



Judit Szekacs-Weisz

Lost Children of Psychoanalysis: Tibor Rajka (1901–1980)

The portrait of an analyst; his life and work in different snapshots*

Oblivion is blurring or deleting the memory of colleagues who were important figures in our professional life even a short time ago. Having been part of the Ferenczi revival from the 1980s, experiencing how his ideas reached and penetrated distant areas of analytical thinking in different parts of the world, we became aware that we have a “cultural mission” to execute: the mission to bring back the lost children of the history of psychoanalysis from oblivion and find for them the place they rightfully deserve in the historical memory of our profession.

An important person to welcome back to international memory is Tibor Rajka; a contemporary of Sándor Ferenczi. Although rarely mentioned, Tibor Rajka, “psychoanalytic doctor of the mind” – as he described himself – was a member of the first, pre-war Hungarian Psychoanalytic Association. After its destruction and during the ensuing years of semi-legality and semi-acceptance, he was one of the most important figures in the revival of the Budapest School and the creation of the second Psychoanalytic Society.

The analyst as a young man

Rajka was born in the first year of the 20th century, so he was to witness all that the following 80 years brought about in creativity and destruction in Central Europe. He has always been and has remained a “participant observer” of the world in a true sense; he preserved his capacity to reflect, to think and to act accordingly throughout all the basic changes he lived through. He was a son of his century.

Anna Arató collected the following biographical data for Rajka:

* This paper uses some details of an article put together by Rajka’s students (Anna Arató, Júlia Gáboros, Gábor Szónyi and Judit Szekacs) published as “L’opera di Tibor Rajka” in *Il Piccolo Hans*, 1984, 43-44: 201-217.

He was born in 1901 in Marosvásárhely, Transylvania, a most progressive, liberal and highly cultural part of Hungary at the time. Rajka and his birthplace developed hand in hand; by the time he was in his middle teens, the formerly small town had grown into a big city with a vivid and progressive intellectual/spiritual life.

World War I brought about uncertainty and insecurity to politics and ordinary lives alike. These experiences had a formative effect on his intellectual development and eventually also on his career choice.

“At the age of 18 Rajka is a romantic youngster fascinated by science and literature. Inspired by a thriving Nietzsche cult in Hungary, he writes a philosophical summary of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, which he publishes in a short-lived cultural gazette for students [*A Jövő Népe – The people of the future*], edited by himself...” (Arató et al., 1984)

“I came to preach the man. I came to be the doctor of your blindness, I came to be the mirror to show the man in yourselves to you” – says young Rajka’s Zarathustra. (Rajka, 1920; Paneth, 1979) These prophetic words – though obviously in a much more modest, mature and realistic way – became his manifesto, expressing the guiding principles of his life.

At the end of World War I, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy disintegrates into separate independent states. Hungary being on the side of the losers will have to give up 2/3rd of its territory including Transylvania. In 1918 Marosvásárhely is occupied by the Romanians. In search of his place in the world young Rajka is ready to move. He goes to Prague to study medicine. The sweeping force of intellectual/cultural life in contemporary Prague amazes him; he finds a world very close to his heart there.

However, he will have to leave his beloved city quite soon. Hoping that he can make a proper living in Hungary, where language difficulties would not stand in his way, he is ready to start packing again. His search for an authentic and autonomous life guides him to Budapest where he is able to complete his medical training. He will spend years at the neurological ward of Szent István Hospital, headed by Professor Sarbó who did not separate neurology and psychiatry. He also expressed a definite interest in the teachings of Freud. Working there Rajka meets his first neurotic patients.

Through Stekelian colleagues – this group is going to play an important part in his professional development – he gets in touch with Ferenczi, who recommends László Révész to him as a suitable person for his training analysis. “He has to wait until 1931 though, when ‘with great luck’ he finds a job: he becomes a G.P. in one of the slums of Budapest, called the Mária Valéria settlement. Personal hardship and his experiences working in such an environment contribute to his deepening sensitivity towards social matters.” (Arató et al., 1984)

Following the requirements of analytical training of the time he had to see patients at the psychoanalytical Polyclinic founded by Ferenczi. It is most illuminating to recall that in the pioneering clinics in Europe this included a formative year of clinical training when candidates were expected to work for free. Graduating in 1937 he became a member of the international psychoanalytical community. He would cherish and proudly retain his continuous membership of the IPA all through his life.

“History marches into your living room – again and again”

By the end of the 1930s, another, an even more brutal war is on the horizon, and the flow of life gets interrupted again. Psychically, world has not been able to work through the experience of the great wars of the 20th century – old and new powers rising and falling, re-drawing the borders of empires and of the confines of ordinary lives, irreparable losses, human tragedies, broken dreams. World War II left an “impossible” task for successive generations who grapple with this inheritance even today. Rajka can be considered a survivor of the first generation. Not being Jewish, he had to face only the “ordinary” type of attacks on the individual and on society, common in the region.

