



Erich Fromm Interviewed by Gérard D. Khoury (I)

Erich Fromm
2000f [1979]-e

Erich Fromm Interviewed by Gérard D. Khoury (part 1), in: *Fromm Forum* (English version) No. 12 (2008), Tuebingen (Selbstverlag) 2008, pp. 33-40. [Transcript of the original English interview given to Gérard Khoury in 1978 and 1979 in Locarno. The tapes are at the Fromm Archives in Tuebingen. Parts of the interview were published in French under the title „Erich Fromm: du Talmud a Freud“ (1979d).]

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Introduction (Rainer Funk)

In December 1978 and early in 1979 Gérard D. Khoury interviewed Erich Fromm in his home in “Casa La Monda” in Locarno-Muralto. Dr. Khoury was born in Lebanon but is living since the seventies as writer, journalist and translator in France nearby Aix en Provence. Impressed by Fromm’s writings he visited Fromm for the first time in the sixties in Mexico and translated later some books of Fromm into French.

The following interview about Fromm’s life and ideas was given by Fromm after he had a severe third heart attack in 1978. Due to this fact he sometimes is not quite precise in his memories (confer my respective footnotes). And it is remarkably that – in contrast to earlier interviews – he is most critical of his parents and psychoanalytic teachers. In spite of these exaggerations and limitations this interview reveals many details of Fromm’s biography and of his humanistic ideas.

The English interview was taped and transcribed as close as possible to the spoken word. It is published here for the first time in its original English version. A French translation of the whole interview was published under the title „Entretien d’Erich Fromm avec Gérard D. Khoury,“ in: *Revoir Freud. Pour une autre approche en psychoanalyse*, ed. by G. Khoury, Paris (Armond Colin), 2000, pp. 149-180. Parts of the interview were published in French under the title „Erich Fromm: du Talmud a Freud,“ in: *Le Monde Dimanche*, Paris (21. 10. 1979), p. XV.

In this issue of *Fromm Forum* the first part of the interview is published; a second part will follow in 2009.

Khoury: I would like to ask you first some personal questions. Would you mind speaking of your family in Germany?

Fromm: That is to say of my family background. That is very difficult to describe. Superficially seen, I can say, my parents were German middle-class Jews. I was an only child; my father was a practicing orthodox Jew quite erudite in all matters pertaining to Jewish culture. But that is really on the surface. I actually would say I grew up in the Middle Ages, by which I don’t mean something negative but rather something very positive.



The whole family story, so to speak, was that of rabbinical ancestors, who sat the whole day and studied the Talmud and were not the slightest bit interested in making money or in trade, or in anything of that kind. My great grand father, for instance, happened to be one of the most famous Jewish Rabbi of his time; he lived in a small town of Bavaria and made his living by owning a small store and sometimes even by traveling a little bit and selling his goods. As the story goes, when a customer came in, interrupting him from the study of the Talmud, he showed some annoyance and asked: „Is there any other store here? Why do you have to come to interrupt me?“ So he was very poor, had many children but he was at his time quite famous in Germany as so called „Wuerzburger Raw“ which means the rabbi of Wuerzburg; he had a brother who was called the „Sennheimer Raw“ and was a rabbi of the small town Sennheim in Alsace.

At that time, a Jewish scholar was not a rabbi in the modern sense but he was just a great scholar who sometimes made his living from anything like a little store or like Spinoza from optical work and sometimes he happened to accept an office in a community, as their rabbi and then was paid a small salary by them, but this was not his main function; he did just the same, he sat and studied, had pupils and taught. This was an important tradition for me; so I found it as a child, and I remember that very well, very strange that people devoted their life to making money and I was very embarrassed when a man had to admit in my presence that he was a business man; in other words, that he spent his whole time making money! I felt ashamed for him, that he was forced to make that admission! In that sense I was really not born in the modern era, because that seems to be normal to me and I just couldn't understand a world in which making money was or should be the main occupation of people. This was medieval traditional view, which was still existent among the old type of orthodox Jews in certain types of their scholars.

