

# PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY IN THE LIFE AND WORK OF ANTAL SZERB: FREUD, ADLER AND A PREVIOUSLY UNKNOWN AUTOGRAPH MANUSCRIPT

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## Abstract

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Antal Szerb was one of the foremost literary scholars and novelists of interwar Hungary. He became interested in Freudian psychology in his adolescence; his views evolved to grant predominance to Adlerian individual psychology. In the 1929-30 academic year, he obtained a state stipend for literary study in England. While there, he was accepted into the London section of the International Association for Individual Psychology (IAIP) on the strength of a letter of introduction from the Hungarian writer and Adlerian psychologist, Oliver Brachfeld. This paper presents a brief review of Szerb's psychological interests and their effect on his scholarly and literary prose; it also presents a newly discovered manuscript page in his hand, tied to Brachfeld's letter of introduction. While Szerb's association with the London IAIP section was brief and perhaps superficial, Adlerian psychology left important traces in his oeuvre.

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**Keywords:** Antal Szerb ▪ Sigmund Freud ▪ Alfred Adler ▪ Ferenc Olivér Brachfeld ▪ individual psychology

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## INTRODUCTION

Antal Szerb (1901-45) is widely respected in Hungary to this day as a literary scholar and widely beloved as a writer of prose fiction. His scholarly works effortlessly bridge the chasm between professional and popular interest; his *History of Hungarian Literature* [*Magyar irodalomtörténet*] (Szerb, 1934a) became one of the greatest – and most unexpected – bestsellers in Hungarian publishing history, and his *History of World Literature* [*A világirodalom története*] (Szerb, 1941) was also widely read by scholars and the general public. Both remain available today. His novels, particularly his début work, *The Pendragon Legend* [*A Pendragon legenda*] (Szerb, 1934b) and his masterpiece, *Journey by Moonlight* [*Utazás holdvilág*] (Szerb, 1937), have never lost their

place in readers' affections. Translations into several languages continue to sell in highly respectable quantities.

Like most of his modernist contemporaries, Szerb was interested in and influenced by the emergence of contemporary psychological theory. Szerb's private and public writings reveal his interest, from his first encounter with the works of Freud in his adolescence through his encounter with the individual psychology of Alfred Adler in his early adulthood. József Havasréti's monumental monograph on Antal Szerb discusses the influence of Freud and Carl Jung on Szerb with great insight (Havasréti, 2013); the present paper sheds new light on the influence of Adler.

The present author's relationship to Antal Szerb springs from his translation of *Journey by Moonlight* (Szerb, 1937/2016). He has subsequently been engaged in scholarly study of literary and other influences on the novel. This led him to investigate Szerb's months spent in London in 1929-30, where Szerb encountered figures who inspired aspects of the novel's characters. In the course of this research, he learned about Szerb's membership in the London branch of the International Association for Individual Psychology (IAIP), informally called the Adler Society. Reference to a letter of introduction enabling his access to the society sparked a search that ultimately yielded not only the original letter of introduction, which was written in German, but also Antal Szerb's own handwritten translation of it into English. The manuscript thus has philological and biographical interest – which is the author's primary competence – but it ties into the relationship between Szerb's work and contemporary thinking in psychology, which may be of interest in cross-disciplinary studies of psychology and literature.

#### SZERB'S EARLY INTEREST IN FREUDIAN PSYCHOLOGY

Antal Szerb became interested in Freudian psychology early in his life, as attested in his diaries. It is no surprise that he found Freud's theories of infantile sexual memory as the source of neuroses persuasive at a time when he himself was undergoing the sexual vicissitudes of adolescence. At the age of seventeen, at a time when he was nearing the end of a brief but intense friendship-cum-love affair with a schoolmate from his all-male Piarist elite high school [*gimnázium*, equivalent to, for example, the French *lycée*], he wrote:

It's an odd thing. I couldn't fall asleep at BT's; at the time, I thought it was because of the sexual aspect, love or what the hell. And I thought that it was love that's able to upset one so much. But now, sexuality plays such an abstracted role: it's been refined out of existence to the point that it plays no role at all. I'll tell you what I was thinking about last night: I thought through in great detail a class [I taught] on first aid to the

new Boy Scout recruits... Well, I needn't say that it would be exceedingly easy to reveal the sexuality in it via Freudianism. (For example, the fact that I thought about how I was going to pollinate my little saplings myself...) (Szerb, 2001, pp. 38-39).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the degree to which Szerb is deluding himself about the degree of sexual attraction he might still have felt for his schoolmate, "BT." What is known is that in 1924, when he finds the woman who completely fulfills him sexually (and who would become his first wife), his diary entry glorying in their physical compatibility reads:

Today... much became expressible and some feeling of limitless liberation seized us... the flood of our kisses and couplings flowed freely, like never before; there was hardness and flawless *Anpacken*<sup>1</sup> in our every movement, and I have never felt a degree of pleasure to compare to this (Since BT) (Szerb, 2001, p. 254).

One hardly needs to call attention to that striking parenthetical qualification. Freudianism in a very different, and ultimately more significant, aspect appears in one of his diary entries as a nineteen-year-old:

The dream of the ghetto.

Back alleys, ancient houses, cramped quarters, courtyard passages, railings, endless hallways – every intelligent Jew recognizes this dream.

It's the atavistic vision of the ghetto. This is the origin of the anxiety: the feeling that overwhelms our dreaming selves at such times – indeed, even while awake, when we seek out such locales with an incomprehensible, tingling craving.

Freudians state that this is a typical and universal dream with its origin in the emergence from the maternal womb.

It's not true. The Freudians were all Jews, and therefore they all knew this dream.

I have made inquiries of many people. The Jews all knew the dream, while I have yet to find a Christian [i.e., gentile] who knows of it (Szerb, 2001, p. 78).

