

Alois Alzheimer: The Man  
By Gertrude Gibbs



Alois Alzheimer was a noted German physician of neurology and psychiatry. He was born in 1864 in the small Bavarian town of Marktbreit, home to his well-established family.

Alois Alzheimer's parents came from large families. Alois' father taught his children that the strong should look after the weak, and the one who finished his education should help the younger ones along their way.

Alois' first four years of schooling (1870 to 1874) were in the hometown of Marktbreit. He attended the Konigliche Humanistische Gymnasium in Aschaffenburg, the same Catholic high school his father had attended and his brothers later attended. Marktbreit was a Protestant town and the Alzheimer family wanted the sons to have a Catholic education. Aschaffenburg was the closest town with a Catholic Gymnasium. Alois was ten years old when he went away to school. He lived in a boarding house among strangers, returning home only on holidays and school vacations.

In 1878, his father took over a law practice in Aschaffenburg and the entire family moved there. His father was more prosperous and could afford a bigger house for his large family. Alois was able to live with his family there.

In 1883, Alois graduated from the Gymnasium with a keen interest in the natural sciences particularly histology and pathology. He attended medical school at the University of Berlin and also at Tübingen, graduating from the University of Würzburg in 1887. He passed his state medical examination in 1888 and interned at the Institute for Mental Patients and Epileptics in Frankfurt under the directorship of Emil Sioli, a progressive psychiatrist. On the first day at the clinic in Frankfurt, Emil Sioli gave the order of "no restraints." He also used "work as therapy" - a movement introduced in England.

At that time, neurology and psychiatry were considered new medical specialties and were typically practiced by the same physician. The belief was that the brain was central to pathology for mental and neurological conditions.

Alois married a Jewish widow, Cecilia Geisenheimer, in 1894. His wife brought considerable wealth to the marriage, allowing Alois to remain independent from university appointments. The couple had three children: Gertrud, Hans, and Maria. Cecilia died in 1901 at the age of 41. Alois' single younger sister, Elisabeth, moved to Frankfurt to raise the three children and manage the household.



*In April 1894, Alois Alzheimer married the widow Nathalie Geisenheimer, née Wallerstein (1860–1901). Three children came from the marriage.*



In 1901 Dr. Alzheimer examined a fifty-one-year-old patient, Augusta Deter, suffering some of the symptoms that we now know today as Alzheimer’s Disease - being suspicious, getting lost in her own home, and not recognizing family members. Augusta also had difficulty speaking, was confused to time and space, and had trouble manipulating tools. Dr. Alzheimer followed Augusta throughout her illness. When she died in 1906, he performed an autopsy examining the brain tissue, and presented the case at a meeting of the Southwest German Psychiatric Physicians Association in Tubingen. He described her dementia, the brain tissue pathology, the paucity of cells in the cerebral cortex, and clumps of filaments (‘tangles’) between nerve cells. Dr. Emil Kraepelin proposed naming the condition after Alois Alzheimer and in 1910 in his book “Lehrbuch der Psychiatrie,” coined the name “Morbus Alzheimer.”

Morbus is Latin for disease.

Dr. Alzheimer was assistant director at the Irrenanstalt in Frankfurt-am-Main until 1902 when he was invited to be on the faculty at the university in Heidelberg. One year later, Dr. Alzheimer moved to the University of Munich. Initially, he did not have an academic position in Munich until two years later when he received a paying position at the university. His lectures included “Instructions into the Psychiatric Clinic” and “Gehirn and Seele” (brain tissue and soul). His other work included preparation for examinations of mentally ill patients. In 1908 he was honored with the title “Ausserordentlicher (exceptional) Professor.” He remained in Munich at the Ludwig Maximilian University until 1912.

While in Munich, the Alzheimer family lived within walking distance of the clinic. So that the children would have ample room to romp around, Alois bought another house with a large acreage near Munich at the shores of the Wesslinger See. The children learned to swim and row. Alois would take Hans to collect butterflies, identifying them and placing them on exhibit. Friends often visited in the evenings and joined the family for meals. Alois liked a good glass of wine and a cigar.

During the Third Reich while Hitler was in power, the family lived in the house outside of Munich. The family kept a low profile during those years and survived because Dr. Alzheimer was a celebrated German icon. All descendants survived the Nazi regime.



In 1912 Alzheimer was invited to the Friedrich Wilhelm Universitat in Breslau in Schlesingen as professor of psychiatry. This part of Germany is now in Poland, and Breslau is now called Wrochaw. On the trip to Breslau he caught a cold, later developed pneumonia, and never completely recovered. Alois Alzheimer, 51, died in Breslau December 19, 1915 of endocarditis and kidney failure. He is interred next to his wife in the Hauptfriedhof (cemetery) in Frankfurt am Main.

The house in which Alois Alzheimer was born in Marktbreit was purchased by the pharmaceutical company Eli Lilly, Indianapolis, U.S.A. and Lilly Deutschland, GmbH in Bad Homburg. Ulrike Mauer undertook renovation of the house acquiring personal objects, including furniture, from the Alzheimer family. The birth house is a meeting place to further the knowledge of mental diseases and keeping the memory of Alois





Alzheimer alive. It was dedicated December 19, 1995, eighty years after Dr. Alzheimer's death. His birth house and his burial place are visited by a large number of tourists from all over the world every year.

A reunion of a granddaughter, Ilse Lieblein, and all of the great-grandchildren was held on January 6, 1998.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Gertrude E. Gibbs** was born in Berlin in 1918. She moved to Oakland, California to attend Mills College. She received a B.A. from Stanford University School of Nursing in 1942. Gertrude worked in a variety of nursing positions from surgical nurse at the University of California in San Francisco to later establishing a one-year program for surgical assistants in Omaha, Nebraska. Her husband, Gordon E. Gibbs, Ph.D., was professor and head of the department of pediatrics at the medical center of the University of Nebraska for thirty years. He developed Alzheimer's disease after retiring; Gertrude was his caregiver for many years. Her research interest in Dr. Alzheimer developed when she heard someone in her Alzheimer's support group ask what kind of a metal "Alzheimer" is.

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