

"The Interwoven Lives of Sigmund, Anna and W. Ernest Freud. Three Generations of Psychoanalysis"

by Daniel Benveniste, Ph.D.

While reading this book, the word "monumental" came to my mind. On thinking about that, I understood it to condense the two main meanings of the word: 'huge' and 'a memorial'.

It is indeed a 'huge' work being 670 large paper back pages long - and it is a very caring and respectful work of memorialising the 'interwoven' aspects of three generations of the Freud Family. One would have thought that there was nothing 'new' to add to the already vast biographical and historical literature on Sigmund Freud and Anna Freud. BUT, this book would not have been written were it not that in the third generation, following in Sigmund's and Anna's daunting footsteps, there came another psychoanalyst in the third generation: W. Ernest Freud.

"W.E.F." as he is sometimes referred to in the book (and I will use this for brevity), is of unique historical significance as being the child to whom Freud refers as playing the now famous "*Fort-Da* Game". When the author Benveniste asked WEF when he began his own training analysis, WEF said "when I was in my mother's belly"! Reading this book attests to the poignancy of that assertion.

The whole purpose of this book is to give us new insights into the family dynamics which 'resulted' in the coming to being of this 'third generation psychoanalyst'.

Reading the index of this well structured work, one is lead logically through the stages leading from WEF' 'pre-birth' to his eventual death, some 92 years later. Section I (1914-1939) deals with Sigmund Freud, Anna Freud, and Ernst's Early Childhood Experience. It moves through his later childhood and adolescence in the context of Hitler and the resultant emigration of The Freuds to London.

Section II (1940-1982) deals with Anna Freud and W. Ernest Freud Working Together. This part covers WEF's psychoanalytic training, marriage and the birth of his only child - a son, Colin as well as WEF's own significant particular psychoanalytic interests.

Section III (1983-2008) is titled "W. Ernest Freud: The Lone Wolf".

Although the psychoanalytically well-informed and scholarly clinician, Benveniste pays much attention to the early and subsequent development of psychoanalysis itself, I consider this to be a mere (how dare I !?) background music to the sturm-and-drang opera of the complex factors influencing the life of young 'Ernst' and the later 'Ernest' Freud. Please remember that he was "Ernst Halberstad" in between!

WEF was the first son of Freud's daughter Sophie and her husband Max Halberstad. He was also the first grandchild of Sigmund. Apart from the 'ordinary' oedipal complexities of any family, the father Max Halberstad was to be 'away' at the First World War - returning home injured. Although Freud himself was a far from actively involved grandfather, he was still Sigmund Freud! Doubtless the relationship with Sophie would have been significantly impacted by this stark reality.

The details and subsequent 'fame' of the *Fort-Da* game are a recurrent theme throughout the book. Benveniste provides a scholarly review of the multitude of efforts by many psychoanalysts to explore this 'quaint' game, invented by WEF to master his ordinary and exceptional anxieties. This 'game' addresses the ordinary vicissitudes of a child dealing with the comings-and-goings of their mother. But, much more has been written about this child's play than - I would venture to say - any other child in history. It is even the subject of much analysis by the child-grown-to-be- man (and psychoanalyst) himself!

The heading covering these issues is "1915: Baby Ernst Enters Psychoanalytic History". And so he does!

When Ernst was in his fourth year, his baby brother Heinerle was born. And less than two years later, his mother Sophie was to die of influenza and pneumonia while pregnant with the Halberstad's third child. But more was to come: Heinerle himself died of tuberculosis at the age of four.

WEF experienced 'ordinary-enough' sibling rivalry issues with his baby brother and his sad death - but these would have much significance in the later life of Ernst.

While these tragedies would, of course, impact any family, the text reads "Nineteen twenty-three was an important year for Sigmund Freud both professionally and personally". This refers to the number of significant deaths impacting on Sigmund Freud in the year of Heinerle's death and the important conceptual developments occurring in his psychoanalytic life.

Sadly what also comes through the text is a degree of 'cut-off-ness' in Freud as to these all too painful events, as he continues his famous correspondences with many of his 'confidants'.

Benveniste draws on very much of the now familiar biographical sources about Sigmund Freud and his family (Ernest Jones, Peter Gay, Young-Bruehl, and many many others). This condensed account of the Freud family life focussing on the birth and development of Ernst Freud makes for a particularly painful read at times, when we read (listen?) with a psychoanalytic sensitivity to the impact the 'ordinary-enough' events must have had on all the participants. BUT (again) this is the family of Sigmund Freud! The painful irony is that the significance of such events as these on the personal development of each human being and their enduring effect is all the more poignant when one has to realise that at that time, they themselves could hardly have known what we know now - thanks to Sigmund Freud, Anna Freud, and so many others who have followed.

Quite apart from the everyday vicissitudes of a family's history, there is the quite unique (and highly relevant to this book) fact of Sigmund Freud's having 'analysed' his daughter, Anna - and her, Anna, having later 'analysed' her nephew, Ernst. I put the word analysed into quotation marks because of what we now know - and likely - would not have been considered an issue then, as to the ethics of 'analysing' a close relative.

