

## What is at stake with the documentary Who's Afraid of Alice Miller?

By Marc-André Cotton\*

*This lecture concluded the New-York December 4-5, 2021, videoconference on trans-generational transmission of trauma, featuring Krystyna Sanderson and Martin Miller.*

***Abstract:** Considering what Martin Miller shared with us during this conference, I would like to go back very modestly to some of Alice Miller's findings and share a few thoughts before we close. Martin shed a particular light on his mother's work and gave an enlightening testimony largely confirming her first findings. I'll start with a reminder about the singularities of Alice Miller's work, her distancing from psychoanalysis, her critic of Freud's drive theory and the concept of narcissism. I'll follow with Alice Miller's trauma theory based on her own traumas of childhood as far as we can tell. How did she not succumb to psychic death herself; how did she make it—how did we make it? Can we spot some of her theoretical concepts in her own path of life? Are we doomed to collectively repeat trauma? My lecture will take the form of questions and answers.*

1. *What were the singularities of Alice Miller's work and why were her first books such a success?*

I think it is important to remember that Alice Miller's work has changed our understanding of psychotherapeutic practice.

That it has helped to open our eyes to the extent of ordinary violence in education—the famous “poisonous pedagogy”—and to its consequences.

She also helped democratize the idea that we need to do some work on ourselves to better support our children in their emotional needs.

It is a perspective that starts from the heart of the child's repressed experience within her family circle and leads to the most cruel collective dynamics, such as National Socialism.

I would add that many associations here in France and Europe that defend children's rights and caring parenting claim to be her legacy.

France only banned corporal punishments from parents in 2019, and the U.S. has not yet done so. There is still a long way to go until all children be respected in this country.

As Martin said, the most recent findings in neuroscience confirm Alice Miller's work, particularly our understanding of traumatic memory and the stress symptoms associated with it.

What also surprised me was to see that she was very early on in the psychohistory movement, welcoming the research carried out by Lloyd deMause in the 1970s.

The success of Alice Miller's work can be understood, in my opinion, by its universal message, by the keys to understanding that it offers us for ourselves and for all of our societies.

2. *Can you tell us about her academic background and her relationship to psychoanalysis?*

As has been said, Alice Miller was a philosopher by training, and later a psychoanalyst, and it was in the psychoanalytic circles of Zurich that she made her debut in the late 1950s.

Martin writes that she found a surrogate family there and that, just as with her own family, she was misunderstood and ended up distancing herself.

Indeed, because of her very critical personality, she quickly confronted the limits of Freudian thought and broke with this movement.

She then became interested in authors who had been rejected by the psychoanalytical community at the time, Heinz Kohut, Donald Winnicott, and John Bowlby specifically.

It was from here that she distinguished herself in her analytical work and would publish her two first works.

Turning to Alice Miller's relationship with psychoanalysis, let's just say that she was quick to put her foot in her mouth!

Psychoanalysis is based on Freud's drive theory.

The child desires what he called the "maternal object".

In Freud's view, the child would be "narcissistic" until she resolves the Oedipus complex and separates from the "maternal object".

3. *You mean Alice Miller came to disprove of this famous drive theory?*

Yes, but gradually.

In the first edition of her *Drama of the Gifted Child*, she was still looking for a path within psychoanalysis.

But later, she associated the drive scheme with some form of poisonous pedagogy.

Alice Miller began questioning the concept of narcissism.

For Alice Miller, the etiology of the narcissistic disorder must be sought in the infant's adaptation to the unsatisfied narcissistic needs of its parents.

This is a fundamental reversal in that it points to the responsibility of parents in the child's despair, whereas the drive theory does not mention this responsibility.

When parents are unavailable to their child, as Martin just confirmed, the child is not able to experience her own feelings, such as anger, feelings of abandonment or helplessness.

The child then adapts to *their* expectations, especially since they try to educate her in such a way that she responds to *their* wishes.

In short, she ends up giving up expressing her own distress and constructs a fictitious personality that Alice Miller describes as the "false Self", following the work of Winnicott.

The child becomes an alienated being—in the primary sense of a stranger to herself.

I believe that we have not finished measuring the impact of this revolution in therapeutic work, but also for the well-being of our children and the understanding of their difficulties.

We all want our children to develop their "true Self".

But at the same time, we have expectations, preconceived ideas of what a child, *our* child, should be.

There are things we don't say, feelings we don't express.

We are not aware of the impact of this educational will on the inner balance of a child and even on her future adult life.