I say that as a sociological footnote, there were also orthodox Jews in Germany who were very rich and very significant business men, especially in the metal trade which was almost entirely in Jewish hands; they were so many practicing orthodox Jews in this trade that the yearly banquet had to be given in kosher food. That, of course was an entirely different type; there was a special mixture of bourgeois attitude with traditional medieval type of the orthodox Jews. They were really in a way a historical paradox, that they should at the same time still carry on this medieval tradition but living a life which was completely that of modern capitalism.

For me this modern life was really not quite understandable; I didn't understand why people lived that way; I felt sorry for them. So, my spiritual home was -- one has to say -- this medieval atmosphere, in which everything was directed to traditional learning, to the perfection of man, to spiritual values. While I went to a German school, took part in German culture as every other boy or student did, who lived in Germany, nevertheless I was -- not a complete stranger -- but I was a stranger very definitely so and I indeed never regretted that. After this day I feel glad to have this experience as the Old Testament once said: „Love the stranger because you know the soul of the stranger for you have been stranger in Egypt“ [Lev 19,33.]. One can really understand the stranger only if one has been thoroughly a stranger, and being a stranger means one is at home in the whole world. These two things go together; if I am not a stranger in one country and in every country then I am not at home in the world and if I am at home in the



world I am a stranger -- and not a stranger everywhere.

Khoury: That's your father's family; what about your mother's family?

Fromm: My mother's family did not have quite the same background although my mother had an uncle, a brother of her father who was also one of the greatest Talmudic scholar of his time. When I was 18-19 years old¹, I studied with him Talmud and I loved and admired him very much. I can perhaps give you an example of his type of pedagogic influence. One time I asked him – and I knew he liked me -- : „Uncle what do you think will become of me?“ hoping he would say something nice. He said: „An old Jew!“ That was a very characteristic Jewish answer to discourage any kind of ambition.

Khoury: Going back to your father, what was his work?

Fromm: He was a business man; he had a wine business. In fact he was ashamed to be a business man. I always noticed, when friends of his ordered something from him, he felt very uncomfortable; he really wanted to separate his shameful existence as a business man from his personal life.

Khoury: What did your father like to do in his personal life? Did he like to hear music, to travel? What was the cultural background?

Fromm: Well, my father had an exclusively Jewish cultural background. He had, in the modern sense, very little cultured; I mean, he would know what an average German of his class would know, a little Goethe and a little Schiller. He was interested very much in Jewish music. [...]

Khoury: How your father appeared to you at that time? What was your relationship to him?

Fromm: This is an awfully difficult question which in a way would lead in a direction which goes far off. I always felt to be the defender of my mother, who used to cry a lot and I felt I had to defend her against my father. Now later on -- that's the case with many boys -- I saw the picture was not as it appeared first; but I was very fond of him and he was very fond of me. My father was very neurotic; he was frightened, terrible anxious about me; he had no fears about himself but had a neurotic anxiety about me and as an only child it was a very bad situation. He pampered me and I got very little discipline. He would have preferred if I had always remained a baby of three! The older I got the less he was interested in me, but I wouldn't say that he liked me. Then came the rivalry ... he liked me as a little baby but he was jealous of all the friends I had. He didn't teach me anything; he was not interested in my own development.

Only at the age of twelve, I met a man who was a friend of the family, the first man who took an interest in my education and who taught me a lot. Up to this day I remember the first picture in the museum in Frankfurt where he took me. The war broke out in 1914, I was fourteen when he was sent to war; when he came back, he went to another town and I was eighteen-nineteen; so, I can say, I had a short time of somebody really educating me.

¹ According to other sources Ludwig Krause was Fromm's first Talmudic teacher when Erich Fromm was aged 11-12 years. – Cf. R. Funk, *Erich Fromm - His Life and Ideas. An Illustrated Biography*, New York (Continuum International) 2000, 176 p.



Khoury: Who was he?

Fromm: That man, with his own words, when he rented a room or when somebody asked him, he would say: „My name is Sussman [Oswald Süßmann], I am a Galician Jew“, which was in Germany then not something very popular, not with the Jews and not even with the non-Jews; he was an extremely honest man, courageous, a man of great integrity. I owe a great deal to him.

