

An Interview with Ed Fancher
By Steven Demby

Ed Fancher, a long time member of the Contemporary Freudian Society, recently retired from his analytic practice. In addition to his successful career as an analyst, Ed has the distinction of being one of the co-founders of The Village Voice. His retirement seemed like a good occasion to ask him about his experiences growing up, serving in WWII, becoming an analyst, and founding The Village Voice with Dan Wolf and Norman Mailer. We spoke in his gracious apartment in Gramercy Park.

S. I understand that you grew up in upstate New York. What was that like?

E. Yes, in Middletown, New York, a very safe middle-class small city. Then I went to a boarding school for my high school years, Northwood School in Lake Placid, New York where I learned skiing, camping out and outdoor life, as well as academics.

S. Then you went to the University of Alaska. That seems like a bit of an unusual choice.

E. Yes, when I graduated from Northwood School in 1941, I wanted to spend a year traveling instead of starting college right away. My father was a veteran of WWI and was convinced that we would be drawn into the war in Europe, and wanted me to enter a college with ROTC, so that I would have a chance to be an officer. He offered to send me to any college I wanted as long as it had ROTC. I looked through a list of colleges and chose the University of Alaska. I knew nothing about it, but it would satisfy my yearning to travel, and Alaska was a place I had always wanted to visit. I loved the year I spent at the University. There were only 300 students, classes were small, the faculty was excellent, and the student body came from all over America, as well as from Alaska. With the bombing of Pearl Harbor, I knew I would be inducted into the military. Before leaving Alaska, I joined two other students on an adventurous summer journey in a rowboat down 300 miles of the Yukon River. We had a wonderful time exploring the wilderness and visiting a small Indian village. When I got back to Middletown, I learned that I could take a semester at Middlebury before being drafted.

I was a pacifist. I had seen the movie “All Quiet on the Western Front” and had read “The Red Badge of Courage.” But after Pearl Harbor, being a pacifist was obsolete. I was also afraid and didn’t want to become cannon fodder. I tried to figure out how I might be able to survive the war. At that time, the army was recruiting for a new unit of ski troops. I figured that since I was a good skier and mountaineer, I might have a better chance of surviving in the ski troops. I joined the 10th Mountain Division and served for three years. We had two years of intensive training in the mountains of Colorado before we were sent to fight the German Army in Northern Italy. I was awarded two Bronze Stars, but I remain convinced that war is insane. Our division suffered almost 5000 casualties out of the 14,000 men who started in combat.

S. How long were you in combat?

E. We were in combat the first four months of 1945, but our division was the spearhead of the final battle that defeated the German Army in Italy. One of our assignments was to capture Mussolini at his villa on Lake Garda. But, when we arrived there we found that he had fled the day before and had been captured and executed by the partisans.

S. Did your experience in World War II have anything to do with your becoming interested in psychology and psychoanalysis?

E. When I was discharged in January 1946 I wanted to resume college in New York City to be close to my family. I decided to go to the New School for Social Research. I met another student there, Dan Wolf (co-founder of The Village Voice). I knew nothing about psychoanalysis at the time, but started taking courses with Erich Fromm, Karen Horney, Sandor Rado, Ernst Kris, Peter Blos, Robert Waelder, Leo Bellak and others. The New School also had several outstanding émigré professors in sociology, economics and philosophy from the great European universities.

S. Teaching undergraduates?

E. Yes, the New School was originally an adult education school and even though I was an undergraduate student these courses were available to me. I got a bachelor’s degree and a Masters degree in psychology and considered going on for a PhD there, but I realized that, although one part of the New School featured many psychoanalysts, the Graduate Faculty in Psychology

was firmly academic-Gestalt experimental psychology. Some of my friends spent five or six years completing an experimental thesis. I didn't want to do that. I wanted to be a psychoanalyst, so I started taking courses at the National Psychological Association for Psychoanalysis (NPAP) that Theodore Reik had established.

I had had several jobs in psychology, including teaching psychology in a high school and supervising a major study of mental health in New York City conducted by Cornell Medical School, the Department of Social Psychiatry, so I became a certified psychologist in New York State under the grandfather clause. I had a psychology internship from June 1954 to June 1955 at the Central New Jersey Mental Health Clinics and was invited to stay on full time after my internship. At that time my good friend Dan Wolf said "I'm going to start a new kind of weekly newspaper in Greenwich Village. It will be an "open newspaper" where the readers will write it. Norman Mailer is joining me in this. Why don't you work half-time in the clinic and half-time with me as publisher for the first year so I can get the paper started." At the end of the first year, Dan asked me to stay on, so I continued as part-time publisher for nineteen years.

