CHILDHOOD WEANING AS AN ENDURING EPOCH OVER THE LIFE OF BERTRAM DAVID LEWIN (1896-1971)

1. Of Prologue

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the death of the above-named progenitor of an eponymously-named collection housed at the Library of Congress.¹ He was born and raised in a tri-lingual (i.e., English, Spanish and German speaking) Jewish family plagued by an over-familiarity with early infant death. His early boyhood home was centered in a small town situated near the beginning of the Chihuahua Trail, a mercantile corridor heavily frequented by late 19th-century military suppliers of American frontier posts as well as ‘mule trains’ that had amassed goods upon the Mexican side of the nearby border for export.

Lewin’s family soon relocated in nearby San Antonio where he attended the public school system in the “Jim Crow” South. He subsequently graduated from the University of Texas and the Johns Hopkins University Medical School. Lewin later studied at the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute (Thompson, 2010, pp. 85-96) and soon thereafter became a pioneering American psychoanalyst. One of his most unique contributions to psychoanalysis was his conceptualization of the “dream screen” in which he elaborated, modified, and extended certain of Freud’s original insights. Correlating available archival data vis-à-vis autobiographical memory often assists historians in discerning a developmental time-table for ascertainable aspects of a subject’s early childhood.


Max Schur (1972) was the author of a “comparison of Freud’s reconstructions with the actuarial data” (p. 118). Much of the data he traced back to what was then known about Freud’s persona some of which was autobiographical. Ernst Kris (1975) soon characterized autobi-
graphical memory as generally telescopic, dynamic and lacking in autonomy. In his words:

“Our autobiographical memory is in a constant state of flux, is constantly being reorganized, and is constantly being subject to changes which the present tend to impose” (p. 299). Kris’s quoted definition, seemingly favored psychic process vis-à-vis veridical reality.

Concurrently, it behooves us to re-examine the actuarial data—echoing Schur’s caveat—presently at hand. Samuel Lewin (1865-1920) was born in Germany and his wife, Justine Levy Lewin (1869-1942), was born in Victoria, Texas as were the three male offspring of their marriage on May 5, 1890, to wit: Alfred Levy (born on April 27, 1893; died on June 2, 1893), Bertram David (born November 30, 1896; died on January 12, 1971) and Herbert Emanuel (born on July 23, 1900; died on March 23, 1901). The oldest and youngest infants are interred in their maternal grandparents’ Family Burial Plot at the Evergreen Cemetery serving Congregation B’nai Israel in Victoria, Texas while both of their parents are buried in San Antonio, Texas.

3. Of Obituaries

Lawrence S. Kubie (1973) was the author of an Obituary for Lewin, his long-time friend. He highlighted ascertainable aspects the decedent’s childhood history:

“While he himself was a baby, two brothers, one older and one younger died in their infancies. (The older may have died before Bert was born)…” (p. 3)…[which] “left on him a lasting impression of the vulnerability of early childhood. In later years, he often referred to this as something which first became clear to him in his training analysis in the middle twenties: and I believe that this played a role in the subsequent development of his interest in medicine” (p. 5).

After Jacob A. Arlow (1971) had published his Obituary about Lewin (pp. 1-5), he read the Obituary written by Kubie (op. cit., pp. 1-16). It was only then that Arlow (1973b) came to
revisit his own earlier Obituary eulogizing Lewin and then reconstructed a pseudo-clinical vignette predicated upon a re-reading of their demised colleague’s œuvré of publications (Arlow, 1973a).² As a consequence, Arlow (1973b) came to fully realize the implications of Lewin’s “discovery of the dream screen” (p. 104).³ In his final tribute, Arlow articulated a supplemental set of observations:

“In many places in his writings, especially when discussing the role of the father as the awakener, the weaner and the soothe r, Lewin reports the following clinical observation, which, in later years, he often hinted was part of his own history” (op. cit.).

4. Of the Reification of a Primal Memory

Pursuant to Arlow’s reckoning, Lewin (1968) had reconstructed an autobiographical clinical vignette about his own infancy, cloaking his pediatric alter ego behind the following guise:

“Until the age of two he was taken into his mother’s bed and given the breast, probably as a pacifier when he awoke during the night. His mother was pregnant at the time, which serves to roughly date the incident, and she tried to break him of this habit, but she could not persuade him to go back to sleep without his simulated nightcap. His father decided to take his hand. He let the boy sleep with him and when the boy awoke and demanded his ‘nonny,’ he said ‘Your nonny is gone away.’ Child: ‘Where’s it gone?’ Father: ‘The wolf got it.’ The child whimpered and repeated, ‘Bad wolf, bad wolf,’ until he fell asleep. After this the child was said to be ‘weaned’…” (p. 30).

