

13th European Congress of EAP, Vilnius, July 2005

Sandor Ferenczi: Widening the boundaries of psychoanalysis... and preparing the ground for Gestalt Therapy ¹

by Serge Ginger

Ferenczi, the Forerunner

I myself had been immersed for 20 years (from 1950 to 1970) in the traditional Freudian psychoanalytic movement, before discovering Gestalt therapy. In my first book on Gestalt Therapy,² published in 1987, I devoted more than 15 pages to Sandor Ferenczi, whom I did not hesitate to baptize "the Grandfather of Gestalt Therapy." For the past fifteen years, I have read many complementary works *by* and *about* Ferenczi, as well as part of the voluminous correspondence which he maintained with Freud, Groddeck, Rank, and several others.³ My point of view was more than confirmed, and therefore, in this brief communication, I would like to point out why Ferenczi seems more and more to me, to be one of the precursors of Humanistic Psychotherapy, and especially of Gestalt Therapy.

Freud maintained an intimate correspondence with Ferenczi, on a permanent basis, for 25 years (1,236 letters), considering him to be his spiritual son,⁴ his secret "Grand Vizier,"⁵ his heir apparent and his only possible successor. Freud said of him that he was "the blameless older brother", that his clinical contributions were "pure gold" and that "he transformed all the other analysts into his pupils." Vladimir Granov⁶ goes even further stating that "Ferenczi is really *the one who made psychoanalysis what it is.*" Michael Balint, for his part, claims that "Ferenczi was at least 25 years ahead of the theories of his time," and I can safely say that 25 years before Perls, he had already laid some

1 This lecture is inspired by a lecture given at the GISC Conference: *The European Roots of Gestalt therapy*, (Paris EPG, March 2003), and at the 8th Congress of EAGT (Pargue, sept. 2004). It has been published in the *Gestalt Review*, Vol. 8, N° 3 (Fall 2004). The « father » of Gestalt therapy is, of course, Perls.

2 GINGER S. (1987). *La Gestalt, une thérapie du contact*. Paris, Hom. & Gr., 7^e éd. 2003, (p. 105, 123-129, 284)

3 Certain documents from Freud's archives (*The Sigmund Freud Archives, Inc. Washington DC*) will be accessible only in 2020, and others, in 2113! (Borch-Jacobsen, 2002).

4 He even wanted to see him marry one of his daughters and willingly called him « my dear son. » They traveled together many times and even spent their vacations together, during several years, in Austria, France, Italy ...

5 In Turkey, the « Grand Vizier » is the Prime Minister.

6 GRANOV Wladimir (2001). *The Future of the Œdipal Complex*, St. Petersburg, East European Psychoanalytic institute.

foundations of the future Gestalt therapy! Like Perls, Ferenczi was a genius, with numerous *borderline* traits, "accepting neither limits nor constraints, ready for each and every experience" (Sabourin 1985).

I won't retrace *all the details* of his biography to-day: I would just like to remind you of certain key points, which seem to me to be *directly linked to the future Humanistic approach*, for example, his constant and active interest in:

- the *body*, intonation, gestures, facial expression and unconscious attitudes;
- the emotions and their psychosomatic manifestations ("*bio-analysis*," 1923, the ancestor of psychosomatics);
- the concept of *introjection* (1912);
- the *current* life of his patients and the « here and now » of the session;
- The *experiencing* of the process occurring in the *here and now* of the session (1920);
- the *counter transference* of the analyst (1900, 1908) and the sharing of his own feelings with his patient (1918, 1924);
- the authentic, *egalitarian* relationship between patient and therapist ("*mutual analysis*," 1924);
- *the personal analysis of the future analyst*⁷ (which he named "*the 2nd fundamental rule*"⁸) and supervision;
- his warm sympathy towards the patients ("*the maternal affection technique*," 1932);
- the opening of psychotherapy to include *serious cases*, such as deep regression, *borderline* or psychotic;
- recognition of the rights of *homosexuals* (1905);
- the opening of psychoanalysis to include *people who aren't medical doctors* ("*lay analysis*," 1926);
- the "*active technique*," 1926, with eventual recourse to paradoxical injunction ("prescription of the symptom" in order to amplify it to the point of absurdity);
- "*technical elasticity*" (1920, 1927), with mistrust of any rigid or generalized theory (which he qualified as "scientific delirium," 1932);
- The importance of *symbols* (1913).

