

Benveniste's Interwoven Lives: Fort Da and the Resolution of Splits in the History of Psychoanalysis.

**Michael Poff, MSW, Psychoanalyst
Carter-Jenkins Center
Tampa, Florida**

The following is a slightly revised version of a letter to Daniel Benveniste on the timely importance of his The Interwoven Lives of Sigmund, Anna and W. Ernest Freud: Three Generations of Psychoanalysis (2015) for psychoanalysis. It suggests that Benveniste's specifically 'interwoven' biography of W. Ernest Freud represents a landmark event in the ongoing working-through of traumatic splitting in the developmental history of psychoanalysis. Readers interested in a more comprehensive review of the immense ground covered by Benveniste in this important work could do no better than Adelman's JAPA book review, (Vol 65, Issue 2, 2017).

Let it never again be said that the importance of W. Ernest Freud's biography for psychoanalysis goes only as deep as its connection to Freud's observations on *fort da*. It is arguable that until Benveniste wrote The Interwoven Lives this was one of the best kept secrets in psychoanalysis, with everyone in agreement about Ernest's "minor role".

I studied for many years under Humberto Nagera at the Carter-Jenkins Center in Tampa Florida and I remember the moment back in 2006 when Dr. Nagera, then director of the CJC, drew my attention to the manuscript of The Interwoven Lives that Benveniste had just sent to him, on Ernest Freud's recommendation, specifically for Nagera's input. The biography in progress was still in the box Benveniste had shipped it in (Nagera had not read it yet). It was roughly the size of two telephone books. As I reflect back on this moment it remains striking to me that, still at that time, my appreciation of W. Ernest Freud (born Ernst Halberstadt) extended little further than Freud's famous observations on *Ernst's* childhood game of *fort da* and Ernest's collaborative role with Nagera and Anna Freud on the Hampstead Clinic's developmental profile research. I'd read nothing of Ernest Freud's later contributions on the psychological aspects of newborns, parents and staff in neonatal intensive care settings.

Nagera described his friendship and work with Ernest during his (Nagera's) decade at the British Psychoanalytic Institute and The Hampstead Clinic (1958-1968). "He used to call us couch brothers because we were both in analysis with [Willi] Hoffer". His reflections focused on *fort da* and the tragic nature of Ernest's many losses, his neuroses, and the envy directed toward Ernest from other analysts in London. He had been the object of resentment and hostilities because of his name and privileged relationship to Anna Freud, particularly in London, where the tense legacy of the *controversial discussions* (1942-1944) between the followers of Klein and Anna Freud was still palpable in spite of the 'gentleman's agreement' of 1945. Nagera summed up his recollections with a rather pessimistic prediction, one which he would eventually - quite

happily – have to revise. He said he doubted that Benveniste would find a publisher for the biography because of the “minor role” that Ernest had played in psychoanalysis beyond, of course, his connection to *fort da*. There would be too little interest in the story of Ernest’s life.

In retrospect, Nagera’s earlier doubts and the image I had of W. Ernest Freud at that time are in stark contrast to the vision one is left with after reading The Interwoven Lives. If only for the immense biographical and historical ground that Benveniste covers in The Interwoven Lives, what emerges is a very different picture of the significance of Ernst’s interwoven relation to Anna and Sigmund Freud and to the theoretical and political unfolding of psychoanalysis. On this basis alone Benveniste has given psychoanalysis a monumentally documented and masterfully probing clarification. But if this were all that Benveniste had achieved I would not have written this essay. Remarkably, there is much more at the heart of The Interwoven Lives than even this. In the course of the biography - interlaced as it is with Benveniste’s extensive verbatim dialogues with Ernest (and many others) – the narrative also manages to draw the reader into the interwoven story of psychoanalysis at a personal level and with surprisingly edifying effects. Undoubtedly, this corresponds to the genuine affection and deepening trust that evolves in Ernest’s relationship with Benveniste and to the powerful transferences with which Ernest begins to invest his biographer in the course of their relatively brief relationship. For this reason, readers of The Interwoven Lives should not be surprised if at some point they begin to experience something like an empathic bit of working-through associated with complicated bereavement. It was my experience of this that moved me to make an attempt to articulate it and, further, to understand it in relation to the continual working-through of traumatic splitting in the developmental history of psychoanalysis as a community.

