

“Beyond Freud and Jung”: Sabina Spielrein’s Contribution to Child Psychoanalysis and Developmental Psychology

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Abstract Up to the present day, Sabina Spielrein has been seen as a means to deeper understanding of Freud and Jung and, in particular, the relationship between these two “great men”. This is also the reason why her scholarly achievements after her 1912 essay “Destruction as the Cause of Coming Into Being” are hardly taken into account. This study shows that Spielrein’s main research work was in the areas of child analysis and developmental psychology—that is, beyond the work and the persons of Freud and Jung—and that she made numerous significant contributions to the field, so many of them ahead of her time.

Keywords Sabina Spielrein · Carl Gustav Jung · Sigmund Freud · Jean Piaget · Developmental Psychology · Aldo Carotenuto · Geneva · Russia · Child Psychoanalysis · History of psychoanalysis · Hermine Hug-Hellmuth · Anna Freud · Melanie Klein · Edouard Claparède

Introduction

Sabina Spielrein would have been as good as forgotten, if a discovery had not been made in 1977 in the basement of the Palais Wilson, the one-time Jean-Jacques Rousseau Institute of Psychology, in Geneva. In fact, if Spielrein’s diary from 1909–1912 and her correspondence with Freud and Jung—over 80 handwritten letters and postcards—had not come to the light of day, and if this acquisition had not landed by Aldo Carotenuto in Rome, her memory would (more than likely) have been lost. She is not mentioned by Freud’s early biographer Ernest Jones (Jones 1953–1957), and even contemporary feminist Nancy Chodorow does not refer to her in her article *Women’s Contribution to the Psychoanalytic Movement and to Psychoanalytic Theory* (Chodorow 1987). Carotenuto’s (1980) Italian language release of these texts in 1980 was and remains seminal. A box of documents from Spielrein was further discovered in the family archive of the past director of the Jean-Jacques Rousseau Institute in 1982. Spielrein gained a larger public through the films *My Name Was Sabina Spielrein* (Márton 2006) and *A Dangerous Method* (Cronenberg 2011). But many of the phases of her life remain less known,

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especially her life and work in the Soviet Union after 1923. Carotenuto's (1980) book was translated into English in 1982, and a revised German version, including unpublished letters from Jung to Spielrein, appeared in 1986 (Carotenuto 1986).

Carotenuto had the first rights and an interpretive monopoly, and his contribution, which put a label on the entire collection of publications (even on Kerr [1993]), strongly influenced our image of Spielrein. (Lothane 2001, p. 36; Nitzschke 2001, p. 72.) He chose the title: "*A Secret Symmetry: Sabina Spielrein between Jung and Freud.*" In the English translation, the names of Freud and Jung are reversed in the title, maybe not to contest the primacy of Freud. No doubt it is impossible to see Spielrein without taking Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung into consideration. But can she only be seen through a dependent relation with these two others? Or, to put it still more concretely, do she herself and her own emerging research depend wholly on these men: Freud, Jung, and, eventually by an historical twist of fate, Carotenuto? Carotenuto has largely determined the view of Spielrein and her scientific work. He wrote about her two primary early publications: her dissertation, *Über den psychologischen Inhalt eines Falls von Schizophrenie* (Concerning the Psychological Content of a Case of Schizophrenia), which was published, in 1911, in the *Jahrbuch für psychoanalytische und psychopathologische Forschungen*; and her essay "Destruction as the Cause of Coming into Being,"¹ which was published in the same *Jahrbuch* one year later. Carotenuto's positive verdict regarding these two publications is at the same time an indictment of the rest of her work during the early phase of her career: "None of her contributions until 1931 achieved the intellectual concentration and originality of these works" (1980, p. 268).

