

## WEEKEND

## The ring master

Sigmund Freud gave bejeweled rings engraved with mythological figures to patients and to members of the 'secret committee' of psychoanalysts that he founded. What prompted the father of psychoanalysis to give such gifts, one of which ended up in Jerusalem?

Eran Rolnik

**I** was preparing a birthday present for a woman friend – a small engraved gem for insertion into a ring. It was fixed in the centre of a piece of stout cardboard and on this I wrote the following words: 'Voucher for the supply by Messrs. L., jewelers, of a gold ring ... for the attached stone bearing an engraved ship with sail and oars.' But at the point at which I have here left a gap, between 'ring' and 'for,' there stood a word which I was obliged to cross out since it was entirely irrelevant. It was the little word 'bis' [German for 'till'].

An obscure article, in which Sigmund Freud subjects to analysis the clumsy text of a gift voucher he intended to give a woman friend, is the only place in his writings that offers a glimpse of his custom of giving as a gift ancient rings set with an intaglio (seal) stone and engraved by an artist. In the course of his life, Freud gave out about 20 such signet rings, set with ancient semi-precious stones from his collection of gems, bearing a figure from Greek and Roman mythology. He himself wore, during certain periods of his life, more than one ring from the collection.

Six of these rings are currently on display in an exhibition, "Freud of the Rings," at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem through March 2019. They represent the three main groups of those gifted with the rings: psychoanalysts who were members of the "secret committee"; friends to whom Freud was especially grateful; and female psychoanalysts whom he treated or of whom he was particularly fond. Also on show are several items from the Freud collection, together with a video work by American artist Amie Siegel, exploring the fetishistic aspect of maintaining Freud's collections. Visitors will also see the ring that Freud himself wore, which is set with a green gemstone bearing a portrait of the god Zeus.

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"My old and dirty gods." The archaeological metaphor first crops up in Freud's writings in his description of the method by which he treated the woman he called Elisabeth von R., beginning in 1892: "This procedure was one of clearing away the pathogenic psychological material layer by layer, and we liked to compare it with the technique of excavating a buried city." Archaeology also influenced the perception of the psychoanalyst's role. He was expected to consider himself less a physician and more an archaeologist of the mind, uncovering the truth concealed in the depths of his patients' unconscious.

In 1856, the year Freud was born, Troy was a myth and archaeology was a speculative realm of knowledge. By the time of his death, in 1939, archaeology was considered a science and museums of the European capitals exhibited precious objects excavated in every part of the world. In the first half of the 20th century, even a private, impecunious collector like Freud could gradually build up a collection of archaeological artifacts that today would be worth its weight in gold.

It was only after World War I that Egypt, Greece and other countries began to restrict the removal of antiquities excavated in their territory. For long afterward, the antiquities markets in Europe were flooded with items robbed from excavations across the globe.

In December 1896, two months after his father's death, Freud bought the first objects of what would become his collection, and wrote to his friend Wilhelm Fliess that he had decorated his study with two plaster replicas from Florence, which were a wellspring of rejuvenation and consolation for him. A few months later Fliess received from Freud an emotional interim summary of the self-analysis he had begun as one of the means of dealing with the loss of his father: "I have found, in my own case too, falling in love with the mother and jealousy of the father, and

I now regard it as a universal event of early childhood.... If that is so, we can understand the riveting power of Oedipus Rex..."

His father's death did more than prompt Freud to embark on self-analysis; it transformed him from being a devotee of ancient cultures into a collector of their remnants.

Once Freud started to listen to what was occurring in his patients' inner world, with the aid of myths and images from humanity's remote past, he apparently sought the physical presence of the heroes of antiquity in his room. "My old and dirty gods," he called them. His collection, which grew apace from year to year, was compressed into the two studies in his apartment at Berggasse 19 in Vienna. Antiquities were not displayed anywhere else in his home.

Among local antique dealers, Freud was known as a knowledgeable collector who would not be tempted into overpaying for an item. If he discovered that an object in his possession was inauthentic, he quickly got rid of it. Four decades later, the two rooms in his apartment were crammed with about 2,000 archaeological items. Amazingly, the Nazi authorities allowed Freud to leave Vienna in 1938 with his collection of antiquities in exchange for a trifling fine of 400 Reichsmarks and without confiscating even one object.

The figurines and statuettes among which Freud spent most of the day helped him enter into the singular emotional and epistemic attitude for psychoanalytical listening. His non-neutral and non-sterile consulting room was an additional expression of the living, warm and involved presence of the physician of the mind, who saw no contradiction between a search for the truth concealed in the depths of the unconscious, and the need to accommodate uncertainty and to acknowledge the multiple facets and meanings that can accrue to every association raised by the patient.