From the time of his graduation, Rajka took an active part in the work of the Hungarian Psychoanalytic Association until 1948, when it was dissolved as a pre-emptive move to avoid persecutory measures of a strengthening dictatorial establishment. He kept working in the Hungarian health service, never giving up his analytical practice.

After many years working “semi-underground” Rajka was one of the main protagonists raising his voice in favour of the re-establishment of the Society: in order to create the legal conditions which would enable this small, surviving, “tolerated” professional community to begin the enormous task facing them – elaborating the losses and picking up the thread in analytical thinking which has been cut, ruptured and buried alive. This second, post war association provided the basis and framework for taking a second look at the experience and formative effects of living in a traumatised land and for re-claiming its well-deserved place among the nations of the psychoanalytic world, where it belonged since its very creation in 1913.

Owing to their efforts after the 1960s psychoanalysis became increasingly accepted in Hungary. The revival of the Budapest School could begin. Rajko, together with Imre Hermann, Rajko laboured hard to resurrect the spirit of the pre-war association. With a few analysts of the next generation, they worked relentlessly: teaching, consulting and exploring possible new ways of promoting psychoanalytic ideas and training.

Looking at Rajka’s biography, one realises that psychoanalysts of the Budapest School had to digest what history taught them early on: that one cannot escape the facts and effects of external reality; the outside world is likely to march into one’s life and upset the existing order, both external and internal. In all circumstances one has to face and attempt to make sense of such experiences. One has to explore the diverse layers of meaning of individual and societal change and trauma in one’s life and work these through as best as one can, in order to be able to live an authentic (and autonomous) life.

He was and remained a clinician, wherever he worked

A collection of papers and two “books of notes” on analytical technique and methodology were left behind outlining some of his relevant ideas regarding our place and professional identity in the consulting room. He emphasised aspects useful for the therapeutic couple to achieve “wholeness” in working together in the here-and-now, in a world in constant development and change. His credo defining the analytical process as a joint encounter between “whole personalities” – including their body, mind and soul – puts him among the early representatives of object relations theory, shared by most analysts of the Budapest School, including Balint.

The idea of a multi-generational model came naturally to him. He paid special attention to ensure the coming to light of unelaborated traumas, anxieties and fears of the previous generation in their analytical session. He was convinced that a sense of continuity can only be reached by working through splits and fragmentations; this is how the past –and that includes the past of our ancestors – can become an integral part of our psychic reality.

The idea of change and growth was central in his thinking. He always tried to see those onto- and phylogenetic moments which could be seen as definitive in the phenomenology of symptom formation. Thinking along developmental lines this way has also been a very hot issue (remember Ferenczi’s Thalassa!) among contemporary theorists.

Rajka’s technical suggestions have always emerged from and were put in the service of the analytical situation.

Motor, perceptual and behavioural manifestations were in the focus of his observations. His paper on *Exposing Behaviour as a Method in Psychoanalysis* makes him one of the first analysts talking about “enactments” and the importance of tackling them; “exposing them” in our daily clinical work. He did this already in 1972 (!).

By “behaviour”, he wrote, “I mean postural, motor, mimical phenomena and also actions and chains of action in the analytic situation. These provide direct, nonverbal information about the patient, which sometimes carries those contents fixed on the level of ‘emotional memory’ that cannot be put into words.” (Rajka, 1972/2005)

Special attention has to be paid to understanding and working through these patterns when they are seen operating in the service of resistance. The technique in itself is a simple confrontation, sometimes in a repetitive manner, reflecting Rajka’s negative experience in trying to “interpret” compulsive phenomena. It fosters “working through phenomena disturbing analytic work at the very moment they emerge”.

The effective mechanism is set to work mainly by the patient seeing himself “not in a mirror, as one sees in the mirror with his own eyes!”, but through the perception of a person whose views s/he can accept or at least consider in the analytical space.

Another simple technique he taught us was “dream drawing”. The aim was to achieve a more profound and multi-dimensional image of the patients’ dreams and

dream-like phantasies. While interpreting a dream, at a relevant moment we would encourage the patient to make a drawing of the dream-element in question. While drawing, the patient can sit up. Finishing the drawing, which does not have to be either professional or nice, s/he is invited to lie back on the couch, take the paper in his or her hand and free associate to the picture. The drawing presents the dream content in spatial terms. This new dimension always furthers new material to appear, hidden from consciousness thus far.

At different stages of the infantile development experiences and phantasies become associated with different units of the living space. Working with these drawings help us make sense of these “topographic childhood memories”. They mobilise infantile material associated with, and in a sense “locked in” with these sceneries in an extraordinarily plastic and vivid manner. Looking at these drawings together within the context of the analytical process creates a space for “controlled sharing”. Putting an aspect of the dream “outside”, thus making visual material accessible for the therapeutic couple, expands the area of interpretation. This shared experience facilitates the appearance of creative elements and “legitimises” a sense of playfulness as an integral part of the analytical process. Associations mobilised by this “complex” method of interpretative work foster living and working through past experiences in the analytic present and help us see more closely how they survived in the unconscious.