To begin with, I was surprised by the depth of grief welling up in me and hitting with force at one particular moment in The Interwoven Lives, an elegantly-structured and surprisingly-condensed eleven-page section near the end, entitled “Fort Da and Unspooling”. Here, Benveniste describes his third-to-last visit with Ernest at his home for the elderly in Heidelberg. This was the last time Ernest was fully conscious and able to dialogue with Benveniste and it struck me as the emotional center of the biography. At this moment the metaphors of Ernst’s childhood game of *fort da* permeate his efforts to master his own “unspooling” in death. These fill his autobiographical notes to himself at this time: “Old age –UNSPoolING (regression)”, “Throwing things out of the pram [Ernst’s baby carriage in infancy]”, “Letting others ‘pick up’”. (pp. 471-472) Ernest reels back in memory and regression to his earliest attachments, traumatic losses and survivor guilt. Benveniste writes, “The notion of ‘unspooling’ is Ernst revisiting the fort da spool and thread in old age.” (p. 472) Ernst must allow others to “‘pick up’ the ‘spool,’ that is, to pick up that which Ernst could no longer do himself...” (p. 472) For Benveniste this meant picking up the spool of Ernst’s hopes to write his own autobiography. The repetition compulsion, love and loss, ambivalence, survivor guilt and Ernst’s regard for Benveniste as his biographer – all these become heartbreakingly poignant in Ernest’s dialogues with Benveniste. In a stunning narrative leading up to and following the last moments of their visit, Ernest tells Benveniste of the auditory hallucinations that he has begun to hear. He happily describes hearing verses from *La Paloma*, a Spanish love song about loss and reunion. Yet Ernest is troubled that someone also keeps singing an old familiar war song of a soldier whose comrade is shot and laying dead beside him. “So you lost your best friend in the war. It’s a WWI song. The war my father was in.” (p. 474) The narrative continues with Ernest’s reflections on surviving when so

many others have died and the ironic suffering of grief in longevity, so characteristic of the Freuds. “My only advice to you is that you do not live too long”.

Nowhere is the generous spirit with which Benveniste earned Ernest’s trust more evident than in the wisdom of his reflections on Ernest’s “strange paraphrasing of George Bernard Shaw’s *“Do not try to live forever, you will not succeed”*”. Benveniste writes of this last moment between Ernest and himself:

Nonetheless, the affection between us was sweet and palpable. We had done a good thing together. He was “unspooling” and I was picking up the spool - the biography that he could no longer write on his own. We embraced and I climbed into my taxi. As the taxi pulled away from the curb, Ernst, standing on the sidewalk, waved broadly to me and kept on waving. I put my whole arm out the window and waved back. Our waving continued for half a block, and then a full block, and then a block and a half, and then two blocks – the two of us – waving to each other – waving good-bye. And then the taxi turned and we were gone for each other – fort and yet da.” (p. 474)

