3.2: A Brief Biography of Sigmund Freud, M.D.

Sigismund Schlomo Freud was born on May 6th, 1856, in the small, industrial town of Freiberg in Moravia (today it is known as Pribor in the Czech Republic). Freud never used the name Schlomo, his paternal grandfather’s name, and he shortened his first name while at the University of Vienna. His family life was unusual, and somewhat complicated. His father, Jakob Freud, was 40 years old when he married Freud’s mother, Amalia Nathanson. She was 20 years younger than Jakob Freud, and several years younger than Jakob’s son, Emanuel, from an earlier marriage. One of Freud’s first friends was a nephew who was a year older than Freud!

Jakob Freud was never particularly successful in business. The industrial importance of Freiberg was declining, so the young family left and eventually settled in Vienna, Austria (Jakob’s sons from his first marriage, Emanuel and Philipp, emigrated to England). At this point Jakob and Amalia Freud had two children, Sigmund and his sister Anna (a brother born between them, Julius, died at 7 or 8 months of age). Shortly after arriving in Vienna, however, they had five more children during the years 1860-1866: Rosa, Marie, Adolfine, Pauline, and Alexander. This resulted in continued financial difficulties, which appears to have been painful for the young Freud (Gay, 1998). There were also personal difficulties that made it difficult for Freud to enjoy a close relationship with his father. Jakob Freud once told his son a story about being abused by an Austrian Christian, a man who knocked Jakob Freud’s hat into the muddy street and then ordered the “Jew” to get off the sidewalk. When Freud asked his father how he had responded, his father said he simply stepped off the sidewalk and picked up his hat. Freud was very disappointed by what he apparently perceived as weakness in his father (Gay, 1998). There was also an embarrassing episode involving his father’s brother, Josef. Josef Freud was convicted and sent to jail for trading in counterfeit money. This caused a great deal of concern for Jakob Freud, who might have been involved in the illegal scheme along with his sons, Emanuel and Philipp (Gay, 1998; Jones, 1953).

Still, Jakob Freud did try to be a good father. His children were generally successful, and he remained active and supportive in the lives of his children and grandchildren. The story mentioned above, when Jakob Freud tried to impart some “fatherly” wisdom to his son, may not have had the intended effect, but it demonstrates that he cared about
teaching his son some of life’s lessons. On Freud’s thirty-fifth birthday his father sent his “dear son” a copy of the family’s Philippson Bible (this Bible contains the Old Testament, which is the only testament in the Jewish faith), which Freud had often studied as a young child (Gay, 1998; Jones, 1953; Nicholi, 2002). The inscription written by Jakob Freud in the Bible ended with a description of the gift “as a token of love from your old father” (see Jones, 1953; Nicholi, 2002). When Jakob Freud died, Freud wrote to a friend that his father’s death had profoundly affected him, leaving him feeling uprooted. He described the death of one’s father as “the most important event, the most poignant loss, in a man’s life” (see Nicholi, 2002). The death of his father appears to have stimulated Freud’s self-analysis, the writing of The Interpretation of Dreams (Freud, 1900/1995) and the formulation of his theory of the Oedipus complex (Nicholi, 2002). Jakob Freud was also remembered quite fondly by his grandson Martin, the eldest son of Freud (M. Freud, 1983).

Freud’s relationship with his mother was also complex. Amalia Freud is described as young (which she was, compared to Jakob), attractive, and energetic. She always took great pride in her son, and was a strong and positive influence throughout his life. Later in life he wrote that “A man who has been the indisputable favorite of his mother keeps for life the feeling of a conqueror, that confidence of success that often induces real success” (see Jones, 1953). During Freud’s self-analysis, around the year 1897, he uncovered profound memories from his earliest years. Sometime between the ages of 2 ½ and 4 years old, Freud accidentally saw his mother naked. This event awakened a powerful desire in Freud. Shortly after recovering this memory, he remembered the deep jealousy he had felt when his brother Julius was born, shortly before Freud was 2 years old. So jealous was Freud, that he remembered welcoming the death of his infant brother (see Gay, 1998; Jones, 1953). Each of these incidents certainly had an impact of Freud’s theory of the Oedipus complex. Surprisingly, however, during the first 2 ½ years of Freud’s life he actually spent very little time with his mother, since he was being raised by a nursemaid. Keep in mind that his mother became pregnant again, then his brother Julius became ill and died, and then his mother became pregnant again, finally giving birth to his sister Anna, all by the time Freud was 2 ½ years old.

