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Helena Znaniecka Lopata: Remarks to the ASA Section on the History of Sociology

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Mary Jo Deegan

The death of Helena Znaniecka Lopata represents a significant loss to the History of Sociology section because she was a good friend and colleague. Because of her direct family tie to the early years of sociology, especially at the University of Chicago, her passing also signals the end of an important era in the discipline. I knew Helena for over 30 years, and I was asked to reflect briefly on her life and career at our section reception in Atlanta. For those members not at the reception, this is what I said.

Helena Lopata was a friend to many of us in the History of Sociology section. She passionately loved and hated sociology, and these strong emotions were tied to the complex career of her father, Florian Znaniecki; her uncertain place in Polish and American society; her roles as a daughter, wife, housewife, and intellectual; and her ambivalence to Chicago sociology.

I met Helena in 1971, and we had a long and complicated relationship. As a feminist, she loved my work. As a loyal yet confused Chicago alumna, she hated my work. But her relationship to the History of Sociology section and to the Harriet Martineau Sociological Society was strong, positive, and brimming with curiosity. I recall her enjoyment of the long

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drive from Chicago to Mackinac Island in 1997, and her delight in finding good food, welcoming friends, and congenial ideas at the end of her journey.

She joined many of us in Bielefeld (Germany), Amsterdam (The Netherlands), and Torun (Poland) as we presented our work to the ISA. At these international conferences she told stories about her father, his important work, and his significant role as the founder of Polish sociology.

We miss her tonight but we can remember her best by celebrating the rich heritage she left to us and other sociologists.