In the grief that hit me as I read this passage I had only registered the first half of Benveniste’s reference to Ernst’s childhood game – *fort* (“gone”). Yet by the very next page of this section on Ernest’s “unspooling” (and reinforced for the remainder of the book) I was caught off guard again when the weight of my grief lifted just as powerfully as it had hit me! This was uncanny. Benveniste describes two return visits to Ernest, the Freud legacy of longevity and survival, and then immediately reintroduces some of his most crucial dialogue with Ernest on jealousy, survivor guilt and Ernest’s reasons for asking Benveniste to assume the (unavoidably ambivalent) role as biographer to a Freud. Surely the best way to describe my reaction was that it felt like consolation and the mastery of bereavement in the manner of *fort* and then *da*. The immediacy, first, of powerful loss (perhaps even survivor guilt) and next, of a sense of the regained object (of Ernst’s disarmingly honest and even playful spirit resurrected so quickly in Ernst’s dialogue with Benveniste) is difficult to describe. But it wasn’t the vicarious experience of *fort da* that occurred to me at first because of how powerful and personal the experience was, and this was the case even though Benveniste’s own words (and the central theme of the biography!) had anticipated it so explicitly: “...gone for each other – *fort and yet da*”. My first associations went to personal losses: the recent death of Nagera in 2016, my father’s decline, the death of a sister only one year older, and other losses in my life, complicated no doubt with their varying admixtures of ambivalence so typical of intimacy. These were engaged especially as Benveniste’s open-hearted goodbye to Ernest condensed in my memory with the remarkable mindfulness of another goodbye of his that I was privileged to witness – his goodbye to Nagera at the end of his last visit to the Carter-Jenkins Center in Tampa shortly before Nagera’s death.

All these associations were what I might refer to as the strictly personal or idiosyncratic part of my response to reading The Interwoven Lives. But, at the risk of understating the obvious, certainly Benveniste has engaged something here in connection with psychoanalysis as a community and its intergenerational history of conflict and mourning. I think of an insight that Benveniste repeats in the course of the biography, to the effect that superficial knowledge of oneself is just that, but deep knowledge of oneself also reflects insight into all of humanity. My thoughts also return to Nagera’s initial cynicism about Ernest’s legacy for psychoanalysis; it

seems likely that it was indicative of a more general view held of W. Ernest Freud, that is when Ernest is thought of at all. The more I consider this in light of The Interwoven Lives, the more I am convinced that the narrative of Ernst's "minor role" has functioned in the manner of a compromise formation at the level of 'the group'. If Ernst's role was minor it was like that of someone on whose back only too much was riding and being projected to be expressed. I hesitate to put it this way, because it suggests too much of the passive scapegoat or victim of collective dynamics and The Interwoven Lives did not leave me thinking of Ernest Freud in these terms. In fact, it was just the opposite! If anything, this was more my image of him at the time of that first discussion with Nagera and before either of us had read The Interwoven Lives.

To state my impression of the significance of Ernest's biography for psychoanalysis *after* reading The Interwoven Lives, it comes to something like the following. What Benveniste - and Ernest - have accomplished here functions like a piece of good analytic work not only *in relation to* Ernest's own further working-through in the transference encounter with Benveniste, but also *because of it*, in relation to the repetition compulsion and dynamics of traumatic splitting still reverberating within the psychoanalytic 'family', of which, in a most surprising way Ernst, as an infant, and still later Ernest as a psychoanalyst, came to be one of the most significant symbolic representations.

To this point, my thoughts return again to Nagera, himself a survivor of Castro's Cuba, just as Ernest, Anna, Sigmund Freud and many other psychoanalysts who immigrated to London were survivors of Hitler's Germany. My thoughts return to the fact that Nagera's cynicism about Ernst's legacy was expressed at a time when he himself was grieving deeply personal losses and confronting his imminent death and questions of his own legacy. My thoughts go especially to one passage in Nagera's Foreword to The Interwoven Lives:

*I was a close collaborator of Anna Freud in the clinical and research activities of the Hampstead Clinic for many years. Indeed, I had been her appointed heir to run the organization, something I had to decline when I immigrated to the United States. Similarly, W. Ernest Freud and I had worked together in many research and clinical projects and were close friends. As such, I thought I knew the Freuds well. **Dr. Benveniste's book proved me wrong. There was much I did not know about them and their lives, which this book brought to light** to further increase the admiration I already felt for both of them as remarkable human beings and colleagues. But even more important than that is the fact that **Dr. Benveniste is able to unfold for us, in a very clear manner, the closely woven fabric of the development of psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic ideas in relation to their interactions.*** (xiv; bold type added)