We shall see that this "ghetto dream" recurs as a significant feature in Szerb's prose. He rejects the Freudian explanation, yet the recurrence of this theme can be considered a Freudian thread in his oeuvre, both fictional and nonfictional. It should be noted that Szerb, born Jewish but baptized a Catholic in early childhood, eventually outgrew his ardent Catholicism, while retaining immense respect for what he saw as the essential cultural benefits Catholicism brought to European civilization and art.

Just as Szerb was becoming more deeply involved with his future first wife, a diary entry reviews his relations with his parents in clearly Freudian terms, though skirting explicit mention of, for instance, the Oedipus complex. At the time, he finds his father unbearably irritating:

My father irritates me immeasurably: his depressions, his clumsiness, his superfluous and poorly expressed speech, and in particular, his disorganization and his bits of advice. ... I now see that the conflict between fathers and sons also obtains between us, and most sharply. ... It's interesting that in my childhood, it was my mother who irritated me more, and I got along fine with my father. According to \*<sup>2</sup>, this is so because you get along with a parent only when you've outgrown them. And, after all, you "outgrow" your mother first. I lean toward some Freudian explanation, myself. It reinforces my homosexual tendency and my indifference toward women, which persists to this day (Szerb, 2001, p. 247).

It is not without reason that Freud interested Antal Szerb. Later in life – in an undated entry after he had returned from London, under the influence of Adlerian psychology, in fact – he confided a growing disillusionment with Freudianism to his diary:

Freudianism made life even more complicated; that is, it even made the problems themselves (e.g., is the woman allowed to...) problematic (Szerb, 2001, p. 273).

He never returns to Freud in his diaries. Admittedly, his diaries become ever more intermittent and laconic, eventually consisting of little more than the occasional, often impersonal, aphorism. This makes the evolution of Alfred Adler's influence harder to trace, since Szerb's diaries thin out just as he begins to explore Adlerian psychology, before he embarks on his sabbatical. Nevertheless, evidence for Adlerian influence can be discerned not only in his (often flippant) correspondence but also in his works of scholarship and fiction.

#### ANTAL SZERB AND ADLERIAN PSYCHOLOGY

By 1929, Szerb's scope of interest in psychology had expanded to include other approaches, and that year, his attention apparently centered on the school of Individual Psychology as developed by Alfred Adler (1870–1937). Adler began his career as a member of Freud's Vienna circle; however, he soon demonstrated an independence of thought that rankled his mentor. Eventually, Freud ostracized him from the circle, although he continued to write respectfully about Adler's work.

Whereas Freud explained much in terms of infantile sexuality, Adler also focused on social forces on the maturing individual. He is best known for explicating the concept of inferiority feelings or complexes, and the means by which people compensate for them – or, in pathological cases, overcompensate. Adler's thinking took hold in Hungary, where the German term for a feeling of inferiority, *Minderwertigkeitsgefühl*, practically became an everyday term in

Hungarian conversation among the educated classes.<sup>3</sup> Adler's school was promulgated via the International Association for Individual Psychology (IAIP, no date), of which Adler was President during his lifetime, which operated branches in major world cities, and which still functions today. Adler's concept of inferiority feelings remains prominent in contemporary psychology; for example, the theme of the 27<sup>th</sup> IAIP Congress in 2017 was "Inferiority Feelings: New Manifestations and New Approaches."

Szerb's study of world literature also led him to consider the psychological impact of social forces on individuals and their works. Szerb, passionately devoted to the literature of the early Romantic period, was deeply influenced by the pioneer of Romanticism in France, François-René de Chateaubriand (1768-1848). As Tim Parks observes, Chateaubriand understood "personality as something constructed within a community and tradition," (Parks, 2018), which anticipates Adler's insights into the importance of social environment on personality formation.

#### SZERB IN FRANCE

Antal Szerb, who received his Ph.D. in literature in 1924, did not obtain the university appointment he longed for; rather, he joined the faculty at the István Széchenyi Business Vocational Secondary School [*kereskedelmi szakközépiskola*] on Vas Street in Budapest. Such secondary schools stood one rank below the *gimnázium*, the elite academic high schools. Nevertheless, Szerb was building a reputation as a scholar, and he obtained a Hungarian state postdoctoral stipend to spend the academic year 1929–1930 on sabbatical in London.

The stipend existed ostensibly to fund Szerb's research into the traces of Hungarian influence in English literature – a topic that clearly failed to excite him, as letters to his family and friends bear out (Szerb, 2001). He cast about for other topics, briefly becoming infatuated with the figure of Mary Stuart and planning to write what "will become our century's most beautiful book" about her (Szerb, 2001).<sup>4</sup> This work never materialized, either; during 1929, he compiled his brief *Outline of English Literature* [*Az angol irodalom kis tükré*] (Szerb, 1929), and later literary fruits of his sojourn included *The Pendragon Legend*, set in England and Wales, and aspects of his chef d'oeuvre, *Journey by Moonlight*.

Szerb preceded his London stay by spending the summer and fall of 1929 in Paris, studying at the Bibliothèque Nationale. While there, he met his fellow Hungarian, Oliver Brachfeld (1908–67), who was then studying at the Sorbonne towards his Ph.D. It was Brachfeld who would write the letter of introduction that gained Antal Szerb admission to the London branch of the IAIP. Brachfeld is a significant figure in the history of Adlerian psychology, and it is worth recalling him in more detail.

