

The real story of Sabina Spielrein: or fantasies vs. facts of a life

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There is a difference between love and lust: love as attachment, affection and admiration and love as libido or sexual desire. The conflict between them can cause emotional disorder, the stuff dramas, whether real or staged, is made of. Dramas entail conflict, external and internal, confrontation, and crisis and are primary. Stories told about dramas are secondary. Narratology deals with recollected narratives of the past, dramatology, a word I coined – with actions and interactions in the present expressed in emotions, speeches, and gestures of face and body. The love and lust between (1) Sabina Spielrein and C.G. Jung and (2) between Freud and Jung were first documented in the Freud Jung letters published in 1974. The first had no consequences for either Freud or Jung. The second resulted in Jung's heresy from Freud's sexual libido theory and their ill-fated breakup.

Spielrein became a scoop in 1980 when her German diary and correspondence with Jung and Freud were published by the Jungian analyst Aldo Carotenuto in his book *A Secret Symmetry: Sabina Spielrein between Jung and Freud*. Even though Carotenuto equivocated whether the Spielrein/Jung involvement was love or lust, the book inspired many to fictionalize and sensationalize their relationship as sexual by psychoanalysts and other writers. In 2002 Roberto Faenza's film *The Soul Keeper* showed nude love scenes and Christopher Hampton's tacky play *The Talking Cure*, with sheets stained by defloration blood became the screenplay for David Cronenberg kitschy creation, with scenes of spanking as foreplay. Hollywood is right: sex sells. As a result, both protagonists became notorious, she as either seductress or victim, he as poster boy of sexual violations during therapy, and a cad and colluder with Freud to boot. The real Spielrein and Jung were trivialized in the tangle of fantasies, fictions, and fibs. One fib was fabricated in John Kerr's book *The Most Dangerous Method*, that the "most important aspect of the Spielrein affair was the change it occasioned in Jung's relationship with Freud," that she "had innocently played the decisive role in fomenting this change." But why is psychoanalytic therapy denounced as dangerous?

The Spielrein life drama

Sheyve, Spielrein's Jewish given name, was the first child born on October 25 1885 to Naftul Aaronovich Szpilrajn (1861-1938) and Khave Mordekhayevna Lublinskaia (1863-1922). As befitting upper middle class assimilated Jews, they changed their Jewish names to Gentile ones: the father renamed Nikolai Arkadievich and the mother Eva Markovna and Sheyve Sabina Nikolayevna.

The parents

married in Rostov-on-Don in 1884, a blooming, bustling city in the south of the Russian Empire. As portrayed by Sabina, "In her youth my mother had loved someone else. They became engaged. And they had to part. Relatives were opposed. My mother felt her life was ruined. Around this time she met my father, was impressed by his intelligence, his firm and noble character, his tender concern for her. In spite of all of this, mother did not love him; three times he was told no. He did not give up. The fourth time she said yes. They became a couple. One could hardly imagine two more different people." These impressions would color Sabina's future love for Jung and the man she married.

Father Nikolai

was born into a family of modest means in Warsaw, then under Russian rule. He first got a Jewish religious education and then a secular one. He spoke Polish, Russian, Hebrew, Yiddish, German, English, French, Greek, and Latin. In Berlin he studied agronomy and became rich as importer/exporter of animal feed and fertilizers. He was often tense, had mood swings but was known in town for his strong personality and original thinking. He never shook hands with people, went outdoors without wearing hat or topcoat, bathed in cold water, was a vegetarian. He admired German culture. As a parent he was both fair and severe and ruled his children with harsh discipline and punishments. The children were taught languages and every day of the week was devoted to speaking German, English or French.