Khoury: I would like to hear more about your mother; was she at home or did she have any activity outside?

Fromm: She was at home, she had her women friends. My mother was very much bound to her own family and really she liked me in as much I was a Krause, which was her family name and everything which was good in me was typically Krause and everything bad was Fromm!

Khoury: Which implies, may be, a kind of conventional marriage.

Fromm: Yes, it was a very conventional marriage; there was not more wrong about it than in the average marriage of that time.

Khoury: It is important to know from where you come, what were your parents. And it is interesting to see how in that context, in that family, you managed to become a psychoanalyst?

Fromm: It has nothing to do with my family except that I became a rather neurotic young man, which is, God grace I didn't become more neurotic, under the influence of a pathologically anxious father who overwhelmed me with his anxiety and at the same time with his lack of giving me any guide lines and not having any positive influence on my education; so I became a rather neurotic young man.

At that time, the chronological thing was to going to psychoanalysis. I must add one thing; I had not the slightest advantage from two analyzes I had and not the slightest help! That doesn't mean that I have had no help from psychoanalysis. All the help I got was in analyzing myself during analyzing my patients; I saw in the patients my problems and I analyzed myself bit by bit in seeing my problems in my patients, so I can only say I was cured by my patients and not by any others!

Khoury: You lived at that time in Frankfurt with your parents? How did you choose your studies and what was your parent's reaction?

Fromm: What I wanted to do was actually to go to one of the Talmudic Universities in Lithuania. It was my great wish to become a Talmudic scholar but that evoked such a fierce reaction on my father's side that I couldn't do it without hurting him so deeply, that I had not the courage or may be the wish to do so. Thus I gave up this project -- I would say today fortunately -- to become a Talmudic scholar and I began to study Law. I had always and still have a great interest in Law and I love Law. For me Law is so to speak the frozen minimum of Ethics, which exists in a society. I am accustomed if I have to make a decision to first ask myself what would be the answer from the legal standpoint, then I try to go beyond the legal standpoint to a human standpoint, but I want to make sure that I, at least, fulfill the legal standpoint and do not operate in an empty



room in which I may imagine myself all sorts of things to my advantage. First of all legal minimum, then comes whatever addition love can make. So I feel at least to stand on some minimal ground.

Khoury: You started with Law in Frankfurt -- and after that what have you done?

Fromm: Law really didn't satisfy me enough; I felt more and more I didn't want to become a lawyer and so I studied in Heidelberg, Sociology and Psychology with Alfred Weber who was a marvelous teacher, a man whom I greatly admired, a man of great intellectual power, of great integrity and of an ardent political conviction for freedom.

Khoury: So from Law to Sociology around 1920-21 and Psychology. Who was teaching Psychology?²

Fromm: It was in Muenchen.

Khoury: What was in Munich the influence of Freud's ideas?

Fromm: Well, I can tell a quite amusing story. Professor Bumke who was the head of the department, a very conventional psychiatrist who was against Freud, said in one of his lecture: „You know, one must admit, there are some things in which Freud was right; for instance that one wishes always to go further that one was. If somebody is professor in Breslau he wants to become Professor in Munich and if he is Professor in Munich he wants to become Professor in Berlin.“ This was the depth of understanding of the chief psychiatrist and his view of the merits of Freud!

Khoury: So Freud was not really known in the University?

Fromm: Completely unknown! I remember in the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute where I was trained, I had a colleague who was a psychiatrist and who was being analyzed; he had to hide the fact he was being analyzed because otherwise he would have been fired from his University's position!

Khoury: What about your parents, when you started psychoanalysis?

Fromm: They were really not interested.

Khoury: They were opposed to Talmudic studies but psychoanalysis was accepted?

Fromm: If my Talmudic studies would have left me in Frankfurt they wouldn't have opposed; it was the radicalism of going to Lithuania, far away, which was unacceptable. So I studied in Frankfurt and a little later I went to Heidelberg which was still very near. I remember the day I was passing all my examinations in Heidelberg, my doctoral examinations, my father who transferred his strong inferiority feeling about himself, came to Heidelberg because he was afraid I would not be received and that I might commit suicide! This was the mental process and the kind of mental „ambiente“ which describes the very essential part of anxiety ridden...

