

DR CLARA ZILAHÍ

Requiescat in pace

CLARA CLOTILDE ZILAHÍ was born in Vienna, Austria, on 22nd May 1927, the only child of Dr Ladislaus Zilahi and his wife Agnes Paula (née Beke), who were devout Catholics of Hungarian extraction.

Her father was born in February 1891, in Bánffy-Hunyad in Hungary – now in Romania and renamed Huedin. He was a lawyer, with a facility for languages, and was an associate of the well-known psychotherapist Alfred Adler. He distinguished himself as secretary of *Verein für Individualpsychologie* (the Society for Individual Psychology¹) and as editor of, as well as contributor to, *Internationale Zeitschrift für Individualpsychologie* (IZIP) (International Journal for Individual Psychology) founded by Adler in 1914.

Her mother, partly of Jewish descent, was born in January 1892 in Budapest, the capital city of Hungary. She was a child psychologist of the Adlerian school, and from 1926 to 1928 she served as deputy librarian for the “Wiener Educational Association”, whose findings were published in IZIP. She also contributed some articles to the journal, and of particular interest is that entitled *Zur Erziehung des Säuglings* (The Education of the Infant), first published in German in 1929, and then translated into English for republication in London in 1933. The article contained the author’s field observations on the development of a child during its first year of life. The child that formed the subject of the article was a baby girl referred to as “Klärchen” – who, in fact, was the observer’s own daughter, Clara. From this we learn, amongst other details, that Clara’s first word at her thirty ninth week was “Du” (You), which, for a long time was the sum total of her vocabulary, and became her usual response to whatever pleased her. But perhaps this observation, and other reported minutiae, should be read as having more to do with the wonder of a mother nursing her first child, rather than providing any new psychological insights.

Following the brief Austrian Civil War of 1934, the activities of Adlerian psychologists were curtailed and IZIP struggled to survive the restrictions. A way for its continuation was offered, whereby the journal could be published in Germany under a different name and on condition that Alfred Adler was replaced by a psychologist sympathetic to Nazi ideology. Since the condition was quite unacceptable, Dr Zilahi refused the proposal, with the eventual result that publication of the journal ceased in 1937 – the same year that Adler died in Aberdeen.

Both parents were strongly opposed to the *Anschluss* – the design of Adolph Hitler to create a “Greater Germany” by annexing Austria and the Sudetenland. This policy was supported by the Austrian Nazi Party which was deliberately encouraged by Hitler to stir up enough trouble to provide the pretext for Germany to intervene in Austria’s internal affairs. When the German Army marched into Vienna in 1938 – ostensibly to restore law and order – the Zilahi family fled for safety to Britain.

Initially, they took refuge with a family living near Beccles in Suffolk. The parish of Saint Benet in Beccles, was a Benedictine foundation and it seems that it was there that they met a Fr John Owen, OSB; for, on 21st November 1938, the Feast of the Presentation of Our Blessed Lady, Fr Owen, in a gesture of hospitality, provided

Clara's mother with a Latin/English edition of the Small Missal, and an English pocket edition of *The Imitation of Christ*—devotional reading which Clara herself came to treasure.

The stay in Beccles was short, for soon afterwards the family moved to Heswall in Cheshire on the Wirral peninsula. At the age of eleven, Clara had arrived in England barely knowing a word of English, yet she eventually became a fluent English-speaker with no noticeable trace of a German accent. She began her mastery of the English tongue with the aid of a pocket edition of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, as is described here in her own words:

“I am here putting down what I know of the history of this pocket size Shakespeare Library, which I believe is unusual, if not unique.

It belonged to an officer in the Merchant Navy (or possibly, the Royal Navy) who wished to be able to carry a complete set of Shakespeare's works around on his voyages. As far as I know it is a complete set of all the works, with one or two duplicated to fill all the shelves.

The owner expressed to his sister a wish that after his death the library should be given to ‘a little girl who was fond of Shakespeare’. He died or was killed in or soon after the First World War, and the library passed to his sister.

