

Irmis Barret Popoff

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Early days

Irmis Barret Popoff (Mrs. P.) was born Irmis Barret de Nazaris, on October 22, 1900. Her father, a Venezuelan diplomat, gave her an aristocratic upbringing. General Barret had to flee Venezuela because of a political coup, eventually moving his family to the United States.

Fluent in Spanish and French, Mrs. P. worked in the translation department at the Morgan Guarantee Bank for 35 years. She came into contact with a group of Russian emigres, married Victor Popoff and had one son, Frank. The marriage dissolved early on.

Searching for knowledge

Mrs. P. searched for esoteric and spiritual knowledge through such avenues as Theosophy before meeting Ouspensky via a public lecture. She worked with him from 1941 to 1947. After his death, she worked with Gurdjieff, whom Madame Ouspensky summoned to take care of “his people.” Mrs. P. also spent time at Mendham with Madame Ouspensky and met at the Foundation with Mr. Nyland, serving for some time as his secretary. She also served as secretary to Mr. Ouspensky and created notes, approved by him, that she would sometimes share during Work periods.

Founding of the Pinnacle

With the prompting of Mme. De Hartmann, Mrs. P. established the former Pinnacle Hotel in Sea Cliff, New York as a center for the transmission and practice of the Gurdjieff Work. Along with her close friend and companion Serge Kosuhoff, she purchased the Pinnacle. As her role as a group leader became more established, by 1970 she had gathered a small community of students to live there.

During the years I worked with her (1977-1984), Mrs. P. offered Work periods at the Pinnacle on weekends, with longer 10-day sessions in the summer. Joined by the residents, a larger group of students attended these sessions. I was in a group in Maine under her direction, and we tried to go frequently for weekends and at least one work week in the summer until her death in 1984.

Ongoing Work

In later years, Mrs. P. worked closely with Lord Pentland and Mme. and Michel de Salzmann. Mme. De Hartmann encouraged her to publish a personal account of her introduction to the Work and then to guide the growing number of interested young people in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Many of those resided at the Pinnacle, including some who had attended one of the courses led by Mr. Bennett at Sherborne House in England.

Mrs. P.'s groups remained fairly independent from the Foundation itself, the Farm, and other Work lineages, although Mrs. Popoff continued to work closely with Lord Pentland. “He trusts me,” she would say, regarding the loose sense of his supervision, “and our groups have heart.”

Mrs. Popoff had known J.G. Bennett and she had a fondness for Claymont, even though she would be quick to point out some differences in the way Work was conducted there. She maintained a traditional and conservative presentation, keeping close to the styles and content of work she experienced with Mr. and Madam Ouspensky and Gurdjieff. Because of her fluent Spanish, Mrs. Popoff also visited groups conducted by Nathalie de Salzmänn, and those established in Mexico by Christopher Freemantle.

First Impressions

As one of the people I would regard as a living icon of the Work, there was something in Mrs. Popoff, something of her being, that emanated qualities we as students could only aspire to (and probably little understood) at that point.

I remember the first time I met her in 1977. I came to the Pinnacle for a work period with some trepidation, having heard a story of an unusual fundraiser event. It was a chess match on the Pinnacle lawn with students as living chess pieces who stood motionless for long periods until directed to move. The temperature and humidity levels were in the high 90s.

After hearing tales of that event, I could not imagine having the wherewithal to participate. I arrived at the Pinnacle terrified that some nearly impossible effort would be asked of me or that I would receive some Gurdjieff-style shock. Indeed, I believe I did!

Personal experience

We gathered in the living room for morning sittings. Mrs. Popoff sat in an antique chair that appeared like a throne when she was in it, and as I looked at her, I perceived her as an entirely different order of person from anyone I had known. It seemed she had no negativity, though looking back from this vantage some forty years later, I am guessing that what I perceived was actually a combination of the fineness of her presence: an open heart, an open attention firmly grounded in sensation while taking us all in very precisely, resting in that other Reality that Mme. De Salzmänn describes so well.

In other words, I was encountering something clearly beyond my own level of being and even perhaps my ability to understand. However, I came to trust the Work and her ever more deeply, as I could sense and feel something that inspired awe and wish in me.

In one of her characteristic ways, Mrs. Popoff invited each of us to write a question and submit it. I remember my observation/question to this day, and also the response she gave, so pungent that even now I am unable to bring myself to share the exchange. But I was stunned. Should I leave now? Did I not belong to the Work?

Trying not to panic, I struggled to be present, to receive the response with some openness and even an attitude of unknowing. Perhaps there was a deeper message, a more positive message, in what she had said. I sat quietly, trying not to betray my struggle to others, but still in a deep inner struggle. Then she requested that we write down what we were thinking at that moment and pass that in. Still in the grips of my reaction, I could only bring myself to write, "I was thinking of my

question and the answer you gave.” These responses were also read, without comment. Soon after that that we were dismissed.

