

Hermine Hug-Hellmuth: The First Child Psychoanalyst

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Abstract

The early Viennese analysts gathered around Freud were a diverse group. Among them was Hermine Hug-Hellmuth, a woman of academic achievement who was the first gentile admitted to the group, sponsored by Isidor Sadger. She used her experience of pedagogy to become the first child psychoanalyst.

Hug-Hellmuth's personal life was in many ways limited. She became responsible for Rolf, her sister's son, whom she analysed. Rolf set out on a criminal career, culminating in the murder of his aunt during a burglary of her home.

Hug-Hellmuth's demise was regarded as a scandal by the analytic group and she was written out of the history, leaving the honour to be the first child psychoanalyst divided between Anna Freud and Melanie Klein. This was quite unfair and it took the work of George McLean to confirm her primacy.

The episode reflects a less attractive side of the psychoanalytic movement who preferred a sanctified history that favoured the leading participants.

Psychoanalysis, as Freud conceived it, arose in the cultural hothouse of fin-de-siècle Vienna, bursting on a world ready for change. Freud's discovery of the unconscious was tailor-made for the times. It was no longer mattered what was visible on the surface but beneath it what counted. Modernism was the message and nothing would ever be the same again.

The early days of psychoanalysis have a romantic quality arising from the baroque environment of Vienna. The sense of a gnostic knowledge that was denied to others added to the controversy, if not hostility, towards psychoanalysis, making for an environment not far removed from a church or even a cult. Freud attracted a bohemian group of followers who

enthusiastically took up his ideas and treated patients. Later women joined the group, an indication of the tolerance they found, as well as the desire to break out of traditional roles. It spread to other centres, notably Zurich, Budapest and Berlin.

Like any church, there was the official dogma while the heretics got written out of the story. This was especially notable with psychoanalysis in view of the near-messianic status that Freud, as the movement founder, held and the constant circling for positions by the surrounding acolytes, ever at risk of being declared heresiarchs.

There is a paradox imbedded in the *weltanschauung* of psychoanalysis. The process of treatment was intended to discover and reveal unconscious events from the individual's past; their hidden history, in short. Yet, as an institution, psychoanalysis has gone to extraordinary lengths to hide its own unacceptable past. This started with Freud and was continued by his daughter Anna, Ernest Jones and Kurt Eissler. What they did went way beyond hagiography, rather a Stalinist attempt to ensure that only the official version would survive with numerous individuals and stories suppressed in the archives.[1]

The first analysts were a diverse bunch; some were innovative and made important contributions. Others were more anodyne with difficult personalities, leading to frequent clashes. Freud was often in despair about the Vienna group and looked to places like Zurich and Budapest to attract more able disciples.[2]

And, as would be expected, there was drama, tension and tragedy. It was a turbulent mix and the outcome for some was often disastrous. That some were seeking a solution to their own difficulties is indicated by the suicide rate, listed as 12.[3] They included Paul Federn, Wilhelm Stekel, Viktor Tausk, Herbert Silberer, Karin Stephen, Eugenia Sokolnicka, Tatiana Rosenthal, Karl Schrötter, Monroe Meyer, Martin Peck, Max Kahane and Johann Honegger.

A member of the early circle was Hermine Hug-Hellmuth, a woman of considerable achievement. One of the first women students at the University of Vienna, she started training as a teacher in 1897, then became one of the first women to get a doctorate in physics. She was the first gentile member of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society and the third woman member. She performed systematic child observation and was the world's first child analyst.[4] These were no mean feats for a single woman in a conservative society that only grudgingly accepted that women could move out of their traditional role as home providers.

Hermine Hug von Hugenstein was born in Vienna on 31 August 1871. Her father, Knight Hugo Hug von Hugenstein, of aristocratic descent, served in the Austrian war ministry, rising to the rank of lieutenant colonel. The family was Catholic. Hug von Hugenstein had an illegitimate daughter Antoine to a relationship and then married another woman. Antoine was brought into the family (with her age reduced to make it more acceptable).

