

# Martin Millers' Account of Alice Miller's Childhood and Parenting

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*Abstract:* The publication in 2013 of an account of her life by Alice Miller's son sheds a remarkable light on the biography of this renowned psychotherapist advocate for children. However, it doesn't entirely do justice to her universal legacy. Regrettably, it is not yet available in English. In German it may be found at Martin Miller, *Das wahre "Drama des begabten Kindes" Die Tragödie Alice Millers* (Kreuz-Verlag, 175 pages, \$ 17.93).

Martin Millers' book explores "the tragedy" of Alice Miller's youth as much as the psychic wounds of its author. As a therapist, the world-known advocate of children has chastised psychoanalysts for their denial of parental abuse. Her elder son aims at revealing her own weaknesses as a mother, all the while acknowledging the impact of war traumas on their painful relationship. Not bereft of anger and bitterness, but in hindsight of a substantive therapy work, this publication offers a moving perspective on the intergenerational transmission of trauma—a theme Alice Miller herself provided with in-depth analysis.

## The Wall of Silence in the Miller Household

A personal tragedy Martin Miller reveals was not to be able to build an emotional relationship with his parents—a suffering he now explains by their silencing any biographical narrative about themselves, notably that of the war period. He denounces their "reversing the parent-child relationship", typical of Holocaust survivors, when adults draw on their children's emotional support and contribute to "the transmission of a repressed trauma of persecution" (Martin Miller, *Le vrai "drame de l'enfant doué". La tragédie d'Alice Miller*, Presses universitaires de France, 2014). After his mother died in April 2010, Martin began to unravel the shroud of mystery and reconnected with family members in the United States. While he would not call into question the value of her tireless support for the rights of children, he nevertheless gain the impression that, for her as well as them, mental dissociation was a means to keep the past at bay.

Alice Miller was born Alicija Englard on 23 December, 1923, in an Orthodox Jewish household living in Piotrków-Trybunalski (Poland). Until her marriage to Andrzej Miller, a Catholic student she met after the war at the University of Łódź, she called herself Rostovska. Martin discovered late that she adopted this surname in 1940 after fleeing the ghetto of Piotrków to hide in the "Aryan" sector of Nazi-occupied Warsaw. "I always had to tell myself that I could no longer be Jewish, but Polish", she revealed to her son. "To survive, I had to change my name and take a Polish identity." Alice managed to save a few family members by providing them with forged passports, but they would keep inside the terror of betrayal and deportation ever after. Having built "a wall of silence" around this traumatic memory, she experienced her child's natural curiosity as a form of psychological harassment.

The author shows how he was trapped in his mother's emotional upheaval. A permanent consequence of war traumas is that it spoiled their early mother-son relationship and confined young Martin in the unconscious role of persecutor. Some of Alice Miller's acquaintances experienced similar reactions from her, such as psychoanalyst Jeffrey Masson who didn't understand why he suddenly "joined the long list of people who had abused her" (Masson's comment on Daphne Merkin, *Private Drama*. "Alice Miller was an authority on childhood trauma, but she stayed mum about her own", *Tablet*, 5/4/2010, <http://tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/32682/high-drama>). Incidentally, as Miller herself writes, isn't it what adults usually do to children, when they spontaneously question their defense mechanism? The son's testimony thus confirms the relevance of his mother's theory.

## Religious stranglehold

The pages dedicated to Alicija's infancy are also revealing: The reader will find evidence of hidden family abuse she later replicated with her son. Martin gathered information from his American relatives, reporting uncritically that Alicija "had a decent childhood, [because] she always got what she wanted" (Irenka Taurek, quoted by Martin Miller). He is confused about his mother's choice to separate from their Jewish roots, but barely understands why she did so and will not call into question the religious stranglehold she rebelled against from an early age.

Indeed, we discover that Alicija's grandfather, Avraham Dov Englard, was a Hassidic rabbi and that his second son Meylech—also "very found of religion"—did not oppose his father's will to marry him to a "cold and unresponsive" spouse. The first born of this unloving couple, Alicija would personify the rebellion against the rules that were fiercely imposed by her parents. Considering that Rabbi Dov Englard was head of a *yeshiva* (religious school) board in Piotrków (Shimshon Maimon, "The Radomsk Chassidic House", in Ben Giladi, *A Tale of One City, Piotrków Tribunalnski (Poland)*, Shengold Publishers, 1991, <http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Piotrkow/pit098.html>), she must have proved quite rebellious to register in the Polish school system—unlike her younger sister who was forced to attend a Jewish school.

Meylech's younger sister Ana and her husband Bunio provided young Alicija with the "helping witness[es]" the crucial role she showed in her later works. The young couple had a more liberal approach to Judaism and assimilated into Polish society—a less constricting world that seemed to fascinate the young girl. Whenever her parents told her off, Alicija found refuge at Ala and Bunio's place. Exposed to her mother's chastisement and afflicted by her father's helplessness, she retreated so that other people judged her as arrogant and distrustful. However, Martin Miller reckons that such despair developed into "a subjective judgment" wrongly hostile to Judaism and fails to admit that Alicija's responsiveness to authoritarianism was not her own—but a natural expression of every child's vital force—that is what makes her works fully universal.

