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Biography of Wilhelm Reich

REICH'S EARLY YEARS (1897 – 1918)

"I was born in a small village as the first son of not unprosperous parents."

-- from [Passion of Youth](#)

Wilhelm Reich was born on March 24, 1897 in Galicia, in the easternmost part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, now Ukraine. He grew up in the Bukovina on a large farm operated by his father. His first language was German, and until 1938 he was an Austrian citizen.

According to *The Bibliography of Orgonomy*--prepared at Orgonon in 1953 under Reich's supervision--his "interest in biology and natural science was stimulated early by the life on the farm, close to agriculture, cattle-farming, and breeding...Between his 8th and 12th years, he had his own collection and breeding laboratory of butterflies, insects and plants under the guidance of a private teacher. The natural life functions, including the sexual function, were familiar to him as far back as he could remember, and this may well have determined his strong later inclination as a bio-psychiatrist toward the biological foundation of the emotional life of man, as well as his biophysical discoveries in the fields of medicine, biology, and education."

Until he was 13 years old, Reich was educated at home by tutors. His mother, to whom he was devoted, committed suicide in 1910 after his father discovered she had had a brief affair with one of the tutors. Reich's father died four years later from tuberculosis, leaving seventeen-year old Reich to direct the farm work on his own without interrupting his studies at the German high school he was attending.

That same year, 1914, the first World War broke out. Soon Russian troops swept through the Bukovina. Reich narrowly escaped being sent to Russia as a hostage, and had to flee his home. Later he wrote, "I never saw either my homeland or my possessions again. Of a well-to-do past, nothing was left." ([Passion of Youth](#)) He joined the Austrian Army in 1915, served as a lieutenant from 1916-1918, and was at the Italian front three times, experiencing what he called "the war as a machine."

In 1918 the war finally ended. Germany and Austria were defeated,

the Austro-Hungarian Empire was broken up, and the Bukovina became part of Romania. Alone, homeless and intellectually starved after four years of war, Reich entered the Medical School at the University of Vienna.

REICH, FREUD, AND THE LIBIDO (1918 – 1934)

"It is sexual energy which governs the structure of human feeling and thinking."

-- from [The Sexual Revolution](#)

As a war veteran, Reich was permitted to complete the six-year course in four years, and he passed the 18 Rigorosa in 18 medical subjects and received "excellent" (ausgezeichnet) in all the pre-medical subjects. He graduated and received his M.D. degree in July 1922.

During his last years of medical school, Reich did post-graduate work in Internal Medicine at the University Clinics of Ortner and Chvostek at University Hospital, Vienna. He continued his postgraduate education in neuro-psychiatry for two years (1922-24)

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postgraduate education in neuro-psychiatry for two years (1922-24) at the Neurological and Psychiatric University Clinic under Professor Wagner-Jauregg (who would win the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1927). Reich also worked for one year in the disturbed wards under Paul Schilder. Additional postgraduate studies included attendance at polyclinic work in hypnosis and suggestive therapy at the same University Clinic and special courses and lectures in biology at the University of Vienna.

Most significantly, however, while still in medical school Reich attained membership in the Vienna Psychoanalytic Association in October 1920. As an undergraduate, his recognition of the importance of sexuality had drawn him to the work of Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis was a new discipline which had emerged from Freud's startling insights into the causes of mental illness. Reich soon became one of the most active younger members of Freud's inner circle, and was considered one of Freud's most promising students.

Reich began his private psychoanalytic and psychiatric practice in 1922. He was the First Clinical Assistant at Freud's Psychoanalytic Polyclinic in Vienna (under the directorship of Dr. Edward Hitschmann) from its establishment in 1922 to 1928; Vice Director of the Polyclinic, 1928-1930; and Director of the Seminar for Psychoanalytic Therapy at the same institution. As a member of the faculty of the Psychoanalytic Institute in Vienna (1924-1930), he gave lectures on clinical subjects and bio-psychiatric theory. He conducted research on the social causation of the neurosis at the Polyclinic from 1924, and at mental hygiene consultation centers in various districts in Vienna (Sozialistische Gesellschaft fuer Sexualberatung und Sexualforschung), centers which he founded and led from 1928 to 1930. Reich's extensive clinical work and research ultimately led to conflicts with Freud.

Freud had discovered that neuroses are caused by the conflict between natural sexual instincts and the social denial and frustration of those instincts. Freud had also hypothesized the existence of a biological sexual energy in the body. He called it "libido," and described it as "something which is capable of increase, decrease,

displacement and discharge, and which extends itself over the memory traces of an idea like an electric charge over the surface of the body."