Lewin’s ostensibly ‘pseudo-clinical’ self-study was published in 1968. It presumably
later led Arlow to reiterate his deceased subject’s primal reconstruction that he had been breast-fed during the first two years of life (i.e., November 30, 1896-November 29, 1898). Arlow obviously accepted Lewin’s adult thesis which posited his retro-dated “weaning” at “the age of two.” With the fragmentary history available to Arlow, he could hardly have been privy about the extent to which father Samuel’s behavior may have overlapped, or even pre-empted, his wife’s nurturing throughout Bertram’s infancy.

A further unknown factor is the extent to which mother Justine may have still been lactating. So also is the question of whether or not her reproductive history included a fœtal miscarriage ante-dating the pregnancy culminating with the birth of third-son Herbert which---allowing for a normal period of gestation---was barely a month shy of Bertram’s third year of life.

The center-pieces of Lewin’s adult work on the oral triad may have indeed been predicated upon an elaboration of his own infantile experiences. Such infantile memories remain germane not only because they were bottomed upon the cessation of maternal nursing beyond “…the age of two [when he no longer] was taken into his mother’s bed and given the breast” (Arlow, op. cit.); but, also because they may have been encapsulated and serially re-vivified during the course of his personal and/or self-analyses as an adult. The upward or downward skewing of dates---as evidenced by certain instances from Freud’s own self-analysis⁴---may often mislead or distort biographers’ historical assessments (Ginsburg, 2007, pp. 304-306).

In “The Train Ride: A Study of One of Freud’s Figures of Speech,” Lewin (1970) highlighted---in his subject’s correspondence with Wilhelm Fleiss (i.e., December 21, 1899)---a scene remembered by a patient as follows:

“Buried deep beneath all of his phantasies we found a scene from his primal
period (before twenty-two months) [underlining supplied for emphasis] which meets all of the requirements and into which all the surviving puzzles flow…I can hardly bring myself to believe it yet. It is as if Schliemann had dug up another Troy which had hitherto been believed to be mythical…with a surprising turn [in his analysis] he provided me with the solution to my own railway phobia (which I had overlooked)…” (p. 74).

5. Of Survivors’ Mourning

A reader of the complete trove of the *Papers of Bertram David Lewin* archived at the Library of Congress might find it difficult to ‘pin-point’ any demonstrable ‘grief of the surviving sibling’ over the course of Bertram’s life. We are simply left to merely speculate about what residual effects the early deaths of two of Samuel and Justine Lewin’s children had upon them. It is certain that there was some effect. One may surmise that sequelae of their parental grieving were passed down to the young Bertram in conscious and unconscious ways. They likely included joy muffled by sorrow after the first-born son of their reproductive life died after a month and a few days of life. A residue of fear must have then ensued upon the heels of Bertram’s subsequent birth and early infancy. The vulnerability of baby-parental object-loss when such an off-spring is suddenly left alone in the dark may have initially manifested itself.

When baby Bertram reached approximately 35 months of age, his mother Justine began another pregnancy culminating in the birth of her youngest son. His abbreviated life began when surviving Bertram was 3½ years old. The adult Lewin---not unlike Freud (Ginsburg, 1999) before him---was stoically averse to focussing upon the milieu attending the death an infant sibling which the former experienced at 4½ years of age.

According to an available archival letter, Lewin (1964) attributed his younger brother’s
death from “measles-pneumonia about six months after birth” (box #1). Other documents actually disclose that he survived for another two months which may or may not constitute a fragmented hint of a dissociated past. How, one may ask, do we come to retrospectively ‘blot out’ or undermine painful remembrances? At which stages of infancy do such ‘mental gymnastics’ operate as a subterfuge to enhance or distort purported periods of earlier bliss?

In contrast to the traumatic infant memories of Harry J. S. Guntrip (1975, pp. 151-152), the most critical juncture in Lewin’s life did not seem to have been any lack of maternal involvement. Instead, his greatest yearning may have been ‘bottomed’ upon an attempt to recover how things felt---before a family tragedy during his 4th year of life---when the future appeared boundless in hope and love.

6. Of an Educational Legacy

The subject of ‘infant death’ also infused Lewin’s educational legacy (i.e., see also Lewin & Ross, 1960). Such an example may be gleaned from published accounts written by Martin H. Stein, one of his students. After pondering his own father’s death when Stein was six years of age, he (1998) asked himself:

“Why then did I become a psychoanalyst? And why so interested in levels of consciousness? In childhood I had some vivid dreams that I never forgot and that I recall from time to time. Even before I was analyzed, I sensed that they had to do with my father’s death and my sense of guilt…” (pp. xxvii).

Lewin, we soon learn ‘inspired’ Stein “in studying the analytic situation via the medium of dream psychology in his classroom teaching at the New York Psychoanalytic Institute in the 1940s” (Stimmel, 1998, p. 198). The ensuing passages speak for themselves:

“One of the students would prepare a protocol of a single analytic session, as
complete and literal as possible, which he would then present to the class, sentence by sentence. Nothing was given about the patient’s age, diagnosis, chief complaint, nor any anamnestic material, aside from what could be gathered from the exchanges between patient and analyst. Following each sentence or short paragraph, Lewin would ask the class to ‘associate’ to the material just read. The results were surprising. Often, by the time half an hour had gone by, the outline of the case would begin to come clear, and after another hour, the group was often able to acquire a pretty good idea of what was troubling the patient, the state of the transference, much of the dynamics, and more. This was 35 years ago. I have probably idealized the experience, and have no notes to check that process (no one took notes in that class!…These brief sketches are most valuable in demonstrating a technical or theoretical principle in a way that no abstract discussion could do by itself…” (ibid.).

