

BEING A CANDIDATE AT THE NEW YORK PSYCHOANALYTIC INSTITUTE  
IN THE FORTIES

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The text for my talk this evening is from the Bible, more precisely from the Book of Genesis, Chapter 6, Verse 4, and I quote: "There were giants on the earth in those days." This was the phrase that leapt into my mind immediately when the chairman of the program for this evening called me and asked me to describe how it was to be a candidate at the Institute in the 1940's.

Because of the turbulent situation during the late 1930's, many of the leading European psychoanalysts migrated to the United States and settled in New York. We were thrilled to have the cream of the European intelligentsia, the collaborators and disciples of Freud, move here and become our teachers. They were heroic figures who heretofore had existed for us only in the psychoanalytic literature and in our imagination. Now these giants had moved to our land and we clothed them in the raiment of myth and legend.

To begin with, of course, there was Dr. Van Ophuijsen, who could have stepped out of the pages of Stendhal or Guy de Maupassant -- tall, lean, of erect carriage, with chiseled facial features. He had a head of perfectly silvery white hair. You recognized immediately that he must be an aristocrat because he never put his arms into the sleeves of his coat. He draped it

insouciantly over his shoulders and not for a moment did anyone imagine that it might fall off. If you met him on the street, you would conclude that he was headed for a performance of "Lohengrin" at the Metropolitan Opera House rather than to give a class at the New York Psychoanalytic Institute. He was the John Barrymore of psychoanalysis.

But if Dr. Van Ophuijsen was the Barrymore of psychoanalysis, Gregory Zilboorg, with his heavy, horn-rimmed glasses, his prolixity of verbal bombast, and a hairbrush for a moustache, surely was our Groucho Marx. He was as dramatic as he was effusive, yet at the same time we knew him to be the confidante of financial tycoons and statesmen and that he had in fact served in some capacity in the cabinet of the short-lived democratic Kerensky regime that preceded the Bolshevik takeover following the overthrow of the Czar.

Then, of course, there was Heinz Hartmann, scion of a diplomatic family, a thoroughgoing intellectual. Both his teaching and his conversations were always at the highest theoretical level, and he would accentuate the points he was making with a most graceful gesture of his long, delicate hands, one of which was forever nursing a cigarette encased in a long and impressive cigarette holder. As we listened in fascination while he manipulated the most abstract and esoteric ideas, it was easy for us to imagine that he must have gone to school with and discussed these very issues in person with Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. Surprise of surprises, therefore,

when in later years, he told me that he thought that the Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association ought to have a humor column.

Quite different from Hartmann was his friend and closest collaborator, Ernst Kris. Warm, open-hearted and friendly, in class he made us candidates feel that everything we had to say was worthwhile. More than that, that it was important and even original. He was massively erudite and we knew that he came to psychoanalysis not from medicine but from the world of art history. It was also rumored that he was a British secret agent. He had indeed worked for British intelligence as an analyst of Nazi war propaganda and we heard that, by using psychoanalytic techniques of interpretation, he was able to determine which ships the German Navy had lost and perhaps even where the fleet was deployed. In fact, together with one of our colleagues, he had written a psychoanalytic pathography of Adolph Hitler for the O.S.S., the Office of Strategic Services, in which the two of them projected probable courses for Hitler's behavior. The document, for some reason, was stamped "Top Secret" and was not declassified until many years after the war, when I had occasion to read it. So there you have it: a genial, effusive scholar, an art historian who was an expert in cameos -- what a great front for a spy.

Naturally we think next of Rudolph Loewenstein. When we first met him, he represented to us the quintessential Frenchman, although he was born in Poland and educated in Berlin.

