

Ferdinand Birnbaum's Contribution to Individual Psychology

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When, after the first war, Gloeckel, with the assistance of many progressive teachers, started to renew the entire school system in Vienna, he found one serious handicap: the alarmingly big number of problem children. The hunger, the economic stress, the lack of parental supervision (fathers at the front, mothers working), the disorganized living conditions (children were sent to Holland, Sweden, etc.), the inflation, in brief all the terrible consequences of a complete political change, were partly responsible for the development of this "wayward youth."

This was the setting when Birnbaum met Adler. Fascinated by his theory and deeply convinced that with adequate guidance the human being *is* able to create his experiences and to develop "on the useful side" by adequate interpretation of his environment, Birnbaum arranged for Adler to start his child guidance center (*Erziehungsberatungsstelle*). It was a teacher's workshop, called *Lehrerarbeitsgemeinschaft*, in which the case was presented by the home-room teacher before an audience of teachers who represented all public schools of the second and twentieth districts of Vienna. Every teacher present was to report in the monthly local meeting of the staff of his own school what he had seen and learned in the child guidance center (EBS). By this arrangement, all teachers of the two districts learned in a short time Adler's principles, and eventually became able to apply them to problem cases in their own classes. Birnbaum made the first arrangements with Frau Marie Reschek, the supervisor of the schools of these districts, who had become an enthusiastic follower of Adler and for many years never missed any session of the EBS. The teachers met every other Friday, once in the *Hauptschule* (Junior High School) of the twentieth district, once in the second district. Birnbaum brought most cases himself and recorded the case histories during the first year. Then he stopped, as *his* part was done. The EBS was established and functioning. He felt he was no longer necessary.

The next most important step, an invaluable contribution to Adler's work, was the Individual Psychological *Versuchsschule* (experimental school) in the twentieth district, where Birnbaum, Spiel, and Scharmer, with official sanction of the authorities, demonstrated successfully how Individual Psychology thoughts and principles can penetrate a whole school, improve significantly the *methods* of teaching, and educate the students to solve their problems in common discussions through collective discussion

groups (*Aussprachegemeinschaft*) and periods reserved for counsel in the classroom (*Klassenberatungsstunden*), stimulating individual endeavor toward self-understanding and improvement.

When Adler left for America he arranged for Birnbaum to become his successor in teaching his classes for teachers at the Teacher's Seminary which was sponsored by the Board of Education. This was Birnbaum's proper place; here he was in his element. He had a brilliant mind; he translated the everyday classroom teaching routine into scientific concepts. He analyzed the elements into which he had broken down the teaching procedures. He put his finger on the possible methodic errors. He developed most carefully—with continuous consideration of Adler's theory—new structures. He encouraged his teacher students to observe carefully what they were doing and saying, and the results of it, to collect successful remarks, "trick phrases." Then each approach was analysed and examined as to the principle on which it "worked." Birnbaum had an analytical mind, and I never ceased to admire how *he* explained to me what *I* was doing.

Birnbaum was the most modest person I have known. He was a very hard worker. All his scientific work he did beside his full schedule as a public school teacher, and this was a very heavy schedule. It was so, even more, as he was always experimenting when teaching. Yet, he never talked about it. He not only preached, he lived Individual Psychology. He was always helpful. His private life was happy through a happy marriage with a fine, understanding woman teacher, Maria B. He had an adopted son, really his orphaned nephew, of whom he was very fond. He had, as I knew him, to struggle financially; but he was so far beyond such worries, due to the profoundness of his interest, that he never even mentioned material matters. He was a *real human being*.