

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE INSTITUTE OF GENERAL SEMANTICS ON ITS DIAMOND JUBILEE

MARTIN H. LEVINSON, PhD

In 1933, Alfred Korzybski published his second book, *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*, twelve years after his first, *Manhood of Humanity*.¹

Science and Sanity created a major stir among scholars and intellectuals, and in 1934, Korzybski began traveling around America to promote his work, which he referred to as *general semantics* (GS). Between January 1935 and the first seminar offered by the Institute in July 1938, Korzybski delivered seminars or lectures at twelve colleges and universities (University of Kansas, Washington State Normal School, University of Washington, Williams Institute in Berkeley, University of Michigan, Olivet College, the Wistar Institute in Philadelphia, the Galois Institute of Mathematics at Long Island University, Columbia University, Northwestern University, the University of Chicago, and Harvard University); three hospitals (the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas, New Jersey's Marlboro State Hospital, and Peoria, Illinois, State Hospital); and at conferences and privately organized seminars in St. Louis and in Los Angeles.

Korzybski sought to educate his readers and students on how to evaluate and respond more effectively to the diverse experiences they encountered in life, particularly with respect to properly reacting and adjusting to symbolic stimuli, such as language. He theorized that much, if not most, of human

Martin H. Levinson, a noted scholar of General Semantics and the author of a variety of books including his most recent *More Sensible Thinking* (2012), is the President of the Institute of General Semantics.

anguish could be traced to prescientific misevaluations of the way we function as the only form of time-binding symbol users.

The Institute of General Semantics (IGS) was incorporated in Chicago because that is where Douglas Gordon Campbell and Charles B. Congdon, psychiatrists at the Student Health Service of the University of Chicago, lived and worked. They were both very interested in Korzybski's system and wanted him to come there. Through Dr. Campbell, Cornelius Crane (heir to Crane Plumbing) also became involved and contributed \$25,000 to the initial funding of the Institute. The Institute's incorporating certificate listed Korzybski, Campbell, Congdon, and Crane as the four incorporating trustees. Additionally, Marjory [*sic*] Kendig was listed as an ex officio member of the Board.

In the 1930s, new ground was being broken in many academic fields and leaders in various disciplines, many of whom Korzybski corresponded with in the process of writing *Science and Sanity*, were invited to become honorary trustees of the Institute. A long list of eminent scholars accepted—there were a total of thirty-one honorary trustees at the Institute's inception.

With a beginning funding and strong financial backing, the new Institute was launched in May 1938, with an office in a small apartment two blocks from the University of Chicago. Two months later, the new Institute presented its first seminar (it consisted of twelve lectures delivered by Korzybski on Monday and Wednesday evenings over a six-week period). In 1939, the Institute moved one block west to a house with the numerically intriguing address 1234 E. 56th Street.

Many of the future leaders of the nascent discipline of GS came to Korzybski's early seminars, men such as Elwood Murray, Irving J. Lee, S. I. Hayakawa, Francis Chisholm, Wendell Johnson, Ray Bontrager, and Dr. Douglas Kelley. Other individuals who have taken Institute seminars, lectures, or workshops include the novelist, short story writer, essayist, painter, and spoken work performer William S. Burroughs; inventor, architect, philosopher, writer, etc. R. Buckminster Fuller; science-fiction writer Robert Heinlein; psychologist and author Abraham Maslow; British physician and coauthor with John Cleese of *Families: And How to Survive Them* Robin Skynner; contemporary science-fiction writer Robert Anton Wilson; and author, entertainer, and composer Steve Allen.

In 1939, Hitler's armies invaded Poland and Belgium. In 1940, France fell and London was being blitzed from the air. Korzybski noted the impact that some of these disasters had on him in his Introduction to the second

edition of *Science and Sanity*, which he wrote in 1941, the year the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

A number of students who had attended Institute seminars joined America's armed forces during World War II and some took *Science and Sanity* with them to their combat postings. In Army hospitals in Europe, Dr. Douglas Kelley used Korzybskian methods to help treat soldiers suffering from battle fatigue and fear.