But as the years passed, Freud and his followers diluted much of this concept, reducing the libido to little more than a psychological energy or idea. By 1925, Freud had concluded that "the libido theory may therefore for the present be pursued only by the path of speculation."

Reich's clinical work convinced him otherwise. He devoted himself to matters of technique in an attempt to overcome the limitations of psychoanalysis in treating neuroses. And in doing so he observed that sexual energy is more than just an idea, and that sexual gratification, in fact, alleviated neurotic symptoms. He discovered that the function of the orgasm is to maintain an energy equilibrium by discharging excess biological energy that builds up naturally in the body. If that discharge function is disturbed--as it proved to be in all of his patients--this energy continues to build up without adequate release, stagnating and fueling neurotic disorders. Reich also discovered that in psychic disturbances, this biological energy is bound up not only in symptoms, but more importantly, in the individual's characterological and muscular rigidities--what he called "armor."

Reich's orgasm theory set him apart from his colleagues, because it indicated that the libido was a real physical energy that possibly might be measured quantitatively. Reich's clinical work also led him to develop new therapeutic techniques to eliminate the patient's character and muscular armor and allow for the flow and discharge of this bio-energy to achieve what he called "orgastic potency," the capacity for total discharge of sexual excitation in the genital embrace.



But the widespread existence of sexual misery forced Reich to conclude that the solution to the problem of neuroses wasn't treatment, it was prevention. "You have to revamp your whole way of thinking," Reich said, "so that you don't think from the standpoint of the state and the culture, but from the standpoint of what people need and what they suffer from. Then you arrange your social institutions accordingly." ([Reich Speaks of Freud](#))

Freud, on the other hand, maintained that culture takes precedence, that sexual instincts must be adapted to the existing social structure. These conflicting positions would lead to an eventual break between Reich and Freud.

Reich also devoted much of his time and money educating working class people about the essential role of sexuality in their lives. "I had six clinics in Vienna where people came and received advice once or twice a week...To provide medical and educational help was its purpose." ([Reich Speaks of Freud](#)) To reach the greatest number of people, he worked within the Socialist and Communist parties in Vienna, and later in Berlin, to promote sex education, birth control, divorce rights, and better housing. Reich recalled that in Berlin there were about fifty thousand people in his organization in the first year.

Reich was also very outspoken about Germany's turbulent political climate. Unlike most members of the Berlin Psychoanalytic Association, Reich openly opposed the rise of the Nazi Party. But Reich's activities exacted a high price. In 1933 he was denounced by the Communist Party, forced to flee from Germany when Hitler came to power, and expelled from the International Psychoanalytic Association in 1934. Reich called these events "catastrophes which threatened my personal, professional and social existence."

BIO-ELECTRICAL EXPERIMENTS, BIONS, AND THE DISCOVERY OF ORGONE ENERGY (1934 – 1939)

"The discovery of orgone energy was made through consistent, thorough study of energy functions, first in the realm of the psyche, and later in the realm of biological functioning."

-- from [Ether, God and Devil](#)

Reich traveled to Scandinavia where, despite incessant bureaucratic interferences, he managed to continue his research. In Oslo, while continuing to teach and develop his therapeutic techniques, Reich undertook a series of laboratory experiments to verify the existence of a physical biological energy expressed in the emotions.

Using human subjects, Reich was able to demonstrate a charge at the skin's surface directly related to feelings of pleasure and anxiety. This charge would increase when a subject felt pleasure, and decrease during feelings of displeasure. From this, Reich concluded that pleasure is the movement of biological energy toward the periphery of the organism, while anxiety is the movement of this energy toward the center. Reich initially assumed that biological excitation of living matter might be electrical, but the results of these experiments indicated otherwise. For example, the biological energy that Reich measured moved in a slow, wave-length fashion, in contrast to electromagnetic energy which moves much faster. Reich wondered if similar energy processes existed in more basic life forms.

This led Reich to conduct laboratory experiments in which he used time-lapse motion picture equipment affixed to microscopes with over 3000x magnification to record the development of protozoa. During these experiments Reich discovered that under certain conditions, sterilized and unsterilized substances--grass, blood, sand, charcoal and foodstuffs--disintegrate into pulsating vesicles that often exhibit a bluish color. Reich observed internal motility in these vesicles, an effect of energy. He called these vesicles "bions," after the Greek word for "life."

