

Obituary for W. Ernest Freud

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On September 30th 2008 W. Ernest Freud, oldest grandson of Sigmund Freud, passed away at the age of 94. As a psychoanalyst he became known for his contributions to infant research, focused mainly on the parent-child relationship during the early stages of child development. However, his first appearance in psychoanalytical literature was at the age of 1½, when Sigmund Freud described his grandson in his essay “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”. W. Ernest Freud himself describes that phase as follows: “My father was Max Halberstadt, one of the best portrait photographers in Hamburg – certainly you all know the great pictures of my grandfather with his cigar –; my mother was Sophie Freud, fifth child of Sigmund and Martha. After the death of my father I took on my mothers name. The analysts among you probably came to know me through my grandfathers observations as the boy with the cotton reel. Even though I do not remember that exact incident, I do have one recollection of this game of disappearance, namely that it took place in front of a mirror in Anna Freud’s room” (p. 63).

The cotton reel game has often been used and mentioned in literature and nowadays stands for separation and loss and then being processed by turning passive suffering into active behavior. For W. Ernest Freud, this subject repeatedly became bitter reality. It all started with the untimely death of his mother: “She died of the Asian flu in 1920 before I turned 6, and my younger brother died 3 years later. Then my father remarried, and I felt very left out and suffered under my stepmothers well-intentioned, but unimaginative regime” (p. 64 *). In 1933, shortly before graduating from school, W. Ernest Freud had to leave Germany, as well as in 1938 Austria. In England he was finally able to study psychology, though under difficult circumstances, as well as complete a psychoanalytic training and specialize on child-analysis at Anna Freud’s Hampstead Clinic. In the early 80s he left England and returned back to Germany.

Based on the child-analytic principles of Anna Freud’s Hampstead Clinic, W. Ernest Freud started working with decreasingly younger children. He developed a psychoanalytical observation concept for infants, a “Baby Profile”, which served as a foundation for detailed mother-child observations at the “Well-Baby-Clinic”, a prevention facility inside the Hampstead Clinic. Not until 1977 at age 63 during a guest professorship in the USA did W. Ernest Freud come in contact with the subject that from now on would define his future work: The psychological aspects of infants in newborn intensive care units. He was the first psychoanalyst to enter this field of work that up until then had been occupied by organ-related medicine only. Again it was the subject of separation that W. Ernest Freud was mostly engaged in – in this case the way to radical separation of mothers and their at-risk children, which he found denied the needs of both parties. During

his following work he not only developed essential concepts, but he also came up with many proposals and suggestions, including practical ideas such as hooks for the wardrobe or a rocking chair for the parents holding their children. As early as in the 70s he started calling for the possibility of skin contact between mother and child in intensive care units. His special interest belonged to the premature babies, of whom he later said: "I got hooked there". W. Ernest Freud then connected his field of studies with his own traumatic separation-experiences and the cotton reel game and documented these efforts in various research papers (p. 323, 335). He went on to extend psychoanalytical concepts such as "cathexis", "bonding" and "attachment" (p. 299) as far as to the prenatal-phase and then applied them to the situation in the clinic. This led to the "WBS", the "Who's Baby?-Syndrome", which raises the question, whom the infant in the intensive care unit actually belongs to (p. 339). What followed was fundamental research on genesis and prevention of premature birth (p. 263, 269, 287), partially conducted together with G. Lange, and then finally one of his most personal projects: A research on the role of the fathers of prematurely born children as "lone wolves" (p. 355).

Additionally to his research he also worked as a psychoanalytic therapist and training analyst, where he developed the concept of short-time analysis (p. 253). In 1992 he received an honorary doctorate from the faculty of arts at the University of Cologne.

As a person W. Ernest Freud was interested in everything new, therefore not using the psychoanalytical concept as a dogmatic boundary, but as a chance to improve the progress of relationships in early childhood. Against the backdrop of his own experiences of loss he fought hard and with great patience against the then existing rigid structures at newborn intensive care units in order to end the separation of the children and their parents. Much to his satisfaction many of his suggestions have been put into effect by now, while others still point to the future, such as his demand to make parents a part of the team in the newborn intensive care units as well as the consequences of his research on the psychodynamic aspects of premature labor. Because W. Ernest Freud never focused much on himself or his experience, one always got the feeling that the own opinion was of interest when speaking with him. His character was not one of self-display, instead he would help establish contacts and animate to write.

As a psychoanalyst he will be remembered for extending the psychoanalytical perspective into areas that were not accessible for psychoanalysis before. Those lucky enough to know him in person will remember him as a friend equipped with a subtle humor as well as a genuinely modest personality.

The quotations – nearly all originally in German – relate to a volume of collected papers in German: W. Ernest Freud: Remaining in Touch. Zur Bedeutung der Kontinuität früherer Beziehungserfahrungen. In Zusammenarbeit mit dem Autor herausgegeben von Hans von Lüpke. Edition Déjà vu, Frankfurt a. M. 2003.

* In consideration of the year (1920), it can be assumed that the pandemic in question is actually the Spanish flu.