

“Everything that could be called friendly or kind is missing”:
Ferenczi in New York.¹

Adrienne Harris, Ph.D.

In 1991, at the Ferenczi Conference that Lewis Aron and I organized in NYC, I had an experience that I suspect was not only mine. Sitting in the auditorium listening to the papers, I felt my professional and intellectual world shift and dramatically reorganize. The very knowledgeable and practiced European voices: Judit Meszaros who we hear tonight, and Andre Haynal, Georgy Hidas, and Judit Dupont joined up with Americans in the throes of discovery or rediscovery. Lew Aron, Therese Ragen, Sue Shapiro, Arnold Rachman, and Ben Wolstein. My metaphor for describing that experience of the conference comes from geology: the image of plate tectonics. Suddenly I saw that continents that seemed to be far apart had really once been joined. I knew my own psychoanalytic ancestors, really for the first time. I understood how object relations had evolved in Britain and I understood that a theory of trauma had been part of psychoanalysis from the very beginning. Books and articles and courses and life long affinities grew out of that meeting.

I think for many of us here, from the psychoanalytic world, Sandor Ferenczi is inspiration, mother or maybe grandmother, and also a cautionary tale. He was considered in Europe the ‘analyst of last resort’. We might see him now as the devoted but perhaps also masochistic clinician, the brilliant thinker, innovative clinical researcher, and the courageous guardian of the importance of real trauma in psychic life.

¹ Introductory Remarks at the Opening of the Sandor Ferenczi Center at the New School. Jan 12, 2009,

Several months ago, when Lewis Aron invited Jeremy Safran and me to join him and to launch the Sandor Ferenczi Center and to house it at the New School, among other reasons, because Ferenczi had taught here in 1926, I felt the world lurch and reorganize. Ferenczi – here – in New York – in the fall of 1926. Again, for me, psychoanalytic history opens; the world and institutions of psychoanalysis here in the United States are suddenly visible in a new way. New York in the 1920's comes into view with its unique intensities and ferment, so in tune with Ferenczi's. Reading the Freud-Ferenczi correspondence in this brief period, one sees that struggles that were not really solved for another 60 years were already apparent in that eight month visit Ferenczi made to New York, in the contacts he made, in the training he did, and, in particular, in the discussion of the strategies he and Freud were devising at that time for the support of lay analysis.

I am actually stunned that there are so many lacunae in our knowledge of Ferenczi. We can literally reconstitute Freud's daybook, but this trip, Ferenczi in New York, which is actually full of meaning and interest, somehow never got on our radar. One of our hopes in this first meeting is that together collectively we can begin to patch the details of this history together. My introduction tonight is a first pass through this complex and wonderful moment.

My title is a quote from Ferenczi's letter to Freud written just after his arrival. "Everything (in italics in the letter) that could be called friendly or kind is missing. The difference from Paris." He goes on to complain about street noise. He was living, by the way, on the Upper West Side. (72nd and Broadway)

Ferenczi had stepped into New York and into American psychoanalysis at a really interesting moment, in a volatile spot. The New School, formed in 1919, in reaction to

the conservative, destructive and anti-Semitic hiring practices of Nicholas Murray Butler, the President at Columbia. This brought together an extraordinary collection of social scientists and intellectuals in a transformative moment – only partially successful in this decade of the 20's- but bursting with talent and progressive determination. The New School, to quote Tom Bender was “ the place that could become the best center of thought in America.” Bender also notes the intentions and aspiration of the group of intellectuals and social theorists in forming the New School who were in the process of making social and political knowledge both academic and professional disciplines. This is a period and an institution in formation when intellectuals were both public and professional and at the New School in its first formation, these were people of radical political and critical thought. We know the evolution of the New School in the interwar period much better but these early years have a particular character and social ferment at their heart.

Many of the initial group forming the New School had ties to a progressive movement, to anti war work, to pacifisms, very important centers for worker education A J Muste and the Brookward Labor School and Charles and Mary Beard in the Workers Education Bureau were all linked in the formation and hopes of the New School. We are in the circle of radical and progressive post war thought, a time of great intellectual and social ferment in the city. The perfect spot for Ferenczi, one would have to say.

