

A Story of Genius

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William James Sidis was a genius. He was by far the most precocious intellectual child of his generation. His death in 1944 as an undistinguished figure was made the occasion for reawakening the old wives tales about nervous breakdowns, burned out prodigies and insanity among geniuses.

Young Sidis was truly an intellectual phenomenon. His childhood achievements ranked with those of John Stuart Mill, Thomas Macaulay, and Johann Goethe. By the time William Sidis was two he could read English and, at four he was typing original work in French. At the age of five he had devised a formula whereby he could name the day of the week for any given historical date. At eight he projected a new logarithms table based on the number twelve. He entered Harvard at the age of twelve and graduated *cum laude* before he was sixteen. Mathematics was not his only forte. At this age he could speak and read fluently French, German, Russian,

Greek, Latin, Armenian and Turkish. During his first year at Harvard University the boy astounded students and scientists with his theories on "Fourth Dimensional Bodies."

The "man behind the gun" in this boy's amazing intellectual attainments is supposed to have been his father, a graduate in psychology at Harvard and a close friend of William James, after whom the boy was named. Dr. Boris Sidis believed in awakening in the child of two an interest in intellectual activity and love of knowledge. If you started early enough and worked intensively, Dr. Sidis claimed that by ten a child would acquire a knowledge equal to that of a college graduate. The boy's father published articles urging other parents to follow his methods. He castigated the school authorities for their "cramming, routine and rote methods," which he said, "tend to nervous degeneracy and mental breakdown."

Sidis pointed to his son, William, as a successful example of his methods. He wrote: "At the age of twelve the boy had a fair understanding of comparative philology and mythology. He is well versed in logic, ancient history, American history and has a general insight into our politics and into the ground-work of our constitution. At the same time he is of extremely happy disposition, brimming over with humor and fun."

Whether or not his childhood life was psychologically normal, William's life after Harvard was a series of unhappy incidents. He engaged in obscure mechanical jobs because, it was reported, "he did not want to think." At the age of twenty-four he estranged himself from his parents and to his last days the gap between parents and son remained unreconciled, though toward his sister he always felt a brotherly love which was expressed by a bond of friendship and mutual interests. Toward the press, William Sidis bore an everlastingly strong hatred.

From this story the newspapers and the general public drew some ill-formed conclusions about William Sidis and genius in general. Newspaper writers pointed out that his "genius had burned out," that he was "tired of thinking." By comparison it was stated that musical geniuses are less likely to burn out. The father's system was held responsible for making the boy a prodigy. The parental pushing was blamed for the mental breakdown and antisocial attitude. From his desire to keep out of the limelight and taking obscure jobs that would pay for his subsistence, William Sidis, the boy prodigy, was made out to be at the time of his death a lonely, eccentric, prodigious failure" whose intellect had deteriorated.

According to several newspaper reports, William Sidis was supposed to have had a brief mental breakdown at the age of twelve, after which it was said, "he returned to school brilliant as ever, but moody, and distrustful." Let us examine some of the true facts the background of this case of genius.

I first checked on the occurrence of the supposed brief mental breakdown. Students of abnormal psychology know that "brief mental breakdowns" in children of twelve are extremely rare. Both William's mother and his sister Helena, informed me that, "he did not have a nervous breakdown." Replies to correspondence from many persons who knew William Sidis have convinced me that the idea of his having had a mental breakdown either early or late in life is erroneous. It seems that during the summer vacation when as a youngster the newspapers reported him to have suffered his mental illness he was at his father's sanitarium at Portsmouth, New Hampshire. But, as his sister explained, "this was their home." Dr. Boris Sidis ran a sanitarium for the cure of psychopathic cases and the Sidis family, including William, lived there.

It is true that the father's concentration on academics to the complete neglect of play and friends for the boy was wrong and

unhealthy by any standards. However, the boy had a prodigious capacity to begin with. At five he had a mathematical ability that surpassed his father's. And it is doubtful whether the parents could have curbed it. Consider little Joel Kupperman, the "wonda child" of the Quiz Kids. At the age of five he did algebra and geometry problems mentally that few college professors could imitate. The Kuppermans are above average in intelligence, the mother is a former teacher, and the father, an engineer. They have used no system with Joel. His mother says: "Where he learns these things is more than I know," but they keep him supplied with all the books he wants.