## Maternal Reenactments

The second part of the book shows how Alice Rostovska's unresolved past traumas resurface when she moves to Switzerland, in 1946, to pursue studies in philosophy with her future husband. Fleeing a devastated country, the genocide survivor is stung by the surrounding opulence and will never escape a feeling of strangeness. Her marriage with Andrzej Miller proves to be dangerously destructive, as the young partners have no choice but to restage their untold sufferings. Martin writes, "The Miller's home was under permanent dispute and heavy atmosphere."

For her part, Alice Miller acknowledged that she projected onto her jealous husband the same sensation of being continuously monitored that engulfed her during war-time in Warsaw, as a blackmailer threatened to reveal her Jewish identity to the Nazi occupiers. One might add that this painful relationship was reminiscent of her parents' who agreed to found a loveless home so as not to depart from tradition. Just as she once did at Ala and Bunio's home, the young therapist will find a new family within the ring of the psychoanalytical seminar of Zürich—until her independent spirit sharply opposed disciples of the Freudian orthodoxy, which ended up rejecting her as a dissident.

"What a strange and painful sense of *déjà-vu* for my mother!" Martin Miller comments, suggesting a parallel of psychoanalytic orthodoxy with the corset of religiosity that overshadowed her childhood. Psychoanalysis was not a refuge where she could experience her *true self*—an expression she discovered while reading Winnicott—but a new ideological fortress from which she resolved to escape. Other precursors such as John Bowlby, who stressed a child's vital need for maternal bonding, would convince her that mental illness stems from traumatic events endured in childhood and not from internal sexual conflicts, as Freud asserted.

## Unworthy Parents

However, such a radical revision comes late in Alice Miller's life, at least for Martin, who was almost 30 years old when she writes *The Drama of the Gifted Child* (1979). It did not prevent her from restaging patterns of behavior she suffered mostly during childhood—particularly that of a "cold and unresponsive" mother whom she swore never to be like. In this regard, reading Bowlby would prove a painful wake-up call, Martin recollects, reporting details of numerous abandonments and betrayals. To

the needs of a newborn that seemed to dictate her conduct—a sensation the young mother abhorred—Alice responded with a cruel detachment.

Born in 1950, baby Martin was placed in the care of a nurse, then spent six months with Ala, Bunio and their daughter Irenka. “My parents remained strangers to me”, Martin confides. When his sister came along six years later—a child born with Down syndrome—he suffered from enuresis and stayed for two years in a children’s home without contact with his family. At home in the following years, domestic employees and nurses would serve as substitute caregivers—a staff his mother often changed to obviate any closeness with the children. One can imagine the influence of such emotional dereliction on young Martin’s psycho-affective development and the author is modest about it, insisting on his difficulties at school.

In addition to such neglect, Martin was exposed to his father’s violence. An unpredictable man, Andrzej Miller smacked him for no reason. He imposed control on the boy’s intimacy by washing with him every morning—with no opposition on the part of the mother. “Were you afraid to protect me from my father when he set up such an ordeal? What did you think when he laughed at me every day at lunch and cut me off?” Martin asked Alice Miller in a resentful letter written in 1994. At that time, he re-experienced maternal betrayal as she unwittingly exerted supervision of his psychotherapeutic treatment with a controversial analyst—a dispute ultimately settled in court. The sense of harassment he was engulfed with at the time would put a definitive end to their relationship.

### **The Importance of Her Works Remains Intact**

Martin Miller’s testimony sometimes borders on settling old scores with his mother and will probably rekindle Alice Miller’s critics. If one can understand that her son should show little empathy for such an oblivious caretaker, it is regrettable that the author—who in turn became a psychotherapist—could not genuinely share young Alicija’s emotional distress in her own family environment. On the contrary, Martin tends to idealize the cultural heritage his mother came to repudiate, as if he himself was looking for a substitute home. From this point of view, his insistence to link maternal neglect with war traumas alone suggests a form of mental dissociation.

It is equally difficult for Martin to question his father’s responsibility in the family problematics and that of his male descendants. A few pages of the book denounce paternal brutality, but he doesn’t believe that the analytical concept of “identification with the aggressor” applies to him and he strongly defends himself against accusation of resembling his father. He speaks emphatically of his ancestor Avraham Dov England, but seems to ignore the psychic consequence of the religious rules he enforced on his children. His second son Meylech, Alice Miller’s father, “wouldn’t or couldn’t impose himself. While suffering from parental dominion, he remained silent and submitted to his fate”. He died in the Piotrków ghetto, Martin Miller says, because “he did not renounce his Jewish identity, even to save his life,” unlike his daughter. One may wonder if the author is well aware that his own existence stems from his mother’s “treason.” which was an expression of her desire for life.

Ultimately, Martin Miller recognizes that “the importance of [Alice Miller’s] works remains intact,” but only her first three books. The later ones as well as her therapeutic counseling over the Internet are considered “speculative”. This reluctance is comprehensible if one keeps in mind that Alice’s first years as a writer were also Martin’s happiest. He was barely thirty and witnessed a radical change: “My mother talked to me about her ideas and I discovered an other person: passionate, open, approachable, relaxed.” Freed from a loveless marriage, she gained confidence against Freudian orthodoxy and shared this project with her son—something she never had done before, creating a sudden closeness that would soon revive the terrible loss of a receptive, loving mother.

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