

Rieder, Ines and Diana Voigt. 2019. *The Story of Sidonie C. Freud's Famous "Case of Female Homosexuality."* Trans. Jill Hannum, Ines Rieder. Saint Helena, CA: Helena History Press. 371 pp.

Reviewed by Ágnes Huszár, Eötvös Loránd University agnes.huszar2010@gmail.com

This significant, easily readable and enjoyable work is a biography of a woman from her birth in 1900 to her death in 1999. The book is a fascinating contribution to three fields: queer studies, Jewish history and psychoanalysis. The heroine of the book is Margarethe Csonka-Trautenegg – named Gretl throughout – who during the last decade of her life shared her life-story with the two authors (Ines Rieder, 1954-2015, writer, historian of gay/lesbian history and feminism in East-Central Europe; and ecopsychologist Diana Voigt, 1960-2009). The authors interpreted Gretl's personal impressions with the help of academic and media sources while focusing mainly on Gretl's youth and treatment sessions with Sigmund Freud.

Gretl was lucky to have been born into a wealthy and loving family. She was exceptionally beautiful and affluent for most of her life, but she was marginalized in two significant ways. She lived as a lesbian in Vienna, a city in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy with a long tradition of patriarchal spirit, and she was a Jew in the mostly Catholic Austria. The Csonka family lived the usual life of an upper-middle class family: most of the father's time was spent running his oil-import and banking companies, the mother was frequently out leading an active social life, and so it was the maids who were to run the household and the tutor to care for the family's children, Gretl and her two (and later three) brothers. The family spent the summers in the Brijuni Croatian islands, engaged in sports and social gatherings in the company of acquaintances. From the point of view of the daughter this idyllic – and for them regular – family life was disturbed only by the behavior of the mother toward her. She was a beautiful woman, dressed elegantly, with social life at the center of her existence. But it was only with her three sons that she had an affectionate relationship, whereas her daughter did not seem to even exist for her.

Gretl's fate reached a turning point when, at the age of seventeen, she met the beautiful but extremely extravagant impoverished baroness Leonie Puttkamer in a hotel in Semmering. Puttkamer had a wide international social circle around her, she engaged in relationships with both men and women, and at that time she was also leading a menage à trois with a couple. Gretl fell for Leonie with adolescent fervor; in fact she very much acted like a teenager in love. She stalked the baroness on the street, brought her beautiful bouquets of flowers and often dreamed of her. A much more experienced woman, Leonie consciously seduced her, telling erotic stories to this much younger girl who was completely inexperienced sexually. "On some afternoons the baroness gets a devilish notion to make Sidi blush and fidget in embarrassment. She likes to see what happens when her noble young gallant gets that prickling feeling in her tummy and between her legs and doesn't know what to do. 'Why don't you read to me from this book, ma



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chère? I'd like that'. Sidonie accepts the much-thumbed booklet and says, '*The Memoirs of Josephine Mutzenbacher*' [a popular, twentieth-century soft porn book narrating the stories of a Viennese prostitute]. Never heard of it.' Sidonie spends tortured hours reading this book aloud. She finds it hideous and feels ashamed, but to please Leonie she knuckles down to the task. And that little tug in her tummy and the heat in her throat – she prefers to ignore them" (23).

The laws of the Habsburg Monarchy strictly forbade homosexuality and threatened those engaging in it with up to five years in prison, as detailed in a section of the law that was removed from its later, the Austrian version only as late as 1971. When Gretl fell in love with Leonie, she was certainly not fully aware of her own emotions, much less of the legal consequences thereof. The intensity of her emotions was manifested first in a suicide attempt. She was walking down the street with Leonie when they met her own father, who had forbidden her keeping in contact with the baroness. Under the influence of her father's angry gaze, she threw herself over a protective wall and fell on the tram rails. Luckily, she did not suffer serious injuries, except for a leg fracture. Her suicide attempt convinced her father of the seriousness of her situation and he believed that his daughter had to be "healed" of her sick attraction. He was confident that the famous Viennese professor, Sigmund Freud, would manage to steer Gretl into the "normal path." In today's terminology, he actually asked Freud to treat his daughter by way of a "conversion therapy."

Freud had his doubts but finally he decided to start therapy with Gretl. He had dealt with lesbianism several times during his work, yet his writings about it were inconsistent. In some of his writings he defines it as a disease, while in others he refers to it as an inversion. In his view, the psychosocial development of women can begin in one of three ways. In the first, normal way the girl notices a defect in her body: the absence of a penis, and later this penis-envy of her is replaced by the desire for a child. In the second way, some girls suppress their sexuality and this sometimes leads to neurosis. In the third way, for some girls, the desire for a child of their own does not develop, and instead they experience some sort of masculinity complex. This can – although it does not necessarily have to – lead to homosexuality. According to Freud, it is possible to steer the choices of homosexual patients into the heterosexual matrix, meaning, from the third path back to the first.