However, there was also an invitation. Those of us who wished could come down to the basement dining room for coffee, tea, and cake. I went down and as we gathered, Mrs. Popoff walked by and patted my shoulder. “Don’t be afraid,” she said, gently, “no one can hurt you.” Her gentleness in that moment canceled out all the pain from my previous struggle, opening me once again, yet in a different way.

And that’s how Mrs. Popoff gave shocks: though she used shock often (and, in my opinion, with the precision of open-heart surgery) she always held us up somehow at the same time and left us feeling strangely both seen and loved.

The Work ideas

Mrs. Popoff grounded her presentation of the Work in the ideas. In fact, during the first Work period I attended there was a reading from Mr. Ouspensky from her notes. The reading discussed the law of repetition, at one’s level of being, when encountering some type of resistance or situation, one would always respond in the same way.

Furthermore, because our being attracts our life, types of events would continue to repeat for us. If we met them in sleep and mechanicality, we would remain under this law, as though our lives were repeating in endless circles back over the same types of automatic experience, with the same types of possibilities.

However, if such moments were met in a moment of consciousness, one could choose to respond differently and this circle could become a spiral, lifting one slightly higher with new possibilities. This is transformation. This is when the enneagram multiplies.

About inner work

Work at the Pinnacle was also quite practical and grounded in an ever deepening and expanding sensation. In that same reading, there were instructions for keeping the eyes relaxed and receptive. The significance of this passed me by at the time, though over the years, the work with attention and sensation built upon this effort towards a more receptive, open attention.

As work continued to deepen, around 1980 a new idea and then an invitation to an effort was introduced to *reverse sensation*. Mrs. Popoff referred to the effort metaphorically as “reversing the glove.” Rather than seeing, one could experience being seen; instead of touching, one could be touched. After working in this way for some time, I had an experience at a sacred place I used to visit, that I was not just breathing, but *being breathed*, not just knowing, but *being known*. This had a deep effect on my inner work.

Years later, knowing she was moving toward her own death, Mrs. Popoff commented on her Work approach, offering the guideline that as Work progressed, it must remain balanced. In order to deepen one’s work, a new idea should be introduced, along with new exercises, relevant personal work, and different Movements. “This develops being in a balanced way,” she said, stressing the importance of remaining balanced in one’s work, an axiom that remains with me.

Soup

Preparing soup was a daily ritual at work periods at the Pinnacle. Leftovers were ferreted out from the many small refrigerators. Mrs. Popoff would refuse some offerings that didn't seem to combine well and take others, including scrapings from the morning egg skillets and from the browning of onions, to make delicious soups that were surprisingly satisfying, using very few ingredients.

This was an art she claimed to have learned from assisting Mr. Gurdjieff. The soup preparation events took on proportions of a teaching and would be "peppered" with insights and comments that kept all the cooks struggling to maintain presence. One almost felt a direct link to Gurdjieff's rooms at the Wellington. Indeed, the impact of her work with Gurdjieff and others was palpable.

Because of the with significant figures within the Gurdjieff Work, she would sometimes share impressions and reminiscences about them. We heard that Ouspensky did not want to take on anyone before the age of forty, before they had enough life experience to be ready for the Work. We heard the story of Rodney Collin's death when he carried a very weak young girl to the top of the stairs, knowing he had a heart condition. At other times, Mrs. Popoff would recall staying up so late in meetings with Mr. Gurdjieff at the Wellington that all she and others could do was to grab a nap in chairs in the lobby and then head to work.

Think, think, think!

We worked with many of the diagrams from Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous*. The last few years I attended Work periods; there was a drawing of the Lateral Octave on a cupboard in the dining room. Mrs. Popoff posed questions, in particular, "Why was there no 'Do?'"

At times like these she would goad us on with "Think, Think! Get the blood circulating in your cerebral cortex!" Working on her book, *The Enneagram of the Man of Unity*, she gave a task to students to create an enneagram of a process and present it or write a description of our understanding. Some of these were collected into the book, along with some of her diagrammatic reflections on the change to a "Man of Unity."

She advocated "long thinking" on many questions, and attempted to get us to use both the intellect and the intellectual part of the emotional center. Similarly, we studied many scientific principles with the encouragement, "As above, so below." In particular, I remember listening to a reading about how chalk is formed. Once again, everything spoke to me in metaphor, revealing other laws that helped support my Work.

The ideas seemed to be alive in Mrs. Popoff. Her understanding of space and time, in particular, beckoned us to ponder eternal time, in which significant cosmic events, such as the death of Christ, remain accessible when our own consciousness can receive the energies and experiences released in such moments.