We can see how all this is very close to the spirit of Gestalt Therapy.

Let me reassure you: I'm not going to take up each of these attitudes in detail, but rather, rapidly illustrate only *several of them*.

The need for parental love and warmth

7 During this « heroic » period, analyses were often very short : several months, weeks, even days... or hours ! Ferenczi twice received 3 weeks of analysis (daily) from Freud, but he also often shared with Freud his life experiences and his dreams, during their vacation walks and correspondence. Rank himself never received any personal analysis. Freud later imposed a few hours on him. Reich directed the seminar on psychoanalytic technique the *Training Institute for psychoanalysts*, from the age of 27 (from 1924 to 1930), at the request of Freud — long before he himself underwent an analysis.

8 The *1st fundamental rule* was that of free association.

Sandor Ferenczi was born in Hungary in 1873; he was therefore 20 years older than Perls. His mother gave birth to 12 children, before falling into a deep depression. His two parents were greatly involved in the intellectual and politically active life of their city (they ran a printing house-book shop, and his mother was president of the *Budapest Jewish Women's Union*), but they were both very reserved on an emotional and sexual level. There was *never any physical contact* among the family members, and they *never talked about the body, sex, or emotions*. Throughout his life, Sandor was obsessed by the need for parental love and tenderness (Barande, 1972). He was looking for both *paternal* recognition as well as warm *maternal* contact. We find this warm and "*maternal*" closeness among a certain number of Gestalt psychotherapists, which can be contrasted with the cold and "paternal" distance of the traditional psychoanalytical approach.

Counter transference and polysemy

In 1900, eight years before his first meeting with Freud, Ferenczi published "*Two Diagnostic Mistakes*" in which he talks about "certain poorly known psychological phenomena" — which are none other than the therapist's *counter transference* which was to cause Freud so much trouble, several years later.

"In traditional psychoanalysis, the analyst was careful to fuel the patient's transference ("transference neurosis"), while at the same time trying, to the best of his ability, to control his own counter transference. In Gestalt, on the contrary, the therapist tries to *limit his client's transference* while *making the most of his own counter transference*, especially through a permanent awareness of his own emotional and corporal feelings — as an echo to the verbal behavior or to the sign language of his client." (Ginger, 1987). Ferenczi went into this theme more deeply during a lecture which he gave in 1918 at the Budapest Conference on "*The mastery of Counter Transference*," a lecture which was described by Freud as "pure psychoanalytical gold."

The "second mistake" was the hypothesis of a *single* cause for problems. This theme of the *polysemy* of every symptom or behavior would be greatly exploited by Gestalt therapists. Every phenomenon has *multiple* causes — past or future — in systemic interdependence, and only a clear view of the whole can enable one to guess its hidden wealth. It is a fundamental law of Gestalt *theory* that "the whole is more than the sum of its parts": the *context* is as important as the text. Ferenczi wrote: "Translation technique has thus forgotten, to the benefit of the exact translation of the detail, that the *whole*, that is to say, the analytical situation of the patient as such, also has a meaning, and even the most important one: it is always the situation *as a whole* which leads to the correct interpretation of the detail of the translated parts..."⁹

We're right in the thick of Gestalt, where nothing can ever be separated from its *field*.

⁹ *Future prospects of Psychoanalysis*, The Hague Conference, 1920.

The body, the emotions, experimenting in a session, the "active technique"

In 1920, at The Hague Conference, Ferenczi related how he encouraged a Croatian pianist to sing during a therapy session, giving free rein to her spontaneous gestures, which enabled her to come to a realization of her desire to please; after which, he asked her to play the piano, thus giving her the possibility of reliving her anxiety in the "here and now" of the session. He therefore encouraged the patient to develop her symptoms (*Gestalt amplification*) and to exploit, instead of ignoring, them. Likewise, he forbade an impotent patient to engage in sexual activity (*prescription of the symptom*); thus his anxiety was no longer centered around his impotence, but rather, around his fear of not being able to control his desire! He emphasized that "the elasticity of techniques," adapted to each case, should be able to shorten the length of the cures. All of this seems to me to foreshadow the philosophy of Gestalt Therapy — which emphasizes the right to be different and the absolute *uniqueness* of every human being.

