



DR. FERDINAND BIRNBAUM

## Dr. Ferdinand Birnbaum

On December 6th, 1947, a cerebral hemorrhage destroyed the life of Ferdinand Birnbaum. This senseless stroke ending his existence makes it evident that he is more alive than ever before. As all the "real" ones who live for LIFE's, not for living's sake, for essential, not for existential values, Ferdinand Birnbaum remains to his friends an ever present *compagnon*, their conscience, the measurement for their own doings. The great does not die with the body, nor does the good, nor the true.

I want to talk about Ferdinand Birnbaum, the friend, the man whom I have known for twenty-four years. Eight of these years we were as far apart from one another through the physical distance of two continents at war as now that space and time have lost any meaning for him. Physical distance does not preclude togetherness whether dictated by forces adversary to Life or by death itself.

My words here are a salute to a man whose life has been what, in my mind, the life of a human being ought to be. And it seems ridiculous to me to want to fence it in in the corral of dates and places. One cannot fence wisdom in, nor goodness, nor greatness. And Birnbaum was a sage and a saint if ever someone deserved this name. He was courageous in troubles, kind in his approach to others, understanding, creative, craving for knowledge and always willing to share it, original in his ideas and transforming ethical patterns into the guiding conceptions of every day living.

I still see him before my eyes as if they had seen him only yesterday. The middle-height slender figure, his smiling eyes, the movements of his hands. I still hear him, patiently explaining his ideas, expounding his conceptions, and with a fine sense of humour commenting on the most complex questions. He was a philosopher who knew so much about any other subject that it would be impossible to press him into any one of the known academic pigeonholes. And he was first and above all an Adlerian, totally and basically influenced by Individual Psychology, which had become the guide to his outlook on life, to anything he did, wrote and thought, and which helped him in the years of the horrors of war to keep going in spite of physical hardships and mental torment.

His life was dedicated to making a living experience out of Individual Psychology. It was not, like many a useful tool, a means to prevent social misfits or to cure them. It was what Adler had meant it to be: a way to self-fulfillment and to the development of a full-valued personality.

Birnbaum was modest, almost humble in his approach to the great problems of Life. And yet, the people around him felt the impact of an individual who in himself had reached individuation, wholeness within the whole.

In his letters written after this war-torn world had again allowed communication, one thing became evident as the few months that he was still here moved on: that here was a man who was unbroken by his fate, who was the same upright, honest, tender, courageous individual, with the same courageous optimism as to the eventual triumph of social interest, to the realization of which he devoted his dwindling physical strength. In the disastrous days of the past years, in the just as disastrous circumstances of present times, Birnbaum kept his eyes on the future for which he worked, on the development of social interest in the Adlerian meaning, on the involvement of each and everyone in the direction of a community of men.

I don't know the details of his life during these last years. I know that he suffered psychically and physically. And his letters showed increasingly the "beyondness" that is also expressed in Mozart's *Requiem*. He saw beyond the obvious, listened to the inner voice, felt the pulse of truth. He was on his "way to God" as he had expressed it years ago in a poem: *Your Way*, "Your destiny be your way to God." And so he lived his destiny fully, "through favour and mercy, through thorn and mockery."

One memory is still vivid in my mind—the last time I met him. It was in the days after Austria's annexation by Nazi power, my last day in Vienna. I met him in the street and did not stop to talk to him to bid him good-bye. I was afraid that it might endanger him to be seen talking to a member of the scapegoat race. But our eyes met and smiled at each other and both of us understood that there was nothing that could change the togetherness within ourselves.

And when letters again were crossing the ocean between Europe and America, he wrote me that the last Christmas card I had sent him after my departure from Austria had all these years had a place under his Christmas tree, as a hope for the future and as a symbol of the indestructibility of friendship.

Physical death of a friend cannot break up inner connectedness. It makes the dead more present, their demands more urgent, their values more precious. It becomes the taskmaster spurring to greater effort; it obligates the survivor to fill the breach with his own person, a difficult task made the more so as there are so many graves of friends lining one's way through life. And yet, there is no other solution but the one that Birnbaum indicated in his poem:

"Take heart and say: yes!  
You are here to wax human.  
Keep going with courage and wisdom; keep striving,  
Creativeness alone brings peace of mind."

Thank you, my friend, for what you have taught me.

LYDIA SICHER