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THE SEPARATION-INDIVIDUATION OF MARGARET S. MAHLER

Her Background

Margaret Schoenberger was born to an upper middle class Jewish family on May 10, 1897, in Sopron, Hungary, a charming city located along the Austrian-Hungarian border at the foot of the Alps, 40 miles from Vienna. She was a true daughter of Sopron in her gracious hospitality, her love of art, music, and theatre, her pursuit of the intellectual life, and her extensive use of the cultural life of her adopted city of New York.

The Gustztav Schoenbergers' home was probably not too different from Margaret's large European style apartment in The El Dorado, which overlooks the trees of Central Park. Her cherished Connecticut home of Brookfield surrounded with the woods she loved may well have brought back memories of the beautiful natural surroundings of Sopron.

Margaret, or Margit, as she was then called, was born to the nineteen-year-old Eugenia Wiener Schoenberger nine months and six days after her wedding. Eugenia felt very put upon by her pregnancy, as she considered herself too young to be a mother. Apparently she blamed Margit for the mishap, and had as little to do with her as possible. As a result, the future student of symbiosis was left to work out her own destiny in that respect, as a normal symbiotic process could not have developed with so rejecting a mother.

When Margit's sister Suzanne was born Eugenia made no secret which child she preferred. Once Margit sat watching her mother nurse her sister, and heard her say, "I suckle you, I love you, I adore you. I live only for you." Margit said defiantly, "And *I* was born of my *father*, not my mother!" This episode served as the prototype of all the mothers and babies she

was to observe in decades to come. She said, “My mother and sister were the first mother-child relationship I investigated.”

Karen Berberian, the therapist daughter of Mahler’s student and close friend, Selma Kramer, personally described the repetition in action. She said in an interview with me, “I remember when my son Josh was an infant, I was breast feeding him and Mahler came and watched intently. It was kind of creepy.”

Margaret had another screen memory in which her mother who was nursing her sister, developed a breast abscess. The mean-spirited woman informed Margaret that she had not breast fed *her*. The child angrily thought, “The abscess serves her right!” This bout of rage probably was the forerunner of the frequent outbreaks that were to plague her and her colleagues.

It seems that Margit was a watcher almost from birth on. Not surprisingly, she was a sickly infant and a poor sleeper. Her father and a nurse stayed up with her at night, not her mother. She said, “I was put into the arms of a wet nurse, who was dismissed when I was five months old because she stole something.”

Margaret felt she was endowed with great curiosity and a zeal to investigate. Another screen memory took place perhaps a year later. The child, who had been told of the birth of kittens in a neighbor’s attic, snuck in to see them. To her horror, she found the kittens’ eyes sealed shut. So she picked them up one by one and pried open their eyes. She said later that she was completely unaware of the danger to her own eyes on the part of the mother cat, who might have attacked her instinctively in defense of her young. Mahler thought the germs of two of her

first articles, *Pseudoimbecility: A Magic Cap of Invisibility*,¹ and *Les Enfants Terribles*² lay hidden in this episode .

Dr. Schoenburger insisted that Margaret didn't *have* to marry, as she herself was better than the average man. He also said she should stay single to take care of her sister, who was weaker and much less self-sufficient than Margaret. While her beautiful sister entered adolescence with a slew of beaux, Margaret devoted herself to reading everything she could find about Einstein's theory of relativity. No man would ever love her, Margaret thought, and if perchance, one did, he was immediately devalued in her mind.

Margaret acceded to her father's wishes that she remain single until she was 39 years old, when she married Paul Mahler. According to Margaret, "He was a very cultured, gentle man. But he was far from a successful man, although he had a PhD. in chemistry." Characteristically, her father tried to discourage the marriage. Although she went ahead with the wedding, his influence may well have contributed to Margaret's ambivalence about her husband. It seems that she was more a mother to Paul than a wife. She did everything possible to find adequate work for him, for she was already highly successful, while Paul, when working at all, held jobs far beneath his level of competency. Mahler told me that when she and her husband ate out at a restaurant, she would slip money to him under the table, to keep him from feeling humiliated when she paid the bill. She resented, too, that he was a typical European man, who refused to do his share of work around the house. She also took offense at his sleeping habits. Margaret told her divorce lawyer,

“Paul always wished to sleep as far away from me as possible.” She divorced him after seventeen years of marriage.

Strangely enough for a woman who had insisted on a divorce, after Paul died she conserved his ashes and had them interred with hers in Sopron, next to the graves of her parents. Apparently, after they were dead, she no longer had to worry about separation-individuation.