Looking at dynamic processes along these lines also illuminates a basic technical point in Rajka’s teaching – in harmony with the Budapest views – emphasising that transference-countertransference processes form an ever-changing constellation. Sometimes it is most helpful to shift viewpoint and contemplate life experiences from the patient’s perspective.

Rajka was always interested in the spatial and sensuous qualities of memories. He wanted to understand how patients used their perception and senses as basic sources of orientation in the world. One of his original ideas in this field was to encourage a comparative study of the importance of the sense of smell as an elementary factor of orientation seemingly lost for the human race in modern civilisation. He believed smell played an archaic role in human relations, a function that should be rediscovered and explored in order to explain normal and pathological phenomena related to this form of tele-reception.

For the pioneer generation of psychoanalysts, research was considered a natural tool in analytical enquiry. While searching for evidence to support their ideas regarding the nature and dynamics of observed psychic functions, the pioneers often turned to experimenting themselves. Searching for a biological model of anxiety in the early 1930s, Rajka worked with rabbits. He found the model he was looking for in the phenomenon of immobilisation. In a series of publications, he summarised his attempts to show analogous forms of behaviour in human pathology (Rajka, 1972). Rajka was convinced that in anxiety he uncovered a basic phenomenon of psychic functioning. Psychodynamic aspects of anxiety and obsession were relevant topics for him (Rajka, 1977). He compared primary compulsive phenomena to anxiety. He regarded them both as basic components of general mental activity.

“A mental case around the turn of the century”

The psychoanalyst – if he is truly interested in dynamic processes and does not focus entirely on the internal stage – has to try to apply binocular vision; a parallel testing of both external and psychic reality, in order to develop a view of the world we live in and make sense of it. That may enable us to look at life through the organic prism of feelings and effects associated with our nurturing or traumatising (re-traumatising) environment. Rajka proves that these are also guiding lines in the domain of mental illness.

Amongst his theoretical writings he left a large-scale manuscript, based on Schreber’s famous book – well known from Freud’s interpretations –, *Memoirs of my Nervous Illness (Denkwürdigkeiten eines Nervenkranken)* chronicling the development of his paranoid schizophrenia with real apostolic devotion, says Júlia Gádoros (1984).

In the introduction Rajka writes:

“It is customary to investigate how books reflect the age in which their authors lived. Schreber was not a professional writer, he was only a psychotic. Therefore, the mirror in which the age could be reflected is deformed and fragmented. Still, it is worth observing what the glass splinters show us – as the peculiarities in refraction can make visible something, one might look for in an intact mirror in vain.” (Rajka, s. a./1993)

His central idea is that in the system of doxasmas (*idée fixe*) the patient transforms the given social reality in congruence with the rules of his psychosis while projecting his psychotic inner world onto the given social reality of his age. Testing the social reality compared to the psychotic “opus” may enrich our knowledge both on psychotic mechanisms and the particular epoch.

There are parts of the Memoirs directly connected to intellectual trends of the 19th century. Quoting Rajka:

“It is quite peculiar how this psychotic mind contains so much of the intellectual and political distortions of the fin de siècle, the German crisis that paved the way to outbursts of aggression- eventually leading to an age of destruction. Schreber tries to justify his own experiences by the irrationality of the world outside: the catastrophic end of the world is a projection of a psychotic desintegration.” (Rajka, s. a./1993)

Rajka demonstrates how a strikingly similar sense of destruction is evident in major works of Schreber’s contemporaries: writers, poets and philosophers in search of explanations. He finds substantial linkages between Karl Jaspers’ ideas and critical questions formulated in Schreber’s premorbid mind.

Doctors facing mental illness are in a paradox situation – he continues. Frequently they are forced to give up their wish for understanding for a long time; they have to stand the test of long months or even years of non-understanding. Symptoms, syndromes and disease are easy to detect in minutes, but that would certainly not be equal to understanding the patient.

Rajka was not only an understanding and caring doctor but also a charismatic teacher. He gave an authentic and most human model for all younger generations to follow. His figure – increasingly resembling the image of St Paul the Apostle on a Russian icon – became a symbol of professional rigour, authenticity, courage and care.

In the last years of his life, he was very ill. He was aware of the fact that his full life was fading away but in spite of the great pain he was to suffer he worked almost to the last minute. True to himself, facing mortality with profound dignity, he was strong enough to embrace life in its full scope and care about a future he knew he would not share with us.

In 1972, summing up the lessons of his life while looking back at the beginning of his century, Tibor Rajka, always the poet, wrote:

“Man already saw where he came from but not where he was going. What he had seen was not reassuring. Belief in evolution became empty and lost its meaning. Feelings of unease were born amidst the technical miracles and economic growth. Art and literature expressed the disconcerting confrontation of modern man with his creations, and his painful struggle to fulfil himself and find his place in the world.” (Rajka, 1972/2005)

His words echoed in our minds when he sent us “going on our way” in search of our self and the concepts, basic assumptions and values we live by.

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