My parents and I came to England as penniless refugees from Austria, in 1938, and for the first few months of our stay were dependent on hospitality. The second family who put us up were the sister of the Naval Officer and her husband, living on the Wirral. I was in my first term at an English school, knowing only a limited amount of English. The class was ‘doing’ *As You Like It*, and in an effort to learn the language as quickly as possible, I spent my evenings going through the play with an English-German dictionary, looking up every word that I did not understand. Whether any other reading set book would have done just as well I shall never know, but I certainly acquired a reputation for a fondness for Shakespeare. Our hostess remembered her brother's wish and presented me with the collection.”

Some time before the departure from Vienna, Clara had started an autograph book into which she collected a few hand-written mementoes from family members, friends and school-teachers. The entry obtained from her maternal grandparents had clearly entailed a farewell trip to Budapest, to what they were pleased to describe as “*Dein zweites Heim*”—Clara's second home. Later, her father, writing in English added the following entry, which seems to lift a corner of the veil hiding the family's sorrow at the collapse of their livelihood and the flight from their homeland:

“My dear Clara,

You have been witness and partaker of our quiet, happy life in Vienna. You have been our happiness, our bringer of joy. You have also been witness and partaker of our unhappiness, breakdown and mourning for our home. You have seen very many good and bad things, my dear Clara. Forget the bad, always remember the good. Always remember Vienna, and every good word and gesture we have experienced since.—

Without sacrificing your own secure feeling for truth and right, without acquiescing in anything wrong, try to adjust yourself to given conditions of life. Do more than try,—do adjust yourself to them. As long as we are able to do this, we live; else we fall back from life, from reality, from all who are our friends; we fall back, become dry, bitter, useless, and die.

Be prepared, my dear Clara, to face every situation, and to do the good. Be, as you are to us, bringer of joy also to the others. They will bless you for it as a good friend.

Be prepared, my dear Clara, as you are now, to do your daily work quite naturally. It is no problem.—

Be prepared to train to make up your mind quickly, —to resolve quickly, —try it, —try it again, stick to it, —have courage to do it, and perseverance.—

You asked me to write into this little book of yours, and I tried to put down a few sentences the truth of which as well as their practical value for the happiness of my own child seemed to me

beyond doubt, beyond any limit or conditions. Yet I should like to add to them : do always use your own strong and sound moral and critical ability and whatever it may be, see and decide yourself.

There is only one thing that matters, my dear Clara: have courage and perseverance, – do not fear anybody but God.

'They that depart from THEE shall be written in the sand,' (Jer. 17.13)

'In the shadow of THY wings will I hope, until iniquity pass away.' (Psalm 58.2)

Heswall, 29th January, 1940.

Your father."

This little note reflects some of Adler's teaching on training a child to have courage and confidence. But it also hints at a shadow that fell upon a previously-happy family life, a shadow that was not dispelled by the move to England, for Clara's parents thereafter seem to have lived separate lives—her father remaining in London and her mother accompanying her through each stage of her career.

In spite of all this, Clara seems to have made the best of things. During her time on the Wirral, she joined the 1st Heswell Company of the Girl Guides (Purple Heather Patrol), and after moving to Saint Alban's in Hertfordshire, she transferred to the 5th Saint Alban's Company (Swallows Patrol). An early sign of a leaning towards the medical profession seems to have been noticed by the friend who described her in the autograph book as "the noble Red Cross student" –no doubt a reference to Clara's pursuit of the Girl Guides' ambulance badge.

In Saint Alban's, Clara attended the High School for Girls and formed the desire to study medicine at Liverpool University, but her headmistress, recognising her undoubted intellectual ability, recommended that she aim for Cambridge University, with a view to becoming a language teacher. Probably bowing to her parents' wishes, she sat and passed the entrance examination for Cambridge University, and was admitted to Newnham College—one of the few all-female colleges in Cambridge. For her twentieth birthday, in 1947, her mother presented her with a copy of the Knox translation of the New Testament and a booklet about Blessed Alix Le Clerc, the co-foundress of the Canonesses of Saint Augustine of the Congregation of Our Lady. The latter gift was intended as a memento of her association with Lady Margaret House—a house of studies established in Cambridge by that order in 1937. Since the establishment was only half a mile from their then-home,² it was most probably the place where mother and daughter regularly attended Mass.