Freud’s nursemaid has been described as an old and ugly woman, but Freud loved her and dreamed about her later in life (see Gay, 1998; Jones, 1953; Nicholi, 2002). The nursemaid was a devout Roman Catholic, and she regularly took Freud to church with her. Despite his young age (less than 2 ½ years old), Freud would come home from church and preach to his family about God. Even though his family was Jewish, they did not practice their faith with much devotion, and it must have been quite interesting to listen to the sermons of their little boy. Why then, as we will see, did Freud come to reject religion and spirituality? It turns out that this relationship ended abruptly. Freud’s half brother Philipp accused the nursemaid of petty theft, and she was sent to prison. At this time Freud’s mother was confined with his recently born sister, so Freud was suddenly denied access to both his mother and his nursemaid. It has been suggested that because he was abandoned so suddenly, and at such a critical time (Freud was 2 ½ years old at this time), by his Roman Catholic nursemaid, that his anger and disappointment led to his ultimate rejection of the spiritual worldview and his antagonism toward the Catholic church (Gay, 1998; Jones, 1953; Nicholi, 2002).

**Freud’s Early Career in Basic Research (Pre-Psychiatry)**

Freud was very successful in school from an early age. At the Gymnasium, which is the term for a preparatory school in countries such as Germany and Austria, he was first in his class for 7 years. This led to a variety of special privileges, including seldom being required to take any examinations (Freud, 1952). It also led to privileges at home. According to his sister Anna, Freud always had his own room to study in, no matter how difficult the family’s financial situation (Gay,
1998). As he prepared for college, Freud initially wanted to study law. However, after learning about Darwin’s theory of evolution and hearing Goethe’s essay on nature, he decided to become a medical student (Freud, 1952).

In 1873, Freud entered the University of Vienna. Initially he suffered greatly from prejudice and discrimination against him because he was Jewish. Believing that he was expected to feel inferior and alien because he was Jewish, he nonetheless persevered. As a result of these experiences, later in life he was prepared for dealing with the considerable resistance that occurred in response to his theories (Freud, 1952). His first research project in medical school came at the suggestion of Professor Carl Claus. Prof. Claus was interested in a report that the Polish scientist Simone de Syrski had identified structures that might represent the testes of the male eel. This was a question that had been studied for centuries without success. After dissecting some 400 eels, Freud appeared to have confirmed Syrski’s findings. The research was not definitive, however, and Freud found little satisfaction in the publication of his work (Gay, 1998; Jones, 1953). He was, however, about to find satisfaction, in the physiological laboratory of Ernst Brucke.

Brucke was a renowned physiologist, anatomist, histologist, and more. Freud had great respect for his newfound mentor, referring to him as Master Brucke and describing him as “the greatest authority I ever met.” In Brucke’s laboratory Freud “found rest and full satisfaction at last” (Gay, 1998; Jones, 1953). The research he conducted under Brucke’s guidance was impressive. Brucke put Freud to work studying the anatomy of the spinal cord and its neurons. At that time, the structure of neurons was not understood. Freud modified the histological staining methods being used in Brucke’s laboratory, and eventually developed a gold chloride method of staining nervous system tissue around the year 1880 (Jones, 1953). This was one of the first uses of a heavy metal stain on nervous system tissue. The silver nitrate method of staining neurons had been developed by Camillo Golgi a few years earlier, in 1873, but it was not until 1888 that Santiago Ramon y Cajal first reported on the structure of the brain using Golgi’s technique. For this research, Golgi and Ramon y Cajal shared the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1906 (Finger, 1994). If Freud had not left basic research for a career in medicine, he might have ended up famous just the same.

