

Wolfgang Georg Jilek (1930–2021)



Fig. 1 Wolfgang Jilek in Vancouver 2006
Photo: Ruth Kutalek

Wolfgang Georg Jilek, Canadian-Austrian Psychiatrist and Anthropologist, died January 15th, 2021. He is survived by his wife Louise Jilek-Aall, herself a psychiatrist, and daughter Martica.

Wolfgang was born in Tetschen-Bodenbach in Bohemia, as son of Dr. Oskar Jilek, medical doctor, and Elfriede, born Biemann, Red Cross Nurse. After World War II his family had to leave Bohemia and he started to study philosophy at the University of Munich, and later medicine in Munich, Innsbruck and Vienna, which he completed in

Innsbruck in 1954. In Vienna he came in contact with Viktor Frankl, the founder of Logotherapy, with whom he kept a long personal and professional relationship. (*see letter from Viktor Frankl to Wolfgang Jilek and Louise Jilek-Aall*) This probably influenced his decision to specialize in psychiatry. After travelling in North and Central America he started to work at the Department of Neurology at the University of Innsbruck, and later at the Swiss Institute of Epilepsy in Zurich where he was introduced to C. G. Jung. There he also met a Norwegian colleague, psychiatrist Louise Aall. They married 1963 and shortly thereafter moved to Montreal, Quebec, in Canada. His acquaintance with Dr. Louise Jilek-Aall was a lifelong marital and professional partnership.

Wolfgang and Louise completed their residency in Psychiatry with the transcultural psychiatrists Prof. E. Wittkower and Prof. HBM Murphy at McGill University in Montreal; both also completed their studies in social anthropology at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. Since 1966 Wolfgang and Louise lived in British Columbia. Wolfgang became a Fellow of the ‚Collegium Regale Medicorum et Chirurgorum Canadense‘ in 1972 and member of the medical faculty of the University of British Columbia in 1975. Until recently he was Clinical Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry. Together with his wife, Dr. Louise Jilek-Aall, they were regional psychiatrists in the Upper Fraser Valley and became interested in the North American Indians. In the 1970s they were visited by Claude Levi-Strauss on several occasions and corresponded subsequently. Several letters (*see letter from Claude Levi-Strauss to Wolfgang Jilek and Louise Jilek-Aall*) show his deep interest in the work of Wolfgang and Louise.

Later they also conducted ethno-psychiatric investigations in East Africa, Haiti, South America, Thailand and Papua New Guinea. In Papua



Fig. 2 Last visit with Dr. Viktor Frankl, Vienna 1991, photographer unknown

New Guinea and Tonga he worked as consultant for the World Health Organisation WHO 1984/85 and 1987, from 1987 to 1989 he was “Refugee Mental Health Coordinator” and “United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees” in Thailand. From 1983 to 1999 he was Secretary and Chairman of the Section Transcultural Psychiatry of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA) and organized international Symposia in Europe, Asia, and South America.

Wolfgang has published widely in English, German and Spanish; because of these scientific merits he was awarded the Austrian Citizenship in 1997; 2002 he became honorary member of the Austrian Ethnomedical Society.

Louise and Wolfgang came to visit Vienna during Wolfgang’s appointment as Guest Professor at the “Abteilung Ethnomedizin,” now Unit Medical Anthropology and Global Health, Medical University of Vienna, in autumn 1999. I still remember his vivid lectures on transcultural- and ethnopsychiatry which he used to complement with numerous photographs and films from the field. He had an encyclopedic knowledge on Austrian histo-

ry and was also interested in his own family history. In the interview I conducted with him while in Vienna and which was published in the Viennese Ethnomedicine Newsletter (Vol. 2, 2, 2000, 25ff., *link*) he related that one of his ancestral relatives was a doctor Jilek who was the personal physician of Archduke Maximilian. In this interview he also explained the difference of ethnopsychiatry and transcultural psychiatry:

I would define ethnopsychiatry, but this is my definition, as the study and investigation of the culture inherent, the emic therapeutic customs, beliefs and concepts as they relate to psycho-social and psychiatric conditions. Ethnopsychiatry and transcultural psychiatry however is often considered as synonymous but I would think that transcultural psychiatry is a comparative, analytical science—in the customary terminology an etic science—, while ethnopsychiatry is based on the information which comes from culture immanent sources—emic sources. Both approaches have to be combined.

Viktor E. Frankl, M. D., Ph. D.