4. *Could you elaborate a bit more on the alleged narcissism of the child and Alice Miller's critique of it? Didn't she also criticize the Oedipus complex?*

Freud made of narcissism a stage of the child's sexual development, based on the analysis of a single case of paranoia—the Schreber case.

Incidentally, the father of this Schreber was a promotor of poisonous pedagogy, which Freud did not consider.

In the narcissistic phase of her development, the child would take her own body as an object of love and, if she remained fixed at this stage, could develop a “narcissistic neurosis”.

These are very painful projections onto the child.

And a very personal interpretation by Freud.

Indeed, his mother, Amalia Freud, was devoted to her first-born son in a very special way.

She liked to call him "*her Golden Sigi*" and gave him countless privileges over his brothers and sisters.

At the same time, she was extremely demanding of him.

One may wonder whether Freud did not project onto the myth of Narcissus his own childhood experiences.

5. *Is this what Alice Miller's critique is about?*

For Alice Miller, there is a healthy narcissism: it is the fundamental need of the child to be taken seriously, to be considered for who she is, as the center of her own activity.

This is a legitimate need.

Martin Miller too speaks of respect and tolerance for the feelings of the baby, and then of the child, as a condition for the formation of a sense of self, of identity.

She says that parents who did not receive this love as children would search all their lives for what their parents did not give them.

Especially with their children, whom they can use as surrogate parents.

This is a mechanism well describes in the film.

6. *When did Alice Miller definitively break with psychoanalysis?*

Psychoanalysis did not manage to shake the romance of a happy childhood that Alice Miller thought she had experienced.

Incidentally, it was the spontaneous practice of painting that allowed her to have her first access to her truth, from 1973.

She writes that she found in her paintings the terror of her mother to whom she was subjected for years.

This practice also helped her to free herself from the intellectual and conceptual constraints in which her education and training had confined her.

Including those of psychoanalysis, which she openly criticizes in her third book, published in 1981.

7. *What was the originality of her therapeutic approach? Would you say that there is an Alice Miller theory?*

As does Martin, Alice Miller herself defined it as a trauma theory as opposed to Freud's drive theory, but also to that of Freud's first seduction theory involving sexual abuse.

Alice Miller goes further: the many forms of childhood trauma, not only those of a sexual nature, lead to repression and consequently to psychic disorders.

For her, the child is always innocent.

This is the Copernican revolution that she made in relation to Freud's drive theory.

We remember that the Freudian interpretation of the Oedipus myth holds the child responsible for the murder of his father Laïos.

The idea that evil is in the child is so widespread that Alice Miller devoted many pages to refuting this thesis rooted in our Judeo-Christian culture and perhaps earlier.

She certainly had precursors, starting with Freud in his first theory, but she was the first to make the truth of the child an inescapable basis for her work.

Even the educational principles of Jean-Jacques Rousseau are highly manipulative from that standpoint.

In fact, the child's needs are rarely met, but rather taken advantage of by adults restaging their own childhood traumas.

This is the repetition compulsion conjectured by Freud, but which Alice Miller extends to all traumas suffered by parents at the hands of their own parents.

Martin talked about mirror neurons to help understand how children respond to their parents' emotions—even those they tend to suppress.

The concept of traumatic amnesia is now a well-studied phenomenon, as are dissociative processes resulting from post-traumatic stress disorder.

All this information is now available to the general public.

But the tendency to minimize the emotional experience of children is still widespread and affects all our societies.

8. *How do you explain then that Alice Miller is today at the center of a controversy involving her son Martin?*

Indeed, one may be tempted to say that Alice Miller came up with nice ideas, but that she did not put them into practice.

That there was the public persona and here we discover a dark part of her, almost a lie.

This is what Martin Miller suggests in the first part of the film.

In reading her books, we have all formed an idealized image of this unconditional advocate for children.

We resonated with her message and projected our own unresolved suffering onto her.

That of not having been heard in our deepest wounds when we were children.

I remember projecting onto her a totally benevolent mother figure that compensated for the real mother who made me suffer.

Alice Miller opened our eyes to what could have been, to what *should have been*.

The feeling of betrayal can be all the stronger and in order not to remain fixed on this image of the ideal mother, we must take a perspective.

Like all of us, Alice Miller had a story and a life path.

She was about thirty years old when she discovered psychoanalysis.

Her entire childhood had been marked by a strict religious upbringing as Martin reminded us.

She compared her childhood to a narrow mountain valley.

With psychoanalysis, she suddenly found herself in a vast plain that made her want to free herself from this imprisonment.

