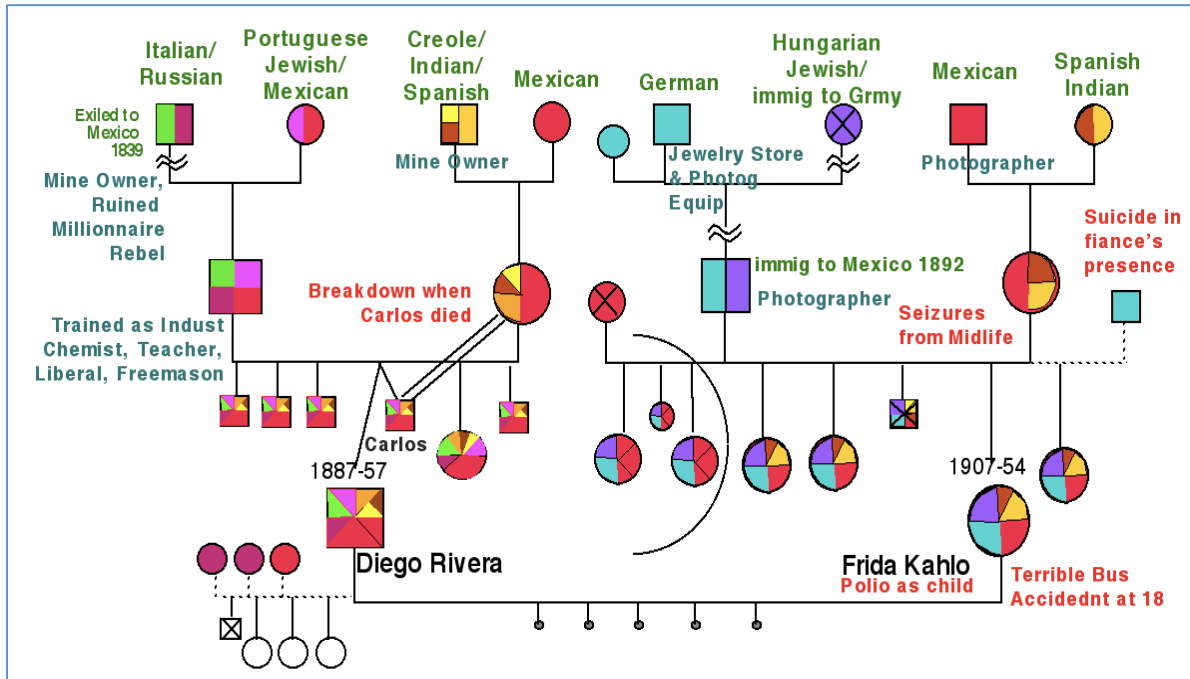


FRIDA KAHLO GENOGRAM LIFE STORY



Historical Context: A Family's Place in Time

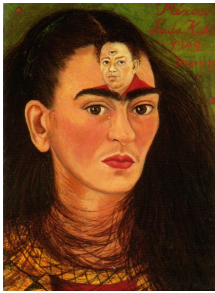
It is vital not only to consider a family's cultural identity, but also to consider the broader sociopolitical context and historical forces that shape family experiences. A compelling example of this can be observed in the case of famed painters Frida Kahlo and her husband Diego Rivera. **Genogram 1: Kahlo-Rivera** shows the genogram of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, typical of many families in their complex mixture of cultural heritages (McGoldrick, Gerson & Petry, 2008). It is impossible to understand Kahlo's family without considering the historical and cultural context in which they lived. Frida Kahlo was a revolutionary artist born in Coyoacán, Mexico, amidst political chaos in her homeland, who so identified herself with her political era that she used to say she had been born in 1910, the year of the Mexican Revolution, although in reality she was born three years earlier. Her life was fully caught up in the sociopolitical struggles of her culture and times, as her work reflects.