An older youngster, whose history appears to approximate more closely that of young Sidis, is Master Merrill Kenneth Wolf, enrolled as a sophomore at Yale University at the age of twelve. The boy's parents, both attorneys, insist that they are average persons in such matters as intelligence and attainments. Yet, the father, Morris H. Wolf, never attended school but like his son studied law at home; formerly a reporter for the *London Daily Mail*, he has published three books and is an accomplished musician. Mrs. Wolf had informed reporters that the education of their son began when he amazed them by starting to talk at the age of four months. By the time he was two, Kenneth Wolf had finished all juveniles and showed an interest in adult works of science, history, and philosophy. In addition to his grasp of French, English grammar, zoology, and chemistry, the boy is a musical prodigy with that rare gift of absolute pitch.

Regardless of their zeal, neither the Kuppermans, the Wolfs, nor the Sidises could have given their children the stupendous intellectual capacities that these youngsters manifested at so tender an age. Their giving was primarily in the nature of the germ plasm, followed to some extent by educational nurture.

Returning to William Sidis, the facts in his background are more

convincing as concerns family heritage. His mother schooled herself at home through elementary and high school, and then was accepted at the Boston University School of Medicine where she received her M.D. degree. Boris Sidis, William's father, earned three degrees from Harvard before he was thirty, though he arrived from Russia at the age of twenty. Moreover, on both parental sides, the family, from grandparents to cousins, includes many whose prodigious intellect is a matter of world renown.

In any case, we can be quite certain that genius is not made by parents' actions. No, William Sidis was not made a prodigy by his father, he was born to be one.

That Sidis was socially maladjusted as an adult cannot be attributed to any simple set of circumstances. That he had not been taught to play in childhood may be considered a definite parental lack of foresight contributing to this maladjustment. However, we must recognize that it is not easy to find playmates or childish games to amuse or interest an adult mind in a young body. The parents of any precocious child will testify to that.

That William Sidis, as a youngster, had been unwholesomely placed in the public eye by association with his father's psychological fame, is a fact of record. Out of this probably grew the eventual separation between parents and son when the youth reached adulthood. As long as he lived, the thought of being considered a public spectacle was positive poison to the soul of Bill Sidis. He refused to have his name attached to any of his later writings and turned down offers of large sums from publishers who would not agree to his use of a pen-name. He won a successful suit against the *New Yorker Magazine* for placing him in a ridiculous light in the public eye in 1937 in one of their "profiles." Sarah Sidis gave a partial explanation for her son's lifelong animosity toward the press. She related that as a child, returning home from school, a couple of

newspapermen would descend upon the boy. While one held him, the other would take his picture. As a youth and as a man, Bill Sidis wanted to be left alone to live as an average individual, and said so, many times. He object bitterly to the idea of being stamped a "genius" and treated as side-show with the connotation of "queerness" that he knew to be associated with genius in the uninformed public mind. After his death, one friend of Bill Sidis wrote a letter which appeared in the Contributor's Column of the *Boston Traveler* in objection to false impressions given in the many newspaper obituary accounts. With her permission I am reprinting it.

People's Editor:

This is about Bill Sidis, who died Monday. His numerous friends do not like the false newspaper picture of him as a pauper and anti-social recluse. Bill Sidis held a clerical position until two weeks ago. For two weeks he had received unemployment compensation. the first time in his life. Today he was to start on a new job for which he had already been hired. Bill Sidis paid his way; he was no burden on society.

Sidis had plenty of loyal friends. All of them found his ideas stimulating and his personality likeable. Very few people know as much about the Indian background of our social customs as he. His manuscript study of it is worthy textbook material and very readable. He knew dozens of stories from Boston's history and told them with relish. He recently submitted a plan for post-war Boston.

But William Sidis had one great cause—the right of an individual in this country to follow his chosen way of life.

He had never been able to do this for himself, first because his father made him an example for psychological theories; then because the public, through newspaper articles, insisted that he was a "genius," abnormal and erratic.

Whenever Sidis saw interference by individuals or governments, with anyone's "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," he fought it any way he could. He won a long legal fight against a nationally known publication on the ground that it had invaded his privacy. Bill Sidis was a quiet man who enjoyed the normal things of life. His friends respected him and enjoyed his company. I am glad to have been one of his friends.

