

ILONKA VENIER ALEXANDER

THE LOST LEGACY OF FRANZ ALEXANDER

A PSYCHOANALYTIC PIONEER REVISITED

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To the Memory of Dr Carl C. Bell

*Whose wisdom, kindness, and love
continue to inspire me every day*

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About the author

Ilonka Venier Alexander is a US/Canadian author who began writing in 2014. She has written and published three previous books with Karnac: *The Life and Times of Franz Alexander: From Budapest to California*, documenting her family's survival and escape during the Holocaust; *Growing Up Alexander: My Life with a Psychoanalytic Pioneer*, a biography of her famous grandfather; and *Love and Survival: The Memoir of Arthur Renyi*, the life story of her uncle. She holds an undergraduate degree in constitutional history from a California university and a master's in social work from the University of Southern California. Before becoming an author, she spent more than thirty years working in the field of mental health, with both children and adults in the US and Canada, and is a founding scholar of the British Psychoanalytic Council.

The granddaughter of Dr Franz Alexander, one of the original thinkers and pioneers in the field of psychoanalysis, Ilonka grew up with him and was deeply influenced by his work. Her latest work examines the early history of psychoanalysis in the United States and Dr Alexander's prominent role in shaping the field. It also explores the reasons why his contributions are not more widely recognised by contemporary scholars.

Series editor's foreword

*Professor Brett Kahr**

Sigmund Freud simply adored books. Throughout his lifetime, he accumulated an extensive collection of literally thousands upon thousands of volumes, which covered such a broad range of topics from literature and history to religion and medicine, including works by such scriptive geniuses as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Honoré de Balzac, as well as those by such scientific originators as Charles Darwin and Jean-Martin Charcot.

Not only did Freud purchase numerous books but, as we know, he authored a very large number of texts about his own highly original and groundbreaking contributions to the burgeoning field of psychoanalysis, ranging from the *Studien über Hysterie* (Breuer & Freud, 1895a), released in English as the *Studies on Hysteria* (Breuer & Freud, 1895b), which appeared in print at the very outset of his career, in collaboration with his mentor Dr Josef Breuer, to *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion: Drei Abhandlungen* (Freud, 1939a), known in English as *Moses and Monotheism* (Freud, 1939b), and, subsequently, as *Moses and Monotheism: Three Essays* (Freud, 1939c), which he completed shortly before his death.

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When the Jews began to flee from Nazi-occupied Vienna during the late 1930s, most escaped with little more than the clothes on their bodies. But Freud, owing to his already well-established global celebrity status, had the privilege of departing from Austria with not only his priceless collection of antiquities but, also, with many of his books as well, more than 2,000 of which remain housed and cared for beautifully at Maresfield Gardens by the staff of the Freud Museum London to this very day.

During the coronavirus pandemic of 2020, I enjoyed the great privilege of having served as a member of the Board of Trustees of the Freud Museum London and, also, of Freud Museum Publications; and, in those capacities, I collaborated with Carol Seigel, then the Director of the museum, and Dr Stephen Setterberg, then the Publisher of Karnac Books of London; and, collectively, we agreed, with the blessing of the Board of Trustees, to create a new monograph series—the “Freud Museum London Series”—for which we would commission a range of books by accomplished authors, documenting the history and biography of Sigmund Freud, Anna Freud, and other founding figures of the psychoanalytical profession, as well as other historically related topics in the field. And happily, in 2021, we launched the “Freud Museum London Series”.