On completing her university course in 1948, Clara was awarded a Bachelor of Arts degree in French, but two or three years after leaving, she returned to her old college to study medicine, gaining a bachelor's degree in surgery in 1955, followed by a bachelor's degree in medicine in 1956, having done the associated clinical work in Bristol.³ After qualifying, she obtained a post as a surgeon at the General Hospital in Stockton-on-Tees, County Durham, and set up home with her mother in Norton.⁴ By 1965, she had accumulated sufficient professional experience to be admitted as a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons. No doubt her surgical skills were suitably complemented by her homely proficiency as a seamstress.

From childhood, she had had a strong abiding attachment to the Catholic faith, and, in the 1960's, she became concerned about the direction taken by the Second Vatican Council, seeing that—to the detriment of Sacred Tradition—the modernism condemned by Pope Pius X, was gaining the upper hand in many of the institutions of the Catholic Church. When Latin was displaced from the liturgy by the

vernacular, she joined the newly-formed Latin Mass Society and, in 1967, she was instrumental in establishing a branch of the society in Stockton-on-Tees, becoming its first secretary.

Dr Zilahi's mother died in November 1969, and her father died just six weeks later. During World War II, he had worked in the No 8 Polindep⁵ Unit of the Allied Force Headquarters (Central Mediterranean), which was formed under General Eisenhower in 1942. The organisation was disbanded in August 1945 and in November of that year, Clara's father was awarded British nationality, as also was Clara.⁶

Soon after the death of her parents, Dr Zilahi gave up medicine in order to devote her time to the traditionalist movement within the Catholic Church. Insofar as she was about to become engaged in a psychological war for the soul of the Catholic Church, she was, perhaps unknowingly, following somewhat in her father's footsteps. She served as secretary for the British section of *La Ligue de la Contre-Réforme Catholique au XXe siècle* (CRC),⁷ the movement founded by the French priest, abbé Georges de Nantes, a fierce critic of Vatican II. Bringing to bear her acquired knowledge of English and French, she translated Father de Nantes' monthly newsletters, and distributed a regular English edition—the first issue appearing in February 1970. She also produced an English translation of his critique of the controversial Dutch Catechism, the result being published under the title "*A Faith For All Men? : A Companion to the Dutch Catechism*" (Edinburgh: David Macdonald, 1971).

In April 1969, Paul VI had promulgated the unprecedented novelty of a new rite of Mass, which soon met with serious doctrinal criticism—not to say *astonishment* when it was discovered to have been concocted with the assistance of six non-Catholic clergymen, whose contribution received the warm public approval of Paul VI. The hostile reception given to this "New Mass" delayed its introduction by a couple of years but when—without alteration—it was brought into use in Britain in late 1971, it greatly troubled the consciences of many serious-minded Catholics—Dr Zilahi amongst them. Her parish priest at Saint Joseph's in Norton, Fr Robert Thornton, had died in December 1970, after serving the parish for all of 37 years : his replacement made the "New Mass" welcome. Early in 1972, Dr Zilahi gave up her home in Norton, and moved south,⁸ to join the parish of Saint Dominic in Downham Market, Norfolk, which, reputedly, was the last parish in England where the Mass was celebrated exclusively in the traditional Roman rite. On principle, the parish priest, Father Oswald Baker, had disregarded the "New Mass" from the outset and, with the tacit consent of the Bishop of Northampton, Mgr Charles Grant, he had continued to use the same rite for which he had been ordained in 1942.

In 1974, "the chief architect of the New Mass", Father Annibale Bugnini, having been elevated to the status of an archbishop and appointed as secretary of the Congregation for Divine Worship, put his signature to a notice which was issued from Rome to all bishops, and which declared that, as soon as authorised vernacular versions of the new rite were available, public celebration of Mass in the old rite was to become unlawful. Given that the old rite was of immemorial custom and that its use was protected by a papal bull of 400 years standing, the validity of this declaration was widely disputed. Even so, in August 1975, Bishop Alan Clark, the auxiliary bishop responsible for the eastern half of the Northampton diocese,

pressed for the resignation of Father Baker, on account of his adherence to the old rite.

