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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on similarities in the lives of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky to enlighten study of their pedagogies and to provide some information for current classroom techniques. Neither man had a great deal to say about his early life, although Piaget published an autobiography. A number of primary sources were used to construct the timeline that shows similarities in the lives of these two theorists. The environments in which they grew up and lived impelled them to bring to their research efforts a personal background that gave birth to their research and influenced its scope and perspective. The timeline traces the course of both men's lives from birth to death, marking the publication of many of their pedagogical works. (Contains 15 references.) (SLD)

A Biographic Comparison Tracing the Similarities in the lives of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky

By Susan Pass

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AERA: Similarities in the Lives of Piaget and Vygotsky
Susan Pass, Ed.D

The pedagogical legacies of both Piaget and Vygotsky remain to be rediscovered in the light of their similarities, pondered, and applied anew for the suitable education of America's youth in the 21st century. Both Piaget and Vygotsky wrote pedagogues that evolved from environments both personal and societal. These events drew forth both men's most deeply ingrained attitudes about their own identities and their most strongly held values and beliefs about personal conduct and education.

To explore this thesis, history will serve as a tool functioning toward greater understanding of the major ideas contained in both cultural-historical theory and genetic epistemology as they apply to American education. Since no comparative biographical study has yet been done on both men, scholars have missed the significance of adversity in both Piaget's and Vygotsky's lives. Yet, this determinant has an important message for either students suffering from adversity or teachers attempting to help them.

Educational philosophies become more vivid in a historical study. This focus on the similarities in the lives of both men can offer a unique opportunity to enlighten scholars on the personal origins of their ideas, provide information for present classroom techniques, and offer predictions for future pedagogical trends. Methodology can eliminate most problems, but not all, in historical work.

Bias is very difficult to completely eliminate. For example, the facts themselves might be biased (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1983, p. 799). Because those writing on Vygotsky could not reveal completely all that they honestly knew for fear of harm from a Communist government, published information on Vygotsky may be biased. Because this work must deal with published, public information, some biographical facts might not be

included. Furthermore, earlier information on Vygotsky was destroyed when the Germans destroyed his hometown, Gomel, during World War II.

In addition, information on Piaget also appears to be biased in that much of it views him in a positive way. His father was prominent enough to protect him through young adulthood. Thus, reporting that Piaget was in the mountains at tubercular sanitariums covered up two hospitalizations for mental anxiety. Piaget himself contributed to the information available through five autobiographies that served to not only explain his life but also commend himself to history. The Swiss also laud Piaget as a "favorite son" and have not rushed to harm his record.

Although Vygotsky authored or co-authored six books and 180 papers before he died at the age of 37 in 1934, in none of them did he discuss personal matters. Instead, his published works included only his pedagogical ideas and the research proving those ideas correct. Additionally, Vygotsky shared few of his pedagogical ideas or opinions with members of his family or with his friends. Perhaps this apparent secrecy was because, during the time of Stalin's repression, Vygotsky might have wanted to protect his family and friends. While purges were endemic, the less Vygotsky's loved ones knew about ideas which Stalin opposed, the safer it was for them. In any case, the focus of all of Vygotsky's published works seemed to be purely professional.

Of the few biographies published on Vygotsky, only one discussed how Vygotsky said his personal life impacted his ideas. Even there, the lone comment that Vygotsky did make was on the origin of only one idea. Although Vygotsky's parents created zones of proximal development for their children and Vygotsky later created them for Gomel, Vygotsky credited the idea for the term "zone of proximal development" or ZPD to the

American Dorothea McCarthy (Kozyurev & Turko, 1935). McCarthy, however, gave only the term. It was Vygotsky who created the concept. Nevertheless, Semen Dobkin, Vygotsky's childhood friend; A.N. Leont'ev; a longtime colleague; and Gita Vygodskaya, his eldest daughter, did provide some information.

She remembered her father as a very busy man who always made time for his children and shared his crowded study with them. At the end of the Cold War, Vygotsky's eldest daughter wrote a paper about her father that reported nothing on what motivated him to create cultural-historical theory. She also opened up a closet in her Moscow apartment to westerners that housed her father's personal papers. There was little personal information in her father's papers, so searching for other sources on Vygotsky's life was one of the challenges of this work.

