

# Man's Search for Meaning

In 1939, despite his relative youth, Viktor Frankl was already one of the most eminent psychiatrists in all of Austria. After spending more than seven years working with suicidal patients at the University Clinic in Vienna, Frankl was appointed as the Head of the Department of Neurology at Rothschild Hospital. He was also hard at work on a new, revolutionary theory of psychiatry—"logotherapy"—based on his decade of experience treating suicidal patients and on his careful study of human neurology and psychology.

By 1942, however, Austria was under the control of the Nazis, and Rothschild Hospital, the only Jewish hospital in Vienna, was ordered closed. A Jew himself, Frankl was in immediate danger of being deported and, ultimately, confined to a Nazi concentration camp. The American consulate in Vienna offered Frankl a visa to immigrate to the United States—but visas weren't offered to his aging parents, who would likely be sent to concentration camps in his absence. Upon receiving his invitation to retrieve his visa from the U.S. consulate, Frankl recounted: "I suddenly hesitated...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?"<sup>1</sup> No matter how hard he thought, Frankl couldn't decide what he should do: he was paralyzed.

One afternoon, when Frankl was still undecided about what to do, he noticed a piece of marble lying on a table in his family home, with a single Hebrew letter engraved on the piece. He discovered that his father had salvaged the piece of marble from the ruins of what had been the largest synagogue in Vienna, recently burned to the ground by the Nazis. It had been a part of a tablet on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed. Frankl asked his father which of the Commandments the letter had represented. "Honor thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long upon the land," his father answered. At that moment, Frankl decided to let his American visa lapse, and stay with his parents in Europe.<sup>2</sup> Soon thereafter, all three were sent to concentration camps.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Did Frankl make the right decision? Why or why not?
2. Frankl seems to have let an apparent coincidence—the appearance of a salvaged piece of marble on his family table—decisively influence his course of action. Was it ethical for Frankl to make such an important decision partly on that basis? Suppose he had found on the table some other salient artifact—say, a copy of the Hippocratic Oath salvaged from his shuttered hospital. Would he then have been justified in making a different decision?
3. What obligations, if any, do we have to our parents? What, if anything, is the basis of such an obligation?

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<sup>1</sup> Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Preface to the 1992 edition: [https://edisciplinas.usp.br/pluginfile.php/3403095/mod\\_resource/content/1/56ViktorFrankl\\_Mans%20Search.pdf](https://edisciplinas.usp.br/pluginfile.php/3403095/mod_resource/content/1/56ViktorFrankl_Mans%20Search.pdf)  
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