He was urbane, witty and master of le mot juste. He brought a sense of intimacy and precision to his teaching of psychoanalytic technique. How to phrase an interpretation, for example, that would touch the heart of the patient. Yet we all sensed in him a spirit of detached sophistication, of benign cynicism. Known to be a friend of the Rothschilds and a collaborator of Princess Bonaparte, we thought of him as the bon vivant, the boulevardier, the connoisseur of fine wines. There was, in fact, a story that he had a collection of rare fine wines, which he stored in the cellar of his house in Paris. When he left the city, he placed the house in charge of a servant. During the Nazi occupation, the house served as a billet for German officers. After the war, we were told that the faithful servant had saved the collection of wine by secreting it behind a false wall in the cellar. All of us shared with Loewenstein the pleasure of this minor victory over the Nazis. How much of the story is true I do not know.

Not all of our instructors, however, were all that serious. Bela Mittelman was never serious, or so it seemed. He used to come to class in tennis shoes. I don't remember if he brought his racket along. He was once asked how he felt about the advice not to permit the patient to make any major decisions during the course of treatment, as, for example, the decision to get married. Mittelman replied, "In the olden days, when marriage was a long affair and analysis was a short one, we did that. But nowadays when marriages are short and analyses are long, we take a different position."

Quite the contrary was Otto Isakower. I suspect that he was an unreconstructed European, who never could become reconciled to the relatively low level of classical education that American candidates preferred. He seemed to follow the principle of indoctrination by terror, a method, I might add, that is not without certain merit. One didn't quickly forget what Dr. Isakower had to say. I doubt if any student ever experienced a lapse of attention or concentration during one of Isakower's classes.

These instructors were not easily deceived. During supervision Herman Nunberg would give the impression that he was half asleep but mention a dream and he was all ears. He stuck to the text of Freud's writings with Talmudic devotion.

I think we were especially fond of our women teachers and a special aura seemed to encompass them. Annie Reich had been married to the fabled Wilhelm Reich, but she was a masterful analyst on her own, perhaps one of the very best of that generation. She was precise, clear and original. More than that, we knew that she had been an active opponent of the Nazi regime and had fought in the streets against those hooligans. But in Edith Jacobson we had the true, the classic image of the heroine. She really was a legend in her time. Although she had safely escaped from Germany, she returned to help friends and former patients in trouble. Imprisoned and sick in the Nazi jail, she continued to defy her captors until she won her final release. In class it was hard to reconcile this gentle,

persuasive teacher with the background information we had on her. She herself never mentioned any of it in class.

Quite a different kind of personality was Fanny von Hahne-Kende. With flaming red hair and a delicate, translucent white skin, you could only imagine her as stepping out of the portals of some ornate, baroque, Hungarian palace. She was soft spoken but firm, but one could never give up the illusion that you were dealing with some fairy tale princess who had wandered into the strange realm of psychoanalysis.

Margaret Mahler, however, was the one, as you shall see, who made the greatest impression on me. I first met her in 1940, when she was consultant in child psychiatry at the New York State Psychiatric Institute, where I was a resident. I was a bit taken aback one day when she arranged a clinical conference, in which she was to interview a 5-year-old boy. All of us, members of the staff and some attendings, took our places in a large semi-circle, seated on small children's chairs. At the center of the arc sat this lovely woman. A little chair directly opposite her was reserved for the patient. I wondered how it would be possible to conduct a meaningful interview under such circumstances. Nevertheless, the young patient entered, sat directly opposite Margaret, who looked him squarely in the face and engaged him directly in those things that were important to him. Before long it was as if they were the only two people in the room, and an earnest, heartfelt conversation took place between the two of them. I never forgot that incident. I

mentioned it to Dr. Mahler many years later. She said she had thought of her experience at the Psychiatric Institute and wondered how anybody could understand her with her thick Hungarian accent. I was taken with surprise. In my memory of the event, she had spoken perfect English.