Carotenuto's opinion must be revisited and critiqued. Carotenuto's assessment holds true only if the critic is superficially interested in Spielrein, but more substantially and actually interested in Freud and Jung. From this point of view, Spielrein is interesting only for the deeper understanding she offers into Freud and Jung. This is not my own perspective. If we are truly interested in doing justice to Spielrein, we must assess her in terms of her independent mind and person, and not simply test her suitability as a contribution to research on Freud and Jung. To put the matter still more sharply: Spielrein exists not only "between Freud and Jung," but also "*beyond Freud and Jung.*" Without ever allowing the interconnections to be broken, this "Spielrein beyond," who is indeed grounded in Freud and Jung, is nevertheless an independent scientist, who proved herself in her dedication and contributions to Child Psychoanalysis and developmental psychology.

Contributions to Child's Psychoanalysis through 1916

Spielrein's research emphasis was developmental psychology and child psychoanalysis.

Thirty-four of her contributions, some of them very brief, have been handed down to us. A great number of these concern the question of developmental psychology in children and provide a plethora of observations and empirical examinations conducted with children. Spielrein's clinical-therapeutic work, specifically her studies in child psychology, added to the further development of psychoanalytic theory.

When one argues—as does Carotenuto—that her substantial scholarly achievements were more or less completed by 1912 with her study of "Destruction as the Cause of Coming Into Being," one thus proclaims that the research work she did for the next 20 years was meaningless and inferior. But, one can only come to this conclusion by looking at Spielrein narrowly—through Jung-Freud lenses—as a means to *their* ends. In this sense, these two form

¹ This 1912 essay is the subject of the article by Pamela Cooper-White in this Symposium.

the criteria, or benchmark, for appraising Spielrein's scientific performance and excellence. Whoever contributes to deeper understanding of these two men is received with interest, while others, in particular women, who journey on their own path, are of little interest. Spielrein *between* is interesting; Spielrein *beyond* is not.

I propose that we try to correct this classical patriarchal perspective. In the same year Spielrein (1885–1924) published her thesis in the *Jahrbuch* in 1911, Hermine Hug-Hellmuth² (1871–1924) had her first psychoanalytic publication in the *Zentralblatt für Psychoanalyse* under the title, “Analysis of a Dream of a Five and a Half Year Old Boy.” (Hug-Hellmuth 1911) Spielrein was then 26 and Hermine Hug, already 40. Lou Andreas-Salomé (1861–1937) was 50. Melanie Klein (1882–1960)-three years older than Spielrein-didn't start publishing before the 1920s. This means that Sabina Spielrein was not only one of the first women to publish in psychoanalysis, but she was definitively one of the youngest. (Cifali 1988, p. 255).

In 1912, in the same year that she published “Destruction,” Spielrein (2002, p. 144–166, 2006 p. 146–152) further published “Beiträge zur Kenntnis der kindlichen Seele” (“Contributions to the Understanding of a Child's Soul”). This initial contribution to child psychoanalysis appeared in the *Zentralblatt für Psychoanalyse*. It treats three cases, and one of them is Spielrein herself! The piece is a “self observation.” Spielrein's goal in this article was to present “easily comprehended examples” of psychoanalysis from the context of child psychology. Using her own personal example and those of two others, Spielrein wanted to prove foundational concepts of psychoanalysis to be easily understandable and quickly accessible. In 1912, she was still only 27. With this study, she intended to show the connection between fear and sexuality, using herself as an example. Each of her three cases “come[s] from a good home with correspondingly appropriate upbringings” (Spielrein 2002, p. 144; re: Spielrein and her family, see Minder 1994, p. 61–62). In her own case, she analyzed the sudden emergence of a “time of fear” and “the sexual etiology of fear.” With astounding intellectual openness, which cannot easily be attributed to her upbringing, she recognized the strength and power of sexuality and sought the traces in herself. Within the memories of her childhood, she analyzed in herself “subconscious phantasies of birth.” She wrote that the differences between people had been of concern to her:

[T]he American captured my curiosity in particular, because, given that the earth was a ball, they had to wander around beneath us with their heads down and their feet up. For quite some time thereafter, I patiently dug a hole in the earth and asked mother each time whether it would take much more time until I had quarried through and could pull an American out by the legs. (Spielrein 2002, p. 146).

