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This dissertation focuses on Austrian and German women émigrés, such as Gisela Konopka from Germany and the Viennese social worker Elsa Leichter, who fled from the National Socialists and settled in the United States, where they pursued careers as social work professionals. My project investigates these women’s lives and careers and traces their professional networks as they related to the social, professional, and academic culture of the United States at a time when the social sciences were expanding greatly and gaining significant public authority. Moreover, I am exploring the role and significance of social work for exiled women as well as the parts these women played in the development of social work and their work’s implications for the social sciences more generally.

My goal is to analyze the movements, networks, cultures, and identities of women émigrés in social work in the United States as well as their scholarly and professional activities. Furthermore, the project also explores the émigrés’ roles as facilitators in transatlantic transfers of theories, practices, and methodologies, particularly in the post-war decades. Working in academia as well as outside the university in welfare agencies, the most successful émigrés combined a unique set of characteristics, that is, their European and American training, their experience of exile, their cultural and cognitive traditions, their encounters with social norms and role expectations in different places, and their language and connections that maintained dynamic international collaborations. These outcomes left a lasting mark on social work and related social science disciplines, on the émigrés’ perspectives on society, as well as on the émigrés’ personal and professional identities in ways that have yet to be examined.

Located at the intersection of the history of exile and intellectual migration, gender and (social) science, and history of the social sciences, my research applies a comparative and transnational framework along with a biographical approach to address the following questions: How did the émigré women’s lives and careers compare to other groups: to their American-born colleagues, to émigrés from
other countries, and to male émigrés in the social sciences? What were women’s roles in the production of social scientific knowledge and in the development of new methodologies and practices? To what extent did these contributions reflect their training and work experience in Austria and Germany? How did the experience of persecution, expulsion, and migration impact these women’s identities, their career choices, and their work? Did the hierarchical structuring of the social sciences along gender lines differ in Europe and the United States? How, over the course of time, did the women’s experience in the United States influence their perceptions of Europe and European social sciences in the second half of the twentieth century?

Whereas accounts on persons exiled by the National Socialist regime have traditionally focused on the experiences of male writers, political figures, or scholars of high reputation, this project adopts a gender-sensitive perspective and presents the women’s experiences in their own right, thus bringing to the fore a group that has not yet received much attention from historians. Furthermore, in contrast to the majority of studies that focus on loss, disruption, and suffering, my research probes exile for its potential to offer liberation and new opportunities in addition to the hardships that forced relocation entailed. My project explores social work as an area in which women exiles had more opportunities and space for agency than in many other fields at a time when numerous highly qualified refugees competed for limited positions in a male-dominated academic and professional landscape.

As the émigré status in quite different personal and professional contexts forced many of the émigrés to reflect on their often shifting and multiple identities, the theoretical and methodological training of this specific group equipped them to engage with this issue of identity, while their activist ideologies motivated them to verbalize these considerations. This specific constellation, therefore, renders them a promising group to study systematically their self-identification as Europeans, as European-Americans, or as Americans. It also allows insights into the ways in which they forged a fresh perception of Europe as they established themselves in and adapted to the United States, which ties my project to the overall goals of the GHI’s Transatlantic Perspectives project.