In order to initiate this scholarly project, I wrote the inaugural title for our new monograph series, namely, *Freud's Pandemics: Surviving Global War, Spanish Flu, and the Nazis* (Kahr, 2021), examining the ways in which Freud navigated his very own multiple pandemics. Although those of us who live in the twenty-first century had to endure the coronavirus pandemic between 2020 and 2022 and beyond, Freud had to confront even more horrific challenges, having soldiered through a lifetime of antisemitic abuse and hatred, as well as two world wars, and, moreover, the so-called Spanish flu of 1918–1920, which impacted upon his entire family and which resulted in the premature death of his beloved middle daughter Sophie Freud Halberstadt. Additionally, Freud had to suffer from his own fast-metastasising oral cancer as well as the invasion of Vienna by Adolf Hitler and the Nazis. In view of the fact that Freud lived until the age of eighty-three years—quite a long time for someone born in the mid-nineteenth century—I strongly sensed that we might all be able to learn something important about the art

of surviving trauma and terror by studying Freud's personal biography in greater detail. Hence, my book on Freud's pandemics endeavours to provide not only an intimate account of his private struggles, but, also, an examination of the ways in which his mentally sturdy mind permitted him to continue to flourish despite those non-stop devastations.

Once we established this new collection of books, I became appointed as Series Editor of the "Freud Museum London Series" and, with the blessing of both Carol Seigel, our past director, and that of her successor, Dr Giuseppe Albano, and with the tremendous support of Kate Pearce, our creative Publisher, we have already commissioned several more titles, currently undergoing completion.

In order to facilitate the growth of this new project, I subsequently produced a further volume for the series, which appeared in print in September, 2023, entitled *Hidden Histories of British Psychoanalysis: From Freud's Death Bed to Laing's Missing Tooth* (Kahr, 2024), inspired by my love of Sigmund Freud and the Freud Museum London. In this text, I have endeavoured to offer readers a wide-ranging and detailed history of the psychoanalytical movement in the United Kingdom by having provided portraits of many of the leading figures in the field, some of whom I had the great honour of interviewing personally during the 1980s and 1990s.

This book includes two chapters about Freud as an "English" psychoanalyst, as he *did*, in fact, practise clinical work at Maresfield Gardens during the last months of his life in London; and, in spite of having grown up as a native German speaker, he eventually came to talk in English with much clarity and success. Hence, it would, indeed, be quite appropriate to conceptualise Sigmund Freud as one of the founders of British psychoanalysis as well as Austrian psychoanalysis.

This publication also provides a brief study of the very "death bed" upon which Freud passed away on 23rd September, 1939—a small couch for medically compromised patients, different to the famous psychoanalytical divan. This "death bed" remains carefully stored in the archives at Maresfield Gardens and I enjoyed the opportunity of examining this moving piece of furniture in great detail and of writing about the "death bed" in this new text.

I have also offered portraits of aspects of the lives and works of such outstanding leaders in the British psychoanalytical community as

Dr Donald Winnicott and Dr John Bowlby—two of the founders of the child mental health movement—as well as the little-known achievements of Bowlby's wife, Mrs Ursula Bowlby, who also championed psychoanalysis. Additionally, I provide studies of such influential figures as Mrs Marion Milner, Mrs Enid Balint, Mr Masud Khan, and Dr Ronald Laing.

I have framed this historical survey of British psychoanalysis with both an "Introduction" entitled "My Love of Deceased Psychoanalysts", and with a "Conclusion" about "How to Be Intimate with a Corpse: The Role of Psychoanalytical Historiography", in which I explore the benefits and the joys of immersing oneself in our professional ancestry, explaining that we all have much more to learn from our forefathers and foremothers. In many respects, I believe that these chapters certainly encapsulate the vision of our new museum monograph series, which might well be summarised as an attempt to archive the past and to learn from the genius of our predecessors.

This book series has now begun to flourish. Dr Caroline Zilboorg (2025), an esteemed academic and, moreover, the daughter of the famous, pioneering psychoanalyst Dr Gregory Zilboorg, produced a wonderful new text, namely, a unique autobiography entitled *A Psychoanalytic Childhood: A Memoir of Growing Up in Mid-Twentieth Century New York*. In this hugely readable and highly engaging title, Caroline Zilboorg, a scholar at Clare Hall in the University of Cambridge and, moreover, a Founding Scholar of the British Psychoanalytic Council, has drawn upon her extensive literary skills and has provided us with a wonderful encapsulation of her early years as the daughter of a true leader in the field, offering rich insights into her own life and the contributions of her pathbreaking father, who contributed extensively to such fields as forensic psychoanalysis and schizophrenia studies, and, moreover, to the creation of psychoanalytical historiography itself.

