

Alfred Adler

Alfred Adler was born in Vienna Austria in 1870 and died in the United States in 1937. He was the second son in a working class family of seven children. His father became financially successful as a grain merchant. When Alfred was a young boy and he developed rickets which is a vitamin deficiency disease that stunted his growth and caused his legs to be weak and crooked. He was unable to walk until he was four years old. He also had weak vision which was also likely the result of poor nutrition. Alfred Adler had pneumonia at age five and almost died. He remembered hearing a doctor telling his parents "Your boy is lost." Adler was run over twice and had a fear of dying which persisted through much of his childhood.

Adler had an older brother who was taller, better looking, better in school and more athletic than Alfred. He was very jealous of his older brother and particularly his brother's success in sports. Being unable to participate in sports he read instead and gained a sense of imagination and mastery from his knowledge that he was unable to gain in sports or in his school work. Alfred's mother was a gloomy, self-sacrificing woman who enjoyed playing a martyr role and liked his older brother better than him. Alfred's father was a cheerful man who doted on Alfred. Adler was so bad at his school work that one of his teachers advised the parents to apprentice him to a shoemaker instead of wasting time and money educating him. Eventually Adler improved as a student and became one of the best students in his class by the time he graduated from high school. He eventually realized his ambition and was admitted to medical college where first specialized in ophthalmology and later switched to general practice and then to psychiatry.

Adler married a rich, Russian immigrant named Raissa Epstein who was an ardent socialist. Adler shared her social views and his first publication was on the pathogenic working conditions of tailors who often worked seventy hour weeks in cramped, ill-lighted and ill ventilated places. He suggested that society should provide medical and psychiatric services to the poor. A concern for the poor remained a central concern for Adler all of his life.

Adler read and wrote a defense of Freud's masterpiece *The Interpretation of Dreams* and consequently was invited by Freud to join the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society in 1902. Adler was a popular member and was elected president of the society in 1910. However by that time the conflict in both style and ideas between Adler and Freud had become evident and he resigned from the society while still its president in 1911. At one point Adler said to Freud "Do you think it gives me such great pleasure to stand always in your shadow?" Freud referred to Adler as a "pygmy" and forbade the members of the society from having any contact with Adler and forbade their wives from having any contact with Adler's wife. Adler and Freud accused each other of plagiarism and never spoke again. Adler founded the Society of Free Psychoanalytic Research to emphasize their independence and rebellion against the dogmatism of Sigmund Freud. They later changed the name to the Society of Individual Psychology when the need for independence paled.

Adler was drafted into the army and served as a physician during the first world war. The experience of the utter horror of a war in which upper class officers sacrificed huge numbers of lower class soldiers in a planned war of attrition confirmed Adler in his socialist ideals.

Adler was asked by the government to open child guidance clinics after the war. He spent much of his career working to improve the educational system and the training of teachers. He opened the first free therapy clinic in the world in Vienna. He was unorthodox in his therapy methods and often met his working class clients in locations comfortable to them such as coffee houses or parks and considered Freud's sumptuous office an upper middle class affectation. He surely

would have felt the same about today's emphasis on orthodox procedures within the community of clinical psychologists.

Adler visited the United States in 1926 and was invited to lecture at Columbia University in 1927 and was appointed a professor at Long Island College in 1932. Understanding the menace of the Nazi's Adler decided to make the United States his permanent home. Adler died of a heart attack while on a lecture tour in Scotland in 1937.

Intellectual Influences

Adler came of age intellectually in the 1890's which was a time of social and intellectual ferment in Europe as well as the United States. It was a time at which the working class was forming unions which were brutally suppressed by the wealthy. Classes were much more clearly defined in Europe than in the United States although the brutal suppression of unions was similar in both places. In Europe there was a tradition of concern by the upper classes for the welfare of the lower classes and so the process of gaining rights for workers was a little less difficult there than in the United States where very little of such a tradition existed. Adler was clearly influenced by Karl Marx's ideas on the clash between social classes although he was not a Marxist.

The 1890's was also a time in which physics was in trouble. It was very clear that the old, Newtonian, view of the world was not working though there was as yet no new synthesis. In Biology the views of Darwin on Natural Selection and particularly the idea of fitness were prevalent and had spawned a social view called "Social Darwinism". The Social Darwinist view suggested that a person's biological fitness was related to their success in society and that people who failed in society should die out so as to improve the human race. Consequently it was deemed by many a good idea for the poor to starve and many attempts to help the poor were stymied by persons of this point of view. Later this view gave rise to the eugenics movement that sought to sterilize people considered inferior and from which many Nazi ideas about racial purity were derived. Darwin himself called Social Darwinism nonsense and noted the cooperative aspect of humans as an evolutionary success. So the themes which Adler derived from the zeitgeist of his adolescence were a failure of orthodoxy, the cooperative nature of human beings in evolution and the repression of one class of people by another.