

# Reports and Review Essays



*I was allowed to ask a question.*

# Helene Deutsch

## A Psychoanalyst's Life

Joanna B. Boehnert  
University of Guelph

Helene Deutsch, perhaps best known to many of us today as Freud's "dutiful daughter" (Chesler, 1972, p. 72), lived a long (97 years), active, and influential life. A life, in fact, which is in direct contradiction to the "biology is destiny" theory of normal female development formulated by Freud and supported (with modifications) by Deutsch. In this biography, Paul Roazen gives a sense of some of the conflicts and guilt that Deutsch experienced in her adult life at least partly because of the discrepancies between what she accepted as the norm for femininity and the life she led.

Roazen, who started over two decades ago "... to meet and interview everyone living who had ever known Sigmund Freud" (Roazen, 1973, p. 13), was authorized by Helene Deutsch when she was in her early nineties to write this biography. He was not only able to draw upon her published professional works, but also upon a published autobiography which she claimed in the preface "... forms a supplement to the autobiography hidden in my general work *The Psychology of Women*" (Deutsch, 1973, p. 11). In addition he was given access to her personal papers and letters and was very fortunate in being able to spend hundreds of hours in interviews with her. He was also aided by family members, students, and colleagues who added their impressions, memories, and interpretations to the story.

Helene Rosenbach was born on October 9, 1884 in Przemysl (pronounced Chemish), Poland to Wilhelm and Regina Rosenbach. She was the third daughter and fourth child born into this Polish-Jewish family. Her lawyer father was an inspiration to her and as a child "... she often sat in a chair under his desk" (p. 6) while he met clients and carried on his work. "The central problem of Helene Deutsch's early life, as she later recalled it, focused around the character of her mother whom she wholeheartedly despised" (p. 7). Regina Fass Rosenbach, a woman very concerned with propriety, was reported by Helene to have hated her youngest child who was her husband's favorite, originally because she was not a son. "As Helene remembered it her very existence was a provocation to her mother" (p. 9) who did beat her and her siblings as punishment and when she was in a bad mood. Helene's oldest sister, Malvina - who was eleven when Helene was born - performed many maternal tasks for her younger sister and "Helene later believed that her identification with Malvina had saved her femininity" (p. 10).

By the time she was fourteen she had completed the schooling that was expected of girls at that time and her mother was particularly opposed to her seeking any higher education. In her autobiography, Deutsch (1973) explained that she was not willing "... to live the idle life of a debutante under my mother's tutelage until I

married" (p. 80). The goal she set for herself was to pass the university entrance examinations which would give her her *Abitur*. In order to secure her father's aid for continuing her education, she ran away twice and agreed to return the second time only on the condition that her father sign a written contract to help her attain her *Abitur*.

It was also when she was fourteen that she met Herman Lieberman, a prominent criminal lawyer in Przemysl who was a devoted democratic socialist. He was twenty-eight, married, and the father of a child when they met at the home of Helene's sister Giezela. (She had recently married a physician who had studied in Cracow with Lieberman.) Roazen claims that the relationship which began between Helene and Lieberman was pursued by Helene "... to initiate her revenge against her mother, denying her any hope for family respectability" (p. 14). Lieberman did, however, "awaken her politically and intellectually and become her mentor, especially as she prepared to get the *Abitur*" (p. 33).

The active love affair between the two began in 1906 when she was twenty-two and he was thirty-six. It was in that year also that she received her *Abitur* and shortly thereafter embarked upon her medical studies at the University of Vienna. Although she had thought about studying law, Vienna did not allow women to pursue a legal education at that time. (Later Helene and two other women successfully petitioned a cabinet minister to open the study of law to women.) During her years of study in Vienna, Lieberman (who remained married to his wife Gustawa) was also there as a parliamentary deputy representing Poland when Parliament was in session. Although they did not live together, "he expected from her - and she complied - everything he would have from a wife according to the cultural standards of that time" (p. 71). During the summer of 1910, Helene accompanied Lieberman to an international socialist congress in Copenhagen. She later

wrote, "although the certainty that we would soon separate weighed heavily on me, the journey to the congress is one of the loveliest memories of my life (Deutsch, 1973, p. 98). She decided to take the final year of her medical studies in Munich and it was there that she was able to end the relationship with Lieberman "although an undercurrent of grief and mourning about Lieberman persisted for the rest of Helene's life" (p. 87). It was also in Munich in 1911 that she met Felix Deutsch, a Jewish physician from Vienna just a few months older than she. With Felix she felt a relief and freedom which she had not known during the years of her relationship with a married man. They married in 1912, "before she began finally qualifying for her degree; Felix had wanted to be sure to have his last name on her diploma" (p. 97) which she received in 1913.

She worked for a while in a hospital for mentally retarded children before joining the staff of Wagner-Jauregg's Clinic for Psychiatry and Nervous Diseases at the University of Vienna. She remained there - with the exception of two months when she was working at Kraeplin's institute in Munich in 1914 - until the fall of 1918 when she began psychoanalysis with Freud. Because of the shortage of male doctors in Vienna during the First World War, she was given responsibilities at the Clinic which otherwise would have been denied her as a woman. (She became assistant in charge of the Women's Division.) In addition to her clinical work, she also did some scientific writing. She quickly became prominent in psychiatric circles in Vienna.

