

Lowenfeld, Margaret Frances Janes (1890-1973)

Lowenfeld, Margaret Frances Jane (1890-1973), Paediatrician, Child Psychiatrist and Child Psychotherapist, was born on 4th February 1890, in Lowndes Square, London, the younger of the two daughters of, Henry ne Heinz Lowenfeld, a business man and property owner of Polish Jewish origin, and Alice Evans, daughter of a Welsh naval captain from a non-conformist Protestant background.

After a brief career in medical research, Lowenfeld became a crucial figure in establishing child psychotherapy in Britain as importance of mental health reached public awareness after World War 1. She is particularly well known for 'The World Technique' in which, in the course of non-directive psychotherapy, the patient uses a sand tray and model figures to create an imaginary world. The emphasis is on mobilising the potential of the image making process itself rather than, as in psychoanalysis, working through the transference relationship established towards the psychotherapist.

Lowenfeld published some nine medical research papers, about twenty-three papers on psychological work, many popular papers, and three books: Play in Childhood (1935), The Lowenfeld Mosaic Test (1955) and The World Technique (1979) published posthumously.

Margaret's elder sister, Helena, became well known as Helena Wright (1887-1981), gynaecologist and a pioneer of birth control. Both daughters were brought up in the Church of England and as British citizens. However, Poland exerted a strong influence. Their father was the third son in a land-owning and mining family from Chrzanow, near Krakow, in what was then the Austrian part of Poland. He came to Britain in the early 1880's and was rapidly successful financially, eventually owning several hotels and theatres. This allowed him to take over the ownership of the Polish Estate. His daughters regularly accompanied him on trips to Poland, travelling through several European countries. This experience contributed to Lowenfeld's later interest in cultural artefacts and traditional patterns and designs as expressive of culture specific modes of thought.

Lowenfeld's education was, in many respects, liberal. She attended kindergarten at the Froebel Education Institution in Talgarth Road, London, the first Froebel school in England. From the age of eight years, she was a pupil at the Church of England High School for Girls, Graham Street, London, before joining her sister, in 1902, at Cheltenham Ladies College. The parents provided both girls with ample opportunities for developing interests in the visual and dramatic arts.

However, despite cultural and educational opportunity, Lowenfeld's childhood was not entirely happy. Her mother enjoyed the lifestyle provided by her husband's success and was well— known as a society hostess. But differences in the parents' temperaments and background finally led to a particularly complex divorce in 1903.

Margaret was deeply affected by the divorce. As a child she has often been ill. In her teens she was under great emotional strain. She was sustained particularly by her active involvement in the Student Christian Movement and by her growing interest in science.

In 1912, Lowenfeld entered the London School of Medicine for Women following her sister Helen. She passed her Intermediate MB examination shortly before the outbreak of World War I. By 1918, she had obtained the minimal qualifications entitling her to practice. However, before taking the examination for the MBBS (Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery), a request from the family village in Poland led her to join a League of Friends Typhus Mission. The Polish/Russian War was still continuing, and epidemics of influenza, cholera and typhus ravished much of Europe.

Entering Poland in 1919, Lowenfeld witnessed extreme examples of distress and survival in children and adults which made her particularly interested in what promotes resilience in mental health and on relations between psyche and soma. Later, difficulties in conveying the horror of what she observed convinced her of limitations in the capacity of verbal language for conveying emotional experience.

On finally returning to London in 1921, Lowenfeld spent a short period as an inpatient at Bowden House Nursing House, London, under the care of Wilfred Trotter, a surgeon and a well-known advocate of psychodynamic psychology gaining public recognition for its success in treating shell-shock victims. A year earlier another consultant to Bowden House, Hugh Crichton-Miller, had founded what became the Tavistock Clinic, London. This took non-fee paying patients for psychotherapeutic treatment. A child patient was amongst the first referrals, but no treatment specifically for children existed (Dicks 1970).

