



Beginnings - Farewells - Beginnings

(From Prejudice to Awareness.
A Living-Learning Process in Sketches.)
By RUTH C. COHN

Miss Cohn is on the VOICES Editorial Board and a repeated contributor. She wrote about herself, "History: Berlin—World War I—revolution, scarce food, water, electricity superimposed upon a background of wealth and two streams of culture fused into one—born into a German-Jewish family . . . Struggle between much closeness and much separation. Early poetry to bridge the gap . . . Hitler—reality gone terror. Switzerland 1933 . . . Psychoanalysis as a passionate hope . . . U.S.A. 1941"—She received her M.A. at T.C. Columbia in 1944, and is on the group therapy faculties at NPAP, Postgraduate Center M.H. She is director of the Workshop Institute for Living-Learning. Her interests include fusing psychoanalytic and experiential concepts, and conveying the essence of psychotherapy through artistic media.—333 Central Park West, New York, N. Y. 10025.

Foreword: (A Footnote as Headnote: Tribute to VOICES)

Recently I was informed of the conditional acceptance of a theoretical article which I had written for a professional journal. The condition was that I "objectify" my "I-style" into a "We-style." This author agreed to comply—however, was granted the permission that she express her point of view with regard to the importance of stating oneself per "I" rather than with the editorial "We." This author then proceeded to change all I-corrupted sentences into proper objectivity as she appreciated the publication of her article in the relevant and important journal. Thus, real objectivity which includes the I-perspective of all observations yielded to pseudo-objective speech, and reduced both scientific value and human interest.

I, I, I, praise you, you, you, VOICES as the Beginning of a new era where the we of the VOICES-population do not have to convert our experiences and thoughts into the transparent Emperor's Clothes of pseudo-objectivity. Glorious

I's from whom the only trustworthy We-society can arise—the We-society which consists of individuals and not of unidentified projections which split groups and nations into “We” and “They.”

Glorious I's, glorious VOICES—I praise you and its past and present editors—John Warkentin, Tom Leland, Vin Rosenthal—and the spirited people backing a publication which marks the Beginning of sensible communication about you's and me's—about human ideas, experiences, dreams, concepts concerning growth, development, sickness and healing—Thank you for a scientific, artistic, Living-Learning exchange of voices!

I was five, six, seven and all childhood years old when I lived under the roof of a four-story building in Berlin. My room was in the rear of the house which overlooked my own school's playground. I owned a little balcony with five flower boxes. The school yard owned a Japanese almond tree which, in the late spring, was a fluffy pink cloud fallen from evening skies to the feet of my balcony. Berlin, post-World-War-I, owned little flowering enchantment. The public parks featured potatoes and turnips, sometimes charitably bordered by pansies and forget-me-nots. To pick these was as forbidden as to open my parents' bedroom door.

The flower boxes were mine. Early in the spring I poked holes into their sandy soil and put into them black round pills, called sweet pea seeds, and brown red-dotted beans. Some weeks later I added tan sticks for the climbing-up living greens. From their stems fluttered grabby-shoed tiny plant feet toward these sticks and the strings which I knotted from pole to pole in parallel lines—to give support to the blossoming vines.

Yet my summer joy about scarlet red fire beans and pink, lilac, white fragrant sweet peas never was quite as fulfilling as the May-happiness during my flowerbox rounds from three to five P.M.—while my parents napped, closed door, in the livingroom. In total concentration I watched my earthy property—waiting for the moment which always came: a piece of soil rose upward, broke loose, and a little dark-hatted soft yellowgreen arrow-head pushed outward from its sheltering birth place.

These moments, repeated over and over again—longed-for in winter cactus afternoons—introduced me into the ecstasy of all living-learning.

Vin, today's new Editor, you gave me the word “Beginnings” for your first issue of VOICES. It electrified me when I heard it, coming through the door of my New York City apartment, inhabited by you and some of my other friends during the AAP Convention while I was on my work trip in Germany.

There was your word Beginnings welcoming me after my journey into the country of my ancestors and my childhood which I had shunned for thirty-

six years—twenty-three of them by my own choice. I had traveled to my homeland, where I did not know a single person anymore.

Over there I had been given an enthusiastic response by 500 people^o whose panel on Sensitivity Training I had chaired for a session. Maybe this response came forth for sharing what I had learned in the United States; maybe for acquainting them with my concepts for groupleading—challenging 500 people to become a group of interacting, speaking and listening persons rather than a frustrated audience; maybe for integrating a group of dissenting students into the discussion; maybe for being Jewish—having been German and having come to share.

I had received love and warmth from a group of sixteen psychoanalysts in a workshop on the Theme-Centered Interactional Method. I had lived with and not quite lived through the sadness of our Farewell—

And there, into my homecoming, there was your word Beginnings exciting me who had hardly descended from 3600 vertical feet above the ocean toward the harvest of lights of New York City.