Mother Eva

was as born Lublinskaia, her last name meaning from Lublin, the Polish city I myself was born in. There were important links between the Jewries of Poland and Russia and their rich chassidic heritages. Sabina remembered being told at age 3-4 that her maternal great-grandfather rabbi Lublinskii was highly venerated for healing and prophetic abilities. He predicted the time of his death to the minute. His son Mordechai, her maternal grand-

father, was still alive in 1910. He loved people and gave money to relatives thus none was left for her mother's dowry; but he believed God would provide for it and God did. Even though Mordechai married a Jewess, his first love had been the daughter of a Christian physician later "unconsciously retained in his love of secular science because my mother was supposed to study, only study and thus he sent her to a Christian gymnasium and then to the university." Mother feared falling in love with a gentile. In fact, a respected gentile man from St. Petersburg fell in love with her beauty, she refused him and he shot himself. Eva became a dentist and practiced until 1903 to become mother and housewife in their large still standing townhouse, still standing. In 1887 brother Jan was born, in 1891 brother Isaak, 1895 sister Emilia and 1899 Emil. Mother also spoke other languages, was musical, but her great passion was shopping and spending money.

Sabina's childhood and early adolescence

Mother told Sabina stories about angels and demons, clairvoyance and miracle cures, inspired by the Chasidic folklore. From age five to seven Sabina was educated in a Fröbel type kindergarten in Warsaw learning to speak German and French. "Until the age of 6-7 I had no fear of any devil. I was an example of courage for my brother and made fun of him by jumping at him out of a dark hiding place or telling him horror stories. My parents warned me that one day I would feel anxiety and understand how her brother felt," as indeed happened shortly thereafter. She also "conversed with a spirit. It was an angel sent to her by God, because she was *an unusual person*, a good spirit that helped her and guided her. At first the spirit spoke German, then Russian." Another memory: "I nurtured grandiose fantasies: I was a goddess and ruled over a great empire, I possessed a great power with which I could know everything and achieve everything, even though I did not really believe in its reality, for there was a critic inside me who knew the difference between reality and fantasy." When the siblings were born, she "was curious how babies are made," which was sublimated later as an interest in science. As an adolescent she was "pure" and "naïve," i.e., ignorant of sexuality about which she would first learn as a medical student. Up to the age of 13 she was "extremely religious in spite of her father's derisions."

In fifth grade, age 15, she "took a lively interest in the psychological aspects of religion and arranged to have lessons in Ancient Hebrew so as to read the Bible in the

original.” She had a crush on the history teacher, a man of high intelligence and a sad expression in his black eyes, but with a habit of odd grimaces, who “has opened up to her previously unknown vistas by leaps and bounds. I wanted to make sacrifices for him, to suffer for him. I was looking for a friend to whom I could bare my soul. Later the poor man fell in love with her mother and when she left for Paris he jumped out of a window. Sabina’s other crush was on her paternal uncle Adolf who was also in love with her mother. Asked mother: “Which of them do you really love, your uncle or your teacher?”

In 1901, “while in the 6th grade, after the death of my little sister” Emilia of typhoid “my illness began:” a prolonged grief complicated by social withdrawal and mounting difficulties in relating to her father and mother. In 1904 she graduated with a gold medal from the all-girl Yekaterinskaia Gimnazia and like other rich daughters of Rostov, e.g., Vera Weizmann, the future first lady of Israel, Sabina wanted to study in Switzerland. Instead she first landed in an asylum. As she increasingly lost control of her aggressive impulses (hitting her mother) and unbearable rage at her father, Sabina had to be committed to the Burghölzli Asylum on August 17 1904, not yet 19 years old, to become director Bleuler's *and* his deputy Jung’s patient. Nine months later Spielrein recovered and while still in the hospital started attending medical school, from which she would graduate in 1911 with an 80 page dissertation on the analytic treatment of a schizophrenic patient.

The hospital treatment of Spielrein was not described in the books of Carotenuto and Kerr because the clinical chart was only published in 1994. In fact, Spielrein was an unusual patient: (1) Jung did not give her an admission physical examination; (2) Bleuler made her an assistant in association experiments; and (3) she befriended a 24 year old inpatient named Rähmi, a kindred spirit, who became her friend and patient. The doctor-patient relationship ended in 1905, as she wrote to Freud in 1909: “four and a half years ago Dr. Jung was my doctor, then he became my friend, and finally my ‘poet’, i.e., my beloved.”