In the midst of the hostilities raging in Europe, the IGS held a Second American Congress on General Semantics (the first took place in 1935 at The Washington Normal School in Ellensburg, Washington) at the University of Denver in August 1941. It was well attended, with a number of fine papers published in 1943 in the volume *Papers from the Second American Congress on General Semantics* (M. Kendig, Editor).

Korzybski presented many seminars in Chicago, about six each year, as well as some in California, New York City, and elsewhere. But, revenues earned from these endeavors were barely able to keep the IGS afloat. Fortunately, Mrs. Frances Stone Dewing, the mother of Mary Morain (a social reformer and leading secular humanist who compiled and edited four books on GS), provided generous financial help at this critical juncture.

In 1942, a small group of Korzybski's students in Chicago got together to establish the Society for General Semantics, an organization whose aim was to interest the public in GS and put out a general semantics journal. Five dollars of their annual ten-dollar membership fee was retained by the Society, and the rest was given to the Institute. In 1948, the Society became the International Society for General Semantics (ISGS). *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, the Society's quarterly journal, was begun in 1943, with S. I. Hayakawa as its editor.

The work of the International Society developed with a greater emphasis on publications, whereas the Institute concentrated on teaching and training through seminars. In the mid-1940s, the Society used the IGS mailing list of seminar attendees and prospects in its membership and fundraising campaigns. A number of Institute trustees also served on the board of the International Society.

The first "popularization" of GS, *The Tyranny of Words* by Stuart Chase, was published in 1938. In the 1940s, additional popularizations rolled off the presses; S. I. Hayakawa's *Language in Action* (a Book-of-the-Month-Club selection brought out in 1941), Irving J. Lee's *Language Habits in Human Affairs* (1941), and Wendell Johnson's *People in Quandaries* (1946) were among them. There were also articles in *Time* and elsewhere

about Korzybski and his ideas, and the list of books and reprints sold by the IGS grew apace. Seminars were held in the spacious living room of the Institute building with students staying at nearby hotels.

However, the staff of the Institute, on average about six people, remained small and there was very little money. In June 1944, Charlotte Schuchardt became office manager and Korzybski's confidential secretary when Pearl Johncheck took ill.

In the spring of 1946, the building that the Institute was renting was sold and the new owners wanted to live in it. This created a major problem for the Institute, as the August 1946 seminar was enrolled and ready to go. Providentially, Institute trustee Robert Redpath, Jr., who knew the headmaster of Indian Mountain School in Lakeville, Connecticut, was able to secure a seminar site in Lakeville. The new venue provided the opportunity for seminar participants to live together in dormitories.

A decision was made to stay temporarily at Lakeville, as the cost of having an office in New York City was not financially feasible. Kendig bought a large old house in Lime Rock, Connecticut, and the Institute became her tenant in December 1946. (Marjorie M. Kendig, the Institute's first Education Director, was a highly talented administrator and was a very devoted worker for the Institute. Her efforts and know-how were crucial in establishing and developing the program of the IGS.) The Institute stayed in Lime Rock for more than three decades.

It was a huge challenge for the Institute staff to function in a rural area, ninety miles from New York, five miles from Lakeville, and multiple miles from a metropolis of more than 2,000. Lime Rock was a "ghost town" in 1946, but there were many well-known private schools in the area.

While reorganizing in Connecticut, the Institute faced some additional challenges, to wit, the Society found it needed all its membership dues to be able to continue to function and could no longer contribute any of them to the Institute. The IGS therefore inaugurated its own membership structure to compensate for funds that it would no longer receive from the Society. In 1947, the Institute became incorporated in the State of Connecticut.

The addition of more trustees, many of them from the New York area, was a plus, and in the years 1947–1950, the Institute schedule was full. Moreover, the New York Society for General Semantics, founded in 1946, was on the rise and other Societies, such as those in Montreal, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, and Ann Arbor, were also forming. In 1948, the third edition of *Science and Sanity* and *Selections from Science and Sanity*, a compendium put together by Guthrie E. Janssen during his one-year

fellowship at the Institute, were published. The following year, a Third Congress on General Semantics was held at the University of Denver, and Korzybski gave a seminar at Yale and held a colloquium in which a number of prominent Yale professors participated.

