



PROJECT MUSE®

---

A Few More Thoughts on Sergei Pankejeff

W. Craig Tomlinson

American Imago, Volume 76, Number 4, Winter 2019, pp. 533-542 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/aim.2019.0039>

AMERICAN  
**IMAGO**

PSYCHOANALYSIS AND  
THE HUMAN SCIENCES  
VOLUME 76 NUMBER 4 WINTER 2019

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/746938>

## A Few More Thoughts on Sergei Pankejeff

I would like to begin by quoting my colleague Lila Kalinich, who wrote the following in connection with a seminar on the Wolf Man some 30 years ago:

I can think of few fates worse than having one's life and psychology reviewed and re-interpreted by generations of psychoanalysts. To me, this is a vision of Hell that rivals both Dante and Steven Spielberg, a prison of mindless pretensions encasing a life. Yet such was the destiny of the Wolf-Man, Freud's most famous case. Since the inception of his analysis in 1910, his pimples, bowel movements, sexual preferences and dreams have preoccupied scores of Freudian friends and foes. (1994, p. 167)

While there may be an element of humorous hyperbole here, we are indebted to Kalinich for reminding us of the very human dimension of the experience of Sergei Pankejeff. Her comments capture something important about the fate of this icon of psychoanalysis, both during his long life, and since his death in 1979, almost 70 years from the time he began his famous analysis with Freud. His analysis and second treatment with Freud in the late teens, his treatment with Ruth Mack Brunswick in the 1920s, and his long friendship and follow-up with Muriel Gardiner have been amply detailed elsewhere. His longevity provided six decades more interaction with various members of the analytic community. Subsequent to his death, several generations of clinicians, literary critics, and others have now had the opportunity to interpret and re-interpret his life and psychology, as well as Freud's famous treatment of him. All psychoanalysts, in a sense, are indebted to him, and as Kalinich suggests, we have not always been as respectful or appreciative as we might have been.

Even without the Wolf Man's long afterlife in the psychoanalytic community, Freud's longest and most famous case history would still hold special place. As Blum noted in 1974, Freud "would never again provide clinical material of such sweep and depth." I would argue that this is precisely the point: As we know, Freud didn't write very many case histories. Still fewer did he write of people he had actually analyzed. Furthermore, he wrote virtually all of them with an important motive of driving home a theoretical point. He essentially stopped writing detailed case histories after this one, for the remaining two and a half decades of his life, during which he wrote profusely. So, Freud provided us with precious little clinical material on the whole, and no longer case histories at all that incorporated the momentous changes ushered in by his structural theory, second dual instinct theory, and important re-considerations of anxiety and defenses in the over twenty years from the late teens to 1939. We are left with the reports of his analysands, like Abram Kardiner, to glean any idea of his actual clinical technique during Freud's last decades, when his theory and psychoanalysis had evolved drastically, and definitively, away from the analysis of symptoms and in the more complex direction of character and defense analysis, so central to all psychoanalytic clinical activity since. Thus, with the Wolf Man it is precisely the experience of reading material of such immediacy and depth that still captivates us. This case history offers both the most immediate window, and in some ways the last, into the actual experience of an extended two-person clinical encounter in Freud's consulting room.

Rereading the case again, I am struck by the hints of immediacy between the lines of Freud's text. It is easy to become lost in the content of the Wolf Man's analysis, but part of what captivates us are the many suggestions of the aliveness of the encounter scattered throughout. Here is one example:

Personal peculiarities in the patient and a national character that was foreign to ours made the task of feeling one's way into his mind a laborious one. The contrast between the patient's agreeable and affable personality, his acute intelligence and his nice-mindedness on the

one hand, and his completely unbridled instinctual life on the other, necessitated an excessively long process of preparatory education and this made a general perspective more difficult. (Freud, 1918, p. 104)

What was the preparatory education, we wonder? How would we understand what we would presumably characterize today as more “supportive” interventions? How did they affect the analytic process? Whatever Freud meant by “preparatory education,” we sense its immediacy. It most certainly involved a very human and very direct encounter, one that enabled all else that followed.

The Wolf Man case is full of this kind of reference, and I believe that is an important part of its hold on us, with its tantalizing suggestion of the immediacy of psychoanalytic clinical work as it was in the process of being invented.