S. And all the time continuing your half-time clinical work?

E. Yes, I worked half time at the clinic and studied at NPAP until about 1960. You probably know that around 1960 several groups broke away from NPAP including the New York Freudian Society, IPTAR, Rubin Fine's institute and the American Institute for Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis (AIPP). AIPP was founded by a psychologist, Ross Thalheimer, who was a graduate of NPAP. I took a few courses there and liked courses with Gertrude Blanck, who also became my supervisor, so I committed myself to AIPP. I also took seminars with Martin Bergmann, as did so many of my friends during those years. I also arranged private supervision with Francis Baudry .

S. So you went to the American Institute for Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis?

E. Yes, I graduated from there and joined the faculty and became a supervisor. Dr. Thalheimer died suddenly and, after a few years of confusion, AIPP gave up it's charter. That was when I applied to the New York Freudian Society, where I already had so many friends. I have found

the NYFS (now the Contemporary Freudian Society) compatible with my interests. I have particularly enjoyed teaching in both New York and Washington, D.C.

S. Any thoughts about psychoanalytic training currently?

E. Candidates should learn Freud before learning other theories. They should also realize that few patients ask for psychoanalysis right away today, and usually want to start with once or twice a week treatment. It is important that candidates learn how to “deepen the treatment” by showing those patients who can profit from psychoanalysis the greater efficacy of more frequent sessions. In this way many psychotherapy patients can gradually and naturally develop into analytic patients. Jane Hall has written an excellent book, “Deepening the Treatment,” dealing with these issues. She also conducts seminars on the same topic.

S. Did your patients know that you were the publisher of the Village Voice?

E. Most of them didn’t seem to know I was involved with the Voice, but occasionally a patient would bring it up, and I would have to deal with it.

S. Could you say more about your decision to start the Village Voice?

E. I think the three of us had certain things in common. Norman Mailer had been a combat soldier in the Pacific and had written about it. Dan Wolf had been in combat from New Guinea to Korea. I had been a soldier in Italy. The three of us had survived the war. This gave us a kind of optimism that, if we could survive the war, we could do anything. Now it was crazy to think that anyone could start a new weekly newspaper in New York City with \$10,000 in 1955. It was insane. But, we brought in more money and we did it. The idea of an “open newspaper” written by our readers was exciting and made the enterprise something of an adventure.

S. In the 50s and 60s was it easy to get patients to commit to coming four or five times a week?

E. It was always hard at full fee, but there were many who wanted analysis and could pay a reduced fee.

S. What was it like working with Norman Mailer?

E. When the paper started, Mailer wrote a weekly column attacking everyone he could think of. That was OK because our readers answered him back. But, he would bring his column in very late, just before press time, and typos occurred leading to a blow up. He also wanted the paper to be far more radical than it was. Years later Norman told me that he had been wrong and Dan and I had been right.

S. Did you feel that your background as a therapist helped you to negotiate all the complex personalities who worked at the Voice.

E. I think so. Sometimes writers fought with each other in the paper. One writer might attack another, but that is the cost of having an “open newspaper.”

S. How did you deal with having these very different careers, your practice and the newspaper, each with demands on your time?

E. Well, a lot of this time I wasn't married, so working seven days a week and long hours wasn't much of a problem. But in late 1969 I got married and we had children, and then there was much greater demand on my time.

S. You are unusual for having these two careers. Do you think it somehow added to your work as an analyst?

E. I think so because I was in touch with the cultural and political life of the community. I knew people in the arts like Ginsberg, Kerouac, Feiffer, Hentoff, and others. Also the Voice was very active in opposing the Vietnam War and in supporting Jane Jacobs in community preservation. Several Voice writers, including Dan Wolf, supported the fight against Jim Crow by making dangerous “Freedom Rides” deep into the South.