Freud did eventually leave the university, however, and began a career in medicine at the General Hospital in Vienna. Part of the reason for leaving and beginning his medical career was that he had met Martha Bernays, the woman who would become his wife, and he needed to begin earning enough money to support a wife and family. First, however, he needed to establish himself in his career. At the General Hospital he met and worked with the eminent Theodor Meynert, who, among other accomplishments, was the first to correctly suggest that Parkinson’s disease resulted from abnormal functioning of the basal ganglia (Finger, 1994). This stimulated Freud’s continued interest in anatomy and brain function, and in 1891 Freud published a book entitled On Aphasia. You may remember from introductory psychology that the two primary speech centers in the human brain are Broca’s area (speech production) and Wernicke’s area (speech reception), and that damage to these areas results in Broca’s aphasia or Wernicke’s aphasia. Carl Wernicke had also been a student of Meynert, but Freud’s book on aphasia was especially critical of Wernicke (Finger, 1994). This put both men firmly in the middle of the debate on structuralism vs. functionalism as it pertains to the activities of the human brain (see Finger, 1994). Although Meynert suggested that Freud should devote himself to studying the anatomy of the brain, Freud had had enough of this sort of work in Brucke’s laboratory. Instead, Freud’s interest turned toward the diseases of the brain (Freud, 1952). With the help of a recommendation by Brucke, Freud was awarded a Traveling Fellowship, which allowed him to afford a trip to Paris to study at the prestigious Salpetriere. He intended to study under Jean-Martin Charcot, one of the world’s foremost neurologists of his day, and the man who named Parkinson’s disease after the physician James Parkinson (Finger, 1994).

Freud was largely ignored when he arrived at the Salpetriere, since he was just one of a crowd of foreign visitors. As
luck would have it, one day he heard Charcot expressing regret that Charcot had not heard from his German translator in some time, and he wished someone could be found to translate his latest lectures into German. Freud wrote to Charcot, offered to do the job, and was accepted. From that point on he became a member of Charcot’s inner circle, and was active in all aspects of the work at the clinic (Freud, 1952). One of the main topics Freud studied with Charcot was the use of hypnosis in the study of hysteria. Freud discussed the earliest conceptions of his psychodynamic theory with Charcot. Charcot was supportive and agreed with Freud’s fledgling ideas, but Charcot’s interests remained firmly in the field of neurology, not in psychology or psychiatry (Freud, 1952).

Upon returning to Vienna and settling down as a practicing physician, Freud was finally able to marry Martha in 1886 (he was 30 years old, and she was 25). They had six children: Matilde, Martin, Oliver, Ernst, Sophie, and Anna. According to his son Martin, Freud was a loving and generous father (M. Freud, 1983). He was also very supportive of his children. As Martin became disillusioned with the study of law, he turned to his father for advice:

…It had always been his hope that one of his sons would become a lawyer. Thus he watched, and I think guided, my first faltering steps in my law studies with the greatest concern.

He agreed that my first studies were dull and boring, but he assured me that one day I would find a teacher with an impressive personality, perhaps a man of genius, and that I would become deeply interested and carried away by his lectures…

Father always expressed himself with great clarity and, when advising me at so critical a time in my life, he added to his normal clarity of expression a natural tenderness and concern… (M. Freud, 1983; pg. 161)

Martin did become a lawyer and, after Martin served as an officer in the Austrian army during World War I, his father helped him to establish his practice.

Finally, any discussion of Freud’s early research career would not be complete without mentioning what Ernest Jones, Freud’s official biographer, called “the cocaine episode” (Jones, 1953). In his last autobiographical book (Freud, 1952; originally published in 1925 in a collection of medical autobiographies) he makes only passing reference to studying cocaine, reporting another near miss in his research career. He had begun studying cocaine while he was away from Vienna, and an opportunity arose to return home for vacation and an opportunity to see his fiancé Martha. As he prepared to leave, he suggested to a couple of colleagues that they examine the effectiveness of cocaine as an anesthetic for use in eye diseases. While Freud was visiting Martha, one of his colleagues, Carl Koller, confirmed the local anesthetic properties of cocaine and became famous for it. Afterward, Freud noted that “it was the fault of my fiancé that I was not already famous at that early age,” but he insists that “I bore my fiancé no grudge for her interruption of my work” (Freud, 1952). Something quite fascinating is that Freud’s interest in cocaine was initially based on the possibility that its euphoric properties might be used to alleviate the problems associated with withdrawal from morphine. A close and long-time friend, Ernst von Fleischl-Marxow had become addicted to morphine because of the extreme pain of an infection, and Freud hoped that cocaine would help. Freud himself began using cocaine to boost his own mood. He sent some to Martha with the recommendation that she try it (there is no evidence that she ever did), and he even began sending cocaine to friends, colleagues, and his sisters. Eventually, however, Freud realized that cocaine was not helping his friend; indeed von Fleischl-Marxow became addicted to cocaine instead of morphine. Freud eventually deeply regretted his research on cocaine, especially since the one positive result of that research had garnered fame for a colleague while Freud was on vacation (Gay, 1998; Jones, 1953).
Freud’s Psychiatric Career