Pankejeff’s analysis and second treatment with Freud in the late teens, his treatments with Ruth Mack Brunswick in the 1920s, and his long friendship and follow-up with Muriel Gardiner have been detailed elsewhere, notably in Gardiner’s book *The Wolf-Man by the Wolf-Man* (1971). His long life provided six decades more interaction with various members of the analytic community. Subsequent to his death in 1979, several more generations of clinicians, historians, and other observers have now had the opportunity to interpret and re-interpret his life and psychology, as well as Freud’s famous treatment of him.

I would like to focus on one source of information that until recently we have not, however, had access to; namely, the extensive interviews with Pankejeff undertaken by Kurt Eissler. As far as I can determine from the holdings in the Sigmund Freud Archives at the Library of Congress, Kurt Eissler, the Archives founder and first director, began interviewing Pankejeff in 1952. These interviews were part of Eissler’s massive efforts to assemble and preserve documents, information and oral history related to both Freud and the psychoanalytic movement to that time. As with so much of Eissler’s work, however, access to these interviews was until recently restricted by Eissler, sometimes for nearly 200 years. Eissler interviewed Pankejeff, almost always on tape, dozens of times between 1952

and 1960, and had the tapes transcribed, producing several thousand pages of manuscript. Transcripts are available for multi-session interviews conducted in the summers of 1952, 1953, 1954, 1955, 1957, 1958, and 1960. As part of the goal of the Sigmund Freud Archives to make available as much of the holdings as possible to scholars, the transcripts of all of these interviews were derestricted at the end of 2016, and with generous support from the Library of Congress and the Polonsky Foundation, digitized and made available online.

A few words about this newly de-restricted material: From a current perspective, my initial impression, based on what I have read so far, is that perhaps the most astonishing revelation of the Eissler interviews is that anyone would ever have thought they needed to be kept secret for 200 years. For one thing, when Eissler tells Pankejeff that the interviews will be locked up, Pankejeff is clearly quite disappointed. This is consistent with everything we know about him. He was eager to tell his story to the world, as he had been since the beginning, first with several prominent psychiatrists, including Kraepelin, then with Freud, then with Ruth Mack Brunswick, then in the interim with Muriel Gardiner, Frederic Weil and others among the analytic community. As we have long known from the follow-up that Brunswick and Gardiner provided, Pankejeff's identity and core sense of self in later life was powerfully influenced by his standing as Freud's most famous surviving patient, both within the psychoanalytic community that long supported him clinically, financially, socially, and more broadly. (Recall that in later life Pankejeff was apparently in the habit of answering his phone, "Wolf Man speaking.") In fact, some of the early interviews in 1952 are clearly first drafts of the memoirs that Pankejeff was so eager to complete, and that Gardiner eventually published. He had thought about the narrative he wants to relate in great detail, and seems at times perhaps to be either reading from a prepared text or recounting one he has been working on.

At this point I want to be clear that I cannot at this juncture attempt either a complete summary, nor a comprehensive appraisal, but only an engaged introduction to Eissler's extant interviews with Pankejeff. For one thing, the material is voluminous. It is not even clear to me how complete the record

is of their interactions in the Freud Archives material. Muriel Gardiner notes at the end of her 1971 book that the Wolf Man had frequent analytic contacts in the 1950s, including with Frederic Weil who administered the Rorschach tests in 1955, an “analyst whom the Wolf Man saw once every few months after 1956,” and “the second analyst whom he has been seeing at more regular intervals in recent years” (p. 363). Most revealingly, however, she notes that:

In the last fifteen or more years the Wolf Man has been visited by an analyst from abroad who has spent several weeks in Vienna almost every summer in order to see the Wolf Man daily during these weeks. This brief yearly period of “analytically directed conversations” is the treatment most comparable to a “regular” psychoanalysis that the Wolf Man has had since his analysis with Dr. Brunswick. (Gardiner, 1971, p. 363)

This analyst from abroad, though not identified by Brunswick, must almost certainly have been Eissler. The assertion that this contact was more of an analysis than the work Pankejeff was doing with not one but two analysts he was also seeing in Vienna during the 1950s is almost as astonishing as the news itself that Pankejeff was indeed still seeing analysts. One wonders what all these analysts were doing with Freud’s most famous patient. Furthermore, if it is true that Pankejeff had been seeing this “analyst from abroad” every summer for 15 or more years in 1970, that would mean that Eissler continued to see the Wolf Man each summer for ten years after the last interview contained in the Archives in 1960! At this point it dawned on me that the already unparalleled, lengthy follow-up material we have on Freud’s most famous patient, now greatly augmented by the availability of transcripts of many of Eissler’s interviews, would continue to grow and expand.