Gretl had become "a celebrity in a grotesque way" (xi), as she herself puts it. She was the nameless young girl, a patient of Professor Freud's, who was in analysis for four months in 1919 and the subject of his 1920 essay "On the Psychogenesis of a Case of Female Homosexuality." Gretl obeyed her father and showed up everyday at one p.m. at Freud's Berggasse apartment. She knew almost nothing about psychoanalysis, so her expectations were also very vague. There was an initial aversion between Freud and Gretl, and no sympathy ever developed between the two. For the doctor, this was not an obstacle for the success of the therapy, but for the patient, it was. Freud was convinced that his patient had a problem that needed medical help; Gretl, on her part, saw no problem in her feelings for Leonie. Freud describes his young patient as follows: "A beautiful and clever girl of eighteen, belonging to a family of good standing, had aroused displeasure and concern on the part of her parents by the tender passion with which she pursued a certain lady, about ten years older than herself" (28).

Freud tried to shoehorn Gretl's homosexuality into his oedipal theory. He explained Gretl's case by saying that although she had entered the oedipal phase, she later suffered

regression and fell back into a pre-oedipal phase. According to the conception of psychoanalysis at that time, everyone goes through the stage of identifying with the parent of the same sex. Yet after this, in the oedipal phase, they move on to fit into the heterosexual matrix, and in the case of girls they see their father as the object of their desire. According to Freud, this did not materialize properly in Gretl's case, so she fell back into the previous stage, identifying with the figure of the mother and accepting her as the object of her desire. The turning point, according to Freud, came when the adolescent Gretl was confronted with the fact that her mother became pregnant again and gave birth to her youngest brother.

Freud saw the mother's behavior as follows: "She had suffered for some years from neurotic troubles and enjoyed great consideration from her husband; she was very erratic in her treatment of her children, rather hard towards her daughter and overindulgent to her three sons, the youngest of whom had been born after a long interval and was not yet three years old [...]. The girl we are considering had little cause in general to feel affection for her mother. The latter, still youthful herself, saw in her rapidly developing daughter an inconvenient competitor." (43). According to Freud, then, Gretl was attracted to older women because she had found her own mother in them.

According to our current knowledge, the conversion therapy of homosexuals is doomed to failure by its very goal and even terminology. Gretl's therapy could not achieve the goal set by her father either, of "transferring or returning" her to heterosexuality. Therapy could, however, have helped Gretl in self-knowledge and self-acceptance but it actually did not, which might be explained by her very unwillingness to work with Freud. She found the professor's requests, for example to report and describe her dreams in detail, humiliating and confusing. As a consequence, she used the usual tactics of rebellious young people: pretending to obey the instructions of the adult, yet somehow objecting or avoiding really doing so. But Freud could not be deceived: "I told her one day that I did not believe these dreams, that I regarded them as false or hypocritical, and that she invented them to deceive me just as she used to deceive her father. I was right, after this exposition, this kind of dream ceased [...]. With our dreamer, the intention to mislead me, just as she used to her father, certainly emanated from the preconscious, or perhaps even from consciousness; it could come to expression by entering into connection with the unconscious wish-impulse to please her father (or father-substitute) and in this way it created a lying dream" (49).

Realizing the resistance of Gretl, Freud decided to suspend the analysis. He did not trust its effectiveness and was increasingly disturbed by Gretl's indifference and contempt toward him. He explained this in part by Gretl's general dislike of men. He also considered her behavior to be the contempt of a rich heiress: "The analysis went forward almost without any signs of resistance, the patient actively participating intellectually, though absolutely *tranquil* emotionally. Once when I expounded to her an especially important part of the theory, she replied in an inimitable tone, 'Oh, how interesting', as though she were a *grande dame* being taken over a museum and glancing though her lorgnon at objects to which she was completely indifferent" (54).

Freud advised Gretl's father to have her continue her therapy with a female analyst, which did not happen. Gretl neither followed Freud's advice nor kept her promise to her father to end her relationship with Leonie. Jane Czyzewska – a psychotherapist specialized in this area –

explains the early termination of Gretl's therapy in an altogether other way: "There may be another reason why Freud terminated their work: in her introduction to the biography psychoanalyst Jeanne Wolff-Bernstein suggests that at the time Freud was seeing Gretl, he was concerned about his youngest daughter Anna who, then aged 22, showed no interest in men. She too turned out to be lesbian..."

<https://medium.com/stillpointspaces/freuds-famous-case-of-female-homosexuality-a-book-review-on-the-story-of-sidonie-c-328e09111c4b>).