Spielrein joked a bit about the putative “innocence of children” (ibid.). Despite her shameladen bourgeois upbringing and her mother's pride in her innocence, Spielrein dared to open herself to such ideas and interpretations. She gave sexuality a completely new position and through this she also gained and made a new perspective on children, their questions, and their issues possible. Yet, her work served to simply underline mainly Freud's findings with examples or “proofs.” (In consideration of her biography, it is interesting to read her comments about what obviously impressed her in this early contribution in relation between the desire to travel and sexuality, “One goes on a journey to seek a new love or to get rid of an old one.”) (Spielrein 2002, p. 163).

In 1912, in the same year that she published “Destruction” and her “Beiträge zur Kenntnis der kindlichen Seele” (“Contributions to the Understanding of a Child's Soul”), Sabina Spielrein married the Jewish-Russian Doctor, Pawel Naumowitsch Scheftel, and one year later

² Hug-Hellmuth was analyzed by Isidor Sadger and later murdered by her own nephew—the object of Hug-Hellmuth's studies from infancy on.

their daughter Renata was born. Spielrein lived with her family in Berlin from 1912 until 1914, where she published several psychoanalytic essays on children and dream analysis. Her “Tiersymbolik und Phobia bei einem Knaben” (“The Animal Symbolism and Phobia of a Boy”) from 1914 demonstrates that Spielrein made an effort to present and prove Freud’s insights by applying examples to them. “Mischa’s story simply shows how a child’s desire and terrifying animals correspond to Freud’s assertions that these are symbolic representations of parents” (Spielrein 2002, p. 188). Likewise, in “Zwei Mensesträume” (“Two Dreams of Menstruation”) written in 1914, she begins with the statement, “in his ‘dream interpretation’ Freud points out the similarity between dreams and folk tales” (Spielrein 2002, p. 189). She also refers to Jung: “Jung described a case of the fear of earthquakes in his work ‘Konflikte der kindlichen Seele’ (“The Conflict of the Childlike Soul”). Here the earthquake also serves as a symbol for birth” (Spielrein 2002, p. 191).

1916–1919: Contributions to the Genesis of Child Thought and Language

After the onset of World War I, Spielrein moved to Switzerland, while her husband returned to Russia. She took up residence in Lausanne, where she founded a psychoanalysis research group. In her essay from 1916, “Die Äusserungen des Ödipuskomplexes im Kindesalter” (“The Expressions of the Oedipus Complex in Children”), which according to her own observations, led her to make a cautiously independent judgment. She wrote:

I do not believe that a child can have an Oedipus complex in the same consummate form that a sexually mature adult possesses... and I have not observed a radical preference for the opposite sex in children. The childlike Oedipus complex is usually expressed in that one loves one person more than another, usually the mother or father, and the child wants to remain alone with that person; therefore, she wishes the other family members away. (Spielrein 2002, p. 199–200).

Here—now without her husband any more, and alone with her daughter in a French speaking surrounding—we find Spielrein coming to trust her own observations and experiences, even making some independent judgments. It goes without saying that she still exercises restraint. This will soon change!

1920–1923: A Wave of Publications

During the years she spent in the French speaking part of Switzerland, Spielrein produced a flood of publications: sixteen articles alone between 1920 and 1923. At the sixth International Psychoanalytical Congress at The Hague, in 1920, Spielrein presented “The Origin and Development of Spoken Speech.”³ We only have a brief summary of this talk (Spielrein 2002, pp. 214 f.), but two years later—in 1922—Spielrein published a longer contribution on “The Genesis of the Childhood Words Papa and Mama” (Spielrein 2002, pp. 238–262). These publications now prove that Sabina Spielrein, who also worked with the linguist Gustav Bally, was a pioneer in a cognitive and linguistically founded psychoanalysis. She was doing research on the origin and development of children’s speech and thought before she ever met Piaget. (Vidal 2001, p. 145–146) Marie J. Santiago-Delefosse and Odéric Delefosse (2002) write, “Our own research work has encouraged us to focus on Sabina Spielrein, a little known author who was also the first analyst to show interest in the links between child development and

