

Sabina and Isaak Spielrein

MAGNUS LJUNGGREN

BOOKS HAVE BEEN WRITTEN and films have been made about the Russian psychoanalyst Sabina Spielrein. We have now finally gained access to all the basic facts of her dramatic life. She stands out as a silenced pioneer, together with women like Hanna Arendt and Rosa Luxemburg one of our time's prominent Jewish female figures. Like them she can probably only be understood fully against her Jewish background, and her path in life becomes especially clear in this respect if it is contrasted with that of her younger brother.

Sabina Spielrein was born to an affluent family in Rostov-on-the-Don in 1885. Her father, from Warsaw, had worked his way up from poverty and been educated as an agronomist at his own expense in Germany. He ran an agency that traded in fertilizer. His name was Naftuli Aronovič but he Russified it to Nikolaj Ar-kad'evič. It was here in Rostov on the border of the broad so-called Jewish Pale in Ukraine that he attempted to adapt himself. His daughter was entered in the Jewish birth register as Sejve but was called Sabina. A hardening anti-Semitic reaction had spread in Russia following the assassination of the tsar in 1881, and the pogroms had begun. It was in this repressive climate that Sabina grew up.

Sabina actually lived under a dual threat—an external one in society and an inner one in the family. Nikolaj Arkad'evič was psychically unbalanced and suffered from depression. He drove his gifted children—Sabina, a sister, and three brothers—hard, setting up an ascetic and demanding program of achievement for them at an early age. Most importantly, however, he beat and punished them regularly. This almost seems to have been the only physical contact he had with them, for he objected to touching people and

refused to take anyone by the hand. He had a lively interest in languages and began his children's training early: they were forced to speak Russian, French, and German on different



SABINA SPIELREIN IN THE 1920S.

days of the week and were punished if they broke the rules.¹ Sabina reacted strongly to this abuse. As an adult she recalled how agitated and indignant she had become when a younger brother was beaten. Then she began experiencing complex feelings of pleasure when her father spanked her on the buttocks. Finally it was enough for her to look at her father's hand—the hand that otherwise never sought contact—to become excited. As she grew up she was tormented by compulsive thoughts and depressive states. Relevant as well here is that she does not appear to have had any close contact with her mother. She inherited a keen interest in music from her and learned to play the piano, but her mother evidently never questioned her father's pedagogy.

Early on Sabina developed masochistic tendencies in the form of a pleasurable need for submission to paternal authority. The reaction of her brother Oskar, six years her junior, was in fact exactly the opposite, and he never allowed their father to subdue him completely. Thus they each came to represent two different strategies to counter aggression, which by extension were two different methods of survival in repressive Russian society.

¹ Personal communication from the late Menicha Spielrein, Moscow.

NIKOLAJ SPIELREIN WITH HIS 'JÜDISCHER WANDER-VEREIN', Leipzig, May 1914. (Isaak Spielrein standing behind his father.)



Around the turn of the century Sabina's younger sister Ęmilija fell ill and died—a blow to Sabina, for she had regarded her as her only ally in the family. In 1904 she graduated with honors from the *gymnasium* in Rostov. She was one of many Russian Jewish girls of her generation whose parents had instilled in them—albeit in this case by brutal means—lofty scholarly and artistic ambitions. She dreamed of becoming a doctor. At the same time her disease symptoms were clearer than ever, and her father took her to consult specialists in Switzerland. It was in this way that she came to the Burghölzli Clinic in Zurich.

By then Sabina was in a state of hysteria. She had nervous tics, swung between fits of laughter and weeping, stuck out her tongue when anyone looked at her or touched her. Her speech was at times

incoherent. Carl Gustav Jung was at the time a young assistant at the clinic. A few years earlier the head of Burghölzli, Professor Eugen Bleuler, had thrust upon him a copy of *Die Traumdeutung*, a newly published book by a Viennese doctor named Sigmund Freud, and now Jung made up his mind to try out its theories on this remarkable Russian woman. Jung's therapy proved effective. The guilt complex rooted in Sabina's early childhood was exposed and her symptoms disappeared (see Minder 1992). It was a minor miracle, but it also resulted in the patient falling in love with her deliverer.