In contrast, there are four biographies and four autobiographies on the longer-living Piaget. Jean Piaget lived until 1980 and was a prolific author writing over 50 books, 180 major studies, 500 papers, 37 volumes in the series Etudes d'Epistemologie Genetique, and published, brief autobiographies. He wrote a short autobiography in 1952, A History of Psychology in Autobiography, which gave some personal information on his understanding of how he conceived his ideas. Two other short autobiographies were to follow, but they were mainly restatements of the first.

Then, in 1976, a more definitive autobiography was published in Revue Europeenne des Sciences Sociales that expanded upon his motivation for creating genetic epistemology. Piaget also provided material for Christine Nasso, who authored a brief biography on him in Contemporary Authors in 1969. Additionally, Piaget published two works refuting biographers whose interpretations on the origins of his pedagogical ideas

with which he disagreed. Outside of these publications, there is little information available as to how Piaget conceived his ideas and no work that encompasses the origins of more than a few of his pedagogical ideas.

Even in his autobiography, Piaget was not prolific in this regard. This silence could have been due to modesty, assuming that he believed the world was more interested in his ideas than in him, or perhaps, deep down, Piaget really loved his parents and wanted to protect their memory. Despite this, enough primary and secondary facts were obtainable through on-line retrieval over the World Wide Web and through personal e-mail correspondences with sources in America, Russia, Switzerland, England, and New Zealand to provide sufficient information for this work.

In summation, there were sufficient primary and secondary sources to conduct this study. This study is based on the belief that more than just a researcher conducting inquires on emerging hard facts on a whim creates theory. "No one creates in a vacuum" (Bruner, 1967, p. 3). Vygotsky lived in a milieu of state-controlled ideas upon intellectual thought while Piaget's work reflected the intellectual environment of a free society. These different environments impelled both Vygotsky and Piaget to bring to their research efforts a personal background that not only gave birth to their research but also influenced its scope and perspective.

To easily observe the similarities in the lives of both men, the reader is asked to look at the attached timeline.