Within psychoanalysis, in addition to the struggles over lay analysis, rival journals were contesting for space and a readership. In the run up to Ferenczi's arrival in late September, he and Freud are already in conversation about lay analysis. Ferenczi urges Freud to have his text on lay analysis translated into English (Ferenczi actually

wrote the introduction to the English translation in 1927). And he and Freud are discussing the determined and actually successful efforts of AA Brill to pass state legislation that would make illegal non MD's doing analysis. In fact, Ferenczi's trip to NY could be seen as a countermove to Brill's efforts to derail lay analysis.

The other (to me) electrifying detail regarding this visit is that Ferenczi had immediately a full clinical practice, working 8 hours day, and seeing mostly non-medical analysts. This means that he was actively opposing (with Freud's very determined agreement), these exclusionary practices Brill and others were developing. Some of these analysands are known, some not. My hope tonight is that we can begin to fill in the absent space and I am anticipating that all of you here with ideas about this will contribute to the shared knowledge. Elisabeth Severn, Clara Thompson, Izette de Forest - These are possible names. One person Ferenczi names in a letter to Freud is Edward Kempfe.

Another tempest in the psychoanalytic teapot involved the work and evolving presence in New York of Otto Rank, then living in the city and practicing something that Freud, at least, did not think was psychoanalysis. What is interesting to me in Ferenczi's point of view about Rank was that he was worried that Rank's approach failed to show the importance of psychoanalysis for deep disturbances. It is relevant that one of Ferenczi's ten lectures was on psychosis.

His lectures, scheduled over 10 weeks – cover theory and technique and applied analysis. Clearly the audience is drawn from both sides of the controversy over medical practitioners. Ferenczi notes 300 people on the first evening. And as we learn from Ferenczi's letter to Freud, members of the medical psychoanalytic establishment came to

hear him. Ferenczi is quick to note who is ready to hear about lay analysis and who is not. Jelliffe and Brill are clear opponents but Ferenczi notes, Dorian Feigenbaum – later the first editor of the Quarterly - does come to the lecture on Lay Analysis. In a letter to Freud, Ferenczi speaks of Feigenbaum as a kindred spirit. Reading Feigenbaum's clinical papers in that era, one sees a very Ferenczian self-reflection and an affinity for deep trauma and trouble.

Throughout the Freud-Ferenczi correspondence of this period, there is a stream of genuinely loving communication, around family and ideas. They had just collaborated on the symposium and book on war neurosis in 1919, occasions in which both remarked on the extraordinary amnesia around war neuroses the minute combat is over, a tragic repetition throughout this century.

At one point, Ferenczi remembers the trip in 1912, using the metaphor of Jason and the Argonauts and the golden fleece, a preference certainly to the concerns around money in that enterprise, but also remembering that occasion in order to speak of the abiding connection between the two of them and the deepening experience they were having in the evolution and establishment of psychoanalysis. In a volume on dissidence and controversy in psychoanalysis, Martin Bergman, noted the difference between dissidents in Freud's lifetime and afterwards. Ferenczi, a loyal son and a dissident in Freud's lifetime, is actually unique in producing a 30-year body of original work, much of it inspiring to Freud. Andre Haynal, in a poignant detail in his book on Ferenczi, notes that Freud was shown the Clinical Diaries after Ferenczi's death and found them to be full of interest.

We begin a new adventure this evening, one that is designed to link us to the European community who so crucially preserved Ferenczi's legacy. In establishing this center at the New School we are linked to analysts here and in Europe who refresh that legacy and we are linked to the intellectual and progressive communities inside and outside psychoanalysis, from the 1920's onward. Every generation will make their own Ferenczi, discovering what is precious from the past and what is newly available to be co-constructed. At the evening in which this talk was given, several commentators in the audience speaking of Ferenczi noticed the extraordinary effect of one person in relation to a group and a culture. For a number of us, there was an obvious tie to the life and effect and work of Stephen Mitchell. Many links. The talk Judit Meszaros gave that night, (posted here on the website as well), restored other aspects of our history in American psychoanalysis as she tracked the extraordinary emigration from Budapest to the US in the 1930's. A lot to absorb.