



FROMM, FERENCZI AND THE "STALINIST RE-WRITING OF HISTORY"

Dr. Ferenc Erös

(Institute of Psychology of the Hungarian Academy  
of Sciences, Budapest)

In 1957, the third volume of Ernest Jones' biography, The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud was published. In his monumental work Jones discusses many times the relationship between Freud and his "Paladin and secret Grand Vizier", the Hungarian psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi. Ferenczi died in 1933, at the age of sixty, from a serious illness (anaemia perniciosa). In Jones' version of Ferenczi's last period,

The mental disturbance had been making rapid progress in the last few months. He related how one of his American patients, to whom he used to devote four or five hours a day, had analysed him and so cured him of all his troubles. Message came to him from her across the Atlantic – Ferenczi had always been a staunch believer in telepathy. Then there were the delusions about Freud's supposed hostility. Towards the end came violent paranoid and even homicidal outbursts, which were followed by a sudden death on May 24. That was the tragic end of a brilliant, lovable, and distinguished personality, someone who had for a quarter of a century been Freud's closest friend. The lurking demons within, against whom Ferenczi had for years struggled with great distress and much success, conquered him at the end, and we learnt from this painful experience once more how terrible their power can be (p. 191-192.)

On June 14, 1958, Erich Fromm published an article in the American journal The Saturday Review under the title "Psychoanalysis – Science or Party Line?". (In the German Gesamtausgabe this title was translated as "Psychoanalyse – Wissenschaft oder Linientreue".) This article was a critical review of Jones' book, primarily an attempt to refute all the accusations made by the British psychoanalysts against Ferenczi, as well as against Otto Rank who was also stigmatized by Jones as becoming at one point insane. Fromm argues that both Rank and Ferenczi were sane, innovative and autonomous persons and as such they became victims of the antidemocratic inner structure, power politics, rivalry, and the suppression of opposing views prevailing within the psychoanalytic movement at that time. He characterizes Jones' work as an instructive example of the Stalinist type re-writing of history according to which all deviations from the "only truth" are themselves proofs of some "mental disturbance".

It is not at all by chance that Fromm uses the analogy of Stalinism. As a Freud-Marxist and originally a member of the Frankfurt School, Fromm had never in his life ceased to fight for a radical renewal of Marxism, for a return to its messianic, humanistic and libertine



traditions. It was his non-conformist or humananistic Marxism which for a long period has made him a non-desirable or at least a strictly censured author in Eastern Europe. Don't forget the date when his article on Jones was published. It was 1958, two years after the 20th congress of the Soviet Communist Party on the one hand, and the oppression of the Hungarian revolution on the other! It should also be remembered that two days after the publication of Fromm's article, on June 16, 1958, the leaders of the Hungarian revolution, Imre Nagy and his associates were executed in Budapest.

The Erich Fromm Archives in Tübingen hold correspondence showing how carefully, in the autumn of 1957, Fromm prepared his article to be published in The Saturday Review. Indeed, he conducted a kind of independent "investigation" into the Ferenczi, as well as the Rank, case. (In this paper I am concerned only with Fromm's reconstruction of the Ferenczi case.) The method of this investigation was to search out witnesses who could give an undistorted account and their personal testimony of the fate of Ferenczi (and, of course, Rank's).

Fromm's feelings and intentions are best documented in his letter of 29th October, 1957, to Norman Cousins, the well-known editor of The Saturday Review. I am quoting a few paragraphs from this letter.

I have just finished reading the third volume of Freud by Dr. Jones, and I am appalled by its spirit. In a truly Stalinist method, he declares that the two pupils of Freud, Rank and Ferenczi (...) were insane at the time of their defection. No evidence of this statement is given. Quite a few people are alive who knew Rank and Ferenczi at that time, and who can testify to the fact that no insanity was observed. All that this amounts to a character assassination of those who showed traces of disobedience and insubordination, in psychiatric language they are called insane, where[as] the Stalinists call such people spies and traitors.

I feel this just shows how psychoanalysis has become a strongly entrenched totalitarian organization, and I find it most lamentable that in the few reviews I have read about Jones' book, nothing of that is noted. I feel strongly compelled to write an article (the tentative title of which might be "The party line in psychoanalytic history writing", or "Dr. Jones re-writes history") in which I would discuss this point in connection with the whole spirit of psychoanalytic development as a crusading and more and more totalitarian-minded organization."