Kahlo grappled with the multiple cultural aspects of her identity all her life – gender, ethnicity and national identity, often depicting her multiple cultural aspects in her art, with one foot located in the cultural ruins of ancient Mexico, and one foot in the industrial imperialistic U.S. (See **Picture 1**). She was a complex mixture of competing, conflicting and contrasting forces. On one hand she was a young Mexican girl, and on the other a sophisticated woman of the world. Her works are a



Picture 1

testament both to pre-Columbian and colonial cultural influences.



Picture 2

Sometimes she depicted her husband inside her head as if it was impossible to have an identity that he didn't in some way own (Picture 2); at other times her work radiated with her fierce independence. Or she depicted herself from a cultural and life cycle perspective, as a child, a traditional cultural woman and a sophisticated woman (Picture 3). She was a vibrant, powerfully creative and forceful woman, who was plagued with debilitating physical injuries and illness. She was openly bisexual and while intensely jealous of Rivera's numerous infidelities, she too had affairs with many men and women. She was alternately hopeful and despairing and vacillated between periods of extreme isolation and wild bursts of exuberance and merrymaking.

Kahlo's life and work embodied a clash between conflicting forces that was a reflection of both the historical and cultural context of her times, and of the unique dynamics of her family's cultural legacy. Her father was a German/Hungarian Jew who immigrated to Mexico where he deeply embraced the culture.



Picture 3

Her mother was the daughter of a native Michoacán woman and a Spanish General, and thus the literal embodiment of Mexican culture; namely, a culture forged through the clash between the conquering Spaniards and the conquered Indigenous peoples of ancient Mexico. Kahlo intensely identified with her roots on both sides of her family system, finding ways to hold the tension between often competing, conflicting and contrasting forces. We might say that she created the first genogram- a diagram of her family with portraits of each (Genogram 2). The complexity of diverse relationships was something that was deeply entrenched within the Kahlo family system, beginning with the parents' marriage. Theirs was a tense and unhappy union, and one has to wonder to what extent their ethnic and religious differences contributed to the distance between them. Frida's mother was a devout Catholic and her conservative values often created distance between her and her daughters, as well as between her and her husband. While Frida's father, Herr Kahlo as she affectionately referred to him, was not a practicing Jew, he nevertheless transmitted this part of his heritage to Frida who claimed her Jewish immigrant ancestry with pride. Her strong ties to her mixed ethnic roots and the power that the historical context had on her life can be observed in another sort of genogram painting she made of herself as a child with her parents and grandparents (Genogram 3) and in a later painting that adapts a genealogical chart of her 1936 family tree. In 1935 the Nazi government established the Nuremberg laws, which prohibited intermarriage and promoted "racial purity."