In his work written in 1923 in collaboration with Otto Rank, "*Future prospects of Psychoanalysis*," he criticizes without mercy those psychoanalysts who "cling with too much rigidity to outdated technical rules [...] with an interpretational fanaticism." Here are some passages which I selected from this book, passages which could very well have been written by Fritz Perls:

- "So many things in analysis depend on little details, apparently unimportant acts such as *intonation, gestures and facial expression*."
- "Analysts have neglected the *present* life of the patient."
- "We have been led to a rather artificial exclusion of everything that is *human*."
- "It is time to develop a *therapy for normal people*."
- "Understanding is not curing."
- "Technical difficulties arise when the analyst has *too much knowledge*."
- "*Knowledge isn't enough*; we have to have a real-life experience of the process."
- It is important to "relive the traumatic experiences, through *real-life experience*, to feel them, to experience them, and not only to explain them."
- We have to "replace the intellectual processes by those factors which have been *experienced* emotionally."

The humanistic approach

In his legacy lecture of 1932, "*Confusion of language between adults and children*," subtitled "*The language of tenderness and passion*" — a lecture which caused a scandal at the Wiesbaden Conference — Ferenczi evoked "*the hypocrisy of psychoanalysts who remain cold and intellectual with patients in crisis*."

In his *Clinical Journal*, in 1932, under the title "*Who is crazy, we or the*

patients?" he wrote:

- "Freud is hiding behind an exaggerated theoretical rigidity."
- "He only analyzes *others*, never himself."
- And he adds: "I can't forget certain remarks that Freud expressed in my presence," such as :
 - "*Patients are only material for us to learn from.*"
 - "*I don't like these patients... a surprising intolerance which makes me a bad psychiatrist.*"
 - "*It is very possible that you will succeed in the analysis of these patients better than I. Which doesn't bother me, because I'm fed up with analysis as a therapy.*"
 - "*Therapeutic problems don't interest me very much.*"

He proposed to Freud — who was suffering from cardiac problems — to analyze him.

" I will come to your house for several months, and I will be at your disposal as an analyst — naturally, that is, if you don't throw me out." But Freud refused (1926).

Ferenczi wondered to himself: "Finally, I think we have to frankly act as *human beings with emotions*, sometimes full of empathy and sometimes openly irritated? Which is to say, to drop all technique and to *show ourselves* as we really are." Since he recommended self-disclosure, so dear to many humanistic therapists in the 1970's, Ferenczi came to the point of offering, and then experiencing, *mutual analysis* — in which he admits his fantasies, his weaknesses and his mistakes to his clients, going much further than the "*controlled involvement*" (Ginger, 1987)¹⁰ of the Gestalt approach.

Sexuality and homosexuality

Ferenczi devoted himself completely to his patients and even tried to respond to the exacerbated quest for love of certain of his borderline clients. Thus, he didn't hesitate to play the role of the "tender mother" (Freud 1932) and even went to a client's home (Elisabeth Severn) twice a day, for sessions of 4 to 5 hours each, sometimes even during the evening or the night, including his holidays... and often for free! He allowed the client to kiss him as often as she wanted to¹¹...(in Haynal, 1996).

Of course, Freud strongly condemned such practices, his "rage for healing" as well as the eroticization of his relations — even if they apparently seemed to be "maternal." However, it should be said in his defense that Ferenczi accepted patients who were quite seriously ill, very regressed, borderline or psychotic — whom Freud systematically refused... and sent to him! (Bourdin, 2000).

It should also be noted that, at that time, a psychoanalyst was not strictly forbidden to have sexual relations with his patients. Despite his

10 « Everything I say is something I think or feel ; but I don't say everything that I think or feel : only that which seems to me, to be *useful for the client*, in this moment. » (Ginger, 1987).

11 Winnicott, also, sometimes held his clients in his arms, or extended a session up to 3 hours (Bourdin, 2000).

warnings, Freud himself admitted: "If the analyst and the patient are both available, there is no reason that they shouldn't be able to get married" (Freud, "*Observations on transference and love*," 1915). Countless affairs took place among most analysts of both sexes. The first official professional *Code of Ethics*, requiring analysts to abstain from having sex with patients dates from...1983 (*American Psychoanalytical Association*).