It is interesting to remark that in the same letter to Cousins, Fromm relates his plans to form a committee protesting against the conservative foreign policy of the United States, and against the atomic threat violently used at that time by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. According to Fromm, this committee should be composed of well known leftist-liberal personalities, such as Norman Cousins, Lewis Mumford, George Kennan, David Riesman, Norbert Wiener etc. - "although Communists and emotional reactionaries should be excluded".

The idea to write a critical review of Jones came also from an American psychoanalyst, Izette de Forest, a former patient and student of Ferenczi, the author of a book on him (The Leaven of Love, 1954), and also a close friend of Fromm. On October 22, 1957, she wrote him:



I enclose two reviews of Jones' last volume and I wish you also would publish an article - a review - of this volume. If Freud considered Ferenczi and Rank "insane" (as Jones says they were) why did he, the AI psychiatrist, not treat them as he should have treated all his psychotic patients - lets hope he did! - with gentleness, insight and patience? Why did he turn his back on "insane" Ferenczi and refuse to shake the hand of a man whom had always call his "son" because he was insane? (...) Those who knew Rank in his last years do not consider him "insane" and certainly those who knew Ferenczi well in his last years do not consider him "insane". This must be Jones own problem - perhaps one of jealousy? Or fear that their types of treatment will really succeed over the Freudian?

You can put your finger cleverly and wisely on this fallacy of Jones and I hope you will do so.

On 31st October, 1957, Fromm answers Izette de Forest, claiming that he had the same idea and reported to her that he had already asked The Saturday Review whether they would publish an article on Jones. (See the letter to Norman Cousins quoted above). In the letter to Izette de Forest, Fromm asked her to write him "all the data you have on Ferenczi, from his last years, and also the names of people who knew him". On the same day he turned with the same request to Clara Thompson, another American psychoanalyst who had also been an analysand of Ferenczi in Budapest. (6)

The two ladies were eager to respond. They both sent their detailed testimony and they suggested further names to be approached. For lack of space - but also for copyright reasons - I can quote only brief passages from these testimonies.

In a four-page letter of November 5, 1957, Clara Thompson describes her memories of Ferenczi. He began telling her his difficulties with Freud in 1932 when he worked on his paper for the Wiesbaden psychoanalytic congress on "Confusion of tongues between the adult and the child" (International Journal of Psycho-Analysis, 30, 1949, 225-230.) "He was having a lot of trouble writing it because he feared Freud would not approve" - Thompson writes. She didn't notice "anything else unusual on him during that spring and summer". "He was very worried about Hitler (...). He talked of wanting to find an island somewhere to escape. I know he had been collecting foreign money in Switzerland - certainly not the activity of a madman." Then came Ferenczi's tragic last visit to Freud:

On the way to the Wiesbaden Congress, September 1932, he stopped in Vienna to see Freud. They apparently had a very rough time. When he came on the train that night, he told me it was terrible, that Freud said he could give the paper in Wiesbaden, but he must never publish it. He wanted him to promise, which I don't think Ferenczi did.

According to Thompson, the first symptoms of Ferenczi's illness appeared in October 1932. After the congress, he went away for a one-month vacation, and, as Thompson describes - "he fell in the railroad station in Paris and was taken to hospital. (...)it was found that his red blood count was below 50% of normal and he had pernicious anemia - a disease rare at his age of 59". Nevertheless, he returned to his practice in November and continued it almost until his death. As Thompson remembers, "he began to go down hill" in March 1933.



One day, he fell asleep while I was talking. Perfectly healthy analysts have been known to do that. (...) Obviously we weren't doing psychoanalysis by then. What finally made me admit to myself how sick he was, was that one morning he forgot I was waiting for my hour. The maid finally told him, and when he came in he wasn't apologetic or concerned, and as you know he was very human in his reactions - never the stiff analyst.

(...)he really tried to prepare me for the fact that he was dying. It was I who wouldn't face it. He talked of what I should do in America, and the last time I saw him he kept saying "Goodbye" and I kept saying, "I'm coming tomorrow" - but the next day, he was dead.

Summing up her experiences of Ferenczi's last months, Clara Thompson believes that

(...) in the last two months of his life there was some organic mental deterioration. That is, he showed memory defects and forgetfulness characteristic of organic brain disease, but I think it was minimal and part of the death picture. To try to push it back into preceding years and explain his thinking by this is to say the least - criminal. I think he was a disturbed man and some of his procedures could be criticized, but I do not believe they were evidence of psychosis(...). Certainly he was never maniacal and homicidal. To call his belief that Freud was treating him badly, paranoid, is obviously to deny the facts.