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PIAGET

Born 8/9
at
Neuchatel

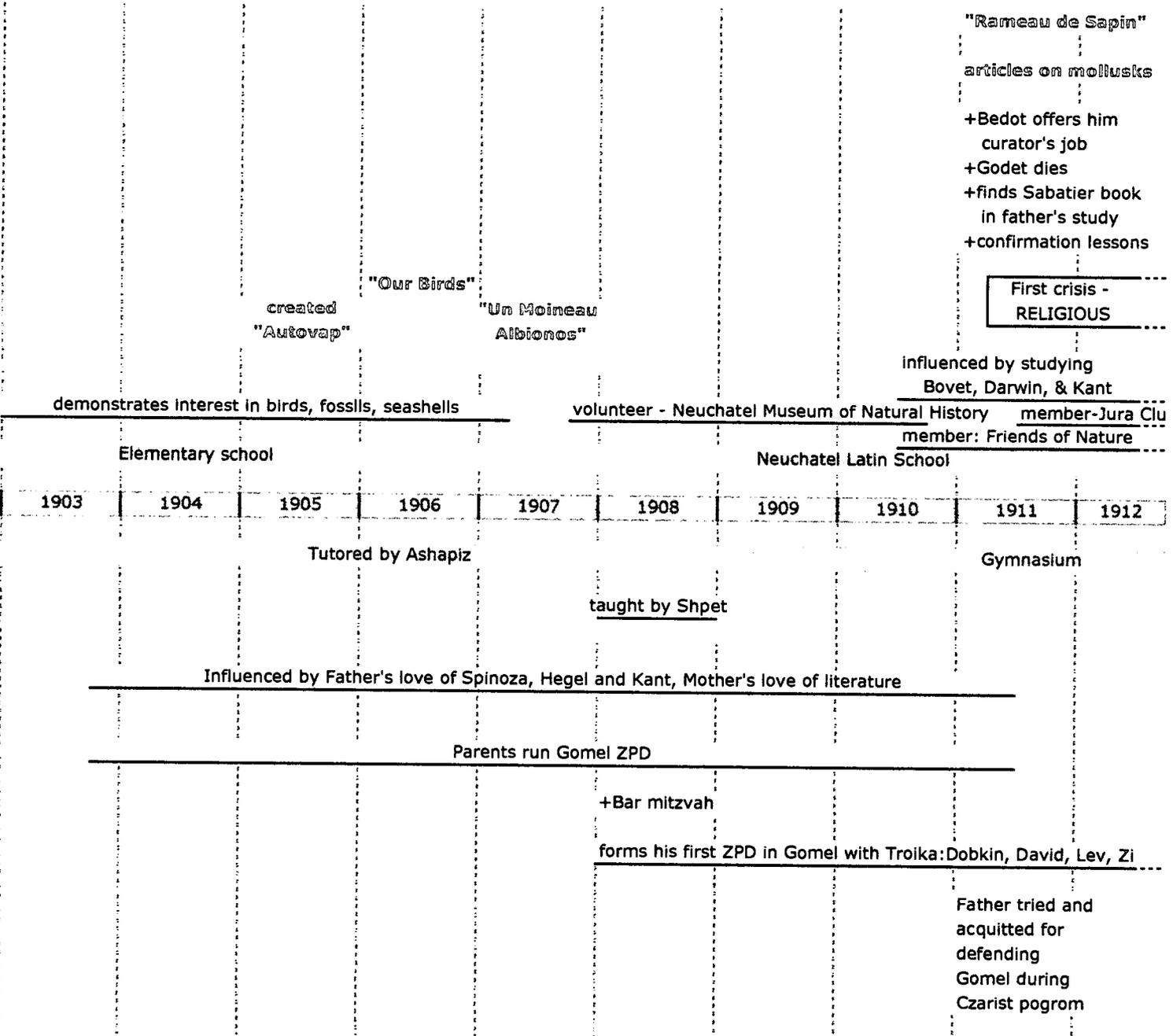
1896	1897	1902	1903	1904	1905	1906	1907	1908	1909	1910	1911	1912
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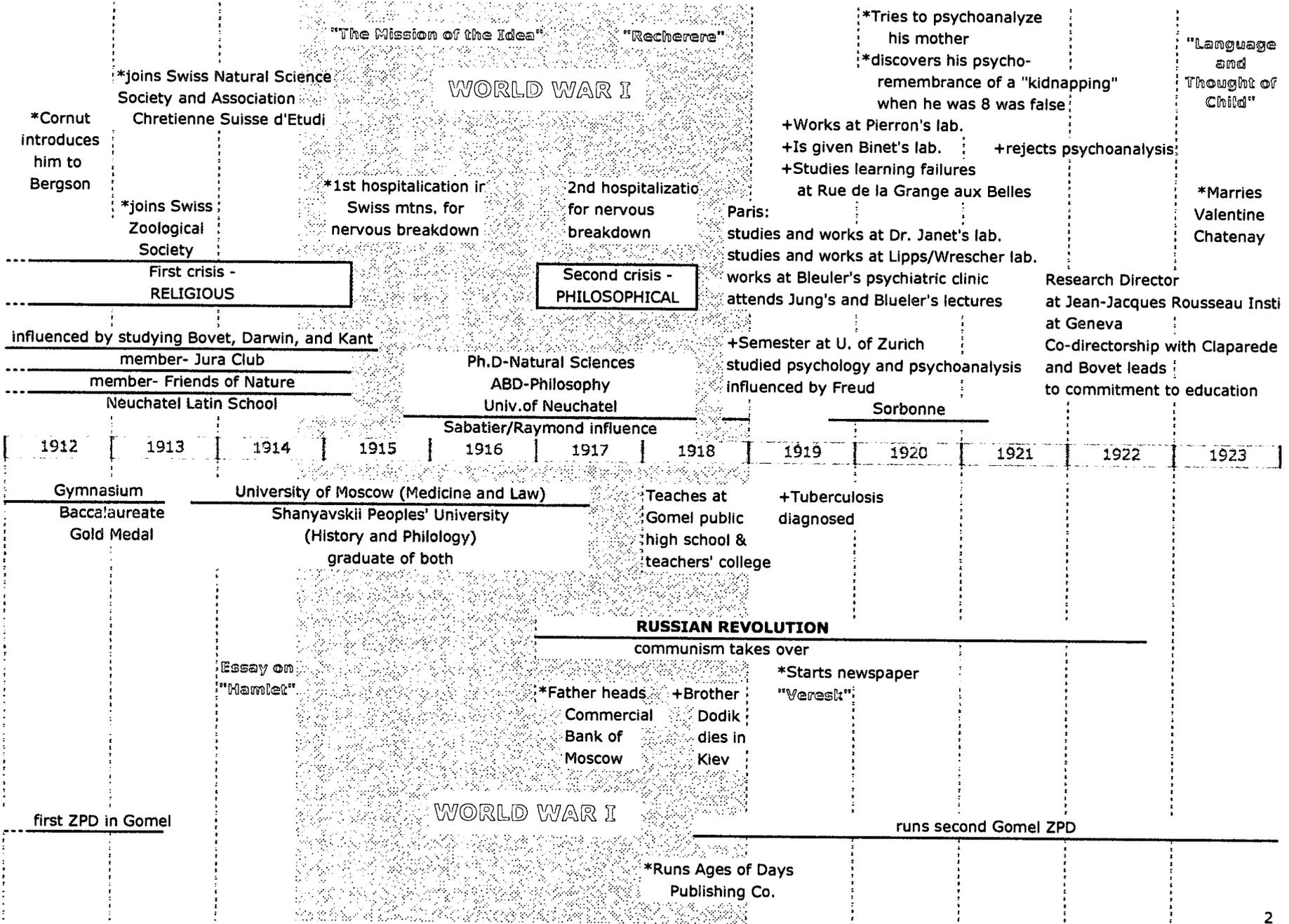
Born 11/5
at
Orsha