Although Anna Freud made considerable contributions to psychoanalysis in her own right, we can't help but wonder about the consequences her relationship with her father/analyst will have had on her own development. Consider now, that Anna Freud took into analysis, in the context of her own training, her own nephew - the son of Anna's then deceased (beautiful and married) sister - having also stepped in as a significant carer of the infant Ernst after the death of his mother. The oedipal implications of all this in reality - let alone phantasy - boggle the mind.

Much of WEF's life and personal identity hinged upon his having been the "*Fort-Da* baby" and having been the analysand of Anna Freud - and written up as a 'a case history' as such. Both of these important aspects of the book are accorded special treatment in the book: the child analytic case in Section IV: "The Case that Possibly Describes Ernst's Child Analysis" and the *Fort-Da* Game in a separate Appendix to the book.

It is important to mention that his mother Sophie regularly 'wrote up' detailed accounts of her baby's development and progress in a "baby diary" reproduced in both the original German and its English translation in two appendices in this book (titled "Sophie's Voice"). A further dimension to this *observed infant!*

Now to Ernest Freud's contribution to the body of Psychoanalysis: it is surely a matter due to 'identification' with his grandfather and aunt, that Ernst Halberstad formally changed his name to W. Ernest Freud. What distinguishes his body of work from that of the average analyst's contribution to the literature is his work in the field of premature infants. He chanced (if that can be said by an analyst) on becoming involved in observation of babies in a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU). Indeed, he met his wife-to-be, Irene, in just this 'environment', both of them seeking educational development in psychoanalytic thinking at the time.

WEF himself acknowledges the significance of his own experiences as an 'observed infant' together with the multiple traumas involving his subsequent born and unborn siblings in determining this "choice" of pursuit of knowledge. The book provides a complete bibliography of WEF's analytic publications.

I will leave it to the potential reader to follow in whatever degree of details the mine of information provided by Daniel Benveniste in regard to his own style of pursuing the requisite information to write this book which is primarily about the life and times of W. Ernest Freud. He is completely transparent about his own efforts in writing the book.

What I consider to be an intriguing aspect of the book is indeed transparently approached in the final full Section of the book: Section V: "Why Did W. Ernest Freud Want Me to Write His Biography?"

We know that Sigmund Freud had overtly negative attitudes about the possibility of being the subject of a biography. Yet it turned out that he has been the subject of an extraordinary number of biographical works - both his life in general and in specific contexts (e.g. his relationship with his 'Jewishness'). Anna Freud, too, has been the subject of the definitive Young-Bruehl biography.

Benveniste has had the opportunity of interviewing at length a living subject and forming a meaningful relationship with him up to and including the time of WEF's death in 2008 at the age of 92. WEF's likely own ambivalence about being the subject of a biographer, rather than writing an *autobiography* (which he may have intended, but became too old and frail to do) is manifest in Benveniste's being haunted by the possibility, earlier in the endeavour, that WEF may change his mind about this work. Fortunately he didn't.

Many fascinating issues are explored in this final Section - not least the likely "transferences" involved between biographer and subject (or perhaps, the other way around?). In this particular biography, WEF had a clearly developed transference to his biographer in the form of being reminded by his biographer (unconsciously - to begin with!) of his little brother Heinerle. This aspect made fascinating reading. WEF was open to new insights about his eventful and often troubled life through the process of the relationship with his biographer right until the end. The parallels with the analytic process itself cannot escape us in this particularly poignant account of Benveniste's painstaking work with his 'subject'.

Benveniste and WEF concur that one of the objectives of writing psycho-biographies – and reading them – is to try to discern unconscious motives for important aspects of the subject's life, and particularly to try to understand any apparent repetitious behavioural phenomena. This book accomplishes both these aspects.

There is evidently much about WEF's life and work not covered by me in this review. His development as an analyst, his marriage and the troubled relationship with his son, Colin, who died young. His likely affair with a woman named "Anna"! And his important work with Anna Freud and the Hampstead Clinic and its relevant luminaries are among the many reasons why someone would want to read this important book.

I only hope to have whetted your appetite to know more about "WEF" if you knew as little about him as I did before reading this book.

Let me leave you with two concluding observations: of the 47 photographs included in the book - some already well known and others not - photo number 1 does not appear until page 94. It is (appropriately) of Sophie and Max, baby Ernst's parents. Photo 2 is a beautiful portrait of Sophie. Photo 3 is a well recognised one of Sigmund and Anna strolling on his arm. Photo 4 introduces Baby Ernst in his "curtained cot" (the cot of the *fort-da game*). Photo 44 is the very elderly WEF and Photo 45 is of the toddler Ernst with a "wooden reel". Photo

46 is the 'return of the repressed': a beautiful photo of a smiling baby Ernst and his beautiful mother. Photo 47 is of the author, Daniel Benveniste with a frail looking WEF. These photos tell the story of the beginning and end of WEF's journey through life.

The final observation attests the author's devotion to his sensitive task throughout the book. He ends as follows, writing after WEF's death:

"He was a sensitive soul who had suffered more than his share of slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, specifically the jealousy of others; the loss of his mother, brother and son; and his survivor guilt. And so it is in this way that I believe Ernst might have seen his biography not only as his revenge, his justice, but also, I imagine, as his way of saying quite lovingly,

Now I am dead and "gone" *Fort.*

"There" is the story of my life *Da!*

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