From the time she was very little, Margit identified with her physician father and dreamed of becoming a doctor herself. When she was fifteen years old, Alice Kovacs (the daughter of Vilma Kovacs, a distinguished Hungarian psychoanalyst) snatched a paper of Freud's Clark University lectures of 1909, which the girls read surreptitiously under a school bench. You can hear them giggling. Mahler said she could *see* from that paper how analysis works, and realized right then that she wanted to become a psychoanalyst. Then the girls found an even more forbidden paper, Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, which they devoured with the avid curiosity of teenagers. Margaret emerged from her reading with a pronounced belief in the existence of the unconscious.

Separation-Individuation

Winnicott once said that without the mother there is no baby. One can almost say that in the case of Margaret Mahler, without another person to melt into, there was no Margaret Mahler. According to Anni Bergman, the chief participant observer at Masters Children's Center and Mahler's longtime associate, “*it was almost impossible for Mahler to work alone, as she was unable to think for herself. All her writing came out of a dyad.*” As if in illustration of her theories on symbiosis, Mahler and each individual she was close to blended into each other and established

a union that was different from any other.

Fred Pine said of Mahler, “Separation-Individuation came from somewhere deep inside of her, and she knew about it personally. She was able to convert it into an important contribution, but *was not able to excise it from her character. The negotiation of boundaries between herself and people who were close to her was always hard for her....*”

With a few colleagues such as Harold Blum, Mahler was intimate and let them into her deepest needs and fears. With others no less valued by her, Fred Pine, for example, she battled constantly and stubbornly. She had a number of “daughters,” but, characteristically, treated each one differently. Her analyst Bluma Swerdlhoff, later to become her friend and interviewer, generally found Mahler kind and caring. With Judy Smith, Mahler’s film editor, she was also helpful and accepting, but coolly professional.

Another “daughter,” Kitty LaPerrière, said, “The analyst who introduced her to me said, ‘If you can forgive some eccentricities you will have an interesting time with her.’ She seemed to me to be intense and cloudy in her eyes, not a happy woman. I thought I could be forgiving, and we agreed that I would come to work for her as a research psychologist. She said, “Kitty thinks like a man.” That was the highest compliment she could pay any woman.

“She was a vulnerable, lonely woman. That was clear when she wanted you to work on holidays. Instead of saying I’m lonely and inviting a few people over, she would order you to come. If you refused, she would say, ‘Do you want to work here or not?’ Shock and awe in Bagdad, that was what people experienced with Mahler when they worked for her.

“Mahler taught the fellows in child psychoanalysis in Philadelphia in her apartment. Occasionally she asked me to sit in. Once she went out to make a phone call. The analysts behaved

like a second grade class who made nasty comments and threw spit balls when the teacher turned her back. In those days they would go to psychoanalytic meetings, where if you were well analyzed you sat motionless. You were supposed to be removed from all human emotions, to have eliminated all unacceptable drives and be all intellect and sublimation. Nobody scratched their nose, in contrast those four or five grown men carrying on like brats.

“I got myocarditis after being with her two years, so I quit and began to work with Nathan Ackerman. When people said Ackerman was difficult, I said, ‘Not after Margaret Mahler!’”

Mahler’s Rages

Par for the course, Leo Maddow’s experience with Mahler was different from everyone else’s. He said, “I found her a wonderful hostess. She gave nice parties and had good food. This was the same woman who was supposed to be a terror, who would pulverize people. But she never did that sort of thing with me.”

I said, “Why do you think she was so nice to you, in contrast to many of the others?”

He answered, “I think she saw me as the chairman and used to call me the chief. I think she had me in another category than the others.”

“You were her boss.”

“Yes.” We both smiled. “If anything, she needed me, and it didn’t pay her not to be nice to me. Mahler was one of those people you either loved or hated.”

I asked, “In your opinion, what was behind her rages?”

“As a psychiatrist, my guess is that she was a perfectionist, and was intolerant of imperfection and stupidity. She couldn’t stand it if people around her were unintelligent.”

Darlene Levy³, one of Mahler's students and closest friends, said that Mahler shouted at her when she was trying to teach her something. Darlene added that when she didn't get it right, Margaret would be disappointed and get terribly upset. "She didn't get angry if you just said something dumb," Selma Kramer, President of the Philadelphia Mahler Foundation and close friend, intervened. "But only if you made a mistake that in any way could hurt the child." *Then Mahler gave her own explanation of why she hollered so loudly. She said that she wanted to impart the knowledge very, very badly, but wasn't confident that the way she said it would get through to the student, so she tried to do it with the volume of her voice.*

Helen Meyers said, "Once in Portugal we had a reception for her. She saw Peter Bloom and Eric Erickson in another part of the room. 'Why is it that they don't come over and congratulate me?' she asked. There was a sort of a little girl quality about her. Margaret was afraid to travel alone, and was traveling at the time with a young companion, a college girl. She got into terrible arguments with this girl. Every morning she would call me and say, 'Do you know what she said to me today!'

