A Precious Legacy: How the Psychology of Alfred Adler Blossomed in America

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Abstract

When Alfred Adler died suddenly in 1937, there was a real danger that the principles he had created would die with him. In the subsequent years, many of his followers fled Europe to escape the rise of fascism. Many of them came to America, The group that settled in New York City came together to form an dynamic core that, in a relatively brief time, reached out to the community to bring his ideas to bear on some of the pressing problems of the time. This paper explores the way in which the immigrant experience and the vision and spirit of Adler empowered these early Adlerians to create what eventually became the Individual Psychology Association and the Alfred Adler Institute of New York, a tradition that goes forward to the present day.
A Precious Legacy

Picture this! It's 1937. Alfred Adler is on a big European speaking tour at the height of his worldwide popularity. In England he meets Ernst Papanek, a colleague, and urges him to leave Vienna. The Nazis are on the rise and Papanek and his family should immigrate for America as Adler himself is looking forward to doing. He goes on to depart for his next stop, Scotland. But he cannot sleep. For many months he has been trying to find out the whereabouts in the Soviet Union of his favorite daughter Vali (Valentina) but to no avail and after many months of agonizing over the lack of contact of Vali and her husband, and even engaging Albert Einstein to help him, he feels heartsick. After many sleepless nights, which have been affecting his health, he writes to his wife, Raissa, who is awaiting his return to Paris. "I can no longer stand this not knowing! I fear for their lives! I am going to find her and bring them back myself."

The next day, he plans to leave for the Soviet Union but before he can set out, he has a heart attack and dies. The brilliant light of Alfred Adler is extinguished! Raissa and her children are in a state of shock and mourning for their father and husband. One might expect the tour to be over. Instead, his daughter Alexandra, by then a renowned psychiatrist in her own right, comes to the rescue. Using her father's notes, she finishes the tour in his place. (cf Kenner).

In Germany, not yet at war, Adolph Hitler and the Nazis are arming for battle. Soon they will annex Austria. In Vienna, fascism is on the rise. The Adler family continues to prepare for immigration to the U.S. Already, Alexandra is living in Boston, having gotten a position as the first woman psychiatrist at Harvard Medical School and Boston General Hospital (cf Kenner). Soon, Kurt, her brother, will join her. Once there, he goes to medical school to prepare to become a licensed psychiatrist.

The world is in a state of unrest. Many Jews and others in the community of Individual Psychology are preparing to leave or have already left Vienna for America: some for New York; still others to California, others to Chicago. Getting to the U.S. is a challenge. America's isolationist policy create barriers to entering the country, and the State Dept refuses to open its
borders. Nevertheless, many of Adler's followers eventually arrive in America, and one particular group settles in New York City. It is there that they hope to carry on the legacy of Alfred Adler.

All émigrés or refugees who come to a new country have similar needs, dealing with a new language, new mores, and a totally new culture. Emigrating because of persecution and fear creates an additional sense of urgency to recreate what has been lost as soon as possible; to reconnect with others to restore what has been left behind and to find a sense of meaning both individually and as part of a group. All this must be accomplished in the context of the individual struggles of bringing family members to a new country, to find safety and refuge, and to find a sense of home again so far away from their homes of origin.

Those Adlerians who immigrated to America exemplified that. It took a while for them to feel a sense of belonging again since first they faced the urgent problem of making a living. Frequently, they took any jobs they could find for which they had sufficient proficiency in English. Many found a way to create opportunities to be able to use the skills they had brought with them. Often their training, skills and Individual Psychology values gave them a sense of motivation and determination to overcome obstacles and challenges in order to be connected to a new society.

When we put ourselves in their positions, realizing their worries and fears about colleagues and loved ones left behind, and the difficulties of starting over, some in the middle of their lives, of just making a living for themselves to obtain the basics of food, clothing, and shelter, we might wonder at their ability to manage so many stresses. Could it be that the values which drew them to Individual Psychology in Vienna are the very values that helped to make their acculturation more manageable and successful?