Rereading this passage and recollecting some of Nagera's *subsequent*, more hopeful observations about Ernest's triumphs in the face of suffering, it's obvious to me now how surely he was acknowledging his initial underestimation of Benveniste's vision for Ernest's biography (and perhaps of Ernest himself) and the larger, more edifying integration it offers for psychoanalysis. The representation there of Ernest's specifically 'interwoven' life conveys something far fairer, forward moving, grateful, self-reflective and perhaps even indomitable or heroic in its analytic persistence, while also dealing squarely with the flawed humanity and real tragedy involved in the history. (Not to mention that it throws new light on the importance of W. Ernest Freud's

actual legacy of writing.) It doesn't hunt for conspiracy or villains and victims, nor does it end in the tragic mode for all the tragic ground it covers. There is even a fascinating moment of dialogue between Ernest and Benveniste - one of the rare times that Benveniste shifts into a clinical mode with Ernest - when the discussion turns to the possible connection between survivor guilt and the recurring theme in Ernest's life of being the object of envy and jealousy. Benveniste confronts Ernest with the possibility that his perceptions of others' jealousy and envy may have been less about external reality and more a function of his survivor guilt. Incredibly, Ernest asks "to what does your 'surviving' refer?" and then is quick to complete Benveniste's enumeration of Ernest's many tragic losses. Benveniste elaborates further on the possible intrapsychic versus external sources of this pattern in Ernest's life, and it's only after Benveniste brings him back to the question a third time (this time from preoccupations with another *external* conflict, the Iraq War) that Ernest seems able to integrate the question. "Well both, one doesn't exclude the other. That would be my spontaneous answer to your question."

Now I think about this moment, as Benveniste challenges Ernest to integrate an *intrapsychic* split in his ego stemming largely from early traumatic losses and survivor guilt. Once again, the more I consider it the more profound it appears to me in relation to the long-standing *interpsychic* dynamics of splitting within psychoanalysis as an intergenerational 'family'. In Ernest's adult life, the interpersonal climate of splitting evolving within psychoanalysis became a significant focus around which his ego organized his own intrapsychic conflicts. But from The Interwoven Lives it also becomes clear that *Ernst Halberstadt* had already become appropriated polemically as a veritable poster child over which the institutional splitting necessitating the famous *controversial discussions* was being contested. Benveniste reminds us that three of the four papers (Isaacs, 1948; Heimann and Isaacs, 1952; Klein, 1944) at the center of this controversy, and especially the last one by Klein herself, were armed with Freud's own famous observations of Ernst, who was destined to become Anna's own surrogate child and most important child analytic case. (See King, P., & Steiner, R. 1991) It is one of Benveniste's remarkable achievements to contextualize this fact in the polemical context of Ernest's specifically 'interwoven' life. By all accounts, Ernst, like psychoanalysis itself, was in the position of Solomon's baby in the *controversial discussions*! He, like psychoanalysis itself, was being held up in arms, as if the argument had become "I'm the more legitimate mother of this child", no less than it surely became about who was the real and legitimate heir apparent (beloved daughter) to Freud. Considered in this light it's a wonder that the 'gentleman's agreement' even occurred (interestingly, only after the bombs stopped falling and the *real* Nazis were defeated). It is no less a wonder that the agreement lasted as long as it did (interestingly, *perhaps also ominously*, until only recently). Finally, it's a wonder that the repetition compulsion associated with this traumatic episode of collective splitting in the institutional history of psychoanalysis has not been more unmanageable. All of this goes to underscore the central point: *given the 'interwoven' significance of Ernst as a central figure and symbol of this historic and traumatic split, it seems unavoidable that The Interwoven Lives, like Benveniste's assistance with Ernest's own complicated grieving, must represent a landmark event in the re-symbolization and working-through of this split.*