² According to the university files of Heidelberg Fromm moved from Frankfurt to Heidelberg in 1919 and studied National Economy (Sociology was still not established) with Alfred Weber, Philosophy (with Heinrich Rickert) and Psychology (with Karl Jaspers). Only after he had finished his doctorate he went in 1925 to Munich to study psychology and psychiatry (with Emil Kraepelin) and started his first psychoanalysis with Wilhelm Wittenberg in Munich.



Khoury: And what about your mother?

Fromm: My mother was not terribly interested in that either because she dreamed of a pianist career for me. I was taught piano as most children of this class were and that ended when the war began in 1914; but my mother's greatest hope was I would become a second Paderewski!³

Khoury: Did you keep a taste for music from that time?

Fromm: I love music in spite of my mother, in spite of all influences; I had to play piano with a half deaf teacher and I was very glad when I could stop. My greatest wish was to play violin and for God knows what reason -- I think because of Paderewski -- I was sentenced to learn piano and so I had a great prejudice against the piano. And I still love the violin.

Khoury: Your studies in Germany, with Law, Sociology and Psychology, gave you a basic knowledge that Freud wished to have?

Fromm: Yes, but it had a different meaning for Freud; it was for him a basis to become a politician or it would have been if he could have studied Law; I had never the wish to become a politician.

Khoury: Did you have another wish? Was your career linear, without interruption? Did things come one after the other without too much questioning?

Fromm: I think without too much questioning. It was rather a slow but unbroken development.

I have not mentioned, this occurs to me now, and it is perhaps necessary to tell it, that I had a period at the age of 15-16 when I was a Zionist. I joined the Zionist youth movement and stayed there for some times. One of the few things I am really still proud of was that after a few years, I might have been 18 or 19 years old at that time, I disliked the Jewish nationalism so much that I made a speech at the meeting of that whole group which was called „Blue-White“ and said: „This Jewish nationalism is not a bit better than the Nazi-Nationalism.“ Now, that took me some courage to say and afterwards I left.

Khoury: Speaking again of psychoanalysis -- with whom did you start first analysis?

Fromm: I started with Doctor [Hanns] Sachs⁴, who was one of the seven most intimate pupils of Freud and I must say -- it lasted a few years -- I can't remember one thing I learned about myself in these years! I don't say that with any feeling of antagonism, but it is to the best of my memory. Then I was analyzed by a very nice man in Muenchen, Doctor [Wilhelm] Wittenberg with whom I had the nicest conversation, but there was also not one word learned about myself from him! I think the only thing I learned was

³ Ignacy Jan Paderewski was a celebrated Polish pianist of the period, also composer and politician, who became Prime Minister of Poland in 1919.

⁴ Actually Fromm started with Wilhelm Wittenberg in Munich in 1925. Wittenberg died in 1927. In 1928 Fromm went to Berlin in order to get his psychoanalytic training at the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute and being analyzed by Hanns Sachs. His training was finished 1930. - His very first psychoanalytic experiences Fromm made in 1924/1925 with Frieda Reichmann at the Heidelberg "Therapeuticum". When Erich Fromm fell in love with Frieda Reichmann they were advised by the Frankfurt psychoanalyst Karl Landauer to stop the psychoanalytic relationship. In June 1926 the wedding of Erich and Frieda took place.



that one pours the cream in the coffee before one pours the coffee!

With Doctor Sachs I did one of the more courageous things; I had seen Doctor Sachs before and he was extraordinarily ugly; he lacked the chin completely. I thought he really looked like a pig! And since I was a very conscientious pupil, knowing one has to say everything, even if it was very difficult, I thought I had better start out with this; then there is nothing more worse that can come, and so I said, looking at Doctor Sachs: „Since I have to say everything, I want to tell you that when I saw you the first time I thought you have a face like a pig.“ Doctor Sachs never forgave me about that because he was really very ugly; that was in the beginning of the three years process and it poisoned our relationship. I don't think I could have learned from him much anyhow. Doctor Sachs answered in a very stupid way as a skilled analyst wouldn't, but he was hurt himself very much, he must have had his own problem with his face; he said: „I don't believe that you disliked me, you put your overcoat very close to my overcoat in the wardrobe outside.“ The wardrobe was very narrow and it was impossible to hang my overcoat somewhere else.