Many people believe that psychoanalysis was developed by Freud during the early years of his medical practice in Vienna. Freud, however, would disagree. He insisted that psychoanalysis was begun by the Viennese physician Josef Breuer (Freud, 1914/1995), a close friend and mentor of Freud. The basis of psychoanalysis lay in a patient that Breuer had seen as early as 1880, and had treated with hypnosis. This case, and the use of hypnosis as part of the “cathartic procedure” developed by Breuer, was the original inspiration for Freud’s interest in hypnosis and his trip to Paris to study the technique with Charcot. When Freud returned to Vienna, he asked Breuer to tell him all of the details of this case, which involved a young woman. This famous patient, known as Anna O., was described by Breuer in the book coauthored by the two men (Freud & Breuer, 1895/2004). As Freud used Breuer’s techniques with his own patients, however, he began to realize that something was lacking. Hypnosis did little to reveal the underlying causes of the hysteria that their patients were experiencing. Since Freud was every bit the scientist, he needed to know more about why he was able to help some patients. He eventually replaced hypnosis with his own techniques of free association (early 1890s) and, eventually, dream analysis (essentially done in 1896, but not published until 1900). This was the point at which psychoanalysis, in the sense that we think of it today, was born (Freud, 1914/1995, 1952).

As Freud’s ideas diverged from those of Breuer, the two parted ways. Freud then developed the aspect of psychodynamic theory that led to his near total rejection by the German and Austrian medical communities: the primacy of childhood sexuality. This theory was so difficult for others to accept that Freud spent nearly 10 years working on psychoanalysis in isolation. However, Freud claims that the concept of a sexual etiology for the neuroses was not really his idea, it had been superficially suggested by Breuer, Charcot, and a highly respected Viennese gynecologist named Chrobak (Freud, 1914/1995). During those years of isolation Freud began to define other major aspects of psychodynamic theory, such as: resistance, repression, conflict, and unconscious impulses.

Around 1902, Freud began to find support for his theories among a select group of physicians. Shortly thereafter a group of psychiatrists in Zurich, Switzerland, which included Eugen Bleuler (the man credited with identifying both schizophrenia and autism as we define them today) and his assistant Carl Jung, began “taking a lively interest in psychoanalysis” (Freud, 1952). In 1909 Freud and Jung were invited to America, where they were warmly received, and psychoanalysis became well-established in America and Canada. By the 1910s it was reported that psychoanalysis was being championed in Austria, Switzerland, the United States, Canada, England, India, Chile, Australasia (the region), France, Italy, Sweden, Russia, Hungary, Holland, and Norway (where the first textbook on psychiatry that included psychoanalysis was written) (Freud, 1914/1995). Germany proved quite resistant, although the renowned Karl Abraham practiced psychoanalysis in Berlin.

Perhaps it was inevitable that all of this success should eventually lead to conflict. Two major groups, whose members differed significantly in their views on psychodynamic theory and psychoanalysis, broke away from the main psychoanalytic groups. They were led by Alfred Adler (see Chapter 4) and Carl Jung (Chapter 3). In his first autobiography, Freud is not exactly kind to these two men. He goes to great length to dismiss Adler’s theories as mistaken, and he flatly rejects Jung’s perspective:

Of the two movements under consideration here, Adler’s is undoubtedly the more important. Though radically false, it is, nevertheless, characterized by consistency and coherence, and it is still founded on the theory of the instincts. On the other hand, Jung’s modification has slackened the connection between the phenomena and the instinctive-life; besides as its critics (Abraham, Firenze, and Jones) have already pointed out, it is so unintelligible, muddled and confused, that
… it is impossible to know how one can arrive at a correct understanding of it… (Freud, 1914/1995; pg. 940).

It is curious to speculate whether Freud’s isolation for so many years may have led to the profound possessiveness he later expressed regarding psychoanalysis as his technique, and his alone, in The History of the Psychoanalytic Movement:

…For psychoanalysis is my creation; for ten years I was the only one occupied with it, and all the annoyance which this new subject caused among my contemporaries has been hurled upon my head in the form of criticism. Even today, when I am no longer the only psychoanalyst, I feel myself justified in assuming that nobody knows better than I what psychoanalysis is… (Freud, 1914/1995; pg. 901)