Moved
to
Gomel

Zinaida
(sister)
born

VYGOTSKY





"Language and Thought of Child"
 *Marries Valentine Chatenay
 Research Director at Jean-Jacque Rousseau Insti
 Co-directorship with Claparede
 Bovet leads to education commitment

"Le Judgement et le raisonnement chez enfant"
 Reads Vygotsky's "The Problem of the Cultural Development of the Child"
 +Daughter Jacqueline born

English publication of "Judgment and Reasoning in the Child"
 studies his own children

+Daughter Lucienne born

Read Vygotsky's "The Problem of the Cultural Development of the Child"
 +Son Laurent born
 studies his own children

Professor of History of Scientific Thought at University of Geneva

Prof. of Psychology, Sociology, and the Philosophy of Science at Univ. of Neuchatel

1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934
	Translates Piaget's 1923-24 books			+Daughter Asya born		+Stalin kills Kornikov		Department of Psychology at Ukranian Psychoneurological Institute at Kharkov volunteers with physically and mentally handicapped			
	+Marries Rosa Noevna Smekova			born		+Vygotsky goes into exile					
	+Addresses 2nd Psychological Congre			Director of Psych. Lab. for Abnormal Children		+Stalin establishes dictatorship		+Son born			+Stalin puts Vygotsky on trial for "political error"
	"Methodology of Reflexology and Psychological Studies"			Works at Moscow Kornilov Institute				works at finishing M.D.			
						Reads Darwin, Piaget, etc.					
						Second troika with Luria and Leontiev for ZPDs in Moscow, Tashkent, and Kharkov					
	+Lenin dies Stalin grabs for power			+1st hospitalization for tuberculosis				Works for Psychological Institute outside of Moscow due to Stalin's purges			
2nd Gomel ZPD				"Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology"		trains psychologists at 1st Central State U. in Tashkent					
	+Daughter Gita born			"Pedagogicheskaj & psikhlogija"		"Problem of the Cultural Developmen of the Child"		"Study of Abnormal Behavior, Ape and Primitive Child"			
				Writes introduction to translation of Piaget's 1923 "Language and Thought of the Child"		"Struejur"		"Lekeipo psiklodogii"			
								"Rech i Myslenie nebenka"			

STALIN

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Honorary
Doctorate
Harvard

studies his own children

Professor of Experimental Psychology at University of Geneva -- 1940-71

Professor of History of Scientific Thought at University of Geneva

Professor of Sociology at University of Geneva

Professor of Experimental Psychology and Sociology at University of Lausanne

1934

1935

1936

1937

1938

1939

1940

1941

1942

1943

1944

1945

+Stalin puts
Vygotsky
on trial for
"political error"

Stalin

Hospitalized for tuberculosis

Betrayal of Luria and Leontiev

Offered possibility of heading a section on Exp. Med. at All Union Institute of Exp. Med.