The nine hour travel had been short in the mourning of leaving and the kaleidoscopic whirl of memory-and-thought splinters against hours of a pastel dusk. It had culminated in a flash of sudden insight following a weeklong, increasingly disquieting search: I had experienced myself in Germany throughout admiration, success and warmth as happy, thoughtful and functioning, however, like behind a milky glass screen—lacking the sense of “this is I, my Self.” Questioning this mini-depersonalization phenomenon I noticed the lack of the playful train of rushing-by words and colorful picturettes which usually blink on and off in my mind’s space before the integrating power of goal consciousness puts them into focus as concepts, thoughts, plans or intuitions. My mind and I had been separate—proper, reactive and industrious—yet we had not played with each other or the people we met.

Sometime in the middle of the workshop week some participants had asked me whether they were different from my American groups. My spontaneous uncensored response was: “I do not know—I do know that *I* am.” And on reflection: yes there were differences between these two German and the American groups I knew. Both, the 500 people at the convention as well as the small workshop seemed to have radar-like tentacles for the slightest possibility of authoritarianism like Rules of a Game. Ground rules were refuted with a passion which struck me as a counter-dictatorial syndrome of a people fighting for “it shall never happen again”—Correspondingly, once the group understood that the ground rules served democracy rather than the whim of the leader, their enthusiasm for the Theme-Centered Interactional Method with its individualistic approach of “be your own chairman” was intense. (One of the participants of

^oD.A.G.C. Convention, Bonn 1969
(Deutsche Association für Gruppentherapie und Gruppendynamik)

the large convention group said: "I know why you asked each person to take time to withdraw into himself and to reflect what he wants to learn and share here; you wanted to prevent mass hypnosis."—This perspective of my approach had never come up in discussions with Americans or in England.)

My experience of being in a plastic-bag confinement puzzled and disquieted me throughout the workshop week. I discussed this with some participants without any apparent progress in understanding.

Suddenly, high up in the sky—belted into the orange seat of my imaginary homeland's Swissair—I was struck by the recognition that my estrangement had been caused by closing my mind against a breakthrough of irrational prejudice—

During the last session of the Theme-Centered Interactional Workshop in Frankfurt this airborne insight had been germinated. The theme of that session had been: "Die Bewaeltigung thes Abschieds-Heute, Gestern, Morgen" (The working through of farewell—today, yesterday, tomorrow).

The session before this last one I had watched with happiness and motherly pride a young one-week-trained colleague lead an interactional workshop with the theme "Reevaluation of the German Mark (D.M.)—can I profit from it?" This theme had been chosen to demonstrate the effectiveness of the method in classrooms with "objective studies" such as economics.

A more seasoned colleague led the farewell group. "Die Bewaeltigung des Abschieds-Heute, Gestern, Morgen" he said slowly and meaningfully into the farewell-reality of the group.

I heard his words and shivered. My torso disappeared from awareness. My legs and arms were reduced to icy feet and hands. A shortened neck carried a faceless skull. I dimly realized that I simultaneously wanted to hide and to be recognized with my sadness. Tears warmed my eyes and cooled my cheeks.

The group's voices: some would see each other soon again—no need to be upset. Some were sad to leave now—but looking forward to rejoining their families. The new ideas would fertilize their work, their teaching teachers, their working with patients and patient groups, their charring committees. Some looked forward to solitude and integration of the multitude of stimuli. Farewell and Beginning fused.

The sound of voices got stuck in my ears and never reached me. I was back in Zurich. It was 1933. I had just trembled through the German Border Exit Control. Now I stood in safety at the fence of a public school playground. Kids running, shouting, playing. In the middle of the schoolyard a teacher, smoking, talking—while boys and girls stood there right with him, giggling, hands in pockets, eating apples. The teacher spoke with them *as if* children were real people—

On my projective screen inside appeared my own childhood's schoolyard in Germany—teachers walking back and forth in the center—an age-and-status-gap away from the marching-around girls who curtsied when their teachers' eyes focused on their passing-by knees.

There, at that fence, dissolving into shaky pieces of wire in the flow of my tears—I gave up Germany—long before Hitler's "Final Solution." And I gave up the German language to speak Swiss with the Swiss and to join their contempt for the "Chaibe Duetsche" (the damn Germans).

And on my rolling-up microfilm of some years later appeared a sunshiny balcony door in Zurich—locked tight by billions of snowflakes which had formed a powdery, fluffy, unmovable resistance. Inside the room: brilliant light flooded the covered-up desk, the copper kettles with hot water, the white sheets and a meaningful bunch of lilacs. Next to me an excited pale husband and a grouchy all-knowing, history-old midwife. And I on my raised bed felt through the awareness of waves of serene pain all my childhood Mays' happy happinesses, culminating in being soil myself—opening up to my own little sprout—letting go and meeting her. Farewell to symbiotic joy, beginning of the many Farewells and Beginnings of being mother and child—letting go and meeting her and letting go again and again and again.