Reich's research also revealed that certain bions exhibited a strong radiation phenomena, and that these bions could kill bacteria and cancer cells. This radiation confirmed the existence of an energy that did not obey any known laws of electricity or magnetism. Reich called this energy "orgone," because its discovery had evolved from his investigation of the orgasm function, and because this energy could charge organic materials. When Reich published his findings, the scientific and psychiatric communities responded with a vicious year-long attack in the Norwegian press.

In the wake of this attack, and the inevitability of a second world war, Reich began to look to America as the future home for his

work. Theodore Wolfe, M.D.--a representative of American psychosomatic medicine who had come to Oslo to study with Reich--was instrumental in arranging for Reich's emigration. When Reich was invited to teach at the New School for Social Research in New York City, the U.S. State Department finally issued him a visa in the summer of 1939. On August 19, Reich sailed for America on the last

ship to leave Norway before World War II broke out.

REICH'S FIRST YEARS IN AMERICA (1939 – 1947)

"There was no doubt of the existence of an energy possessing extraordinarily high biological activity. It remained only to discover what its nature was and how it could be measured."

-- from [The Cancer Biopathy](#)

Reich settled in the Forest Hills section of New York City; taught courses at the New School for Social Research in Manhattan ("Character Formation: Biological and Sociological Aspects" and "Clinical Problems in Psychosomatic Medicine"); began publishing his books in English; trained American physicians in his therapeutic techniques; and pursued his investigations of orgone energy. This research included:

- treating cancer mice with bion injections
- developing a cancer serum from bion cultures
- finding a way to isolate and collect orgone energy from bions in order to study its functions and make it more usable

And since orgone radiation from the bions seemed to permeate all substances, Reich was constantly confronting questions about the origins of this energy. Where did orgone energy come from?

The Orgone Energy Accumulator (1940)

To isolate and collect orgone from bion cultures, Reich relied on the results of several laboratory experiments. These experiments demonstrated that organic or non-metallic materials--such as cotton, wool or plastic--attract, absorb, and hold the energy. Metallic materials --like steel and iron--attract the energy and quickly reflect it in both directions. On the basis of these findings, Reich constructed small boxes with alternating layers of organic and metallic materials, with the inner walls lined with metal. By looking through a specially designed lens inserted into a wall of each box, one could observe orgone radiation from the bions within the enclosure. These "orgone energy accumulators" also revealed an unexpected phenomenon: the appearance of orgone radiation inside the enclosure *even without the presence of bion cultures*.

Reich now faced the daunting possibility of having discovered a biological energy that seemed to be everywhere, while still pondering the perplexing question of where orgone energy originated. In Maine, he would soon find the answers.

Reich and Rangeley, Maine (1940)

In the summer of 1940, during a camping trip to New England, Reich discovered the beautiful Rangeley Lakes region. While staying in a small cabin on Mooselookmeguntic Lake (the largest of the Rangeley Lakes), Reich's observations of the night skies verified the existence of orgone energy in the atmosphere. This discovery of atmospheric orgone was a major thrust forward in Reich's research. And with its low humidity and clean air, Reich realized that the Rangeley region provided an ideal environment for this work. (In contrast, since water and high humidity absorb and hold orgone energy, the summer weather in New York City made it difficult to carry out his experimentation.) Later that year, Reich purchased a cabin on Mooselookmeguntic Lake where he returned in the summers to continue his experiments.

The Accumulators and Medical Orgone Therapy

Meanwhile, back in New York, the accumulator quickly became an increasingly vital tool for Reich's research. The accumulator's organic layers attracted the atmospheric energy which was directed inward by the metal layers. Any energy reflected outward by the metal layers was immediately re-absorbed by the organic material, attracted back to the metal, and directed toward the inside of the box. The result was a higher concentration of orgone energy inside the box. The more layers, the stronger the concentration



the concentration.

This accumulation of energy can be verified in a number of ways. For example, a constant temperature difference exists between the air above the box and the surrounding air, contradicting the Second Law of Thermodynamics. There also exists a slower electroscopic discharge rate in the higher orgone concentration inside the accumulator than is demonstrated by an electroscope outside the box.

The accumulator now allowed Reich to test the effects of orgone radiation on cancer mice without resorting to bion injections, by simply placing the mice inside the metal-lined enclosure. Because his results with cancer mice were so promising, Reich decided to test the effects of orgone radiation on humans. He constructed accumulators large enough for a person to sit in, and in 1941 began experimental treatments with cancer patients.

