

Memories of Liesel

Like many others I got to know Liesel through being taught by her on the London Qualifying Course. I was especially interested in what she had to say about the group analytic training in Germany (GRAS, which stands for Group Analytic Seminars). Being a German speaker, I approached her towards the end of my training to say that I would be very interested in working in Germany if there was ever a vacancy. Liesel was kind and non-committal and I regarded it as a distant possibility. Sometime later we happened to be walking together up the hill from the Finchley Road towards the I.G.A. It was 1992 and we were talking about the Gulf War, when she suddenly changed from English to German. For some reason I remember this vividly. At the time I thought no more of it but now I think that she must have wanted to hear what my German was like. A short time later I was very surprised when she informed me that another group conductor was needed on the German course and asked me if I was interested. In a way this was typical of the way the GRAS staff team worked. Liesel had taken on the first step of sounding me out, after which an extremely democratic procedure followed, which involved my being interviewed separately by all the other members of the staff team who were at that time: Adele Mittwoch, Sally Willis, Gregory van der Kleij and Hymie Wise.

I joined the GRAS staff team in 1993 soon after I qualified and thus began one of the most important, enjoyable, and interesting periods of my professional development and my professional life. I will be forever grateful to Liesel for what I learned from her during those years as well as for her friendship and support.

Having left Germany at the age of 10 and not lived or worked in a German speaking context since, my first reaction on arriving at GRAS was to be overwhelmed by a sense that my 10-year-old German was not up to the task, my professional German at that time being more or less non-existent. This felt like a real crisis and I sought Liesel out in her hotel room saying: "Liesel am not sure if I can do this." Liesel was a person to whom it was possible to show one's doubts and fears without losing face. I am sure that I am not the only one to have found this. She listened attentively and respectfully to what I had to say about my experience of finding myself in an environment where people were speaking, what was after all my mother tongue while at the same time feeling at a loss and lacking confidence in my ability to speak it. She was especially interested in the fact that, while I felt difficulty in expressing myself fluently in German, my experience in the seminars was that the theoretical concepts felt more real and meaningful to me when expressed in German. When I had finished, she informed me that: "we all felt like that at the start" and that she had full confidence in me: "Let them hear your voice." It took me a while to get my bearings and I hope my groups did not suffer too much, but I will always be grateful to Liesel for encouraging me to use this opportunity to re-establish my connection with the German language and re-finding my German identity.

I was lucky to have been able to talk with Liesel about the emotional meaning and impact of language, as her own experience of having two languages, one her mother tongue of Austrian German and another which was now the major language of her current life and work, had given her a deep understanding and interest in the subject. Here is what she had to say in her Foulkes Lecture (Group Analysis, 1993, Vol26, 4): "Does the act of translation alter the group analyst's emotional contact with the group? Modes of expression are shaped by the cultural structure of the language used. Is there an inevitable distortion or loss in translation? Might it at times amount to failing to grasp not only what is expressed but what is implied?" She goes on to give an example of a member

of an English group whose mother tongue was not English and who although he spoke perfect English, “felt he could not understand what was going on and ... felt ‘stupid’”.

I want to say something about Liesel’s importance to GRAS and the significance of her role there for both trainees and staff which of-course includes me. It was in 1976, shortly before his death that Foulkes asked her to assemble a group of German speaking group analysts who would be prepared to lead a workshop in group analysis for German psychoanalysts. The original invitation had had been to Foulkes himself from the German psychoanalyst Dr Michael Moeller who had been deeply impressed by Foulkes through his participation in seminars led by him. Moeller’s hope was that this projected workshop would lead to the establishment of further training in Germany. Foulkes had replied that it was too late for him and handed the task on to Liesel.

The original workshop took place in spring 1977 in small town in Hesse, South Germany called Wölfersheim (wolves’ home) and Liesel wondered whether she would be like the helpless Mowgli, lost in the jungle, uncertain of her reception by the community of wolves. I gather that these early beginnings were rather chaotic - full of questions and uncertainty, and that on their homeward journey to London the staff group felt uncertain as to whether they would be returning. However out of these early beginnings grew a bi-annual group analytic training that is now in its 44th year. Obviously, many people contributed to the success of the GRAS training, but I think that Liesel’s ability to hold on to a confident belief in its viability as well as her ability to contain anxiety played an absolutely vital part. Perhaps her experience from the early days of the group analytic training at the IGA in London, which she has described as “like a cottage industry-worked out as it went along, experimental” played a part in giving her that confidence.

