

Man's Search for Meaning

PREFACE TO

THE 1992 EDITION

THIS BOOK HAS NOW LIVED TO SEE nearly one hundred printings in English—in addition to having been published in twenty-one other languages. And the English editions alone have sold more than three million copies.

These are the dry facts, and they may well be the reason why reporters of American newspapers and particularly of American TV stations more often than not start their interviews, after listing these facts, by exclaiming: "Dr. Frankl, your book has become a true bestseller—how do you feel about such a success?" Whereupon I react by reporting that in the first place I do not at all see in the bestseller status of my book an achievement and accomplishment on my part but rather an expression of the misery of our time: if hundreds of thousands of people reach out for a book whose very title promises to deal with the question of a meaning to life, it must be a question that burns under their fingernails.

To be sure, something else may have contributed to the impact of the book: its second, theoretical part ("Logotherapy in a Nutshell") boils down, as it were, to the lesson one may distill from the first part, the autobiographical account ("Experiences in a Concentration Camp"), whereas Part One serves as the existential validation of my theories. Thus, both parts mutually support their credibility.

I had none of this in mind when I wrote the book in 1945. And I did so within nine successive days and with the firm determination that the book should be published anonymously. In fact, the first printing of the original German version does not show my name on the cover, though at the last moment, just before the book's initial publication, I did finally give in to my friends who had urged me to let it be published with my name at least on the title page. At first, however, it had been written with the absolute conviction that, as an anonymous opus, it could never earn its author literary fame. I had wanted simply to convey to the reader by way of a concrete example that life holds a potential meaning under any conditions, even the most miserable ones. And I thought that if the point were demonstrated in a situation as extreme as that in a concentration camp, my book might gain a hearing. I therefore felt responsible for writing down what I had gone through, for I thought it might be helpful to people who are prone to despair.

And so it is both strange and remarkable to me that—among some dozens of books I have authored—precisely this one, which I had intended to be published anonymously so that it could never build up any reputation on the part of the author, did become a success. Again and again I therefore admonish my students both in Europe and in America: "Don't aim at success—the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one's dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself. Happiness must happen, and the same holds for success: you have to let it happen by not caring about it. I want you to listen to what your conscience commands you to do and go on to carry it out to the best of your knowledge. Then you will live to see that in the long run—in the long run, I say!—success will follow you precisely because you had forgotten to think of it."

The reader may ask me why I did not try to escape what was in store for me after Hitler had occupied Austria. Let me answer by recalling the following story. Shortly before the United States entered World War II, I received an invitation to come to the American Consulate in Vienna to pick up my immigration visa. My old parents were overjoyed because they expected that I would soon be allowed to leave Austria. I suddenly hesitated, however. The question beset me: could I really afford to leave my parents alone to face their fate, to be sent, sooner or later, to a concentration camp, or even to a so-called

extermination camp? Where did my responsibility lie? Should I foster my brain child, logotherapy, by emigrating to fertile soil where I could write my books? Or should I concentrate on my duties as a real child, the child of my parents who had to do whatever he could to protect them? I pondered the problem this way and that but could not arrive at a solution; this was the type of dilemma that made one wish for "a hint from Heaven," as the phrase goes.

It was then that I noticed a piece of marble lying on a table at home. When I asked my father about it, he explained that he had found it on the site where the National Socialists had burned down the largest Viennese synagogue. He had taken the piece home because it was a part of the tablets on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed. One gilded Hebrew letter was engraved on the piece; my father explained that this letter stood for one of the Commandments. Eagerly I asked, "Which one is it?" He answered, "Honor thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long upon the land." At that moment I decided to stay with my father and my mother upon the land, and to let the American visa lapse.

VIKTOR E. FRANKL

Vienna, 1992