

Ferdinand Birnbaum, a Biographical Sketch*

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Dr. Birnbaum was born May 16, 1892, the son of a wood turner who later became a small postal official. The father was a good student who wanted to become a teacher but had to do manual work because his father died very young. Ferdinand, during his grammar school years, wanted to become an engineer. However, his parents did not have the courage to put him through a prolonged education. Therefore, Birnbaum went merely to the secondary public school. There, at less than thirteen years of age, he founded, together with Fingermann, the noted writer, a club called the "*Reformbunde*." They also published a journal. During this time, from the money he got for his meager lunch, he started a library containing works on history, art, hygiene, science, etc.

When the father lost his job, the mother took employment as a maid in the home of a professor. The boy liked to accompany his mother because he found in the reception room a bookcase where he could read what he wanted. At fourteen, after finishing school, it was planned that he should be apprenticed to an electrician. But a friend got him a scholarship to become a teacher. He was disappointed by the mediocrity of his fellow students. For outside studies he attended the *Volkshoime* (adult education colleges, scattered all over the city of Vienna). After graduation in 1911, he taught grammar school until 1914 when he went into military service. During his years of military service he studied mathematics and natural sciences. Before he went into the army he was a member of the International League for Peace and was proud of being the youngest active member of this organization.

At the end of the war he was confined to the hospital with malaria for one year. He studied during this time and took his teacher's examination for secondary schools in German, Biography, History. From then on he studied continually at the University until he finally got his Ph.D. degree in 1937. He was continuously active both in his studies and as a teacher, instructor, lecturer, and writer. His first love was higher mathematics and theoretical physics. He studied Logic with Carnap, Wittgenstein, Weismann, attended classes on Quantum-Theory, Number-Theory, Non-Euclidian Geometry, studied with Schlick, Philosophy of Mathematics and Relativity Theory.

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Out of his desire to live and experience practically his theoretical recognition, he felt drawn to the problems of living, of human beings who have to master theoretical findings. During his many years of study—he took twenty-three semesters at the University of Vienna!—he began to study with Gomperz, Indian and Greek Philosophy; with Eibl, Patristics and Scholastics; with Reininger, History of Modern Philosophy, especially Spinoza, Kant, Fichte, Hegel; with Schlick, Natural Philosophy; with Spann, Social Philosophy; with Meister, Cultural Philosophy. He tried not only to know the systems of all modern thinkers and philosophers but to be able to think with them. Then he began to switch from abstract philosophy to sociology, studied with Baxa, Sauter, and especially with Max Adler, not neglecting thereby further studies in Geology, Geomorphology, Economic Geography, and Folklore.

His final interest was the study of psychology and pedagogy, as he felt painfully his inadequate training in these fields while teaching other teachers. Even in his practical work with children he recognized the inadequacy of the teaching methods, especially the inhibiting influence of a pedagogic philosophy which was dominated at that time by mechanical concepts, recognizing mainly the hereditary and environmental powers affecting the child. Thorough as he was, he started his study of psychology in the biological sphere, took Animal Psychology and Cultural Biology with Camilo Schneider, and also Anthropology and Ethnography and Psychology of the Primitives. At the same time he studied the Science of Art with Strzygowsky, Eisler, Schlosser, and Diez. Such thorough approach to the problems of psychology led him to an intensive study with Karl and Charlotte Buehler and their assistants. By acquainting himself with Experimental Psychology, Gestalt Psychology, Developmental and Social Psychology, he arrived at a total understanding, especially since he read almost the entire pertinent literature, so that there was hardly any psychological work of any significance that he did not know. He was able to read and understand French, English, Latin, Greek, Italian, Swedish, Danish, Turkish, Hebrew, and Sanskrit.

He began his studies of pedagogy with Kammel, taking Experimental Pedagogy and Didactics, Education from the point of Value Theory, turned then again to Meister to study the History and the Theory of Education, working at the same time at the Pedagogical Seminary. He not only knew thoroughly Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Herbert, but also the immense literature of newer publications and discoveries of pedagogic nature of all civilized countries. His friends and pupils were often stunned by his almost artistic ability to quote from authors and lecturers, as his unbelievable memory enabled him to retain every detail and to use it at any given moment. Even more impressive was his ability to comprehend the essence of what he read

and heard and his daring ability to connect various parts of science and knowledge with each other. What a mind!

Even before his academic studies he got acquainted with psychoanalysis. As it was not taught at the University, he participated in a psychoanalytic circle under the leadership of Dr. Fenichel, studied thoroughly the works of Freud and of his important co-workers, as well as later, the works of Jung and others. In 1920 he met Alfred Adler and was immediately deeply impressed with him. Very soon the relationship of teacher-pupil changed into deep friendship. He became one of the most important teachers and contributors in the development of the technique and philosophy of Individual Psychology and tried to integrate Adler's psychology and philosophy into the total psychological science. He wrote innumerable papers, the first one in 1923 on "The Prelogic Thinking and its Ascendence to the Logic from the Point of View of Individual Psychology." He gave many lectures at the Individual Psychology Association of Vienna, at various colleges and study groups; he participated in many congresses all over Europe; he made important contributions to many books, as for instance, a chapter on "Talent" in the *Handbuch der Individual Psychologie*, 1926; a chapter on "Talent and Education" in Alfred Adler's *Heilen und Bilden*, 1928; a chapter on "Technique of Education" in *Technik der Erziehung*, 1928. His own book, *Die Seelischen Gefahren des Kindes* (The Psychological Dangers of the Child), appeared in 1931. His doctor's thesis, *Versuch einer Systematisierung der Erziehungsmittel* (Systematizing the Tools of Education), is a work of three volumes which is now in print. In 1923, Birnbaum was one of the founders of a journal for parents and teachers, *Elternhaus und Schule*, to which he contributed regularly until 1934. This journal was originally only for the parent-teacher organization of the twentieth district, but became, in 1926, the official journal of the PTA of the whole city. In 1929 Dr. Birnbaum was appointed as *Dozent* (Assistant Professor) at the Pedagogic Institute of the City of Vienna, as the successor to Alfred Adler. He maintained this position until 1934 when the democratic system was abolished and many other of Birnbaum's activities were stopped. Birnbaum, together with his friends Oskar Spiel and Scharmer, organized the Experimental School in one of the slum districts in Vienna; by their unbelievable success they attracted wide international attention. Students from all European countries and the United States came to visit and observe. One of his students organized the schools in Turkey in line with Birnbaum's recommendations.