OLIVER BRACHFELD: WRITER, ADLERIAN PSYCHOLOGIST, AND ANTAL SZERB'S FRIEND

Born Ferenc Olivér Brachfeld (Horváth, 2008) in Budapest and a graduate of its famed Lutheran *gimnázium*, he went to the University of Vienna to study philosophy but also took life-changing courses in psychology from Alfred Adler. He spent two years studying psychology at the Sorbonne in Paris (quite probably overlapping Szerb's stay there) before completing his doctorate in Budapest. He then completed a lecture tour of Spain before becoming a *Dozent* (roughly, assistant professor) at the University of Barcelona. A year later, the Spanish Civil War drove him back to Paris until 1942, when he made a narrow escape to South America, obtaining successive professorships at universities in Venezuela, Colombia, and finally, in Quito, Ecuador, where he passed away. He published extensively as a psychologist, with several works translated into numerous languages, pre-eminent among them his *Inferiority Feelings* (1935, revised and updated in 1950) (Brachfeld, 2014).

Brachfeld also found the time to translate several works of Hungarian, English, French, German and Russian literature into both Spanish and Catalan, as well as writing ten articles, mainly on Catalan and Spanish literature and theatre, in the leading modernist Hungarian literary journal, *Nyugat* [*Occident*] from 1931 to 1937. He also wrote a novel, *Violante de Hungría* [*Violant of Hungary*], in 1942 and a history of his native land, *Historia de Hungría*, in 1957 (Brachfeld).

At the time of Szerb's Paris sojourn in 1929, Brachfeld was Director of the Paris section of the IAIP. It is unknown whether Szerb had known Brachfeld, seven years his junior, in Budapest, or whether they became acquainted in Paris.

To better illuminate his personality, let us note that Oliver Brachfeld seemed to be a sort of social nexus, host and guide for visitors from his homeland, out of his home on rue Cujas in the Latin Quarter. That street name rings a sentimental chord in many Hungarians, who recall it from the opening lines of the poet Miklós Radnóti's (1909–44) beloved 1943 poem, "Paris":

A Boulevard St Michel s a Rue  
Cujas sarkán egy kissé lejt a járda.  
(Radnóti, 1943/2013, p. 110/p.111).

Where Boulevard St. Michel crosses la Rue  
Cujas, the sidewalk slopes a little bit

The poet and his wife, Fanni Gyarmati (1912–2014), spent several weeks in Paris during June and July 1937, where they socialized with Brachfeld frequently. He introduced them to Chinese food and the local branch of PEN International; he accompanied them on day-trips to sites including Chartres; and he even performed palmistry for the couple. In her diary, Fanni characterizes the budding

psychologist: “Oliver talks and talks, most entertainingly—and nonstop” (Radnóti Miklósné Gyarmati F., 1935–1946).

### SZERB AND THE ADLER SOCIETY

Antal Szerb must have become involved with the IAIP during his summer in Paris, because in a letter written from London to the Hungarian schoolteacher Magda Tanay, he writes:

...I’ve stumbled into a most interesting society: with the help of a Parisian letter of introduction, I looked up the local branch of the International Association for Individual Psychology (Adlerian), where they received me with great pleasure... (Szerb, 2001, p. 45).

The London section of the IAIP, informally known as the Adler Society, had been founded in 1927 by the Serbian political activist, theorist of art, social critic, philosopher and pacifist Dimitrije Mitrinović (1887–1953) (Passerini, 1999). Mitrinović must have been a charismatic character with a flair for organization. Among his many other activities, he founded and led the New Europe Group, which advocated for a European Union as a means to maintain the peace after World War I. The nature of Mitrinović’s relationship with Alfred Adler and individual psychology appears to be unexplored territory, as far as the present author can determine.

The author and nature of Szerb’s letter of introduction has remained unknown until the present report. An internet search on the names of both Mitrinović and Szerb points to the New Atlantis Foundation Dimitrije Mitrinović Archive in the Special Collections of the University of Bradford Library in the UK. The archive’s catalog was completed and posted online in late 2015 (Burgham, 2015). Section 4 of the catalog deals with the Adler Society. There, it lists the following item under catalog number NAF 4/3/1/5:

Letter to Dimitrije Mitrinović from Dr Oliver Brachfeld. Date: 29 December 1929. Scope and content: Typescript letter sent from Paris from Brachfeld, attached to a manuscript, unsigned note sent from Paris, both introducing Dr Antal Szerb to Mitrinović. Language of material: English; German (Burgham, 2015, p. 358).

Figure 1 shows the typescript letter by Brachfeld on the letterhead of the Paris section of the IAIP. As a curiosity, one may note the letterhead’s use of the French form of Brachfeld’s given name: Olivier. His signature uses the German (and English) form: Oliver. He apparently dropped his other given name, Ferenc [Francis], after emigrating from Hungary. A literal English rendering of the text is provided in Appendix 1.

Note that in the letter, Brachfeld does not identify himself as “Dr,” in contradiction to its archival description. In fact, he obtained his doctorate – in literature – from the Pázmány Péter University of Budapest (today Eötvös Loránd University) the following year, with a 1930 dissertation entitled “Hungarian References in Ancient Catalan Literature and Catalan Folk Ballads” [*Magyar vonatkozások a régi katalán irodalomban és a katalán népballadában*] (Brachfeld).

Before getting to an English translation of the letter, let us note a few interesting details. First: the headquarters and meeting rooms of the London branch of the Adler Society were located at 55 Gower Street, in the Bloomsbury quarter of London and within a couple of blocks of both the University of London, where Szerb was studying, and the British Library, where he spent most of his time. Second, by late January 1930, Szerb had moved into a university student hotel just a two-minute stroll away, at 111 Gower Street.

Attached to Brachfeld’s letter of introduction in the archive is a handwritten English translation, shown in Figure 2. The text is as follows, save for the header and date.

Dear Dr Mitrinovic,

Please permit me to introduce the bearer of this letter, my friend and colleague, Dr. Antal Szerb.