As for Izette de Forest, on November 7, 1957 she sent Fromm some notes on her association with Sándor Ferenczi. She also sent a written testimony on "Ferenczi's last visit to Professor Freud", as it was reported to her by Ferenczi himself. "This story was told me in great sadness" - writes Izette de Forest. "On my last visit, in 1931 [correctly: 1932], to Professor Freud", Ferenczi related to her,

I told him of my latest technical ideas. These are empirically based on my work with my patients. I have tried to discover from my patients' told history, from their association of ideas, from the way they behave (...), from the frustrations which arouse their anger or depression, and especially from the content - both conscious and unconscious - of their desires and longings, the manner in which they suffered rejection at the hand of their mothers or their parents or surrogates. And I have also endeavored through empathy to imagine what kind of loving care, even in specific details of behavior, the patient really needed at the early age, a loving care and nurture which would have allowed his self-confidence, his self-enjoyment, to develop wholesomely. (...)

The Professor listened to me with increasing impatience and finally warned me that I was treading on dangerous ground and was departing fundamentally from the traditional customs and techniques of psychoanalysis. (...)

This warning ended the interview. I held out my hand in affectionate adieu. The Professor turned his back on me and walked out of the room. I shall never see him again.

With the help of the two women, Izette de Forest and Clara Thompson, Fromm was able to collect some more testimonies on Ferenczi's last year.



In the correspondence over Ferenczi, I found letters from two other American psychoanalysts, Elizabeth Severn and Alice Lowell, both one-time analyzands of Ferenczi in Budapest in the early thirties. They both testify that their master was in full possession of his mental capacities in the last period, too.

There is also a letter to Fromm, dated November 8, 1957, from Mrs. Sylvia Grossman, a biographer of Georg Groddeck, with whom Ferenczi maintained warm relations (their correspondence was recently published). Mrs. Grossman reports a letter she received from Margarete Honegger, Groddeck's friend and secretary for his last eight years. Mrs. Honegger wrote to Mrs. Grossman:

**Concerning Ferenczi Mrs. Groddeck and I are rather upset about the verdict of Mr. Jones. I have seen him in summer 1929 and in autumn 1932. The last time I saw him he made the impression of a very sick man but not of an insane. Of course Ferenczi was always a man of poor health.**

Fromm and his most devoted collaborator in this "investigation", Izette de Forest, approached some family members of Ferenczi. Mrs. Elma Laurvik, Ferenczi's step-daughter, living then in New York, in her letter of November 10 to de Forest (with whom she was apparently on friendly terms) affirmed that during the fatal illness of her step-father "NOBODY observed any change in his MENTAL capacities". Mrs. Sophie Erdős, Ferenczi's only living sister wrote from Wellington, New Zealand on November 25, 1957. She was also indignant about Jones' statement and declared that "it is quite certain that Sándor was in possession of all his mental faculties to the end".

In the correspondence with family members the names of two persons emerged who were supposed to have crucial proof against Jones' allegation. One was Dr. Lajos Lévy, a founding member of the Hungarian Psychoanalytic Association in 1913, who had been a well-known internist and psychoanalyst in Budapest and who medically treated Ferenczi until the end. The other was Dr. Mihály (Michael) Bálint, another Hungarian analyst who had been a close friend of Ferenczi and the literary executor of his will. They both lived in London in the fifties. As it was suggested by Mrs. Laurvik, Fromm turned to Dr. Bálint on November 12 asking him to make a statement on Ferenczi's last period. On November 25 he asked Dr. Lévy "to write me, from your own observation, whether you saw any evidence of a psychosis in Dr. Ferenczi during the last years of his life, or for the statement that he died in a paranoic and homicidal outburst".

Dr. Bálint did not answer Fromm (or, at least, his letter is missing). Dr. Lévy, in his letter of November 30, written in German, acknowledged that Jones' statement needed correction. Since, however, Dr. Jones is seriously ill, "he cannot and would not get into a discussion with a death candidate (Ich kann und will nicht auf eine Polemik mit einem Todeskandidaten eingehen)".

Ernest Jones died, indeed, very soon (in 1958). Surprisingly enough, the "death candidate" made a (private) statement on the Ferenczi case in a letter of November 28, 1957, to a certain Professor Magoun who apparently criticized him for his accusations against Ferenczi. A copy of this letter had been forwarded to Fromm by Izette de Forest.



I think it is sheer nonsense to talk of my having made an attack on Ferenczi simply because there are people who cannot bear the truth. (...)