Their way was no doubt eased by the extensive skills and abilities they brought with them from Vienna, which eventually helped them find their way into fields in which they could again have a sense of significance and purpose, though often compromises had to made.
Focusing on the Adlerians who came to New York, that process of reconstructing a community is vividly illustrated. We are fortunate in having two excellent resources for understanding how these early Adlerians rebuilt their world. The Alfred Adler Institute of NY has the minutes of each meeting of what became, first, the Association for Individual Psychology, and subsequently, the Alfred Adler Institute, from December 1944 to 1947/48 but there was a gap of the previous years going back to Adler’s untimely and shocking death. These are penciled, handwritten and on-going records and yearly minutes including Courses, Lectures and Workshops and most importantly the planning of the 10th Anniversary of Adler’s Memorial service.

Reading those Minutes with the handwritten fragile and barely legible recordings in an old copybook at which breathing on it might cause it to crumble, we realize its value. The non-stop tremendous outflow of ideas, initiative, group effort, cooperation and support with very goal-oriented planning in those pages is inspiring. But what happened before?

Where can we find that information? It is in an article entitled “The Formative Years Of Adlerian Psychology In The United States - 1937 -1943,” written by Nahum Shoobs, unearthed by Marina Bluvstein and easily located on-line, if you look under Shoobs’ name. Schoobs has stepped up from Vice President to become President of the "Individual Psychology Society of New York” after the sudden death of his predecessor, Dr. Dey in 1939. This is another unexpected loss that demands action, and Shoobs is able to fill it with the encouragement of Alexandra Adler who has come in from Harvard University. In his short but very comprehensive article, he explains that the shock of Adler's sudden death caused a temporary passivity in the forming group of 25, all "professing Adlerians." Alexandra has come to help this group in moving forward. He highlights the names of some of those who go on to be involved in the creation of the New York Association of Individual Psychology from 1944 to 1948.

This group of 25 consists of psychologists, educators and psychiatrists, school psychologists, and school supervisors and others in the field of education. In addition to
Alexandra Adler, who certainly is a carrier of her father's legacy, we hear about the Beechers who are in New York and D.C part-time and establish a Center in Brooklyn in addition to training many groups in Adlerian theory in their home. Danica Deutsch who together with Mrs. Otto Frohenknecht and Sophie Lazersfeld organizes lectures at Carnegie Hall and Hunter College for students and lay people. As Shoobs writes "the original Individual Psychology Society of New York has become incorporated by Mrs. Frohenknecht and has been the locus of Adlerians in New York who were referred to us by Mrs. Raissa Adler. We (she) offered them our hospitality and they helped renew our impetus." The society also becomes an advisory center for many of the Europeans as well as for Americans.

Who is coming to the U.S. at that time? We can surmise that many of them are Jewish, others may be Socialists, intellectuals and others opposed to the Nazi regime, each having to make the decision to stay or to leave. Shoobs does not tell us what sense of welcome and safety they may have felt coming at last to a safe harbor. What kind of advice do they need? What have they had to overcome to arrive here and equally important what might they have they had to leave behind.

Raissa Adler has found them and has brought them to the Individual Psychology Society of New York. We can only wonder at the many unfinished personal stories. What we can understand is that finding a group of colleagues and friends who welcome them at this time of many unknowns must have given them a sense of meaning and purpose and the courage to continue.

