

Martina Hexel

Heinz Kohut

Connected with the name Heinz Kohut are mostly his publications which include his life work 'Self Psychology'. Most of all his books about 'Narcissism' 1971, 'The Healing of the Self' 1977, and the posthumously published work 'How does Analysis Cure?' 1984, are well known. Today in America Self Psychology is a widespread method of psychoanalytical treatment. Every year there are conferences on 'The Psychology of the Self'. The first European symposium on Self Psychology took place on Schloss Langenrain on the Lake Constance in 1983.

Heinz Kohut was born 3rd May 1913 in Vienna. He was an only child. His mother Else was born Lampl, a practising catholic. His father Felix Kohut was a businessman in the paper industry. He was of Jewish origin, but an agnostic. During World War I the father served in the Austro-Hungarian k.u.k. Monarchy at the Russian front, sometimes visited there by Heinz and his mother. Up to his fifth year of age Heinz grew up with his mother and her parents outside Vienna. Heinz Kohut had a strong relationship to his grandfather, but he died before the end of World War I. Kohut described his childhood as sad and characterised by loneliness, because his parents were often absent in the evening on social obligations.

For the first two years Heinz was taught at home. A private tutor lent him his support until he was 14 years old, not uncommon at the time. He made an unforgettable impression on Heinz, because the tutor took him to the opera, to museums and promoted him intellectually. From 1924 Heinz Kohut attended the grammar school at Gymnasiumstraße 83, where he took his school leaving examination in June 1932. He kept his teachers there always in affectionate memory, which showed when he spoke about his time at school in later years. His schoolfriend Adam Wandruszka described him as a quiet lad with a high interest in literature, who read a lot and took to sports very readily. After his school leaving examination Kohut enrolled at Vienna University to study medicine.

Dieses Kapitel ist ein Nachdruck aus dem Buch: O. Frischenschlager (Hrsg.): Wien, wo sonst! (Wien, 1994, Böhlau-Verlag) mit freundlicher Erlaubnis des Herausgebers.

In 1936 he went to Paris for a year, where he worked as an extern in different infirmaries. His father died the same year. During his medical studies he already began to read Freud's writings and began his psychoanalysis with August Aichhorn. In November 1939 he obtained his doctorate. What Kohut remembered of 4th June 1938, the day Sigmund Freud left Vienna, he named his private myth. This departure remained in Kohut's mind's eye the symbol of loss of everything that was precious to him in his world of the time - he was then 25 years of age. And even though he was Freud's admirer, he had never met him before. It was August Aichhorn who pointed out to him that Freud was leaving Vienna and encouraged him to go to the station.

'It is the remembrance of the one time I saw Freud - the symbol of the father, the incarnate allegory of the effort for mastery of passion and explanation. This moment was a low-point in my life and at the same time by its buoyancy a peak - the source of the most important obligations of my future. It was in 1938 when I went to the station, on a sunny day in Vienna, because I had learned that Freud was to leave the city. I cannot tell you the story because there is no story. I was a young man and the world I knew, the culture where I had grown up, had collapsed - there was nothing I could adhere to. And still, there was this symbolic incident: An old man left the city of my parents, and I, a young man, raised my hat to this man as the train carried him away.'

For Kohut Freud's departure was more than only tragically being left alone, symbolically it meant for him the loss of the purpose in life, the loss of what was worth living for. 'I was passionately involved in the German and Austrian culture. It was the peak of humanity in my eyes; Goethe and the great German philosophers, the writers and the composers. I often stayed in the coffee house until 3 a.m. and discussed Rilke. That was life for me. And suddenly this filth came and declared, they were the true Germans. Suddenly I was a stranger and did not belong anymore. It was the end of the world, the end of an era. I felt as it was the end of my life and also of my cultural existence.'

Ten months after the 'Anschluss' (of Austria, d.Ü.) in January 1939 Kohut also left Vienna for England with the aim of emigrating to America. But since he was not equipped with a passport and a visa as required for the immigration into the United States, he had to stay in England and was billeted in a compound for German and Austrian refugees. Because he was a physician, he could draw from some privileges and the Britons made an effort to make his stay as agreeable as possible. Half a year later he was allowed to go London to his uncle Hans Lampl.

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Carmel, California
23rd September 1971