I have all the letters Ferenczi wrote to Freud from 1907 till the end. They make most painful reading as displaying a thoroughly unstable and suffering personality whom personally I always loved. But the evidence of increasing deterioration is only too plain. (...)

Naturally if anyone attacks me in public I shall have to produce some of the evidence I have taken care to suppress in Ferenczi's own interest.

So much for Jones. Without acquiring crucial proof from Dr. Lévy and Dr. Bálint, Fromm finished his article and sent it to The Saturday Review in early December. Besides published sources, he could refer in his review only to the few personal communications he was authorized to quote. But the case was not finished. It seems that quite independently of Fromm, Mrs. Laurvik had also raised the issue. On December 6, 1957 she wrote Izette de Forest:

I have written to Balint and asked him what is being done officially to negate Jones's statement. He answered that Dr. Levy and he are considering the matter and probably their statement will appear in the [International] Journal [of Psycho-Analysis]. He promised me to let me know what will be done definitely, but to date, I did not hear.

(Would it be possible that both Levy and Balint, being foreigners, would hesitate to come out in their host-country, against England's famous psychiatrist?)

At the end of her letter Mrs. Laurvik quotes Bálint's letter of December 2 she had just received:

In the meanwhile I wrote to Jones expressing my disagreement with his views. He wrote back quite sensibly and we are now trying to arrange something that will meet the case without unnecessarily hurting him. Perhaps you know that he is very ill and I really don't like to be too unpleasant with him.

A compromise had been negotiated, indeed, in the following way: Both Bálint and Jones sent a letter to the editor of the International Journal of Psycho-Analysis (39, 1958, 98.). In their respective letters, they both expressed their own views on Ferenczi's illness. Let us see how Fromm commented on this compromise in his letter to Izette de Forest on the very day when his article was published in The Saturday Review (June 14, 1958):

I believe he [Bálint] is an intelligent and warm human being, but definitely lacking in courage. I just read this morning the statement he made in the International Psychoanalytic Journal about Ferenczi, and that is really a very cowardly statement, making concessions to Jones for which there is no justification. Especially his point that the disagreement does not deal with disagreement in facts, but interpretation, is quite untenable, since Jones' statement must refer to facts which permit the interpretation of insanity, when in truth Balint himself believes there were no such facts. (...) The whole story is really like a cheap dime novel, and pretty sordid.



To sum up, Fromm's intervention in this "cheap dime novel" can be regarded as an early attempt to rehabilitate Ferenczi both personally and scientifically. The true rehabilitation started almost two decades later when the growing popularity of Ferenczi's views in the international psychoanalytic community directed scholarly attention to the real nature of his innovations and to the depth of his relationship to Freud. The recent publication of his 1932 clinical journal (Journal clinique, Paris 1985) shed new light on his theoretical and technical endeavors in the last period of his life. The forthcoming publication of the Ferenczi-Freud correspondence in 1990 will give full access to the facts suppressed by Jones "in Ferenczi's own interest".

The more all this underlines Fromm's extraordinary intellectual courage in raising the issue as early as 1958, when even such a devoted follower of Ferenczi as Michael Balint could not quite openly challenge the authority of Freud's official biographer (presumably not only because of Jones' serious illness). Fromm was far from being a self-appointed or amateurish protector of Ferenczi. The latter played an important role in his intellectual development. It can be filologically documented that throughout his entire life work, from his early criticism of the patricentric-authoritarian features of orthodox Freudian therapy to his theories on the matriarchal society and to his later concern with the nature of love and humanism he owes a lot to Ferenczi's views. Thus, there is a perhaps implicit but strong connection between Ferenczi's theories and Fromm's analytical social psychology during and after his involvement in the Frankfurt school.

#### N O T E

This paper is to be presented at the Eighth European CHEIRON Meeting, Göteborg, Sweden, August 30 - September 3, 1989. I wish to express my special thanks to Dr. Rainer Funk, the head of the Erich Fromm Archives in Tübingen, Germany, who called my attention to this material and who granted me access to the files while I stayed in Tübingen in Germany in autumn 1988 in the framework of a scholarship from Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD). This paper is part of a larger project on the history of Hungarian psychoanalysis, supported by the MTA-Soros Foundation, Budapest - New York. Instead of listing detailed bibliography, I mention here only two volumes I used extensively. On Ferenczi, Pierre Sabourin: Ferenczi - Paladin et Grand Vizir secret. Editions universitaires, Paris 1985; on Fromm and his relationship to the psychoanalytic movement, Erich Fromm: Schriften über Sigmund Freud, herausgegeben und kommentiert von Rainer Funk. Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, Stuttgart 1989.