

A Document. Jung to Freud 1905: a report on Sabina Spielrein

Bernard Minder, *Lenzburg, Switzerland*
(Translated from the German by Barbara Wharton)

Summary

A recently discovered letter, dated September 25, 1905, proves that Jung's first attempt to get in contact with Freud had taken place earlier than it had been assumed on the basis of their published correspondence. The letter contains a brief case history of Sabina Spielrein's illness. It was addressed to Freud and handed over to Sabina Spielrein's mother who intended to remove her daughter from Jung with whom the girl had fallen in love. However, the letter was never passed on to Freud.

Introduction

In 1980, in *Diario di una segreta simmetria – Sabina Spielrein tra Jung e Freud*, Carotenuto published the diaries and letters of Sabina Spielrein which had been discovered in Geneva in 1977. In 1986 it became possible to supplement this material for the first time in German from the missing letters of C.G. Jung.¹ By means of these publications a pioneer of the psychoanalytic movement was brought into focus, someone who, almost exemplifying the fate of significant women of that time, had fallen into oblivion.

Sabina Spielrein was born in Russia in Rostov-on-Don in 1885. She developed signs of severe hysteria in early childhood. As a highly intelligent girl she was able to complete her schooling with great success, in spite of her psychological difficulties. In 1904 she was brought to Switzerland in a desperate state and was admitted to the Burghölzli Psychiatric Clinic on 1 June 1905. She remained an outpatient of Jung's until 1909. With the material he published Carotenuto tried to claim that the transference/countertransference situation between Spielrein and Jung had developed in a sinister way.² The letter, which I published in an earlier paper, contributes to a clarification of the relationship between Jung and Spielrein.

This letter is significant in another way too. It documents Jung's attempts to get in touch with Freud. When this letter did not fulfil his intention Jung again made an approach and laid the foundation of their collaboration by sending Freud his *Studies in Word Association*. Apparently the previous report never reached Freud, since in his second letter to Freud, on 23 October 1906, Jung presents a brief sketch of the history of Sabina Spielrein's illness.³

This letter, signed by Jung, was found in duplicate form in the 'copy-book' of the Burghölzli University Psychiatric Clinic. From 1878 (the Clinic was opened in 1870) all the letters of the medical director which left the hospital were stored in duplicate; they were kept in their entirety, in bound format, until 1936. They contain the correspondence relating to male and female in-patients. A letter of a private nature rarely appears. Unfortunately only a few isolated examples of letters sent to the Clinic remain in preservation. The present letter is partly known to us from Carotenuto's work, but the date is there marked as an 'error' with the comment that the documented Jung-Freud correspondence began on 11.4.1906.

I am grateful to the relatives of Sabina Spielrein and to the medical director of the Burghölzli Clinic (Prof. Dr D. Hell) for permission to publish the letter.

The letter ('report')

Source: Burghölzli copy-books, Vol. 63; Burghölzli Archive.

Transcription accurate regarding text, but not regarding lines.

25.9.1905

Report on Miss Spielrein to Professor Freud in Vienna, handed over to Mrs Spielrein for use if the occasion arises.

Dear Professor,

The daughter of Mrs Spielrein, Miss Sabina Spielrein, student of medicine, suffers from hysteria.

The patient suffers significantly from an hereditary weakness, both father and mother being hysteric, especially the mother. A brother of the patient has suffered severely from hysteria from an early age.

The patient is turning twenty and her affliction appeared distinctly about three years ago. But of course her pathogenic experiences reach far back to her early years. By using your method I have analysed the affliction fairly thoroughly and with considerable success, even at the outset.

