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Mortimer Ostow, 88, Theorist on Anti-Semitism

By JEREMY PEARCE; REPRINTED FROM YESTERDAY'S LATE EDITIONS.

Dr. Mortimer Ostow, a psychiatrist and neuroscientist who studied the psychological sources of anti-Semitism and other expressions of religious and racial fanaticism, died on Sept. 23 at his home in Riverdale, N.Y. He was 88.

The cause was cancer, his family said.

Dr. Ostow, who was in private practice in Riverdale and Manhattan, was the author of a 1996 book, "Myth and Madness: The Psychodynamics of Anti-Semitism," in which he explored the origins and overt manifestations of racial prejudices.

In the 1980's, he led a group of psychologists and psychoanalysts in a study that investigated the root causes of anti-Semitism. In reviewing case histories of patients, the group found that negative feelings and a resentment of Jews could sometimes be traced to early childhood.

Dr. Ostow and his colleagues suggested that such feelings might be linked to troubles in toilet training or even an Oedipal rivalry, in which a son's negative impressions of his controlling father could be projected onto Jews.

In later studies, Dr. Ostow and others looked at fanaticism and the psychological motivations behind terrorism. His conclusions included the theory that terrorists often experience childhoods marked by anger or hopelessness.

In a 1986 interview with The New York Times, he remarked on the terrorists' characteristic obsession with a final and self-justifying revenge, "in which, though the forces of evil will prevail at first, they will ultimately be defeated by the forces of good."

He continued, "That victory will mark the end of the present era, and the initiation of a new era of peace, harmony and general exaltation."

In the 1960's, Dr. Ostow was an early advocate for extending psychotherapy in cases where patients had been medicated and discharged from mental health facilities.

In 1965, he told members of the American Psychoanalytic Association that drug treatment by itself was often inadequate and that drugs "remove the more florid symptoms of mental illness while leaving the disturbance itself untouched."

Instead, he argued for an allied approach combining drugs with intensive therapy to prevent relapse. He had explained his ideas in an influential 1962 book, "Drugs in Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy." He also wrote "The Psychology of Melancholy" in 1970.

Mortimer Ostow was born in Brooklyn. He received an undergraduate degree and master's degree in chemistry from Columbia. In 1941, he earned his medical degree from New York University.

Dr. Ostow trained at the New York Psychoanalytic Institute and Mount Sinai Hospital before opening his private practice. In 1954, he began a long association with Jewish Theological Seminary in Manhattan, where he instructed rabbinical students in aspects of psychology in an effort to help rabbis better understand family dynamics and problems.

From 1966 to 1989, he directed the seminary's Bernstein Pastoral Psychiatry Center. He retired as a professor emeritus in 1990. In 1995, the American Society of Psychoanalytic Physicians gave him its Sigmund Freud Award.

Dr. Ostow's wife of 63 years, the former Miriam Furst, died in 2005.

He is survived by a son, M. Jeremy Ostow of South Orange, N.J.; three daughters, Dr. Abigail Ostow, a psychiatrist, of Newton, Mass., Rachel Lustbader of Manhattan and Dr. Robin Ostow, a sociologist, of Toronto; two sisters, Shari Friedman of Riverdale and Evelyn Mandelker of Manhattan; 11 grandchildren; and one great-grandchild.

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