S. Tell me a little bit about the international books project.

E. I had been on the Committee on Public Relations of the Freudian Society, and everyone quit the committee except me. We had a web site that featured the Abstracts of Freud's Psychological Works. Two Iranian universities contacted us by email asking for help getting books for their libraries about Freud and psychoanalysis. The University of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation is in Tehran. I sent them books and journals until about

five years ago, when we suddenly stopped hearing from them. I suspect political pressure. The other university was Kurdistan University, about 500 kilometers from Tehran. I have been sending books and journals to their library for ten or twelve years. Our contact there was a graduate student in psychology when we started, and now he has his Ph.D. and is a faculty member and is writing a book on psychotherapy with another faculty member. He writes me that he would love to have me teach at his university, but it isn't the right time politically. He would also love to come to America to study. He loved Arlow and Brenner, and when each of them died he asked me to write an obituary and he translated them into Farsi and published them in a psychological journal. If there is ever a thaw between our two countries, perhaps CFS can arrange an exchange of faculty with the Kurdistan University.

S. Speaking of Arlow, you were in a study group with him, correct?

E. Yes, about eight or nine members of the NYFS (now CFS) met with Arlow weekly for about three years. He had one of the sharpest analytic minds I have ever met with. I think everyone felt that way.

S. Was he critical or tactful or somewhere in between?

E. He was quite direct. This seminar only discussed process notes of the members. He would suddenly stop somebody presenting and say "Wait, wait, did you hear what the patient just said? How come you didn't pick up on that? Do you understand what that meant?" When the seminars ended we took Dr. Arlow to lunch. He said to us "the future of psychoanalysis is now in your hands, no longer the medical groups."

S. What is your perspective on the current health of psychoanalysis?

Psychoanalysis has many problems now. There are too many institutes and too many divergent theories leading to a chaotic situation.

Academic psychology, still immersed in behavioral theory, continues to attack psychoanalysis as unscientific. But psychoanalysis must survive. It provides the most effective treatment for many neurotic problems. My own personal analysis was enormously helpful to me, and my treatment of patients in analysis confirmed to me the value of the treatment. Also, psychoanalytic psychotherapy usually once or twice a week, based on

psychoanalytic psychology, is effective in helping many people. But conducting psychotherapy also requires a great deal of training.

But psychoanalysis is split into many factions and camps. For instance, Arnie Richards has been leading a struggle to reform and democratize the American Psychoanalytic Association.

S. So psychoanalysis has to survive and the Contemporary Freudian Society has to survive. Any thoughts about what we as a Society need to do to survive?

E. I really don't know what should be done. I think we have a fantastic theory of how the mind works, and a skill in applying a therapeutic practice that changes lives for the better, but we seem not to be able to advertise our successes to the world. The only other thing I can think of is that CFS might try to find an academic partner. Psychoanalysis is a cognitive psychology, and always has been, and should be in contact with those academic psychology departments that are open to this way of thinking.

S. What have you been reading in the psychoanalytic literature that you find interesting?

E. I have become very interested in the superego lately and have written a paper, which I hope to publish, about the conversations between the superego and the ego, and how they can be used in treatment. I have been influenced by Paul Gray's writings on the superego. I am also very excited by reading Eric Kandel's new book "The Age of Insight: The Quest to Understand the Unconscious in Art, Mind and Brain, from Vienna 1900 to the Present."

S. You were just talking a few moments ago about the need to train people to do sophisticated once and twice a week psychotherapy, and I know you had an interest in the status of psychoanalytic psychotherapy and wrote an article about it in 1990.

E. Yes, I thought that every psychotherapist should have a personal analysis so as to be in touch with his own unconscious. I still believe this, but in the real world of insurance and clinics and radically reduced fees, most therapists don't have the money, time or conviction.

S. Any thoughts about what practicing as an analyst in later life was like for you?

E. I thought that I was practicing well, but that as I approached the age of 89 I thought that I should plan to ease out of my practice, which I did. I do miss seeing patients.

S. Do you feel that the Freudian Society is doing what it can to keep later life analysts involved in the Society?

E. I'm not sure. A few years ago Ruth Lax wrote a very insightful paper "Becoming Really Old: the Indignities." Perhaps you have read it.

S. What are your plans for your retirement?

I plan to do a lot of reading. I am re-reading Rapaport on the superego. I suspect that the role of the superego in cognitive functioning may be a missing link between psychoanalytic psychology and cognitive psychology. I take courses with The Teaching Company on DVD disks. Right now I am taking a DVD course of 36 lectures on Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. I am also in a monthly reading group with men who are all smarter than I am. They include a sociologist, a philosopher, a publisher of travel books, an English professor, who is also a poet, and a corporate lawyer. I also hope to do some traveling with my wife.

S. Thank you for so generously sharing some reflections on your life experiences and on psychoanalysis.

E. My pleasure.