In 1934, after the rise of totalitarian government in Austria, he immediately lost his appointment at the Pedagogical Institute. The Experimental School continued, but no longer as an experimental school, now merely as a regular secondary school. In June 1934 he was offered a teaching

position at the University of Chicago, but he was too sick to leave. As soon as the Germans occupied Vienna, he was first transferred to other schools and then scheduled to be deported to Poland. His sickness and the certificate of several physicians saved him from deportation. However, he was ordered to work as a manual laborer in a munitions factory in 1944 under penalty of jail and fine if he refused. His foreman there, who needed somebody for hard work, sent him home. Shortly afterward he was sent to the hospital for hypertension and stayed there for three months. Even before the end of hostilities and the German defeat, he prepared with Dr. Novotny the later resumption of the Vienna Association for Individual Psychology. In June 1945, still sick, he started to work with Spiel on a new form for evaluating students (*Schuelerbeschreibungsbogen*). The reaction of the teachers was negative, as this form required from them much work and especially psychological insight. Birnbaum held innumerable conferences with teachers and principals until finally the plan was adopted by the Board of Education.

The Viennese Association resumed its work in 1946. Birnbaum opened the first session with the paper printed in this issue. He, Dr. Novotny, and Spiel, started again the *Internationale Zeitschrift für Individual-Psychologie*, which contained in its first issue Birnbaum's paper. He gave another talk at the Association, commemorating the tenth anniversary of Alfred Adler's death. He gave two talks in the Institute for Science and Arts on the "Position of Individual Psychology within the Current Psychological Research," and in June 1947, on "The Psychology of Alfred Adler." He resumed his position at the Pedagogical Institute at the City of Vienna and accepted another position as Professor of Pedagogy at the Woman's Teacher's College in 1946, all that while suffering severely not only from hypertension but from the ensuing generalized neuritis and arthritis.

Birnbaum was, after World War I, very interested in psychoanalysis and participated—as was said before—in psychoanalytic conferences; but already before 1923 he had turned completely to Alfred Adler and became a contributing editor of the *Zeitschrift*. Throughout the years he followed with great and sympathetic interest the development of psychoanalysis until in the last years he participated, now as a leading Adlerian, in discussions with a group of psychoanalysts under Professor Aichhorn, to develop the basis of what he called a "Theory of Convergence." This last undertaking which had its foundations in Birnbaum's inclination for synthesis had its success in bringing the former hostile brothers, Psychoanalysis and Individual Psychology, not to a reconciliation, but to a mutual appreciation and tolerance, at least in their birthplace.

Birnbaum was so modest that very few of his friends knew of his poetic achievements. The first public knowledge of his poetic work was

in November 1947, a few weeks before his death, when Radio Vienna broadcasted a sequence of lyrical poems written in the month of hospitalization, at the depths of personal and national tragedy before the liberation from dictatorship. These poems show his integrity and optimism in looking forward toward cure and salvation. After his partial recuperation in 1946, he, for the first time, offered a volume of poems for publication, which was accepted, although the lack of paper so far has prevented its printing.

In one of his letters he wrote, "I spent my school time in Vienna and my vacations in the country; and so I became what I am today: a more or less accomplished dual of city intellect and country spirit. I am not ungrateful to life that it assigned me for a long time more to science. Through the combination of my daily professional work with scientific studies and research it was possible for me to contribute something useful. But the human part wants its right, too. The country spirit wants to be heard beside the city intellect. It is like a call of the earth to which I must obey. This desire to obey is reflected in my way of work. I hardly can finish something in one attempt. It must grow in me as a tree adds ring after ring. It must become a dusted past before it presses me to touch it again and to find new formulations. Now it seems that much in me is ready to be presented."

And then, after he found himself, after he was free again to work and to write and to teach, after he started the Adlerian work in Vienna again with a new and contagious fervor, death called him suddenly on December 6, 1947. His widow and friends found in his desk a wealth of material he had written. The few letters which the writer received from him in the few months between his new freedom and his death show a depth of vision and wisdom in the clearest form which could not fail to impress deeply and forcibly. His latest books are in print, still. When they and the many papers which his widow and friends prepare for publication are available, Birnbaum will speak to us again with more stimulation and illumination than ever. Then, all of us, not only the few fortunate ones who were close to him and worked with him, will know what we all have lost by his untimely death.

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The *Bulletin* plans to continue the publication of Birnbaum's papers.