We learn from Shoobs' report that by 1942 Mrs. Otto Frohnknecht has been able to move the Individual Psychology Society meeting place from Brooklyn to the Y.W.C.A. as it is more centrally located. And by the 5th Anniversary of Adler's death "heartfelt memorial services were held at our YWCA meeting place in downtown New York City!" In the same year, the original Individual Psychology Society of New York changed its name and was incorporated as the present Individual Psychology Association of New York.
A Precious Legacy

This is a period of great activity by these early Adlerians. We learn that "Interest was so intense that meetings were held monthly in Shoob’s home and elsewhere. Then at their meeting place in downtown Manhattan at the YWCA." At the same time, Dr Fechtinger, who was working three days a week at the LI College Hospital Mental Health Clinic, together with Pastor Allen, conducted a mental health clinic at the Community Church; Alexandra Adler and others offered university courses. Asya Kadis is very involved with ideas to follow up and lectures to give. In addition to his excellent work as president of the Individual Psychology Association, Nahum Shoobs gives four courses a year in Individual Psychology for teachers under the auspices of the Board of Education. At the end of his listing of all the work done at this crucial time, all on a voluntary basis, we realize the incredible commitment that took, and how many unsung heroes and heroines working together and pooling their strengths and abilities this required. As to his query "Has this original Individual Psychology Society of New York been of any value to Adlerian Psychology and the Individual Psychology movement," this is left for the reader to decide.

His own decision is reflected in his continued, committed engagement in the years of the second phase 1946 – 1948, the highpoint of which is Alfred Adler's memorial meeting which is well attended and features H. L. Ansbacher's talk, "Alfred Adler's Place in Psychology Today."

After observing the intensity of activity and commitment of the infant years after Adler's death 1937 -1943, we move to 1944 – 1948. In these a relatively few years, we see a continuation of creative activity and movement forward by some of same individuals, especially spearheaded by the work of Alexandra Adler and supported by Raissa Adler who began as the IPA's chair person. So the two people closest to Adler are also following in his footsteps.

After Adler's sudden death, it was Alexandra who immediately stepped up and carried on. Raissa found, welcomed and brought interested Adlerians to the meetings of the Individual Psychology Society of NY – which has become the incorporated Individual Psychology Association – “who would give the group new impetus.” What a model of keeping the spirit of
Adler alive, bringing in new members to its ranks with their philosophy of Individual Psychology and adding their unique creative ideas and their special strengths and interests.

For example in 1946 - 1947 Danica Deutsch gives a course for professionals in Counseling Technique from her living room at 333 Central Park West; We also have: Alexandra Adler's course at Hunter College “Childhood and Economic Level”; Sophie Lazersfeld's “Problems of Womanhood: Their relation to Growth and Maturity,” as well as a lecture on “Marriage -- Rivalry or Partnership.” Asya Kadis teaches “Projective Techniques for Professionals” using finger painting, drawing and storytelling. Shoobs continues his committed involvement with a series of courses for teachers on "Personality Adjustment of School Children through Individual Work and Group Work." Kurt Adler gives a lecture on “Current Problems of Youth.” These are just some of the many lectures, courses and workshops reflecting individual interests and skills and bringing in opportunities for learning for professional and lay people as well.

There is cross-fertilization of ideas and support. Dreikurs comes from Chicago to give a lecture on “Alfred Adler, Pioneer of Psychosomatic Medicine;” and Lydia Sicher comes from the West Coast to give a workshop for active members and professionals on "Terminological Mischief." Ansbacher comes from Vermont to give "Psychology of Memory." Everyone pulls together from the various regions of the country. In 1944 Dreikurs, with the encouragement of others in New York and Chicago, begins the mimeographed "Individual Psychology News" which ultimately becomes the present, "Journal of Individual Psychology,” of which Lydia Sicher wrote: “(The) need for it is the greater because so many adherents of Adler's school are scattered throughout the world and the 'News' might become their means of still feeling united -- tied together by a common idea.”