Dr. Szerb is professor at a grammar school, author of several excellent works,  
(more or less)

and is one of the most meritorious of the younger Hungarian aesthetic generation. He is travelling to London to study there on a grant from the State of Hungary; he wishes to include Individual Psychology in his studies. I shall be most grateful for any support you can give him.

I would like to use this opportunity to send best wishes for the New Year on behalf of our young group to the London group. Yrs etc etc

The author of this report is no expert in handwriting identification, so he cannot state with certainty that the note is in Antal Szerb’s hand, although the assertion seems more than plausible, based on authenticated handwriting samples he has seen. However, two aspects of the note reinforce the hypothesis that Szerb is, indeed, the letter’s translator. The first piece of evidence is circumstantial. Contrary to the archive catalog’s description, the letter was not “sent” from Paris – that is, it had not been posted. The letter explicitly states that Antal Szerb (“the bearer of this letter”) hand-delivered it to Mitrinović – presumably, with the translation attached (although it could have been stapled to the letter later, by someone in the Society’s offices).

The second piece of evidence is embedded in the text of the translation. The German term, “*Mittelschul*” – which is rendered in English today as “secondary



school” – is here rendered “grammar school,” but with the interlinear, parenthetical annotation, “more or less”. Why is this so? The answer, of course, is that Szerb taught not at a Hungarian *gimnázium*, but at a *kereskedelmi szakközépiskola*, which fails to slot neatly into the English secondary education system of the time, being less than a grammar school but more than a trade school.

The wry humor of that “more or less” is typical of Antal Szerb’s writing, and the fact that he could not let a possible exaggeration of his status stand without qualification is characteristic of his ingratiating personal modesty. The looseness of the translation, exchanging highly formal German salutations for laconic English idiom and rephrasing some of the sentences, is also typical of Szerb, the literary translator who was generally willing to sacrifice precision for idiom and atmosphere.

Once Szerb was accepted into the Adler Society, what did he find? In his letter to Magda Tanay, the same one quoted earlier, he writes:

...straightaway I befriended a whole bunch of very odd people—artists, philosophers, their female followers, and primarily *Berufsneurotiker*,<sup>5</sup> whom I’ve always preferred above all others. Already on Saturday night, I participated in their costume ball: I donned the Russian velvet shirt I use as a housecoat, and a female artist of my acquaintance lent me her yellow boots, so I became a most passable little *muzhik*.<sup>6</sup> I was there until three in the morning; a Serbian woman asked my advice as to which of her two gallants she should take as a lover; I drank four glasses of whisky with an Irish woman; and I made friends with a little gymnastics teacher who goes by the enchanting given name of Gwynneth [*sic*]. Isn’t it beautiful! I don’t know whether you’re as strongly under the spell of names as I am. The men, naturally, were a good deal more interesting than even the women, but it’s hard to occupy oneself with the men at a ball. So, in other words, I enjoyed myself immensely and totally forgot that I’m in London; I shed that invisible steel helmet that I always feel on my head. This is Bloomsbury, the English *Quartier Latin*, and I feel *I shall have a damned good time*,<sup>7</sup> as they say. On Friday, I’m moving into a student hotel where many young people live, and I’ll feel better there than here.<sup>8</sup> I’ll await your next dear letter there: University Hotel, 111 Gower Street, London W. C. 1 (Szerb, 2001, pp. 45–46).

His letter betrays a lingering trace of that “indifference to women” which he had mentioned in his diary entry of May 1924 – even though he eagerly and entertainingly tells Ms Tanay about his time spent with newfound female acquaintances. A little later, he wrote to his cousin, János Faludi (Tóbiás, 2015):<sup>9</sup>

I’m doing very well in social matters as well as in other respects: I looked up the local branch of the International Association for Individual Psychology, where they celebrated me eagerly because, given that I speak German and have a PhD, they think I’m a famous philosopher in my homeland. From time to time, I let fall a witticism from the treasury

of Tivi and Mr. Hász,<sup>10</sup> and thus maintain the illusion. I am to give a lecture on pragmatism in two weeks.<sup>11</sup>

I'm with them virtually every evening; within a week I've already been to a costume ball, a party at an artist's studio, and a philosophical seminar. It's an indescribably amusing and mixed group. Many of them are foreigners, especially Russians and Serbs; their leader is also a Serb, a most intelligent and peculiar man.<sup>12</sup> But the majority are English, Scots and Irish – of all sorts of professions. To this point I've already befriended a Scottish major; a socialist member of parliament; Svanholm – with his daughter, a poetess; a Hindi gentleman; and a very sweet little English gymnastics teacher whose given name is Gwynneth (as if I'd invented the name for a character in a Celtic novel) with whom I'm going to have dinner today, if true; and, furthermore, with one or two *Berufsneurotiker* and, naturally, with a great many artists.

The intellectual content of the Society is a unique mixture of psychoanalysis, Russian mania, and Dalcroze (Lenkei, 2009),<sup>13</sup> which is what makes the atmosphere of the Sönza family, Mrs. Páczai<sup>14</sup> or Évi Stricker<sup>15</sup> so attractive. But just imagine how godawful these good Jewish things sound in English! Imagine a gorgeous blond English *goyta*,<sup>16</sup> wife of a Russian artist, who says things like: *I am afraid I am an extrovert*.<sup>17</sup> Utterly grotesque: I think you'd disdain it even more than I.