I've thought a lot about this difficult episode in the history of psychoanalysis because of my experiences in Tampa, a city in which, quite unfortunately, the tendency toward splitting in psychoanalysis (going back to its beginnings) has been particularly intense and painful. I've

thought a lot about it also because of my close connection for two and a half decades to Nagera and to my good friend and colleague, Frances Marton, and their own close connection to Anna Freud. When Benveniste's Anna Freud in the Hampstead Clinic: Letters to Humberto Nagera (2015) came out, I was sharing with colleagues how vividly Anna Freud's letters revealed her genuine respect and affection for Nagera. An analyst colleague and friend of mine reacted to this, saying, "You do know, don't you, that Nagera wasn't *really* Anna Freud's heir apparent?" This caught me off guard and I avoided engaging over the question of heir apparency, mainly because of how painful the local conflicts had been for me during my own training. If the same question were posed to me today I might still avoid debating it, but it would be for a different reason now. Only later did it occur to me that my colleague's claim – as surely as my anxiety in response to it - reflected a curious assumption. Quite apart from the question of its accuracy, it implied the idea that Anna Freud could only have had *one person* toward whom she felt trust and affection sufficiently to invest them with her legacy! Here was the same old controversy over who would be the *one* true heir or favored child. I think of one of the later paper's Nagera delivered at the Carter-Jenkins Center, "The Oedipus complex Revisited: Suggestions for its Amplifications and its Role in Later Malignant Acting Out and Conflicts". (2005) He cautions about the psychic demons associated with loss and narcissistic wounds, sibling rivalry, guilt, etc. that can get unleashed in training analyses and can wreak havoc in the form of internecine institutional conflicts if they are not sufficiently understood, worked through and grieved. I think of the repetition compulsion, traumatic losses, survivor guilt. I think of *fort da*.

With regard to the value of The Interwoven Lives for the continued working-through of this kind of splitting, one gets the feeling that it was not only Ernest's object losses (especially in connection with the death of his brother Heinerle) that became activated in the transference with Benveniste and conveyed so personally to the reader. Most significantly, I'm thinking of Ernest's inner representations associated with Anna Freud and Freud himself. Benveniste's frank explorations with Ernest of the simultaneous analyses of himself and Anna Freud stand out here, along with his reflections on the likely parallel processes that must have gotten engaged. It's arguable that The Interwoven Lives is in the singular position of offering the reader a transference glimpse not only of Anna Freud as Ernst's analyst, *but also of Anna Freud as Freud's analyst*. Given Ernst's unique role in Anna Freud's own self-identification as a developing analyst I can't think of any other psychoanalytic work or document about which this could be said with more justification. I think of the moment when Ernest free-associatively animates his analyst-typewriter who applauds his "Aha!" moment about the death of Heinerle, which he arrives at while analyzing his transference with Benveniste. Ernest suddenly catches himself, becoming self-conscious in this moment of playful spontaneity, as if the typewriter/Benveniste/Aunt Anna/Freud at that moment might take his free associations literally and think he is crazy, or worse, retaliate for the indiscretion of disclosing too much biographical information. Benveniste observes Ernest's associations to something blowing up – like the Iraq war – which would invariably stop him from completing his autobiography, something which his aunt and grandfather would never have wished to do. Both persons were powerful superego figures for Ernest and both were unambiguous in their loathing of the idea of revealing their biographical details to the world. And each spoke contemptuously of, and distrusted, biographers. Did Ernest know more than anyone that his autobiography would have to be an 'interwoven' one, essentially making him biographer to both Anna Freud and Freud himself? Did he trust Benveniste more than he trusted himself with this job? In this regard, it's possible

that Ernest had given Benveniste the rare gift of a truly *Freudian slip* in an earlier dialogue over his choice of Benveniste as his biographer. Curiously, Ernest refers to his many autobiographical notes, which Benveniste will find after Ernest's death, as "copious notices", of all things. Notices? About what and about whom? Whatever the case, Ernest describes them as a "nightmare" that will keep Benveniste and a generation of writers busy. It is no surprise that Ernest experiences his typewriter getting jammed (as he writes to Benveniste of his "Aha!" moment!) as sounding "like a gun jamming!" (512) Ernest certainly associated his autobiography with explosive consequences. One thinks of a jammed gun bolt remaining loaded but leaving no 'smoking gun'.