After that experience, I analyzed myself, that is to say, my patients analyzed me as I said it before. So, since I tried not to be an outsider who listened but to put myself into what the patient felt and to feel what he feels -- what I still do, because it is in my opinion the only way to understand him, not to be an outsider; the patient feels he is understood. The patient must feel that you know what he feels, not intellectually but inside. The difference is very clear between a person who senses at the other one really and can talk from the inside and the person who has remained outside and is only able to listen to. So I analyzed myself and still do analyze myself and still find new things.

Khoury: During the period of your analysis, did you have a research's work also? Have you been involved in the School of Frankfurt?

Fromm: At the University of Frankfurt, there was a group of people which published together, under the editorship of Horkheimer, the director of the “Institut fuer Sozialforschung“, a journal, the “Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung“, in which most earlier works of that group were published; my function was to represent psychoanalysis in the group as one of the social sciences, which is necessary for the full understanding of society.

Khoury: Was there Adorno in the group?

Fromm: Yes, but about Adorno I had never anything to do with him.

Khoury: And Marcuse?

Fromm: Marcuse was also in the Institute and we worked together but never were very close. With Horkheimer I was on friendly relationships until our full separation.

Khoury: Do you mean full separation because you left Germany or because...?

Fromm: No, because I left the Institute.

Khoury: Do you want to add something to that German period?

Fromm: I can add I was a member of the Berlin Psychoanalytic Society after finishing my official training; I then had a private practice in Berlin. I was accepted as a member of the Psychoanalytic Society, that was so to speak the form of graduation. When I think of



my first years of practice all what I can think is that I must have been awfully dumb, probably I was not as dumb as I think now, but if I think of the ignorance and the nonsense which I was taught!

Khoury: So you had to modify your method slowly?

Fromm: Actually I began with the observation that I became awfully tired during the hours of analysis, when I analyzed people and then I asked myself: „Why do you get tired?“ and the answer came, there must be something wrong with what you are doing, that you are not more interested. Then I began to leave the rules and act spontaneously, to forget what I had learned. And then I was not tired any more and I developed my own methods of analyzing which I have changed more or less constantly through out the years. The more you learn the more you do think somewhat differently. I have never written a book about psychoanalysis and its techniques because I felt that will come another five years and I shall know more; so by now I feel that if I want to write this book at all I should write it now.

Khoury: Is it at that time that you left Germany and went to the United States?

Fromm: Yes, I should like to mention, speaking of that, one thing: My own insight in political processes helped me to recognize the necessity of Hitler's victory about a year earlier than most people. Not that I was more clever but because I was more accustomed to an objective analysis and less filled with wishful thinking. I remember very well this time; it was unbelievable to me, how people who were very intelligent, just because they didn't want to see what would happen didn't see it and at a time when they could still have spared their lives, they repressed what they could still have otherwise seen.

This held true also for Horkheimer and other members of the Institute. We all saw that pretty early to the extent, for instance, that the Institute sent all his money abroad a good deal before Hitler came to power. I think it is the only case of an Institute who did that, otherwise of course the Nazis would have seized everything.

Khoury: [...]What have you done when you arrived to the United States?

Fromm: I started my practice there, in New York, but I didn't take so many patients. I have had a principle all my life that I didn't analyze anybody before two o'clock in the afternoon; I had a strict rule that the morning was always there for writing. That is very important because naturally the seduction of earning more money, especially if at part time the money is not too well of, is considerable sometimes. I never broke that principle; I would rather do nothing in the morning than to take a patient. So, I stuck to that principle always.

Khoury: This implies a continuation of the spirit of your family, as far as I refer to what you said of the „milieu“ in which money was not the essential element the Talmud was. I would like here to ask what do you think of the financial relation between the analyst and the patient according to the rule established by Freud?