(Some days later we received a birth certificate that "on February 2nd, 1940, a female nationless foreigner had been born in Zurich.")

Ruth—you are in today's pain of farewell?"—The group leader had given me the comfort of empathic timing. So had the group.

"I have icy hands and icy feet. It's like being cold and dying. Each goodbye is like a little death, a piece of me dying—

"So many friends and relatives and other refugees traveled through Zurich—1933-1941—I spent so much time in consulates and at the airport—They left for Australia, Africa, South America, San Domingo, Cuba—I knew I would never see them again—I had an airport phobia for years.

"Then we too left Zurich, in 1941 during the war. The United States gave us the right to work and to become citizens—which Switzerland never would—I knew I would never want to root anywhere again—except for in the love and cause of people—never, never again in soil—like trees—anywhere."

The group was silent. Franz, the group leader, accepted tenderly what I said. Anne, his wife, seemed to cry with me. And suddenly unspoken words ripped through me: "Franz and Anne are Jewish."—I pushed these crazy words away—but they rolled back in again and again.

Franz and Anne were not Jewish. I knew this. They were people I would have chosen as friends anywhere, anytime. But I felt a depth of alignment with them beyond reality; a feeling of belonging as if we had shared our childhood,

or had depended on each other for life. I could not bear the idea of leaving them. The pain of separation—it seemed to encompass the never conscious pain of leaving my family and friends in 1933—giving up my childhood and the proximity of all people I loved; giving up part of myself—my language of familiarity and poetry, the soil, the culture and the pattern of living which had been my family's for generations.

"Franz and Anne are Jewish." Being Jewish or not had not seemed to matter in my childhood's cosmopolitan home, nor in Switzerland as a student, nor in New York in my melting-pot of friends.

Yet—there had been the shock of Jewish benches. Jewish expulsion. Jewish extermination. There had been an estrangement from other students at the Swiss universities, because I was concerned with the fate of refugees and psychoanalysis while they worked for their degrees. There were subtle ties to childhood glimmers of prejudice—the looking down on "goyim" as less trustworthy, less intelligent, less "hip"—Oh no, not all of them—but—. (There was a bitter joke in Hitler's times: "There are seventeen-million good Jews in Germany—in reality there were only six-million Jews altogether—because every Nazi knows one good Jew." This prejudice—had it been reversible? Were the Christians in our assimilated family and circle of friends exceptions—like the "good Jews"?)

There was, in April 1941, the traveling in a locked train through unoccupied France and an Odyssey of obstacles through Spain to Lisbon—we were *Jews* now, not Germans or Swiss or Americans—And there was—throughout the years of my studies—the torturous question: "Can we not use psychoanalysis and psychodynamic knowledge to help community groups rather than individual patients? Can groups overcome sado-masochistic fixations, illusions, prejudices?" (Behind my work in initiating and refining the Theme-Centered Interactional Method I have acted under the driving force of this question and the incessant awareness of "Here but for the grace of God go I.")

Returning from my workshop trip from Frankfurt, the Swiss jet plane followed the sunset until it finally caught up with the darkened space. There was an eerie quality about going home Westward. I found myself thinking in French and Swiss German—as if to avoid making a choice between my two "real" languages: German and English.

"Franz and Anne are Jewish"—Close to falling asleep a shattering memory broke into my awareness: A black woman in a Black-and-White Confrontation Group crying out to the group: "No matter what anyone says: Ruth is black!"

"Franz and Anne are Jewish"—I had made them Jewish for my loving sake. I made them non-Aryan, non-German, "one of my kind." I had understood this connection in the black woman's outcry as "Her Thing." She could not give herself permission to feel close to me as long as I was white. I had carefully sorted out this fact with her—without a shadow of awareness that she and I alike shared the sediments of group contempt.

The Frankfurt workshop group had worked on subjects such as group therapy techniques and philosophy, group leading and group norms, groups in conflict and individual disturbances, which included "secret agendas" such as my desire to find out what my colleagues had experienced and done throughout the Hitler years. However, the one pertinent theme which would have punctured my "plastic-bag" had not come to my mind, nor had it been suggested by others: "Prejudice—mine and yours—Awareness and Change."

Beginnings—seeds dying, leaving shells behind while plants grow lightwards. Farewells—containing death and the beginning of another life and another death.

Prejudice: Once necessary to safeguard the sanctity of the family, the tribe, the nation—love for one group and hatred for another—will we now ascend through living-learning-loving channels toward the *One-World* of Survival of Man as Man? □

As a patient gets more and more healthy in psychotherapy, the relationship approaches that of a natural relationship between two human beings; and gradually the doctor-patient relationship is no longer doctor-patient at all, but is a person-to-person relationship . . . I think the important thing in therapy is to take this little bit of the intense relationship and to make the patient able to continue the good behavior and the love in other relationships where he can transfer what has happened in therapy. The transference for me really is the transference from therapy to the world at large, and this involves the ability to accept tenderness, feeling, and relationship with other human beings.

—Henry Guze