

## Alfred Adler: eminent psychiatrist

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the birth of Alfred Adler, a psychotherapist who is remembered as probably second only to Sigmund Freud in terms of his reputation and influence in the field of psychotherapy.

Adler was born on 7 February 1870 in Rudolfshelm, which was then a village on the outskirts of Vienna but has now long been absorbed into the Austrian metropolis. He was the second of seven children of a Hungarian-born Jewish grain merchant and his wife. As a child, Alfred developed rickets, which prevented him from walking until the age of 4 years. At this age, he caught pneumonia and heard the doctor tell his father that he would not recover. Later, Adler would say that it was at this point that he determined to be a doctor.

Adler attended the University of Vienna, where he studied psychology and philosophy in addition to medicine and qualified in 1895, at the age of 24 years. For the next 2 years, Adler worked at the Vienna General Hospital and Polyclinic, then one of the great teaching centres in Europe.

In 1902, Adler set himself up as a general practitioner in a less affluent part of Vienna near the Prater, a combination of a large amusement park and circus. His patients included circus folk and their families and it was perhaps these people who led him to his later theories of ‘organ inferiorities’ and ‘compensation’.

In 1908, Adler was invited by Sigmund Freud to join an informal discussion group, which met in Freud’s house on Wednesday evenings. Each week, a member of the group would present an article, which would then be discussed. This society was the beginning of the psychoanalytical movement.

In his first year of membership of this group, Adler presented his article entitled ‘The aggressive instinct in life and in neurosis’. Adler was concerned with overcoming the ‘superiority/inferiority’ dynamic, and was one of the first psychotherapists to discard the ‘analytical couch’, on which the patient would lie, the therapist sitting alongside or behind the patient’s head, in favour of two chairs, with patient and therapist facing each other. His method was not limited to treatment of the condition, but extended to prevention by pre-empting future problems. Prevention strategies included encouraging and promoting social interest, belonging to the family and community and eradication of both pampering and neglect – especially corporal punishment, which was strongly forbidden. His clinical treatment method for adults aimed to uncover the hidden purpose of their symptoms.

In 1911, Adler and his supporters disengaged from Freud’s circle of the Viennese Psychoanalytical Society and formed the Society for Individual Psychology. The primary difference between Adler and Freud centred on Adler’s view that the general realm (exteriority) is as important to psychology as the internal realm.

Following Adler’s break from Freud, Adler built up a successful school of psychotherapy, promoting a socially orientated approach. In 1912, Adler became particularly interested in the prevention of neurosis and delinquency in childhood. He began educating teachers with this in mind and organised guidance centres in 30 schools in Vienna. His thesis was that it is the aim chosen in early childhood that decides the character of the individual.

Adler’s efforts were halted by the outbreak of the First World War. During this period, he worked as a military doctor in the Austro-Hungarian army. After the war, returning to his practice in Vienna, he established a number of child guidance clinics, was a frequent lecturer in Europe and in the USA and, in 1927, became Visiting Professor at Columbia University.

In the early 1930s, with the rise of Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany, Adler’s clinics in Austria were closed down because of his Jewish background (although he had, in fact, converted to Christianity). He emigrated to the USA after accepting a professorship at the Long Island College of Medicine in 1932.

In April 1937, Adler arrived in Europe from America and commenced an extensive programme of nearly 50 lectures and clinical demonstrations in Holland, Belgium and

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France before travelling to the UK, where his first public engagement was the delivery of a 5-day course of five lectures on psychopathology at Aberdeen, one on each day. His last lecture, on 27 May, entitled 'The Structure of Neurosis' was given to a crowded and enthusiastic audience. He told a friend that he found the work easy and was delighted by his reception. The following day he collapsed in the street while out walking and died suddenly, aged 67 years.

Autopsy revealed 'degeneration of the heart muscles'. He was cremated in Edinburgh but his ashes were not claimed. In 2007, Adler's ashes were rediscovered in a casket at the crematorium and returned to Vienna for burial.

Truly a remarkable figure in the story of psychiatry.

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