But to start with what we do have, and what I have been able to glean from a first, admittedly fragmentary initial approach to these voluminous transcripts: There is a very clear progression from the first carefully arranged and annotated interview in Eissler’s earliest meeting in 1952 to a far more

complex relationship as the years go by. This first interview is clearly rather formal, with Pankejeff devoting much of it to his “memoirs,” and comes complete with commentary, not only by Eissler, but briefly by Berta Borenstein and Ruth Eissler as well. After two days of taped interviews, Eissler writes an addendum that they met every day for the next week and a summary of those non-taped meetings, as well as his own observations. Eissler appends a summary of a number of subsequent interviews conducted that week which were not taped, as well as his own observations. Among these observations were comments that the Wolf Man was highly intelligent, but inclined to find contradictions expressing an ambivalent attitude toward authority. (Already, one senses that these interviews will prove fertile sources of both transference and countertransference phenomena.) Eissler holds it as interpretable that Pankejeff doesn’t accept Freud’s primal scene reconstruction (in this, we may now recognize the Wolf Man as a theoretical pioneer ahead of his time, for few accept Freud’s primal scene reconstruction today.) Eissler notes that Pankejeff always at first accepts, then rebelliously whittles away at interpretations; and that he does not have delusions, but rather overvalued ideas. He does not have psychosis either.

As time goes on, this formality loosens in the extended relationship that developed between them, and many things point to the presumption on Eissler’s part of what was in effect a treatment relationship. In the summer of 1955, Pankejeff greets Eissler in a somewhat agitated and disorganized state; he had not been expecting Eissler, or had not known the exact date at least, apparently partly as he had not read some of Eissler’s subsequent letters. However, he feels it is embarrassing to talk about some recent developments which are “unpleasant” with Eissler, to which Eissler replies immediately, “But you *must* finally come out with it!” In this invocation of what by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century was already a cartoon caricature of the topographically—or even cathartically—oriented psychoanalytic technique from the earliest years of psychoanalysis, one has almost the impression here that Eissler is imagining himself as the Freud of 1910–1914.

By 1958 and 1960, Eissler conducts the interviews even more like psychiatric interviews or treatment hours, with practi-

cal suggestions to Pankejeff's long and anxious monologues on his physical ailments and worries about insurance coverage, and arguments and advice to see a doctor for them. Pankejeff discusses some of his current treatments and the possibility of taking Miltown (meprobamate), a newly invented so-called minor tranquilizer that in the late 1950s had attained a pop-culture status perhaps comparable to ketamine in our current moment. Eissler listens in silence to, and even occasionally engages with, Pankejeff's pages and pages of protracted freely-associating rantings about women's body types, astrology, horoscopes, including those of Goethe and Nietzsche, and Pankejeff's abstract theories of consciousness. He appears to read part of Pankejeff's paper on Free Will for him into the microphone, when the latter's voice begins to fail after his rantings. Eissler makes clear he is diagnosing depression at one point, a diagnosis with which we might not disagree today, though it is would be hard for us to overlook Pankejeff's extreme chronic anxiety diagnostically.

By July of 1960 the interviews have changed altogether in character and seem overwhelmingly purposed as clinical hours devoted to helping Pankejeff with current conflicts and life circumstances. In response to Pankejeff's hypochondriacal worries about his age-related deterioration, Eissler reassures him rather kindly about his concerns regarding the state of his memory and his overall health. At great length they discuss whether he should marry a girlfriend named Franzi, the implications it would have for their pension, and the relationship of all this to his long and complex history with women. He feels guilty about Theresa; Eissler makes complex interpretations linking his present experience to his lifelong unconscious guilt at his exploitive treatment of women as objects, his complicated sexual development in adolescence, and the uniqueness of his relationship with Theresa in its transcendence of his usual exploitive pattern and its emotional intimacy.

This last transcribed interview from 1960 is arresting also for the fact that it breaks off with an agreement to meet the following day. Having wondered about this, and because of Muriel Gardiner's comment noted above, I inquired about the possibility that there might be more material at the Library of Congress. To my astonishment, I learned that the Eissler bequest included the actual reel-to-reel tapes as well as the transcripts,

and that an extensive tape collection, currently being identified and catalogued, has survived and includes tapes dated as late as 1972, twelve years later. It has been communicated to me by the Senior Archives Specialist at the Library of Congress that the tapes are in the process of being de-restricted and transferred to the Recorded Sound Section of the Library of Congress, and scheduled to be made available in 2020. It would appear that after a full century, the Wolf Man case is as alive and present as ever.