In 1949, Francis P. Chisholm, president of the ISGS since 1947, ran for reelection on a platform based on “unifying” or “merging” the IGS with the ISGS. The Institute and four of six members of the ISGS Governing Board supported this plan in principle. The two ISGS Directors who did not support the unification plan were editor of *ETC*, S. I. Hayakawa, and associate editor, Anatol Rapoport. Hayakawa felt so strongly about the matter that he chose to oppose Chisholm as President of the ISGS. Hayakawa believed the strength of the Society came from its different organizational structure and focus as compared to the Institute.

Despite endorsements from the Institute and the leadership of the New York, Los Angeles, and Boston Societies for General Semantics, Chisholm was not able to prevail against his more publicly prominent opponent, and talk of combining the two organizations was put on hold. Hayakawa assumed the duties of the presidency of the ISGS in addition to his duties as the editor of *ETC*. A few years later, the International Society moved its office to San Francisco and several local societies became chapters of that organization.

In 1950, Korzybski was preparing a paper to be delivered at a symposium at the University of Texas. He had almost completed that manuscript when, in the early morning of March first, he suddenly died, a few hours after suffering a coronary thrombosis.

Kendig accepted the trustees’ appointment as Acting Director and later Director, and the Institute’s staff immersed itself on the urgent tasks ahead. Kendig began the publication of the *General Semantics Bulletin* (the Institute’s “yearbook”), and two issues came out in 1950. That same year, the second edition of *Manhood of Humanity* was published and the August seminar, the first without Korzybski, was presented. Dr. J. Samuel Bois delivered the theoretical lectures at this seminar.

Ray Bontrager subsequently became the chief lecturer on theory, with Harry Holtzman adding an important new dimension of art, or “non-verbal abstracting,” as he liked to call it. Neurosurgeon Russell Meyers gave talks relating the functioning of the nervous system to GS, and Charlotte Selver supplied “sensory awareness” workshops. (Charlotte Schuchardt Read, who acquired that last name when she married famed etymologist and lexicographer Allen Walker Read in 1953, later delivered such workshops.)

The Institute also unfurled its version of *Group Dynamics*, a newly developed field in experiential human relations.

In the 1960s, Kendig's health began to fail and she found it harder to keep up with the demands of the director's job. She left that position in 1964, although she served as Interim Director from 1971 to 1975 while she was in and out of the hospital. Charlotte Schuchardt Read became Acting Director at various times when needed, traveling from New York City to Connecticut. Professor Elwood Murray also served as Director for two years (September 1967 to September 1969) with his office at the University of Denver.

During the sixties and seventies, Robert Pula, Milton Dawes, James Broadus, Elton Carter, Allen Flagg, Kenneth Johnson, Elwood Murray, Thomas Nelson, and others advanced the Institute's mission through their teaching and writing. Harry Maynard taught GS classes at Cooper Union in New York, and Robert Holston and Jane Heyburn brought GS to the business world. Severen Schaeffer conducted seminars in Paris. In this period, the Institute held many of its seminars at the University of Denver or at Colorado Academy (an independent, nonsectarian prep school).

Christopher B. Sheldon—the skipper of the 92-foot sailing ship, *Albatross*, which sank in a freak storm in 1961, a disaster that inspired the 1996 movie *White Squall*—followed Elwood Murray as Director for about eight months. After that, Charlotte Schuchardt Read served as Director until April 1983, when Robert Pula was appointed for a three-year term.

In 1983, after thirty-seven years in Connecticut, the Institute decided to sell the sizeable house it occupied in Lime Rock. The IGS membership and publication office was moved to Ridgefield, Connecticut, where it was overseen by Tom Nelson's AAV Publishing Company. Robert Pula was the Director at the IGS Baltimore office. However, this arrangement proved too costly to continue so all Institute functions were transferred to Baltimore, a municipality far from the center of IGS activities. That latter circumstance created a need to move closer to New York City.

In the mid-1980s, the IGS hired Marjorie Zelner as Executive Secretary and relocated its administrative setup to office space shared with her husband's business in Englewood, New Jersey. The Institute's 2,500-book library and archives, however, was kept in storage pending a suitable "home." The Institute's President William Exton, Jr. and a small group of trustees, assisted by Marjorie, ran the Englewood operation on a volunteer basis.