Genogram 2



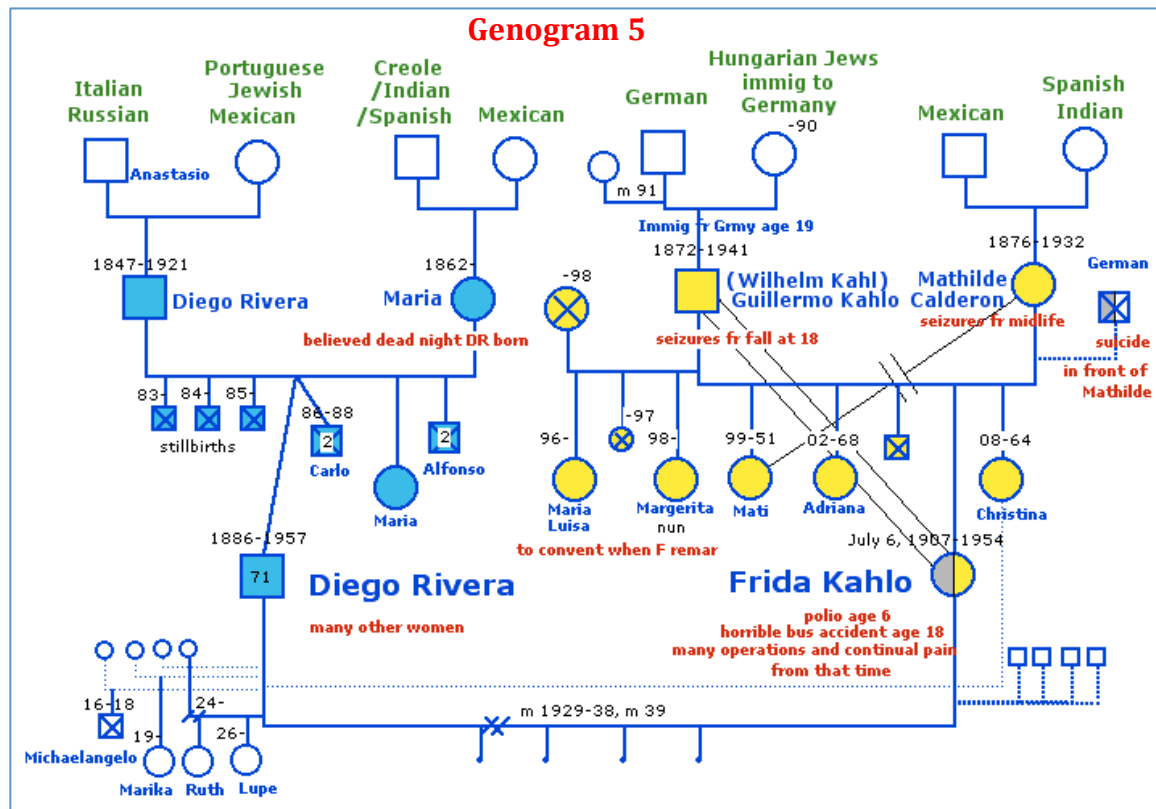
Genealogical charts were one method the Nazis used to prove or disprove “racial purity.” By 1936 Nazi-oriented manuals on how to conduct genealogical research were distributed in the German School of Mexico City, where many of the teachers joined the Nazi Party and encouraged their students to chart their family trees. Distressed by this, Kahlo adapted this Nazi device to emphasize her interracial origins, her subversive statement a reflection of her identification with her Jewish roots and multi-racial roots. Beyond this, her art reflects both her passion for and attunement to the duality of Mexican culture in terms of the convergence of ancient Mezo-American and European Spanish roots. Her paintings routinely included religious symbols that were Jewish, Catholic and Indigenous, further depicting the impact of her family’s mixed ethnic and religious roots on her life and her work.

When trying to understand a family from an intergenerational perspective, consider how the historical context shaped whatever behaviors occurred at a give point in time. The very same behaviors have different meanings and provoke differential reactions



Genogram 3

depending on the historical period in which they are situated. Help clients recognize how the historical period as well as the cultural context in which family members lived may have affected their experiences.



Resilience in the Face of Loss

Families' resilience in the face of loss, trauma, and dysfunction enables it to survive (Walsh, 2006). It is important to explore such resourcefulness and to underline it. **Frida Kahlo (Genogram 5)** provides a remarkable example of such resilience through her amazing ability to transform cultural differences, disruption, loss, trauma and physical disability into transcendent strength and creative energy. Her resilience and the resilience of her family are evident in many aspects of their history. She first became ill at age six with polio, which left her right leg weaker and smaller. At 18 she experienced a traumatic bus accident, in which she was impaled on a metal pipe, which went completely through her pelvis and fractured her spine. The accident left her with chronic pain for the rest of her life, in spite of numerous operations. Coincidentally, her father had suffered a fall at the same age, which left him with brain damage and seizures, changing the course of his life, dashing his hopes of university study. His accident and his mother's death the next year compounded by his father's quick marriage to a woman with whom he didn't get along, influenced his resolve to emigrate to Mexico the next year.

In Mexico he changed his name from Wilhelm Kahl to Guillermo Kahlo. He became a noted photographer, although he suffered ongoing sequelae from his accident.