Endnotes

¹ Dictionaries often define the word “archive” as “a place in which public records or historical documents are preserved.” “The Sigmund Freud Archive” was incorporated in 1950. Bertram D. Lewin served as a founding Trustee and early President. Beginning in 1952, the contents of the Collection were housed at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. Lewin, as an individual, became an inter vivos donor in 1964 of certain items owned by him that were delivered in his behalf to the aforementioned Archive. Meanwhile, a “Bertram A. Lewin Library” was established at the Pittsburgh Psychoanalytic Center in 1974. According to Mary Mylenki (1982): “…the core of the collection being approximately 700 of the late Dr. Lewin’s books. Of these, about 200 are either in a foreign language or rare, the earliest dating from 1765. The emphasis of
the collection is on psychoanalysis” (p. 623). The Library of Congress was thereafter designated by Lewin’s estate representatives as the repository of a further assortment of his personal papers. He was thereafter listed as the posthumous “Creator” of this eponymous collection. A “Register of His Papers” (i.e., at the Library of Congress) was subsequently arranged and described in 1992. They were duly abstracted as follows: “Psychoanalyst, educator, and writer. Correspondence, diaries, biographical data, reports, surveys, speeches and writings, school papers, certificates, legal documents, and photographs. A “Finding Guide” was prepared (i.e., inventorying 10,000 items; 20 containers plus 1 oversize; 10 linear feet; 1 microfilm). It was revised in 2001 by Allan Teichroew with the assistance of Margaret McAleer and Patrick Holyfield. The archivists have compartmentalized Lewin’s work under five topics, to wit: “Family and School Papers, General Correspondence, Subject File, Writings File, and Oversize.”

² It is known that Freud rarely made any mention of Julius’s infant death in his personal correspondence; he is not known to have explicitly made any mention of him in his œuvré intended for public dissemination. Julius’s burial at either 6 or 8 months of age (Ginsburg, 2010, p. 703) is believed to have taken place in Weisskirchen (Moravia) on April 15, 1858 when Sigismund was 23½ months of age.

³ In referencing “the intense oral rage aroused in the child against both parents in the primal scene,” Arlow (1981) credited Lewin with connecting “this theme with his concept of the oral triad. In a regressive way, the child interprets the primal scene in oral terms, conceiving of the experience as a form of mutual cannibalism or reciprocal sucking. Lewin traced various types of insomnia to the experience of being awakened by parental intercourse. The insomnia, in turn, may be equated with the wakefulness of the unfed baby. The primal scene is reproduced in adult depression and elation. It disturbs the child’s sleep, leading to a wish to return to sleep, to deepen
sleep, and to stay asleep—sometimes forever…” (pp. 105-106).

4 To frame the ‘developmental time-tables’ cited by Lewin and then Arlow in yet another context, it is noted that Freud (1907) wrote to Karl Abraham on July 5th concerning the aetiology of neurosis as follows: “According to my impressions the age of three to five is that to which the determination of symptoms dates back. Later traumas are mostly genuine, while earlier ones falling within this period are prima facie doubtful. So here is a gap to be filled by observation” (p. 2). He (1909) reiterated this caveat in his “Introduction” to Little Hans: “I have for many years been urging my pupils and my friends to collect observations of the sexual life of children—the existence of which as a rule has been cleverly overlooked and deliberately denied” (p. 6).

5 A ‘defining biography’ (i.e., however one interprets the phrase) about the life of Bertram D. Lewin has yet to be written (cf., Thompson, 2010, Ginsburg, 2010 & Ginsburg, 2009). Such an author is confronted by a series of metaphorical “holes” in his or her perusal of available archival sources. As Lewin (1948) once put it: “…there are many attitudes to reality, according to whether it is faced optimistically or pessimistically. Proverbially, the optimist sees the donut, the pessimist sees the hole” (p. 524). Among the psychoanalyst-authors who’ve alluded to Lewin’s proverbial “holes” were Samuel Abrams and Leonard Shengold (1974) in an article entitled “The Meaning of ‘Nothing’: I. A Note on ‘Nothing.’ II. More about the Meaning of ‘Nothing’.” Presumably, they were without access to the then deceased Lewin’s trove of papers at the Library of Congress and elsewhere. The following year, André Green (1975) observed: “The notion of the void or of emptiness is currently in fashion; or rather, it has come back into fashion. In culture, first of all, owing to the fascination of the Far East. Psychoanalysis is no longer the answer…In its turn, it is posing the question of the blank—the blank dream (B. Lewin)…” (p. 116).
References


