

Uncovering the Forgotten Freudians

By BRUCE BOWER

Contrary to popular legend that tags Sigmund Freud and his early followers as staid devotees of psychoanalytic dogma, many of Freud's first disciples were bohemians and political radicals who wanted to use psychoanalysis to reform social and sexual codes. The recently uncovered correspondence of a noted early psychoanalyst indicates that these "political Freudians" either abandoned their views or communicated secretly among themselves after Nazism forced their exile to England and the United States in the 1930s.

The fate of the "political Freudians" has been brought to light by a ream of letters written by Otto Fenichel, a respected analyst and prolific author, from 1934 until just before his death in 1945. Four years ago, Edith Gyömrői, one of the six analysts who originally received Fenichel's correspondence, gave the copies she had saved to her friend Randi Markowitz, a Los Angeles analyst. It was time, Gyömrői felt, that the Freudians who had gone underground 50 years ago were heard from again.

Why were the letters kept secret for so long? Fenichel and company had been part of a large group of political Freudians who flourished in Europe in the early 1900s. In the 1930s, however, Germany's Third Reich turned their world upside down. Analysts, especially political Freudians who espoused socialism and the reform of "bourgeois" society, left Europe for England, America and other safe harbors. But they threw their political baggage overboard when they crossed the ocean. Survival came first; political controversy only risked deportation. Fenichel wrote his letters to keep the spirit of political psychoanalysis burning among a select few. He considered his work "top secret," telling the recipients to destroy the letters when they were through.

Today, Fenichel's words endanger no

one, yet they reveal a branch of early psychoanalysis that Freud scholar Russell Jacoby says has been for the most part forgotten. Jacoby, an English professor at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, British Columbia, helped Markowitz organize her cache of correspondence for submission to a publisher. In a book based on the Fenichel letters, *The Repression of Psychoanalysis* (Basic Books, 1983), he describes many of Freud's early followers as radicals and maverick intellectuals bent on changing the sexual and social codes of turn-of-the-century Europe. They were far from the stereotype of the passive analyst listening to the problems of wealthy neurotics in a plush office.

Even with almost 90 of Fenichel's letters in hand, Jacoby only partially reconstructs the era of political Freudians. He was refused access to the Freud Archives in England and guesses that they contain more of Fenichel's 119 *Rundbriefe*, or "round letters." The only researcher to get into the archives is Jeffrey Masson, former projects director of that institution. Masson was fired in 1981 when he claimed that Freud crippled psychoanalysis by turning away from his original "seduction theory" of neurosis.

In broad terms, Freudian theory describes neurosis as an imbalance between human impulses and the defenses that control and channel the expression of those impulses. According to the seduction theory, the sexual abuse of children by adults is a primary cause of neurosis. Later Freud held that reports of parental abuse were often the universal sexual fantasies of his patients released during adulthood. This view is an important part of the Oedipus complex. Masson, in his book *The Assault on the Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1984), claims that modern psychoanalysts follow Freud's

lead and treat their patients' reports of childhood trauma as fantasies, ignoring the reality of child abuse.

Few Freud scholars or analysts support Masson. "Freud never totally gave up the seduction theory," says George Pollock, director of the Institute for Psychoanalysis in Chicago. "The reality of childhood seduction doesn't refute Freud's major contributions such as the discovery of the unconscious, his finding that dreams have meaning and his description of emotional transferences from a younger era to other life situations."

Pollock agrees with Jacoby that the Fenichel letters reveal far more about the development of psychoanalysis than do Masson's assertions. A major break in the field occurred with the onset of Nazism and the forced exile of many psychoanalysts, they say, not with Freud's downplaying of child abuse. The Freudian refugees found status and affluence in their adopted homes, but, says Jacoby, "the cultural and political spirit of classical analysis vaporized." The political Freudians either gave up on their reformist ideas or carefully hid them in exile.

The cultural atmosphere had been far different in the Vienna of the early 1900s. Freud, who was himself a supporter of socialist causes, gathered around him both a core of disciples devoted to individual therapy and a number of others who wanted to promote psychoanalysis as a tool to fashion less restrictive social and sexual rules. Freud skillfully played off both groups. "He bent over backward to show that his findings were valid regardless of politics," says Pollock, especially because psychoanalysis was also attacked at the time for being a predominantly Jewish psychology.