From 1905 to 1911 Jung assumed a new function, as her medical school teacher and, with Bleuler, as her dissertation supervisor. The teacher-student relationship was a big blank in English psychoanalytic journals and books until I published my 1999 paper in the IJPA, “Tender love and transference,” later translated into other languages. The

paper was based on Sabina's Russian diary and letters, also first published in a 1994 in German dissertation, plus unpublished letters I found in 1998 in a Geneva archive.

Jung and his patient

In the hospital, true to her mischievous nature, Sabina acted out all manner of pranks to test the nurses and Jung, never Bleuler. Jung's note in January 1905: "Since the last abreaction markedly improved. Last night, during the evening visit, was reclining on the sofa in her usual oriental, voluptuous manner, with a sensuous, dreamy expression on her face." Like beauty, seduction is in the eyes of the seducer. June 1, 1905: "Pat. is discharged. She now lives independently in town and attends university lectures."

In September 1906 Jung penned a report addressed to Freud and "given to Mrs. Spielrein for possible use": "*I have analyzed the clinical condition almost completely with the help of your method and, early on, with a favorable result. In the course of her treatment the patient had the misfortune to fall in love with me. She continues to rave blatantly to her mother about this love and her secret spiteful glee in scaring her mother is not the least of her motives. Therefore the mother would like, if needed, to send her to another doctor, with which I naturally concur.*" This report never reached Freud but moved Spielrein to write to Freud in 1909 requesting help with Jung.

Later in 1906 Jung writes to Freud: "I am currently treating an hysteric with your method. Difficult case, a 20-year old Russian girl, ill for 6 years. I should be extremely grateful if you would tell me in a few words what you think of this story." One Freud's responses: "essentially, one might say, healing is effected by love."

Jung's letter was a lie, for he was not treating her in 1906, as no fees were paid either to the hospital or privately, nor did Spielrein need treatment. In December, reacting to Freud's analysis of his dream, Jung writes: "the failure of the rich marriage: my wife is rich. I was turned down when I first proposed, later I was accepted. I am happy with my wife in every way, no sexual failure but a social one; sexual restraint is a convenient screen hiding an illegitimate sexual wish that had better not see the light of day," and it is about Spielrein. Socially wife was unavailable due to pregnancies and childbirths. Freud missed it. In 1907 Jung lied once again when he presented her at a congress in Amsterdam as a case of "psychotic hysteria." In 1905 Bleuler wrote to Zurich University: since "Miss Spielrein is not psychotic, for she was admitted here for

treatment of nervousness with hysterical symptoms, we have no reservation in recommending her for matriculation.”

Jung and his medical student

Jung never mentioned to Freud that he had been Spielrein teacher for six years and thus an object of admiration and affection, as detailed in her Russian diaries and letters. In 1905 Sabina writes to mother: “To-morrow I am going to the medical library and will borrow [Eduard von] Hartmann’s “[Philosophy of] The Unconscious”, which I accidentally saw in the catalog. Since I saw this book at Junga’s [pet name], I believe it is worth reading. I visited him today. He comforted me about Remi; in his opinion her condition has improved markedly. Junga told me that I should not be wearing a hat with holes in it and that I should also have my shoes mended. I replied that I had run out of money, but that I had already received so much that I could not ask my parents for more. Then he made a proposal to make me a loan of 100 francs and write you about it. But as I objected vigorously, he forced me to accept 10 francs from him for the hat and the repair of the shoes. Naturally, I shall soon pay him this money back. He is coming to visit me on Friday (1st of September) at 3 o’clock. If only I could only learn to cook borscht before then! Today Jung and I went on rounds at our Hospital. There is number of women for whom I am an object of admiration! So there, you can see what kind of a person he is, my Junga.” In 1906 she expresses her admiration for his “colossal intelligence and character and lecture, which was wonderfully beautiful (not only in the scientific but also in the ethical sense). There you were, able to create so much enthusiasm and feeling -- how is it possible? *You are endowed with a wonderful potential energy and you could achieve much more than you actually do.* -- If you could only know how ethically beautiful you were then (when you treated the patients with so much care and love)! ... I was completely transformed, soft and warm towards people. Even though I went home in a flood of tears, I was calm and strong in my decision -- one doesn’t need anything else, it all comes from *poetry*. I love you too much, and therefore perhaps I imagine something that is not there (or perhaps it is there?) (for example, that you despise me, that you do not want that I should stalk you, etc.). Each time that causes me emotional storms and self-torture. For this reason I wanted to leave Zurich for at least three years, but I have found no better university.”