The English didn't gain their Empire thanks to intelligence, and even the intelligent ones seem like blockheads when measured according to the grand Parisian scale. But the many Slavs or Easterners variegate the tone pleasantly (Szerb, 2001, pp. 46–47)

Writing to his friend, Dionisie Pippidi, he describes his active social life in London, which he senses must come as a surprise:

You must be wondering how I've been able to acquaint myself with so many people. Well, in England even you would become a sociable man. I'm lodging in a students' hotel, but here they've built the lodgings in such a way that everybody spends time in the public spaces. The English smoke their pipes and read newspapers, with hugely vacant expressions. The foreigners converse. Then the English let themselves be drawn into the conversation, too. Furthermore, I also have a club: I'm a member of the International Association for Individual Psychology (Adlerian), and I spend many evenings there. I'm among adults here, and it's most entertaining: mainly because the English never attain the degree of individual development that we continentals term adulthood. God be with you, my friend. Take care to avoid toothaches and Serbian poetesses writing French sonnets (Szerb, 2001, p. 50).

Antal Szerb was famously unmusical, yet one of his friends from the Adler Society was the musician, dancer and eurhythmics teacher Valerie Cooper (1884-1965), who played a significant role not only in the Adler Society but also in Mitrinović's New Europe Group.<sup>18</sup> In a letter to Magda Tanay, Szerb bemoans the difficulty of being linked to musicians:

When I arrived home, there in the hall was a letter awaiting me, in which they're inviting me this evening to the studio of Miss Cooper, where I've often spent time; tonight, there will be a big party in honor of Béla Bartók. It's most uncomfortable that Bartók will likely have given a concert beforehand, at which I shan't be present because I cannot abide concerts. In any event, I'll tell everyone that I'd been there.

The same letter also reveals a growing, nagging sense of isolation amid the polyglot community of the University and Adler Society:

O if you could only see into my heart... to see how alone I am among the fifty nationalities, and how horribly unsatiated. Except that I don't like to talk about such things. Maria Theresa<sup>19</sup> was once asked by a lady-in-waiting what she should do, since she didn't love her husband. "Behave as if you loved him, and with time you'll come to love him," the queen replied. This is what I do with London. *And how do you like London? Oh, marvelously* (Szerb, 2001, p. 51).

Szerb's feeling of social alienation became predominant a few weeks later; writing to Dionisie Pippidi, he describes his return to a monastic lifestyle:

...I'm in no mood for social life. I no longer go to my club [*i.e.*, the Adler Society], nor do I go to pubs where I've drunk vast quantities of bad British beer in the company of young Englishmen more or less worthy of affection (Szerb, 2001, p. 52).

These letters are, aside from the newly discovered page of Figure 2, the only first-hand documentation we have of Antal Szerb's stay in London. His diary contains no entries at all between April 1929, before he left for Paris, and November 1930, when he had long since returned to Budapest. The letters suggest that his main motivation to join the Adler Society was social, and that as he began to feel alienated from English society, so his participation in the Adler Society waned (despite its large proportion of non-English members). It raises the question: did Adler's individual psychology exert a substantive influence on Szerb and his work?

#### FREUD'S AND ADLER'S INFLUENCE ON THE MATURE ANTAL SZERB

Antal Szerb burst onto the Hungarian literary scene in a big way in 1934, which saw the publication of his seminal *History of Hungarian Literature* and his debut novel, *The Pendragon Legend*. Two years later saw a similar spurt of productivity. He wrote another scholarly work, *Weekdays and Wonders* [*Hét-köznapok és csodák*] (Szerb, 1936a), which presented and analyzed post-World War I novels from France, England, the United States, and Germany. He also

took a trip through Italy in the company of his friend, the historian of classical mythology and religion – and later the associate of Carl Jung – Károly [Karl] Kerényi (1897–1973). That trip yielded his philosophical travelogue, *The Third Tower* [*A harmadik torony*] (Szerb, 1936b). Both works would influence his great novel of the following year, *Journey by Moonlight*.

*Weekdays and Wonders* presents the novel as essentially a vehicle of rebellion, where the object of the rebellion is an ossified aspect of the author's own society and national culture. This gives even international literary and aesthetic movements different characters in different nations. Szerb describes vitalism in the novels of D.H. Lawrence (1885–1930) as his battering ram against the gates of British conventionalism and sexual repression. Perhaps surprisingly, he finds Thomas Mann (1875–1955), in his novel *The Magic Mountain* [*Der Zauberberg*] (Mann, 1924), the supreme exponent of vitalism, precisely because Mann – unlike Lawrence, who regarded death as the enemy of life, to be implacably resisted – understood death to be perhaps *the* essential component of life, so that Mann's vitalism is more comprehensive than Lawrence's could ever be. This conclusion is presented via a comparison to Freudian theorizing about the role of the death instinct:

Art is recognition. Thomas Mann, just like Proust, did not learn from the sciences when it came to the important things, but using artistic intuition and mercilessly honest self-inspection, he discovered new territories before the sciences got there. To our own day—and thus, principally in Freud's latest works—psychology seeks the role of the death instincts in the individual and the collective only by feeling its way in the dark. But the entire territory of the soul still remains spine-tinglingly mysterious today. It is likely that we still do not understand Mann's book completely today, because in it we are made aware, for the first time, of such things as are still covered by the veil of our own unconsciousness. In this respect, the prophetic nature and message of *Der Zauberberg* will only reveal itself completely to a future humanity having reached a higher degree of understanding (Szerb, 1936a, pp. 194–95).

Szerb makes the connection to Freud's investigation of the death wish but finds it inadequate compared to the insights of an artist of superior intuitive powers.

Alfred Adler turns up in Szerb's discussion of the other contemporary German author he esteems most highly, Franz Werfel (1890–1945):

He is a purposeful writer: he writes each novel based on a different program, and he introduces a new side of himself in every novel. He has written novels based on Freudian and Adlerian psychological theory: *Nicht der Mörder, der Ermordete ist schuldig* (Werfel, 1920), and *Der Abituriententag* (Werfel, 1928). Both novels find their seed in a memory from youth, since grown hazy but revealed in the adult's deeds. Their true territory comprises those feelings—self-esteem, superiority, inferiority—that, in general,

are grouped around the individual's self-evaluation, which Freud groups together under the name of ego-feelings, and which stand at the center of Adlerian individual psychology's interests (Szerb, 1936a, p. 208).