This news was not received lightly by the parishioners in Downham Market, a majority of whom rose up in defence of the old Mass and of their much-loved parish priest. They formed an action committee (later to be known as *The 1570 Society*), for which Dr Zilahi—once again taking to her typewriter—acted as secretary. Due to their efforts, the dispute became a *cause célèbre* and raised world-wide interest, but it ended with Father Baker being suspended under the questionable charge of “*disobeying the highest authority in the Church*”. He was allowed to remain in the presbytery, as provided for in Canon Law, but he was denied the use of the church building and any financial assistance from the diocese. Therefore, with the help of his supporters he opened a private oratory in Downham Market, to which, were drawn from far afield, many layfolk who wished to remain true to Catholic Tradition in which they had been raised.

Coming to believe that the position taken by Father de Nantes was anomalous, Dr Zilahi broke with the CRC and resumed her career in medicine, working part-time as a locum in the accident and emergency departments of the hospitals in Wisbech, Great Yarmouth and Lincolnshire. She fully retired from surgery in the early 1990's, and was later to recall that, in all of her medical career, the most rewarding period was the eighteen months that she spent nursing Father Baker prior to his death in 2004.

Father Baker's oratory remained in use by visiting priests until its closure in 2010. Dr Zilahi then took it upon herself to find an alternative venue where the traditional Mass could continue to be celebrated. Suitable premises for hire were found in Ely; *The 1570 Society* was revived; and for her remaining years she reprised her former rôle as its secretary.

The range of her interests and activities included animal welfare, ecology, cycling and gardening. She often had a small stall in Downham Market, selling home-grown plants to raise money for her charitable causes, amongst which were the *Woodland Trust*, and *Compassion for World Farming*. These interests were not unconnected with her Catholic faith, for, like Father Baker, she saw the natural world as a gift from God, to be treated with respect and to be used wisely.

Having been an undergraduate in Cambridge, cycling was almost second nature to her. She never owned a motor car partly because in her work she had seen and treated the results of too many motoring accidents. Her ideal was to travel by rail, accompanied by a bicycle for use over the shorter distances at each end of the journey. It was an ideal less easily realised when, with the withdrawal from service of guards' vans, stowage for bicycles almost disappeared from railway trains. She first became involved in rail-user groups in 1968, when she joined the *Railway Invigoration Society* and participated in a two-person demonstration against the threatened closure of her local station at Billingham. Her membership continued after her move to Norfolk, and when, in 1978, that society merged with the *Railway Development Association*, she joined the combined body, which took the name the *Railway Development Society*. She belonged to the *Fen Line Users Association* from its foundation in 1985, and she helped to form the *West Norfolk Public Transport Users Association*, which she served as secretary. To help raise funds needed for fighting rail closures, she organised a stall on the market place in Downham Market, “*selling gifts, garden produce, plants, home made preserves, cakes, etc. Everything at Bargain Prices!*”; and she regularly participated in sponsored cycle rides, to much the same

purpose. She was a committee member of the *Mid-Anglia Rail Passengers Association*, and, for many years, she also served as membership secretary for the East Anglian branch of *Railfuture*—the campaigning arm of the *Railway Development Society Ltd*. Continuing in this latter rôle, she joined the Society's board in 2004 and was appointed director with responsibility for disability issues. She finally retired from these activities in 2012.

In February 2013, on medical advice, she entered a local care home for a period of rest and recuperation, but, following a fall in which she incurred minor head injuries, she spent a fortnight at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in King's Lynn. Three days after being discharged, she suffered a heart attack and was rushed back to the hospital where, having been fortified by the Sacraments of the Catholic Church, she died peacefully in her sleep on 27th March 2013, at the age of 85.

She never married.

P.B. Revised 3 June 2013

NOTES

1. "Individual psychology" is the term used for Adler's holistic approach to the person as an indivisible being, as distinct from Sigmund Freud's analytical approach.
2. 15 Owlstone Road, Cambridge.
3. Residing at 5 Westbourne Place, Bristol.
4. 23 Roseberry Road, Norton.
5. Acronym for Political Intelligence Department, which itself was a cover-name for the Political Warfare Executive.
6. *London Gazette*, 11 January 1946, p.417.
7. *The League of the Catholic Counter-Reformation of the 20th Century*.
8. 31 Wimbotsham Road, Downham Market.