



## Autobiographical Highlights

by Erich Fromm

### The family background

Being the only child of two overly anxious parents did not, of course, have an altogether positive effect on my development, but over the years I've done what I could to repair that damage. (1974b) – Superficially seen, I can say, my parents were German middle-class Jews. I was an only child; my father was a practising orthodox Jew quite erudite in all matters pertaining to Jewish matters. 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. (1979d)

### The background of tradition

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 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 by travelling 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?“ (1979d)

### The sense of the world

I was exposed to the same influences as every other young German during this time. But I had to deal with them in my own way. Not only because one always had an exceptional – not necessarily unpleasant – position as a Jew in Germany but also because I felt quite at home neither in the world I lived in, nor in the old world of traditions. (1977i) – My sense of the world was that of a premodern man. That attitude was reinforced by studying the Talmud, reading the Bible a lot, and hearing a lot of stories about my ancestors, who had all lived in a world that predated the bourgeois world. – I've remained an alien in the business or bourgeois culture, and that explains why I developed such a harshly critical attitude toward bourgeois society and capitalism. I became a socialist. (1974b)

### Alfred Weber

I had only one non-Jewish teacher whom I really admired and who deeply influenced me and that was Alfred Weber, the brother of Max, also a sociologist, but in contrast to Max, a humanist not a nationalist and a man of outstanding courage and integrity. (*Letter to Lewis Mumford 1975*)

### Salman Baruch Rabinkow

I was Rabinkow's student for about five or six years and, if I remember correctly, I visited him at that time almost daily. The bulk of the time was occupied with studying Talmud, the rest with studying certain philosophical writings of Maimonides, the *Rav's Tanya*, Weiss's *Jewish History*, and a discussion of sociological problems. He took great interest and was very helpful in my doctoral dissertation... Rabinkow influenced



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my life more than any other man, perhaps, and although in different forms and concepts, his ideas have remained alive in me. (1987a)

### Sigmund Freud

Freud opened a new world for me, the world of the unconscious. He taught me – and many millions – that only a small part of ourselves is conscious. He distinguished two kinds of the unconscious: the so-called preconscious – something which could be conscious, but is not at the moment (because one would go insane if one always thought about everything which goes on in one's brain at the same time). Then there is the unconscious – the sense of the repressed which is prevented by some force within me from becoming conscious. (1980e) – Besides Freud there are, in my opinion, only two most important psychoanalysts, Sándor Ferenczi and a man who was very close to him but of a very different type of personality, Georg Groddeck in Baden-Baden. (1979d)

### Georg Groddeck

When I think of all analysts in Germany I knew, he was, in my opinion, the only one with truth, originality, courage and extraordinary kindness. He penetrated the unconscious of his patient, and yet he never hurt. ... Even if I was never his student in any technical sense, his teaching influenced me more than that of other teachers I had. He was a man of such stature, that the majority of the psychoanalysts in Germany were not capable of appreciating him, and he was too proud a man to make himself pleasant and popular. (*Letter to Sylvia Grossman 1957*)

### Johann Jakob Bachofen

Bachofen's discovery gave me a key not only for understanding history, not only for understanding so many things in our patriarchal society in which love is made dependent on performance, but also for understanding what I have come to see more and more as the central problem in individual human development: What meaning – in women as well as in men – does our longing for a mother have? What constitutes the bond to the mother? (1974b)

### Karl Marx

What drew me to him was primarily his philosophy and his vision of socialism, which expressed, in secular forms, the idea of human self-realization, of total humanization, the idea of a human being whose goal is vital self-expression and not the acquisition and accumulation of dead, material things. (1974b) – Freud and Marx have been the two great disillusioners, although Marx saw deeper because he looked at the forces underneath which needed illusions, while Freud only individually dissolved illusions people had in their own individual relationship to reality ... (1979d)

### Max Horkheimer and the Frankfurt School

At the University of Frankfurt, there was a group of people which published together, under the editorship of Horkheimer, the director of the „Institut für Sozialforschung“ a journal in which most earlier works of that group were published; my function was to



