

Otto Kernberg

Otto Friedmann Kernberg was born on September 10, 1928, in Vienna, Austria. His father was Leo Kernberg, his mother was Sonia Paula Friedmann Kernberg. He was an only child. Otto Kernberg's father, Leo Kernberg, born near Lemberg (Lvov) in eastern Poland, was a decorated WWI veteran. He was a monarchist who was devoted to the idea of an Austria-Hungarian empire, and Otto remembered commemorative events tied to the empire always being celebrated in his home. In the 1930's Leo Kernberg worked in the Import-Export Division of the Austrian Ministry of Commerce. In the autumn of 1938, he was warned by friends who worked in the department that Kristallnacht was planned (which took place on November 9-10, 1938). Leo hid for two weeks. The Gestapo agents came to Otto Kernberg's apartment looking for Leo, stayed some hours, and then left them alone. As a result of the Nazi-planned Kristallnacht attacks on Jewish properties and individuals, the family saw all the synagogues burned down, the apartment of his English teacher half destroyed (his parents had gotten him English lessons in the hopes that they would escape to the U.S.). The Kernberg family escaped over half a year later, leaving Vienna on July 16, 1939. Otto was 10 years old. They were able to take one of the last opportunities to leave. WWII broke out September 1, 1939 a month and a half later. The family had previously often vacationed in Abbazia on the Adriatic sea in Italy. With their departure from Vienna in July 1939, the three of them now pretended to do the same. Otto was allowed to take only one toy with him. They waited in Italy to get the visa to Chile -- was the only place where they could buy a visa to emigrate -- first in Abbazia and then the port of Genova. They left Italy in December 1939 by ship and arrived in Valparaiso on January 21, 1940. Otto Kernberg lived in Valparaiso until age 15, then Santiago Chile. He studied at Windsor School for High School for two years, then attended the Instituto Nacional for two years and then Medical School at University of Chile.

He came to the U.S. with a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship in clinical psychiatry, 1959-1960 (Baltimore John's Hopkins) returning to Chile after the fellowship was over. He came back to the U.S. in 1961 to the Menninger Foundation in Topeka, Kansas, eventually becoming director of Menninger Hospital, where he stayed until 1973. It was there that he developed the first research on severe personality disorders.

In 1973 went to Columbia and then to Cornell, where he developed further research on psychopathology of personality disorders. He became director of the Westchester Division of NY Hospital- Cornell Medical Center for 19 years. He then continued as director of the personality disorders institute at the Department of Psychiatry at Cornell (in NY). Now retired, at age 95, he continues to do research on psychopathology of personality disorders. Treating patients and training medical students, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts.

During the interview, Kernberg discussed his interest in studying the psychology of perpetrators "the subjective world of people in whom aggression dominates, the sense of persecution, self-righteousness, the enjoyment with destroying, making others suffer." He also spoke of the processes by which individuals can regress psychologically when joining mob forces, and what steps could be taken to counteract such regression.