Fromm: I think it is pure swindle! Just a ridiculous rationalization; they say, the patient must make a sacrifice, otherwise it doesn't work, so a rich man can never get into heaven because if you charge him 200 dollars an hour, this is not a sacrifice! The only



measure on the side of the analysand is the quality of the inner participation of the patient and not what he pays.

Khoury: But today it is a well admitted principle everywhere. How can it be changed?

Fromm: The best would be, of course, if the analysis is taken in charge by social insurance, so there is no more direct money relationship between the analyst and the patient. The analyst should then really not be tempted by money. I had always the principle of charging such fees that I was available for people who were not rich. I practically never had rich patients, with one exception in all my practice, and I did not charge more when the patient was very rich, but when he had very little I charged sometimes less. I had a maximum and not a minimum. [...]

Khoury: But as far as you are concerned, you were able to teach, in the United States, and so complete your income by earning money through teaching?

Fromm: In teaching I earned almost nothing because teaching was done without payment except in some colleges where I got some payment. The New School for Social Research paid for teaching. I retained my complete freedom, that is to say I had not any income from any source which would have made that source so important for me that I could not have easily dropped it. I think that was the same held true for the patients, I didn't want to charge rich patients a great amount because that would have created a kind of dependence on the patients.

Khoury: With whom did you work in the United States?

Fromm: Actually, I was one of the few persons who found the Psychoanalytic Institute in the States, the William Alanson White Institute, together with Sullivan, Clara Thompson, Karen Horney... – she later left.

Khoury: Where did you work? At hospitals...

Fromm: No, I analyzed, I supervised analysts in training and I gave seminars.

Khoury: Were you at the head of a new school of psychoanalysis?

Fromm: I intentionally avoided to found a new psychoanalytic school.

Khoury: In the foreword of „The Heart of Man“ you wrote: „I have never been satisfied with being classified as belonging to a new ‘school of psychoanalysis’ whether it is called ‘cultural school’ or ‘Neo-Freudianism’. I believe that many of these new schools, while developing valuable insights, have also lost much of the most important discoveries of Freud. I am certainly not an ‘orthodox Freudian.’“ -- My question then is: „How can you define yourself?“

Fromm: I would say I am a psychoanalyst who has his basic knowledge from Freud and who tries to develop it according to his own experiences and who does not consider himself to be a founder of a school. It is like in any science, theories are developed on the basis of new findings and of more experience; this is usual, and only if one makes a school of *one* thinker then begins a sort of dogmatism and so on.

Khoury: You want to avoid creating a new dogma, you also want to avoid being fit in ...



Fromm: ... a little box nor do I want to collect around myself adherence which most younger people like to do, so that they can form a group, leaning themselves on somebody who makes them feel more secure.

Khoury: Is it a desire to keep in all fields -- in reality and in thought -- freedom?

Fromm: Yes, and what an old-fashioned professor would do, he teaches and let his students do what they want with what they learned.

Khoury: It seems to me that you had always in your life a guiding line that you never changed; you had a radical attitude and were never tempted „to adapt“ to what is called the „necessities of life“. Using the term „to adapt“ I am referring to the American adaptative psychology, about which you might want to say a few words.

Fromm: As far as I am concerned, it is true, I never did much adapting. Concerning Psychoanalysis, there is one more thing that has to be said. All depends on the attitude of the analyst to society. Most analysts have a bourgeois middle class social viewpoint and therefore think we live in a relatively sane society and that the individual who is adapting to that society is sane. I, being a socialist and a critic, believe we live in an inhuman, irrational, crazy society and the so-called adapted person can be defined in terms of: „He is as crazy as the average“.

Psychoanalysis can have two functions. One, to help a person to reduce his suffering. That is similar to medicine. He has symptoms, he suffers, more than others and the aim is to help him to overcome suffering. Psychoanalysis, however, can have an entirely different function, provided it is critical of society, namely to help a person to further his spiritual development -- which goes much beyond the social aims and practice of his society. That is to say, psychoanalysis can be a moral, if you like, a religious discipline for the optimal development of man. So, these are two entirely different possibilities of psychoanalysis.