In the early 1990s, the IGS initiated a fundraising campaign to secure money to support a suitable site to hold the library and archives. The upshot was the dedication of "The Alfred Korzybski Research and Study Center"

in 1994, in the renovated nineteenth-century carriage house behind the home of Marjorie and Larry Zelner.

In 2000, Marjorie was diagnosed with cancer and resigned as Executive Director. That same year, Jeff Mordkowitz, a former president of the IGS Board of trustees, was reelected president and appointed executive director by the Institute's trustees. The IGS administrative office moved to his home office in Brooklyn, New York.

Marjorie succumbed to her illness and died in October 2000. The library and archives remained in the Zelner's carriage house until March 2002, when the Board approved moving them to the Dallas-Fort Worth area in Texas.

In September 2003, the IGS Board accepted plans to merge with the ISGS; consolidate the operations of both organizations in Fort Worth, Texas; and search for appropriate property to purchase in Fort Worth as a "permanent" home. The ability to buy such a place was made possible by a sizeable bequest from the estates of Allen Walker Read and his wife Charlotte Schuchardt Read. In November, a home was secured in the Fairmount Historic District of Fort Worth.

In January 2004, The ISGS and the IGS officially merged, with Steve Stockdale assuming the duties of Executive Director for the "new" IGS. Administrative functions were transitioned from Concord, California (where the ISGS was headquartered) and Brooklyn.

After renovating and remodeling was completed in September 2005, the Institute's offices, library, archives, and seminar facilities were consolidated in Read House. During this time, the Institute also published a web site that contained many digitized documents for people to view.

In 2007, Stockdale and some Institute trustees proposed having IGS and all its assets subsumed by Texas Christian University (TCU), as a way to save money and have the IGS associated with an academic institution. But, the majority of trustees thought the Institute could remain viable as a stand-alone organization if it cut down its expenses, so the proposal to be taken over by TCU was declined.

Stockdale resigned his position in 2007 and Lance Strate, a professor of Communications at Fordham University, assumed the duties of Executive Director in 2008. Strate served as the Institute's director for three years during which time he revived IGS publishing and helped the Institute gain a firmer foothold in academia.

In 2011, for budgetary savings and reasons of efficiency, the Institute board voted to suspend the publication of the *General Semantics Bulletin* and retain *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* as the Institute's sole journal.

The trustees also voted to relocate the IGS headquarters to Forest Hills, New York, where it is currently being managed by IGS President Martin H. Levinson and a small group of Institute trustees, à la the tenure and administration of William Exton, Jr., on a voluntary basis. Institute materials are being accommodated in New York City and at Wiley College in Marshall, Texas, and the IGS bookstore has relocated to Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan.

In the past two years, the IGS has published an updated reprint of *Selections from Science and Sanity*, four new books, and a new continuing education guide. The Institute representatives have also presented and/or exhibited at various academic conferences in the United States and abroad. And the IGS has continued to sponsor the Alfred Korzybski Memorial Lecture (AKML), a popular annual event begun in 1952 that is usually given in New York City (a long list of distinguished scholars in various fields working in a non-Aristotelian direction have spoken at the AKML—individuals such as R. Buckminster Fuller, Fritz Roethlisberger, Abraham Maslow, Gregory Bateson, and Jerome Bruner).

But perhaps, the most important thing to note is, through savings on paying salaries and greatly reducing real estate costs, the IGS is now in sound financial shape. And that is very good news for it means that the IGS can keep on going forward, hopefully for at least another seventy-five years, developing and promoting the application of GS ideas and principles to bring about clearer thinking, peaceful interaction, and greater sanity in people's lives.

Notes

1. For additional information on the history of the Institute of General Semantics see Bruce I. Kodish, *Korzybski: A Biography* (Pasadena, CA: Extensional Publishing, 2011), 438–623; Charlotte Schuchardt Read, “The Institute of General Semantics: A Brief Historical Survey” *General Semantics Bulletin* 54 (1988–1989): 62–68; Steve Stockdale, “Snooping Around the Time-Binding Attic” *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 59, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 90–99; “The Institute and the Society: A Self-Reflexive Assessment of Two Organizations, One Discipline, and General Semantics” *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 60, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 271–280; and “A History of the Institute of General Semantics,” <http://www.generalsemantics.org/about-us/history>.