



## Ruth Janssen Gardner

January 12, 1929 - December 5, 2017

Radiate love. It was Ruth Gardner's credo.

Widely known as "Oma" today, Helena Edelgard Ruth Janssen Gardner was born to German immigrant parents, Johannes "Hans" Janssen and Johanna "Hanni" Ziegenhein Janssen, in Reading, Pennsylvania, on January 12, 1929. She died with her hand in her daughter's and her son-in-law at her side at Aldersgate Village in Topeka, Kansas, on December 5, 2017, attended by Great Lakes Caring Hospice support staff.

Ruth's childhood home was in a Pennsylvania Dutch community where only German was spoken. Her parents spoke German at home throughout their lives. When Ruth was eight years old, her parents traveled in Germany for a year leaving Ruth in a German orphanage as a kind of boarding school stay while her brother lived in a German military school. Her father saw Hitler speak at an industrial fair in Germany in 1938. Hans recognized that the equipment being displayed was in violation of the Treaty of Versailles and Hitler's speech horrified him, so he moved his family back to the USA to stay.

Ruth was a sickly child, and her parents moved several times when she was growing up which she said left her feeling insecure. Her parents were too busy leading interesting lives to be attentive parents. It must have been hard to be a teenager from a German family living in the USA during WWII. It probably

didn't help that her vivacious and fearless mother had been a controversial suffragette and political activist on two continents and was famously the only registered Socialist in Yankton, South Dakota. Ruth lived with her parents through graduating from tiny Yankton College where her father was a professor of economics and art history. Ruth's lonely refuge was in books and radio. As an adult, her priority was stability. She lived in the same house in Topeka's Kenwood neighborhood for 63 years. She filled it with fine music, reproductions of classic art, and thousands of books.

Ruth's father was the oldest of eleven children raised in Wuppertal, Germany. He was the only member of his immediate family to leave Germany. With ten aunts and uncles on that side of her family (only a spinster aunt on her mother's side), the German cousins proliferated into a large number with the generations added over the years. Ruth worked hard at staying in touch with all branches of her family. She was a devoted correspondent until she just could not address an envelope anymore. Her last visit to Germany was in 1950, but as soon as her children were old enough to travel on their own, she sent them to stay with German relatives, to get to know the family roots, to share in the love she enjoyed long distance. It was a beautiful affirmation of her success in maintaining family ties that German cousin, Jonas Jaenicke, was at her bedside reading Bible verses in her first language in the last hours before she died.

Ruth married her father's star student, Riley W. Gardner, on August 27, 1950. She moved straight from her parents' home in Yankton to married life in Topeka, where Riley had already begun working at the Menninger Foundation as a research psychologist before he completed his Ph.D. at KU in 1952. She reveled in the intellectual stimulation and friendships of the Menninger community until Riley's sudden retirement in 1970.

Ruth found many roles for herself in Topeka. She hosted NAACP meetings in

her living room. As soon as her children could be trusted to speak to strangers, she had the whole family out campaigning door-to-door for Democratic Party candidates. She loved to invite people into her home for parties and events on almost any excuse and for almost any occasion. She hosted luminaries including Jean Piaget for dinners at her table. She encouraged neighborhood kids to use her home as a clubhouse. Ruth welcomed everyone. One scary night, her family found a group of rough-looking teenage boys eating dinner at her kitchen table around 10 pm. The strangers had come to her door “for help because their car had a flat tire two blocks away.” To this day, the family thinks that she simply charmed the boys out of robbing her. Either that, or books and art were not what they had been hoping to steal and when she offered them dinner, it just sounded like a good alternative. Radiate love. It’s powerful stuff.

Ruth delighted in working with children. She was an assistant preschool teacher at Bruce School and in the earliest years of Discovery School when it was founded by her dear friend, Barbara Thiele. She was an active Potwin School and Roosevelt Junior High volunteer, teaching extracurricular cultural topics and remedial reading. She taught night classes in reading skills at Washburn University. She tutored students in phonics in her home. Creative and well-organized, Ruth led her son’s Cub Scout den. With her partner, Thelma Martin, and help from CJ Huss, Ruth was a Girl Scout leader from her daughter’s grade school years into junior high.

It’s fitting that Ruth’s obituary should include lots of words. Even though English was a second language for Ruth and her family, they all cultivated vast vocabularies. They were a family of scholars. Though her English vocabulary was expansive, Ruth’s spelling was comprehensible only to people who speak both German and English. There was a memorable Mother’s Day when 31 little Girl Scouts presented their mothers with paper plate wall

hanging gifts faithfully copied from Ruth's written instructions to say, "Happy Muther's Day." It makes sense when you know that the German word for mother is mutter.

