

Chapter 1

Kazimierz Dabrowski: The Man

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I feel privileged to provide a biography of Kazimierz Dabrowski, as he had a profound affect on my life. I was just beginning my master's program in Edmonton when one of his colleagues, Marlene Rankel, picked me out of a crowd and said, "I have a book for you to read and someone for you to meet." Reading the book (Dabrowski, 1972) gave me a unique perspective and insight into my personality and life history that I had never had before, and I couldn't wait to meet him. I certainly wasn't disappointed, and it was my privilege to be his student and later, to receive his unpublished papers.

Over the years that I knew him, I developed a tremendous appreciation for many aspects of Dr. Dabrowski, but two particularly stand out. First, in my life experience, he was a unique human being. He had a tremendous energy about him, an animation, a twinkle in his eye, and yet he also had a tremendous sense of calm about him. He was extremely gracious and one of the most humble people I've ever met. Above all, Dabrowski had a remarkable sense of compassion and an ability to look you in the eye and deeply connect with you. On one occasion, I recall asking him about my anxiety, and he put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Ah yes, but this is not so negative." You couldn't help but feel better after just sitting beside him.

My second appreciation was academic. Dabrowski, a truly Renaissance man, had an astounding command of world cultures, the arts, philosophy, medicine, neurology, and of course, psychiatry and psychology. His theory is a complete system of thought. The more one tries to dissect it,

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the more its comprehensiveness and integration become obvious. My appreciation for his body of work has grown over the years as I have come to know it more intimately.

One of my proudest moments came when Dabrowski, late in his life, asked me to keep his theory alive after his passing. I have honored his request through my Dabrowski website (<http://members.shaw.ca/positivedisintegration>) and the dissemination of his original writings. In the process, over the last 20 years, I have had the privilege of being friends with his daughter, Joanna (also a psychologist). There is no question that Dabrowski left a tremendous legacy, both in terms of his family and in the theory he gave us. In reflecting back on Dabrowski, it seems so obvious that he was a human being who lived his theory. He strove to meet his own high standards and acted as an exemplar by action; whatever the peril, you could sense he always chose the higher path in his life.

Dabrowski's Early Life

Kazimierz Dabrowski was born in September 1, 1902, in Klarowo, Lublin, Poland. Dabrowski's father, Antoni, was an agricultural administrator. Kazimierz was one of four children; he had an older brother and a younger brother and sister. Reflecting on the early death of his sister, Dabrowski said:

I learned about death very early in my life. Death appeared to me not just something threatening and incomprehensible, but as something that one must experience emotionally and cognitively at a close range. When I was six, my little three-year-old sister died of meningitis. (1975, p. 233)

One of the most significant early influences on Dabrowski was his first-hand experience of World War I. He spoke of being particularly affected by observing the aftermath of a major battle that occurred near his hometown. As he walked among the dead soldiers laying in his former playfield, Dabrowski was fascinated by the various positions their bodies took and the different expressions frozen on their faces. Some seemed calm and peaceful, while others appeared horrified and frightened (K. Dabrowski, personal communication, 1977). Again, Dabrowski was forced to confront death, while also trying to make sense of the war and its brutality.

Dabrowski's early education took place in Lublin, where Catholic priests and pastors schooled him and he had a rich family exposure to books

and music. His education continued in Lublin, attending university where he studied psychology, philosophy, and literature. He went to Warsaw in 1924 to study and completed an M.A. at Poznan. During his studies, his best friend and classmate inexplicably committed suicide. At the time, Dabrowski was contemplating becoming a professional musician. After his friend's suicide, he decided to enter medicine and study human behavior (M. Rankel, personal communication, January 2007).

Dabrowski was given a grant from the Polish National Culture Foundation to study psychology and education in Geneva in 1928-29 under neurologist/child psychologist Édouard Claparède (1873-1940) and philosopher/psychologist Jean Piaget (1896-1980) (Aronson, 1964). Dabrowski received his medical degree from the University of Geneva in 1929, completing a thesis on the conditions of suicide entitled "Les Conditions Psychologique du Suicide" ["The Psychological Conditions of Suicide"] (1929). Dabrowski's curriculum vitae² indicates that in 1929 he also received a *Certificat de Pedagogie* [Teaching Certificate] from the University of Geneva. In 1930, Dabrowski studied psychoanalysis in Vienna under fellow Pole, Wilhelm Stekel (1868-1940) (Aronson, 1964).³ During this time, he attended psychoanalytic meetings and "met most of the great psychoanalytic personalities, including Sigmund Freud" (K. Dabrowski, personal communication, 1977).