Tender love turns stormy

In 1908 Jung writes to Sabina vacationing with family in Rostov: “You have come in for a great bonus of friendship along with the heartfelt wish that your life should be successful and with a minimum of goals that serve no purpose and the pain connected with them. Never lose the hope that work done with love will lead to a good end. I can only write a short letter today because I have JUST returned home very tired from a long walk. Please keep writing to me at the Burghölzli. With heartfelt love Your J[ung].”

Mother opened another Jung’s letter received in Rostov:

“His letter calmed me down. It expresses deep friendship, lightly colored by something else, which is quite natural. He often thought of you, of your soul. He is probably in the throes of a conflict and his counsel to you and to himself is not to let the feeling of love grow but to suppress it, though not to kill it completely. Have I got it right? He who is able to do it will be victorious, or else will be out in left field. I am sure he will be victorious. He writes that this is necessary for the sake of his loved ones, his wife and children. I like the tone of his letter very much, especially the limits which he places on you and himself. It seems to me that it could not be any better. You have in him a person devoted to you, with a touch of love (more than that is *not permitted* and you have to remain content with that), a person for whom you have profound respect and appreciation, which you also have from him, and what more do you need? You should be happy because it is more than you had wished for. Had you wished to cause him to divorce his wife, then it would be a different matter, but if not, then you must not go any further. The important thing is to realize that he could be taken, but it is not worth it. You cannot have it better than the way it is. Do not torment yourself, suppress your feelings so that they do not make you suffer and continue meeting him as a friend. He also needs you, but he is not suffering, on the contrary, he is getting better. Please, please, do not tell him I opened the letter. As far as the jam is concerned, tell him that you brought along fruit for him but were unable to bring more. Rent a lavish apartment, invite him and write to me with all the details. You can talk to him about love but remain unyielding, you only stand to gain from it. For the time being, do not hide you feelings.”

In her response Sabina differentiates between love as a bond and love as lust: “That I love him is as firmly determined as that he loves me. He is for me a father and I am a mother for him, or, more precisely, the woman who has acted as the first substitute for the mother (his mother came down with hysteria when he was two years old); and he became so attached to the woman [Helen Preiswerk] that when she was absent he saw her in hallucinations, etc, etc. Why he fell in love with his wife? Let us say, his wife is “not completely” satisfactory, and now he has fallen in love with me, a hysteric; and I fell in love with a psychopath, and is it necessary to explain why? I have never seen my father as normal. His insane striving “to know himself” is best expressed in Jung for whom his scientific activity is more important than anything in this world An uneven dynamic character coupled with a highly developed sensibility, a need to suffer and to be compassionate to the extreme. You can do to him and get from him anything you want with love and tenderness. Twice in a row he became so emotional in my presence that tears just rolled down his face! Then he starts reproaching himself endlessly for his feelings, for example, that I am something sacred for him, that he is ready to beg for forgiveness, etc. Remember how dear daddy was apologizing to you exactly in the same manner! It is unpleasant for me to quote all those self-reproaches he addressed to himself, because we are both either equally guilty or not guilty. This conversation took place almost two weeks ago and we both felt literally tormented, unable to utter a word, etc. We stood still in the most tender poetry. Will I ever in my life forgive him for what he had concocted with me, will he ever forgive me for what I have done to him! The difference is that I know that for him scientific activity is above all else in life and that he will be able to bear everything for the sake of science. The question is only how my intellect is going to relate to this whole story and the trouble is that the intellect does not know how to relate. The question for me is whether to surrender with all my being to this violent vortex of life and to be happy while the sun is shining, or, when the gloom descends, to let the feeling become transferred to a child and science, i.e., the scientific activity that I love so much? It is very possible that I will fall in love again and will have success, i.e., I will find myself a husband. -- But don't you

forget that this is still very far in the future and therefore, do not worry. *So far we have remained at the level of poetry that is not dangerous, and we shall remain at that level, perhaps until the time I will become a doctor, unless circumstances will change.* I am only writing to you now because I cannot feel happy without a mother's blessing, that is, without you approving my actions and that you should delight as long as I am well."