***The Third Tower*** revives the theme found in the young Szerb's diary: the dangerous attraction of narrow back alleys, his "dream of the ghetto." The theme appears immediately, in the first installment of the travelogue, in its own tiny chapter.

I walk the back alleys of Venice again, with unceasing greediness. These streets are amazingly narrow. There are some where two fat men can't squeeze past each other, and even the wide streets are only just wide enough...

If I were forced to speak in entirely concrete terms, I'd say that I love Italy for its back alleys. The alley is, to me, what the garden was to Goethe's age, and what "nature" was to the Romantics. ... My dreams and nostalgias lead me here: I experienced the greatest ecstasy of my life when I first beheld a small Italian hill town and its back alleys.

I don't know what it is within me. The emotion the alleys produce is so deep that I can't regard it as merely the response of a historically inclined man; it's much more intense and instinctive. I'm familiar with the Freudian explanation and bored with it; it's so plausible that I no longer even believe it (Szerb, 1936c).

The "Freudian explanation" is, of course, the infantile memory of emergence from the womb, which Szerb had considered and dismissed as a nineteen-year-old. The mature Szerb has developed a fine sense of irony and a penchant for antiphrasis to dispense with it: "it's so plausible that I no longer even believe it."

Adlerian feelings of inferiority arose to afflict Szerb personally in Verona, where he was forced by a huge influx of holiday travelers to take an inferior hotel room, where the only window with a view was at floor level, and the door wouldn't stay shut:

My bourgeois and snobbish instincts made use of this tormenting night to torture me. "Only you can wind up taking a room like this, you teacher!" said my bourgeois and snobbish instincts. "A proper man would have left in disgust. Neither your father nor your extended family would have set foot in such a room! Where the window is down below!" I was ashamed of myself. I was intensely ashamed of myself until morning.

It was neither inferiority nor superiority feelings, however, that Szerb experienced most acutely during his travels through Mussolini's Italy. What he experienced was the oppressive effect of a collective, a hive, on a thinking individual. Only when he ascended to the third tower of the city walls of San Marino, beyond the stamina of the other tourists, did he attain an understanding of and release from his sense of oppression:

There, at the foot of the Third Tower, I understood everything: my uneasiness on the trains, in the hotels, in the restaurants, amongst the tourists, everywhere on the entire trip, where I, as a solitary man, had to interact with collectivism, the happy Italian collectivism. I feared for my solitude from them, and from the European future that they symbolized to me. I feared for my solitary happiness in the face of their herd-happiness, because they are the stronger.

This happiness that I feel here at the foot of the Third Tower, I cannot hand over to anyone. Just as I cannot hand myself over to anyone or anything, to any State or any Ideal.

This conclusion seems to be that of a reasonably well-adjusted individual.

***Journey by Moonlight*** begins straightaway with a resurrection of the dream of the ghetto. The opening lines read:

There had been no trouble at all on the train. It began in the back alleys of Venice (Szerb 1937/2016, p. 5).

The protagonist, Mihály, and his bride Erzsi are on their honeymoon. Their very first night in Italy gets off to a bad start when Mihály excuses himself to go in search of a particular wine he's craving. But that's not his actual craving:

Impossibly narrow streets branched into impossibly narrow streets, and wherever they led, every one of these streets became still narrower and darker. If he extended both arms, he could simultaneously touch the opposing rows of buildings, those silent houses with large windows behind which, so he thought, mysteriously intense Italian lives must be slumbering. They were so near that it felt, indeed, like an intrusion to be walking these streets at night.

What was this strange spell and ecstasy that seized him here in the alleyways? Why did he feel like someone who had come home at last? Maybe a child might have dreamt of such things – the child, Mihály, who lived in a detached garden villa but was afraid of open spaces. Perhaps this adolescent wanted to live in such narrow confines that every half a square metre has separate significance, ten paces already mean a border violation, decades pass next to a rickety table and human lifespans in an armchair; but we can't be certain about this.

He meandered along the alleys this way until he realized that dawn was already breaking and he was on the far side of Venice...(Szerb, 1937/2016, p. 7).

Indeed, back alleys and ancient houses would continue to lure Mihály irresistibly elsewhere in Italy, especially in several quarters of Rome (including its ancient ghetto):

Streets and houses had awakened far-reaching presentiments before, but never to the extent that Rome's streets, palaces, ruins and gardens did. Meandering among the immense walls of the Teatro Marcello, or gazing at the way little baroque churches sprout among the antique columns in the Forum, or looking down at the star-shaped Regina Coeli prison from one of the hills, or wandering the alleys in the ghetto, or crossing peculiar courtyards from Santa Maria sopra Minerva to the Pantheon, through whose huge oculus, big as a millwheel, the dark blue summer evening's sky looks down – these are what filled his days (Szerb 1937/2016, p. 151).

The alleys of the seedy Trastevere quarter develop an ominous aspect, as Mihály becomes convinced that someone is following him. And not for the first time: a similar experience in a dark Spoleto alley had terrified him until his imagined pursuer turned out to be perfectly harmless. In Trastevere, however, the situation would be more consequential.

When he reached the bank of the Tiber, he became aware of the sensation that someone was following him. But he suppressed the feeling, convinced that it was just a fleeting delusion. As he wandered through the alleyways of the Trastevere quarter, however, this inner sensation grew continually stronger (Szerb 1937/2016, p. 198).