In 1931, Dabrowski studied child psychiatry in Paris under George Heuyer (1884-1977), a pioneer of child psychiatry in France, and he also attended lectures given by the prominent French neurologist and psychologist, Pierre Janet (1859-1947) (Aronson, 1964). Dabrowski's curriculum vitae lists a Ph.D. in psychology, University of Poznan, 1931, focused on self-mutilation and supervised by S. Blachowski.⁴ Dabrowski's curriculum vitae also lists a second M.D. degree from the University of Poznan, 1931.

² Dabrowski's curriculum vitae is available to us as he submitted it as part of his supporting documentation to several Canada Council grant applications; 1970, 1971-1972, 1972-1975, and 1973-1975.

³ Dabrowski's curriculum vitae indicates "Certificate of Psychoanalytic Studies, Vienna (under Wilhelm Stekel), 1931." It is not clear if a certificate was given or not.

⁴ There is some confusion over this degree. Aronson (1964, p. x) indicates that it was in "experimental psychology" and was granted by the University of Poznan in 1932.

In 1933, by invitation of the Rockefeller Foundation, Dabrowski and his first wife went to Harvard University to study public health.⁵ From 1933 to 1934, Dabrowski studied under C. Macfie Campbell, Director of the Boston Psychopathic Hospital, and William Healy, first Director of the Judge Baker Foundation (Aronson, 1964). In 1934, Dabrowski returned to Switzerland and was made a *Privat Dozent* [Lecturer] in child psychiatry at the University of Geneva under Édouard Claparède (Aronson, 1964).

Dabrowski returned to Poland to organize mental health services and, with financial support from the Rockefeller Foundation, established the Polish State Mental Hygiene Institute in Warsaw, which opened in 1935. From 1935 to 1948, except for the interruption of the German occupation, Dabrowski was the director of the Institute (Aronson, 1964).

Meanwhile, Dabrowski embarked on his prolific writing career—for example, publishing works on behaviorism (1934a), self-torture (1934b), and in 1935, a major work, *The Nervousness of Children and Youth*. In 1937, the first signs of the theory of positive disintegration could be clearly seen in Dabrowski's initial exposure to a North American audience in the English monograph "Psychological Bases of Self-Mutilation" (1937), published with the assistance of C. M. Campbell (who also provided a preface). Dabrowski followed up with another Polish article, with the English-language title "Types of Increased Psychic Excitability" (1938).

In the late 1930s, Dabrowski was involved with an anthroposophy association⁶ dedicated to the work of Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) in England, run by Alice Baily of Cambridge Wells, Kent. Dabrowski studied Steiner, a polymath best known for developing anthroposophy (a spiritual science) and Waldorf education. Parapsychology and Eastern studies also interested Dabrowski, and he practiced meditation daily.

5 Dabrowski's curriculum vitae indicates a "Certificate of School of Public Health," Harvard University, 1934. However, Battaglia (2002, p. 67) indicates that Dabrowski did not meet the criteria, and no certificate was given.

6 Anthroposophy, also called spiritual science, is a spiritual philosophy based on the teachings of Rudolph Steiner. It states that anyone who "conscientiously cultivates sense-free thinking" can attain experience of and insights into the spiritual world. Steiner attempted to develop anthroposophy as a non-materialistic application of science, a course of inquiry the majority of contemporary scientists reject. Anthroposophical ideas have been applied in areas such as Waldorf education, curative education, biodynamic agriculture, anthroposophical medicine, and eurythmy or dance therapy.

