

Sex versus Survival: The life and ideas of Sabina Spielrein

John Launer

I want to talk this evening about a most extraordinary woman. She was close to Freud and Jung during the years when they worked together during the creation of psychoanalysis. She proposed to them that the 'talking cure' should be based in human biology. She felt that being a woman gave her a special insight into this because she understood sexual and domestic violence, seduction, and abandonment – all of which she had experienced. After they failed to take up her ideas, she moved from the world of psychoanalysis to join the pioneers of child development. She worked with Jean Piaget, becoming his psychoanalyst, and helped him to develop some of his ideas, before she moved on to Moscow and helped to set up the science of psychology in the Soviet Union. She became a respected paediatrician, combining ideas from psychoanalysis and child development. She defended Freud publically in Russia, even after psychoanalysis had been banned. She was murdered in the Holocaust, along with her two daughters, in 1942. She was then completely forgotten, written out of history as if she had never existed.

Some decades later, in the 1980s, her diaries and letters were found in Switzerland. They showed that she had been Carl Jung's mistress for a while. This stimulated tremendous interest in her. People wrote books about her affair with Jung, they wrote plays for the theatre, and they made films about her. You may have seen one of them: 'A Dangerous Method.' It was directed by David Cronenberg and the part of Sabina Spielrein was played by Keira Knightley. It depicted the mythical version of Spielrein, not as a great thinker and doctor, but as a sex object. In case you haven't seen the movie, I want to explain the

mythical version of Spielrein's life that it shows, and which is what most people know about her.

The mythical account goes roughly as follows. Spielrein had a mental breakdown as a teenager and ended up in hospital under the sole care of Carl Jung. He tried out psychoanalysis for the first time on her. This was a remarkable success. She continued to see him for therapy, and this developed into a deep and lasting love affair. Freud became involved and he helped them to end their affair amicably. Spielrein later became psychoanalyst not very important psychoanalyst, and helped Jung and Freud develop a few of their ideas. She then returned to Russia, she turned into a sad and prematurely old lady.

Almost every single detail of this myth is untrue. It is either unsupported by the evidence or contradicted by it. It is largely based on the books written over twenty years ago that focussed on the two men rather than on Spielrein herself.

My own interest began when I first read one of her articles: 'Destruction as the Cause of Coming into Being,' published in 1912. It struck me at once that Spielrein was trying to do what many neuroscientists and psychoanalysts are trying to do a century later: to understand the unconscious mind in terms of Darwin's vision of the imperatives in life – to survive and to reproduce. I started to read everything I could about her. When Cronenberg announced he was bringing out his movie about her, my wife Lee helped me to pull together a 100 page account of Spielrein's life and ideas and I self-published it. A publisher then approached me to ask if I would like to write a proper, full length version, based on a scholarly review of all Spielrein's available letters and diaries.

I didn't set out to write a revisionist account of her life. However, I found that some historians had already tried to challenge parts of the myth. There were even more parts of it that I needed to challenge myself. Here is the story that emerged.

Spielrein was born in 1885 into a wealthy Jewish family in southern Russia. She was a brilliant child, fluent in three languages by her teens, and gifted in music as well as science. From her very early years she had a strong sense of having to fulfil a 'higher calling'. She had an inner 'guardian angel' with whom she would commune about this. Her parents' marriage was turbulent. Both her parents and two of her brothers were violent towards her. There is a strong suggestion that her father's violence was sexual. When she was sixteen, Spielrein's sister Emilia died suddenly from typhoid. She then suffered what we would now see as a hysterical bereavement reaction: tics, grimaces, alternate laughing and crying. Her family took her to the university mental hospital in Zurich. Its director was Eugen Bleuler, one of first people to believe mental hospitals should be therapeutic communities. One of his assistants was Carl Jung.

Sabina began to calm down straight away. Within a few weeks, she was able to apply for medical school in Zurich. Jung later claimed in two letters to Freud, written several years apart, that he had analysed her while she was in hospital. I believe there is little evidence for this. He took her psychiatric history in episodes over the first five days of her admission, using a fairly conventional approach, but then he went on leave. He recorded no more significant conversations for two months, and she was already much better by then. It was only after she had already applied for medical school and was working with him on word association tests in his laboratory that he recorded around seven further conversations with her. She largely repeated things she had already disclosed when he had taken her initial

history. Several historians have also pointed out how he avoided exploring abuse in the family. Spielrein spoke a number of times during her admission about 'someone' or 'something' crawling down her back or intruding on her. Bleuler's entries in the notes indicate that he believed she was at risk from her father and possibly her brothers. There is correspondence where he requests and in some cases insists that her family should stay away from her. He doesn't mention any treatment by Jung. Overall, the notes give the impression that Bleuler's interventions were the main influences that helped Spielrein get better.

