



Contemporary Psychoanalysis

ISSN: 0010-7530 (Print) 2330-9091 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/uucp20>

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Lora Heims Tessman Ph.D.

To cite this article: Lora Heims Tessman Ph.D. (2016): A review of Grete Bibring: A Culinary Biography, *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, DOI: [10.1080/00107530.2016.1149409](https://doi.org/10.1080/00107530.2016.1149409)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00107530.2016.1149409>



Published online: 11 Mar 2016.



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BOOK REVIEW

A review of *Grete Bibring: A Culinary Biography* by Daniel Jacobs with Olga Umanski. Newton Centre, MA: Boston Psychoanalytic Society & Institute, 2015. 125 pp.

LORA HEIMS TESSMAN, Ph.D.

Grete Bibring: *A Culinary Biography* is an entrancing book, hard to put down. It emerged from the wise epiphany that one key to emotional life may be found in one's guest lists, and the elaboration of menus planned for them over changing time. Jacobs tells us

The record of her [Grete's] dinner parties, put in context, tell the story of a life lived with others. They tell us how Grete held onto old friendship while accommodating new ones, and the part these friendships played both in managing the enormous disruptions in her life, while also helping her make important contributions in our field. Her entertainments, the food she provided, the company she kept and the discussions she stimulated were expressions of who she was and what she most valued in life. (p. 6)

Grete's handwritten notes, in small black booklets containing records of her dinner parties from 1927 to 1977, were discovered after her death by her colleague Dr. Helen Tartakoff, who donated them to the BPSI Archives. There, after 40 years of being unnoticed, librarian Olga Umansky brought them to the attention of Dan Jacobs, library director, and provided further research. The book became a collaborative venture of the members of the library committee of BPSI (Drs. James Barron, Ellen Goldberg, Malkah Notman, Marcia Smith-Hutton, Rita Teutsch, Shari

Thurer, Anna Wolff), some of whom contributed their own memories of Grete Bibring. The culinary diaries spanned Grete's entertaining in three very different settings. First was Vienna. Then, harrowing years of loss with the perils of escape from Nazism, brought Grete to London and finally Boston. In addition to a vivid narration of Grete's life, and the exodus from Vienna of her friends and colleagues, many familiar in the history of psychoanalysis, the reader is treated to her handwritten lists of whom she invited to what, and 11 actual (tempting) recipes. We follow Grete's notes from abundant elegance to simple fare; from intimate gatherings to larger receptions and "punch parties" that promoted social connections between members of the large psychiatric department that she headed.

Jacobs writes "[b]orn in 1899, Grete grew up among the baroque splendor of an aging Hapsburg empire, politically decrepit, but rich in music, the sciences, and the arts, in which, as a young girl she immersed herself" (p. 11). Dinner parties were a familiar part of life in her family. Her father, a successful factory owner, was a free thinker, with social conscience, whereas her mother tried to impose a strict Victorian propriety on her daughters. Grete, the youngest of four, aimed "to be the smartest, most rational and, perhaps, the most independent. 'As a child I trained myself against anxiety.... I always went my own way. I was a little bit of a maverick without knowing it.'" Being a maverick and mastering anxiety stood her in good stead. At age 18 she became one of very few females to study medicine at the University of Vienna. She reported that when she entered medical school "I tell you I was really a funny girl, I think I wasn't aware that girls don't go into a profession" (p. 15). She graduated from both medical school and the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society in 1924. Meanwhile, her mother continued to insist that she be chaperoned when with male colleagues, even the day before her wedding, when "we wanted to go out and my mother wouldn't let me. She said 'When you are married, Grete.'" Grete's early dinner guests in Vienna were part of a larger group of Viennese liberals, who, she said "were really involved in trying to help the working class." Grete felt "[m]oney... doesn't belong in medicine. I feel it wrong to ask for money in exchange for medical help." "Grete's social commitments influenced the way she practiced—but not necessarily the way she entertained" (p. 22). Helen Tartakoff wrote:

With the resourcefulness, courage and reality-orientation which have always been characteristic of her, Grete decided to prepare for expatriation

by learning to cook. She invited a group of friends to Sunday lunch to partake of her piece de resistance, Poulet a la Bonne Femme! Not only was the lunch excellent but the opportunity to enjoy a quiet family meal, in a city teeming with tension, left an unforgettable impression. This woman neither lost her equilibrium in the face of grave dangers nor relaxed her high standards.

Jacobs notes:

Grete Bibring was part of the psychoanalytic aristocracy that came in the 1930s and 40's to an America ambivalent about receiving them.... Newcomers like Grete, with medical training and a personal connection to Freud, had a special aura about them that made assimilation into American psychoanalysis a little easier. But being an immigrant is never easy. There is always some part of you left behind that dwells in another place. (p. 9)

Grete was surprised at the intense rivalries among Boston analysts, and responded by not inviting her adversaries to dinner. Her menus, Americanized, leaned toward simpler fare, reflecting the realities of food rationing and a country at war. In Boston, it was a tradition that analysts teach in medical and social work settings. She followed suit with eagerness and talent. In 1946, she became chief of psychiatry at Beth Israel Hospital. Here, in the 1950s, she launched the innovative "Study of the Psychological Processes in Pregnancy and the Earliest Mother Child Relationship." This was pioneering. Her study deviated from psychoanalytic tradition in several ways: "An important aspect of the study was the attempt, unusual for that time, to use observational data outside of the therapeutic setting, to study psychoanalytic ideas. The focus on psychobiological processes was also unusual." It was posited that a "normal pregnancy evoked a "maturational crisis" in the mother to be. Conflicts that were reawakened included the patient's relationship to her own mother as she experiences the transition from becoming a daughter to becoming mother. The long period of gestation provided an opportunity to develop new resolutions to earlier psychological conflicts. This included the development of a relationship to the baby as a new object. Conditions that would influence the outcome of this "crisis" beneficially or adversely included "the pre-pregnancy personality, and the social context. Implications for care" were explored. In 1958, Anna Freud wrote to Grete: "What I find so refreshing in your point of view is that you are free

from the usual obsession of the analyst with the past. How can [one] forget that the individual is confronted with experiences that are completely new" (pp. 61–62).