It pleases me greatly that we now have the privilege to publish a remarkably engaging new book by Ilonka Venier Alexander, the granddaughter of the groundbreaking psychoanalyst Professor Franz Alexander—the very first person to graduate from a formal psychoanalytical training institute. Since my undergraduate years, I have deeply admired the multitudinous contributions of Franz Alexander—one of

Sigmund Freud's most impressive disciples—and I continue to learn from this iconic man to this very day.

Ilonka Venier Alexander has generously crafted a deeply moving book about the life and work of her grandfather, compellingly entitled *The Lost Legacy of Franz Alexander: A Psychoanalytic Pioneer Revisited*, in which she explores not only his rich history but, also, his innumerable contributions to the mental health profession, ranging from his work as a veritable founder of psychosomatic medicine to his huge investment in the development of the psychoanalytical movement in the United States of America as Franz Alexander became literally one of the first clinicians to practise to the west of New York. Indeed, he actually facilitated the growth of movements in both Illinois and in California.

Over the last decade, Ilonka Venier Alexander had already published three gripping books about her grandfather and his family. In 2015, she released *The Life and Times of Franz Alexander: From Budapest to California* (Alexander, 2015), in which she provided an encapsulation of her grandfather's personal and professional biographies. In 2017, Karnac Books released her next book, *Growing Up Alexander: My Life with a Psychoanalytic Pioneer* (Alexander, 2017), in which she described her family in more detail across the generations. And, in 2019, she co-edited the memoirs of yet another of her Hungarian ancestors, Artur Renyi (2019), entitled *Love and Survival in Budapest: The Memoir of Artur Renyi*.

Ilonka Venier Alexander's current book has built upon her multi-decade research about her grandfather and the history of psychoanalysis, and this volume provides an even richer exploration of Franz Alexander's extraordinary role as one of the planet's most impactful clinical practitioners. In this engaging new text, the author provides not only a very detailed examination of her grandfather's psychoanalytical research contributions and organisational achievements but, moreover, she has located even more unpublished archival documents from a very wide range of academic and medical institutions and has incorporated this material into her narrative with much skill and much engagement. I have come to regard Venier Alexander's investigative skills as quite inspiring and it does not surprise me that the British Psychoanalytic Council elected her as one of its Founding Scholars.

I salute this great author and we feel very honoured to include her latest book as part of our “Freud Museum London Series”. This study not only provides us all with a great opportunity to learn and relearn from the genius insights of her memorable grandfather but, additionally, offers us a model for how we might all conduct significant historical research and, hence, write a warmly engaging text.

In years to come, we hope to commission more titles about a wide range of historical topics—whether scholarly investigations, personal memoirs, oral histories, or archival investigations—and we warmly encourage aspiring authors with projects-in-the-making to approach us, as we would be very keen to discuss potential books for the future.

We trust that publications about the life and work of Freud and his followers, and about the history of psychoanalysis more broadly, will assist us not only with the preservation of the very best of Freudian psychology but, also, will help to prepare us for centuries to come. Our troubled planet has much to learn from these ancestors about the causes of insanity and the potential for cure!

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Preface

A biography tells one, if you do not know where you are from, it will be difficult to determine where you are going.

On that serene Sunday morning of March 8, 1964, the world of psychoanalysis was jolted by the sudden and shocking death of Dr Franz Alexander at his home in the Tuscany Hills neighbourhood of Palm Springs. Dr Alexander, known for his youthful vigour and magnetic charm, was far from anyone's notion of old age. His untimely passing left me and the entire psychoanalytic community reeling with disbelief.

At the time of his death, Dr Alexander was in the middle of co-authoring his final cutting-edge book, *The History of Psychiatry*, alongside his colleague from Mount Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles, Dr Sheldon Selesnick, where he was the director of the Department of Psychiatry. This collaborative project underscored Dr Alexander's ever-present commitment to advancing the field of psychoanalysis. Moreover, he eagerly anticipated giving the American Psychoanalytic Association's Annual Memorial Karen Horney Lecture and a draft of that speech was on his desk, a desk that was also littered with galley proofs, manuscripts, and many letters from Freud he was intending to include in a new book.