Later in life, Ruth became a Bible scholar and a life coach to an untold number of friends needing an ear, some emotional support, or simply a warm smile. Always an avid reader, she read the Bible with discipline, front to back, repeatedly for one hour each evening, then spent a second hour reading related texts including St. Augustine, contemporary Charismatic texts, lives of the saints, and several translations of the Koran. She made herself an expert in Al-Anon and Nar-Anon. We don't know how many women she sponsored. She staffed the local Nar-Anon Family Group meetings in Topeka for decades, contentedly studying that literature and praying alone if no one showed up. She was reliably available for anyone who might have found their way to the program. Radiate love.

Ruth attended St. Joseph Catholic Church and Holy Name Church. She lectured on weekdays at Assumption Church, often staying to pray and to make herself available to anyone who might come by seeking comfort. She found her own comfort in the Glory to God prayer group meeting at Most Pure Heart of Mary Church.

With impressive strength and iron-willed self-discipline, Ruth defeated chronic debilitating depression with a strict regimen of healthy eating, daily walks for miles outdoors, and prayer. She was resolutely cheerful and kind with others to the end of her life. When dementia drove Ruth into a locked care facility, her daughter-by-love, Kenyan immigrant Salome Ngure, brought smiles to her face and helped her to continue to spend time outdoors almost every day.

Widowed for a decade before she died, dementia progressively affected her sharp mind and powerful memory and ultimately robbed her of her

independence. Considering Ruth's lifetime of devotion to guiding and caring for other people, it was most cruel that the first thing dementia stole from her was her recognition of people — first the names, then her recollection of even her dearest friends. Her last years in her home were very isolated, but she maintained her disciplined, healthy lifestyle. Her one indulgence was a scoop of ice cream as her treat for the day right before bedtime each and every night. Her family suggests that friends who want to honor her now treat themselves to an extra bowl of ice cream as a salute to Ruth.

Ruth told everyone who cared that the greatest joy in her life was raising children. She was determined to give a different kind of love and devotion than she felt she had received as a child. Radiate love. Proof positive of her success is that each of the children she raised feels the strength of inherent good cheer and bold self-confidence. Ruth and Riley raised their own two children, Helen Ruth Crow and Mark Howard Gardner, and they provided daily care for their granddaughter, Samantha Ruth Crow Quist, from birth until she left for college. Ruth loved her son-in-law, Dan Crow, and former daughter-in-law, Naomi English, as she loved her children- by-birth. Her family was completed by granddaughter, Daya English Gazmawie, Samantha's husband Jake Quist, Daya's husband Ahmed Gazmawie, and great-grandchildren, George Daniel Quist, Aria Ruth Quist, and Felix Amir Riley Gazmawie.

Ruth expected the best from those in her charge. Some of the last full sentences she articulated included an assignment. She said, "I am old. It is my time to be in this bed. You. You go out and do something good."

Ruth's annual Christmas gift from her economist father was a budget book. She managed the family money carefully, maintaining a frugal lifestyle throughout her adult life. Though the peak household income in any year was \$35,000 in 1970, and she never invested in the stock market or a business, Ruth saved enough money to pay for her own private care in comfort for the

last three years of her life. She funded dozens of charities for decades: \$1/monthly to each. In cash. Maybe even an occasional \$5 bill if a cause touched her especially deeply. At tax time, she sent the IRS a little extra money each year because she was so proud to be an American. Radiate love.

The family suggests that in lieu of flowers, memorial contributions might be made to the charity of the donor's choice. The odds are strong that whatever your favorite cause might be, it might have been one of Ruth's favorites, too.

Giving beyond the end of her life, Ruth donated her body to University of Kansas School of Medicine. There will be a private funeral Mass when her family is gathered for Christmas. Arrangements are being handled by the Kevin Brennan Family Funeral Home of Topeka. Condolences may be sent online to [www.kevinbrennanfamily.com](http://www.kevinbrennanfamily.com).