While she was at medical school, Spielrein carried on assisting Jung in the laboratory. It is clear she had a massive infatuation with him. She wrote him long letters about love, socialism and other matters. He occasionally seems to have replied although we don't have his letters from those years. There was a lot of wishful thinking on Spielrein's part that she meant a great deal to him, but nothing really to support this. He was involved in other matters including his marriage, having children, his growing friendship with Freud, his university career and his first extra-marital affairs. During their encounters in the laboratory or socially, he started to experiment on her by offering interpretations for her crush. She detested this and begged him to stop. She could not have made this clearer. In a letter to Freud later on, this is what she wrote this, with typical directness:

'I begged him many times not to provoke my 'ambitia' [proud hopes] with various probings... In the end the unavoidable happened: it reached the point where he could no longer stand it and wanted "poetry"'.

Over the course of the next five months, his emotions changed, and he confessed he had had affairs with several women before. Jung's wife then wrote an anonymous letter to Spielrein's mother, who threatened to shop him to his boss. Spielrein confronted him and assaulted him with a letter knife. Jung resigned from the hospital, and started to fire off desperate letters to Freud, calling her a liar, and then blaming her for being a ruthless seductress. Jung and Freud then entered into a shabby conspiracy to neutralise Spielrein. Both lied flagrantly to each other, as well as to her. She forgave both of them, although not without first letting Freud know what she thought of their antics. Another of her letters to Freud again shows her amazing directness:

'If only he [Jung] was really able to be honest with himself, if he was really able to be honest with you, I would then be so happy! You are cunning too, Professor...You would rather spare yourself an unpleasant moment. Isn't that correct? Even the great "Freud" cannot always ignore his own weaknesses'

She resumed erotic encounters with Jung, but her friends tried to persuade her he was a 'good-for-nothing' and in the end she convinced herself that he was a 'Don Juan'. When she qualified as a doctor in early 1911 she left Zurich for good, and of her own accord. However, she remained grateful to him. His care for her as a psychiatrist had played a significant part in her recovery. Even if his friendship had been intrusive, and their affair was brief, it gave her probably her first experience of tender physical contact – although probably not full sex and certainly not spanking.

Spielrein went on to meet Freud and established a friendship with him. She then embarked on a psychiatric career which included publication of around 37 papers. She married a doctor called Pavel Sheftel although the marriage was never a happy one. When the First World War broke out, Pavel returned to Russia, leaving her with a baby daughter. It was a decade before they were reunited.

If we set aside the myth and now start to consider Spielrein's intellectual work, it is phenomenal. For her MD dissertation, she wrote the first extended study of schizophrenic speech. It was one of the first papers to look at the meaning underlying psychotic talk. The following year, she wrote two more significant papers. One was an article on childhood fantasies about pregnancy and childbirth: it may have been the first systematic attempt to describe the imagination of children. The other was her most significant paper: 'Destruction as the Cause of Coming into Being.'

This was probably the most important work she wrote. She proposed that human beings are caught up in a tension between two opposite instincts: the instinct to survive as an individual, and the instinct to reproduce: sex versus survival. She also argued that the reproductive instinct is inherently destructive as well as creative, particularly for women, as it challenges their psychological and physical identity. She argued against Freud's idea that the sole pursuit of pleasure underlies our actions, proposing that only the reproductive drive can adequately explain all our instincts:

'I must dogmatically defend the viewpoint that the personal psyche is governed by unconscious impulses that lie deeper and, in their demands, are unconcerned with our

feeling reactions. Pleasure is merely the affirmative reaction of the ego to these demands flowing from the depths'

Later on, she expanded on this idea in a letter to Jung. She described how children seek attachment with parents in the interests of their survival and, ultimately, of reproduction. For Spielrein, there was really only one instinct – the reproductive one.

'Tranquility, freedom of movement, play with other children, favorite foods – everything is sacrificed in return for more attention from those whose love one desires. To express my personal opinion, I would include this instinct for self-preservation in the instinct for preservation of the species'

Around the beginning of the First World War, Spielrein published a further ten papers. A paper on 'The Mother-in-Law' was the first to take a feminist perspective on family relationships and the wider social influences affecting these. An article she published on the treatment of a boy's phobia about monkeys was almost certainly the first case report of a child being treated for an emotional problem through talking. Another paper shows that she is likely to have been the first person to use play therapy with children.