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20. Juli 1983

Lieber Kollege Jilek, verehrte Frau Doktor,

soeben aus München und dann von ein paar Tagen in den Bergen nach Wien zurückgekehrt - gerade nur, um die Post abzuholen und zum Zahnarzt zu gehen - finde ich Ihr Manuskript und Ihr schönes Buch vor. Letzteres hatte ich gerade nur die Zeit durchzublättern, muss aber sein Studium aufschieben; das Manuskript zu lesen habe ich mir aber nicht nehmen lassen, und unmittelbar darnach und noch unter dem Eindruck der Lektüre wollte ich Ihnen schreiben, wiesehr ich beeindruckt bin von Ihrem Wissen, das ebenso umfassend wie fundiert ist, von Ihrem tiefen Verständnis für überraschende Zusammenhänge und von der Menschlichkeit, die sich in Ihnen beiden so harmonisch mit der Wissenschaftlichkeit paart.

Sie wissen doch, dass ich Sie in den letzten Jahren in zahlreichen Vorträgen, aber auch Publikationen (auch Büchern) immer wieder zitiere - jetzt kann ich es noch viel intensiver, auf Grund der Formulierungen in Ihrem jüngsten Manuskript!

Und dazu wollte ich Ihnen schnurstraks danken - tief beeindruckt von Ihrem neuesten Werk, aber auch gerührt von den Rückverweisen auf meine Vorlesungen zu Ihrer Studentenzzeit. Inzwischen ist, wie man ja hier zu sagen pflegt, viel Wasser durch die Donau geflossen, ich bin ganz alt geworden, Sie aber blicken bereits in Ihren Jahren auf ein ansehnliches Lebenswerk zurück, nicht nur als Forscher, sondern auch als jemand, der einem ganzen Volke zur Gerechtigkeit verholfen hat.

So drängt es mich denn, zu alledem Ihnen beiden meine Glückwünsche darzubringen.

Mit herzlichen Grüßen, denen sich meine Frau anschliesst, verbleibe ich

in Bewunderung und Dankbarkeit Ihr

P. s.: Auf das hohe, ja vorbildliche formale und verbale akademische Niveau Ihrer Ausführungen bin ich bei alledem ja noch gar nicht eingegangen. Wie ich denn auch noch gar nicht gesagt habe, wie schade es ist, dass die Umstände es nicht erlaubten, uns auf ein längeres Gespräch zusammenzusetzen.

Fig. 3 Letter from Viktor Frankl to Wolfgang Jilek

COLLÈGE

DE

FRANCE

CHAIRE

D'ANTHROPOLOGIE SOCIALE

Paris, le 23 juin 1974
2, rue des Marronniers 75016

Monsieur et Madame W. Jilek
"Schoenbrunn House"
P.O.Box 29
Harrison Hot Springs, B.C.

Chers Collègues et amis,

Ce mot pour vous remercier très vivement de votre lettre si cordiale du 17 juin. Je me réjouis beaucoup, sitôt terminées les cérémonies de ma réception à l'Académie française, de reprendre le chemin de la Colombie britannique, cette fois en compagnie de ma femme et de mon fils. Votre si gracieuse invitation me touche; nous espérons bien pouvoir en profiter et vous rendre un jour visite à Harrison. Toutefois, une certaine marge d'incertitude subsiste dans notre programme, tant en ce qui concerne les dates et la durée du séminaire que notre tour ultérieur en direction du nord et dans l'intérieur du pays; mais nous nous verrons, je pense, dans les premiers jours suivant notre arrivée, ou bien je prendrai la liberté de vous téléphoner soit à Harrison, soit au Mental Health Center.

En attendant le plaisir de vous revoir, je vous prie, chers collègues et amis, de croire à mes sentiments les meilleurs.



Claude Lévi-Strauss

Fig. 4 Letter from Claude Lévi-Strauss to Wolfgang Jilek



Fig. 5 From left to right: Maranda, Todd, Lévi-Strauss, Chief Malloway, Mrs. Malloway, W.G. Jilek, L. Jilek-Aall; residence of Drs. Jilek, July 1974, photographer unknown

When asked what transcultural- and ethnopsychiatry can contribute to medicine and anthropology he answered: “The recognition of the findings of comparative cultural psychiatry, which is my preferred term (if I had the choice I would call transcultural psychiatry comparative cultural psychiatry) and ethnopsychiatry (...) is essential for practising health professionals. (...) I would emphasise that in future the curriculum of the training of health professionals and of psychologists should certainly include courses in ethnomedicine, and ethnopsychiatry I consider as part of ethnomedicine, and comparative cultural psychiatry in order to give them both a culture immanent view through ethnopsychiatric information and a comparative transcultural view.”

Wolfgang will be greatly missed for his kindness and warmth, his humor, and his knowledge.

Acknowledgement

The letters and photos are a donation from Wolfgang Jilek to the Austrian Ethnomedical Society. They show very well the very personal contact of Louise and Wolfgang Jilek with the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, founder of structuralism, who visited them several times in Vancouver, and with Viktor Frankl, founder of Logotherapy and existential analysis in Vienna. Reprinted with kind permission of the Austrian Ethnomedical Society.

RUTH KUTALEK, Vienna