

Alice Miller obituary

Psychoanalyst who wrote *The Drama of the Gifted Child*

Sue Cowan-Jenssen

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Alice Miller, who has died aged 87, was an influential and controversial figure in the world of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. Her first book, *The Drama of the Gifted Child* (1979), sold millions worldwide. A Freudian analyst, she described how a child's need for love was often exploited by parents in order to meet the parent's own unmet needs. Unable to express their true feelings, these children grow up unhappy and depressed, out of touch with their real selves.

In *For Your Own Good* (1980), she introduced the concept of "poisonous pedagogy" to describe the child-rearing practices that were so prevalent in [Europe](#), especially before the second world war. She believed that the pain inflicted on children – "for their own good" – was unconsciously the parent re-enacting the trauma that had been inflicted on them when they were children. Thus the cycle of trauma continued down the generations.

She analysed the childhoods of several famous figures in order to prove her point, the best known being Adolf Hitler. In her view, all Hitler's atrocities could be explained by the brutal persecution and abuse he experienced as a child. It is here that Miller was at her most powerful. She brought the reality of child abuse to the foreground in a way that many found compelling. She described how children protect their parents in order to salvage some hope of having their needs fulfilled and in the process have to repress their true needs.

Long-term suffering could be avoided only, in her opinion, if the child had an adult in his or her life who could acknowledge the reality of their experience. She called these adults "empathic witnesses" and this acknowledgment, she said, not interpretation, should be the role of psychotherapists with their clients. She attacked psychotherapy, especially psychoanalysis, because she saw it as a system of thought that denied the reality of those treated.

Sigmund Freud claimed that he had initially believed in the reality of childhood sexual abuse and that it was only later that he came to think of his patient's stories as fantasies. Miller condemned Freud's change of mind as an act of cowardice and a betrayal of children; and, distancing herself from these ideas, in 1988 resigned from the International Psychoanalytic Association, which represented Freudian thinking.

I first met Miller in 1984 when I was a young psychotherapist working in Paris. She appeared frail, but she was an uncompromising character, and even fellow professionals that she had admired failed to meet her demanding standards. She told me that psychoanalysts such as

John Bowlby, Donald Winnicott and Heinz Kohut modified their views on childhood trauma in order not to be cast out by their fellow professionals.

Her refusal to compromise was both her strength and weakness. Her sense of certainty led her into a personal cul de sac. She came under the influence of a Swiss psychotherapist called J Konrad Stettbacher, who was the only therapist she believed to be on the side of the child. Later, she had to withdraw her support when allegations against him of professional misconduct emerged.

Miller rarely revealed details of her personal life. She was born in Lwów in **Poland** to the middle-class, Jewish Rostovski family. The Drama of the Gifted Child, though essentially her own story, found resonance with the experience of her many readers. She told Jane Islay, her first publisher in the US, that her parents had managed to smuggle her out of the Warsaw ghetto and she had lived with a Catholic family under an assumed name. Sometimes she would manage to sneak back in to the ghetto bringing food for her family, but she could not save them. She later told me that it was only when she started spontaneous painting in the early 1970s that she began to remember the destruction she had witnessed. Miller left Poland in 1946 to study for a doctorate in psychology and sociology at the University of Basel. She subsequently trained as a psychoanalyst in Zurich and started to practise in 1960. During this time she married the sociologist Andreas Miller and had two children, Martin and Julika. Her marriage did not survive. After her first books were published she no longer worked as a therapist and devoted the rest of her life to her writings.

She was a passionate supporter of children's rights, fighting to the end to abolish the smacking of children, which she saw as an abuse of power. She wrote open letters to the Pope, George W Bush and Tony Blair asking them to outlaw physical punishment.

Miller attracted a worldwide following and until the last weeks of her life communicated through her website, www.alice-miller.com. Parents and psychotherapists owe Miller a huge debt. Ever alert to the abuse of power, she reminded us to question whether we do "know best" and, above all, never to humiliate those who depend on us. She is survived by her son and daughter.

Alice Miller, psychoanalyst, born 12 January 1923; died 14 April 2010