World War II and the Post-War Years: Humanitarianism and Imprisonment

The details of Dabrowski's life during the war years are sketchy, but there is no doubt that they were very difficult. Aronson indicated that "of the 400 Polish psychiatrists practicing before the war...only thirty-eight survived" (1964, p. x). Dabrowski's younger brother was killed in 1941, and his older brother was captured in the Warsaw Insurrection and sent to a concentration camp. In 1939, the Germans closed the Institute of Mental Health in Warsaw, and Dabrowski shifted his operations to a second institute in Zagórze. Dabrowski had apparently foreseen the disruption of the approaching war and had organized a "secret institute" for pedagogical work, disguised as an Institute for Tuberculosis. The Institute, where Dabrowski spent much of his time from 1942 to 1945, provided services for some 200 children and youth in the forests near Zagórze, and Dabrowski's Institute sheltered and saved many war orphans, priests, Polish soldiers, members of the resistance, and Jewish children (Battaglia, 2002).

In 1942, the Nazis imprisoned Dabrowski for several months on suspicion that he was involved with the Polish underground.⁷ His second wife, Eugenia (whom he married in 1940, his first wife having passed away of tuberculosis), eventually negotiated his release, and Dabrowski resumed his former position of director of the Institute of Mental Health in Warsaw. Dabrowski said that during his wartime experiences, he saw examples of both the lowest possible inhuman behavior, as well as acts of the highest human character.

Dabrowski obtained his specialty as a psychiatrist in June 1948 from Wrocław University (Battaglia, 2002). Dabrowski's curriculum vitae indicates: "Habilitation in Psychiatry, University of Wrocław, 1948." Also in 1948, he founded and became president of the Polish Society of Mental Hygiene. In December 1948, Dabrowski received a Ford Foundation Fellowship, and he returned to the United States, where he studied mental health, neuropsychiatry, and child psychiatry (Battaglia, 2002).

⁷ My understanding is that Dabrowski was never held in a concentration camp *per se*; rather, he spent his several incarcerations in the Nazi prison system (including at Montelupich prison located in Kraków).

Imprisonment Under Stalin

In 1949, the Polish Government, under Stalin, closed the Warsaw Institute and declared Dabrowski a *persona non grata*; he and Eugenia attempted to flee. The Polish communists imprisoned Dabrowski in 1950 for some 18 months, and Eugenia was briefly imprisoned as well. When he was released, Dabrowski's activities were kept under strict control, and he was assigned work in Kobierzyn and Rabia resorts, apparently as a tuberculosis physician. Eventually, he was declared "rehabilitated" and was again allowed to teach, securing a professorship at the Catholic University of Lublin, and he again organized mental health services in Poland. He was also allowed to travel, and through the support of the Ford Foundation, he attended several international psychiatry congresses (e.g., in Spain, France, England). Dabrowski's curriculum vitae indicates: "Professorship in Experimental Psychology, Academy of Catholic Theology, Warsaw, 1956" and "Professorship in the Polish Academy of Sciences since 1958."

The Sixties: Dabrowski Establishes Roots in North America

In the early 1960s, Jason Aronson, editor of the *International Journal of Psychiatry*, traveled behind the iron curtain to invite psychiatrists to submit articles for his journal, and he met Dabrowski in Poland. Dabrowski later visited Brandeis University, where he was invited to give a lecture and where he met Abraham Maslow (1908-1970). The two had lengthy discussions and became friends.

Even though Maslow's (1970) conceptualization of self-actualization does emphasize developing autonomy, Dabrowski rejected it because it lacked a multilevel perspective and did not differentiate between lower versus higher aspects of the self. Maslow's self was to be actualized as is, with an acceptance of its shortcomings, even its lower-level animalistic impulses. "The self-actualized person sees reality more clearly: our subjects see human nature as it *is* and not as they would prefer it to be" (Maslow, 1970, p. 156). Dabrowski emphasized that development required the differentiation of higher versus lower aspects of the self and the consequent inhibition of lower features. In spite of their differences, Maslow endorsed Dabrowski's book, *Mental Growth through Positive Disintegration*, saying:

I consider this to be one of the most important contributions to psychological and psychiatric theory in this whole decade. There is

little question in my mind that this book will be read for another decade or two, and very widely. It digs very deep and comes up with extremely important conclusions that will certainly change the course of psychological theorizing and the practice of psychotherapy for some time to come. (Dabrowski, 1970, back cover)

In 1964, Dabrowski and Aronson spent two months translating material (Dabrowski, 1964a; 1964b) that became Dabrowski's first major book in English, *Positive Disintegration*, to which Aronson contributed an introduction. Aronson subsequently published the first chapters of this book in his journal (Dabrowski, 1966).