The analysis has essentially established the following:

The physical chastisements administered to the patient's posterior by her father from the age of four until seven had unfortunately become associated with the patient's premature and now highly developed sexual awareness. This sexuality came to be expressed by the patient from very early on by her

rubbing her thighs together to commence an act of masturbation. Masturbation always occurred after she underwent punishment from her father. After a while the beatings were no longer necessary to initiate sexual arousal; it came to be triggered through mere threats and other situations implying violence, such as verbal abuse, threatening movements of the hands, etc. After a time she could not even look at her father's hands without becoming sexually aroused, or watch him eat without imagining how the food was ejected, and then being thrashed on the buttocks, etc. These associations extended to the younger brother too, who also masturbated frequently from an early age. Threats to the boy or ill-treatment of him aroused her and she had to masturbate whenever she saw him being punished. Gradually any situation which reflected violence aroused her, for instance being told to obey. As soon as she was alone she was plagued by obsessional fantasies, for example, she would imagine all kinds of torments; the same thing happened in her dreams: for example, she often dreamt that she was eating her lunch and simultaneously sitting on the lavatory and that everything was going straight out through her bottom; at the same time she was surrounded by a large crowd of people watching her; on another occasion she was being whipped in front of a great mob of people, etc.

Thus her situation at home naturally became untenable. After numerous severe disturbances she was brought to Switzerland about a year ago, first to a sanatorium. The doctor there however was no match for her frankly demonic moods and contrary behaviour. She drove everyone there to despair. Finally the private clinic could no longer cope and she was brought to us here at the asylum. She initially harassed everybody, tormenting the nurses to the limits of their endurance. As the analysis progressed, her condition noticeably improved and she finally revealed herself to be a highly intelligent and talented person of great sensibility. There is a certain callousness and unreasonableness in her character and she lacks any kind of feeling for situation and for external propriety, but much of this must be put down to Russian peculiarities.

Her condition improved so much that she could commence studies last summer term. She suffers enormously whenever she meets with members of her family, something that the mother cannot quite comprehend, but which should be obvious on reading the above (Mrs Spielrein knows about the most important part of her daughter's complex).

During treatment the patient had the misfortune to fall in love with me. She raves on to her mother about her love in an ostentatious manner, and a secret perverse enjoyment of her mother's dismay seems to play a not inconsiderable part in this. In view of this situation her mother therefore wishes, if the worst comes to the worst, to place her elsewhere for treatment, with which I am naturally in agreement.

Remaining at your service and most faithfully yours,

Dr Jung.

Discussion

The date of the document is remarkable in several respects. For one thing this is the first attempt by Jung to make contact with Freud. Furthermore the letter was written on the letterhead of the medical director three months after Sabina Spielrein had been discharged from the Burghölzli. What made Jung use the medical director's note-paper for his outpatient? The simplest explanation probably lies in the following circumstances.

From April 1905 Jung had occupied the position of a senior physician; as a result he had to deputize for Prof. Eugen Bleuler in the latter's absence. This was the situation at the end of September 1905.⁴ As we learn from the letter, Spielrein's mother called on Jung with the intention of transferring her treatment elsewhere. She therefore found Jung at the Clinic and he used the note-paper which was conveniently to hand. This is an important point, because the use of the Clinic letterhead for outpatients seems to be unique; an inspection of all the letters in the Clinic archive signed by Jung confirms this.

The document bears the title of 'report'. It is not therefore a medical referral letter in the narrower sense. This is borne out by the phrase 'for use if the occasion arises'. This form of words suggests that Spielrein's mother was in an awkward position in relation to Jung. After all, the care her daughter had received under Jung during her nine-month stay at the Burghölzli had led to a dramatic improvement. After six months she was able to take up the study of medicine at the Clinic. Now 'if the worst came to the worst' she had to protect her daughter from a possible love relationship. Evidently she was not certain, for she intended to make use of the letter only 'if the occasion arose'. Why Sabina Spielrein remained in treatment with Jung after all, we do not know. In any event she never became Freud's patient.

The next question is why she should have been referred to Freud in Vienna of all places. After all Sabina Spielrein was living and studying in Zürich. It is possible that this accorded with a wish of the mother. Another more plausible explanation is offered by the following connection; Jung writes:

By using your method I have analysed the affliction fairly thoroughly and with considerable success, even at the outset.