"She wouldn't talk to somebody for months because they didn't come to dinner," Dr. Myers continued. When she was happy with me she called me Helennitchka, when she was mad it was Helen."

It seems Mahler was less angry with people who maintained their distance from her. She got along very well for decades with her close research associate, John McDevitt, but they never were on intimate terms. "She didn't tell me about her personal life, and I didn't tell her about

mine,” he said.

Ernst Abelin, a research associate at the Masters Children’s Center, got to know Mahler privately and stayed in touch with her until she died. He, like McDevitt, apparently was able to stay friendly because their relationship was not an intimate one. He said, “I tended to be very low key and cautious with her.”

In my opinion, Mahler was psychologically unable to set boundaries between people she cared about and herself. She did with her anger what she was unable to do psychologically. According to Anna Freud, “Libido binds, rage separates.” With individuals like McDevitt and Abelin, with whom she was not particularly close, she did not need rage to distance herself from them .

Mahler’s longtime associate, Anni Bergman, said, *She needed other people to think; she was unable to think by herself. That was my role. Whether about the design, the results, or the individual children, she always needed someone to think with.* Underneath her brilliance there was a tremendous insecurity. She had a terribly unfortunate temper, had rages, you had to be a very special person to be able to tolerate and appreciate her good sides.”

The late great Jacob Arlow, the Grand Old Man of psychoanalysis⁴, said, “I never saw Margaret in a temperamental outburst, but she was not a woman who was easily crossed, especially if she was in control. She was a difficult person, but I didn’t reach the degree of working together in intimate projects where such flair-ups are likely to occur. *The lasting impression I have of her is of a embattled woman, and the word ‘dour’ comes up in connection with her.* I don’t

recall her kidding around, joking, or making word plays, but that might have been my own stiffness.”

Henri Parens, author of important work on aggression⁵, experienced Mahler as “complex, fascinating, - and impossible. “I once danced with Mahler,” he said. “It was like I was dancing with a small, life size statue. To try to get her to move with the flow, I had to yield to her; I had to figure out where she wanted to go and guide her there gently. What a pain in the ass! Mahler was very hungry, and too demanding of people’s personal environment. Some people rubbed her the wrong way. For those people she would make some comment which could frizzle a person.”

Leo Rangell, renowned analyst, writer, and former president of the American Psychoanalytic Association, said, “She wanted me to write a book on tics with her. I would have done it, if I hadn’t had to leave for the army. She got mad at me, and said crazy things, like I left her. She said I rejected her. As if I wanted to be in the army!

“By the time we met for the last time, she had become bitter and feisty, with the same paranoid streak, and wore a self-satisfied look She felt she did not get the acclaim she deserved. She was a forceful, difficult, and important person, who didn’t get enough recognition.”

Difficult as Margit’s relationship with her mother had been, it took a turn for the positive after she learned that her mother had been killed by the Nazis. Mahler made peace with her mother after her death, which spurred her creativity, according to Harold Blum, “We had a private conversation about her mother who was murdered at Auschwitz. She clearly felt conflicted, had grown up hating her mother, and now was honoring her in her martyrdom.”

The mechanism of Mahler suddenly cutting off a relationship in punishment for some minor or unknown deed was repeated by a number of interviewees. Ruth Lax said that she and Mahler were good friends for many years, until once when they sat next to each other at a dinner party. Margaret told Ruth that her husband had just died and she was very upset. Ruth said, "But you were divorced many years ago." After that, Mahler didn't talk to Ruth for two years. I asked her if Mahler had ever abused her. She said smilingly, "Not unless you call not talking to me for two years abusive."

Many colleagues told me that one day they were the best of friends, and the next day they didn't exist for her. Most never found out the reason for her sudden coolness. It seems to me that Mahler was a litmus test for what was psychologically unresolved in her cohorts. By bonding on a deep level with a person, her psychological genius was able to pick up pockets of repressed material. I believe she repeated with susceptible people the history of her weaning trauma and the loss of her nurse at five months..

From her earliest relationship with her mother, who discouraged the formation of a symbiosis with her baby, Margaret Mahler's continuing motivation in life was to individuate and become her own person. This was evident all through her life, from rejecting the idea that her mother had given birth to her, to breaking away from her family at the age of fifteen to live on her own in Vienna, to her unusual ways of gaining knowledge (she was an auto-didact), to her move to Philadelphia when she was not accepted as one of the powerful hierarchy of the New York Psychoanalytic Society, to her plea to psychoanalysts everywhere to encourage individuation in the younger generation of analysts and allow them to become themselves. Given the circumstances of her thwarted symbiosis with her mother and an Oedipus Complex wreaked with havoc, the life of

Margaret Mahler was a triumph of the Separation-Individuation process.