In her teaching, she focused on the professional development of women, including a popular course at the Radcliffe Institute, which "evolved as a free Socratic dialogue on the changing patterns of sexual behavior, career choice, and coeducational living at Harvard and Radcliffe that were taking place in the late 60s and early 70s" (p. 73). Grete was considered sort of a feminist, but did not side with "angry" feminists.

Among the qualities in Jacob's writing that appeal to me is his habit of staying true to the psychoanalytic process of equally honoring negative and positive associations. He draws on the associations of different people, which coalesce to form the portrayal of Grete, including the personal and professional difficulties linked to her nature. For example, Notman observes that in meetings of the Pregnancy Study Research Group: "Using group's consensus to arrive at conclusions was not Grete's style. There was subtle pressure for agreement in which the opinions of the senior people, especially Dr. Bibring's, were most influential. Furthermore, she did not encourage independent research within the study or independent publication of portions of the material" (p. 62). In such intolerance of other opinions, she seems to echo Freud (p. 79).

Sanford Gifford remarked

she could seem aloof and unreachable, despite her keen sense of humor, her intelligence and vivacity. At times, family members, including her husband suffered her judgments. How much her children and grandchildren weighed and how they dressed mattered to her, perhaps too much. They feared her criticisms. Often it seems, she preferred sitting and embroidering to playing with them. Her sons felt that her work often came before them.

It is pointed out that "[s]he was not always gentle. She did not suffer fools gladly and there was an occasional student or faculty member for whom she chose sharp words." Though Jacobs is carefully truthful about Grete's particular shortcomings, he shows tactful restraint by not violating the privacy of her intimate relationships through insensitive exposures. Such respectful reserve cannot be taken for granted in psychoanalytic accounts, too often penned with competitive glee. Likewise, although divisive politics among personal adversaries in psychoanalytic institutes

is clearly described, it is somehow conveyed as natural to the complexity of interacting personalities, as impetus to active reform when systemic, authoritarian, or unfair, but without sermonizing or reproach. The reader is introduced to the life stories that underlay the friendships and aversions among various familiar European, British, and American psychoanalysts who influenced psychoanalysis and vivified Grete's life. The ferment made sense.

My conjecture about Grete is that she found ways for her maverick, innovative self to cohabit, from childhood on, with concessions to elegant propriety without forfeiting either. She was of the generation of European-trained psychoanalysts (some interviewed by Chodorow in the 1970s) who claimed three aspects of their adult identity. They described their lives as encompassing lively participation in "erotic, maternal and professional" spheres, and several among them were famous party givers. A number of analysts Chodorow interviewed didn't report feeling constrained by Freud's theory about penis envy and the naturally submissive position of women. Because Freud actually treated his favored women followers well (in spite of his theories), there was space to hope about "having it all." But mystery remains. We might ask how Grete perceived, adjudicated, or tried to resolve her conflicts between her career and the intimate needs of her family. Yet the notion of resolution seems mistaken, because preferences are plucked from options through specifics in character, and because time and energy are, after all, not infinite.

Grete continued to be productive during the last decade of her life, adapting to the developmental crises of widowhood, retirement, and increasing physical limitations. In 1961, after the death of her husband, psychoanalyst Edward Bibring, she became the first woman to become a full professor at Harvard Medical School, and was elected president of the American Psychoanalytic Association. Work sustained her during mourning. Although entertaining had dwindled during his illness, she now turned to it again. She had posited that "[a]lgression, greed, self-centeredness, envy etc.—they may all be used successfully in the service of professional and social activities, finding expression in the striving for achievements" (p. 65).

Grete wrote about growing old: "by the decrease in intensity of instinctual drives, by the cooling off of the libidinal involvement, by the easing of the heavy burden of rigid work commitments, old age can provide a freedom from outer and inner pressure which in this form may never

have existed before." She added, pithily, "the rider is tired, but so is the horse" (p. 75).

The culinary biography stirred my own associations, ranging from the surprises of aging to also having kept lists of friends invited and menus conjured (Wiener schnitzel, chocolate mousse, and Viennese crescents from the same recipes have tended to occupy my table, too) to the ever-present conundrums, for myself and my patients, of how to straddle the magnets of personal life with those in professional life. By now, the ever-shifting imagery of favored gender roles has different hues.

The book is artfully presented and richly illustrated, the front cover graced with a portrait of young Grete holding a slender cigar. The narrative is seamless without interruptions of chapter headings. Jacobs has noted that the spirit of the book was meant to qualify "like a good dinner party conversation" as stimulating and pleasurable, evocative but not exhaustive, with a little gossip, but also restraint. The *Culinary Biography* invites the ghost of Grete Bibring to rise, and as vividly inspiring psychoanalytic ancestor, to come, along with the reader, to the feast.

Lora Heims Tessman, Ph.D., member of the Boston Psychoanalytic Society and Institute, and of IPTAR, is author of *The Analyst's Analyst Within and Children of Parting Parents*, plus various chapters on father-daughter relationships, female development, trauma, and psychoanalytic process. She practices psychoanalysis and supervision in Newton, MA.

*82 Kirkstall Road
Newtonville, MA 02460
lb tessman@aol.com*