# Tribute Wall



“ *Ruth Janssen Gardner*

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January 28, 2023 at 12:08 PM



“ *Dear Helen, Dan, Mark, Samantha,  
My memories of dear Ruth go back to 1954. Ruth and Riley were the first people to invite me, a young graduate student, to their home when I was hired as a research assistant at Menningers on the same project as Riley, Phil Holzman, And Herb Schlesinger. Helen was the very first baby I knew in Topeka. When Dick Siegal and I married in 1956, the four of us spent many times together watching the first appearance of Elvis Presley on the Ed Sullivan show, attending sports and music events in Lawrence, enjoying Ruth's goose and red cabbage at Christmas. We went through the births of Mark, Naomi, and John together. WHEN Dick died and I moved back to Boston, Ruth and I stayed in touch with each other and the major changes in our lives. We reunited when I moved back to Topeka in 2005. We had many good times catching up and reminiscing. It was hard to watch Ruth during her final years but she faced what was happening to her with grace and acceptance. The faith she chose was a help to her and she had helped others. Thank you Helen and Dan for being with her in her final moments. She loved all of you deeply. And I loved her. Diana Laskin Siegal*

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**Diana Laskin Siegal** - December 22, 2017 at 10:05 PM

PG

“ My sincere sympathy to all of Ruth's family. I was a member of Glory to God Covenant Community with my dear Sister in the Lord, Ruth! We spent many hours together seeking to grow in our relationship with God and our fellow community members. We prayed together many times. She taught me a lot with her great wisdom. She will always hold a special place in my memory and heart. She will be a wonderful intercessor for all of us left behind.

*Phyllis Goetz*

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**Phyllis Goetz** - December 11, 2017 at 09:07 PM

FG

“ Helen and family: our sincere condolences on the loss of such a wonderful woman. Her biography was a wonderful testimony of love and inspiration for others. May God bring you comfort and peace during this season of the Christ Child's birth.

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**Frank & Yoshi Gerner** - December 10, 2017 at 07:24 PM

SK

“ Prayers to you all. Aunt Ruth was not my aunt by blood, but by love. She truly radiated love in my direction. I attended her estate sale so that I could have a tangible memory of her, but the memories in my mind are far more precious. Every marzipan candy I see will remind me of her. Rest well dear Aunt Ruth. You have truly earned it. Peace and love to her family, blood and otherwise.

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**Stacey Kramer** - December 10, 2017 at 12:09 PM

KW

“ *What a beautiful tribute to Ruth in the newspaper today. I read every word and it touched my heart. I would love to have known her but feel as though I do. Radiate love...beautiful words. I attended her estate sale and remember the hundreds (if not thousands) of books and I also remember the children's toys she lovingly saved in the attic. She reminds me of my other mother in many ways. Blessings to Helen and Mark and the other family members. Kristen Anderson White, Topeka*

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**Kristen White** - December 10, 2017 at 10:24 AM

EF

“ *I did not know Ruth. But after reading her obituary, I found out what a wonderful Person she was! Radiate love!*

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**Edward Fennell** - December 10, 2017 at 10:17 AM

CT

“ *I was one of the privileged ones to spend time with Ruth at Assumption church before and after weekday mass. Ruth knew my Mother, Emma McKinley and they both worked with and appreciated Fr. John Rossiter. Ruth shared stories with me and occasionally my granddaughter. She reaffirmed my family and nurturing priorities which was a wonderful blessing for me. The most treasured gift she gave to me were her prayers for my family members. I have always felt her to be my personal family prayer warrior until reading her obituary. Now I realize Ruth was so much more than my personal mentor, she was amazing! I cherish the treasure I got a glimpse of in my hour of need! I tried to keep her in my prayers also and know she is well cared for in her heavenly home, and I will still ask her for her prayers for my family. God bless and give her family members peace.*

*Connie Zeller Townsend*

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**Connie Townsend** - December 10, 2017 at 09:57 AM



“ *My husband and I lived next door to her, then we moved away but I would still stop by and see her...she always brought up how she wanted to "be set free" no more pain and not a burden to anyone. It would be selfish of me to wish her back. but she is where she wanted to be. She would write letters to me, she was absolutely a doll and I love her!!*



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**christine criswell-joy** - December 09, 2017 at 08:41 PM

HS

*I was impressed to read Ruth's obituary, sent out to former Menninger staff by Becky Remy today. Although I knew a few facts about her from her daughter, I had no idea what a loving, cultured, and remarkable woman she was. Helen, you are in my thoughts.*

*Helen Stein*

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**Helen Stein** - December 10, 2017 at 07:19 PM

AS

*Helen and family, Joe and I did not know that Ruth Gardner was your mother. We saw her obituary notice early on and knowing a lot of Gardner's we never dreamed that was your maiden name. I use to see your mother at noon mass at Assumption Church when I worked at the Legislature and would attend mass during the week. It was a very interesting obituary about a remarkable woman. Our sincere sympathy and prayers. God bless!*

*Joe and Anne Steinbock*

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**Anne Steinbock** - December 11, 2017 at 08:26 PM