

Isidor Sadger: A Viennese Psychoanalyst Killed by the Nazis

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Isidor Sadger, one of the earliest members of the Freudian circle, was the only one of the Viennese psychoanalysts to die in a Nazi concentration camp. His analytic career was not without its difficulties and he was closely involved with Hermine Hug-Hellmuth, the first child analyst. This article presents an outline of his career, writings, and interactions with Freud and the early analytic group.

HISTORY

Isidor Isaak Sadger (29 October 1867–21 September 1942) was born to Miriam and Hersch Sadger in Galicia (Neusandec in modern Poland). Following the stream of Jews from Galicia (like Freud's family) to Vienna, Sadger completed his medical training and doctorate in 1891. He trained as a neurologist and encountered Freud, who had started his medical career in that field. Specializing 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 semesters of 1896 and 1898, he attended Freud's lectures. Freud introduced Sadger to the Wednesday group in 1906. Another connection to the 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 [2].

Sadger was a prolific writer with a special interest in the psychopathology of authors (pathography), notably Ibsen and other writers, in addition to scientific journalism. He was an active participant at 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 that homosexuality could be cured in moral and determined patients "with a definitive Yes!" [3]. He argued that homosexuality was due to events during upbringing, but still reported family histories of homosexuality that contradicted his thesis.

He had the distinction of introducing the concept of narcissism (narcissismus) to psychoanalysis [4]. This concept was adopted by Freud, who developed and extended the idea along his own lines. This, and the biography he later wrote, was the chief source of the bitterness that led to the fallout between the two.

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 [5]) not only irritated Freud but caused him to have a dream about the Norekdal Style [5]. With the intense focus on the unconscious among the analysts, it is an unusual distinction to have infiltrated Freud's dreams in this fashion.

Sadger, who remained single, was regarded by the others in the group as an odd character. Described as difficult, morose, and probably depressed, his colleagues thought his style of writing was so exaggerated that it verged on the ludicrous [5]. His talks on anal-eroticism, homosexuality, sadomasochism, and hereditary taint were poorly organized and badly presented. Karl Abraham complained of how he applied analytic principles with the rigor of an Orthodox Jew, an interesting statement considering that the group that was almost exclusively Jewish.

He was criticized as being too systematic and outrageous as well as lacking in civility and appearing to be a misogynist [8]. It appears his objection was not as much to women as to lay analysts, something he felt strongly about [1]. The latter criticism can be questioned in view of his relationship with Hermine Hug-Hellmuth, as described later. Sadger was never analyzed, something that may have been held against him, but Wilhelm Reich was among his analysands [1].

Peter Gay, writing about the luminaries in the early group, described him as an able analyst and rather provocative companion [11]. Freud regarded him as a good worker for his research, but described one of his papers as repellent [1] and distanced himself from Sadger's interpretation of sexuality.

He commented to Jung, “Sadger’s writing is insufferable,” later adding that Sadger 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” [13].

Sadger’s biography *Sigmund Freud: Persönliche Erinnerungen* (Recollecting Freud) was published in 1929. By this time his disillusionment with Freud was growing, although he continued to attend meetings until 1933 [14]. The book has a curious, almost samizdat, history. It was widely believed that it had never been published or alternately suppressed [6]. 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 was found at the Hebrew University). A suitably translated version was issued in 2005 to complete its resurrection.

Sadger wrote that Freud was a genius who had erased from memory his humble origins [10]. He could not tolerate dissent and was challenged by anyone with new ideas and dogmatic in his insistence on agreement. In this, Sadger preceded predicted the revisionist views of Freud in later, critical biographies [10]. He also criticized the followers of Freud’s psychoanalytic theories 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-Hellmuth. She was one of the first women to get a doctorate in physics at the university, and 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 combination made her the world’s first child analyst and a contributor to the development of child psychoanalysis who originated play therapy [1]. While initially well-regarded, her reputation plummeted with publication of *A Young Girl’s Diary* in 1919 [11]. This book was considered something of a scandal and in 1927 Freud asked that it be recalled.

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, and continued to be her psychoanalyst. He introduced her to the analytic group and remained a close friend until the end of her life. Both of them remained single, and her biographer says there was no evidence they ever became lovers.

Her personal life was bleak. Her sister Antoine’s son, Rolf, was a behavior problem who constantly was accused of stealing and was described in a report as a sexually premature liar. On the night of 8–9 September 1924, Rolf broke into Hug-Hellmuth’s apartment and strangled her. He was convicted of

her murder. It was seen as a scandal that reflected poorly on psychoanalysis.

Like Sadger, Hug-Hellmuth’s contribution was written out of the official history of psychoanalysis [12]. Recently, Canadian child analyst George MacLean investigated the matter and gave Hug-Hellmuth the belated recognition she deserved [13].

DEMISE

We have no information about Sadger’s life after the Anschluss until his tragic end. His last address was listed as Vidën 2, Nestroygasse 4/14. He was taken by the Nazis in Transport 1V/10, no 688, to Theresienstadt concentration camp on 10 September 1942. Sadger was killed less than 2 weeks later [14]. He was the only one of the Vienna analysts to have this fate.

DISCUSSION

Freud portrayed himself as a lonely pioneer, who in the early days, was shunned by his medical colleagues [7]. Those early followers provided important support when he was isolated. This friendship led to the formation of the Wednesday Psychological Society.

Revisionist historians have exposed the divisive nature of the early psychoanalytic group. The followers are of interest but have received relatively little study. Their attitude toward 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 [15].

Freud found the group to be tedious, if not troublesome, and greeted the establishment of the Zurich group as a potential counterweight with enthusiasm [1]. His tolerance for those who did not meet his exacting standards was limited. He stated, “I judged that the association with Vienna was no recommendation, but rather an obstacle for the new movement” [1]. Those who disagreed were expelled on a regular basis. As late as 1922, New Zealand psychiatrist Mary Barkas, having a training analysis with Rank, described him as a great man whose undeviating style led him to suppress anyone who 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.

Ernest 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 defend the purity of the image of its founder.

Sadger took part in the origins of psychoanalysis. He started analyzing 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 aimed at him, Sadger continued to attend analytic meetings until as late as 1933.

Sadger received little credit for his loyalty to a man who was rejected by the medical and scientific establishment for many years yet 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 help Austrian and Hungarian analysts flee to 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 fate of the Austrian Jewish community.

CONCLUSIONS

Isidor Sadger deserves to be remembered, as much as any victim of the Holocaust, and also as a significant member of the early psychoanalytic movement.

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Capsule

New therapies for sickle cell disease

Sickle cell disease can be treated with matched bone marrow transplants from family members, but this treatment is not available to all patients. Sickle cell disease results from a hemoglobin subunit gene mutation and can be overcome by expression of different hemoglobin subunits. Recent developments have highlighted the possibility of gene therapy and engineered cell therapy to replace mutated bone marrow

cells. In a perspective, **Tisdale** and colleagues discussed the developments in anti-sickling drugs and gene and cell therapies and what is needed to treat patients effectively, including those in low- and middle-income countries.

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Eitan Israeli

“We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way”

Viktor Frankl (1905–1997), author, neurologist and psychiatrist, Holocaust survivor