In the early 1920s, Spielrein moved to Geneva to join the founders of child psychology – including Jean Piaget. She took him on as a patient for. She also produced around nineteen further papers. These made links between psychoanalysis, child development and linguistics. They include a magnificent paper on the origin of the words 'Mama and Papa'. Here is a wonderful quotation from it:

‘Like no other, the act of sucking is fundamental to the most important of the child’s life experiences: here it learns the bliss of knowing its feelings of hunger satisfied, but it also learns that this bliss has an end and has to be won again. The infant has its first experience that there is an external world; its contact with the mother’s body plays a part in this by offering resistance to the movements of the tiny mouth. And finally the little creature learns that there is a refuge in this external world, which is attractive not only because its hunger is satisfied there, but because it is warm, soft and safe from all dangers. If we have felt once in our lives ‘Let this moment linger, it is so beautiful’ it was surely at this time. Here the child learns for the first time to love, in the widest sense of the word, that is to perceive contact with another being, independent of nourishment, as the highest bliss.’

In 1923, Spielrein returned to Russia. She joined the staff of the world’s first psychoanalytic kindergarten, where Stalin’s son Vassily was one of her charges. She taught Alexander Luria and Lev Vygotsky, who later became known as the greatest figures in Russian psychology, alongside Pavlov. Within a year or so of joining the kindergarten, Spielrein got caught up in a dispute between Stalin and Trotsky about its future, and returned to her home town of Rostov.

Her husband Pavel was in a relationship with another woman, and they had recently had a baby daughter – although Pavel returned to live with Sabina and Renata. A year after Sabina’s return, she and Pavel had a second daughter, Eva. Spielrein worked in a children’s clinic, combining medical paediatrics, child psychology and developmental studies. She continued with observational research of children into the late 1920s. She spoke about this

publicly in 1929, when psychoanalysis had virtually been banned by Stalin. During the 1930s all three of her brothers, by then eminent Soviet scientists, were executed in Stalin's Terror. Spielrein herself continued to work until shortly before the German invasion. In June 1942, Spielrein and her two daughters Renata and Eva were murdered by a Nazi death squad, along with almost the entire Jewish population of the city.

She left a huge legacy behind her. How did it happen that the real Sabina Spielrein was forgotten and came to be displaced by the image of a young woman having sex and being spanked in a Hollywood movie? The straightforward explanation is that she returned to the Soviet Union in the early 1920s, and that she died there in the Holocaust. As a Russian, she always represented a culture that was poorly understood and denigrated in the west. After her return, it was literally inaccessible. Her murder in 1942 meant that she never lived to see opportunities for contact with former colleagues in the west. I think the more important reasons for forgetting her were because of her own beliefs. She refused to join factions. She lived in an age when people who were charismatic leaders like Freud, Jung or Piaget earned huge reputations. Those who were more interested in building bridges were pathologised, or given only minor parts in the lives of the gurus.

Were Spielrein's ideas forgotten because she was a woman? The answer isn't straightforward. Some other women from her time in psychology achieved great reputations. What seems more likely is that Spielrein was marginalised because she wrote and behaved as a woman. She approached biology and sexuality as someone who was both tempted by desire and afraid of it. She wrote about the family dynamics surrounding

mothers-in-law in terms of gender roles. She described child development, language and thought from her own experience of motherhood.

This was reflected in her personal life as well. Freud tried to persuade her to uncover her hatred of Jung, but she was never disloyal to either man. She carried on trying to persuade them to resume dialogue, years after there was any prospect of it. She combined the roles of lone parent, researcher, writer and clinician, when her husband and others were insisting it was cruel for a woman to do so. She didn't demand acknowledgement from others when they took up her ideas. She never knew how to play politics, or had the slightest wish to do so. Some people have described Spielrein's life as if she was determined to become a victim. I prefer to see it as an example of blaming the victim instead of listening to her and taking her seriously.

In the end, I believe Sabina Spielrein did have a 'higher calling': it was to come up with ideas that were a century ahead of her time. It is a privilege to honour her calling this evening.

Sex versus Survival: The Life and Ideas of Sabina Spielrein, by John Launer, is published by Duckworth/Overlook Press.