It was not until twenty years later that she discovered the spontaneous practice of painting, and even later that she wrote *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, where she began to tell her story.

9. *You mean to say that for her children, the damage was already done?*

Alas, yes! Alice Miller could not avoid reproducing her own suffering on her children at a time when she had not done the work for which we are so grateful today!

*"I was not given to be a good mother,"* she says modestly in one of her letters to Martin.

I think the sight of the horror she had restaged on her children literally blew her mind.

She was probably unable to shake off the guilt that this vision caused her, and this might be one of the keys to understanding the virulence of some of her letters to Martin.

One can only acknowledge the courage of her son to be so transparent in the film and give an enlightening illustration of the trauma theory elaborated by his mother.

10. *So could you go back to the early years of Alice Miller's life, which the film doesn't mention?*

I think this is very important.

The film reveals the dramatic circumstances in which Alice lived through the war years.

An unspeakable anguish that she would later transfer to her own child—the repressed trauma of persecution that Martin Miller denounces.

I suggest that behind this trauma resulting from a war situation, there are also older imprints, buried from the first years of Alice Miller's life and throughout her childhood.

In my opinion, they determined the relationship she established with her baby Martin and the "emotional blindness" she displayed—to use one of her own concepts.

So, let's look at some biographical elements we know and their emotional impact, as they show up in her writings and those of Martin Miller.

Alice Miller was born Alicija Englard to an Orthodox Jewish family in Piotrków-Trybunalski, Central Poland, on January 12, 1923.

Her paternal grandfather was a Hasidic rabbi who ran a Talmudic school in this town—a very religious and strict man.

His second son Meylech, Alicia's future father, was always in his shadow.

Although Meylech was in love with another woman, he did not dare to disobey when his father imposed on him an uncultured, *"cold and impassive"* wife.

The partners remained strangers to one another—a pattern that Alice Miller would replicate with her husband Andrzej Miller.

But let's go back to Alicija's mother.

Alice Miller denounces her *cruelty*: *"At the slightest sign of resistance,"* she writes, *"I had to fear the worst reprisals."*

The mother quietly applied her childrearing methods without fear of her child's reactions and the father avoided confrontation with his wife.

He never stood up for his daughter or confirmed her feelings.

However, Alicija remained attached to her father, who sometimes took her hand.

*“If my father had had the courage to see what was happening to me and stand up for me, my whole life would have been different.”*

One of her regrets, she writes, is that she allowed herself to be intimidated by nurses instead of responding with her own instincts to the language of her newborn children.

I think that we have here enough elements to glimpse the family environment in which Alice Miller grew up and her intimate knowledge of the “poisonous pedagogy” that she later denounced.

Added to this is the cruel lack of a reassuring relationship with her mother, a tragedy that she admits to having subsequently replayed with her children.

At the same time, it seems that the young Alicija transferred her need to be protected, to be rescued, to a helpless father and probably felt betrayed by him.

The film shows us that she transposed this same illusion onto her future husband Andrzej Miller, who could protect her from Nazis, but who turned out to be a very poor partner to say the least.

The feelings of persecution and betrayal internalized by little Alicija thus go back to the very first years of her life.

They were of course exacerbated by the tragic circumstances of the war, but these do not explain all their intensity.

*11. Can we explain her determination to discover the truth and not succumb to psychic death by identifying entirely with her persecutors?*

This is an almost metaphysical question!

Can we indeed find, in Alice Miller’s entourage, in the first years of her life perhaps, clues to understand the formidable energy she put into not only surviving, but also discovering what she called the truth of the child, *her truth*.

Indeed, the theme of psychic death is recurrent throughout her work, almost an obsession.

One can imagine that she had to repress the fear of not surviving abandonment by developing unusual sensitivity and cognitive faculties.

A kind of hypervigilance—a constant state of alert.

She learned to control her emotions but responded with a bright wit that her parents equated with rebellion.

Her son writes that his mother was constantly arguing with them about the rules of Judaism, such as dietary standards, which the child already considered irrational.

But at the same time, they must have secretly admired her intelligence, being both uneducated.

In his own book, Martin Miller describes the intensity of his mother’s rage at her parents and family.

But one can also think that the Jewish culture also brought her a warmth and conviviality that Martin regrets not having known.

Alicija’s grandfather was a learned rabbi, and everyone admired his wisdom and intelligence.

So, she had him as a kind of example.

In contrast to her parents who remained faithful to orthodoxy, her aunts and uncles opted for a more liberal lifestyle.

Her uncle Fishel was a Zionist and emigrated to Palestine.