Hug-Hellmuth's family life was dominated by a series of tragedies: economic decline,

death of two infant sisters followed by the death of her mother from tuberculosis in 1883. Her father was to die in 1898.

Hug-Hellmuth became a teacher in public and private schools before entering the University of Vienna in 1897. She was introduced to psychoanalysis by Isidor Sadger, another character written out of the history of psychoanalysis who deserved better.[5] A neurologist, he attended Freud's lectures in the late 1890s, started analysing cases around 1898 and joined Freud's group in 1906; he was either the first or the second doctor in Freud's circle to begin analytical work. Sadger spoke out publicly for Freud before 1900, wrote on homosexuality and may have been the first to use terms like narcissism.[6] This indicates his pioneering role in recognising the work of a man who, by his own account, was rejected by the medical and scientific establishment for many years. As events were to show, he was to get little recognition of his loyalty.

Sadger was regarded as an odd character. Described as a difficult, morose and probably depressed man, his disregard for psychoanalytic conventions earned him the disdain of colleagues. Freud regarded him as a "good worker" for his research, but described one of his papers as repellent. Ernest Jones took a special dislike to him after he wrote a biography of Freud (*Recollecting Freud*), saying (with malicious prescience) that Sadger should be put in a concentration camp. He was killed by the Nazis in Theresienstadt camp in about 1942, the only one of the Vienna analysts to have this terrible fate.[7]

Sadger became Hug-Hellmuth's doctor in 1907, going on to be her analyst. He introduced her to the analytic group and remained a close friend to the end of her life. [8] Both of them remained single but her biographer says there was no evidence they ever became lovers. In 1911, she resigned her teaching post and the next year published her first paper on psychoanalysis in the *Zentralblatt für Psychoanalyse*, even before she began to take part in the meetings of the Vienna Psychoanalytical Society. She participated in analytic meetings and became a member of the Vienna Society in 1913.

She was described as a small woman with black hair, always well dressed; Helen Deutsch described her appearance as aesthetic.

Hug-Hellmuth changed her name several times for reasons which are not clear. However, such nominal fence-jumping was a practice followed by several leading analysts, including Otto Rank (Otto Rosenfeld) and Erik Erikson (Erik Homburger). In 1907, she used Hug-Hellmuth, in addition to Hug von Hellmuth. With the collapse of the Hapsburg Empire after the war, she had to drop the 'von' and was then known as Hug or Hug-Hellmuth.

By any standards, her work she was exceptional. She combined Freud's insights with her pedagogical background and made insightful observations of the inner world of children. At the International Congress in The Hague in 1920, she reported on her efforts in her paper

“On the Technique of the Analysis of Children.”[9] A year later she became director of the Educational Counselling Centre associated with the Ambulatorium of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. Her work was based on observation and analysis of children’s behaviour and applying psychoanalytic theory to education and the psychology of children.[10] This made her the first child analyst and a contributor to the development of child psychoanalysis. Like Sadger, her fate was to be written out of the official history.

A Young Girl’s Diary, edited by Hug-Hellmuth, was published anonymously in 1919 by the official psychoanalytic publishing house.[11] It was a sensitive account of a young girl’s puberty. Freud – initially – was most taken with the book, writing a forward in which he described it as a gem with a special vision into the soul of a girl.[12] The enthusiasm was not to last.

No one in the analytic circle doubted that Hug-Hellmuth was the author (rather than the “editor” as she was listed) and a number of reviewers criticised its authenticity. It was clear the book was based on her own experiences and the controversy over authorship ultimately detracted from its value with many reviewers impressed by the description of the psychology of a pubertal girl. It was considered something of a scandal and in 1927 Freud asked the book to be withdrawn.[13] It was not until the third edition in 1922 that Hug-Hellmuth would admit to being the real author.[14]

Away from her analytic career, things were not going well. Both she and her sister were to have what can only be called bleak personal lives. At the age of 41, Antoine invested her savings in a private school and had an affair with the headmaster, resulting in the birth of her son Rudolf Otto (known as Rolf) in 1906. The relationship did not last and Antoine lost all her money. Here started the situation which was to have such a tragic outcome for her sister.