Initially comparatively eclectic in orientation, the Tavistock eventually became more psychoanalytic. Lowenfeld accepted the importance of unconscious processes and drives but found psychoanalysis too restrictive. She favoured a more holistic approach which emphasised the strengths of the individual child. In the first instance, Lowenfeld continued her career by becoming a research student at the Mothercraft Training Centre dedicated to promoting infant health according to methods advocated by Truby King. She went on to contribute to two major research projects, on infant feeding and on rheumatism in childhood.

Finally, in 1928, Lowenfeld established the Clinic for Nervous and Difficult Children, a community based drop-in centre at 12 Telford Road, London. This was in the same year that, on rather different lines, the Child Guidance Council was established in Britain. The Paediatric Association was also started, with Lowenfeld as a founder member.

The success of the clinic led to several changes of premises. Arriving in Warwick Avenue in 1931, it acquired the name 'Institute of Child Psychology' (ICP). By 1935, annual attendance had risen to over thirteen hundred. Lowenfeld's historical survey and observational research had led to the publication of 'Play in Childhood' and the first psychotherapy training was established. In 1937, she gave her paper 'A thesis concerning the fundamental structure of the mento-emotional processes in children' to the general section of the British Psychological Society. This outlined her views on the primacy of an integrative mental function, simultaneously cognitive and affective, which functioned in infancy, and which rewired non-verbal means for its expression. She later called this the 'proto system'.

The work was partly influenced by her close friendship with the philosopher, Robin Collingwood, whose Essay on Philosophical Method (1933) had recently been published. The work was well received amongst practitioners and academics in psychology, medicine and education, who had observed its practical effects. But within the year Lowenfeld was strongly criticised by psychoanalysts present at her reading of 'The World Pictures of Children' given to the general section of the British Psychological Society. Though personally devastated by the criticism, her enthusiasm was encouraged by a further move to new premises at 6 Pembridge Villas, on 23rd June 1938.

Unfortunately, World War II broke out within 15 months. The clinic was evacuated to Birkhampstead, Hertfordshire, under the name of 'The Childrens' Clinic'. After the war the formation of the National Health Service in 1948 introduced further complications. The clinic changed its status from a friendly society to a non-profit making limited company taking children from poorer families via a special arrangement with the North West Regional Health Board. The ICP functioned side-by-side the child guidance clinics which increased numerically immediately after the war. Along with other child psychotherapy trainings recently established, regulation of the ICP training came under the auspices of the new professional body, the Association of Child Psychotherapists, which Lowenfeld helped to found.

Unfortunately, in 1978 with the recession, the hospital board withdrew its financial support, affecting a large proportion of clients. The ICP was forced to close. The training was discontinued more or less simultaneously five years after Margaret Lowenfeld's death.

However, during World War II, though suffering mentally and physically, Lowenfeld had continued to generate new ideas. After the war, her friendship with the anthropologist, Margaret Mead, whom she met in London at the World Federation of Mental Health Conference in 1948, was particularly important in fuelling a growing interest in using Lowenfeld's mosaics in cross cultural work. Mead also encouraged Lowenfeld's interest in educational research, culminating in the Kaleidoblocs Test used in psychological assessment and Poleidoblocs which enable children to discover mathematical concepts. The latter, in particular, is still used in primary schools today.

In the late 1960's Lowenfeld spent less time at the ICP focusing on writing and on private work with adults. She lived alternately at her Harley Street flat and at Cherry Orchard, a house in Cholesbury, Buckinghamshire, which she had bought on the death of her mother in 1931. She was supported by her close friend and living companion, Ville Andersen, a Danish citizen who had trained at the ICP in the 1950's.

Always a person of firm ideas, in her last years she suffered increasingly from confusion and alterations of mood. After going into a coma she died in the Hospital of St John and Elizabeth, near her sister's flat in St John's Wood, London on 2nd February 1973. She was buried at the Church of St Lawrence, Cholesbury, Buckinghamshire.