They were all terminal cases. Reich promised no cure nor charged any money, as shown by the affidavit that his patients and/or their family members were required to sign:

"I state herewith that I came to see Dr. Wilhelm Reich for possibly helping the case of my _____ who suffers from cancer. I came because I was told of the experiments that Dr. Reich has made with cancer mice and human beings. Dr. Reich did not promise me any cure, did not charge any money, and told me that only during the last few months has he tried the orgone radiation on human beings who suffer from cancer. Death or abscesses could occur as a consequence of the disease. I told Dr. Reich that the physicians have given up the case of my _____ as hopeless. Should death or

abscesses occur during the time of the experiment, it will not be because of the treatment." ([The Cancer Biopathy](#))

Over a period of time, the patients showed marked improvement: relief of pain, healthier blood condition, weight gain, and the shrinkage and elimination of tumors. Despite these positive results, the patients died, reinforcing Reich's conviction that cancer is a bioenergetic shrinking following emotional resignation, and that the tumors themselves are not the disease, but merely a local manifestation of a deeper systemic disorder. Once again, Reich's focus became prevention.

Orgonon – A Permanent Home for Reich's Work

In November 1942, Reich purchased an old farm a few miles from his cabin in Maine. The 160-acre property of fields, forests, and hills bordered a small lake known as Dodge Pond, and commanded stunning views in all directions. Reich called the property "Orgonon," and envisioned it as a permanent home for his work.



In 1945, a Student Laboratory was built at Orgonon. Three years later, construction began on the Orgone Energy Observatory which included additional laboratory facilities, Reich's library and study, and outdoor observation decks to observe and study atmospheric orgone energy phenomena. Funding for these buildings and for Reich's research came exclusively from his own income as a physician and teacher, and from loans and contributions from students.

By 1947, after less than eight years in America, Reich's work was attracting considerable interest as orgone research expanded into new areas of psychiatry, medicine and biophysics. One of Reich's most significant new developments at Orgonon was the discovery of a motor force in orgone energy from the atmosphere, a scientific breakthrough with enormous practical implications.

As Orgonon continued to grow, Reich's dream for a home for his work was slowly becoming a reality. Sadly, it was a dream that would not be fulfilled.

THE FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION'S CAMPAIGN AGAINST REICH (1947 – 1957)

"The more success I have, the more I sense that I am in mortal danger. And the more successful I become, the

mortal danger. And the more successful I become, the less they will be inclined to spare me. It can hit me at any place and at any time."

-- Diary entry (June 14, 1947)
from [American Odyssey](#)

In 1947 an article entitled "The Strange Case of Wilhelm Reich" appeared in *New Republic* magazine. Authored by freelance writer Mildred Edie Brady, it was filled with distortions and innuendos about Reich's sexual theories and orgone research. Brady's most inflammatory claim was that Reich was building accumulators of orgone energy "which are rented out to patients who presumably derived orgasmic potency from it."

Implying that Reich was a danger to the public, Brady challenged the medical authorities to take action against him. Two months later, the article was brought to the attention of the Food and Drug Administration. The result was a ten-year campaign by the FDA designed to destroy Reich's work. The FDA focused on the orgone energy accumulator which Reich and his physicians were using experimentally with patients. Convinced that the accumulator was being fraudulently promoted as a sexual and medical device, FDA agents spent years interviewing Reich's associates, physicians, students and patients, looking for dissatisfied users. None were ever found.

As the FDA's investigation continued, so did Reich's work.

Reich and the Cloudbuster

Reich continued to develop new ways to visualize, measure, and harness orgone energy from the atmosphere. The cloudbuster, for example, was an experimental instrument that could affect weather patterns by altering concentrations of orgone energy in the atmosphere. It comprised a set of hollow metal pipes and cables inserted into water, creating a stronger orgone energy system than that in the surrounding atmosphere. Water, which strongly attracts and absorbs orgone, draws the atmospheric orgone through the pipes. This movement of orgone from a lower to a higher energy system was used by Reich to create clouds and to dissipate them.



Reich used the cloudbuster to conduct dozens of experiments involving what he called "Cosmic Orgone Engineering (C.O.R.E.)." One of the most notable occurred in 1953. During a long drought that threatened the Maine blueberry crop, several farmers offered to pay Reich if he could bring rain to the parched region. The weather bureau had forecast no rain for several days when Reich began his cloudbusting operations. Ten hours later, a light rain began to fall. Over the next few days, close to two inches fell. The blueberry crop was saved, and in local newspaper articles the farmers credited Reich.