Similarly, the trace we leave in time is left in eternity. Thus, consciousness and conscience are important in the present moments of our lives. It is also important to bring consciousness into memories so that they might light up moments "like fireflies" in the line of one's life in eternal time.

Service

Service was an important aspect of the Work Mrs. Popoff transmitted to us. It was both a path of transformation and an outcome. Our group in Maine organized annual yard sales to benefit the local animal shelter. The first year, we were given a task to beg door-to-door in our neighborhoods for donated items, remembering all the time, "All life is holy."

We soon discovered that the devoted woman who ran our local animal shelter had no running water (which we later helped her install) and that she had hauled water in the winter, even though she suffered with pleurisy. We cleaned cages, painted the shelter, and raised money.

Throughout it all, we worked against our self-centeredness, and in the process learned how to organize something. Later, the Maine group made a quilt to be auctioned off at another sale to raise money for one of Mme. De Salzmänn's Movements films. Mrs. Popoff, already in what was almost the final year of her life, donated precious items. These included her veil from her First Communion, fine tablecloths she had crocheted as a young woman, and other treasures, most of which were bought by students. Through her example, she transmitted to us that living a life of service is an attitude that we can each carry in our heart.

Sincerity

Because she could work as skillfully with people's individual features and their personal work as with the ideas, Mrs. P. could call forth a deep sincerity from us in moments. She frequently admonished us not to try and copy the Work of someone we admire in our group, or our group leader, but to discern from our own observation and efforts, to develop our own understanding and work from that.

I remember one Work period where our group leader came in and, after the silent meal was done, enthusiastically shared his new understanding that "It's all so simple!" He went on, apparently waxing eloquent but my attention had drifted and I "came to" when Mrs. Popoff asked us to go around the table and share how we understood what this gentleman had just said.

One after another, people shared brilliant thoughts, and I sat there, guiltily embarrassed that my attention had wandered so freely and associatively and I had slipped into a torpor. I wondered what I could possibly say when it got to me.

When my turn came, Mrs. Popoff looked at me and as our eyes met, I could not answer in any way but sincerely. "Well," I said, "When he said 'It's all so simple,' I thought, 'It's not simple for me.' And then," I guess my attention wandered and [I blurted impulsively] for some reason all I can think of now is The Emperor's New Clothes!" I'm sure my face was red with shame and my mind quickly in wonderment about what I had just said, when Mrs. Popoff beamed and replied, "You get the prize! Keep working that way and you will get the golden ring!" In this way, she responded to what she perceived as genuine work and sincere observation

The Cats

No memoir of Mrs. P. would be complete without some comments about cats. Mrs. Popoff had adopted many strays and continued to leave food out on the porches for others. Some 17 cats lived in the Pinnacle itself with a few antisocial ones in cages, but the rest had free roam of the house. Cat feeding and tending was an early morning and late afternoon ritual for us, including carefully washing dishes and scooping litter, once again time used by Mrs. Popoff as teaching time.

One felt her concern and relationship with each cat inhabitant, and it instilled in many of us the example and the feeling of responsibility for animals. Knowing that Gurdjieff said that we don't have the being to be compassionate to our fellow man so we should start with animals, I believe this served as an important step for us.

As it was in the beginning...Is Now...and ever shall be...world without end...Amen.

These words from a Catholic prayer formed the titles given to five summer Work Periods that Mrs. P. offered around 1982. During that time, she began to introduce the connection between presence in the moment "Now" and the eternal, the realm of the spiritual. The tasks given at that time were all related to becoming deeply present in the moment—the only time when a connection to higher worlds could be established.

Mrs. P. offered a series of morning tasks taken from her work with Ouspensky, aimed at feeding the emotional world, and the astral body. Later, working toward unity, simultaneity, and the energy of light/spirit were introduced. At times Mrs. P. might ask us our impressions of the meaning of an event only to respond after several of us offered interpretations, with a meaning of a totally different order. She would explain that she saw things from a higher perspective, and her interpretation was more fundamental.

Visitors

Visitors were welcomed at the Pinnacle. I regret that Mrs. Popoff's fond association with the Sufi sheik Reshad Feild happened just before I came. Occasionally we listened to some of his tapes or worked with the sacred dances he had taught. Reb Zalman Schacter was another visitor. Indian gurus came on occasion, and a Catholic priest came to one of our closing dinners. Dr. Bhatnagar came and chanted with us. We watched movies about Johnny Appleseed and learned about Swedenborg. We watched Bergman's *The Magic Flute* and pondered the symbolism. Some students remember painting the dining room green for Bhante, and a visit from a whirling dervish.

One's own responsibility

Mrs. Popoff had the ability to connect with and apparently see into those around her. She knew how to inspire remorse by bringing to attention one's negligence or lack of caring, and tying such things in a more cosmic way to the reasons there is such suffering in the world, so as to make one truly feel one's own responsibility.