She is right that the need to bring people together is great, all the more so in the aftermath of the war. Beside the great geographical dispersion, there are deep feelings of betrayal between those who stayed in Vienna and those who left. Those who immigrated are very suspicious of the motives of those who stayed. And in response, those who stayed find it necessary to prove that
they couldn't carry on their work, either privately as Individual psychologists and certainly not as a group, during the Nazi years. In letters, they express their hurt feelings that some of their lifelong colleagues had doubted their reasons for not deciding to leave. For example, Lydia Sicher has an extensive correspondence with Oskar Spiel until they reconcile their differences and ultimately resume their friendship. Sicher then starts sending care packages to her closest colleagues who need help in the devastation that is Europe after the war. It is a wonderful example of working out deep feelings in a way that reflects their Individual Psychological values of discussing and working together to iron out the severest differences and then being able to re-bond and reconnect. Gradually ties with the Individual Psychology members in other parts of Europe are rekindled as well.

While many of the members of the Individual Psychology Association in 1948 are well known on the East Coast -- for example Alexandra and Kurt Adler, Helene and Ernst Papanek, Danica Deutsch -- others are not, because after the war, they moved to other locations in the US or to Europe. The East Coast group later become leading figures at the Alfred Adler Institute of New York, which grows out of the activities of the IPA.

The second milestone event to honor Adler was held in New York in 1947. The original invitation read:

“The Individual Psychology Association of New York and the Alfred Adler Medical Society of New York cordially invite you to attend a MEMORIAL MEETING observing the Tenth Anniversary of the Death of Alfred Adler.

PROGRAM

PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS OF ALFRED ADLER – FRANK BABBOTT,
M.D. Former President, Long Island College of Medicine

ALFRED ADLER’S PLACE IN PSYCHOLOGY TODAY – H.L. ANSBACHER,
PH.D. Professor of Psychology, University of Vermont
Leading up to this Memorial event had been a great deal of working together and collaborating, reconnecting the Individual Psychology members who had to leave Vienna to find a safe haven elsewhere at a time of great challenges. The title of Clara Kenner's book about that period, “A Heaven Ripped Apart,” captures the mood perfectly. While Alfred Adler had planned to immigrate to New York and had already chosen a place for his office, many of the other Adlerians were forced to do so. Some came to New York, others such as Lydia Sicher, to California, and still others like Rudolf Dreikurs to the Chicago area. In those early years, there was a great deal of cross-fertilization and support for each other. Consequently, this event, the first major one by the IPA in the postwar years, is also a celebration and affirmation of the efforts of Adlerians to rebuild their lost Viennese psychotherapeutic community in the New World.

In 1950, some members of the Individual Psychology Association, founded the the Alfred Adler Institute, the first American organization to offer a complete training program in Adlerian psychology. The training and course work were excellent. Many luminaries came to share their wisdom especially in the earlier days of the Institute’s founding continuing the legacy of Individual Psychology.

The next major milestone was the 100th Anniversary of Adler's birth, held in 1970, hosted by the Alfred Adler Institute. I had been a student at the AAI for less than two years at the time, and felt excited about the official celebration at the Barbizon Hotel. It was a very formal affair with the administrators and faculty members of the Institute present. They included my teachers: Alexandra Adler, Helene Papanek, Danica Deutsch, Leo Gold, Lucia Radl, Eva Wolf, Bob Ellenbogen, Alfred Farau, as well as Ina Block, the Registrar, and Kurt Adler, the Executive Director. I felt excited to be a part of this event because by that time I was already a committed Adlerian. It hadn't taken me very long to feel at home at the Institute as my ideas and Weltanschauung – ‘world view’ -- were very congruent with Alfred Adler's. Not long ago I
found a testimonial speech for this event in a small booklet by ‘Prof. Dr. Alfred Farau of New York. “My Teacher Alfred Adler.” I had learned a lot from this excellent teacher but only in re-reading this small gem, a speech given in the Barbizon Plaza did I realize how perspicacious Adler was and how brilliant and articulate a presenter was Alfred Farau.

Later that year an excellent article appeared as a big spread in the magazine section of the New York Times "Alfred Adler: The man who gave us 'Inferiority Complex,' 'Compensation,' 'Overcompensation,' 'Aggressive Drive,' and ‘Style of Life,’ Alfred Adler: His ideas Are Everywhere!"