Jung gave Sabina psychoanalytical literature to read and encouraged her to pursue her own medical studies. In the spring of 1905 she was discharged from Burghölzli and was admitted that fall to the medical school at Zurich University, determined to study psychiatry. At this point Jung belatedly began actively reciprocating her feelings. Jung had some anti-Semitic tendencies, but at the same time he discovered within himself what at first glance appears to be a paradoxical attraction to Jewish women. In 1906 he initiated a correspondence with Freud in which Sabina Spielrein figured in various ways from the outset. It was she, after all, who was the very basis of their friendship. He also discussed her case in lectures and scholarly articles.²

For Freud as well, of course, Jung also eventually became something of a deliverer. During the early years of the century psychoanalysis had been a purely Jewish affair in Vienna, a kind of doctrine of Jewish liberation. Freud's theories broke out of the Vienna ghetto when they reached Zurich and were well received by Bleuler, but at home they were still meeting stubborn resistance tinged with anti-Semitism. Freud began to regard Jung as the man who would victoriously spread his psychodynamic therapeutic method to the rest of the world and legitimate it in non-Jewish circles. Soon he placed all his hopes on Jung, even as the student of psychiatry Sabina Spielrein and the newly appointed head doctor at Burghölzli were being joined in an increasingly deep erotic and intellectual

² See especially: Jung, C. G.: Die Freudsche Hysterietheorie [The Freudian theory of hysteria]. *Monatsschrift für Psychiatrie und Neurologie* 1908:4, in Jung 1979.

communion. It was in fact a kind of creative symbiosis in which it is difficult to determine in retrospect who was doing the giving and who the taking.

In Zurich Jung found himself surrounded by a whole group of Russian Jewish female students who (having been barred from universities at home) quickly accepted deep psychology and fell in love with him. He was at the same time married and had two children; a respectable Swiss on the surface, he struggled with his polygamous instincts. Spielrein, a music lover and adaptable in her father's footsteps, had for her part been captivated by the Wagner craze and fantasized about bearing Jung a heroic Aryan son named after Siegfried from the *Ring of the Niebelungen*, the very symbol of their intellectual kinship and ultimately evidently a manifestation of her desire to transcend her Jewish identity.

1905 was a tumultuous year in Sabina's life. She recovered from her illness and began her career as a physician. It was also the first year of revolution in Russia. The autocracy was approaching disintegration, and not least the Jews broke free of the ghetto and mounted the barricades. Sabina's brother Oskar was only 14 or 15, but he was already an active revolutionary. There is something symbolic in the fact that it was now that he reportedly first rebelled against his father and struck back; as a result, the beating ceased. Oskar took part in Jewish self-defense patrols and soon also became a member of the Socialist Revolutionary Party. In 1906 came the backlash: there were mass executions of revolutionaries, pogroms struck Rostov as well, and the counterfeit anti-Semitic *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* was disseminated throughout the country. At the age of 16, Oskar chose to join the Socialist Revolutionaries' terrorist organization. He never threw any bombs, but he did become deeply involved in conspiratorial activities.³ Soon the police searched the Spielrein home and found leaflets and revolutionary appeals. Oskar responded by shooting himself in the mouth, but his wounds were not life-threatening. His father managed to bribe the police and took him to Paris for

³ Letters and notes in possession of the Spielrein family, Moscow.

medical treatment.⁴ Thus at the same point in time Sabina and Oskar each discovered their own doctrine of liberation: psychoanalysis and socialism.