It is quite obvious from this evidence of Bill Sidis's enjoyment of wholesome friendships to his very last days that his genius did not make of him the "queer, friendless personality" that is too often erroneously thought to be characteristic of geniuses.

The intellect of William Sidis did not "burn out." What the journalists did not report, and perhaps did not know, was that during all the years of his obscure employments he was writing original treatises on history, government, economics and political affairs. In a visit to his mother's home I was permitted to see the contents of a trunkful of original manuscript material that Bill Sidis composed during the time he was supposed to be "reluctant to think." And in his obscure mechanical jobs, the "adding machines" that the newspapers described him to be working in later life were comptometers. Moreover, he would work two of them at a time, one with his left hand and one with his right, using his elbows for the space bar. That's not all. Supplied with a full share work that was supposed to consume an eight hour day, he would finish all of it

within one hour. If that's an example of "burned out genius, then I'll ...

Nor was Bill Sidis lacking in a sense of humor. Many pungent witticisms are to be found in his manuscripts. In book form they will draw many a chuckle from the reader when published. This is a characteristic sample: "Famous author, foreign correspondent and noted commentator: a fellow with a sponsor."

There was no lessening of William Sidis' mental acuity. Helena Sidis told me that a few years before his death, her brother Bill took an intelligence test with a psychologist. His score was the very highest that had ever been obtained. In terms of I.Q., the psychologist related that the figure would be between 250 and 300. Late in life William Sidis took general intelligence tests for Civil Service positions in New York and Boston. His phenomenal ratings are matter of record.

In the interest of scientific truth and the benefits to be derived from its application, I have tried to offer a truer story of an intellectual genius. To mothers of intellectual prodigies, I say, fear not that the youngster's brain power will be dissipated with age. Feed it, and it will grow like that of any precocious musical or artistic genius. True, there are reports of extremely precocious children whose brilliance flared like a torch and burned out before the age of twelve as a result of the brain tumor which can be diagnosed by a medical specialist.

The life of William James Sidis vividly portrays what psychology teaches about intellectual genius. *It is first born and then developed. The prowess appears at an early age. It does not expire any sooner than musical or artistic talent. Mental derangement is not characteristic of genius. Unrealistic publicity in connection with a youthful person of very superior capacity should be avoided. The feeling of being different or queer should be guarded against. The*

precocious child it neither to be squelched in his thirst for learning nor to be zealously prodded. Allow the child to be the guide of his guardian. To develop normally, a youthful prodigy should have opportunities for wholesome emotional and social contacts with a friendly world.

We have seen the necessity for the rational nurture of intellectual side of life regardless of what the original nature may be.



Letter from Dr. Sperling to Helena Sidis re a philology manuscript and an anthropology manuscript.

(Click/tap to open, again to enlarge.)

**THE COLLEGE OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK
THE CITY COLLEGE—DEPARTMENT OF HYGIENE
CONVENT AVENUE AND 138TH STREET**

January 14, 1945 [Wed.]

Dear Helen:

Your letter appeared in the nature of a crossing of thoughts by some coincidence or telepathy if one is inclined to give credence to the existence of telepathic thought waves. I visited Mr. McDowell at Greenberg publisher's on Friday and received the materials from your brother's manuscripts and was today debating with

myself whether to mail them to you in Boston or wait until I heard from you. I had called your former address in N.Y. and they gave me a Boston address where I could reach you.

Mr. McDowell's comments on the manuscripts were these. Both of them he thought were rather scholarly and thus would not lend themselves to publication for popular sale. He suggested that you have some one or more of the outstanding scholars in the the fields of philology and anthropology respectively read both manuscripts for the purpose of passing on their merits and suggesting possible agencies for publication. His feeling was that most commercial publishers would have the same reaction as he had and that you would do best through some educational agency or publication through a scholarly grant. In the field of philology he suggested Margaret Schlauch at N.Y.U. as a likely person for the language manuscript and for the anthropology he suggested you contact the The Museum of Natural History authorities.

My sister came in to borrow my typewriter so I'll finish in ink. I'll be looking forward to seeing you again upon your return to New York and will be much interested to gain any additional knowledge you may have about Bill. I have not as yet gone further in trying to contact any additional friends of Bill's and will let that wait and then I will set myself to a specific project on the subject. Please contact me when you get to N.Y.

Sincerely,

Abe Sperling

P.S. We are awaiting our new arrival any hour now.