Freud’s Final Years

Freud’s final years were somewhat tumultuous. The Nazis had taken over Germany and Austria, and they were rapidly preparing for World War II. Being Jewish, Freud’s life was in danger; indeed, at least three of his sisters were murdered in the concentration camps, most likely in Auschwitz (M. Freud, 1983). Freud, however, had influential friends, including European royalty and wealthy individuals with ties to the British and American governments. The American secretary of state, Cordell Hull, took word of the situation to President Franklin Roosevelt, and following Roosevelt’s instructions, Hull had the American ambassador to Germany intervene on Freud’s behalf (Gay, 1998; Jones, 1957). Freud also received substantial help and comfort from Marie Bonaparte, H.R.H. the Princess George of Greece, including the payment of a ransom in order to secure permission for Freud to leave Austria (M. Freud, 1983). Finally, in May 1938, Freud, his wife Martha, and their daughter Anna left together for England, along with Freud’s dog. They were all received quite warmly in London, except for the dog. She was quarantined for six months (M. Freud, 1983).

Freud, however, had already been ill for many years, and was suffering a great deal of pain due to cancer. He was also in his eighties. Nonetheless, Freud continued to work, and he completed An Outline of Psychoanalysis (1938/1949) and Moses and Monotheism (1939/1967) while living in London. But the end was near, and the cancer was progressing rapidly. In September 1939, Freud asked his doctor, Max Schur, to remember an agreement the two had made not to prolong Freud’s life unnecessarily. Freud asked Schur to discuss his condition with Anna Freud. Anna Freud at first resisted, but eventually submitted to the inevitable, and Schur administered a series of morphine injections that proved fatal. Sigmund Freud died on September 23, 1939 (Gay, 1998; Jones, 1957).

In the funeral oration delivered by Ernest Jones, Jones remembered that three qualities had particularly impressed him upon first meeting Freud: first, “his nobility of character;” second, “his direct and instinctive love of truth;” and third, “his courage and inflexible determination.” Jones also said that a “great spirit has passed from the world…for Freud so inspired us with his personality, his character and his ideas that we can never truly part from him…” (Jones, 1957). Prior to the escape from Austria, Freud had expressed a sincere desire to “die in freedom.” He loved England, where he was able to accomplish that goal. In reference to England and the funeral ceremony, Jones said:

He died surrounded by every loving care, in a land that had shown him more courtesy, more esteem and more honor than his own or any other land, a land which I think he himself esteemed beyond all others. (pg. 247; Jones, 1957).
Sigmund Freud was one of the greatest minds of modern times. He was the first person to provide a comprehensive theory of personality and personality development, and he did so in what he considered to be a logical and scientific manner. Since he was first, however, how can we place him amongst the other great psychologists? As I contemplated the importance of Freud to the history of psychology, I looked back at my own graduate school training. The textbook assigned for my graduate history of psychology course was *Theories and Systems of Psychology* by Robert Lundin (1979). In the chapter titles, Lundin mentions only three psychologists by name: Wilhelm Wundt, the founder of experimental psychology; William James, America’s preeminent psychologist; and Sigmund Freud. Since Freud’s name is also mentioned in the title of the chapter devoted to his followers, Freud actually has two chapters devoted to his influence. I also looked at *A History of Psychological Theories* by Ross Stagner (1988), who was an esteemed faculty member in the psychology department at Wayne State University in Detroit and author of one of the first personality textbooks (Stagner, 1937). Stagner mentions six individuals in the titles of his twenty-two chapters, and once again Freud is among them. In addition, the well-known psychological historian Ludy Benjamin includes a chapter on the correspondence between Freud and Jung in *A History of Psychology in Letters* (1993). There are actually numerous books published on the correspondence between Freud and a variety of other people, and thousands of those letters have been published. These are just a few examples of how deeply Freud is recognized as a major figure in the history of psychology.

Another testament to the legacy of Freud is how enduring some of the issues he addressed have proven to be. In the early years of the twenty-first century there has been a growing conflict between religion and society. In the United States the concept of separation of church and state has been challenged perhaps most aggressively in our schools, with issues such as praying at school sporting events and the teaching of creationism in science classes. In other countries, religious fundamentalists often stand in opposition to the establishment of democratic governments. Increasing globalization does not seem to be bringing people together, but rather bringing people into competition and conflict. Freud used the knowledge he had learned in his studies on psychoanalysis to address such major societal issues. He presented his ideas in books such as *The Future of an Illusion* (1927/1961) and *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930/1961), and he hoped that by advancing our knowledge of the human psyche we could help to continue the development of the human species and civilization. The recognition that problems like these still plague humanity suggests that we have a long way to go. But brilliant men like Sigmund Freud have helped to provide us with a basis for moving forward.