ALEXANDER ADLER (1901-2001)*

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Alexandra Adler was born in Vienna, Austria on September 24, 1901, the second of four children born to Alfred Adler -- the founder of individual psychology -- and his Russian wife, Raissa Timofeyevna Epstein, who was a daughter of a Jewish merchant. Alexandra's brother Kurt was born in 1905 and her sister Cornelia in 1909. Alexandra was baptized on October 17, 1904 with her father and her older sister Valentine (b. 1898) in the Protestant Church of the Dorotheergasse, although it is unclear what Alfred's "conversion" really meant: one biographer claims Alfred rejected Judaism because it was a religion for only one ethnic group and he wanted to "share a common deity with the universal faith of man" (Bottome, 1939, p. 65). However, Kurt Adler insisted in 1995 that "we are all atheists," and Alexandra's niece Margot also described her aunt as an atheist.1

Raissa Epstein Adler, a radical socialist, influenced her husband's views on women and served as a feminist model for her daughters and son, having come to Zurich to study zoology, biology, and microscopy because women were not allowed to study at the Russian universities. Alfred provided both humor and a gift for music, and he played four-handed piano with Alexandra. One of the family's adventures included a 1914 vacation in Russia shortly after the outbreak of World War I: Raissa Adler and her children were caught in Russia and released only after she convinced the Czar that she had been forced to marry Alfred. Alfred's war-time duties separated him from the family a great deal, and the entire family suffered the typical deprivations of post-war Vienna. Alexandra no doubt also witnessed some of the strong conflicts between Alfred and Raissa: Alfred came from the working class, Raissa from the intelligentsia; he devoted his energy to the promotion of individual psychology and education, she devoted hers to radical politics; during the war, their sympathies went to their home countries, which were at war with each other.

Following in her father's footsteps, Alexandra received her medical degree in 1926 from the University of Vienna, then specialized in psychiatry, completing her internship and residency at the University of Vienna Neuropsychiatric Hospital where she later directed the neurological department for women. She was one of the first women to practice neurology both in her native Austria and later in America. In 1934 she was in charge of a child guidance center in Vienna until it was closed by the fascist Austrian Chancellor Dollfuss. Alexandra's 1935 move to America appears to have been multiply determined. According to Ellenberger (1970), Alfred Adler had already foreseen the potential consequences of the Nazi regime, and sought to ensure the future of individual psychology by bringing it to the United States. He started by founding the *Journal of Individual Psychology,* which first appeared in 1935. Alfred settled in the United States in the early 1930s, and when he was thought to be dying Raissa and Alexandra came from Vienna to nurse him. After his recovery, they stayed in America. Kurt Adler reports that the family emigrated because his mother was arrested in 1935 for her work with the "Red Help," a communist aid organization, and Alfred Adler had to promise to take his wife out of Austria. Whatever the reasons for the move, when they arrived in the fall of 1935 Alexandra was immediately offered a position as a neurology instructor at the Harvard Medical School. Because

no women were given regular faculty posts, she was added to the research staff with automatically renewable annual appointments. She served there and at Massachusetts General Hospital through 1944. She was a visiting professor of psychiatry at Duke University in 1944, and had a private practice in North Carolina until 1946, when she joined New York University College of Medicine's department of psychiatry, where she became a full professor in 1969. She was a member of the staff at Gracie Square Hospital and at Bellevue Hospital, and worked for 20 years with female offenders at the New York City Department of Corrections, eventually publishing her observations on 1,000 patients (Adler, 1955).