Still, during the early days of psychoanalysis, the *secrecy* of the sessions was far from being guaranteed: thus Freud, Ferenczi (and others) often shared information that their patients had confided to them. The situation was even more complicated, considering that it was normal practice to analyze one's wife, one's children and even one's parents... in addition to lovers and mistresses! A "transparency" which caused quite a bit of insecurity thus developed among the first disciples. We can note that the suicide rate among the first analysts was particularly high: 6 % out of 200 [including Eugénie Sokolnika, founder of the *Paris Psychoanalytical Society* (SPP) and Clara Happel, one of Perls' analysts].¹²

Several decades later, during the early development of Humanistic Psychotherapy and Gestalt Therapy, there was again a loosening of the rules, sometimes to the point of extreme permissiveness.

The relationships between the original founders of psychoanalysis — as well as between those of Gestalt Therapy — were marked by a *homosexual* atmosphere, usually *sublimated* but often evoked. Thus Jung — who had been a victim of sexual abuse during his childhood by a man that he venerated — partially justifies his break with Freud in a letter: "I fear that you will betray my confidence... I have been burned. I fear your sexual action over me."

Later, Ferenczi — who also had been sexually abused by a man¹³ — analyzed with Freud his homosexual transference. Much has been written about the "triangle" Freud, Jung, Ferenczi, and Freud himself confided to Jones, in 1912, "his non-resolved homosexual problem." Freud had pointed out that great *creators* were often homosexuals.

As early as 1906, Ferenczi became openly involved in a political struggle against the social exclusion of homosexuals and he believed that "since they were not destined for reproduction, this *third sex* will be devoted to the progress of human evolution." He distinguished two types of homosexuality: on the one hand, the effeminate, and on the other, the virile (such as Plato, Michaelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Oscar Wilde) and maintained that homosexuality was *innate*. He was interested in the "biology of pleasure" (*Thalassa*) and in neuropsychic connections (1922).

Lay analysis

Ferenczi firmly supported Freud in his permanent, and sometimes desperate, fight for the development of a "lay" psychotherapy, practiced by people who were *not medical doctors*. Thus, during a visit to the USA, despite the hard opposition of the *New York Psychoanalytical Society*, he

12 Cf. Roudinesco et Plon (1977). *Dictionnaire de la psychanalyse*.

13 Followed by two governesses - which created in him a « hatred of women. »

Ferenczi, the Grandfather of Gestalt, by Serge Ginger, Paris.

deliberately offered 25 evening seminars to "lay practitioners." Freud wrote to him saying: "The internal development of psychoanalysis, *contrary to my intentions*, is drifting everywhere further from that practiced by laymen, to become a *medical specialty*, and I consider that to be *fatal* for its future!"

This problem still exists in several countries, where the practice is limited to medical doctors and psychologists,¹⁴ and therefore, it again threatens the future of psychotherapy in Europe... and I dare say that EAP is now continuing the Ferenczi's struggle for... *Strasbourg Declaration!*

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Abstract

This article underlines some concepts and therapeutic attitudes already developed by Ferenczi 25 years before Perls, such as: introjection, the potential richness of the counter-transference and of the personal involvement of the therapist, the importance of the process in the here and now of each session, the role of the emotions and the body, etc. Both Ferenczi's and Perls' approaches are based on a warm humanistic philosophy, far from the cold and scientist approach of Freud. They consider the client in his environment and interpsychic and social relationships.

Perls quote very seldom Ferenczi but it's very likely that he knew his writings and theories which were quite popular in Germany in the thirties. So I consider that Perls has been unconsciously strongly influenced by Ferenczi during the elaboration of Gestalt Therapy.

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For more details, see the *Bibliography* of 14 pages, books and articles, on Ferenczi, in *Revue française de psychanalyse*, special issue on *Ferenczi*, PUF, 1995.

14 Voted recently in Germany and Italy, and being considered by several other countries, contrary to the *Strasbourg Declaration*, currently signed by 41 European countries — who adhere to the *European Association for Psychotherapy* (EAP) which represents 120,000 professional psychotherapists.

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- *La Gestalt, une thérapie du contact* (1987), Hommes et Groupes, Paris, 8th edition: 2006.

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