Poetry meant hugs and kisses.

A heart-rending appeal is penned by Jung towards the end of 1908:

"I regret a great deal and regret my weakness and curse fate that is menacing me. ... You will laugh when I tell you that lately I am **constantly flooded with early childhood memories** [Jung's emphasis] ... Will you forgive me that I am who I am? That I am thereby offending you and forgetting my duty as physician towards you? ... My misfortune is that I cannot live without the joy of stormy, ever-changing love in my life. ... Since the last scene I have completely lost my sense of security towards you. ... I need definite agreements so that I do not need to worry about your intentions. Otherwise my work will suffer, and that seems to me more important than the momentary problems and suffering in the present. Give me at this moment something back of the love and patience and unselfishness that I was able to give to you during the time of your illness. Now I am the sick one. ..." (pp. 195—196).

The roles were reversed: the former patient became his therapist. She wanted marriage and a child, the rich gentile would never divorce his wife and marry Jewess Sabina.

The Skandal in 1909

In March 1909 Jung again wrote anonymously about Spielrein: "A woman patient, whom years ago I pulled out of a very sticky neurosis with unstinting effort has kicked up a vile **skandal** solely because I denied myself the pleasure of giving her a child. I have always acted the gentleman towards her. Meanwhile I have learnt an unspeakable amount of marital wisdom, for until now I had a totally inadequate idea of my polygamous components despite all self-analysis. Now these painful salutary insights will be of the greatest advantage to me in later life. The relationship with my wife has gained enormously in assurance and depth."

Jung lied twice: The minor lie is Jung's exaggerating the "*Skandal*," which in German means a row, a noisy private altercation, whereas in English 'scandal' means public offense and disgrace. The major lie is Jung's continuing coverup of his marital problems: Emma Jung had threatened divorce three times, first in 1906. He admits to suffering from a "rather sensitive conscience, don't feel clean," but does not ask Freud to be his analyst but uses him as a phony supervisor of a non-existent patient. It is only after Freud confronted Jung after Sabina's complaint did Jung confess in a fit of panic and paranoia:

"Spielrein is the person I wrote you about. She was, of course, systematically planning my seduction which I considered inopportune. Now she is seeking revenge. Lately she has been spreading a rumor that I shall soon get a divorce from my wife and marry a certain girl student, which has thrown not a few of my colleagues into a flutter. What she is now planning is unknown to me. Since I knew from experience that she would immediately relapse, I prolonged the relationship over the years and was trying to treat gratis (!) with untold tons of patience, even abusing our friendship for that purpose." Jung also confesses his predilection for Jewish women: "my first visit to Vienna had a very long unconscious aftermath" (which, as he told Spielrein, "meant that he had transferred his libido from Frä. Freud [Mathilde] to me"); then the Jewess popped up in another form, the shape of my patient."

The *Skandal* was a storm in the teapot: "the rumor buzzing about me did not emanate from her and that she freed herself from the transference and suffered no relapse, that regrettably, he "was "largely to blame for the high-flying hopes of *my former* patient .Caught in my delusion that I was the victim of the sexual wiles of my patient, I imputed all the other wishes and hopes entirely to my patient without seeing the same thing in myself. My action was a piece of knavery."

In summary: there was never a boundary violation and whether they had sex or not is nobody's business. As he rightly wrote to Spielrein's mother, they were both adults and if she wanted him as Sabina's doctor, the fee was ten francs per session. Jung had casual sex with other women while the poetry continued well into 1911. After Sabina's

departure Jung treated a new patient Antonia Wolff, who would become his mistress and accepted as a member of the family.

The epilogue

After graduation, in 1911, Dr. Spielrein became the second woman member of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society following her lecture on the death instinct, which would become her 1912 landmark paper, “destruction as a cause of becoming,” praised by Jung. “I am surprised by the abundance of excellent ideas that anticipate a variety of my own,” and acknowledged by Freud in 1920 as a forerunner of his death instinct theory.

