

## David Georg Gil's life

By Gideon Gil

It was January 1939, and a 14-year-old Austrian boy had recently arrived in Malmo, Sweden, and been taken in by strangers. Days earlier, he'd boarded a train in Nazi-occupied Vienna. The breaking glass of Kristallnacht was still echoing, his family's dry goods business had been confiscated by the Nazis, and his father Oskar Engel had been arrested and imprisoned in Buchenwald, the concentration camp, for the crime of being Jewish. So his mother, Helene, had done what mothers do — she had found a way to keep her child out of harm's way, arranging for transit on a Kindertransport, the refugee program that rescued more than 10,000 European children from the coming Holocaust.

"We are missing you very much ... I cannot go to your room at all," Helene wrote to her son shortly after he'd reached Sweden (after first scolding him for his handwriting in the letters he'd sent to her). "May the dear God protect you and let you become an honest, good human being. My only desire is once more to be together with father, your brother and you." She wouldn't get her last wish, but before her son died on March 6, 2021, in Lexington, Mass., he could look back on his 96 years and know that he fulfilled her first prayer.

Some 70 years after his mother wrote that letter, Helene and Oskar's son — David Gil — was asked what he wished he had said to his parents: "Thank you for saving me. Your dreams and hopes for me have been fulfilled in unexpected ways. I completed my interrupted education against many odds, and I developed a career as a social worker, scholar, and university professor. I study ways to overcome violence and social injustice in human relations, like the conditions that destroyed our family."

Gil — who was born in Vienna on March 16, 1924 — was a teacher and mentor to generations of graduate students and a devoted husband of Eva (nee Breslauer), his partner for nearly 66 years before she died in 2013. Together, they turned their Lexington, Mass., home into a salon of sorts for students from all over the world. For 46 years, from 1964-2010, Gil taught at Brandeis University's Heller School for Social Policy and Management, where he was a professor of social policy and director of the Center for Social Change. He also was a visiting professor at Washington University in St. Louis for many years and taught at the Harvard Extension School. His Brandeis Ph.D. students included a future First Lady of South Africa (Zanele Mbeki), a future NFL owner (the Philadelphia Eagles' Jeff Lurie), and Otis Johnson, a mayor of Savannah, Ga., who described Gil as one of "the pillars of social policy work" and his "North Star" in the analysis of social systems and inequality. An Australian graduate student visiting Boston once called Heller faculty member Jon Chilingirian out of the blue, he recounted during a 2009 event honoring Gil. "I do not want to meet with you, I never heard of you," the caller said, "but can you introduce me to David Gil? I can't wait to meet him. He is my inspiration."

His academic progeny include 85 Ph.D. students whose dissertation committees he chaired and 47 more whose committees he served on. Many have gone on to careers working for social change as professors and social workers. Gil's longtime Heller colleague and former Brandeis Provost Marty Krauss called him a "legend at the school. ... He had such a gentle touch and demeanor. I will miss him greatly."

In the mid-1960s, Gil led a government-funded, nationwide study that was the first systematic effort to document the scope and underlying causes of child abuse in the United States, which until then was a dirty secret that was little discussed in public and was essentially seen as the fault of bad parents. He instead concluded that child abuse was tied to poverty, life stresses, and other societal forces, including cultural encouragement of the use of force in raising children, and that this analysis required a broad re-evaluation of social-services practices and changes in government policies. The research was the foundation of the first of five books he authored, "Violence Against Children," published in 1970 by Harvard University Press. His next book, "Unravelling Social Policy," published in 1973, was a seminal work in social policy; it was translated into many languages and became a widely used textbook. In 2009, Chilingerian said scholars place it among the most influential in discussing the role of values in policy analysis, along with the work of thinkers John Dewey and John Rawls.

His scholarship increasingly focused on the systemic roots of social and economic injustice. In 1969, he proposed a guaranteed income for families with children, in a book chapter titled "Mother's Wages — an Alternative Attack on Poverty" — an idea that now, a half-century later, has been rebranded and included in President Biden's economic stimulus plan. In a 2009 collection of essays honoring Gil after his retirement from teaching, one student recalled how during class, he would say, "There is no such thing as a 'more just' society. It is either just, or not."

Another student, Catherine Nichols, described Gil's "thoughtful reading and critique of every page" of her master's thesis on Arizona's welfare-to-work program and being "astounded at his ability to question the concepts that were often accepted in wider academia." In particular, he encouraged the student to explore that a "real solution to welfare and work issues" is the elimination of poverty and forced labor: "We know how to do this," he wrote in a comment on the thesis, "but we lack the political commitment. Part of moving in that direction is acknowledging it clearly whenever possible and putting it on the public agenda."

Gil practiced what he preached, students and colleagues said. He fostered a democratic classroom, wanting to learn as much from his students as they learned from him, and even letting students grade themselves — trusting they would be honest in judging how much effort they put into their coursework (in fact, not everyone gave themselves an A). Alexandra Piñeros Shields, executive director of the Essex County Community Organization in Massachusetts, said "he shared the power of his classroom with his students." She recalled that during a break one day in a class discussion of low-wage workers in the global economy, she and other students invited a janitor, a Salvadoran immigrant, to join the second half of class because "we knew that David would be fine with that," she wrote in her 2009 tribute. Former student Thomas G.

Broussard Jr. said in an email that Gil “would get angry if people called him ‘Professor.’ I called him Professor by habit, even after he had told me not to. I had to work hard to use David.”