In Mexico Kahlo married a first wife and had three daughters, the middle of which died very early. Then his wife died tragically in childbirth with the third daughter. He apparently met



Guillermo Kahlo & Mathilda Calderon at their wedding

his future wife, Mathilda Calderon, the very night of his first wife's death. He married her very soon thereafter. She, however, conveyed that she did not want to have to raise the other two surviving daughters of his first marriage, so those girls were sent to a convent and he and Mathilda "started over." Over the next years Mathilda and Guillermo had 3 daughters, a son who died, and then a final daughter, Frida together. Frida was the daughter born after the lost son. If we look at a picture of Frida in her teens, she does indeed look like a son, and perhaps again her ability to connect to many disparate parts reflects this complexity. She seems to have been in a way a replacement for her lost brother. She became her father's favorite child, and the only one given a German name, Frida. She early developed an interest

in art, his profession, which became, as it did for him an outlet, following her accident. Like her father, Frida had held hopes of becoming a scholar and physician. Instead, she became an artist, like her father and her maternal grandfather before that.

Frida's "genogram" portrait of her family, appears to show herself and her sister Christina with their two older sisters on the left and a baby boy (?) her brother in the middle. Then on the right are two faceless people and below a boy crossed out. Could the two faceless people be her two sisters who were extruded from the family. She seems to have had an amazing ability to convey the concept that those who are lost are never fully gone, that the trauma of what came before affects us always. Could she be trying to give the message that the two extruded sisters were still part of the family and that her brother was still in fact part of it as well. Her other "genogram" portrait similarly reveals the hidden- the baby in her mother's stomach. Is that her brother? Is she saying that she is living the life for the lost brother as well?



Both Frida's parents had experienced severe traumas early in life. Her mother, Mathilda Calderon a brilliant and attractive woman of Spanish and Indian background, had been in love with another German, who committed suicide in front of her. All her life she kept a book of his letters and, though she married Kahlo and had four daughters and a son with him, she never seems to have been able to live up to her potential. Mathilda encouraged Kahlo to go into business as a photographer with her father. Unfortunately, he seems never to have come to terms

with his earlier traumas. Over the years he became bitter and withdrawn in spite of his obvious abilities and early efforts to reinvent himself. It was his favorite daughter, Frida, who demonstrated the most remarkable ability to transform traumatic experiences into hope and art, in spite of much more severe disabilities.

She was her father's favorite, his helper. The mother later cut off her oldest daughter, Mati, refusing to see her for 12 years. Mati, was the only family member to visit Frida when she was hospitalized after her horrific accident. And it appears that even when she returned home neither parent was able to attend to her, apparently too upset themselves about what had happened to her!

Three years later Frida married Diego Rivera, 21 years older than she. He was already very successful but her parents thought him ugly and fat, though the father finally gave his approval. Rivera appears to have been the love of her life, but he was never faithful, having affairs, including with her sister Christina. The couple divorced and remarried and Frida herself had lovers both male and female, including the famous Russian Revolutionary Leon Trotsky. The couple eventually lived in separate but connected homes in Mexico City. Both were remarkable artists. Although Rivera had several other children, the pregnancies Frida had with him all ended tragically in miscarriage. In spite of her physical and psychological suffering throughout her life, Frida Kahlo was one of the most remarkably inventive and colorful artists of the 20th century.



Kahlo/Rivera Families

- Alcantara, I., & Egnolff, S. (1999). *Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera*. New York: Prestel Verlag.
- Drucker, M. (1991). *Frida Kahlo*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Grimberg, S. (2002). *Frida Kahlo*. North Dighton, MA: World Publications Group, Inc.
- Herrera, H. (1983). *Frida: A biography of Frida Kahlo*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Herrera, H. (1984). *Frida*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Herrera, H. (1991). *Frida Kahlo: The paintings*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Kettenmann, A. (2002). *Frida Kahlo, 1907-1954: Pain and passion*. New York: Barnes & Noble Books. (Original publication 1992, Cologne, Germany: Benedikt Taschen Verlag GmbH.
- Kahlo, F. (2001). *The diary of Frida Kahlo: An intimate self-portrait*. Toledo, Spain: Abradale Press.
- Kahlo, F. (1995). *The letters of Frida Kahlo: Cartas apasionadas*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.
- Marnham, P. (1998). *Dreaming with his eyes open: A life of Diego Rivera*. New York: Knopf.
- Rivera, D. (1991). *My art, my life*. New York: Dover.
- Tibol, R. (1983). *Frida Kahlo: An open life*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.