

The Life and Times of Franz Alexander: From Budapest to California, by Ilonka Venier Alexander (London: Karnac, 2015; 154 pp); reviewed by Anna Borgos
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Franz Alexander – the focus of this book – was one of the most significant figures in the dissemination of psychoanalysis in the United States. He established the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis in 1932; his manifold activities included research, teaching, writing and clinical work. He strove to integrate psychoanalysis and medicine and is best known for being the founder of psychosomatic medicine, but he also worked in the field of criminology (applying a psychodynamic approach), elaborated new psychoanalytic techniques (short-term therapy) and concepts (like ‘corrective emotional experience’), as well as contributing to psychiatric historiography. He was simultaneously receptive and inventive, traditional and modern, highly successful, even celebrated, and also strongly criticized and partly forgotten.

The genre of this book is rather unusual, being a mixture of (auto)biography, professional history, social history and family history. The author is the granddaughter of the protagonist of the book, a clinical social worker and psychotherapist herself. Her book is not only a history of Alexander the prominent psychoanalyst, but also that of ‘Big Papa’. A main motivation for its (long-cherished) writing is the recent revelation of the grandfather’s, and thus the author’s, Jewish origin. This provides an additional, significant layer of the book, running throughout the chapters from the assimilation of the great-grandfather (philosopher and aesthete Bernard Alexander), through partly externally forced denial and concealment in the next generation, to the shift from the grandchildren’s complete ignorance of their Jewish heritage to the new-found identity and family of the author. This individual and transgenerational family history is a typical collective story, and trauma, of twentieth-century Eastern Europe. The author’s further personal trauma involved separation from her father, including his total ‘elimination’ and a resulting distortion of family memories, as well as the painful and incomprehensible erasure (by Franz Alexander) of her mother’s and thus her own existence in the eyes of the larger family.

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Ilonka Alexander's relationship with her mother was quite bad; her grandfather, Franz Alexander, was her closest and most influential bond and the object of her primary idealization, but this is also coloured by the new discoveries, and the disappointing and confusing experiences, of the last couple of years. Her mother and aunt had a hectic childhood with frequent migrations – in financial safety but in emotionally quite unstable circumstances. Concentrating on his own professional life, the 'private' Alexander, the father and husband, was often physically and emotionally distant from his family, although he cared about his daughters' upbringing and education. As a grandfather he was different, though.

Ilonka Alexander starts by depicting the 'scenery': the socio-political and cultural background of turn-of-the-century Budapest, placing the history of the Alexander family in this context. For the local reader this is a somewhat simplified socio-historical tableau describing the economically and culturally prosperous pre-war city and the post-war trauma and decline. At certain points there is some confusion regarding historical events too, with vague and misleading sentences such as: 'Hungary was about to enter an era of prolonged darkness and political and social upheaval as communism and violence loomed on the horizon' (p. 29), which ignores the fact that the short-lived Commune in 1919 (albeit with both progressive and violent sides) was followed by the much more influential and prolonged right-wing and anti-Semitic 'white terror'. Franz Alexander's father, Bernard Alexander, lost his university appointment and academic membership not 'as communism began to emerge' (p. 31) but actually after the fall of the Soviet Republic and because of his engagement with it.

The author portrays the wealthy, liberal, but also traditional, and intellectually lively atmosphere of the family (living in the building of the imposing New York Palace) and the close spiritual relationship of Franz Alexander to his father (he called him 'Sun King'). The story of the Alexander siblings is fascinating: soprano and singing master Erzsébet married caricaturist Henrik Major (who had a long-term affair with Clara Thompson after their 1923 emigration to the US); art historian Magda married psychologist Géza Révész and emigrated to Amsterdam in 1920; high vacuum technology expert Paul married a Czech wife and emigrated to the UK then to the US; photographer Borbála (Borka) married Artur Rényi and became mother of the world-famous mathematician Alfréd ('Buba') Rényi (she was also the only one to stay in Budapest, dying young, and was erased from family history); actress and writer Lilla married a Dutch then a Russian man and emigrated to the US.

