

ISIDOR SADGER: A VIENNESE PSYCHOANALYST KILLED BY THE NAZIS

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Introduction

Isidor Sadger, one of the earliest members of the Freudian circle in Vienna, was fated to be the only one of the Viennese psychoanalysts to die in a Nazi concentration camp (Roazen 1992). His analytic career was not without its difficulties and he was closely involved with the tragic Hermione Hug-Hellmuth, the first child analyst.

History

Isidor Isaak Sadger [29 October 1867 - 21 September 1942] was born to Miriam and Hersch Sadger (like Freud's paternal family line) in Galicia¹ in 1867. Following the stream of Jews who moved to Vienna after 1850, Sadger completed his medical training and doctorate in 1891. He trained as a neurologist and encountered Freud, who had commenced his medical career in that field. Specialising in hydrotherapy, a common treatment at the time, Sadger described it as 'the treatment of the future' for nervous diseases, which included the neuroses.

In the winter semester of 1895/96 and in the summer semester of 1896 and 1898 he attended Freud's lectures. It was Freud who introduced Sadger to the Wednesday group in 1906. Another connection to the analytic movement was with his nephew Fritz Wittels – introduced to the group by Sadger – who also became an analyst and wrote the first biography of Freud *Sigmund Freud: His Personality, His Teaching, His School* in 1924 (George 1925).

Sadger was a prolific writer with a special interest in the psychopathology of authors (pathography) – notably Ibsen and many minor writers - in addition to scientific journalism. He was an active participant in psychoanalytic congresses. His interest in fetishism led him to coin the term *Sadomasochismus* (sadomasochism) in 1913. He is credited with the discovery of the importance of the mother in male homosexuality. Freud noted in his revised 1910 edition of 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality' that his conclusions about homosexuality were partly based on information from Sadger. In 1908 Sadger described a brief analysis of a homosexual Danish count and wrote a paper that homosexuality could be cured in moral and determined patients 'with a definitive Yes!' (Lang and Sutton 2016). Sadger argued that homosexuality was due to events during upbringing, but still reported family histories of homosexuality which contradicted his thesis.

He had the distinction of introducing the concept of narcissism (*Narcissismus*) to psychoanalysis (Padovan 2017). This was taken up by Freud who developed and extended the concept along his own lines. This, and the biography he later wrote, was the chief source of the bitterness that led to their fallout.

¹ Neusandec in modern Poland.

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In the kind of event that could only happen in the analytic circle, Sadger's article 'The tale of the thinking protein' (published in the *Deutsche Review* in 1897) not only irritated Freud but caused him to have a dream about the *norekdal* style (May 2003) – it is an unusual distinction among the analysts to have infiltrated the Great Man's unconsciousness in this fashion.

Sadger, who remained single, was regarded by the analysts as an odd character. Described as a difficult, morose and probably depressed man, his colleagues described his style of writing as so exaggerated it verged on the ludicrous (May 2003). His talks on anal-eroticism, homosexuality, sadomasochism, and hereditary taint were poorly organized and badly presented. Karl Abraham complained of the rigidity with which he applied analytic principles with the rigor of an orthodox Jew – an interesting statement about a group that was almost exclusively Jewish.

He was criticised as being too systematic, outrageous, lacking in civility and a misogynist (Cotti 2005). It appears his objection was not as much to women, as to lay analysts, something he felt strongly about (Roazen 1992). The latter criticism can be questioned in view of his relationship with Hermione Hug-Hellmuth, as described below. Sadger was never analysed, something that may have been held against him, but among his analysands was Wilhelm Reich (Roazen 1992).

Peter Gay, listing the luminaries in the early group, described him as an able analyst and rather provocative companion (Gay 1995). Freud regarded him as a 'good worker' for his research, but described one of his papers as repellent (Roazen 1992) and was to distance himself from his interpretation of sexuality. He commented to Jung, 'Sadger's writing is insufferable' and later add that he was a 'congenital fanatic of orthodoxy, who happens by mere accident to believe in psychoanalysis rather than in the law given by God on Sinai-Horeb' (Letter Freud to Jung 5 March 1908; McGuire 1974: 130).

Sadger's biography *Sigmund Freud: Persönliche Erinnerungen* (Recollecting Freud) was published in 1929 by which time his disillusionment with Freud was searing although he continued to attend meetings until 1933 (Sadger 2005). The book has a curious, almost samizdat, history. It was widely believed that it had never been published or alternately suppressed (Cotti 2005). A story circulated that it had been bought up by psychoanalysts to destroy the copies. Decades later the only copy Alan Dundes could locate was in a Japanese university library (a copy later emerged in the Hebrew University). A suitably translated version was issued in 2005 to complete its resurrection.

Freud, Sadger wrote, was a genius who had erased from memory his 'humble origins' (Esterson 1993: 10). He could not tolerate dissent, was challenged by anyone with new ideas and dogmatic in his insistence on agreement. Sadger was predicting the revisionist views of Freud in the later, non-hagiographic biographies.² He also criticised 'the psychoanalytic sergeants' who maintained the purity of the doctrine, but omitted mentioning Freud's fixer, Ernest Jones.