JAN, EMIL'AND ISAAK SPIELREIN, c. 1930.

and this seems to have made him more concerned about his bourgeois facade. He began humiliating Sabina in an effort to push her away from him. She wrote to Freud and complained. Jung also wrote to him, denying Sabina's significance in his life by dismissing her as hysterical.⁶ Gradually he became increasingly entangled in contradictions and lies; he could not have known that Freud was already informed of how things really were. Symptomatically enough, parallel to this drama Jung was moving away from Freud's theory of the instincts, which may have had to do with a repression of the role of sexuality in his own life. But Freud did not yet draw the correct conclusions. He remained loyal as long as he could with the Jung he had declared to be his 'son' : the price of giving up his

1909 proved another important watershed year for them both.⁵ The revolution in Russia had for the time being been crushed. Oskar withdrew from political activism and began studying philosophy and psychology under German professors. First he worked with Wilhelm Windelband in Heidelberg, and then with Wilhelm Wundt in Leipzig. Psychology as a science was still in its infancy; aided by Sabina, he sensed its dormant resources.

Late in 1908 a son had been born to Jung in Zurich,

⁴ Personal communication from Menicha Spielrein, Moscow.

⁵ Spielrein's case was in fact already at this time briefly resumed ('the girl Š.') in a report from Zurich by Dr Fejga Berg in the Russian journal *Sovremennaja psichiatrija* (1909:1,131). '

⁶ Jung's letter of 7 March 1909 in Carotenuto 1986, 232.

intended psychoanalytical trailblazer was too high. Sabina felt abandoned and desperate. She could rightly claim to be the only one of the three who was playing a clean game. She stood straight and firm where Jung wriggled and Freud ducked.⁷

In 1911 Sabina finished her studies; her thesis appeared the same year in *The International Psychoanalytical Yearbook* edited by Jung (Spielrein 1911). The subject of her paper was an effort to discover a pattern in the disorder of a paranoid's delirious speech. She made connections not least with mythology. Jung was at the time on the same track, but she was in fact first, for *Verwandlungen und Symbole der Libido*, Jung's study of myth, was published in two installments in the yearbook in 1911 and 1912. Rivalry between the two researchers was now a fact. Jung was never particularly inclined to admit his sources or inspiration. His acknowledgment of Sabina Spielrein was expressed only in their correspondence, where he made references to 'remarkable parallels' in their works.⁸

NIKOLAJ SPIELREIN WITH
EMIL'S SON ÉVAL'D, 1928.



⁷ For another interpretation of this dramatic moment see Lotane 1999.

⁸ Jung's letter of 18 March 1912 in Carotenuto 1986, 206.

Early on Sabina had entertained ideas about an inherent human death instinct which on Jung's suggestion she now developed in an article entitled 'Die Destruktion als Ursache des Werdens'. In retrospect this appears to be her principal work, a substantial contribution to psychoanalytical theory from which both Freud and Jung would profit. She went first to Freud with the paper, delivering it in two lectures at weekly meetings of the Vienna analysts, and then published it in the *International Yearbook* in 1912. Evidently on the basis of her own experiences with Jung, she speaks in it of a death instinct contained within love, a destructive impulse inseparable from the human creative impulse, of Thanatos and Eros as twins. Beneath our individual survival instincts she perceives an ever present nihilistic collective instinct: the species and the self are in insoluble conflict with each other. Again she makes comparisons with mythology, including stories from the *Talmud*.

Freud was impressed. He found Sabina Spielrein's thesis to be important yet all too dependent on personal factors. Eight years later, in 1920, he developed a related idea in his essay 'Jenseits des Lustprinzips', in which he speaks of an inherent human death instinct, which, however is contrasted with the creative instinct. Already in 1912 he had begun speaking about the importance of 'countertransference', certainly as a result of insights gained from the Spielrein-Jung-drama (see van Waning 1992, 401).

Sabina was on her way over to Freud. As a new work of hers written during her stay in Vienna indicates, she had begun to be involved in child psychoanalysis. She had a strong yearning for a child of her own. She spoke to Freud about her Siegfried fixation, and the pressure appears to have eased. Around New Year's Eve of 1911-12 she also visited her home town Rostov and gave a lecture at the medical society there on psychoanalysis, which had just experienced its—very early and broad—breakthrough in Russia. In connection with the lecture she met a Russian Jewish doctor colleague, Pavel Seftel'. Perhaps as a result of her conversations with Freud she made up her mind to marry him.