My understanding is that Dabrowski declined an offer of a position at Brandeis University to work with Maslow because he refused to renounce his Polish citizenship, a requirement for American citizenship (a stipulation of the offer). He instead accepted a position at a hospital in Montréal, Canada, in 1964, where dual citizenship was not an issue. While there, he met Andrew Kawczak, a Polish lawyer and subsequent philosopher, who became an important collaborator.

In 1965, Dabrowski secured a visiting professorship at the University of Alberta and moved his family to Edmonton. He also held a visiting professorship at Université Laval (Laval University), Quebec City. Dabrowski's second major English publication, *Personality-Shaping through Positive Disintegration* grew out of discussions with Kawczak and some of Kawczak's graduate students (Dabrowski, 1967). An introduction to this book was written by American learning theorist O. Horbart Mowrer (1907-1982). Another core group of students formed in Edmonton, and several went on to become Dabrowski's co-authors including Dexter Amend, Michael M. Piechowski, and Marlene Rankel.

The Seventies: A Final Flurry of Activity

Dabrowski spent his last years teaching, writing, and dividing his time between Alberta, Quebec, and Poland. Several Polish and English publications were the result of this last flurry of activity, including *Mental Growth through Positive Disintegration* (1970), *Psychoneurosis Is Not an Illness* (1972), *The Dynamics of Concepts* (1973), and the two-volume *Multilevelness of Emotional and Instinctive Functions* (Dabrowski, 1996a; Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1996).

It should be noted that English was Dabrowski's last learned language. The majority of his Polish publications (numbering in the hundreds) remain

untranslated; however, many of his 20 or so major Polish books were also published in French and Spanish (in addition to his English works, referenced here). Major Dabrowski centers were developed in Spain and in Lima, Peru, where Sister Alvarez Calderon taught the work.

In 1979, Dabrowski had a serious heart attack in Edmonton but was resolute that he would not die on what he considered foreign soil. Kazimierz Dabrowski returned to Poland and died in Warsaw on November 26, 1980. At his request, he was buried beside his friend, Piotr Radlo, in the forest near the Institute at Zagórze. His wife, Eugenia, and two daughters, Joanna and Anna, survived him.

Dissemination of Dabrowski's Legacy

In November 1982, a memorial conference was held in Edmonton. By then, I was a psychologist working with the Government of Alberta; however, over the years, a priority of mine was to keep Dabrowski's theory alive by maintaining an archive containing his original writings, along with collections of publications related to his theory. With the development of the World Wide Web, I established and continue to maintain the Dabrowski website (<http://members.shaw.ca/positivedisintegration>). My efforts at disseminating his legacy have included making his original writings available to interested parties and participating in and hosting conferences on the theory.

Over the years, many Dabrowski-related workshops have been held, as well as a number of major conferences, including: Université Laval [Laval University], Quebec City, QC (1970), Loyola College, Montreal, QC (1972), Miami, FL (1980), Warsaw, Poland (1987), Keystone, CO (1994), Kananaskis, AB (1996), Kendall College, Evanston, IL (1998), Mont-Tremblant, QC (2000), Fort Lauderdale, FL (2002), and Calgary, AB (2004 and 2006). An important part of continuing Dabrowski's legacy has been maintaining friendships with former students of his, who have contributed to the dissemination of the theory in their own ways.

One area where Dabrowski's theory is alive and well is in the study of giftedness and gifted education. In Dabrowski's earlier Polish research (1967, 1972), he conducted comprehensive examinations and testing of children who displayed superior abilities. He found that every child displayed characteristics suggestive of positive disintegration. Piechowski (1979a; 1991) subsequently introduced Dabrowski's concept of overexcitability, a component of developmental potential, to the field of gifted education, and over the

past 25 years, many research projects and papers have addressed the topic (see Mendaglio & Tillier, 2006).

I consider my participation in this book another way of keeping my promise to Dr. Dabrowski.

Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration

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