



Thoughts from Linda:

Man's Search for Meaning

Viktor E. Frankl

2019

I always assume that most people know of Viktor Frankl (1905-1997) and have been surprised that in the past few years fewer and fewer people seem to know of him or of his most published of 39 books, *Man's Search for Meaning*.

His story is one of the most interesting and inspiring stories of the 20th Century.

He was a survivor of four concentration camps during WWII, emerging to lead a life of meaning which as he said when asked to express the meaning of his own life, was that it was all focused on "helping others find the meaning of theirs." This book explains his journey and gives an almost unbelievable picture of life of prisoners in the Nazi camps of WWII.

He was born in Vienna, Austria and lived there before and after the war. After obtaining his medical degree in 1930, Frankl gained extensive experience at a psychiatric hospital in Vienna, where he was in charge of the "pavilion for suicidal women".

Over a four-year period (1933–1937), he treated 3,000 patients each year. In 1937, he began his private practice, but with the Nazi annexation of Austria, his ability to treat patients became limited. In 1940, he joined the Vienna Rothchild Hospital, the only hospital still serving Jewish patients, as head of the neurology department. Prior to his deportation to the concentration camps, he helped numerous patients avoid the Nazi euthanasia program that targeted the mentally disabled.

He wrote this book in 1945 in 9 days, after being released from the camp, and originally intended for it to be published anonymously. However, his friends and colleagues influenced his thinking, noting that the transparency of his own identity might give the

reader even more understanding based on the absolute validity of the telling of these experiences as he knew them.

The book has two parts: the first part is his story of the everyday experiences of being in a concentration camp and the second part is about the theory of logotherapy in a summarized version.

He was tattooed as prisoner #119-104 having been sent to the first camp after being offered an opportunity to leave Austria for the USA, which he declined. He tells a quite moving story about just why he declined that offer—it was all about staying to care for his elderly parents.

In fact, his father later died in a camp as did his wife. Viktor Frankl was first sent to Auschwitz and his story of the arrival and early days there are both shocking and revelatory. He traces the journey of the prisoner through three phases: early arrival, the routine of daily life and survival and the release from the camp, focusing on the psychological nature of each phase.

As Harold Kushner notes in the *Forward*, a most enduring insight offered by Frankl is the thing he attributed to being able to survive the camps: the attitude that the only thing we as human beings can control is our reaction to events and our freedom to choose how we will respond to the situations that life throws at us.

It is important to realize that he had developed many of his theories prior to WWII and was a young prodigy, growing up in Vienna. He corresponded with Freud and others and wrote several scholarly papers as a young man. He earned both an M.D. and a PhD. from the University of Vienna and later served as a visiting professor at Harvard, Stanford, SMU among others.

His philosophy and therapeutic doctrine of Logotherapy (20 volumes in German) is summarized by him in the second part of the book. This approach to positive therapeutic treatment has gained great popularity and deserves even more space in the book.

Victor Frankl argued that “life is not primarily a quest for pleasure, as Freud had believed, or a quest for power (as Alfred Adler taught) but rather a quest for meaning.” He saw three primary sources: 1.) in work of doing something significant, 2.) in love, through caring for another person and 3.) in courage during difficult times.

This book is consistently selected by *The New York Times* as one of the key 100 books that everyone should read, and Amazon has also selected it in its top 100 list.

In the age of COVID, and in all ages, it would be a terrific way to begin a new year. His universal message is of hope and meaning, flavored with our own responsibilities...to ourselves and to each other in living a life of meaning.