clash of private opinions." Then he analyzed my statements and I was losing out, as very shortly he had me with no logical legs to stand on. I would try to beguile him into making love to me, but he would push me away and say this has nothing to do with making love. He said, "You stay on your side of the room and I'll stay on my side, and we'll thrash this out."

'The argument went on all that night without sleeping, while we drank cups of tea, all the next day without changing our clothes - with more cups of tea - and into the next night - more cups of tea - and in the latter part of that night I awakened to find Alfred sitting up with tears running down his cheeks, not weeping, but with his adorable quality of a capacity for caring, he said, "Man is not an animal. Man can transmit his accumulated knowledge from generation to generation, and a man or a generation has the capacity to begin where the former one left off." He had come to a beginning solution in his sleep. Then they decided to leave Washington and go to a sister's farm near Lee's Summit, Missouri, where Korzybski wrote the first draft of Manhood of Humanity.

In the following years Mira Edgerly continued her career as a painter, helping and encouraging her husband in every way she could, working as much as possible where he was or nearby. They went to New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, La Jolla, Chicago, Washington, Cambridge, etc. Korzybski was lecturing in many places and developing his theory. In August 1924 they travelled to Toronto where Korzybski presented his first paper on the theory of time-binding at the International Mathematical Congress. Their home was on an abandoned farm in Maryland near Johns Hopkins from September 1924 to May 1925.

The following two years they lived in Anacostia, while Korzybski studied psychiatry at St. Elizabeths Hospital in Washington. She was intensely interested in the theoretical scientific conversations of her husband with his friends. She had never had an opportunity to study scientific subjects, and her marriage had opened up an entirely new, greatly stimulating world for her.

In 1927 the Korzybskis moved to a studio on the top floor of a large Brooklyn house. Here, up to 1933, the months and years dragged on as the enormous task of elaborating, editing, and publishing Science and Sanity was accomplished (the first draft had been written in Pasadena, March 1928 - March 1929). She continued to paint during this period, besides devoting whatever time she could to helping Korzybski in many ways. In spite of the tremendous vitality of these two people, photographs taken at this time reveal their utter exhaustion.

From 1937 to 1939 she travelled and painted in South America - in Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro and Trinidad.

After 1939 she lived in Chicago, where the Institute of General Semantics had been established in 1938. The crippling arthritis, which was to pain her increasingly until her death, began about 1943, and she could no longer paint. In those first years of her disease, when relatively little was known about arthritis, she enjoyed being a 'guinea pig' at the hospital, encouraging the doctors to experiment, so that others after her might be more able to be helped. Her high-spirited candor and sense of humor remained with her through it all.

When she was more than 70 years old she attended classes in anthropology at the University of Chicago. With her insatiable curiosity she delved into reading and studying scientific literature, surrounding herself with books, encyclopedias, journals, etc.

In her remaining years she started to write her autobiography, applying to herself the questions she sought to learn from others when she approached portraiture: 'Who are you? Why do you think so? How did you get that way?' Her good friend the late Dr. William Alanson White of St. Elizabeths Hospital, had told her she was like a psychoanalyst in her ability to get people to reveal themselves.

Mira Edgerly originated and developed a new type of portraiture, using large ivory pieces. Through the world's largest ivory cutting house in London she obtained sheets of ivory cut into pieces 6 by 12 inches or more. She carefully selected ivory from a particular section of Africa with translucent qualities giving special brilliance and luminosity to colors. Then she had to pioneer her way through creating an entirely new technique. The late John S. Sargent, on seeing her work, exclaimed, 'Here at last is a portrait on ivory, not a miniature!' By her new method she was able to paint full-length portraits and family groups.

She felt that the figure-as-a-whole was as important as the features, and did not begin to paint until, from a number of sketches made without the face, one was selected that conveyed a sincere and spontaneous expression of the personality of the subject, showing characteristic contours and movement. The face she considered the barometer of what went on inside the skin. Around the figure, the composition for the picture was built up, including in the background the life and interests of the subject, and often also a special design for the frame. She did not allow herself to falsify any features, but felt free to choose that pose and lighting which would best bring out the characteristics of the individual. She painted her subjects in their home, where she could come to know them, their clothes, interests, and deepest desires.

Her portraits have been hung in the art galleries of H.R.H. The Duke of Connaught, H.S.H. Princess Henry of Pless, the Duke of Hamilton, Earl Curzon of Kedleston, Lord Sackville, Alfred Rothschild, Esq., etc., in Europe, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires, as well as important private galleries in the United States.

Asking her friend Burges Johnson one day what he considered one of her chief characteristics, Mira Edgerly was told, 'You had developed the flair of bluffing about what you wanted to be. Your bluffing was always in line with your ambition. As far as I know, you always made good.' Her 'bluff' was an expression of her strong self-confidence and daring. She advised young persons to 'have a fairly clear idea of what you want out of life and what you hope to attain as soon as you possibly can. Never stop planning for it.'

One of the most profound influences in her childhood she felt to be the receiving of a little 2-inch gold ruler with the golden rule engraved on it. It was given to her by a friend of the family, and she took it with her everywhere.

'If we consistently work for the ever higher level standard of best in ourselves,' she wrote to a friend, 'and consistently work to help to bring out the best in the other fellow; that automatically motivates the art of living with a driving force which can mount all difficulties and raise us high above petty, personal reactions . . . our best selves are always in us and it is up to us to put [them] into function.'

That she did bring out the best in others her many friends who held her in affection would doubtless testify. She did so for none more than for her husband, who wrote in 1921 in his first book:

I wish also to acknowledge the deepest gratitude to my wife, formerly Mira Edgerly, who has found in this discovery of the natural law for the human class of life, the solution of her life long search, and who, because of her interest in my work, has given me incomparably inspiring help and valuable criticism. It is not an exaggeration to state that except for her steady and relentless work and her time, which saved my time, this book could not have been produced in such a comparatively short time.⁴

And twelve years later in Science and Sanity:

My heaviest obligations are to my wife, formerly Mira Edgerly. This work was difficult, very laborious, and often ungrateful, which involved the renouncing of the life of 'normal' human beings, and we abandoned much which is supposed to make 'life worth living'. Without her whole-hearted and steady support, and her relentless encouragement, I neither would have formulated the present system nor written the book which embodies it. If this book proves of any value, Mira Edgerly is in fact more to be thanked than the author. . . .⁵

Her ashes will be buried beside those of Alfred Korzybski in the cemetery at Lime Rock.

REFERENCES

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