Erotic Transference in the Early History of Psychoanalysis:

Ferenczi’s Analysis of Elma Palos

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On July 14, 1911, Sandor Ferenczi decides to take Elma, the daughter of his mistress, Gizella Palos, into psychoanalytic treatment following a consultation with Freud prompted by their concern over Elma’s difficulties in her relations with men, pursuant to which Freud gives a tentative diagnosis of Elma’s condition as “dementia praecox.”

In a letter of July 20, Freud responds tersely to Ferenczi’s announcement: “I . . . wish you much practical success in the new enterprise with Fraulein Elma, but of course, I fear that it will go well up to a certain point and then not at all.”

(Freud/Ferenczi Correspondence, p. 296)

On October 18, Ferenczi reports to Freud: “The analysis of Frau G.’s daughter (Elma) was already making very nice progress when one of the youths in whom she was (neurotically) interested . . . shot himself on her account a week ago. It is very questionable how the matter will go now.” (p. 304)

On December 3, Ferenczi reports:

Things are proceeding more rapidly than I imagined they would. I was not able to maintain the cool detachment of the analyst with regard to Elma, and I laid myself
bare, which then led to a kind of closeness which I can no longer put forth as the benevolence of a physician or of the fatherly friend\(^1\) (p. 318)

On December 5, Freud writes: “First break off the treatment, come to Vienna for a few days... don’t decide anything yet, and give my regards many times to Frau G.” (318f.)

On December 17, Freud writes a long letter to Gizella, in which he expresses his sympathy with her plight and his deep distress over what has just transpired. He analyzes Ferenczi’s conflict in terms of his “swinging from his mother to his sister, as was once the case in his earliest years” (p. 320) He reveals his grave doubts about the future of the planned union of Ferenczi and Elma, and counsels forbearance and resignation on Gizella’s part.

On the first day of the new year, in the throes of a sudden reversal reminiscent of the \textit{peripateia} of a Greek tragedy, Ferenczi writes to Freud:

At the last minute, when the already completed plan was presented to Elma’s father he made a few hesitant objections by alluding to Elma’s earlier engagement, which had been called off a few years ago. At that, to my amazement, certain doubts crept into \textit{Elma’s} mind. I inquired further and learned from her . . . that \textit{every time} she wishes something especially strongly, she inwardly feels an inability to wish (as well as to hate) without reservation. \textit{That}

\(^1\) Elma describes the event, long after the fact, in a letter of May 7, 1966 to Michael Balint:

\begin{quote}
All in all after a few sessions Sandor got up from his chair behind me, sat on the sofa next to me and, considerably moved, kissed me all over and passionately told me how much he loved me and asked if I could love him too. Whether or not it
always made her so unhappy. . . [T]he scales fell from my eyes. . . I had to recognize that the issue here should be one not of marriage but of the treatment of an illness. Of course, I myself cannot continue the treatment. After many bitter tears. . . she consented to go to Vienna and enter treatment with you. . . . (323f.)

In his letter of January 3, in response to Freud’s letter of the previous day expressing his consternation over the sudden turn of events, Ferenczi writes:

I cannot spare you the effort and trouble of taking Elma into treatment. There is no other way out. She wishes to be treated by me—that is naturally out of the question; if we leave her to herself, then we will jeopardize her stability. . . . I have not expressly withdrawn the bonus (marriage); only I feel inwardly and I believe that Elma’s absence will dissolve the transference relationship in me, and the treatment will do the same in her. (pp. 325f.)

Limitations of time prevent me from giving a comprehensive account of Freud’s analysis of Elma, which began in early January of 1912 and was terminated in late March or early April of that year. Suffice it to say, Freud had revised his earlier diagnosis of dementia praecox to one of “infantilism” (p. 340), and if nothing else, the treatment diminished any potential threat to her “stability”.

During the months of Elma’s analysis with Freud, while, at Freud’s insistence she and Ferenczi remained separated, Ferenczi vacillated painfully between his wish that the treatment would open up the possibility of a viable marriage with Elma and his was true I cannot tell, but I answered “yes” and—I hope—I believed so (qtd in
realization that this eventuality would alter if not disrupt entirely his already severely strained relations with Gizella. Interestingly, although she, too, was deeply hurt by the events as they unfolded, Gizella not only came to accept the idea of Elma’s marriage to Ferenczi, she even began actively to advocate it. Thus, with Gizella’s complicity, Ferenczi was able to keep the fantasy of his family romance with mother and sister alive.

In a letter to Freud of April 17, he gives the following assessment of Elma’s recently terminated analysis with his mentor:

> The effect of the treatment has certainly been very deep. Elma has complete insight into the infantile complexes that make up her character, and she no longer has the ambition to be more than she can be by nature; she is much more social than she was before, and she has given up the hunt for her illusions. (p. 364f.).

The story, however, does not end here. Still hopeful that, building on what Freud has accomplished analytically, Elma would become amenable to marriage with him, Ferenczi decides to resume Elma’s analysis. But, on May 27, following an incident in which Elma was accosted by one of her suitors, Ferenczi writes to Freud:

> From the matter in which she reported the incident... I saw that she cannot admit to me and to herself everything that is going on in her... I... told her emphatically that there can be no talk of engagement as long as she doesn’t commit herself to open (analytic) discourse. If she can’t do that, then I will cease all further attempts and consider the matter settled.(p. 374)

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Berman [2004], p. 514)
Ferenczi’s immediate technical goal was to break down Elma’s resistance to the realization of “her long-suppressed resentment” against him and marriage. Further analysis would then bring about “a clarification of the situation necessary to make a decision.” He concedes that in that eventuality “It is possible that she will lose patience and give up the treatment along with her intentions to get engaged. If it comes to that, then [he] will be comforted by the awareness that a break is preferable to an inauspicious union” (ibid.).