Tries to get "Thinking & Speech" smuggled out to Piaget

+Vygotsky dies before trial -- June 11

"Growth of
Logical
Thinking"

Honorary
Doctorate
Cambridge

Writes
commentary of
Vygotzky's 1926
"Thinking
and Speech"

Director of International Center for Genetic Epistemology -- 1955-80

Professor of Experimental Psychology at University of Geneva -- 1940-71

Professor of Genetic Psychology at Sorbonne -- 1952-63

1957

1958

1959

1960

1961

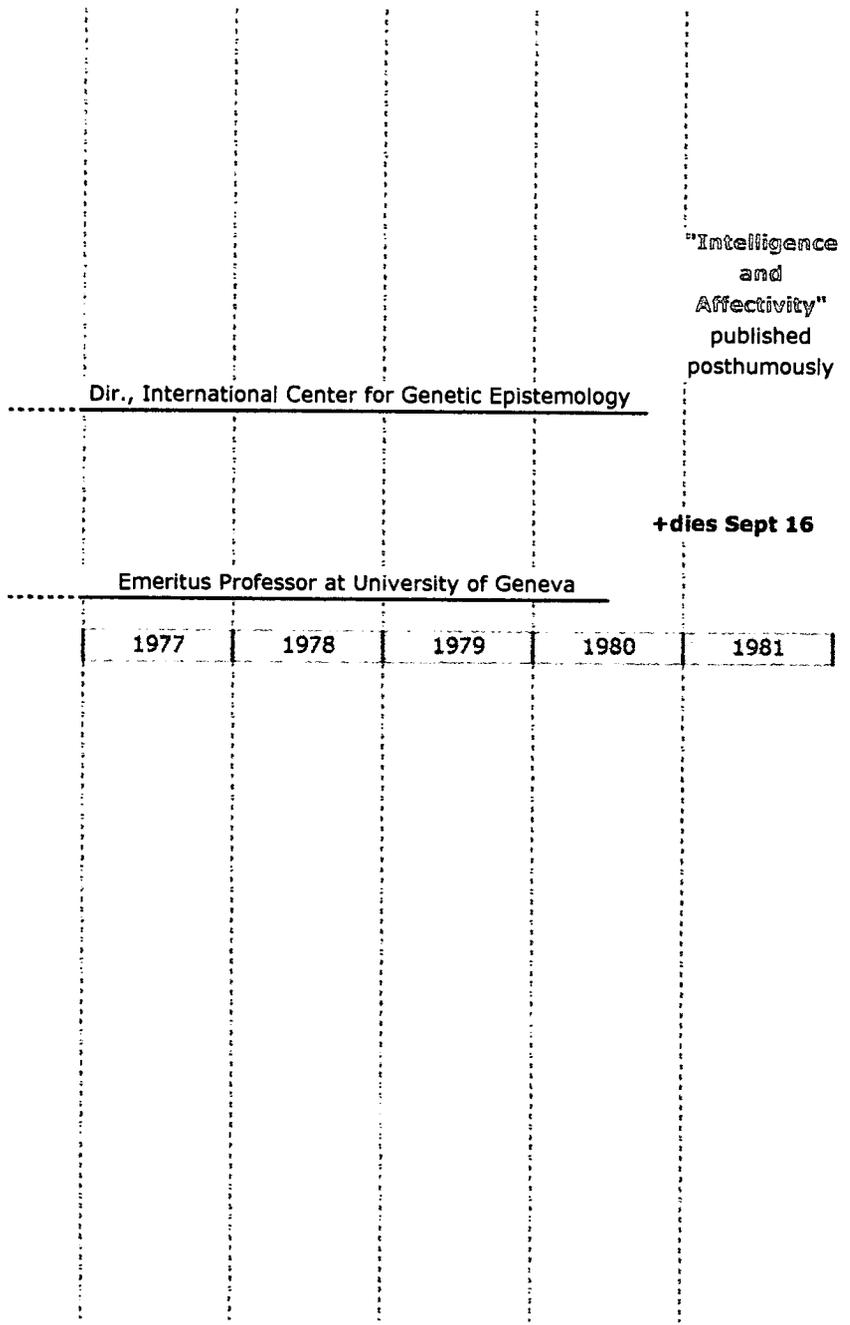
1962

1963

1964

1965

1966



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