

**SOME PERSONAL MEMORIES
OF ALFRED KORZYBSKI
AND HIS TIMES**

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SEVERAL PRESENT DAY STUDENTS of general semantics have repeatedly indicated a desire to hear anecdotes, stories, descriptions, and opinions from those who knew Alfred Korzybski personally, in order to make him come alive as a human being. Otherwise, they say, he will remain an abstract author of a difficult 43-year-old book of 761 pages plus 56 pages of introductions. Since Korzybski died a quarter century ago, if personal recollections are ever to be^a published they must be written soon.

The scholastic and university environments of the 1940's were vastly different from those of the 1970's. Today it seems that many more students and faculty members are open-minded, scientifically oriented and able to consider and possibly accept new ideas and approaches. They are much less likely to be upset or even baffled by such statements as "The old absolutes are gone" or "You can never know all about anything" or "Science requires a probability orientation."

In the 1940's, g.s. was taught in fifty to one hundred colleges and universities but almost never was listed in catalogues under its name. Several prominent "scholars" in other fields dismissed g.s. with shallow, adverse comments which so clearly indicated a complete lack of understanding of the subject that one wondered if they had read any part of the growing literature. Students of g.s. and members of g.s. societies were sometimes termed "followers" or "cultists." Consequently, some of us were always on the look-out for anything written that com-

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mented favorably, especially if it quoted a prominent psychiatrist, mathematician, or physicist. In a sense, we *were* "cultists," if by "cult" one means a group who accepts certain ideas and attempts to get others to consider them. However, "cult"₁ is not "cult"₂ and this particular "cult" appealed to many graduate students and taught its "followers" to "distrust generalizations, including this one." In any case, Korzybski must have experienced and felt this opposition to his ideas as keenly as the rest of us, and he welcomed as gladly as we did the praise of established scholars: the Second edition of "Science and Sanity," published in 1941, quoted favorable comments on the first edition by twenty-three outstanding intellectual leaders, including six from the fields of mathematics and physics, six from biology, botany, zoology, and entomology, five from psychiatry, etc.

Physically, Korzybski was 5 feet 8 or 9 inches tall, weighed about 165 pounds, was of a stocky build and powerful of body and voice. He lost a leg in World War I and walked with a cane with some difficulty. Nearly always he wore clean and neatly pressed trousers and a shirt open at the collar, and on only a few occasions were his associates able to persuade him to wear a jacket. Some thought him gruff and curt because he was usually serious and was not given to small talk, but he often gave evidence of a well developed sense of humor.

He demanded little of life in the way of comforts or luxuries. He wanted and collected a sizable and interesting library. I never saw him take more than two drinks (always rum), despite some of the stories I have heard. His bearing and force of personality seemed to have a special appeal to the ladies in a "Yul Brynner" manner; at least he was equally bald.

Korzybski was enormously patient with anyone who was genuinely trying to understand, learn, and practice g.s. He was at least equally impatient with and even scornful of critics who gave evidence of having spent ten minutes thumbing one of the popular books on "semantics" and then acting as if they knew "all" about Korzybski and his work. Such an event might make him fume and wave his arms in frustration or shrug his shoulders in disgust.

Korzybski's robust voice needed no microphones. And when he spoke, he revealed a broad scope and depth of information on a startlingly wide variety of subjects. He kept current on day-to-day events, and within hours after the Hiroshima bomb was dropped he released a widely published statement for the press which, when read today, shows remarkable foresight.

I once called on him at the hotel where we had reserved a rather elaborate suite for the duration of one of the New York seminars. My purpose was merely to inquire if he were comfortable and wanted anything to make him happier. "Sit down," he said, in his deep and com-

manding voice. He then placed two straight chairs about three feet apart and facing each other. With him in one and me in the other, he proceeded to give me an unrequested two-hour lecture on the history of the Catholic Church in Europe: its power, political activities and social views. When I tried once to ask a question or comment or tell him I had other things to do, he said in no uncertain manner, "Do not speak." I feel sure he meant "Do not speak outside your skin or inside it—just listen." Needless to say, I did just that. Later, I wondered why he was at that moment so interested in the subject, since it played no part in the on-going seminar.

Fortunately for us "followers" and "cultists," g.s. was strongly attacked by certain leftist and communistic scholars. ("It ignores the class struggle," one said.) Perhaps for this reason, g.s. largely escaped the Joe McCarthy Committee's witch hunts. During the early post World War II days I had a personal visit from a member of the U.S. Naval Intelligence who wanted to know if Korzybski was "a communist." I could completely reassure him on that point (because he had no use for doctrinaire religions, including communism). However, the reason I gave was that A.K. had been a Count in Poland and his family had lost their extensive land holdings. When I inquired why my visitor wanted to know all this, he said that two Naval Captains had applied to go to a g.s. seminar and that called for a routine investigation.

