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Autor(en): **Walser, Hans H.**

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Adolf Meyer—Student of the Zurich Psychiatric School

Von Hans H. Walser

Adolf Meyer, the outstanding American psychiatrist, was born in Switzerland in 1866. In 1892, at the age of 26, he sailed for the United States. First he became a pathologist at the Illinois Eastern Hospital at Kankakee. Two years later he was appointed pathologist at the Worcester State Hospital (Massachusetts). He became more and more interested in psychiatry. Pursuing his work from 1901 on in New York, he transformed his pathological institute into a psychiatric institute. In 1904 he became professor of psychiatry at the Cornell University Medical College. But the most important period of his life began in 1910, when he was appointed director of the Henry Phipps Psychiatric Clinic of the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. Here he remained until his retirement in 1941. In the last 25 years of his academic life he was the undisputed leader in American psychiatry. He died in Baltimore in 1950.

The characteristic traits of Adolf Meyer's work have often been described. They cannot be repeated here. But, in considering his achievements historically, we are confronted with certain questions:

1. Why did Adolf Meyer move from neuropathology to psychiatry?
2. Why, in doing so, did he *not* adopt the then leading concepts of Emil Kraepelin's German psychiatry?
3. What enabled him to develop valuable psychiatric concepts without previous sufficient psychiatric training?

An attempt to answer these questions can be made by considering the circumstances of his medical training during his youth in Zurich. In his early childhood, Adolf Meyer lived in a little village near Zurich (Niederweningen) where his father was the minister of the Protestant church. He came from a family of farmers and rural craftsmen. Manfred Bleuler has stressed the importance of these origins for his later concepts. Adolf Meyer then lived in close contact with the rural population. He was therefore more inclined to consider each patient as an individual sick person rather than to adopt abstract disease entities. Furthermore his sense of social responsibility was

aroused. Equally important were the teachings at the Medical Faculty of the University of Zurich where Meyer qualified in 1890. Here he met the psychiatrist August Forel. Meyer was so impressed by the personality and the teachings of Forel, that he decided to write his doctoral thesis under Forel's supervision.

August Forel (1848–1931) came from a distinguished family in French speaking Switzerland. He took his degree as a medical doctor at the University of Zurich. Studying with Theodor Meynert in Vienna and with Bernhard Gudden in Munich, he did valuable work in brain anatomy. In the second half of the last century Germany had taken over the leadership in the field of psychiatry. Outstanding psychiatrists believed that the riddle of psychic disorders could be found through a better knowledge of the anatomical structure of the brain. This was the period of “brain psychiatry” («Gehirnpsychiatrie», E.H. Ackerknecht). The second pillar of German psychiatry was the hospital management, and here the therapeutic nihilism prevailed. But the concepts of Forel's psychiatric teachings differed more and more from those valid in Germany and Austria. So, Forel broke with the ideas of therapeutic nihilism by introducing hypnosis as a means for the cure of neurosis. Through his hypnotic experiments he gained a deep insight into the unconscious regions of the human mind, and this even earlier than Sigmund Freud. So, Forel became a forerunner of dynamic psychiatry. He led an active struggle against alcoholism, and stressed the prophylactic point of view, i.e. the prevention of alcohol addiction by total abstinence. His book “The Sexual Question” was an enormous success. He anticipated many points of the mental hygiene movement. He became so engaged in his new psychiatric concepts that he abandoned brain anatomy and finally resigned his academic career as early as 1898, then being only 50 years old. From now on he devoted himself totally to free scientific work and to ethical duties. Adolf Meyer's work of course went far beyond all that he had learned from his masters in Zurich. But, despite his originality, the traces of Forel's teachings can clearly be seen during the development of his thought. For a short survey we can take the four large volumes of Meyer's “Collected Papers” as a guide to demonstrate this point: The *first volume* shows the very large extent of Meyer's neurological and neuroanatomical work. In a paper of 1893 on “Neurological Work at Zurich” he states how much he is indebted to his teachers, mentioning above all Constantin von Monakow and August Forel. There has been much said about Adolf Meyer's psychiatry (*volume two*). And it seems obvious that there is a certain parallelism in the views of

Adolf Meyer and of Eugen Bleuler (1857–1939), as different as the achievements of the two men may be. The two of them had studied with August Forel. So, e. g., Bleuler created the more dynamical concept of “schizophrenia” out of Kraepelin’s “dementia praecox”, while Adolf Meyer preferred “reaction types” to Kraepelin’s more statical terms. In the papers on medical teaching (*volume three*) however Meyer surpassed by far all he could have learned in Europe. The same can be said about mental hygiene (*Volume four*), but here similar tendencies at least could be traced in Swiss (and in German) psychiatry.

As a master, Forel had been Meyer’s example for psychiatric work in its broadest sense. And later on, he became a friend too. It is quite obvious, that the wish, Adolf Meyer had expressed in a letter to August Forel dated 28th December 1893 was fulfilled. In translation from the German it runs as follows:

“I sincerely wish I had followed your courses with more understanding . . . One semester and later some clinical lectures . . . that is all I brought with me to America. I clearly see that this was a good basis, and I hope that in time I shall be allowed to call myself your student.”

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Summary

Adolf Meyer (1866–1950) was the most prominent psychiatrist of his time in the United States. The basis of his knowledge of psychiatry has been laid by the great Swiss psychiatrist August Forel (1848–1931) with whom Meyer had studied in Zurich.

Zusammenfassung

Adolf Meyer (1866–1950), der führende amerikanische Psychiater seiner Epoche, stammte aus der Schweiz. Er war ein Pfarrerssohn von Niederweningen (Zürich). Seine psychiatrische Ausbildung erwarb er bei August Forel in Zürich, bei welchem er doktorierte. In diesem Artikel, einem Vortrag am 7. Weltkongreß für Psychiatrie in Wien 1983, werden die Verdienste von Forel und Meyer um die Psychiatrie ihrer Zeit gewürdigt.

Prof. Dr. med. Hans H. Walser
Zeltweg 7
CH-8032 Zürich