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represent Psychoanalysis in the group as one of the social sciences, which is necessary for the full understanding of society. ... With Horkheimer I was on friendly relationship until our full separation. (1979d) – Since a few years Dr. Horkheimer has changed his attitude to my work. He accused me of being a conformist and that my theoretical approach was not particularly fruitful any more for the use of psychology in the social sciences. In general, he expressed his opinion at different times that psychology was only of minor importance for social science anyway. This is in strict contradiction to his attitude prior to that time. (*Memorandum 1939 for Kurt Rosenfeld*)

### The new approach to psychoanalysis

I try to show that drives which motivate social behavior are not, as Freud assumes, sublimations of sexual instincts. Rather, they are the products of social processes, or, more precisely, reactions to certain constellations under which the individual has to satisfy his/her instincts. These drives ... are fundamentally different from natural factors, namely the instincts of hunger, thirst, sexuality. Whereas these are common to all human beings and animals, the former are specifically human products and not biological; they are to be understood in the context of the social way of life. (*Letter to Karl August Wittfogel, 1936*)

### The new psychotherapeutic approach

As I began to shift my attention more and more to what struck me as truly central in my work, that is, to the relationship of one human being to another and to the specifically human emotions that are rooted not in instinct but rather in man's existence as a human being, I began to see, then I began truly to understand; and the person I was analyzing could understand what it was I was saying, too. He felt: Aha, so that's the way it is. (1974b)

### Being a scientist of his own

I have never had, and have never been able to acquire to this very day, the ability to think about things I cannot make come alive in my imagination. I have no gift for abstract thought. I can think only those thoughts that relate to something I can concretely experience. If that relationship is lacking, my interest fades, and I can't mobilize my abilities. (1974b)

### The loving writer

Love has no purpose, though many people might say: Of course it does! It is love, they say, that enables us to satisfy our sexual needs, marry, have children and live a normal, middle-class life. That is the purpose of love. And that is why love is so rare these days, love without goals, love in which the only thing of importance is the act of loving itself. In this kind of love it is *being* and not *consuming* that plays the key role. It is human self-expression, the full play of our human capacities. (1974b) – My beautiful Love, I love you so that it hurts but the hurt is sweet and wonderful. I wish you feel it in your sleep. (*One of Fromm's „messages“ he wrote in the seventies for his wife Annis if he got up before her*)



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### On politics

I have been a socialist since my student days forty years ago, but have never been active politically until the last five years, when I have been very active in helping to form an American peace movement, on the left wing of which I find myself. (*Letter to Adam Schaff 1962*) – I am an extremely political person, but neither in politics nor anywhere else can I cling to illusions simply because they support my „line.“ Lies can tie us to a party, but ultimately it is only the truth that can lead to the liberation of man. But too many people are afraid of freedom and prefer illusions to it. ... We cannot split our off our knowledge of ourselves from our knowledge of society. Both belong together. ... I feel that political progress depends on how much of the truth we know, how clearly and boldly we speak it, and how great an impression it makes on other people. (*1974b*)

### Biophilia – the love for life

The other night I wrote a kind of appeal which is centered around the love of life. It was born out of a mood of despair which made me feel that there is hardly any chance that atomic war will be avoided, and sudden insight in which I felt that the reason why people are so passive toward the dangers of war lies in the fact that the majority just do not love life. I thought that to appeal to their love of life rather than to their love of peace or to their fear of war might have more impact. (*Letter to Clara Urquhart 1962*)

### What man can become

There is a Hassidic story which occurs to me. The pupil sees the rabbi in a sad mood and asks him: „Master, why are you sad? Are you sad that you have not reached the highest knowledge, that you have not the greatest virtues?“ The master said: „No, I am not sad about that. I am sad not to have become myself totally“. – That is to say, in every human being ... there is an optimum of what he could become, there are things that he could never become. So many people waste their life by trying to become what they could not be and by neglecting to be what they could become. ... So a person in the first place should have a certain image of what he could and what he could not become, what are the limitations and what are the possibilities. (*1979d*)

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