Korzybski often said, "No one can always be conscious of abstracting and delay all his reactions, including me—and I wrote the book." Like all of us, he did not always practice what he taught. But when he failed, one was never quite certain that he was not consciously playing to achieve his point. One night during a seminar, one of the older students came to us and said that he was so hard of hearing he was missing much of the lecture. He requested permission to move to the front row, which we had kept vacant at Korzybski's request. We replied that we would ask Korzybski, who then refused, stating that he kept the front row open as a protection in case someone in the audience should try to attack him (which had happened in one or more previous seminars and conferences). Although A.K.'s message was carried back to the student during the intermission, he moved to the front anyway, and, in order to hear better, he turned his good ear towards Korzybski and kept his mouth open. When the lecture was over A.K. was furious, assuming we had permitted this "obvious idiot to move to the front, sitting there with his head cocked to one side and his mouth open." (The student was at least 55 years old and was the founder and head of an important and highly regarded advertising agency specializing in ethical drugs.)

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The impact of Korzybski's seminars on a participant were often unpredictable. He preferred to give his thirty hours of lectures in as few days as possible and often gave two three-hour lectures in a day. One lady dropped out after attending only two lectures, even though she had found paying the fees a financial burden. Later she explained to friends that "He was jerking the supports out from under the structure of all I have been taught and believe and I couldn't stand it. If I had continued I would have had to revise everything in my life."

A.K.'s early lectures in a seminar often were not understood by those who had not read some of the literature. Efforts were made to persuade prospective students to read *Science and Sanity* or *People in Quandaries* before registering for a seminar, but it was never made an absolute requirement. I recall one incident when a person attending a seminar turned to my wife at intermission and said, "I've been to nine hours of lectures and he hasn't once gotten into higher mathematics and that's what I came for." She replied, "Everyone gets their money's worth on a different night." At the end of the evening he leaned over and said to her, "Tonight I got my money's worth." He never explained what had been said that reversed his attitude, but it had nothing to do with mathematics.

One night while riding across Manhattan in a taxi I asked Korzybski if he were satisfied with the progress g.s. had made. He thought an unusually long time before replying. "Yes," he said. "It has more acceptance than Einstein's ideas received in a similar amount of time."

On another occasion I brashly asked him whether he had read all the books included in the bibliography of *Science and Sanity* (619 in the first edition, 100 additional in the second). With a quick look of surprise and even scorn, he replied "Certainly—and studied all of them and many articles not included!"

To drive home the points of his lectures, Korzybski used several small devices carried in his pocket. One was a penny box of matches which would be given by prearrangement to someone who asked for a match. The student would shake it and, not hearing a rattle, would give it back, saying, "It's empty." At that point A.K. would open it and say, "I'm sorry, but it's too *full* to rattle." This would lead to further discussion of the role in behavior of unconscious assumptions, lack of awareness of abstracting, confusion of orders, etc. Korzybski would also quite often draw, rather poorly, sketches on a blackboard to illustrate his points. At intermissions some more gifted artist from the audience would neatly redraw the figures and these were never erased. At the beginning of each lecture, Korzybski would review in a sentence or two each of the figures on the board from all previous lectures. There were no interruptions and no questions in the early lec-

tures. Written questions were permitted in the latter part of the seminars, but I feel reasonably certain Korzybski answered only those he wanted to cover and which he thought would contribute to the understanding of the other students. It was my understanding that the reason he did not accept questions in the early part of a seminar was that he felt many shallow and argumentative points would be raised and that as the seminar progressed the points would be covered in any event.

Korzybski did not often make neat, clean-cut, sharp statements. For example, if he were discussing something and at the same time explaining the use of the structural differential he would not point to a specific level and say, "That statement is on this level." Rather, he would wave his hand at a whole area, apparently to communicate that "That statement is more or less on this level, depending on the context, the meanings of the individuals involved, etc." At the same time, he was forceful and convincing. He had a slight accent (*neurosis* was "new roses"), but it served to require intense concentration on the listener's part and was not so pronounced that it hampered communication.

Today it seems to me that college and graduate students are somehow much better prepared than thirty years ago to understand general semantics and to use it in their daily lives. There seems to be much less pressure toward conformity in many directions, including ideas, dress, behavior, music, art, etc. I believe that today Alfred Korzybski would be offered important posts in leading universities and provided with money and staff to further his research and work. It is unfortunate that he was not given such opportunities during his lifetime.