



LEO KANNER (1894-1981) PAPERS ARCHIVES FINDING AID

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BIOGRAPHY

Leo Kanner was born on June 13, 1894, in Klekotoz, Austria. The young Kanner proved to be an extraordinary student and began to write poetry when he was only ten. He graduated from the Sophienlyceum in Berlin in 1913 and entered the university. After a period of service in the Austrian army in World War I, he resumed his studies at the University of Berlin, completing the Staatsexamen in 1919 and receiving his M.D. degree in 1921. He became a part-time assistant at the Charity Hospital and started a private practice with specialized interest in the new field of cardiology. Inflation in Germany in the 1920's was so rapid that one had to spend money as soon as one received it; by the following morning, it was worth little more than the paper it was printed on. An American physician in Berlin for post-graduate study persuaded the young internist to consider opportunities in the United States, and in 1924 Dr. Kanner took a position as Assistant Physician at the State Hospital in Yankton, South Dakota (where a Leo Kanner Memorial Building was dedicated in 1980).

At Yankton, he set about perfecting his English by doing the New York Times crossword puzzles, at which he became spectacularly proficient. His first published paper was on general paralysis among North American Indians, a contribution to the continuing debate about the antiquity of syphilis in North America; the rarity of the disease among Native Americans supported the contention that selection had contributed to host resistance. Two years later, he published a second paper on blood pressure response to adrenalin in functional psychosis and a monograph on the folklore of the teeth, a work based on dissertations he had supervised for dental students in Berlin.

He applied to the Henry Phipps Psychiatric Clinic and was interviewed by Adolf Meyer at the APA meeting in Minneapolis. In 1930, at the end of his three-year fellowship, Kanner's gifts were well known at Hopkins. When Edwards A. Park, the professor of pediatrics, and Adolf Meyer decided to inaugurate the first child psychiatry service within a pediatric hospital (the Harriet Lane Home) in the United States, they secured support from the Macy and Rockefeller Foundations and chose Kanner to start the enterprise in a small pediatric examining room equipped with a wash stand and table for an office. With no more training in pediatrics or child psychiatry than he had received as a medical

student, Kanner taught himself pediatric psychiatry—and went on to teach generations of students what he learned.

He published the first American textbook to bear the title "Child Psychiatry." In separate prefaces to the first edition, Adolf Meyer wrote, "it will serve as a safe starting point and an incentive to proceed from what is well tried to the ever new ground to be conquered" and Edwards Parks added, "the book is full of wisdom and common sense, no other book is quite like it. It brings to the pediatrician much needed aid."

Dr. Kanner is best known for his delineation in 1943 of the syndrome he described as "autistic disturbances of affective contact" but later designated as early infantile autism (and known to many as "Kanner's syndrome"). Less well known but deserving of as much remembrance is Leo Kanner's concern for mentally retarded children at a time when most psychiatrists excluded them from the purview of their clinics. Presentation of a paper on this subject resulted in a double row of inch-high headlines across the Baltimore Sun on April 8, 1938, and led to community action to end a foul practice generated by the collusion of attorneys and judges over the valiant opposition of the superintendent of the Training School. The practice had been to obtain the release of patients through the use of Habeas Corpus writs to secure unpaid domestic servants for the affluent by enterprising attorneys who charged substantial fees. Others were claimed by relatives to manipulate estates, and others were claimed by parents asserting their long neglected "natural rights." Clinical skill joined to social conscience generated a study with immediate benefit for the lives of a despised minority. Four years later, in a rejoinder to a prominent neurologist who advocated euthanasia for the feeble-minded, Kanner wrote, "Let us try to recall one single instance in the history of mankind when a feeble-minded individual or group of individuals was responsible for the retardation or persecution of humanness and science. Those who caused Galileo to be jailed were not feeble-minded. They who instituted the Inquisition were not mental defectives. The great man-made catastrophes resulting in wholesale slaughter and destruction were not started by idiots, imbeciles, morons or borderlines. The one man, Schicklgruber, whose IQ is probably not below normal, has in a few years brought infinitely more disaster and suffering to this world than have all the innumerable mental defectives of all countries and generations combined." How appropriate, then, that he was to receive awards from the National Association For Retarded Children and the Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr., Foundation and the C. Anderson Aldrich Award for the American Academy of Pediatrics.

During the years of Nazism, he pledged personal bond, found jobs, and provided guidance for several hundred German refugee physicians whom he rescued from the Holocaust. This was at a time when many of his conferees were too preoccupied with their own careers to heed the pleas for help and when others urged caution on him lest an influx of Jewish refugees arouse domestic anti-Semitism. He raised funds to support the democratically elected Spanish Loyalist government against the invading Falangist armies. In so doing, he earned himself a place on the honor roll of "premature anti-Fascists" compiled during the McCarthy era.

Leo Kanner became an Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Johns Hopkins in 1933 but was not elevated to the rank of Professor of Child Psychiatry until 1957, 2 years before he became Emeritus. Hopkins, like other medical schools, did not change the tradition of a single professor in each department until the 1950's.

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