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Michael Balint

Throughout his life Michael Balint was a fountain of joie de vivre and fresh ideas. He had a winning personality with a knowing smile and sparkling eyes. He was not afraid to question seemingly firm dogmas and by this opening doors on new views.

A notoriously critical look accompanied his often sharp tongue. He could be quite arrogant and direct, but he loved it when one took up the challenge. When he had provoked somebody he used to employ the saying, 'If you have a Hungarian as a friend you do not need enemies.' His British colleagues therefore named him the 'wild Hungarian'.

Balint became world famous through his successful work with medical practitioners. He succeeded in bringing psychoanalytical knowledge into medical practice. Today his 'Balint-Groups' apply all over the world and have proved as an excellent medium in further education even of non-medical occupations (e.g. nurses, judges and teachers). Balint had no time for personality cult, not even his own. And there are few stories about his life. But he mentioned his private life in introductions to his books, and he let something be known in his scientific writings, making his clear-cut writing lively and compelling.

Balint was born as Michael Bergsmann 3rd December 1896 in Budapest. The Bergsmann family lived in Baross utca, at the corner of Maria utca in the 8th District, next to the Semmelweis University Clinics. The flat served as his father's practice as well. Among medical practitioners and students mostly petit bourgeois and civil servants lived in Josefstadt in Pest. The eager, vibrant 'Mischí' and his sister Emmi, one and a half year his junior, were raised as Jewish orthodox. 'I loved my mother very much. She was a straightforward person, had both feet on the ground and she was never desperate when something did not work out well. She tried to make the most of the few pleasures available. The German Jewish grandfather was a butcher in Bohemia. His son, Michael's father, had a good reputation as a medical practitioner. But Dr. Ignac Bergsmann was a notorious choleric; he was irascible, rigorous and bitter. Father and son were often fighting head-on and Michael spent a lot of time with friends of the family.

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Michael's thirst for knowledge was insatiable, from schooldays onwards. He wolfed down all that fell into his hands that was readable. From the start he had a special love of the exact natural sciences: chemical science, mathematics and most of all biology. But he began his medical studies only unwillingly, at behest of his father, so Michael said. Yet the Hungarian Study Regulations of the time allowed a lot of space for his various interests. In 1914 he was sent to the Russian front straightaway and from there to the Italian Dolomites. It might have been because of a self-inflicted thumb injury that Michael was sent home two years later. Such self-mutilations for refusal to do military service were not uncommon among the Hungarian intellectuals at that time. The name change to 'Bálint' (Hungarian for Valentine) between 1916 and 1921 testifies to the then frequent assimilation. Specific reasons were never told: It might have been the fear of an anti-Semitic pogrom or a declared positive commitment to the Hungarian people? Anyway, this was a point of contention between father and son, too. Michael also changed his religious affiliation and became a Unitarian. Their motto 'Semper reformari debet' (constant renewal is necessary) remained for him a life principle. Both parents took their own life in 1944 in order to escape arrest by the Hungarian Nazis. From England Balint had tried to get them passports.

Balint encountered psychoanalysis from the beginning with his typical, critical as well as vivid, interest. So he read Freud's 'The Interpretation of Dreams' and 'The Psychopathology of Everyday Life' with ambivalence. But he 'was irrevocably won over for psychoanalysis at the age of 21 by "The Three Essays" and "Totem and Taboo". "Totem and Taboo" was lent to me by a young girl. ... We had been very good friends even then. From our shared enthusiasm for "Totem and Taboo" until her death in 1939 Alice and I had read and studied, lived and worked together.' Alice had been a classmate of Michael's sister Emmi and Margret Mahler, and she was the daughter of the Hungarian training psychoanalyst Vilma Kovacs.

When Hungary was proclaimed a republic after World War I in 1918 Michael had just completed his studies and begun work at a chemistry laboratory. At the beginning of 1919 the communists' and socialists' Council Republic was brought down. In those days on the run from racists of the 'Hungarian Awakening', and while they both sought refuge in the service accommodation of a professor of the Pathophysiological Institute, he met the seven years older psychoanalyst Imre Hermann.

'The usual ambivalence of friendship was intensified by our meeting under life threatening circumstances on the one hand, but on the other hand watered down. ... The fear, the joint fate, the tragedy of the world around us and inside us, our own weakness, the concern regarding our survival had made us friends for ever, but also in part to opponents', Hermann wrote, whose observations on primates and the resulting 'Theory of Clinging' had a lasting influence on Balint at any rate.

Michael and Alice married and left the Hungarian 'White Terror' behind by moving to the then scientifically and culturally blooming metropolis of Berlin in 1921. Michael worked in the chemistry laboratory of the later Nobel Prize winner Otto Warburg, and obtained an academic degree for his published works. At the same time Alice followed her own ethnological interests in the 'Völkerkundemuseum'. They both began their training analysis with Hanns Sachs at the same time. Michael began half-day work in the Psychoanalytical Institute, headed by Karl Abraham, where he met Melanie Klein again, whom he had first seen in Ferenczi's anteroom in 1920. Furthermore he was given the opportunity to take on patients for psychoanalysis at the famous Charité Hospital.

In 1924 the situation in Hungary calmed down again and the young couple returned. They both continued their training analysis with Ferenczi until two years later, when he travelled to the United States for a few months. At this time Michael worked as an assistant at the Budapest University Clinic. He wanted to carry out his psychosomatic treatments here too, but he was not provided with suitable premises, so at last he gave up. He was admitted into the Hungarian Psychoanalytic Society and concentrated on his growing number of psychoanalytic clients. From 1927 on he offered his first seminars for medical practitioners.