Freud was now increasingly aware of Jung's real intentions. The newly expanded notion of the libido Jung had launched in his study of myth was of course a break with Freud's ideas on the instincts ; henceforth Jung spoke in the wider sense of creative libido energies in our unconscious. It is easy to see that Jung had to some extent used Freud and Spielrein and their insights to further his own career. Now he wanted to choose his own path and build his own movement. In letters to Sabina Freud expressed *his* great disappointment and finally made common cause with her. As he remarked in 1913:

My personal relationship to your German hero has broken down once and for all. He has behaved too badly. Since I received my first letter from you my opinion of him has fundamentally changed.....I imagine that you still love him so deeply because you are not releasing what he deserves.....We are and will remain Jews, and the others only try to exploit us and will never understand us.⁹

Sabina, who had married the year before, was at the time pregnant, and Freud commented: I have, as you know, been cured of the last little glimmer of sympathy for the Aryan cause, and I hope that the child, if it is a boy, will become a steely Zionist.¹⁰ One month later, in September 1913, Sabina gave birth to a daughter who was named Renata, 'the reborn'. At the same time the international psychoanalytical congress in Munich confirmed a trying break between Freud and Jung. Jung wrote his Swedish colleague Poul Bjerre: I have until now not been an anti-Semite, but now, I think, I am becoming one.' (Bärmark & Nilsson 1983, 633.)

By this time, under the impression of the intensified tsarist persecution of the Jews that culminated in the so-called Bejlis affair, Oskar Spielrein had become perhaps not a steely Zionist but in any case an extremely conscious Jew. He reassumed his real name Isaak Naftulovič, studied Yiddish, and increasingly sought out Jewish authorities. At the outbreak of World War I he was stuck in Berlin, living in the apartment Sabina had just given up after a couple of years working at a hospital there. As a Russian citizen he was forbidden to leave the city. He studied partly under professor of philosophy Hermann Cohen, who ran his own Jewish university, and

⁹ Freud's letters of 20 January, 8 May and 28 August 1913 in Carotenuto 1986,122-4.

¹⁰ Freud's letter of 28 August 1913 in Carotenuto 1986,124.

partly under the psychologist William Stern, who was in the process of developing his own work psychology, so-called psychotechnique, at his newly opened laboratory.

Sabina—alone now that her husband had been drafted into the Russian military—was at this moment drawn more and more to music. She took music lessons and composed alongside her psychoanalytical work. Later she settled down in Lausanne in Francophone Switzerland. She worked on bringing about a rapprochement between Jung and Freud. In letters written during the war years she attempted to convince Jung of how much in all events he and Freud had in common. Jung's answers were almost brutal. He emphasized that it was an idiosyncrasy of the Jews to reduce their 'deepest spiritual content'⁵ to a question of infantile gratification of instincts. He summarized that Freud raped 'the most sacred'. He 'spreads darkness, not light'.¹¹

In 1920 Sabina Spielrein attended the international psychoanalytical congress in the Hague, delivering a paper in which she linked together her interests in child psychology and language acquisition. After this she moved to the so-called Rousseau Institute in Geneva, where she began an exciting collaboration with prominent psychologists such as Edouard Claparède and linguists such as Charles Bally. With Professor Bally she did research on grammatical structure and its relationship to pre-conscious thought. Among her patients was Jean Piaget, the most important name in twentieth-century child psychology.

¹¹ Jung's letter of 3 April 1919 in Carotenuto 1986, 222.

As for Isaak Spielrein, he was already back in Russia with reborn revolutionary dreams and a fresh membership card in the Bolshevik party. He had arrived via Vienna, where he visited Freud. He hoped to establish a central place in the new society for psychotechnique, that method for increased labor productivity and the rational use of manpower. In 1922 he set up a psychotechnical laboratory at Aleksej Gastev's newly founded Central Institute of Labor in Moscow. After a short time, however, Gastev's purely mechanical view of humanity led Isaak to break with the Institute and move his activity to Moscow University. Soon he was on the presidium of 'Vremja' (*Time*), a league that aimed at spreading the notion of scientifically organized labor to the masses. Trockij and Lenin were honorary chairpersons, and the other members of the presidium included, in addition to Gastev, Vsevolod Meyerhold.¹²



ISAAC SPIELREIN IN BERLIN

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At home among the family Isaak Spielrein spoke Yiddish. Many Bolshevik leaders were Jews like himself (and his closest associates), so that being Jewish was suddenly not a handicap but perhaps even an advantage. One of the over 100 scholarly works he published during his intense activity in the 1920s described how non-Jews in the young Soviet state could take Jewish names to get better in step with the revolution (see Ètkind 1993, 204). In 1923 Isaak persuaded Sabina to come home to undertake responsible tasks in the new society.