His Trastevere tracker turns out to be a former classmate, and the encounter sets in motion the decisive train of events in Mihály's odyssey. What, aside from the dissolution of his brand-new marriage, does that journey entail? Nothing less than Mihály's struggle between the desire to rebel against the expectations of his bourgeois milieu and the existential pressure to conform to them – and, as part of that struggle, the conflict between his life instinct and his death wish. It is an echo, somewhat modified, of Szerb's own experience of Italy that the visit to San Marino's third tower raised to his consciousness.

In *Weekdays and Wonders*, Szerb had noted how Thomas Mann's artistic insight led deeper than Freud's still embryonic scientific efforts toward an understanding of the complementary and mutually necessary roles of life and death and their respective drives. In the denouement of *Journey by Moonlight*, it is social pressures, as expressed both in classical mythology and by present-day forces, that determine the nature of Mihály's outcome. This realization of cultural and historical influence on the evolution of the individual's psychology is an essentially Adlerian position (and one with literary roots, for Szerb, in Cha-teaubriand). Mihály's struggle is not (mostly) about inferiority feelings and their compensation, but about the conflicting drives to conform to, or rebel against, social forces.

Mihály's Italian odyssey began as a typical bourgeois honeymoon but became a frantic attempt to escape back into his rebellious adolescence. By journey's end, he appears grudgingly to have accepted his role in bourgeois society, to give

up rebelling via an active retreat to adolescence, allowing it rather to persist as a nostalgic memory. But does he, really? Szerb ends the novel on a note of perfectly judged ambiguity:

He was going home. Once again, he'd attempt what he had failed to do for fifteen years: to conform. Perhaps this time he would succeed. This was his destiny. He'd surrender. The facts were stronger than him. Escape was impossible. They'd always be stronger ...  
 ... He must stay alive. And he too would live: like rats amidst the ruins. But he'd live, nonetheless. And as long as one lives, something might yet happen (Szerb 1937/2016, p. 261).

Szerb frames his novel with classical symmetry: Mihály departs, as he had entered, on a train. The hint of ambiguity in its conclusion that is not quite a resolution makes the novel thoroughly modern. Note also the strong echo of *The Third Tower* in this conclusion: “The facts were stronger than [Mihály],” whereas in the travelogue’s conclusion, Szerb feared for his “solitary happiness in the face of their herd-happiness, because they [the collective] are the stronger.”

## CONCLUSION

Antal Szerb was fascinated by modern psychology from his adolescence on. At a time when he was trying to work out his own sexuality, he found Freudian psychology both plausible and helpful; but even before he had entered his twenties, he glimpsed shortcomings in its attempt to relate most neuroses to issues of infantile sexuality. This is revealed most strikingly in Szerb’s preoccupation with the dream of the ghetto, which begins in his diary, resumes in his philosophical travelogue, and finds its fullest treatment in his fictional masterpiece nearly two decades later; and all in implicit refutation of the dream’s Freudian explication. Both Szerb’s biography and his scholarly and literary oeuvre indicate that his views evolved to accord with Adler’s theories of the importance of social forces on personal development.

The London section of the International Association for Individual Psychology receives no further mention in Szerb’s published correspondence after his letter of March 30, 1930 to Dionisie Pippidi. It may have been merely a passing phase, and it may even have been of more social than intellectual significance to Szerb at the time, but his interest in psychology persisted throughout his life and revealed itself in his writing, both scholarly and creative, as it began under Freud’s influence but developed toward an Adlerian viewpoint. And the Dimitrije Mitrović Archives have bequeathed us a long-lost, newly found memento of Antal Szerb, professor at a grammar school (more or less).



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Figure 1. Oliver Brachfeld's letter of introduction for Antal Szerb.