Among the antiquities in the collection are items directly connected to psychoanalytic theory – those that depict the myths of the sphinx and of Oedipus the king – along with others that Freud left shrouded in mystery. They added new layers and dimensions – spatial, visual, aesthetic, even tactile – to the highly developed verbal imagination of the inventor of the "talking cure." Freud listens or writes and his finger caresses a statuette of the god Thoth – patron of medicine, witchcraft and writing in Egyptian mythology – in the form of a baboon. Occasionally he gets up and invites a patient to accompany him to the next room, to show her a statuette that their conversation evoked for him associatively.

Keepers of the seal. The birth of the International Psychoanalytical Association in 1910 reflected the process of organization and expansion in which psychoanalysis was caught up in the years preceding World War I. But Freud, deeply disappointed with such brilliant pupils as Carl Gustav Jung, who rejected the cornerstones of his theoretical construct, sought a way to ensure a certain degree of agreement among his collaborators.

Sandor Ferenczi, from Hungary, had an original proposal for ensuring the future of psychoanalysis: Freud himself would psychoanalyze a select group from among his students, and they would be the elite that would lead the psychoanalytic movement after his death. Freud preferred to accede to the suggestion of his British colleague Ernest Jones and formed a committee whose role would be to ensure that no member of the International Psychoanalytical Association would express public disagreement with the principal tenets of Freudian theory.

Freud was undoubtedly ambivalent about the psychoanalytic oligarchy he had created with his own hands: He in-



The ring that Sigmund Freud gave to his daughter Anna, now on display at the Israel Museum. She saw it as a symbol of paternal love.

Freud Museum, London / Arlon Bar Hama

sisted that the committee's existence be kept secret. The first time the five members met, on May 25, 1913, Freud gave each of them a signet ring. And so, for more than a decade, and far from the eyes of the other members of the association, Freud's five "knights of the sacred order" conducted regular correspondence and held secret meetings, whose declared purpose was to demarcate a clear boundary between psychoanalysis worthy of the name and other approaches.

As functional as the "arrangements committee" of the psychoanalytic movement was, however, it would be no exaggeration to also fault this small band for the tendency of psychoanalysts in the post-Freud era to be drawn to the courts of psychoanalytic rebbe.

The story of the "secret committee" is known to those familiar with the history of the psychoanalytic movement. In contrast, the story of the generous and demanding gifts that Freud gave his associates continues to be marked by collective repression to this day. Almost every analyst whom I told about the rings that Freud awarded to his successors reacted with a mixture of surprise, embarrassment and derisiveness. "Yes, right, he had a thing with rings. I knew that, but I never thought about it." That's the sound of repression.

With this ring. In one of his passionate love letters to his fiancée, Martha Bernays, Freud mentions a ring she received from her mother. The ring reminds Freud of the "fable of the rings" at the heart of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's play "Nathan the Wise." He sums up for Martha the moral of the play; the question of whether a ring passed down as an inheritance is authentic or not, is of no significance. Based on this letter, Lessing's fable of the ring can be seen as an additional source of inspiration for Freud in handing out the five rings. It wasn't the only

time that Freud played down a literary source of inspiration that was liable to underscore his Jewish origins.

Lessing's "Nathan the Wise," which was published in 1799 and is set in the medieval Land of Israel, is considered a turning point in the relations between Jews and Germans. Nathan the Wise tells the sultan Saladin a fable about a ring that confers divine grace upon the person who wears it. The ring is passed down from father to best-loved son, and when it comes to a father with three sons all of whom he loves equally, he promises the ring to each of them. To keep his promise, the father creates two perfect copies of the original ring, so it is no longer possible to know which of the three is the authentic one. On his deathbed he awards one ring to each son and dies. The brothers argue among themselves about which of them received the real ring, but a wise judge warns them that it is impossible to make a decision, because no one can disprove the hypothesis that all three rings are actually counterfeit. The judge suggests that each of the sons should live his life as though he received the original ring from his father.

Freud's search for a preferred heir ended in bitter disappointment: Jung left the psychoanalytic movement about a year before the formation of the secret society. It's plausible, then, that the implicit message in awarding non-identical rings to five pupils was that none of them was the "chosen son" and that they must keep watch over one another, overcome the tensions between them and function as lightning rods for the storms raging in the psychoanalytic world.

Not one of the rings that Freud granted his knights of the sacred order was "real" in the fetishistic sense, and each was meant to derive its significance from its wearer; from whoever was willing to view it as a symbol of the love of psychoanalysis and not as a symbol of the love of the primal father of that discipline. The only person who saw the ring as a symbol of paternal love – and rightly so – was Anna Freud. She admitted to her father in one of her letters that she almost gave one of the two rings she received from him as a gift to the psychoanalyst who had helped her, Lou Andreas-Salomé.

