

HOW I CHOSE MY CAREER*
Alfred Adler (1870-1937)

I was born in a house that lay on the very outskirts of Vienna. I was the second child of the family. One of my earliest recollections is of sitting on a bench, bandaged up on account of rickets, with my healthy elder brother sitting opposite me. He could run, jump, and move about quite effortlessly, while for me movement of any sort was a strain and an effort. Everyone went to great pains to help me, and my mother and father did all that was in their power to do. At the time of this recollection I must have been about two years old.

My next recollection is of an incident that took place when I was nearly four years old. My younger brother had been born. I remember him only very slightly, but his death remains firmly fixed in my mind. Before he was born, there can be no doubt but that I was reared and watched with the greatest solicitude on account of my sickness. I am sure that I must have been forced to put up with a great deal less of this attention when my younger brother was born. I have a vague idea that I took this apparent loss of attention on the part of my mother very much to heart. But it did not affect me in regard to my father who was out all day working and to whom I became deeply attached. As I found out later, I wronged my mother in feeling that she deprived me of her affection. Throughout her life she loved all her children with the same degree of warmth and affection.

I did not enjoy staying at home, perhaps because my attitude towards my mother was at fault, but also without doubt because I did my utmost to excel at running, jumping, and rushing around, activities of which my elder brother was constantly making me aware. I was always eager to get outside and was helped in doing this by the fact that almost next door to our home was an open, practically unused plot and a big field. There were practically no vehicles about and when there were they moved so slowly that there was scarcely any chance of our being run over or being involved in any accident. But despite this I was run over twice when I was four or five years old, but without being hurt at all seriously.

The field near our house was the meeting-place of all the local children. Most of the people in this district were quiet and humble, usually poor people who frequently asked me into their homes. Because of my friendliness and liveliness I was well received wherever I went.

My elder brother was the only one with whom I did not get along well and he never took any part in our games. At an early age I became

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a part of a wide social milieu, and in our games both the boys and the girls learned to look upon one another as normal equals.

So, early organic inferiority that I struggled hard to overcome, and an early connection with events beyond the family circle, definitely laid the foundations of my psychic structure and my attitude towards life. As an additional spur there was the urge never to lag behind my elder brother. Those who are familiar with my life-work "Individual Psychology" will clearly see the accord existing between the facts of my childhood and the views I expressed in my studies of Organ Inferiority and in my main work, *The Nervous Character*. The similarity between my experiences and the basic views of Individual Psychology is not without interest, when one considers the time I devoted in later years to:

Inferiority Feeling: as the motivating power of the striving for achievement. Social Feeling: which aims at an ideal of perfection for mankind. We can also see quite clearly in these experiences of my childhood how they established a certain characteristic tendency more or less representative of my position in the family and my desire to move freely - to see all psychic manifestations in terms of movements. But not my childhood experiences in themselves were important but rather the manner in which I judged and assimilated them.

This applies to another incident that occurred when I was three years old. My parents left us two boys for a few days in the care of a governess. When they came back I met them, singing a street-song, the words of which are in my mind to-day, as is the melody to which I sang it. (It is possible that I sang or heard this same song at some later period so that my remembrance and understanding of its significance might spring from that later date.) This song was about a woman who explained that she couldn't eat chicken because she was so hurt by the killing of the animal. At this the singer asks how she can have such a soft heart, when she thinks nothing of throwing anything she can lay her hands on at her husband's head. My father at once decided to dismiss the governess, concluding quite rightly that she had taken me to musical shows in the evenings. In spite of the fact that he was pleased at my singing, he looked at what lay behind it, looked deeper, something I also learned to do. But I, too, saw deeper, in that I realized that I must in the future judge mankind not by their spoken words and sentiments but by their actions. Once the song had put this into my head the idea remained forever and grew stronger and stronger.

My early realization of the fact of death, a fact which I grasped sensibly and wholesomely, not morbidly - not regarding death as an insurmountable menace for a child - was increased when I had pneumonia at the age of five and the doctor, who had suddenly been called in, told my father that there was no point in going to the trouble of looking after me as there was no hope of my living. At once a frightful terror came over me and, a few days later when I was well I decided definitely to become a doctor so that I should have a better defence against the danger of death and weapons to combat it superior to my doctor's.

Shortly afterwards the father of one of my playmates, a lamp-maker, asked me what I was going to be in life. "A doctor," I said. He answered, "Then you should be strung up at once to the nearest lamp-post." This remark made no impression upon me at all; I merely thought, "There's another who's had a bad time at the hands of a doctor. But I shall be a real doctor." Soon after it struck me that this man, a lampmaker, had his trade, rather than me, uppermost in his mind. After that the determination to become a doctor never left me. I never could picture myself taking up any other profession. Even the fascinating lure of art, despite the fact that I had considerable abilities in various forms of music, was not enough to turn me from my chosen path, and I persisted although many complex difficulties lay between me and my goal.

It is these psychical trends, which even in my childhood had assumed form and style-of-life, to which I am indebted also for my insight into psychic manifestations.

To this I must add what the friendly reader has perhaps already guessed from my account: That I decided at an early age to come into close contact with all difficult problems, in order that I might be in better position to solve them.