The Injunction

In February 1954, the FDA filed a Complaint for Injunction against Reich in the Federal Court in Portland, Maine. The Complaint declared that orgone energy does not exist, and asked the Court to prohibit the shipment of accumulators in interstate commerce and to ban Reich's published literature which they claimed was labeling for the accumulators.

After considerable thought and discussion of this matter, Reich responded with a lengthy letter to Judge John Clifford, explaining that he could not appear in Court, since doing so would allow a Court of law to judge basic scientific research. He wrote:

"Scientific matters can only be clarified by prolonged, faithful bona fide observations in friendly exchange of opinion, never by litigation... Man's right to know, to learn, to inquire, to make bona fide errors, to investigate human emotions must, by all means, be safe, if the word FREEDOM should ever be more than an empty political slogan.

Furthermore, Reich asserted, if his painstakingly elaborated and published findings

"...over a period of 30 years could not convince this

administration, or will not be able to convince any other administration of the true nature of the discovery of the Life Energy, no litigation in any court anywhere will ever help to do so. I, therefore, submit, in the name of truth and justice that I shall not appear in court as the 'defendant' against a plaintiff who by his mere complaint already has shown his ignorance in matters of natural science."

Judge Clifford did not accept Reich's letter as a valid legal response, and on March 19, 1954, a Decree of Injunction was issued on default as if Reich had never responded at all. But the Injunction itself was even more excessive than the initial Complaint:

- it ordered orgone energy accumulators and their parts to be destroyed
- it ordered all materials containing instructions for the use of the accumulator to be destroyed
- it banned a list of Reich's books containing statements about orgone energy, until such time that all references to orgone energy were deleted

After the initial shock, Reich continued his research, traveling to Arizona to experiment with the cloudbuster in the dry desert environment. While he was there, and without his knowledge, one of Reich' students--Dr. Michael Silvert--moved a truckload of accumulators and books from Rangeley, Maine to New York City, a direct violation of the Injunction.

As a result, the FDA charged Reich and Silvert with criminal contempt of court. Following a jury trial, both men were found guilty on May 7, 1956. Reich was sentenced to two years in federal prison, Silvert was sentenced to a year and a day. The Wilhelm Reich Foundation--founded in Maine in 1949 by students and friends to preserve Reich's Archives and to secure the future of his discovery of the Cosmic Life Energy--was fined \$10,000.

While Reich appealed his sentence, the government carried out the destruction of orgone accumulators and literature. In Maine, several boxes of literature were burned, and accumulators and accumulator materials either destroyed or dismantled. In New York City, on August 23, 1956, the FDA supervised the burning of several tons of Reich's publications in one of the city's garbage incinerators, including titles that were only to have been banned. Among the materials burned were:

- [Orgone Energy Bulletin](#) (12,189 copies)
- [International Journal of Sex Economy and Orgone Research](#) (6,261 copies)
- Emotional Plague Versus Orgone Biophysics (2,900 copies)
- [Annals of the Orgone Institute](#) (2976 copies)
- [The Oranur Experiment](#) (872 copies)
- [Character Analysis](#)
- [Cosmic Superimposition](#)
- [Ether, God, and Devil](#)
- [Listen, Little Man](#)
- [People in Trouble](#)
- [The Cancer Biopathy](#)
- [The Function of the Orgasm](#)
- [The Mass Psychology of Fascism](#)
- [The Murder of Christ](#)
- [The Sexual Revolution](#)

This destruction of literature constitutes one of the most heinous examples of censorship in United States history.

On March 8, 1957, Reich signed his [Last Will and Testament](#). Among

its stipulations was the establishment of [The Wilhelm Reich Infant Trust Fund](#) as the legal entity charged with operating Orgonon as [The Wilhelm Reich Museum](#); protecting, preserving, and transmitting his scientific legacy to future generations; and safeguarding [Reich's Archives](#).

All appeals denied, on March 12, 1957--two weeks shy of his 60th birthday--Wilhelm Reich was temporarily incarcerated at the Danbury Federal Penitentiary in Connecticut. On March 22, he was taken to the Federal Penitentiary in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. He died there of heart failure on November 3, 1957, and was buried at Orgonon.

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Contact : 207.864.3443 | wreich@rangeley.org