As a psychotherapist, Alexandra was one of the leading systematizers and interpreters of her father's work, which she expounded first in the *Zeitschrift für Individual-Psychologie* with a 1929 article on "the technique of giving advice in child training" and a 1935 article "concerning the border zone between neurosis and psychosis." She provided a systematic overview in *Guiding Human Misfits* (Adler, 1938), a book printed in both the United States and England, with a second edition in 1948, reprint editions in the 1970s and 1980s, and a German edition in 1990. She further clarified the tenets of individual psychology in book chapters (e.g., Adler, 1947a, 1959), booklets (Adler, 1973), and various dictionaries and encyclopedias (e.g., Adler, 1947b), emphasizing the concepts of organ inferiority, psychic compensation, the neurotic's fictitious goal or life style, and the influence of family position or birth order. She also wrote numerous articles for the *(American) Journal of Individual Psychology*, focusing on Adlerian practices for the treatment of schizophrenia, neuroses, and personality disorders; the use of modern drug treatments in psychotherapy in the 1950s; the concepts of compensation and over-compensation; the practice of group therapy; and the emergence of existentialist and religious psychotherapies in the 1960s. After her father's death in 1937, Alexandra edited the 1937 volume of the *Journal of Individual Psychology* and served as the president of the International Association of Individual Psychology. In 1948 she became medical director of the newly founded Alfred Adler Mental Hygiene Clinic in Manhattan, and became actively involved with the new Alfred Adler Institute. Later she served as the president of the American Society of Adlerian Psychology.

Adler was one of the first to provide detailed accounts of what is now known as *post-traumatic stress disorder* in 500+ survivors of the famous Coconut Grove nightclub fire that occurred in Boston on November 28, 1942, claiming 492 lives. While Erich Lindemann (1944) worked with the families of victims to develop a theory of grieving and the concept of "grief work," Adler (1943) studied survivors and found that they experienced unresolved grief with personality changes involving guilt, rage, demoralization, and diminished *elan vital*. Adler found that a year after the disaster 50% of the survivors still experienced sleep disturbances, increased nervousness and anxiety, guilt over survival, and fears related to the fire. Adler (1944, 1950) also reported at length on the disintegration and restoration of vision in one of the fire survivors who suffered from visual agnosia, most likely due to a lesion of the brain caused by carbon monoxide fumes. The 22-year-old patient added part by part until she recognized a whole; often she recognized parts and guessed the nature of the whole. In essence, she recognized objects "by tracing the contours, by adding the parts and making conclusions from all she had perceived" (quoted in Arieti, 1974, p. 282). Adler's work contributed to demonstrating that this patient's inability to perceive wholes was not due to a defective visual field. Adler and others argued that "in certain pathological conditions wholes cannot be perceived, only parts. A tendency exists,

however, to reconstruct wholes, at times inappropriate ones, only loosely related to the original" (quoted in Arieti, 1974, p. 282). Arieti (1974) gave Adler's studies a central place in his argument regarding perception in schizophrenics, who apparently manifest "an automatic fragmentation of perceptual wholes followed by an instantaneous reintegration according to primary process, rather than secondary process [or] principles of cognition" (p. 281).

Adler also contributed to the understanding of the neurological basis of multiple sclerosis. Adler and the Harvard neurosurgeon Tracy Jackson Putnam (Putnam & Adler, 1937) conducted a post-mortem study of the brain of a woman diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, demonstrating that cerebral plaques characteristically spread in a rather odd, specific relationship to large epiventricular veins and bizarrely altered the affluents of these veins. Illustrations from this article are routinely reproduced in the medical literature on multiple sclerosis.

In 1959, Alexandra married Halfdan Gregersen, a former dean and professor of romance languages at Williams College. Gregersen died in 1980. Adler died January 1, 2001, in the New York University hospital where she had worked, of various complications of aging. Her Jewish friends honored her life by observing shloshim. Prior to her death she was honored with the 1977 *Goldenes Ehrenzeichen der Stadt Wien* (a gold decoration from the city of Vienna) and she was included as a case study in a book on *Jewish Women in New York Exile* (Hartenstein, 1999).

Note

In addition to the references that follow, I relied on a "meditation on death" delivered in January 2001 by National Public Radio correspondent Margot Adler who was responsible for the end-of-life decisions prior to Alexandra's death, and on the following internet sources visited January 8, 2003: an interview with Kurt Adler (http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/hstein/kurt-90.htm); F. Alfons Schelling's website on multiple sclerosis (http://www.multiple-sclerosis-abc.org/evo/msmanu/844.3A1D141718604); obituaries of

Alexandra Adler in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* (both at http://www.alfredadler.edu/news.htm)and the *Harvard Gazette* (http://www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/2001/01.18/08-adler.html); and a posting in the PNAI-OR-RABBI Digest 1698 (at http://shamash.org/listarchives/aleph-pnai-or/log0102).

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