But the work was under surveillance from 1932 on, 'these were the '30s and the situation in Hungary became tenser from day to day. It became very unlikely that any institution would provide me with the necessary opportunities to put my ideas to the test. Therefore I decided to gather some medical practitioners in a kind of seminar, to address research into psychotherapeutic opportunities in their day to day practice. Even though I had very vague ideas of the needs of my colleagues (for instance I began the seminar with a series of courses, which I know today were completely useless), the interest was so great that a second group was established.

Meanwhile the political situation grew worse. We were ordered to give the names of all the participants of our meetings to the police. And one plain-clothes policeman participated and made detailed notes. We never found out the content of these notes and who read them. To our knowledge the only practical result was that after a number of meetings the policeman consulted one of us on his own account and for his wife or his children. We were very amused, but under such circumstances there was absolutely no discussion conceivable and the group of physicians split up.'

Michael and Alice had a very intimate and balanced marriage, 'all our ideas - whether arisen from her head or mine - were first cheerfully welcomed, and then probed, field-tested and in endless debates criticised. It often was sheer coincidence, which of us had one of our ideas scripted for publishing. Besides psychoanalysis, Alice was interested most of all in anthropology and education, and I in biology and medicine. And these were mostly the criteria for the deci-

sion as to who should write about a certain idea. We only had one paper published together, but all could just as well have been published with both our names.' The couple led a comfortable middle-class life, was friends with painters and musicians such as Leo Wiener and of course with colleagues such as Istvan Hollós or Géza Roheim, with whom Alice had worked. They discussed endlessly social influences on psychological manifestations with Otto Fenichel. Each summer they spent a month in Tragöß in Austria.

The marriage produced one child: the son John Balint, who later became a professor for psychoanalysis living in New York. Friedrich Kovacs, Alice's stepfather, was a well-to-do architect, who had built a house in Mészárosz utca 12 that belonged to him. He provided a flat on the fourth floor for the young family and another for the Psychoanalytic Society, which from 1930 on ran an ambulance from there, the 'Polyclinic'. Anton von Freund donated a large sum to finance this institute, but it was reduced to a pitiful amount by inflation. Rising medical practitioners built such clinics at the time in order to break new ground. Each member was under obligation to dedicate two hours of the eight hours of daily work to destitute patients for only a symbolic fee.

This now renovated house today carries a plaque with the inscription, 'Dr. Bálint Mihály, the pioneer of humane psychosomatic medical science lived in this house. The Psychoanalytical Institute in which he worked was also based here.

The Hungarian Association of General Medicine und the Hungarian Society of Psychiatry 1986' The idea was that the institute should also serve psychoanalytical teaching and research, and Balint was one of the leading representatives. He relied in his work on experience and on his keen powers of observation. 'The three closely linked topics - human sexuality, object relations and psychoanalytical technique' - determined his life work.

Treatment success was close to the heart of both Ferenczi and Balint and contrary to Freud they wanted to render a 'fresh start' possible for the patient. This led to a treatment technique that allowed more room for the psychoanalyst's feelings and paid more attention to them. His whole life through Ferenczi remained a teacher and role model for Michael - 'due to an undissolved transference' - as Balint said ironically. In 1930 Ferenczi wrote, 'Balint developed the ideas further, where I had failed.' Love was the central topic here. Instead of narcissism, caring for other people is the main aspect of human life from its inception. One of his first great lectures Balint held in Wiesbaden 1932, 'Character analysis and fresh start'. Despite Freud having advised against it, Ferenczi spoke about 'The language of tenderness and passion', and through this he was considered to be unworthy of discussion by many. One year later Ferenczi died. Alice Balint, her mother and Michael read his 'Clinical Diary' and decided to wait for a more suitable climate for its release - it would take half a century. Balint became the testamentary executor and in 1935 Ferenczi's successor as head of the Budapest Polyclinic.

The same year in Vienna, of all places, he gave the lecture 'Critical Notes on the Theory of the Pre-genital Organisations of the Libido' and by this showed himself further as the intrepid disciple of his meanwhile accursed master. But he did not want to break away and was always proud not to have established his 'own' school. In May 1937 at the 2nd Four-country Conference Balint explained, 'Primary narcissism was never observed; what we see clinically is always secondary narcissism only. ... If the world does not love me enough, does not give me enough satisfaction, then I have to love myself, have to pleasure myself.' According to Balint primary love is not only passive, as Ferenczi thought, but is definitely an active way of making contact. 'This primitive egoistical form of love acts by the principle, "what is good for me is all right with you." ... Claims of the object which go beyond this unanimity are unbearable, they evoke fear or aggression.

This form of object relation is not bound to any erogenous zone, it is not (only) oral ... love.' It was half a century before the 'baby watchers' confirmed Balint's assertion.

In 1938 there was an emergency meeting in Géza Roheim's mansion. But only the Balints decided on emigration, early in 1939 to Manchester, where John Rickman lent them a helping hand. In the first year the family was already struck by disaster, which had hung over them like the sword of Damocles. During the visit of an acquaintance Alice lost consciousness temporarily. Michael was called and took her home. He thought it was a fainting fit due to an intestinal influenza and put her to bed. But Alice became unconscious again. The physician called to her aid could only record her death. A cerebral vessels aneurysm, which they already knew about, had burst.

As early as 1946 Balint returned to Hungary as an envoy of the British Society and he also made contact with German psychoanalysts. It took up to the '50s (of the previous century) until Michael Balint found happiness again in his private and professional life. At the Tavistock Clinic he met Enid Eichholz and came to love her. With the help of his wife he succeeded in launching so-called Balint Groups. In these groups psychoanalytic knowledge was more and more employed on the real physician-patient relations and through this it gained a much broader currency. In this way the Balint's research groups did integrative work in practical clinical, theoretical and patient perspective.

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