How would we view and treat Pankejeff today? I think it bears mentioning that this is in some regards an impossible question. We live in an era and cultural-historical setting far removed from that of Pankejeff. Child-rearing practices are different today among all social classes, and the modern world bears little resemblance to the almost unimaginably privileged standards and social class enjoyed by aristocrats in late-nineteenth century czarist Russia, who lived on vast estates that had until quite recently been maintained by serfs. To the extent that there is any social or historical context to the expression of psychiatric symptoms, many of Pankejeff's symptoms and his developmental experience were unique in time and place.

In our own era, Muriel Gardiner summarized the case as a successful treatment that enabled Pankejeff to lead a reasonably fulfilled life, but that left behind significant unresolved conflict. Harold Blum's important watershed essay on Pankejeff from 1974 changed our way of thinking about him and remains a touchstone more than four decades later. Among Blum's many contributions was to note that the psychoanalytic community had never adequately revised its understanding of the case even in accord with Freud's structural theory. We would indeed conceptualize today much of Pankejeff's psychopathology as consistent with borderline organization (although in important regards not always consistent with the more severe psychiatric label of borderline personality often used today), both before and after his analyses. Blum's recent contribution dealing with the Rorschach tests administered to Pankejeff in 1955 further supports this. We would probably view all this symptomatology today a bit less harshly, as the product of early deprivation and trauma requiring compassion and repair as well as interpretation. Pankejeff's privileged childhood was also notable for its

lack and guidance, and missing what Blum termed appropriate behavior and responses from the adults in his world throughout his childhood and adolescence. And after all, Pankejeff, when he finally found his way to Freud in 1910 after years of floundering and near-useless treatment, was all of 24 years old. His later “reanalysis” with Ruth Mack Brunswick took place when the latter herself was in her 20s and inexperienced enough that the fact that she herself was simultaneously in analysis with Freud was perhaps her main qualification, although one that we would see today as entailing rather serious transference and countertransference complications.

Rather than trying to spell out some of those complications, or those of Eissler’s also extended and quite unorthodox relationship with Pankejeff, and their possible connection to the latter’s persisting anxieties and other neurotic symptoms throughout his life, I would suggest considering more broadly the approach suggested by Richard Gottlieb in his last paper. That is, that we regard the Wolf Man case from the point of view of a two-person system; namely, as a complex transference-countertransference enactment between Freud and Pankejeff in which Freuds’ reconstruction was itself part of the enactment. In fact, we might extend Gottlieb’s insight to the psychoanalytic community’s subsequent continuous engagement with the Wolf Man, both during his life and over the past century, one in which we, as clinicians and historians, are constantly preserving, at times defensively protecting, and reconstructing the case itself according to the needs and perspectives of our own time. If one looks at the Wolf Man case in this way, Freud’s most famous case study is alive and well, open for further consideration, and all signs point to our continuous engagement with it for a long time to come.

## References

- Blum, H. (1974). The borderline child of the Wolf Man. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 22, 721–741.
- Blum, H. (2013). The Wolf Man’s Rorschach. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 94(5), 937–944.
- Freud, S. (1909). Notes upon a case of obsessional neurosis. *Standard Edition* (Vol. 10, pp. 151–318). London: Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1918). From the history of an infantile neurosis. *Standard Edition* (Vol. 17, pp. 1–124). London: Hogarth Press.

- Freud, S. (1914–1998). *Sigmund Freud Papers*. Washington D.C.: Library of Congress, Manuscripts Division. Retrieved from [http://findingaids.loc.gov/db/search/xq/searchMferDsc04.xq?id=loc.mss.eadmss.ms004017&\\_start=3752&\\_lines=125&\\_q=pankejeff&\\_displayTerm=pankejeff](http://findingaids.loc.gov/db/search/xq/searchMferDsc04.xq?id=loc.mss.eadmss.ms004017&_start=3752&_lines=125&_q=pankejeff&_displayTerm=pankejeff)
- Gardiner, M. (1971). *The Wolf-Man by the Wolf-Man*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gottlieb, R. (2017) Reconstruction in a two-person world may be more about the present than the past: Freud and the Wolf Man, an illustration. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 65(2), 305–316.
- Kalinich, L. (1994). Some reflections on the Wolf Man. In E. Ragland-Sullivan & M. Bracher (Eds.), *Lacan and the Subject of Language*. New York: Routledge.