

May 1962

Gregory Zilboorg, 1890-1959

Gerard Fountain

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lmq>

Recommended Citation

Fountain, Gerard (1962) "Gregory Zilboorg, 1890-1959," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 29 : No. 2 , Article 6.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lmq/vol29/iss2/6>

GREGORY ZILBOORG

1890-1959

GERARD FOUNTAIN, M.D.

In 1919, Gregory Zilboorg arrived in New York speaking Russian and excellent French but no English. He at once secluded himself for three months during which he made himself master of an English of the precision and elegance that were later to make his *History of Medical Psychology* a masterpiece of historical writing. Instead, however, of quietly getting used to his new language, he displayed it to the world as soon as it was acquired. He traveled about the eastern and southern United States on Chautauqua, lecturing on the drama and on Russia. More than that, within a year he had translated Andreyev's *He Who Gets Slapped* for the Theater Guild. Zilboorg's translation was idiomatic and lively (neither quality has tended to be characteristic of English translations of Russian plays) and on the stage it was a big success.

Both the impatient pursuit of knowledge and the rather daring use of it once acquired characterized Zilboorg to the end of his life. He not only perfected himself in many studies — psychoanalysis, historical writing, philosophy, as well as some minor skills including photography, cabinetmaking, and cooking — but he constantly exercised them, often in full view of the public, without hesitation or apology and usually with notable success.

Gregory Zilboorg was born in 1890, eldest of the four children of a scholarly grocer of Kiev, in the Ukraine. His highly orthodox religious training culminated in a *bar mitzvah*, after which he attended high school and then ventured to St. Petersburg where he secured admission to The Psychoneurological Institute. Vladimir Bekhterev, Chief of the Institute — he was one of the founders of Russian experimental psychology, investigated hypnosis, and engaged in controversy with Pavlov over the conditioned reflex — insisted that his students look at their patients as whole human beings. The physician may neglect neither the physical nor the mental, neither the world within nor the world without, a lesson Zilboorg always bore in mind. After receiving his degree from the Institute, he served in a military hospital and also in the army; he writes of fighting at Dvinsk in 1917. From Bekhterev he had acquired more than an interest in psychiatry and neurology, however; students at the Institute were permitted, perhaps encouraged, to engage in political activity. Zilboorg saw the outbreak of the Revolution of 1917 and participated in its development. He has recorded his memory of the beautiful Winter Palace, its marble floors besmeared with eighteen inches of Petersburg mud tramped

in by the mob. When the Provisional Government was formed, Zilboorg became secretary to Skobelev, Minister of Labor, with whom he traveled about, often addressing the crowds, in an increasingly desperate resistance to the insurgent Communists. As the situation of the Kerensky cabinet became hopeless, Zilboorg and his sister fled — after delays and difficulties caused by destruction of the railroads, and only two days before the Communists appeared at their lodgings to carry him off — to Kiev, where he collaborated with Marc Slonim in producing a newspaper so distasteful to the occupying Germans that its editors seldom dared sleep two nights at the same address. From Kiev, he managed to work his way westward through Hungary, Austria, and Germany to Holland, where for a year he lived at Scheveningen, longing to reach the shores of England barely visible over the water from his bedroom window. His observations on the history of those times were published in 1920 as *The Passing of the Old Order in Europe*, a volume of pacifist tendency remarkable for its dispassionate appraisal of the events in which its author had been so deeply involved. Kerensky, Lenin, the Central Powers, Wilson, all friend and foe, are discussed with an objectivity easier to achieve years after an epoch than contemporaneously.

After months of effort, Zilboorg received his visa for the United States. On the ship that brought him here, he lectured on *La Russie*

et la catastrophe mondiale, and landed in New York in 1919.

Soon after his arrival, besides learning English, lecturing, marrying, publishing his first books, and translating plays and works on criminology, Zilboorg now attained his second medical degree, at the College of Physicians and Surgeons. He thereafter joined, with the help of Dr. Thomas Salmon, the staff of the Bloomingdale Psychiatric Hospital, where he remained for six years, absenting himself for a time to be psychoanalyzed in Berlin by Dr. Franz Alexander. In 1931 he began to practice psychiatry and psychoanalysis privately in New York. This practice he continued until his death in September 1959. He lectured at several universities, including California and Yale, and delivered the first Academic Lecture to the American Psychiatric Association. Among the professorial chairs he held were those at New York State University and Fordham.