Dear friend Wandruszka,

Thank you so much for your caring letter, so rich in substance, that followed me during my holidays to California. It is extraordinarily nice of you, to write in so much detail. And since your letter reached me I regret so much more that we were not able to meet again in Vienna. I was in Europe rather often during the earlier years, but I have only been in Vienna once previous to my visit last summer. That was in September 1957 to visit relatives, who still lived in Vienna at the time; some still do. Yes, you are right: Who of us would have dreamt 40 years ago what life would do with us. The worst for me probably were the months (10!) spent in Vienna after the 'Anschluss' until I finally could escape to England in January 1935. There I stayed in a compound for German and Austrian refugees for around 6 months. But then I was granted permission to go to my uncle in London, who did reasonably well for himself. In February 1940 we went in a British convoy to Canada and further on to Boston. From there by bus to Chicago (with only the money I still had), where a friend lived (Loewenberg). The first time in the USA was adventurous - I did not have a penny to my name and spoke only little English. But quickly I found employment in a small infirmary and was lucky to gain a position as an assistant physician at the university. There I stayed for almost 10 years, doing my state examination, then the specialist examination in neurology (1946) and psychiatry (1949). At the same time I qualified as a psychoanalyst and completed my course at the Chicago Institute in 1950. But later I left the full time professorship at the Chicago University, yet I am still active after all these years as a teacher (with the rank of professor), just one lecture a week. Certainly I have published a lot (much of it has been published afterwards in German translation). Now my book 'The Analysis of the Self' will soon appear, published by Suhrkamp Verlag (i.e. the German translation). Presses Universitaires de France will publish it in French. The printed article was only a fraction of a lengthy lecture I gave at the FU in Berlin in October 1970. It might be of interest to you that I did the eulogy for Mitscherlich in St. Paul's Church in Frankfurt, when he received the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade. (It could be seen then in the European Cinema-News//Vorschlag d.Ü. // nicht: European TV-Cinema) Sometime I will send you some of my speeches - in the same way as we compared our homework at school.

Will we meet again sometime? Maybe I will come to Vienna in spring 1972, I am asked to give the Freud lecture. I will certainly let you know beforehand.

You gave me plenty of information about former school colleagues, so I would like to return the favour. But alas I do not know much. Asriel is a physician in Kentucky, married, entirely 'American middle class'. Loewenberg named himself for as long as one can remember Levarie. He is a professor for musicology at Brooklyn College, has written many books in his scientific discipline, some (maybe two) even accessible for lay people, too. He is married and has a beautiful daughter who is a cellist.

Now about my own private life. I have been married to an American of German origin in 1948. (But her family has lived for more than 100 years in America.) We have a son (Thomas August) 21 years of age. He is in his last year of college (Oberlin, Ohio). He wants to become an historian!!! - Main interest: modern European history (German, Russia) with special consideration of psychological aspects in the history of people. My wife is 'social worker' with special training in psychiatry. Since our son started college (even somewhat earlier) she took up her profession again part-time and now she works half-day with young students in the student health department of Chicago University. My wife and I share interests, not only professionally, but also the joy of music and visual arts. We travel a lot (we like Italy especially), we love the mountains (sometimes rent a farmhouse in the Rhätikon not far from the Vorarlberg border) and have had a wonderful marriage for the last 25 years.

So, this has to be enough for today. I hope so much that we will have the opportunity to meet again.

Cordial greetings to your family (although we have not met, as one used to say), to school colleagues, who should still remember me and very special good wishes and much love to you.

*Your old friend
Heinz Kohut*

P.S. I have no picture of our school leaving day. Cannot even remember if one was taken. But lots have vanished in the haste of 'departure'.

P.P.S. I have still got beautiful letters from after the war from old teachers, from Weidinger, Hornung (whose brother taught my uncles) and even one from Gattringer.

In February 1940 Kohut received the visa for the United States and was taken by a British convoy first to Canada and on to Boston. He decided to go to Chicago and used his last money for this journey by bus. He reached Chicago, with 25 cents in his pocket and little knowledge of the English language, where he instantly applied for American citizenship, which was given to him five years later. Soon after his arrival he was on the payroll of a small infirmary. The fact that Kurt Eissler and Paul Kramer, who had also been analysed by Aichhorn and lived there, too, may have influenced his decision to go to Chicago.

Kohut's interest in the fragmentation of the self in his theory of narcissism was certainly related to his own biography too. Even in his earliest years he often had experience of loneliness. Having to leave his native country, to which he was strongly linked, made a crucial contribution. Again and again he emphasized in his writings that men are dependent on supportive surroundings their whole life through, which increase the coherency, strength and harmony of the self. The search for one's father is also reflected in his theoretical structures, where he always points out the importance of the father in early childhood development.

'The father, I have built (in my mind's eye, d.Ü.), that inner ally who helps me to maintain my own integrity even in psychologic difficult circumstances, taught me for a long time to turn to reflection, the search for meanings and explanations. And I have learned that the joy of such mental activity often has to compensate for immediate gratifications which are so hard to hold in reasonable boundaries. Increasingly and in the course of a lifetime, with a changing emphasis, these thoughts and reflections became attempts to understand myself, to understand others and recently, also even if tentatively and with great care, to understand men as such, how they feel, react and behave in the arena of history.'

Before Kohut followed his own path in the field of psychoanalysis and turned to Self Psychology he was already an acknowledged psychoanalyst. While he had been concerned with the psychology of the self a considerable time already and found this theory confirmed in his clinical studies, he still held onto the psycho economical theory. Only after the death of Heinz Hartmann, whose successor-designate he was, did he abandon Freud's metapsychology. To the last Kohut was active in the Institute of Psychoanalysis in Chicago and as president of the American Psychoanalytic Association. On the initiative of his friend of many years, Adam Wandruszka, he became a corresponding member of the 'Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften'.

Kohut died in Chicago 8th October 1981 unexpectedly of cardiac failure in his 68th year of age.

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Translated by Ulla Kalberg