Sabina Spielrein was the first hysterical patient of Jung's on whom he had used the Freudian 'method' (cf. note 2). Thus on the one hand it made sense for the patient (in terms of continuity of treatment), while, on the other, right at the beginning of a much hoped for contact with Freud, Jung could offer him an interesting case in the form of Sabina Spielrein. Later it was Jung again who laid the foundation of a mutually useful and fertile relationship by sending Freud his *Studies in Word Association* (see Freud's first letter to Jung, McGuire 1976).

Jung's report begins with the very unusual remark that it is to be handed over to Spielrein's mother. Clearly Jung was subordinating the medical duty of confidentiality to parental power. (The patient was at that time not quite twenty.) Some remarks on the family weakness follow, then a brief case-history

of the illness and of his therapeutic approach (references to work with dream material) and of the progress of the treatment. The effect is to confirm fully the psychopathology as we know it from Carotenuto. What is new is that Jung was looking to Freud's approach for a bearing on the dynamics of the origins of hysteria. Astonishing here – as it is in the later correspondence between Jung and Freud – is the apparent recognition that the 'physical chastisements administered to the patient's posterior ... had unfortunately become associated with the patient's premature and now highly developed sexual awareness'. Thus a 'trauma' is associated with 'sexual awareness', there is no question of 'sexual trauma'. The problem of incest is not even discussed later. Jung's understandable uncertainty in this area is illustrated partly by his statement that he had analysed the patient only 'fairly thoroughly', and partly by his somewhat awkward formulation of her 'character': 'much of this must of course be put down to Russian peculiarities'. His choice of the expression 'put down' is to be noted: here, it seems to stand for 'putting aside unresolved problems'. On the other hand, the assertion that callousness, unreasonableness, a lack of feeling for situation and for external propriety are Russian peculiarities has a disturbing effect on the reader.

At the end of the 'report' there is an answer to the question of how it came to be written at all. The patient had the 'misfortune' to fall in love with Jung and apparently acted with 'a secret enjoyment of her mother's dismay'. As we know from Jung's paper 'Association, dream and hysterical symptom' (1906),⁵ this situation was not new to him. In that paper he reports on similar emotional disturbances in two patients who were hospitalized at the Burghölzli in the spring/summer of 1905 (as a reading of the hospital records shows), that is, before the visit from Spielrein's mother. The patient mainly under discussion in that paper underwent the association experiment and the information gained from that was compared with the analysis of her dreams. I will quote two dream analyses from the paper, dream no.5 and dream no.7:

Here the black man has turned into a white figure; the burning house is the sexual complex. Miss L. [the other patient; present author] is a patient who has a crush on the author. She was, like the patient, taken ill because of an erotic complex. The patient therefore expresses through this person that she has fallen in love with the author. Thus the patient substituted the tender relationship with her mother, which is damaging to her energy, by the erotic relation to the doctor.

(Jung 1906, para. 835)

The patient desires a sexual relationship with the author, ... but this is connected with the obviously deep impression made on her by my previous analysis, in which I ruthlessly destroyed her illusions.

(*ibid.*, para. 839)

Jung was therefore aware of the phenomenon of transference love and was able to establish a clear boundary in relation to these patients. But it is noteworthy that he then speaks of 'misfortune' in relation to Sabina Spielrein. It

should also be mentioned at this point that Sabina Spielrein was the victim of similar emotional disturbances several times during the course of her illness. Whether in the end it was due to pressure from the mother, or because of a presentiment of the future development of his relationship with the patient, that Jung expressed himself as ‘naturally in agreement’ that she should be referred ‘elsewhere for treatment’, must remain an open question.

Notes

1. Carotenuto, A. (1982). *A Secret Symmetry: Sabina Spielrein between Jung and Freud*. New York: Random House.
2. The period of her hospitalization remained unknown until recently. Her complete hospital records were published within the context of my dissertation (1992). The significance of the ‘Spielrein case’ for Jung and for the Clinic was elucidated there.
3. McGuire, W. (ed.) (1976). *The Freud-Jung Letters*.
4. Bleuler’s application to the governing executive on 28.8.1905 for leave from 7.9. until 28.9.1905, Bleuler’s return to duty on 28.9.1905; Burghölzli-Archive.
5. Jung, C. G. (1906). CW 2.