Reflecting back, I can see that such things also left a sense of a personal connection to others and to larger scale events in a way that fed one's wish to work. She could hold the mirror up in one moment and yet somehow at the same time communicate her love for you and her valuation of you

in a way that felt truly intimate. In a way, looking at her as my spiritual mother, I sometimes feel she “loved me into being.”

Despite apparently merciless shocks, I knew Mrs. Popoff believed in me. She recognized my strengths even before I did, asking me to keep notes of Work periods, and giving me a book on music and vibrations long before I had any idea, I would someday be playing the piano for Movements. She gave me lots of personal advice and helped me through many periods of growth, shaking me out of some notable stuck places.

The work we did with Irmis Popoff gave me a love for an insight into the Work ideas and diagrams. It helped me to search in a sincere way. It was effective in giving me the tools and wish for an open, engaged presence that I try to better establish and deepen to this day. It helped me learn to think and helped me want to understand. When I look at the Five Strivings in *Beelzebub's Tales*, I believe that she addressed and tried to instill each one in our beings.

Last days

Mrs. Popoff died of congestive heart failure in 1984. Her last years were periods of intense work for those around her and have inspired paradoxical reflections among her students. Some of her behavior seemed erratic. People could not tell whether it was truly intentional, as some type of test for those she was with, or simply a reflection of the confusion that poor blood supply was causing in her brain.

Through my personal experience, I believe that there was profound teaching available in those moments if one could use it, which required surrendering one's own adherence to the logical and didactic, instead opening to an intuitive, metaphorical type of direct understanding. Whatever her actual experience was at that time, her own work remained constant through it.

For instance, I went on one long drive with her which she insisted was to find “the direct route to the airport.” As I drove, I felt that the “driving” instructions she was giving were instead instructions on how to work. “Oh, you missed that turn. Well, you'll have to find another. Watch more carefully next time.” “Someone in that house is suffering; we must send a blessing.” As I write this, I realize it was not so much the words in themselves forming the nature of our interaction in the moment, what was passing and what seemed to be being transmitted. if I could be receptive.

Another time I sat up with her late at night and she asked me to go out on the balcony and recite the Lord's Prayer to the neighborhood. Summoning up my inner “Good Gurdjieffian,” I attempted obedience and tried to work against my embarrassment by going out and calling out, or rather mumbling moderately loudly, the prayer. It was as though I was calling it out to the neighborhood, feeling pretty stupid all the time.

The next night as I similarly sat up with her, she requested I do the same thing. Not again! I managed to summon some inner strength to stand up to this woman for whom I had such regard as a teacher. “I can't do that, Mrs. Popoff.” “Why not?” she inquired. “Because when I did that last night, I couldn't remember myself. I just can't do it again.” She smiled, reached down, and picked up her copy of her book, *Gurdjieff, the Work—On Myself, with Others, for the Work*. She handed it to me. “Write that in my book!” she demanded.

This period was heart-breaking for many of her students, who feared that it meant Mrs. Popoff would not have a conscious death. Some left active work with her; some left the Work forever. For me, it became a time when an important principle was forged in me through my own inner friction around all this. It made me review all I had received through her transmission and what I had been able to verify and make my own. No matter what one made of Mrs. Popoff's current state, this was what I had now, and what I had to trust, to try, to work to continue to understand and embody. This I knew to be valid.

Since her death I have been fortunate to work with several wise and inspired teachers. I have had to learn to discriminate between what was inspiring and useful, and what was personality or ego when they slipped more into such a state. I have heard stories of well-recognized spiritual leaders who have been accused of predatory sexual behaviors or political ambitions within their organizations. In all this, one must learn to separate the wheat from the chaff. Thus, even the struggles of what to believe, what to trust in the intense work of Mrs. Popoff's last year have served as another teaching that brought me much benefit.

Mrs. Popoff died at the Pinnacle on October 13, 1984, surrounded by her students. I had just returned from a trip to Lourdes, from where I had sent a postcard telling her I had prayed for her. One of the people with her asked, "That's in France, right?" and told me that Mrs. Popoff had nodded.

There is so much more that could be said about this remarkable woman, who gave so tirelessly and spared herself nothing. I remember the annual summer road trips to Madam Ouspensky's grave; the unpretentious notation of the Stations of the Cross along the upper wall of one of Mrs. P.'s small private rooms; the dinner quietly left on her plate, apparently "offered up" as a suffering when one of the cats was discovered missing; the energizing two-hour Movements class one very hot and humid summer day when all we really "wanted" to do was go rest on our beds; and so much more.

It is my hope that this article gives at least a taste of the experience of work with Mrs. Popoff.