In light of all this, it's remarkable that Ernest repaid Benveniste's gift of persistence regarding his avoidance of references to Heinerle's death by freeing himself for Benveniste to proceed with "the gap in my autobiography". How remarkable it is that at this highly conflictual moment Ernest was able to summon the encouraging voice of his analyst in order to proceed with Benveniste. "Don't get derailed...The first thing that came to my mind was my analyst saying 'The first thing that comes to your mind': and there it is." I imagine Ernest's image of Freud talking to Anna in his own memory of Anna encouraging him, as the analyses of both carried all the meaning and weight of legacy. "And as a good analyst you can proceed now with it and the gap in my autobiography." (511); or, conversely, both Ernst and Anna sensing the importance to their analyst of their clinical productions, as if to say, "Here are the gifts of my associations with which you can repay me by immortalizing them in the progress of our famous mutual child, psychoanalysis."

In my correspondence with Benveniste he mentioned how few had initially bought or read The Interwoven Lives. I told him I'm convinced that this will change. Certainly, from reviews such as Adelman's and from endorsements by the likes of Nagera, Wallerstein, Halberstadt-Freud, Etchegoyen and Rangell, there is good reason to expect that what Benveniste has achieved will gain steady notice. But it's inconceivable to me that The Interwoven Lives will not also fairly soon become assigned reading on the historical syllabuses for Ph.D. students in Freud scholarship and be the inspiration for many dissertation topics, and will be excerpted and discussed in the historical readings in psychoanalytic institutes and be on the suggested reading lists for the historical courses. From this alone the larger community will eventually get it -- and the rest will be a more fully integrated history of psychoanalysis. In the meantime, I'll remain struck by the fact that in the absence of The Interwoven Lives I would still have no reason to think twice about Ernest's "minor role". God bless him, Ernest knew better and he chose his biographer well. Much appreciation and admiration are due for what Benveniste and W. Ernest Freud have given to all of us here.

References

Adelman, A. J. (2017). "Past and Present". Book Review: *The Interwoven Lives of Sigmund, Anna and W. Ernest Freud: Three Generations of Psychoanalysis*, by Daniel Benveniste. *JAPA*, Vol 65, Issue 2.

Benveniste, D. (2015). The Interwoven Lives of Sigmund, Anna and W. Ernest Freud: Three Generations of Psychoanalysis. International Psychoanalytic Books, New York, NY.

Benveniste, D. (2015). Anna Freud in the Hampstead Clinic: Letters to Humberto Nágera. International Psychoanalytic Books, New York, NY.

Heimann, P. (1943). "Some Aspects of the Role of Introjection and Projection in Early Development." In King, P., & Steiner, R. (1991) The Freud-Klein controversies, 1941-45. London: Tavistock.

Heimann, P. & Isaacs, S. (1952). "Regression". In M. Klein, P. Heimann, S. Isaacs, & J. Riviere (Eds.) Developments in Psychoanalysis. London: Hogarth.

Isaacs, S. (1948). "The Nature and Function of Phantasy." *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.*, 29:73-97.

King, P., & Steiner, R. (1991) The Freud-Klein controversies, 1941-45. London: Tavistock.

Klein, M. (1944). "The Emotional Life and Ego-Development of the Infant with Special Reference to the Depressive Position." In King, P., & Steiner, R. (1991) The Freud-Klein controversies, 1941-45. London: Tavistock.