³ Spielrein can be located in the obligatory group picture of the Congress participants in the second row on the right.

language.” (p. 724). Peter Fonagy considers her to be the very first analyst who formulated an attempt to combine language with Freud’s drive theory. (Cifali 1988, p. 264) Barbara Wharton (2003) writes in her comment about Spielrein’s paper of 1922 that it is

...striking in that it expresses ideas and a quality of attitude and insight far in advance of its time. Not only does Spielrein perceive the importance of the infant’s relationship to the breast for its psychic development, anticipating the work of Melanie Klein ..., but Spielrein also records her observations on her daughter as an infant and young child ... with a precision and sensitivity which seems to point forward to the work of Winnicott and Fordham (p. 287).

Spielrein posed the thesis that autistic as well as social languages exist whereby, the latter was developed according to the first. She differentiated between (primary) autistic languages and social languages (like song, words, etc.) and developed an exciting theory in the context of child development explaining the meaning of a mother’s breast and sucking/nursing. Her lecture theoretically preempted Melanie Klein’s (1936) later but more famous distinction between the “good” and “evil” breast in the context of a baby’s development in Klein’s paper “Weaning”. Klein does not mention Spielrein here (see Richebächer 2008, p. 345 [40]).

John Kerr (1993) pointed out that Spielrein’s 1920 lecture

... was striking in its attempt to integrate Freud’s notion of a primary autistic stage in infancy ruled by the pleasure principle with the findings of developmental psychology. Taking the words ‘mama’ and ‘papa’ as her examples, Spielrein argued that the child’s first words arise out of the act of sucking and are imbued with a magical, wishfulfilling quality. (...) In short, spoken speech arises in an intermediary zone between the pleasure and reality principles. (p. 493).

What is so striking too is—as Barbara Wharton puts it—Spielrein’s “uncanny foreshadowing of Winnicott’s concept of transitional objects and the question ‘Did you conceive of this or was it presented to you from without?’”—because Spielrein asks “whether the child makes his language, or whether he simply inherits it” (p. 287). Wharton again: “Spielrein is convinced of the essential sociability of the infant, of his need to communicate and to relate.” (p. 287).

Analyst John Launer (2011) notes on her paper given in The Hague:

Once again, Spielrein’s thinking was far in advance of its time. She anticipated ideas that became central in the field of child psychology during the coming century: the social nature of infants, the importance of child observation in understanding the human mind, and issues concerning attachment, separation and loss. Yet the paper is totally unlike the lecture she had once given in Vienna. Her argument is focused. Her voice is now strong, independent and utterly lucid. There are a few references to Freud but none to Jung. It is clear that she is now her own woman. (p. 66).

In 1921, Spielrein and her daughter moved to Geneva, where she became a member of the Genevan Society for Psychoanalysis, whose director was Theodore Flournoy’s nephew Edouard Claparède (1873–1940). She gave lectures on psychoanalysis and pedagogy at the Institute Jean-Jacques Rousseau, which Claparède had founded in 1912 and—“which was fast becoming the world’s leading pedagogical center” (Kerr 1993, p. 493)—and published numerous works— among them were several theoretical works on child analysis based on the foundational protocols from her daughter’s childhood (see for example “Little Renate’s human development theory”—her theories of birth [1920] when she was a 4 ½ years old). Years before Melanie Klein studied (and analyzed) her own children, Spielrein already observed her own

daughter and kept records of what she saw. In 1922, she moved from the Viennese Society for Psychoanalysis (*WPV*) and joined the Swiss Society for Psychoanalysis (*SPV*).