In 1915, Antoine died and Hug-Hellmuth had to become more involved in Rolf’s life. This was by no means easy. From an early age, Rolf was a severe behaviour problem, making it difficult for him to stay with foster parents. He was a poor student, constantly stole and described in a report as a liar and sexually premature.

Rolf became an important research subject for Hug-Hellmuth, emerging as the major personality in her first book, *Aus Dem Seelenleben des Kindes* (On the Spiritual and Mental Life of the Child), published in 1913.[15] Many of her papers included observations of his early development, behaviour, and dreams.[16] She concluded that Rolf’s actions were based on abnormal sexual motives and tendencies.

In using observations of Rolf’s behaviour in her writing, Hug-Hellmuth was no different to the other analysts.[17] Freud had analysed his daughter Anna (which remains a source of controversy), Melanie Klein did it with her children (earning their lasting derision), as did other analysts in the movement.

Rolf's relationship with his aunt worsened after 1919 when she caught him stealing. By 1922, his situation was critical with expulsion from schools, loss of jobs, more stealing and a suicide attempt. From February 1924, he would harass her incessantly for money.

On the night of 8-9 September 1924, shortly after the completion of her book *New Ways to the Understanding of Youth*, Hug-Hellmuth was murdered by Rolf. He broke into the apartment through a window at midnight. When his aunt was disturbed, he smothered and strangled her, robbing money from her purse. He was caught the next day and charged.

Before her death, Hug-Hellmuth expressed concern about her safety; in August she wrote a will leaving all to Rolf and stating that no account of her life and work was to be written about her[18]; this was later to be used by the analytic movement to bury her role. She told Sadger that she was going to be killed.

At his trial Rolf testified that his aunt had attempted to analyse him and her writings had many observations of him.[19] This was a poor legal defence but fed the scandal over the affair. He was found guilty and sentenced to twelve years imprisonment with the interesting requirements that he should sleep on a hard mattress every three months and spend each anniversary of the murder in a darkened cell.

After being released from prison, Rolf, in an act of remarkable *chutzpah*, contacted the Vienna Psychoanalytic Association demanding restitution as a victim of psychoanalysis. Unsurprisingly the request was denied. He was then referred to Helen Deutsch for treatment. Wisely, she demurred but he continued to turn up to her office until her husband got a detective to scare him away.

Nothing further is known of Rolf's fate except that he did not commit any more crimes.

As for Hug-Hellmuth's posthumous fate, the dragons guarding the movement ensured that she was effectively expunged from the history. [20] There were several reasons for this. The scandal starting with *A Young Girl's Diary*, following the embarrassment for the movement over the circumstances of her murder. But the main issue was her primacy as the first child analyst.[21] This primacy was taken up first by Anna Freud and then her arch-enemy, Melanie Klein. The former, as Freud's intellectual heir, had only started attending meetings in 1919 and presented her first paper in 1922. This put her a decade behind Hug-Hellmuth's child work.[22] Klein, much later, made token acknowledgement of her role but then focussed on the dispute with Anna Freud.

It was an unbecoming approach that reflected poorly on those involved. Hug-Hellmuth deserved better. It was not until recently that George MacLean, a Canadian child analyst, collected the facts and gave the belated recognition she deserved.[23] After all, no less than Freud was to say that she had done his grandson Ernst, the son of Sophie Freud "a good deal of good".

The development of psychoanalysis remains intriguing. Social, cultural psychological, even religious factors all came together in the hothouse milieu of fin-de-siècle Vienna. The lives of Freud and the early analysts continue to attract biographies. Its theories still resonate in some areas of the humanities, notably literary criticism. Yet, in the suppression of its own history, psychoanalysis displays a disconcerting insensitivity, reinforcing the beliefs of those who regard it as a cult with some oppressive tendencies. Of the sceptics, there may be something in what Karl Kraus had to say:

Psychoanalysis is that mental illness for which it regards itself as therapy.

References

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