The theatrical gesture embodied in the granting of the rings from Freud's collection of ancient gems is certainly consistent with the authoritarianism latent in his personality. At the same time, it's difficult to think of any gift other than an ancient signet ring that would better epitomize the dialectical tension between monolithic and diversified, between theoretical monotheism and cultural polytheism, and between radicalism and patriarchalism – all of which were revealed to everyone who was exposed to Freud's personality and which continues to accompany psychoanalysis to this day.

The creator of psychoanalysis didn't really surround himself with

yes-men. Each recipient of a ring was grateful to the genius who invented psychoanalysis but, when the time came, was able to find the right distance from him and claim his intellectual sovereignty. Jones would take the side of Melanie Klein in her dispute with Anna Freud, and didn't hesitate to tell Freud his doubts about the quality of the analysis he conducted on his daughter. Otto Rank left the psychoanalytic movement, immigrated to America and is remembered as one of the most crazed short-term therapists that modern psychotherapy has known.

Sandor Ferenczi placed psychoanalysis on a pre-Oedipal path that underscores the connection with the mother in early childhood, and challenges the fundamentals of Freud's psychoanalytic technique. And Karl Abraham, who died prematurely, saw himself as Freud's intellectual equal and expressed his sovereignty in a se-

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ries of innovative articles. Even Max Eitingon, whose loyalty to the professor was unbounded, found a way to part from him. In 1933, shortly after the Nazis came to power, he emigrated from Berlin to Palestine, to Freud's displeasure, and founded a new psychoanalytical society in Jerusalem.

**Psychoanalytic object.** A certain tension prevailed in the room of the exhibition's curators, Morag Wilhelm and Dudi Mevorach, after I tried on the ring found in the Israel Museum's storerooms, which turned out to be the one Freud gave to a patient, the analyst Eva Rosenfeld. Until that moment I had observed the objects owned by Freud with equanimity. I'd always preferred the Freud house in Vienna over the Freud house in London. Hardly any items from his estate remain in the Vienna apartment where he lived and worked for most of his life, but his spirit pervades it to this day. I like working in the library in one of the rooms in the apartment. A visitor will find Freud's walking cane on display there, and one of his hats. The two stereotypical museum artifacts that were given to the Vienna museum as a gift by Anna Freud only underscore what

happened when Austria was annexed to the Third Reich. Freud doesn't live here anymore.

It is the elegant home in Hampstead where Freud spent his final years that contains all his personal effects. The crowning glories of the London house are the library, the study and the splendid collection of antiquities, all of them a gesture to the great person that Freud was. But the London museum, which "hit the jackpot," comes across more as homage to Freud's ego ideal and particularly to the father ideal of Anna Freud, who managed her father's memorial industry with a high hand.

I ran my fingers across the ring bearing the image of Nike, the goddess of victory, that Rosenfeld bequeathed to the Israel Museum, and which curator Wilhelm only recently identified as a Freud ring. The magic began to do its work, as in the "Indiana Jones" stories in which an ordinary object that was in a type of deep sleep is uncovered and is revealed to wield great influence. Psychoanalysis – a familiar inner object that has accompanied me for many years – and the ring – a foreign object I placed on my finger for a brief moment – became one. The foreign object and the internalized object merged.

Psychoanalysts frequently reflect on the question of what the object of psychoanalysis is, or what a psychoanalytic object is. Can it be that questions relating to the nature of mental representations, and to the location, in reality or in fantasy, of primary objects – theoretical and clinical questions that occupied Freud during the years of his self-analysis, when he began to collect antiquities – impelled him to create rings from ancient seal stones in his collection? Is it possible that Freud already knew the answer to this, too? That precisely an old-new object like a signet ring, which would be passed from one generation of analysts to the next and would end up one day in Jerusalem, would turn out to be more appropriate than any manuscript, hat or cane to act as a ferry that would transmit something of the quality of the psychoanalytic object that feels most at home in the unconscious, that is, in a foreign country?

A further hint about the meaning of the rings can be found in a letter that Eva Rosenfeld attached to her donation to the museum: "On January 5, 1930, which was my 38th birthday, Professor Sigmund Freud surprised me with the precious gift of his ring [...] Throughout the years, the ring has been a very precious possession of mine. I am now getting on for 86, and I wish to leave it to the country which is our original home." Rosenfeld, like Freud, never visited this country. Her choice to send the ring she received from Freud "home," to Jerusalem, can be interpreted as an expression of a wish to restore it to the unconscious.

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A 1922 photo of members of the "secret committee" Freud created, whose purpose was to demarcate a clear boundary between psychoanalysis worthy of the name and other approaches.

Freud Museum/London