More to the point is something that I have to tell that took place in 1944. I blush with embarrassment as I recall the story but it is too good a tale to withhold. I went to Philadelphia to a meeting of the American Orthopsychiatric Association, where I was going to present my very first psychoanalytic paper on fingerpainting in the psychotherapy of children. At the same time and at the same hotel, the American Psychoanalytic Association was having its meeting. In those days the people who attended the convention numbered about 80. and, as was customary, they culminated their activities with a formal dinner. I wandered over to the meeting, paid my fee and was seated at the table right next to Margaret Mahler. I don't have to describe to you how awed and excited I was to be seated next to this important and attractive person. In my mind I was trying to fashion some complimentary remark that would reflect the high regard I had for her. Now it is true that I have a keen sense of appreciation for feminine pulchritude but I have a far greater capacity for putting my foot in my mouth. So at some point in the conversation, I said to her, "You must have been a fabulous beauty in your youth." Margaret leaned back at least two feet, looked directly at me and said, "And vat's the matter vith me

now?" I have no recollection what I replied, if anything, but we were good friends for the rest of her life.

One of the giants, however, came from a land even more remote than Europe, at least more remote culturally. That was Bertram D. Lewin, who hailed from Central Texas. He had an encyclopedic knowledge of practically everything and of psychoanalytic literature in particular. At meetings of the American Psychoanalytic Association, he would station himself in the hallway and field questions from anyone on almost any subject, while all the time a long segment of ash was accumulating at the end of a cigarette that drooped carelessly from the corner of his mouth. He was fluent in German, French and Spanish and had a reading knowledge of Russian, Portuguese, Italian and Swedish. He would write verses and parodies in Latin and other languages, and sometimes render them into four additional languages. When asked in class, "What do you do when you feel have lost the train of the patient's associations?", he replied, "Same as we did in Texas when we set out to look for a lost horse. You ask yourself, 'If I were a horse, where would I go?'"

In closing, I would like to touch, however lightly, on the conditions of clinical practice of psychoanalysis then and now. The issue occurred to me recently when I had a conversation with a fictitious recent graduate, who wanted to talk to me about a disturbing dream he had. He said, "This was a most anxiety-laden dream, one of the worst I can recall. I dreamt I had



a patient to place in psychoanalysis, a well-motivated patient suffering from a phobia, who could afford to pay a regular fee and was ready to start analysis at four or five times a week. My own schedule was all filled up so I called my closest friend and colleague. I told him that I wanted to place this patient and was about to give the details of the history. 'I'm sorry,' he said, 'I'm all filled up. I can't squeeze anybody else into my schedule.' So I called another colleague. The same story. He wondered perhaps if the patient would be willing to come at odd hours that he could arrange from time to time. I told him I felt that this was a most unsatisfactory way of proceeding. So I called another colleague. He too was filled up, but he was willing to take the patient on after the summer if a vacancy really turned up. Or perhaps he would put the patient on a waiting list, although he already has one or two people on that list. I thought that it would be improper and perhaps not even ethical. I started to call another colleague and I woke up in great distress. Now what do you think of this dream?" he said to me.

"I think the purpose of this dream is quite clear," I said, trying to be reassuring and not to appear condescending. "You must be having trouble filling your schedule. To that he said "I have one analytic case and lots of vacancies in my schedule."

"This dream," I said, "is like the classic examination anxiety dream. You remember what Freud said about the typical

examination anxiety dream? One of the reasons why it is hard to understand is that the disturbing affect, anxiety, is attached precisely to the expression of the reassuring wish fulfillment. You wish you had a full schedule and could be offering a patient to your colleagues who would be equally well off. But in spite of that wishful presentation, the anxiety about your situation breaks through anyway." And then I added, "You must be having a very hard time."

"I am indeed," he responded.

"How do you manage?" I asked.

"Well," he said, "I have a part-time hospital job and I do some consultation for a social work agency.... But can you imagine such an impossible dream, everybody all filled up?"

"I don't have to imagine it," I said. "That really happened. That's how it was in the late 40's and the early 50's."

"Really?" my fictitious colleague replied. "You must have been very well off in those days."

"Not at all," I replied. "Do you know what my fee was then? I charged \$4.00 per hour."

"Four dollars an hour!" he exclaimed. "How did you manage?"

"How did I manage? I had a part-time job in a hospital and weekends I did consultations for a social agency."

Times were really better then. Almost every colleague did have a relatively complete practice of psychoanalytic cases,

and I recognize that things are very different now. At least it is good to be able to look back to a happy past and to try to anticipate a more hopeful future.