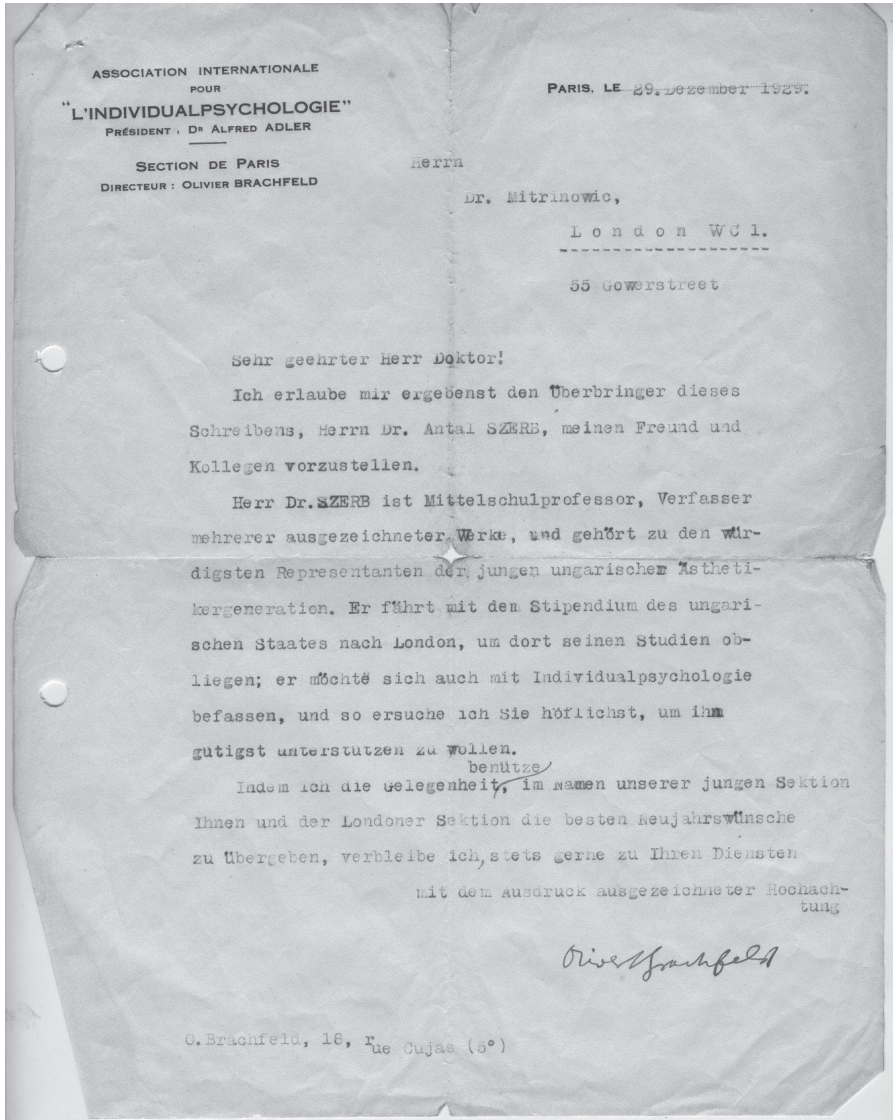


Figure 2. Manuscript translation of the letter of Figure 1, likely in Antal Szerb's hand.

~~Verein für~~ Internat.  
Association Internationale  
pour

Paris, 29th Dec. 1927

Dear Dr Kitzinovic,

Please permit me to present  
the bearer of this letter, Dr  
Antal Szerb, ~~as~~ my friend  
and colleague.

Dr Szerb is professor at a  
grammar school, author of  
(more or less)  
several excellent works and  
is one of the most meritorious of the  
younger Hungarian aesthetic generation.  
He is travelling to London <sup>to study there</sup> on a  
grant from the State of Hungary;  
he ~~is~~ wishes to ~~study~~ <sup>include</sup> Individual Psychology  
in his studies. I shall be most  
grateful for any support you  
can give him.

I would like to use this opportunity  
to send best wishes for the New Year  
on behalf of our young groups to  
the London groups. Trs etc etc

APPENDIX 1

A literal (insofar as possible) English rendering of the German text of Figure 1.

International Association  
for "Individual Psychology"  
President: Dr. Alfred Adler

Paris, 29 December 1929.

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Paris Section  
Director: Olivier [sic] Brachfeld

To Mister

Dr. Mitrinowic [sic]  
London W C 1.  
55 Gowerstreet [sic]

Most esteemed Doctor!

Allow me humbly to introduce the bearer of this letter, my friend and colleague,  
Dr. Antal SZERB.

Dr. SZERB is a secondary school professor, the author of several excellent works,  
and one of the worthiest representatives of the young generation of Hungarian  
aesthetes. He is traveling to London under a scholarship from the Hungarian  
state to study there. He would also like to deal with Individual Psychology, and  
so I politely ask that you support him graciously.

Taking this opportunity on behalf of our young Section to deliver best wishes  
for the New Year to you and the London Section, I remain ever at your service,

expressing my greatest respect,

Oliver Brachfeld

O. Brachfeld, 18, rue Cujas (5<sup>e</sup>)

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Anpacken (German): wrestling holds.
- <sup>2</sup> “\*” denotes an intimate female friend who remains unidentified.
- <sup>3</sup> The author’s personal *observation, as a first-generation American growing up* in the social setting of the Hungarian émigré community in the United States.
- <sup>4</sup> A Romanian classical philologist whom Szerb had met in Paris the preceding summer, and who became one of his closest lifelong friends. Note that Szerb wrote to Pippidi in French; the letters were published in Hungarian translation by Pál Réz, and the present English is based on the Hungarian translation.
- <sup>5</sup> *Berufsneurotiker* (German): professional neurotics.
- <sup>6</sup> *Muzhik* (Russian): a Russian peasant.
- <sup>7</sup> In English, in the original.
- <sup>8</sup> “Here” meaning Szerb’s lodgings at the time of writing, at 44 Tavistock Square, also in Bloomsbury.
- <sup>9</sup> János Faludi (1903-56): published as a poet in the journal *Nyugat* in 1921-22, after World War II he became a Communist Party functionary in the publishing industry during the Stalinist Rákosi era; while attempting to defect following Soviet suppression of the revolution of 1956, he froze to death near the Austrian border.
- <sup>10</sup> *Tivi and Mr. Hász*: nicknames of mutual literary friends Tivadar Aczél (1902-?) and Vilmos Juhász (1899-1967).
- <sup>11</sup> The Mitrinović Archive records many guest lectures at the Adler Society; Szerb’s lecture is not among them, so he may never have presented it.
- <sup>12</sup> That is, Dimitrije Mitrinović.
- <sup>13</sup> According to Lenkei, the reference is to Émile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865-1950), an influential developer of eurhythmic pedagogy.
- <sup>14</sup> According to an anonymous reviewer of this manuscript, “Mrs. Páczai” was most probably Mrs. Pál Pátzay (misspelled in the source), née Lucy Liebermann, who was a psychoanalyst and therapy instructor, as well as a student of the noted eurhythmic artist Olga Szentpál. See Lenkei, *op. cit.*
- <sup>15</sup> Neither Lenkei nor I have been able to trace the references to Svanholm or the Sönza family. Éva (diminutive: Évi) Stricker (1906-2011), the daughter of Laura Polányi, was an artist, avant-garde dancer and scenic designer in Budapest; later, having emigrated to the U.S. and under her married name of Eva Zeisel, she became a famed industrial designer and ceramic artist.
- <sup>16</sup> *Goyta* (Yiddish): a female gentile.
- <sup>17</sup> In English, in the original.

- <sup>18</sup> For more on the New Europe Group, including Valerie Cooper's activities, see Passerini, *Op. cit.*, pp. 126–137. The Mitrinović Archive contains many items by or addressed to Valerie Cooper.
- <sup>19</sup> Maria Theresa of Habsburg (1717–1780), Empress of Austria and Queen of Hungary and Croatia (1740–1780).