¹² Kol'cova *et al.* 1990,113; see also Kurek 1999, 155.

Aided by Trockij, psychoanalysis had developed ties to the state and experienced its second breakthrough on Russian soil. Freud's writings were published by a state-owned house, and an official psychoanalytical institute had just opened in Moscow at which Sabina assumed a key position after her return. She examined children with problems at the institute polyclinic and gave lectures on child psychoanalysis. There is much to suggest that she was planning a major study based on her work with the children that would rival research being done in the West by Melanie Klein and Anna Freud.¹³

As early as 1924, only a little over a year after returning, Sabina Spielrein nevertheless decided to leave all these commitments and move back home to Rostov. There were problems in working with colleagues at the institute, and she was increasingly aware of political pressure on psychoanalysis. Lenin had died early in the year, and the power struggle had begun among his successors, a battle Trockij soon would lose. The psychoanalytical institute was closed a year later. But Sabina also went to Rostov to repair her family life and be reunited with her husband Pavel Seftel' after ten years of divorce. She got a job as a child psychiatrist concentrating on psychoanalysis.



Éva Spielrein, NÉE LJUBLINSKAJA; ON HER DEATHBED IN 1922

¹³ Personal communication from Professor V. I. Ovčarenko, Moscow.

Isaak was still working enthusiastically on psychotechnique. He held a professorship and, with his team, studied working life from the inside and made guest appearances in various professional roles in order to integrate theory and practice and supplement interviews and measurements with the results of personal experience.

It appears that Sabina did not find her way back to her husband in Rostov. Those who knew them report that he was intellectually her inferior and was conscious of the fact.¹⁴ They had interests in common, however, for he also had a position as a pediatrician. In 1927 Sabina gave birth to another daughter. But in many respects husband and wife lived separate lives. The room for psychoanalysis was by now drastically limited. Stalin had emerged the victor in the power struggle in the Kremlin, and ideological conformity intensified. In 1929 Sabina participated at a psychiatry congress with a rather courageous defense of Freud at a time when he had already been branded a 'bourgeois idealist' and 'reactionary' and the publication of psychoanalytical works had practically ceased.¹⁵ Two years later she published her last contribution, on children's drawings, in the international psychoanalytical journal *Imago* (Spielrein 1931). She seems to have fled more and more into her work as a child psychiatrist at a tuberculosis clinic to escape both her marital problems and Stalinist dogmatism. Henceforth she could practice psychoanalysis only in informal contexts.

The hours were numbered for psychotechnique as well, and it was gradually liquidated. The faithful Isaak nevertheless held out as long as he could. In 1931 he hosted an international psychotechnical congress in Moscow at which he was elected chairman of the entire global association. He entertained plans of founding a psychotechnical university in Moscow, the first of its kind in the world. When his research was later suppressed three charges in particular were leveled at him: Trockij, the principal ideological enemy, had unquestionably also supported psychotechnique, its experimental methods had been focused on the individual rather than the masses, and in addition Isaak, eminently knowledgeable in

¹⁴ Personal communication from Valerija Èl'vova, Moscow.

¹⁵ See Spielrein 1986, 203-12 (with my commentaries on pp. 2611).

foreign languages, had cultivated all too extensive contacts with other countries. In 1935 he was arrested and sentenced to hard labor in the camps.