Amid the picturesque desert setting of his home, shared with my grandmother, Anita Venier Alexander (fondly known as Annie), Dr Alexander's desk was a testament to his boundless creativity and ambition. Despite recovering from what was initially diagnosed as pneumonia, he had been seen swimming in the pool just the day before—a symbol of his strong-willed disposition. Dr Franz Alexander's sudden departure left behind a rich repository of unfinished projects and a profound void in the world of psychoanalysis, proof of his enduring legacy and the impact he had on all who had the privilege to know him.

I am the granddaughter of Franz Alexander and have spent my professional working years in academic medicine as a psychotherapist and clinical social worker. I was a teenager at the time of my grandfather's death, still in college, most likely dreadfully naïve, perhaps somewhat obnoxious, and my grandfather was my only male role model. My grandfather had taken on the role of father almost immediately after my birth in the waning days of World War II, once my parents separated and ultimately divorced, and my mother returned home to her parents' household on the lake front in Chicago.

At the time of his death, I was living with my mother's younger sister, Kiki, a social psychologist at a California state university, and her husband Jack Levine, a deputy probation officer for the County of Los Angeles. I suspect my grandfather also orchestrated the move to my aunt's after my mother abandoned me at seventeen when she left Los Angeles for Reno with her fourth husband, a Chartered Public Accountant who she had met while working for Mary Pickford. Jack and Kiki lived in a mid-century modern house in the Pacific Palisades, a rather exclusive Los Angeles neighbourhood. This home was destroyed in the Pacific Palisades fire on January 7, 2025.

My grandfather had always been extraordinarily important to me, and I could not imagine going through one day without him. I vividly recall attending a memorial service in Los Angeles a week after the Catholic funeral mass in Palm Springs, and subsequent burial in his beloved San Diego/La Jolla area, thinking it so unfair and peculiar that he was gone. I looked at others walking on the streets and was filled with rage; they were alive, and he was not. I needed him so much. He had always been there to help me, to listen to me, to play with me,

and to take care of me as well as making sure I was safe. He had made every major decision regarding my life: education, living arrangements, friends, extracurricular activities, and he had even named me after his older sister and himself, Ilonka Frances. It was as if I had come along at a point in his life when he could share time with and show affection to a child. He was no longer devoting all his time and energies to the professional work. I always felt as though I had magically become his third daughter.

I don't ever remember thinking of Dr Franz Alexander as old, yet at his funeral, I vividly recall looking up and speaking with Dr Sandor Rado. What struck me then was how old Dr Rado appeared, wrinkled and elderly, his shirt too big around his neck, with his tie hanging low. He was a contemporary of my grandfather and seeing him like that made me pause and think, "Is this what old age looks like?" In that moment, I couldn't help but wonder if I had somehow missed subtle changes in my own grandfather's appearance over the years we lived together. We saw each other daily, yet had I been too wrapped up in my own teenage world to notice any change in his appearance? It was a moment of introspection, questioning my own awareness and presence during those formative years.

For decades, beginning immediately after graduation from college, I considered the possibility of writing the story of my grandfather, my life with him, and of his contributions to the field of psychoanalysis. I was encouraged to do so by college professors, therapists, as well as family and friends. It was not until 2010, when I discovered cousins, their names and existence purposefully kept from me, that I began to seriously contemplate and attempt to start such an intimidating assignment. It was then I learned that my grandfather was a strong, complicated, and controlling man, not just at the office, but also within the family.

Embarking on a journey of discovery, I travelled to the old country, up to Alaska and other places in the United States. I met many family members, and in that process uncovered the man I loved and missed, perhaps idealising him along the way. I learned that he, too, idealised and idolised his own father, Bernard, and this realisation sparked a deeply personal journey of self-discovery. As I delved deeper into the life of the man I loved, I uncovered secrets and surprises that revealed

a complex and fascinating individual. His book, *The Western Mind in Transition*, offered a glimpse into his own personal hero—his father, whom he idolised without embarrassment.

