MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT BERTRAM DAVID LEWIN (1896-1971)

An essay entitled “The Struggle of Psychiatry with Psychoanalysis: Who Won?” by Sander L. Gilman (1987/1988) contains the following phraseology: “For Lewin, it was the Eastern Jew who filled the conceptual category of the ‘money-grubbing Jew’ in European anti-Semitic rhetoric” (pp. 310/120). It seemingly saddled Lewin with an “Old World” stereotype purportedly imbuing his persona during a specific era in which he lived. Gilman is not alone among scholars who have superimposed gratuitous trans-Atlantic innuendoes about Lewin’s conjectural pre-World War II frames of thought. Slighting ‘asides’ by Riccardo Steiner (2000) that “…there was Lewin, of course…” (p. 67) parrot other uncomplimentary perspectives that have surfaced elsewhere.¹

Lewin, the progenitor of an eponymously-named collection housed at the Library of Congress, died on January 12, 1971. Soon, we’ll be marking the 40th anniversary of his death. 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. As a pioneering American psychoanalyst raised in both the “Mex-Tex” borderlands as well as the “Jim Crow” South, he graduated from the University of Texas and the Johns Hopkins University Medical School. Lewin then attended the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute (Thompson, 2010, pp. 85-96).

At a “Special Meeting of the Council on Professional Training in New York” (i.e., convened under the auspices of the American Psychoanalytic Association on February 26, 1939), a Resolution was passed that “recognizes the existence of technical reasons for the regulation of the number of students” at contemporary member institutes. The minutes pertaining to Lewin’s participation were transcribed by the reporter as follows:
“Emphasizes that this whole problem is especially a problem of the New York Psychoanalytic Institute whose student body has certain special characteristics. They [the students in New York] work under exceptional economic pressure. They are primarily interested in earning a living and not in academic or scientific work. They hold meetings like county medical politicians. Many of them are ideally too old” (Lewin, 1939, p. 3).

The underlined phrase—judging from the reporter’s transcript of the relevant proceedings in question—has been deleted from Gilman’s version of the foregoing text reputedly quoting Lewin. Nevertheless, Gilman continued with his commentary thusly:

“This is an extraordinary statement given the influx of Jewish, Viennese-trained psychotherapists in the United States. Lewin stresses the image of the psychoanalyst as scientist, but as a scientist in a mode both attractive to as well as clearly rejected by Freud. For inherent in this image, as stated by Freud in his postscript [The Question of Lay Analysis], is the image of the scientist as a well-to-do individual undertaking science as an extension of haute-bourgeois identity. The image of the analyst as money-grubbing practitioner is thus contrasted with that of the pure scientist, pure in a number of senses of the word—pure as unsullied by filthy lucre, pure in devotion to an abstract science. But Lewin picked up the thread of racism present in Freud’s rejection of science…” (pp. 309-310/119-120).

Gilman’s ‘backhanded’ espousal of Lewin’s ‘trains of thought’ imputed in the last-excerpted sentence is no less speculative than the thrust of the exploratory title of his essay quoted at the beginning of this paper. A more recent characterization articulated
by David Cohen (2009) states:

“Other commentators, like Sander Gilman, find it hard to accept Freud’s loyalty to Jewishness. Freud suffered from ‘internalised anti-Semitism,’ Gilman suggests, and looked down on the religious East European Jews as ignorant, superstitious peasants with long beards which were probably teeming with lice. There is no evidence that Freud looked down on religious Jews. It is true that he had his moments of ambivalence towards his father and that did sometimes lead to some ambivalence about his heritage. But Freud always felt Jewish” (pp. 26-27).

Jill Salberg (2010) has also commented, in part, about “Gilman’s work on Freud and anti-Semitism” as follows:

“Gilman’s emphasis on the profoundly pervasive effect of anti-Semitic views of Jews is valuable in revealing the impact on Freud of having both lived and studied within German Christian culture. But Gilman takes the point of view of the Jew as seen by the Christian world, not as experienced by Jews. Gilman does not perceive how the parents became the mediator of the Jewish cultural environment. Nor does he include the possibility of an internal world of complicated identifications…” (pp. 15-16).

The Bertram David Lewin Papers, readily accessible at the Library of Congress, have been open as a public repository since 1974. How the context of Lewin’s thinking developed deserves a more comprehensive inquest of his professional œuvré than the ‘nut-shell’ characterizations thus far proffered by Gilman. Imaginative rhetoric about “when who rejected or won what” hardly seems to suffice.
Footnote

¹ Under the auspices of the *American Psychoanalytic Association*, it is more accurate to observe that Lawrence S. Kubie served as Chairman of the “Emergency Committee on Relief and Immigration” while Bertram D. Lewin served as its Treasurer. Contrary to the flawed context of the statement by Douglas Kirsner (2009) that “…Bertram Lewin was opposed to sponsorship [of émigré analysts] during his presidency of the NY Society (1936-39), [while] Lawrence Kubie who followed him as president (1939-40), was very active in rescuing European colleagues” (p. 18), it is noted that the aid efforts of both Kubie and Lewin---along with those of Bettina Warburg---continued throughout the aforementioned dates and beyond. Their humanitarian *triage* may have perhaps been skewed in favor of younger psychoanalyst-trainees such as Judith Kestenburg [Silbnerpfennig] (Ginsburg, 2009, pp. 1181-1184). It is further noted that Hitler’s *Anschluss* climaxed in Vienna on April 2, 1938. Lamentably, many Jewish and *non*-Jewish analysts were unable to follow Freud out of Austria.

References


Lewin, B. D. (1939). In: Transcript of Minutes of “Special Meeting of the Council on
Professional Training in New York” of the American Psychoanalytic Association on February 26, 1939 (pp. 1-5). Archived in Special Collections of DeWitt Wallace Institute for the History of Psychiatry in the Oskar Diethelm Library at Weill Cornell Medical College, New York, NY.


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