Liesel and Michael Moeller were generally regarded as the mother and father of GRAS, the two pillars supporting it. They were good parents. Liesel admired Moeller for his exceptional ability to translate ideas, as well as his deep conviction in the value of group analysis into reality. As for the mother role that Liesel was seen as providing it is perhaps relevant to quote her on the subject of “the good mother”. This is what she had to say in response to being stung by Walter Schindler’s attribution of her success as a group analyst to her warm hearted and “motherly” personality:

“The concept of ‘the good mother’”, she replied, “has little to do with maternal warmth, still less with warm heartedness, other than that caring is a natural attribute of normal mothering. “The good mother” in this context, is one who facilitates the emergence and development of the unique self of her child.The ‘very good mother’ which the group can be is not a sentimental, uncritical, never angry group. On the contrary: the experience of being other, pitching oneself against the greed and need of others, and holding on to one’s feelings, views, and sensations, is of the essence of the process of the emergence and restoration of the undeveloped or mutilated self.” (Group Analysis,1981,14,2).

I think that what she says here describes the kind of mother role that she undertook at GRAS, which did indeed develop its own unique identity rather than allowing itself to be colonised by London. As one of the early block trainings it seemed that the proximity of the clinical supervision, theory, and therapy to each other, and thus their constant interplay, contrasting with their separation in time and space as on other trainings at the time, led to an increased depth of understanding. Liesel had played a key part in developing this structure.

Most significant in my opinion, is the key role she played in the introduction and development of group analysis in Germany and the German speaking realm. The participants of GRAS at that time were the generation immediately following the second world war. This was the generation of young

German psychoanalysts who had lost the generation before them, of those who would have been their teachers and mentors, as a result of persecution by the Nazi regime. The fact that Liesel and Adele Mittwoch were willing to return to be their teachers given their own history, and the generosity of spirit that this entailed was of great healing significance and they were deeply grateful. It represented the closing of a circle which had been broken so painfully and traumatically.

Neither Liesel nor Adele believed that this generation of young Germans should be held responsible for the horrors and tragedies of the Nazi regime. This was a generation, many of whom had experienced extreme trauma as children in wartime and post war Germany, which they had mostly been unable to speak about. They were a generation who were carrying a burden of historical guilt and shame which often led them to feel that they did not have the right to speak about their own trauma and suffering. As well they were the children of parents who had been traumatised into silence. The opportunity provided in the groups at GRAS to speak about their experiences and be heard, often for the first time, was life changing for many. Many of them had been unable to do so in their individual analyses and I think it was important that Liesel, as their therapist (having spent the war in Palestine as a member of the British army), was a person who had not shared their trauma and came from the outside. In the large groups in particular the fact that Liesel had clear opinions of her own and was not afraid to express them was greatly valued. In that way and in view of the experience of silence from the previous generation, she acted as a role model for them.

It is interesting to note that the history of group analysis itself is intimately bound up with the theme of war and war trauma. Liesel was deeply interested in the wartime experience of children and in intergenerational trauma. I particularly remember a moving talk she gave in London on this subject.

Back in London after we had both left GRAS, we remained friends and, as well Liesel was the supervisor of my clinical work. I have warm memories of these supervision sessions. She could be challenging but at the same time she was always affirming and supportive and I always came away feeling empowered. Liesel's many supervisees over the years loved and valued her. This is what Ewa Wojciechowska who was one of them has written about her:

Liesel was a guiding light in my life for more than a quarter of a century, first as supervisor and subsequently as mentor. I feel her loss keenly. As a supervisor, she had many qualities - supportive but challenging, honest, and direct - all delivered with her characteristic warmth and humour. And when it came to those awkward moments in supervision when a group got stuck up some or other cul-de-sac, she would say "it's all grist to the mill"-a phrase I use to this day. We, her supervisees, would hang on her every word, especially when it came to her reminiscences of Foulkes with whom she had worked directly.

It was a privilege and an honour to have known and worked with her.

During the final years of her life, I went to see her frequently at her home in Stanmore and our relationship became very close. When she was still mobile enough we went out for walks and sometimes to the local Turkish restaurant in the High Street. Later I sometimes came very early on a Sunday morning to help when her Caribbean carers were off to church, and we had breakfast together. We shared many things and talked about our lives and the times we had lived through. She once sang me a song from her childhood in "Red Vienna", and reminisced about her exciting life as a young woman while she was in the British army in Egypt. Her daughter tells me that she defended the human rights of German prisoners of war. We talked about our experiences of ageing, although she would always brush me aside saying, "but you are still young", even when I had passed 80! She

found it hard to let go and was always interested to hear about what was happening in the group analytic world.

Liesel's 100th birthday was a truly joyful occasion. She was surrounded by her children, grandchildren, great grandchildren, and close friends. She received flowers from GASI and the IGA, a memory book with photographs and messages from friends and colleagues, as well as greetings from Cornelia Krause-Girth on behalf of GRAS. All these clearly meant a great deal to her.

Sadly, her health declined after that and covid restrictions prevented us from meeting as we would have done. I did manage to see her twice in October during the period between the two major lockdowns. I found that she had become very frail, and my heart went out to her, but we were both excited to see each other again. I helped her talk to Ewa in Yorkshire on Skype and to her friend Doris Heuser from GRAS on the phone. That was the last time I saw her. I still can't really believe she is gone and even as I was writing I found myself thinking: "I must talk to Liesel about this".

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Inge Hudson