The most famous person she analyzed during this time—besides Pierre Bovet, Edouard Claparède, and Charles Odier—was Jean Piaget (1896–1980). For eight months in 1921, the year Piaget really started with his developmental research, Spielrein analyzed him in Geneva every morning at 8 o'clock. Both Spielrein and Piaget attended the seventh International Psychoanalytical Congress in Berlin in September 1922 (Freud's last one). Spielrein gave a lecture on "Time in the Unconscious Life of the Soul", in which she "argued that the future tense is acquired by the child through the idea of repeated action while the past tense is acquired through analogies to spatial imagery. It was an important early contribution to the new field of psycholinguistics". (Kerr 1993, p. 495).

The relation between Spielrein and Piaget is in some sense mysterious. Piaget made contradictory remarks regarding why the analysis was ended. In a 1979 interview, he called her "Ms. de la Fuente," and said it was only "a didactic analysis", just "a learning experience." (Vidal 2001, p. 141) Further, he claimed that he was "impervious to the theory" and that Spielrein could "never convince him" of the validity of psychoanalysis. (Vidal 2001, p. 141) He puts the blame for ending the analysis on her: she was the one who, in a frustrated manner, said it was not worth it, whereas he found it "marvellous" to track down his complexes. (Vidal 2001, p. 141) Piaget said 1977:

... I am ashamed to say, but I'm not so interested in individuals, or the individual, I'm interested in that what is general in the development of intelligence and the cognition, whereas Psychoanalysis in its essence is an analysis of individual situations, of individual problems etc." (Volkman-Raue 1993a, p. 14 [transl. IN]; see also Volkman-Raue 1993b, pp. 159–161).

In contrast to Piaget, Spielrein was indeed interested in individuals.

1923–1942: Back in Russia

In 1923, Spielrein (1923) gave numerous lectures on the theme of Aphasia in Zurich, Geneva and Moscow, and published an article in French on "Some Analogies Between the Thought of the Child with that of the Aphasic and with Preconscious Thought". She was of the opinion that thought disorders that occur in aphasia are analogous to early childhood thought.

In the fall of 1923, Sabina Spielrein left Switzerland and returned to Russia, took up residence in Moscow, and became a member and instructional analyst for the Russian Psychoanalytical Association (*RPV*). But before she left Geneva, she packed her diaries, her personal documents and her correspondence with Freud and Jung into a brown suitcase and gave it to her supervisor at the Genevan Institute of Psychology, Edouard Claparède (Richebächer 2008, p. 250). In Moscow, Spielrein gave lectures at the first Institute for Psychoanalysis in the Soviet Union with Ivan Ermakov and Mosche Wulff, which was concurrently the first state run educational institution for psychoanalysis in the world, and offered seminars for child analysis. Spielrein held various positions. She was the director of the Department of Child Psychology at the State University of Moscow and worked at the Children's Home Laboratory with Vera Schmidt. (Richebächer 2008, p. 251–267).

A year and a half after her return to the USSR, Sabina Spielrein lived together with her husband again, and bore their second daughter Eva in 1926. Even though she kept working, she seemed to withdraw. (Karger and Weismüller 2006, p. 137 [Anhang]; Richebächer 2008, p. 250.) When the Marxist Leon Trotsky fell, and Stalin came to power, a dark era of persecution began for psychoanalysis in Russia. Spielrein went home to Rostow. She is listed

on the membership list of the Russian Psychology Society until 1933. Thereafter, psychoanalysis was prohibited in the Soviet Union. In 1942, after the Germans had taken Rostow, Sabina Spielrein and her daughters were killed by the SS Special Forces, together with the rest of the Jews of Rostow. (Issel 2003).

Spielrein's pioneering contributions in the area of her specialty of child analysis remain almost unnoticed to this day. In the classical reception of psychoanalysis, Freud's daughter Anna functions as the founder of child analysis; in the field of object relations theory, Melanie Klein is given the credit. The truth is more complex and still waiting to be discovered.

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