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Erich Fromm, 79, Dies; Famed Psychoanalyst

By Dava Sobel
c. New York Times News Service

NEW YORK — Dr. Erich Fromm, the psychoanalyst and social philosopher whose influential writings ranged over subjects from the alienation of the individual to the sanity of society, died Tuesday of a heart attack at his home in Muralto, Switzerland. He would have celebrated his 80th birthday Sunday.

Fromm wrote 20 books, most of them hailed as major works in the field of psychology, including "The Art of Loving" (1956), in which he called love "the only sane and satisfactory answer to the problem of human existence." He sought a sane solution to political difficulties as well and in 1957 helped to organize the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, or SANE, which took its name from his book, "The Sane Society" (1955).

Fromm was schooled in Germany in the analytical technique of Sigmund Freud, but he developed his own theories and his own style of psychoanalysis.

Similarly, although he was born into a Jewish family as the descendant of a long line of rabbis and reared according to orthodox teachings, he abandoned Judaism when he was 26 years old. As he explained in 1962 to a reporter, "I gave up my religious convictions and practices because I just didn't want to participate in any division of the human race, whether religious or political."

Born in Frankfurt March 23, 1900, Fromm became a pacifist at the age of 14 when World War I began. He sought American citizenship after visiting the United States in 1933 and emigrated from Germany, then dominated by the Nazis, in 1934.

His theory of human nature cut a middle path between the instinctivists, who held that innate qualities were fixed at birth, and the behaviorists, who taught that all responses are the result of learning.

"Every character trait is interrelated with every other," Fromm wrote in 1972,

"and a single trait cannot be changed without changes in the whole system. That is why to change the character of a person can be compared to splitting an atom; to change only his behavior can be done by conditioning."

No subject relating to human experience was beyond his consideration. The late Margaret Meade, anthropologist and author, praised Fromm for this scope when she said of his book, "Escape From Freedom" (1941), "It bridges the gap between economics and psychology and shows how no theory which invokes only man's way of earning a living or man's human nature alone is sufficient."

Others found his eclecticism pretentious. Harvey Cox of Harvard Divinity School criticized him for his "congenital insensitivity to the normally respected boundaries between disciplines."

Fromm entered psychoanalysis from philosophy, not medicine. He earned his doctoral degree from the University of Heidelberg in 1922 and also trained at the University of Munich and the Psychoanalytic Institute in Berlin.

He began seeing patients in 1925 and began what was to be a distinguished teaching career in 1929 at the Frankfurt Psychoanalytic Institute and the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt.

He lectured all over the world and held formal faculty appointments at Columbia University, Bennington College, Yale University, Michigan State University, where he founded the school's Institute of Psychology; New York University, and the National University of Mexico.

Dr. Earl G. Witenberg, director of the William Alanson White Institute for Psychiatry, Psychoanalysis and Psychology in New York, said in an interview that Fromm was one of the founders of the institute in 1943 and worked there continuously until 1950.

"He was a penetrating

man," Witenberg said. "He could very adroitly make formulations and statements about a patient after one hour of interviewing. He could describe a patient's difficulties in literary and graphic, almost poetic, terms."

In his personal dealings, Witenberg said, Fromm "did not countenance fools or sham," and added: "People had to be authentic as well as sincere. He was a great man, both by his presence and his firm ideas. You either loved him or you hated him."

Once, when Witenberg asked him why he had given up his strictly Freudian approach to analysis, Fromm replied that he had got bored with it. "He was more interested in confronting the patient," Witenberg said, "often working face to face with him and dynamically engaging him with insights about his condition and working actively toward the goal of getting those things clarified."

Witenberg cited this confrontational practice as one of Fromm's major contributions to psychoanalysis. And although Fromm discussed the strengths and weaknesses of Freudian analysis in his book "Sigmund Freud's Mission" (1959), his own technique of treatment was never the subject of any of his written works, and his colleagues learned what they could about it through word of mouth.

In the 1950s Fromm saw a danger in spreading technology and warned about the possibility of people turning into robots. He participated in a conference on unions in 1956, where he warned that a 20-hour work week, which was being advocated then, would produce nervous breakdowns in people who would not know what to do with their time.

Rather, he suggested making work more interesting, making "men count again" and making all segments of life — economic, cultural, political and spiritual — move forward in an integrated way.

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Erich Fromm Dies

Erich Fromm, world-renowned psychoanalyst and social philosopher is dead at 79. He was the author of 20 books, among which was "The Art of Loving" and was an organizer, in 1957, of the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE). (Page A6)