My journey led me to uncover a long-held family secret—my heritage as a Jewish person. Though Dr David Terman, former director of the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis, now the Chicago Psychoanalytic Institute, revealed to me during a visit in the spring of 2011, that my grandfather's ancestry was no secret to those in Chicago, it did remain unexpressed. This is further evidence of the intricate web of identity and perception that shapes our lives.

I was stunned and confused. I was raised a Roman Catholic, as were my mother and aunt; my grandmother had been raised by nuns in a Catholic convent in northern Italy. She went to mass every morning. It was at that time that I wished my family, my mother, aunt, and grandmother could help me with this revelation. But they were already gone from the physical world. And, sadly, they were the ones who had lied to me, along with my beloved grandfather, Big Papa. Was the motivation behind the lie self-hatred, preservation, fear, or was it commonplace among intellectuals in Eastern Europe during the early part of the last century? As I would learn, it was all those things.

When my grandfather died, he was referred to as a Renaissance Man, and that may well be the most perfect descriptor of the man. He was a man with a complicated personality, many talents, and varied interests. His intellect, wit, charm, sense of style, charisma, and active engagement in sports paint a vivid picture of a vibrant and dynamic personality.

It was perplexing and intriguing to me to discover that despite his significant contributions in his field, his legacy seemed somewhat under-represented in the academic literature. When I enrolled in graduate school and studied clinical social work, my professors at USC knew of him but few of the textbooks mentioned his work. (Years earlier my mother had compared him to Elvis Presley in terms of importance, when she said, "Your grandfather is as important to psychoanalysis as Elvis is to music." That simile was intended to convey his impact in a way that most likely would resonate with my eight-year-old mind.)

So, I questioned others at the time as to why he was not more prominent in the current academic literature ... this was in the early 1980s.

Now, many years later, after reading his books and many of his publications, 12,000+ pages of his correspondence, letters to and from such psychoanalytic greats as Karl Menninger, Ives Hendricks, Rado and Rank, Sigmund Freud, and others, it still makes little sense to me. I am puzzled. His influence was epic. There isn't much that happened in the field of American psychoanalysis during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s that he did not orchestrate or influence. However, as times change and perspectives evolve, there may be renewed interest in revisiting and recognising his contributions within the broader context of the field. Exploring his legacy could offer valuable insights and potentially ensure a rediscovery of his impact on contemporary practices that had not been fully acknowledged or integrated into the prevailing literature.

Knowing and understanding that most public people also have very private personas, my grandfather was no different. My grandfather led a complex and intriguing life, with both public and private facets that intrigued and perhaps eluded those close to him. Even a cousin Judit Laqueur-Revesz said to me, "He was a hard man to know." This comment suggests to me that he may have harboured layers of depth and mystery that even family members found challenging to unravel.

This conversation took place at her home in Malcesine, Italy, a villa overlooking Lake Garda, a place my grandfather often visited during his summer breaks in Europe. The setting of this conversation, overlooking the lake and village, add a poetic touch to the narrative. The family, my family, was deeply interconnected with individuals in fields such as psychology and architectural history. Judit's mother was my grandfather's older sister, Dr Magda Revesz-Alexander, an architectural historian who was married to the psychologist Dr Geza Revesz, whose work on the psychology of music is still relevant today. Judit was the first person I contacted when the family secrets began to be revealed. She said, "We have been looking for you your whole life."

The surprise admission that my Alexander family had been seeking me throughout my life hints at a deeper story and one of deliberately

hidden family secrets. Exploring these disclosures has offered profound insights into my grandfather's private world and his impact on those close to him. Discovering late in life that many family secrets were lies has been profoundly unsettling. It led to a range of emotions including shock, betrayal, anger, and sadness. This revelation challenged my sense of identity and understanding of my family and its history. It prompted a re-evaluation of relationships and the search for truth and closure. It also opened a path to healing, allowing me to confront the past, be reconciled with the present, and find peace.