Her youngest aunt Ala attended Polish school and married Bunio—a love match.

Even before the birth of their daughter Irenka, the second protagonist of the film, Alicija liked to take refuge in their home.

Ala and Bunio lived as assimilated Jews: in their home, Alicija could find confirmation of her rejection of orthodoxy, and above all, escape the constant arguments with her parents.

I think it was at Ala and Bunio that Alice Miller experienced what she would later call a “helpful witness”—someone who could give the child some understanding.

For little Alicija, Ala and Bunio were helpful witnesses.

*12. Didn't this couple also play a crucial role in Martin Miller's life?*

Indeed, and this reveals a psychological reality that Alice Miller conceptualized later: the notion of restaging.

The film tells how Ala and Bunia fled Piotrków with their little daughter Irenka when the Germans arrived—the scene in the forest in which Irenka recalls this with emotion.

Later, the family moved to Switzerland, and it was to her that Alice Miller entrusted Martin, then two weeks old.

Irenka was then 18 years old and would play the role of a surrogate mother for him during the first six months of his life.

Alice Miller told her son that she felt completely overwhelmed by the baby.

She even blamed him for refusing the breast!

Considering the unconscious mechanisms she later discovered, we see here an example of a mother passing on to her child the rejection she suffered from her own mother.

Unconsciously, she restaged the maternal rejection at the expense of her newborn.

Had she been aware of this, she would not have put her newborn in the care of one of her vague acquaintances for his first 15 days of life.

She would have found a way to connect with Martin.

Since this abandonment proved catastrophic for the baby, Alice Miller agreed that Ala and Irenka could pick him up and take him home.

It was a matter of life and death, but this did not move the young mother.

She left him for a second time, agreeing to entrust him to those who had once been *her* helpful witnesses.

A lesser evil perhaps, but a new traumatic break for Martin.

In this new restaging, Alice Miller probably did what she could do best, which was to leave her child with the very people who, in her own childhood, had saved her from a psychic death.

For her too, it had been a matter of life and death.

This shows that there is something inescapable about the traumatic re-enactment.

*13. Indeed, but isn't that a somewhat depressing prospect? Are we doomed to repeat traumas?*

This is a question that already preoccupied the ancient Greeks.

They had found that we reproduce patterns of behavior from our family lines, that we are therefore bearers of a family history.

Tragedies features characters chained to their destiny, often predicted by an oracle.  
We can think of Tiresias in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*.  
Even if they know the fate that awaits them, the characters in tragedies are not free to escape it.  
The contemporary world has developed a different conception.  
We have got rid of religious dogma—or so we think.  
We grew up with the idea of a certain amount of free will.  
Sometimes it takes painful life experiences to realize that we are also caught up in patterns of repetition.  
That we can be subject to various forms of compulsion and that we need some kind of treatment.  
We may be getting a glimpse that our childhood was not as idyllic as we thought.  
We could *wish* that all of this was behind us, but obviously it is not.  
I would say that our free will today is to exercise our conscience willingly to get rid of these chains of destructive causalities and not to look the other way.  
We have here a perspective of realization that speaks to our deepest nature.  
I'd like to go back to the reasons that drove Alice Miller to pursue her relentless quest for truth.  
There is her family environment—repressive for sure, but also warm and liberal for the time.  
There are the enlightened witnesses she found on her journey and psychoanalysts are among them.  
But first there is her inner self, the one she called her “true Self” which always refused to die.  
Although Alice Miller was not able to free herself from all her traumas, her quest for truth resonated with her readers, first and foremost with her son Martin.  
Like many of us, I have been impressed by his working through the trauma and growing.  
We all embody a truth-loving being who goes forward no matter the cost.  
Sometimes through painful re-enactments, sometimes through the awareness of their underlying significance.  
We all share a reflective consciousness that characterizes us as a species.  
And this consciousness is not only expressed on an individual level, but it also has a collective and even transgenerational reality.  
I would like to finish with this perspective.  
Thank you for listening!

**\*Marc-André Cotton** is International Vice-president of the International psychohistorical association, and co-organizer of this conference. With his late wife Sylvie Vermeulen, he has worked since many years based on Alice Miller's approach to childhood trauma and psychotherapy. Together, they founded the website *Conscious Perspective* in 2002. He regularly writes for the French quarterly PEPS, a magazine dedicated to young parents who want to implement benevolent parenting in the family and facilitates training for coaching parents in France. He's the author of *In the Name of the Father, the Bush Years and the legacy of violence in childrearing*, published in French in 2014.