Throughout his career, Gil advocated for social workers to become politically active and work for progressive social change, arguing that by focusing only on the welfare of individual families in their jobs, they often are just papering over the effects of unjust policies. It was a theme he expanded on in his 1998 book “Confronting Injustice and Oppression: Concepts and Strategies for Social Workers.” Carol Brill, a friend and former student who was the longtime executive director of the Massachusetts Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers, described him in 2009 as a “radical conscience of the social work profession.” She credited him with influencing her, when she served on a committee that wrote the NASW Code of Ethics, to incorporate language on “the responsibility of social workers to take action on social, cultural and economic injustices.” Before joining the Brandeis faculty, he himself was trained as a social worker, earning a master’s degree and doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work. He was also active in progressive causes. He was co-chair of the Socialist Party USA from 1995-99, an active member of the Democratic Socialists of America, and served on the executive committee of the National Jobs for All Coalition.

He was president of the Association for Humanist Sociology in 1981-82 and received numerous awards, including the 2000-2001 Social Worker of the Year from the Massachusetts Chapter of NASW; the 2006 Presidential Award from the Council on Social Work Education; and the 2008 Noam Chomsky Award from the Justice Studies Association.

In accepting the Chomsky Award, he traced the evolution of his ideas, explaining that his traumatic separation from his family in 1939 “became the impetus for my life-long efforts to gain insights into the nature of violence and oppression, and into ways to overcome these dehumanizing practices.” As he worked on a dairy farm in Sweden — caring for 39 cows and one bull, he liked to say — and World War II erupted around him, the seeds of pacifism took root. “What I had figured out at that time already was that it wouldn’t be any better whether this happened to German kids or to any kid — it shouldn’t happen to anybody. The question is not retribution but how to get out of this cycle of violence,” he said in a [2003 interview](#). He happened to read two other books at that time that heavily influenced his intellectual development: A biography of Mahatma Gandhi, and Russian writer Peter Kropotkin’s “Mutual Aid,” which he said exposed him to the philosophy and practice of human cooperation and active non-violence. Lasting social change cannot be achieved through coercive means, he often said. As he wrote in one of his last essays, “Just ways of life would have to be discovered and chosen voluntarily by people in order to be accepted by them.”

After a year in Sweden, and turning the minimum age of 15 for emigrating to Palestine, he traveled there by plane, train, and boat in March 1940, and was settled on a kibbutz. “The egalitarian, collective culture of the kibbutz, and the experience of the mutually destructive conflict between Palestinians and Jews, became sources of the gradual emergence of my critical consciousness,” he said in his Chomsky Award talk.

It was in Palestine that Gil's deep commitment to protecting children — and the courage to stand up for his beliefs, no matter the cost — emerged. On the kibbutz, he was inducted into the Haganah, an underground Jewish paramilitary force, but became disenchanted with the group's fight against the Palestinians and left to live with pacifists. He later learned that the underground's leaders had wanted to execute him because they feared he would betray them. When he was 18, he refused to join the British Army, and without papers showing he'd served, it was hard to find a job. He ended up working in a home for delinquent children, where he discovered that the headmaster was physically abusing the kids. He and a co-worker went to a newspaper with the story and the headmaster was fired. Then in 1948, he was conscripted into the Israeli Army during the War of Independence, and again he refused to fight. "The first thing you do is go to a swearing-in ceremony," he told the interviewer in 2003. "You line up everybody on the parade ground. And to indicate your agreement, your loyalty, you step forward. Well, I remained standing." Gil was jailed for a few days before being released to do social service work for army families.

For a number of years, he was a probation officer in Israel, becoming assistant director of the Youth Probation Service — where he met Eva, who worked there as a translator. They were married Aug. 2, 1947, and came to the United States in 1953, when he received a United Nations Scholarship to study at the University of Pennsylvania. Before leaving for the United States, he changed his name from his birth name of Georg Engel to David Gil (Gil means "joy" in Hebrew) because Israel didn't want him traveling abroad on a diplomatic passport with a German name. After returning to Israel for a few years, David and Eva permanently settled in the U.S. in 1957 with their infant twin sons, Daniel and Gideon.

Gil's mother eventually succeeded in escaping Austria in 1940 with her husband, who was released from Buchenwald when she booked passage for them on an illegal transport ship to Palestine. But they were intercepted by the British and transferred to another ship, the SS Patria, which the Haganah mined, intending to disable it and prevent the British from sending the nearly 2,000 refugees elsewhere. The ship sank instead, and several hundred passengers drowned in Haifa harbor. Gil's parents swam to shore, only to be imprisoned in an internment camp for illegal immigrants. He was able to see his mother just once, shouting to her across a double row of barbed wire fences. He didn't know it at the time, but she was sick with typhoid, and she died a few months later. His father was eventually released, and his older brother, Harry, made it to Palestine as well, but the family was never together again as his mother had wished.

"I often feel guilty and depressed," Gil said in 2008, when asked what he would say to his parents. "Perhaps I should not have left you and stayed with you and helped you cope during terrible times. You might have survived and the family could have been reunited, rather than everyone going separate ways."

In later years, he often talked of the pleasure he took from his own family, and his satisfaction in his long marriage to Eva and the success of his children and grandchildren. And he nurtured close ties with his brother's family in Israel, speaking often by phone to his nieces there. He is

survived by his two sons, Daniel and Gideon; their wives, Deborah Sassoon and Lisa Huber; and two grandchildren, Michael Gil and Liana Huber.

Asked in the [2003 interview](#) whether he was hopeful for a just society in the U.S. and around the world, he replied: “If you analyze what goes on, you can't say it looks hopeful, but instead of constantly pointing out how hopeless it looks, do your part to change it. Get others to do it.”

A memorial service will be held at a later date. The family requests that gifts in memory of David be made to the Heller Fellowship Fund – Diversity and Inclusion Scholarships at [heller.brandeis.edu/give](https://heller.brandeis.edu/give); or to a social justice cause of your choosing.