

A Tribute to Irmgard Koch

This past Friday, the matriarch of the Crossings community went on to her glory. Irmgard Koch, beloved teacher and friend to so many, was part of Crossings from the very beginning. She took every class, pressed Bob and Ed to invent more courses so she could continue taking them and even coined the phrase “God-sized problem” for D-3 in the Crossings matrix. Irm and I were roommates on our trip to Asia ten years old this spring. I was thirty-something, Irm was 89. She was always ready to take off for whatever adventure was next: visiting former students in Hong Kong, climbing the Great Wall in the pouring rain, touring a royal palace in Seoul, Korea.

In the last few years when I visited Irm at LaClede Groves, there were times when her conversation wandered and I had a hard time following where she was going. But then, as if a veil would lift, she’d make a comment or ask me a question that seemed to come straight from the Holy Spirit’s mouth. No matter what the situation, no matter what the time or place, Irmgard gave us the best of herself and the best of her Lord.

Joining me today in this tribute to Irm are three other members of the Crossings community. Sherman Lee and Jim Squire were both fellow travelers to Asia with Irm and me (and, of course, Ed and Marie Schroeder). Vivian Hauser was a fellow student with Irm in Crossings classes, but also had been a high school student in Irm’s English classes at Lutheran South. All of us wish to express our appreciation to our Lord for allowing us to be part of Irmgard’s life.

Robin Morgan

At my office I keep a photo that unintentionally is a conversation starter. It is a picture of six people who toured Asia (10 years ago this next weekend) for several weeks on a Crossings "junket", that is, a series of meetings with locals and expatriates on the topic of ministry in daily life. Pictured in front of a Korean hostel are Ed and Marie Schroeder, Jim Squire, Robin Morgan, myself, and Irmgard Koch, who is usually the conversation starter at my office, for as I list the biographies of the photo subjects, the universal reactions are "she was 89 when she took that trip!?! " and "that's the way I want to be when I'm 89." The extremely modest Irm would be aghast at such reactions, for she never wanted attention for her longevity nor accomplishments; after all, there are five other photo subjects not singled out for their ages. But Irm stands out in the photo for another reason: her pink hat, quite eye-catching, quite stylish. There's a long story behind the hat, but in short Irm suffered a minor head injury on the first full day in Asia that required traveling to a hospital with no Korean language skills, and that to help cover the bandage, Irm sported a pink sun hat. A few days later while visiting an historical Korean farming village (like historic Jamestown), we noticed each school group color-coded itself – some had red t-shirts, others green bandanas, and in particular, one group of eight year-old girls had pink hats, exactly like Irm's. From a distance, a grown American woman was indistinguishable from a group of Korean schoolgirls!

This is the way I remember Irm the most: in the pink hat. She was the consummate teacher, always guiding the mind, intellect and soul and simultaneously the enthusiastic student, seeking and searching through life with the wide eyes of a child. She had/has the faith of a child, of a beloved child, of a blessed child, a child of God, knowing and loving Jesus.

And in a photo at my office, she continues to spread the Good News, being a conversation starter that opens the doors for conversations that go beyond the realm of "work", allowing for yet uncharted possibilities of weaving faith and daily life.

Sherman Lee

[To get a look at Irm in the pink hat you can go to <http://members.aol.com/jamess1889/foreast.html>]

Irmgard always had positive things to say about my writing. I'm sorry to say I've lost touch with her the past few years. But from the many years of Crossings courses and get togethers, not to mention an adventure in Asia, I saw someone who never stopped being a teacher. In fact, she could teach and lift one's spirits at the same time. She was very unassuming, almost to a fault, and yet never shrank from expressing a considered opinion when it was called for.

We used to take on heady stuff in that quaint little classroom at Webster University on Saturday mornings, including confronting God's terrible condemnation of sinners, and yet she was an integral part of making those classes so enjoyable. Of course, she had Great Connections, as we all learned about so meaningfully around that old wood table. The place and everything in it looked ancient, and yet thanks to Jesus the "sweet-swapper", the room was filled with Good News. What a marvelous example for me to re-appropriate in my ministry: a frail-looking vessel in which God's Holy Spirit flourished and comforted all who were touched by Irmgard Koch.

Jim Squire

The Koch Book
You must have thought some days wasted,
Reading books and parsing phrases,
Adolescents blankly staring,
Shakespeare's words beyond their caring.

Let me tell you, dear Miss Koch,
Not all we learned was in the book.
We may have missed some minor cases,
Forgotten authors, dates, birthplaces,

But what we learned to read was you,
Whose sweet delight filtered through
Those poets words, those honored dramas,
Encouraged us through teen-age traumas.

You taught the light yon window breaking
And Portia's mercy never straining,
But what we learned was love of learning,
Joy in life, a gentle yearning.

Though you have no Pulitzer, no Caldecott award,
The joy of work well done is surely your reward,
For dear Miss Koch, you wrote a book
On students—living pages.
We witness to your teacher's heart
We sing your Maker's praises.

Vivian Hauser