That is—more or less—what ensued. On July 18, Ferenczi writes to Freud:

Evidently she (Elma) doesn’t want the analysis, but would like that not she herself but I or Frau G. should be responsible for stopping the treatment.—I put that to her, and she finally admitted that she . . . was beginning to lose patience. . . . I told her that she had never worked properly since her return from Vienna, but had tried to apply her old arts of seduction and wanted to realize the decision to marry. She had been obstructive the whole time. I frankly admitted having made big mistakes in the last analysis (before Vienna) by accepting her mostly neurotic advances as real, but that now I was quite sure of myself, so that she finally had to give up “seducing” me away from the proper analytic path for the second time. (pp. 391f.)

And, on August 8, Ferenczi writes to Freud: “I have given up Elma’s analysis and in so doing severed the last thread of the connection between us.—“(p. 402).
Commentary

How should we view these events from the vantage point of today? Our immediate reaction is to ask: Who is seducing whom, and to what end? By all accounts Ferenczi’s treatment of Elma, with Freud’s—albeit grudging—complicity crosses ethical boundaries and violates commonly held tenets of acceptable analytic technique. (see Gabbard). From a historical perspective, however, one is inclined to give the parties some benefit of the doubt. The term “countertransference” had only just entered the psychoanalytic vocabulary with Freud’s lecture at the Nuremberg Congress of 1910, when he stated: “We . . . are almost inclined to insist that [the physician] shall recognize this countertransference in himself and overcome it.” (1910, pp. 144f.) Freud had also alluded to his own (presumably erotic) countertransference when he mentions a “narrow escape” (Mc Guire, p. 230) in a letter to Jung of June 7, 1909, in an attempt to console the latter in his relations with another, now famous, patient, Sabina Spielrein. (See Carotenuto, Lothane). Ferenczi took some note of his countertransference in the first phase of Elma’s analysis – to the effect that he had fantasies about marrying Elma -- but its mention is conspicuously absent in the critical moment when he revealed to Freud in his letter of December 3, 1911, that he “was not able to maintain the cool detachment of the analyst with regard to Elma.” From then on, the lives of Ferenczi, Freud, Gizella, and Elma—indeed, the history of psychoanalysis itself—were profoundly altered. It would take the better part of a century for the term “countertransference enactment” to become part and parcel of psychoanalytic discourse.
As we continue to integrate these events into our historical consciousness, we must ask ourselves why Ferenczi decided to take Elma into treatment in the first place. He was, to be sure, a neophyte, 38 years old, possessed of the *furor sanandi* that Freud would later warn about in his essay on Transference Love (1915, p. 171). He was eager to help Elma in her hour of need and allay Gizella’s worries about her future. His revered teacher and mentor, Freud, harbored no reservations about the scheme, apart from some skepticism to the effect “that it will go well up to a certain point and then not at all.”

From a purely technical point of view, once the analytic genie was out of the bottle and the events that had been set in motion after December 3, 1911 began to unfold, Freud acted appropriately in calling a halt to the treatment, but his decision to resume the analysis himself, succumbing, as he did, to Ferenczi’s urgent appeal for help, remains one of the many questionable aspects of the process.

Most significant, however, are Ferenczi’s motives, a detailed examination of which exceeds the scope of this paper. His impulsive actions in response to Elma’s report of her suitor’s suicide are worthy of attention in their own right (see Berman 2003), but the larger issue of his proposal of marriage and his decision to resume the analysis, with its hoped-for outcome contingent on freeing Elma’s ability to love (and marry) him, the analyst, deserve the utmost critical scrutiny. Ferenczi did, to be sure—as did Elma—eventually become reconciled to the realization that this goal was unattainable, but the enterprise itself was doomed by his inability to acknowledge that freeing her capacity for love analytically and arranging their marriage in the process were mutually exclusive.

Ferenczi’s analysis of Elma Palos and his well-documented analysis of Elizabeth Severn (code-name, R. N.), conducted during the last years of his life, along with Freud’s
analysis of Dora, take their place in the history of psychoanalysis as monuments to flawed technique. But their importance lies less in their failure to produce the desired therapeutic outcomes than in what has since been learned from them. In the case of Dora, it was the discovery of transference as a prime determinant in human motivation and an essential feature of the analytic process; in the case of R. N., in which erotic transference also played a major role, it was the addition of empathy and the analysis of countertransference to the analyst’s therapeutic armamentarium; in the case of Elma it was the advisability of abstinence in the analytic situation. Thus, we can discern resonances of Freud’s experiences with Ferenczi and Elma Palos when he wrote the following cautionary words in 1915 in “Observations on Transference Love”:

. . . [T]he experiment of letting oneself go in tender feelings for the patient is not altogether without danger. Our control over ourselves is not so complete that we may not suddenly one day go further than we had intended. In my opinion, therefore, we ought not to give up the neutrality towards the patient, which we have acquired through keeping the counter-transference in check. (1915, p. 164).²

Several generations of psychoanalysts have been deliberating the implications of this statement ever since.

² In his Editor’s Introduction to “Observations on Transference Love,” Strachey characterizes Freud’s letter to Ferenczi of December 13, 1931 (in which the latter is admonished for his use of the “kissing technique) as “an interesting postscript to this paper” (p. 158).
REFERENCES