In 1917 she successfully gave birth to a son, Martin (Freud's oldest son was also named Martin) after having experienced several miscarriages. She engaged a nurse shortly after Martin's birth to allow her to continue her work. In her autobiography she wrote "Paula [the nurse] practically insisted on taking upon herself the responsibilities of a good experienced mother ... Her chief stipulation was that I abdicate a great

part of my motherhood and become a sort of mirage" (Deutsch, 1973, pp. 123-124). Although Martin was a very wanted child, her career appears to have been her top priority and by her own standards as well as those of others, she neglected her son. The relationship between Martin and his father was much stronger than that between Martin and his mother. Roazen claims that Helene's bitterness toward her mother was "almost matched by Martin's feelings toward her" (p. 328).

The years from 1918 - when she was formally elected to membership in the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society and began her analysis with Freud - to 1935 when she left Vienna for America, were busy and successful years for Helene. She idealized Freud and identified very strongly with him. A major disappointment for her was having to halt her analysis with Freud in 1919 when he gave her hour to the "Wolf-man." (In a *New York Times Magazine* interview when she was 94 (Gordon, 1978), Deutsch claimed that the only thing she would still like to do was to complete her analysis with Freud.) During these years she became a successful analyst, headed the Vienna Training Institute which was established in 1924, enjoyed a reputation as a writer and a lecturer, and was sought after as a training analyst and supervisor. In discussing her seminars which were reported to have been remarkable experiences, Roazen reports, "After a full day's analytic practice, she might conduct such a seminar until one-thirty in the morning, and have the stamina to revive and want to go on to another case. (As she reflected in retrospect, evidently she was not eager to go home.)" (p 247).

She left Vienna for Boston in 1935. Although Freud did not want her to leave, he did not try to dissuade her on personal grounds. She enjoyed a great deal of success in America where she was influential in further establishing psychoanalysis in Boston and was much in demand as a training analyst. She continued in this capacity until 1962 when she resigned as a training ana-

lyst from the Boston Society out of loyalty to Felix who was relieved of his standing as training analyst because of failing health and memory. Helene's marriage to Felix lasted fifty-two years and his death in 1964 "was particularly difficult because she had so many guilt feelings about him" (p. 327). Roazen indicates that Helene had ambivalences about her marriage to Felix, but she eventually did *choose* life with him even though others continued to see signs of conflict between them. Apparently there was also a great deal of mutual emotional support. Helene enjoyed a greater professional success than did Felix who was an analyst as well as an internist. This imbalance caused strain and resentment on both sides. After Felix's death, Helene idealized her union with him, but the three men she mentions as having inspired and aided her in her personal revolutions were her father, Lieberman, and Freud.

During her last years she was plagued by physical disabilities and the loneliness which comes from having outlived most of her friends. She died in 1982 in the house in which she had lived since 1936.

Woven into this biography is also a discussion of some of the contributions Helene made to the clinical literature during her lifetime. And the book ends with an Epilogue entitled, "A Woman's Psychology", in which Roazen shows where some of Helene's views differed from Freud's and also establishes explicit linkages between some of her conceptualizations and her own experiences.

There is no denying Roazen's familiarity with the early psychoanalytic movement and those who were involved in it. His dedication to interviewing all those who had known Sigmund Freud has provided him with contacts and material which have been translated into at least three other books. The extent of his knowledge, however, was sometimes confusing when he added information on people and events which seemed

to add little to the understanding of Deutsch's life. The chapters on the years with Lieberman made extensive use of the letters he had written to Helene (hers to him were destroyed), but I often found myself wondering how *she* had interpreted the events and feelings he was describing. I also did not get the impression that her analysis of Tausk and his consequent suicide made that much of an impression on Deutsch even though a chapter was devoted to it.

It was difficult at times to put the story together as a chapter could include events and illusions to events spanning many years. For instance the first chapter began with Helene's birth, ended with information on the dates and places of death of family members (one as late as 1981), and in between referred to some of her clinical writings as well as to her affair with Lieberman. I would have found a table of important dates and events in her life useful in keeping a proper perspective on the unfolding of her story.

Helene Deutsch was a pioneer and her own life stands in contradiction to the concepts of passivity, narcissism, and masochism which dominate what many people know of her psychology of women. In this biography Roazen gives a sense of the humanity of the woman with her public successes and private failures influencing her seeming prescription of the stereotypical role of wife and mother for the fulfillment of women. I am left with a sense of a sadness for this woman - who in our eyes today - added to women's oppression. She was an "active woman" which in her view meant that she had to lose out on some of the benefits that accrue to normal feminine women. Roazen suggests that, "If Helene had been more accepting of herself, it might have led her to ideas about human development and normality that would match the unconventionality of her own experience, and entitle others to feel more at ease in defying conformist pressures" (p. 343). And that could

have made a great deal of difference in the history of the psychology of women.

#### References

- Chesler, P. (1972). *Women & madness*. New York: Avon.  
 Deutsch, H. (1973). *Confrontations with myself: An epilogue*. New York: Norton.  
 Gordon, S. (1978, July 30) "Helene Deutsch and the legacy of Freud." *The New York Times Magazine*, pp. 22-25.  
 Roazen, P. (1973) *Brother animal: The story of Freud and Tausk*. London: Penguin.