The letters Isaak Spielrein wrote with appeals to high levels of the party give the impression that he refused to understand anything that was going on in society. The revolution had been his entire life, he swore that he had always followed the general line of the party. Thus the eternal rebel proved to be unswervingly loyal to his executioners (see Kol'cova *et al.* 1990, 127-31). As the terror reached its peak in 1937 Sabina's other brothers Jan (head of the State Institute of Energy) and Emil' were also arrested. In the course of a few months they were all executed as enemies of the people. This was Stalin 'nationalizing' the revolution, for the terror was directed not least at a generation of unheretically devout Jewish world revolutionaries. The stamina of the others, as in the great show trials, proved to be as undermined as Isaak's.

Around the middle of the 1930s Stalin completely crushed child psychology. In 1937 Pavel Seftel' died of a heart attack. Nikolaj Spielrein, Sabina's father, died heartbroken the following year. How did she react to all these shocks? According to eyewitnesses, she lived a very lonely life, old before her time and exhausted yet persevering, with her work as a refuge and her daughters, both very talented in music, as points of light in the darkness.¹⁶

Sabina Spielrein no longer had any contact with the international psychoanalytical movement. She could not have known that the conflict between Jung and Freud had become very charged politically during the 1930s. Jung had early on shown a large measure of understanding for the National Socialist cause and even some fascination with Hitler as a mythical Aryan 'hero'. In the psychiatric bulletin he edited together with Hermann Göring's cousin, Jung in 1934 emphasized the still unrealized psychic potential of 'the young Teutonic peoples'. He considered that they had been insulted by Freud's dismissal of their spiritual depth as 'a morass of banal infantilism'. To Jung's way of thinking Freud had made the mistake of applying Jewish categories to the German psyche, reducing it in the

¹⁶ Personal communications from Svetlana Konjaeva, Rostov, and Valerija El'Vova, Moscow.

light of the Semitic fixation on sex. Jung was finally forced to ask himself: 'Has the formidable phenomenon of National Socialism, on which the whole world gazes with astonished eyes, taught them [i.e. Freud and his followers — *M.L.*] better?'¹⁷

At this point Jung appears to have entertained hopes that his own psychology would achieve a breakthrough in the Nazi state. Freud's writings had just been publicly burned. In 1938 Freud barely managed to escape the Nazis when they occupied Vienna. By that time they had already painted a swastika on his house and interrogated his daughter. Four of his sisters would die in Auschwitz.

In October 1941 Hitler's troops occupied Rostov. In November they were driven back by the Red Army. When they arrived they had not yet shown their true face in the city. Sabina Spielrein refused to flee, even though she and her daughters were given several opportunities to evacuate. She was evidently completely disillusioned with Communism and inclined to dismiss most of the revelations about Nazism as propaganda. She claimed she knew 'German culture' and had nothing to fear.¹⁸ In early 1942 the building in which she and her daughters lived was bombed, and they were forced to seek refuge in a basement. In late July 1942 the Germans again took over Rostov. Soon all the Jews of the city were summoned to a central assembly point. From there they were driven to a spot outside Rostov called 'Snake Ravine', where they were shot and thrown into a mass grave. The last time Sabina and her daughters were seen was in the long Jewish procession being herded away toward the place of execution.¹⁹

Sabina Spielrein seems to have been as unable of seeing through Nazism as her brother Isaak was of seeing through Stalinism. In the end both submitted without resistance to Hitler's and Stalin's genocides. There was a connection here with their earlier choices: Sabina's denial of her Jewish identity and Isaak's intensification of it in his passion for socialist revolution.

Sabina and Isaak Spielrein

¹⁷ See Jung, C.G.: Zur gegenwärtige Lage der Psychotherapie [The state of psycho-therapy today]. *Zentralblatt für Psychotherapie und ihre Grenzgebiete* 1-2 (1934), in: Jung 1978.

¹⁸ Personal communication from Valerija El'vova, Moscow.

¹⁹ Personal communication from Valerija El'vova, Moscow.

lived at the very core of the great psychological insights and horrendous political crimes of our time. Their hopes and ultimate tragedies assume the form of a richly symbolic narrative of Jewish destiny in the totalitarian twentieth century.

GOTHENBURG (translated from Swedish by Charles Rongle)

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