His ideas have been and would continue to be everywhere! But often without attribution!

For Adler's 125th Anniversary celebration in 1995, I was on the Board of Trustees and coordinated, orchestrated, and chaired the event with a wonderful committee, two of whom are board members of the AAI-NY of today (Barbara Berger and Marcia Blecker). Working together with them and a small committee of dedicated Adlerians was an inspiring experience. We invited the Austrian Consulate to partner with us and observances were held in the rotunda of the NYU Law School. It was a most festive event, a portion of the space was arranged as a Viennese cafe, showing slides of Adler's life with live piano music from the Vienna of his day. At the same time, we honored Kurt Adler for his 90th birthday. The speakers included Bob Ellenbogen who was our executive director at that time, the Austrian Consul General, Leo Gold, (board and faculty member) Edward Hoffman, author of the then most recent biography of Adler, Bob Powers, an eminent Adlerian who came from the West Coast, Eva Spur, Marion Balla from Canada, Jan Bronson, Gil Bartlett (who followed Bob Ellenbogen as Director), and other Individual Psychology members from Germany and Vienna. Everyone was very excited to see Alexandra Adler in her wheelchair surrounded by many loving students.

During the ensuing years, in addition to training and certifying postgraduate students at the Alfred Adler Institute of New York to become analysts using Adlerian principles in
Individual, Marriage & Family, and Group practices, we have given many presentations at the 92nd St. Y to familiarize lay people with Alfred Adler’s vision and contributions to humanity.

The AAI-NY, in honoring the 150th Anniversary of Adler, upholds the tradition of his outreach work from his presentations all over Europe and in the U.S. which started with the tailors and continued to the last day of his life in Edinburgh, Scotland. We at the AAI-NY are currently engaged in working with the clinical staff of community service organizations to explore, assess needs and develop training programs to meet these needs from an Adlerian perspective, using Adlerian values and practices.

We carry on Adler's work within the community by matching our skills to the organization. Going out to help where the current needs are, we have worked with clinicians helping victims of domestic abuse. Now, we are engaged with another facility in training administrators and through them, direct service staff to deal with stress leading to burnout and turnover using an Adlerian approach.

Looking back to those early days, it seems as if Alfred Adler was with his colleagues and friends in spirit, and all the preparatory work that had been accomplished before the exodus came to fruition at a very challenging time in the history of the organization. It was as if everyone carried their own piece of Individual Psychology in their hearts as they practiced some of the tenets of Adler's philosophy in their work to recreate in the new world much that had its beginnings in the old one.

It's also important to remember that Adlerian psychology is much more than an encouraging way of helping clients, it is a philosophy of life! A manual for living on a daily basis. It was this ingredient that fortified and energized the founders and movers of Adlerian psychology. Any philosophy or psychology is only as good as it is useful and practical in terms of its goals. It's evident that the philosophy of Individual Psychology was not just a philosophy for good times but certainly served its members well in difficult times as well. In fact, the values of Individual Psychology lent themselves extremely well to the challenging times in the U.S. and
elsewhere, not just in the 30's and 40's but also after the War. The encouraging approach of a belief in the ability of individuals to overcome obstacles and to contribute to the well-being of the world is exactly what was needed then and what is still needed now.

Where is Adler today? He might be considered the grandfather/pioneer of: CBT, Positive Psychology, Relational Psychology, Solution Focused Therapy, and Rational Emotive Therapy to name just a few. Adler’s work has inspired Abraham Maslow, Viktor Frankl, Albert Ellis, Carl Rodgers, Rollo May, Erik Fromm and Karen Horney.

Alfred Adler's 150th Anniversary is here and we realize how much work there is to complete within our own borders and world-wide as we continue to carry forward his legacy for today, tomorrow and into the future.