Franz Alexander began his medical studies with a year in Göttingen in 1909, finishing in Budapest. (It is not mentioned in the book, but in high school he was the classmate of the later world-famous chemist, economist and philosopher Michael Polányi.) During World War I he was

a military surgeon. He met his future wife, Anita Venier, in Isonzo where she volunteered for the Red Cross. She was from a strongly Catholic aristocratic family – another step in the assimilationist strategy. The series of emigrations started in 1919 and led from Vienna through Berlin to Chicago and, after a short detour to Boston, to Los Angeles. The motives behind the migrations were political pressure as well as personal–professional mobility – an important part of Alexander’s personality. The author’s recollections here rely in part on Franz Alexander’s own professional autobiography, *The Western Mind in Transition* (Alexander, 1960).

Ilonka Alexander tells the story of the 1920s Berlin period when Eitingon and Abraham established the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute, a *Poliklinik* providing training and free treatment – the first of its kind. Alexander became its first student in 1920. He had a short three-month analysis with Hanns Sachs, a lay analyst – this positive experience was possibly a model for both his later introduction of short therapies and his support of lay analysis. His wife’s artistic career started in Berlin too. Alexander’s first book, *The Psychoanalysis of the Total Personality*, came out in 1927. A moving episode tells how Bernard Alexander’s acceptance of psychoanalysis arrived and was demonstrated before his death, in the same year, in an article comparing Spinoza and Freud. The 1929 financial crisis and the upcoming political change brought an end to the sense of the Berlin Institute as an island of safety.

The 1930 invitation to a congress in the US came at the best time. Alexander was offered a visiting professorship of psychoanalysis at the University of Chicago Medical School. He had a bad reception from the medical school (explained by a mixture of anti-Semitic and anti-psychoanalytic attitudes) and was better received by social scientists. In 1931 he spent a year in Boston as a training analyst of the Boston Psychoanalytic Society.

After a short return to Europe in 1932 – and refusing Freud’s invitation to stay in Vienna (though they remained in close contact) – Alexander went back to Chicago. In 1932 he established the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis, modelled after the Berlin Institute. The nearly 25-year-long period which followed was the time of major innovations: short analysis, works on criminal personality, the concept of corrective emotional experience and psychosomatic medicine. He gained significant academic acceptance, was appointed Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Illinois, and also became part of Chicago’s social elite. On the other hand, he was strongly criticized by ‘purist’ Freudians, which led to his eventual departure (followed by a conservative turn in the institute in the 1950–60s, when his name ceased to be mentioned).

In 1955 came the next and final move to Los Angeles where a group of immigrant analysts had already been working (including Otto Fenichel,

Ernst Simmel and Frances Deri). In 1950 the Los Angeles Institute had split over the long-standing debate on lay analysts leading to the creation of the Southern California Psychoanalytic Society and Institute in the same year, which opposed lay analysis (but supported short-term therapies and believed in 'corrective emotional experience'). While most European analysts joined the Los Angeles Institute, Alexander connected to the other one. He started working in Mount Sinai Hospital, establishing a department of psychiatry and a programme in psychotherapy and psychosomatic medicine.

In the last years of his life Alexander was appointed to a Chair in Psychoanalysis at the University of Southern California School of Medicine. His university professorship was the fulfilment of his long-standing dream of carving a place for psychoanalysis in the academic sphere. Unfortunately, this period was very short, terminated by Alexander's sudden death in 1964. The author cites a set of more or less platitudinous obituaries, which is a moving gesture but not necessarily the best way to realistically estimate Alexander's reception.

Bouncing between professional and personal history, the book is on the whole an informative and readable work. It demonstrates the virtues and problems of hybrid genres, though: while it can be interesting for a wider audience, some parts are trivial for the professional, others for the local (Hungarian) reader. So it is hard to determine who its 'implied' or ideal reader is. People engaged or interested in the history of psychoanalysis and social history can definitely benefit from it. Its style is here and there a bit commonplace and redundant. The author adopts a storytelling tone; she did not mean to write a regular professional book; it contains sporadic references (mostly to oral communications), although at the end of the book a bibliography is provided (and a more comprehensive one is attached to the series editor, Brett Kahr's foreword). However, it is precisely this personal element, the switching between subjective and objective perspectives, that makes her book a unique work.

Reference

Alexander, F. (1960) *The Western Mind in Transition: An Eyewitness Story*. New York: Random House.