In 2014, after meeting dozens of cousins from the UK, Europe, and America, and one from Australia, and arranging two Broessler family reunions on two different continents, I thought I was emotionally prepared to write a biography of my grandfather. I wanted to focus on the family and the ties and connections that helped shape his decisions, in his professional as well as his personal life. I did not want to appear as a doting granddaughter. I did not intend that biography to be a treatise of his concepts and theories. And it most certainly was not. I wanted it to be intimate and loving, but an honest, straightforward account. Because my cousin and others said he was a hard man to know, I wanted to fully reintroduce him and help others understand his choices and what influenced them: mostly his philosopher father, his close-knit family, and his privileged intellectual upbringing.

Ten years have passed since *The Life and Times of Franz Alexander: From Budapest to California* was published by Karnac. During that time, I discussed this book at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychoanalytic Association in Chicago, lectured at the Sándor Ferenczi House in Budapest, filmed the first "Meet the Author" interview with the Boston Psychoanalytic Society and Institute, and became a founding scholar of the British Psychoanalytic Council. I believe these actions and honours underscore my commitment to share and discuss my grandfather's legacy on diverse platforms. Those activities continue to be a highlight for me and a deep privilege. I have also been fortunate to have two additional books published by Karnac, books that continue to explore and illuminate the life and work of Franz Alexander.

The past decade has afforded me many feats that represent a rich tapestry of experiences. It has been fascinating to dig deeper into Franz

Alexander's writings and to explore his vast and varied personal correspondence. And, again, it has been perplexing to encounter the gap between his profound influence and his relative obscurity in contemporary discussions.

The decision to probe deeper into Dr Franz Alexander's ideas and concepts, within the context of their time, and taking into consideration the psychoanalytic landscape and geopolitical influences of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, is indeed overdue. By revisiting and discussing these theories extensively, we gain valuable insights into their evolution and a better understanding of contemporary interpretations. Introducing younger analysts and psychotherapists to the originator of concepts such as short-term treatment, evidence-based research, lay analysis, forensic psychiatry, psychosomatic medicine, and how the personality of the therapist affects the outcome of treatment is crucial. These ideas, though groundbreaking in their time and sometimes controversial, have nevertheless laid the essential foundations for modern psychotherapy practices.

This book attempts to bridge the gap between the historical context and present-day applications, fostering a deeper understanding of Dr Franz Alexander's enduring contributions to the field of psychoanalysis. This dialogue is not just a scholarly pursuit, but a meaningful exploration of a legacy that continues to shape the landscape of mental health treatment. This book is not about me. The focus of this book is centred on my grandfather and his pioneering ideas, beginning in the early twentieth century. However, the exploration is intertwined with my family's history, and unsurprisingly often adds a personal dimension to the narrative.

These achievements not only celebrate my grandfather's life and ideas, but also affirm my own attempts to contribute to advancing understanding and dialogue within the field. I hope I provoke a sustained, dedicated, and ongoing exploration within the psychoanalytic community that will optimistically expand the conversation around Franz Alexander's enduring impact and relevance in contemporary psychoanalysis.

In the end, the journey has reaffirmed that many of his ideas have become common practice today. This adds another layer of intrigue to the puzzle. How could someone with such profound influence and

foresight be seemingly overlooked or forgotten within his own field? This mystery highlights a broader challenge of recognising the legacies of other pioneers and how those ideas, too, become integrated into the fabric of modern practices.

Through each of the previous books I not only gained a deeper understanding of Franz Alexander, but hopefully enriched the conversation within the field by shining a spotlight on a figure whose impact deserves wider recognition. My goal now, as the mystery unfolds and sheds light on his contributions, is to enrich our understanding of psychoanalytic history and to serve as a catalyst for re-evaluating and repositioning his legacy within present-day conversations.



Dr Franz Alexander flanked by the Menningers during a visit on April 7 to 15, Dr Karl Menninger on the right and Dr Charles Frederick Menninger on the left. Photo courtesy of Kansas Historical Society. Reproduced with permission.