In the winter of 1911/12 she lectured in Rostov on psychoanalysis and there met a Jewish doctor, Pavel (Fayvel) Naumovich Sheftel whom she married on 1st June 1912. She gave birth to daughter Irma Renata on 17 December 1913, in Berlin. In 1914, with the outbreak of WW I, Pavel Sheftel was drafted and went back to Russia while Spielrein stayed in Europe with daughter for the next nine years, working and practicing, finally settling in Geneva, where she analyzed Piaget. The family fortune was lost in the 1917 revolution and Spielrein became impoverished, repeatedly complaining to Freud that he did not refer patients to her, incurring this rebuke: "You have also become *meshugge* and with the same symptoms like your predecessor [Jung]. And your argument according to which I have not yet sent you any patients?"

In 1922 her mother died. In 1923, yielding to calls from parents, brothers and husband, as well as to Freud's urging her “to accomplish important work at the side of Wulff and Ermakov" in Moscow, she returned to Russia. In spite of the mantle of Freud and successes in Moscow, e.g., lecturing and teaching at the State Psychoanalytic Institute, as head of the section on child psychology at Moscow University and had an appointment at the State Psychoanalytic Institute and co-worker at the State Children's Home and Laboratory “International Solidarity,” Spielrein abruptly returned to Rostov to her family and husband. From 1914 to 1923 Dr. Sheftel had lived with Olga Snitkova with whom he fathered daughter Nina. Sheftel moved back with Sabina in 1924 and in June 1926 their second daughter Eva was born. The Sheftels lived in three rooms in the rebuilt carriage house of the old family town house. There was a couch in one of the rooms but practicing psychoanalysis after 1925, when Stalin began repressing psychoanalysis, would have been risky. Spielrein worked as school medical psychologist

(pedologist) and gave the daughters an excellent education. It was a hard life, Sabina aged rapidly, a bent woman, wearing old-fashioned clothes and shoes. The husband died of a heart attack in 1937. Thereafter Spielrein made a friendship pact with Olga Snitkova to take care of each other's children in case one predeceased the other. Her middle brother Isaak was interned in Stalin's concentration camp in 1935 never to return; brothers Jan and Emil were shot as enemies of the state in 1938. Father Nikolai died of grief in 1938. Isaak's wife and daughter Menikha survived in Central Asia. Menikha Isaakovna (1916—2000), a physiologist and biochemist, was discovered in 1982 in Moscow by the Swede Magnus Ljunggren. She had a perfect command of German. Emil's father-in-law, wife, and son Evald escaped from Rostov and survived. I met Evald Shpilain in Moscow in 2003 and his son Vladimir Shpilrain in New York: he is professor of mathematics at CUNY.

Menikha Isaakovna wrote to me in 1994:

“In November 1937 I decided to travel to Rostov, to my grandfather. Sabina asked me whether I believed what was being written in our newspapers about the cruelties perpetrated by Germans. She added, she had lived for many years in Germany and could not believe what is being printed in our newspapers, since she knows the high level of the German culture, of the people who gave the world Goethe, Heine, Schiller and many well known and outstanding people. I told her that I believe what was written about the Germans, I told us many stories and gave us underground literature from Germany, publications with descriptions of Nazi crimes. Obviously, I was unable to convince her. Cut off from contacts with the West, Spielrein did not know what was going on in Germany nor was she aware of Jung's boundless admiration for the Nazis, inspired by Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, aired on Radio Berlin in 1933

The first occupation of Rostov during WW II lasted for 8 days in November of 1941 whereupon the Germans were repulsed by the Red Army. On July 27 1942 the Germans reoccupied the city. Last time Spielrein was seen in August marching with her daughters in a long column of some 27,000 Jews towards the immense Zmeyovskaia ravine, on the outskirts of Rostov: all were gunned down and thrown into the mass grave, where a museum now stands. Some commentators saw in Spielrein's staying there as acting out her death instinct, a case of wild analysis, trivializing her martyrdom. In the

hospital she wrote her last will: on her grave an oak be planted in her memory with a sign “I was once a human being and my name was Sabina Spielrein” while another inscription read: “And let young life play at the entrance of the tomb and let indifferent nature shine with outer splendor”.

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