Dr. Zilboorg's list of published works is impressive by its size — about two hundred — as well as its diversity. To lay journals, among them *The Nation* and *The Atlantic Monthly*, he contributed many studies of psychological problems, such as loneliness or aggression, besides occasional discussions of such topics in the news as the candidacy of Wendell Willkie. He also contributed often to journals of sociology, law — he was particularly interested in the legal concept of insanity — and other disciplines related to psychiatry.

His early psychiatric writings were concerned with psychosis, especially its amenability to treatment, and suicide, of which he made a major study, demonstrating that suicide is a symptom of many psychiatric states rather than of depression alone. Whatever their subject, these papers are always original and challenging, even disturbing; Zilboorg never wrote anything dull, and he always wrote with something to say. His clinical discussions were colored by his historical view; he was more aware than most of what has been said and done in medicine before the modern era, and this knowledge gave him a special sympathy for his subject.

In 1941 he published (with George Henry, who contributed two chapters on special topics) his greatest work, *A History of Medical Psychology*. This book, which remains unique, establishes its author as the leading historical writer in English on psychiatry, and ranks with the finest examples of historical monograph in general. It succeeds in combining a full survey of the field with memorable portraits in detail of the great figures in the history of psychological medicine: Vives, Pinel, the baneful Kramer and Sprenger of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, even the witches themselves and the half-charlatans Mesmer and the phrenologists — all the players in that strange and momentous drama are brought to life by Zilboorg in a memorable way and (what seems especially notable) all are given their due. Karl Menninger wrote of the book, "[Dr. Zilboorg]

organizes, collects, and cites historical material with a fine perspective, a consistent structure, and an admirable restraint. Nothing of [this] kind has ever been attempted in English."

Zilboorg throughout this work emphasizes that every great psychiatrist has regarded every aspect of human life as important. This spirit, which animated Galen, Vives, and Freud, led Zilboorg inevitably to the final effort of his life. After his orthodox Jewish childhood, he became on arrival in America a Quaker; but within his last fifteen years he was led perhaps partly by an interest in the Episcopalianism of his second wife (whom he married in 1935) to enter the Catholic Church, finding in medieval and modern Catholic philosophy an acceptable definition of man's place in the scheme of things. For many men, psychoanalysis and Catholicism have seemed irreconcilable, but Zilboorg, who found so much satisfaction in both, could not accept this condition. His adherence to a religion so much at variance with Freudian psychology has seemed paradoxical to many; but his intense sincerity cannot be questioned nor can anyone ever have embraced the Church with fuller understanding of the two schools of thought. It was his belief that the religion attacked by Freud was not in fact religion at all but a misconception thereof, and his last writings are a dignified, lucid, and persuasive attempt at reconciliation of the philosophies of psychoanalysis and Catholicism. It is of Zilboorg's credit that he never

broke with psychoanalysis as have so many other radical thinkers, but rather expounded psychoanalytic ideas with originality and eloquence. As recently as 1951 he published a sympathetic study of Freud's life and thought (called *Sigmund Freud: His Exploration of the Mind of Man*), and he remained actively interested in THE PSYCHOANALYTIC QUARTERLY, of which he was a founder in 1932 and an Associate Editor until his death.

Gregory Zilboorg was an extraordinarily brilliant speaker — his swiftness of intellect in even casual discussion was like the alertness of a skillful boxer. He was showy: he relished the trappings of success, and he was impatient. His treatment of patients was sometimes disturbingly unorthodox, yet his unorthodoxy was planned and was often successful where others could not succeed. One might say that he never missed a trick, yet he

was earnest and kind, and most courageous.

His insistence on examining man in his totality never permitted him to give up the pursuit of understanding even when it led him into what many of his friends regarded as the camp of the enemy. In this respect he resembles one of the great figures of the medical renaissance whom he described so well.

Gregory Zilboorg played an important part in determining the character of modern psychiatry. How he did so, the nature of his influence, is suggested by his own summary of the history of medical psychology:

"The history of psychiatry is essentially the history of humanism. Every time humanism has diminished or degenerated into mere philosophic sentimentality, psychiatry has entered a new ebb. Every time the spirit of humanism has arisen, a new contribution to psychiatry has been made."

Reprinted from *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, Vol. XXIX, 1960, No. 1, with kind permission.



FEDERATION EXECUTIVE BOARD MEETING SCHEDULED

The Executive Board of the National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds will hold its annual meeting June 27, 1962. Time: 9:30 a.m. Place: Pick-Congress Hotel, Chicago, Illinois.

The Officers of the national organization and one delegate from each active constituent Guild comprising the Board will conduct business.