The few references to Sadger in the literature refer to his activities in the Viennese analytic group, but ignore his involvement with Hermine Hug-Hellmuth³. One of the first women to get

² This is a growing list, e.g. Esterson (1993); Webster, R. (2005). *Why Freud Was Wrong: Sin, Science and Psychoanalysis*. Oxford: The Orwell Press. An extreme example is by Frederick Crews (2017). *Freud: The Making of an Illusion*. New York: Metropolitan Books/ Henry Holt & Co.

³ There is no mention of her in Gay (1995); Roazen (1992) devotes a few paragraphs to her life and death without any mention of Sadger.

a doctorate in physics at the university, she was the third woman and the first gentile member of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. She combined Freud's insights with her pedagogical background and made insightful observations of the inner world of children. This made her the world's first child analyst and a contributor to the development of child psychoanalysis who originated play therapy (Roazen 1992). While initially well regarded, her reputation plummeted with publication of *A Young Girl's Diary* in 1919 (Hug-Hellmuth 1971). This was considered something of a scandal and in 1927 Freud asked the book to be withdrawn.

Her 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 and her father in 1898. 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. Both of them remained single but her biographer says there was no evidence they ever became lovers.

Her personal life was bleak. Her sister Antoine's son Rolf was a behaviour problem who constantly stole and described in a report as a liar and sexually premature. On the night of 8-9 September 1924, Rolf broke into the apartment, strangled Hug-Hellmuth and was convicted of her murder. It was seen as a scandal that reflected poorly on psychoanalysis.

Like Sadger, Hug-Hellmuth's contribution was to be written out of the official history (MacLean 1986). It was only recently that Canadian child analyst George MacLean investigated the matter and gave Hug-Hellmuth the belated recognition she deserved (MacLean and Rappen 1991).

Demise

We have no information about Sadger's life after the Anschluss until his tragic end. His last address was listed as Vídên 2, Nestroygasse 4/14. Taken by the Nazis in Transport 1V/10, no 688, to Theresienstadt concentration camp on 10 September 1942, Sadger was killed on 20/21 September.⁴ He was the only one of the Vienna analysts to have this fate.

Discussion

Freud portrayed himself as a lonely pioneer in the early days, shunned by his colleagues (Gay 1995). Those early followers provided important support when he was isolated. This led to the formation of the Wednesday Psychological Society.

Revisionist historians have exposed the fissiparous nature of the early psychoanalytic group. The followers are of interest but have received relatively little study. Their attitude towards psychoanalysis was one of intense enthusiasm, but it is difficult not to believe that dealing with their own problems was a motivating factor. The best evidence for this is the fact that 11 of them committed suicide, the most well-known case being Viktor Tausk (Kaplan 2019).

Freud was to find the group tedious, if not troublesome and greeted the establishment of the Zurich group as a potential counterweight with enthusiasm. His tolerance for those who did not meet his exacting standards was limited: 'I judged that the association with Vienna was no recommendation, but rather an obstacle for the new movement' (Roazen 1992: 185). Heretics were expelled on a regular basis. As late as 1922, Mary Barkas, having a training analysis with Rank, described him as a great man whose undeviating style led him to 'squash' anyone who

⁴ <https://www.holocaust.cz/en/database-of-victims/victim/57319-isidor-sadger/>. Accessed on 6 July 2019.

disagreed with him. After Freud, the official history came under the aegis of Ernest Jones and Anna Freud, who went to great lengths to defame the dissidents.

Jones took a special dislike to Sadger after his biography of Freud, saying (with appalling prescience) that Sadger should be put in a concentration camp. The sheer viciousness of the comment reflects not only the less appealing aspects of Jones' personality, but the determination of the inner circle to maintain the purity of the image of the founder.

Looking at the origins of psychoanalysis, Sadger was there from the start. He started analysing patients in 1898, spoke out publicly on Freud before 1900 and joined Freud's group in 1906; he was either the first or the second doctor in Freud's circle to begin analytical work. He may have been criticized about his writing and attitude, but his work still had merit and, in some cases, was co-opted by Freud. Despite the derision he was subjected to, Sadger continued to attend analytic meetings till as late as 1933.

Sadger was to get little credit for his loyalty to a man who was rejected by the medical and scientific establishment for many years and was effectively written out of the official history of the movement.

After the Anschluss, the analysts, almost all Jewish, faced a threat from the Nazis, who had declared their opposition to Freud's work. Jones, this time to his credit, made great efforts to get Austrian and Hungarian analysts into safe countries. Freud resisted leaving Vienna until the threat to him was imminent and it took an international effort, headed by Princess Marie Bonaparte and William Bullitt, to get him safely to England. Because Sadger had left the analytic group by this time he may have been excluded from the attempts by Jones and others to get analysts to safety. Until his name was published on the list of victims of the Nazi genocide, no one knew what had happened to Sadger after the Anschluss. It is difficult to believe that he did not share the awful fate of the Austrian Jewish community that was to end in murderous dissolution.

Isidor Sadger deserves to be remembered, as much as any victim of the Holocaust, but also as a not insignificant member of the early psychoanalytic movement.

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