In the 1920s, Freud's theoretical and political rebels left Vienna for Berlin. Their "Berlin Institute" was a hub for independ-



(Left) Otto Fenichel, at a 1938 meeting in Prague, Czechoslovakia, poses with analysts Steff Bornstein (far left) and Charlotte Feibel. (Below) Fenichel confers with Anna Freud (facing camera) and others.



Hanna Fenichel Pitkin

Psychoanalysis originally attracted a potpourri of political rebels, memories of whom have been resurrected by some recently disclosed documents

ent thinkers, including Fenichel, Karen Horney, Melanie Klein, Wilhelm Reich and Franz Alexander. At first, the institute devoted its resources to providing therapy to those who could not afford it. Many of its analysts were driven toward a more fervent socialism, or in some cases communism, by the economic collapse of Germany in 1929 that fueled the Nazi party. "The Berlin Institute was the most important [psychoanalytic society] of its time," says Jacoby. "Freud watched it carefully, but it quickly lost its reformist zeal."

The crushing blow, as revealed by Fenichel's correspondence, was exile. Fenichel was grateful to be admitted to the United States in 1938 with his wife and child. But left-wing visions of social reform could only be exchanged in letters with a trusted group of six colleagues; loose lips, they reasoned, risk temporary visas.

"The first priority of the psychoanalytic exiles was to make a living in America," says Joel Kovel, a New York City analyst who has written critically of modern analytic training. "Their attitude was far different from Freud's, who wanted to revolutionize society and psychology."

Strangers in a strange culture, the Freudian refugees hid their nonconformist ideas. Freud's therapy flourished as "a de-cultured trade," says Jacoby. By the 1940s,

psychoanalysts had split into two factions, he explains — the "orthodox," who saw psychoanalysis as a medical discipline that explains individual behavior, and the "neo-Freudians," such as Erich Fromm, who stressed social and cultural determinants of behavior but rejected the significance of instincts and sexuality.

Fenichel was caught in the middle. In a letter written from Prague, Czechoslovakia, in April 1935, he describes his role in two early Freudian feuds. At that time Wil-

helm Reich was urging the political Freudians to embrace communism, a move Fenichel opposed. He mentions that Reich, a brilliant clinician who alienated many of his colleagues, was excluded from speaking at a major psychoanalytic meeting. Fenichel also talks of his quarrel with Robert Waelder, a leading Viennese analyst who harbored no sympathy for a mix of Freudian theory and politics.

In the United States, he kept quiet about politics but got involved in theoretical debates. The foundation of neurosis is instinctual, he held, but social and cultural factors are layered over inner conflicts. Writing from his Los Angeles home in 1941, he asks his small analytic circle to support the official psychoanalytic organization in the United States, even if it neglects the importance of social forces. At least, he says, it does not reject Freud's original theories for those of neo-Freudians.

By July 1945, when he sent out his last "round letter," Fenichel realized that Waelder's vision of a non-political psychoanalysis, not his, had been achieved. Six months later, just after the publication of his major work, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis*, he died.

Fenichel's correspondence, however, resurrects a forgotten line of psychoanalysts. Some of them were "wild and sloppy" in their theorizing, says Kovel, while others were "brilliant." Their work contrasts vividly with the "sterility" of modern psychoanalytic thought, holds Jacoby.

Mainstream psychoanalysts, such as Pollock, see their own efforts in a better light. "This is a dynamic science and field," he contends, "that can now play a role in the humanities, biological sciences and social sciences." In addition, there are still those who seek to expand Freud's theory. Clinicians working in the area of "object relations" theory, for example, attempt to trace the psychoses and severe neuroses to disturbances of the relationship between mother and child in the first years of life. They are attempting to understand and treat patients much sicker than those Freud analyzed.

Significantly, knowledge about Freud has expanded while insight into the psychoanalytic movement and its origins has lagged behind. Yet the fate of the political Freudians, more than the fate of Freud, shows how psychoanalysis has changed, says Jacoby. "The political Freudians are artifacts from a psychoanalytic dig. They summon up a village and culture of great vitality that has been paved over by the psychoanalytic highways of America." □



Freud's house, like many in Vienna, was draped with a swastika in 1938 (above). The Gestapo rummaged through his belongings and confiscated passports and money. Later that year, Freud arrived in Paris (left) on his way to exile in England. He is supported by Princess Maria Bonaparte, a former patient who paid the ransom demanded by the Nazis for his release, and then United States Ambassador to France William C. Bullitt.



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