

## **The Return Of Gertrude Gelehrter -a short story by Anthony (Tony) Fagin**

### **I. The Initial Interview**

“So, what is it that makes you want to work as a volunteer for a specifically Jewish counselling service?” Bluma Helfgot, the Clinical Director of SAYCHL, asked.

In response to my letter of enquiry, she had invited me to attend an initial interview at her first-floor flat in a 1930's block in a quiet crescent near Edgware underground station.

“Well,” I replied, “I’m Jewish – it’s an important part of my identity – and I thought it might be interesting to work with Jewish clients. I feel that in the problems people present there is often a deep, underlying, existential – you could even say ‘spiritual’ – issue that is overlooked and needs to be addressed.”

“That” – Bluma’s blue eyes twinkled with pleasure – “is a very good answer.”

We were in her consulting room. She looked very small in her high-backed chair, which she was able to rotate and tilt back at will. I was sitting opposite her. There was a couch with a colourful kilim rug; two or three tasteful, framed paintings on the walls; and beside her a low table with a small army of archaeological figurines from the classical world, presided over by the headless Winged Victory of Samothrace.

Bluma went on to ask about my training and the way I worked with clients. I told her I was in the third year of my training as a T.A. counsellor.

“What is T.A.?” she asked.

“Transactional Analysis. I’m training with Stewart McElhone.”

“Ah, one of those narcissistic charismatics.” A note of sourness had crept into her voice. “I went to one of his weekend intensives called ‘Change Your Life!’ I found his way of working rather superficial. He took no account whatsoever of the irrational, which is one of the main principles of psychoanalysis.”

I explained to her that, in individual and group sessions, clients presented a problem they were having and then, using T.A. theory, we worked on it and attempted to gain some insight into it.

“But how do your clients know T.A. theory?”

“Part of each session involves a teaching component.”

“That is very didactic. Tell me: what are the main elements of T.A. theory?”

I started by explaining what ‘Ego States’ were.

“Parent, Adult, Child sounds to me very much derived from Freud’s Superego, Ego and Id.”

“Yes, I agree. And you’ve probably heard about ‘Games’,” I added.

“Ah yes, ‘Games People Play’ by Eric Bernstein, a nice Jewish boy and – did you know? – a failed psychoanalyst. I think his theories are rather trite. He was a positivist, a rationalist. And the essence of Freud - *he* was a true genius – is that the unconscious is *not* rational.”

She had difficulty accepting that I did not use the ‘transference’, which she claimed was the main tool of the psychoanalyst.

And when I told her I also used elements of Gestalt therapy, it was as if I had lit a fuse. Till then she had been composed and somewhat aloof. Now she became agitated, tapping the floor, which her right foot could barely reach.

“‘Gestalt’ is a German word. D’you know what it means?”

“Not exactly.”

“‘Form’, ‘shape’, ‘pattern’. It was developed by Fritz Perls – I knew him – another Jewish genius,” she said ironically. “How d’you use Gestalt?”

“It focuses, not on the past, but on the client’s problems in the here and now....”

“Ah-hah! ‘The here and now’. This very fashionable phrase I am hearing everywhere I go nowadays in the therapy world. The-here-and-now,” she toyed with the phrase, “‘the here *and* the now’.... Yes, the present, all very well, but what about the PAST?”

“Gestalt doesn’t ignore the past ...”

“Gestalt! *Gewalt!*” She jumped up and, her hand shaking, poured a glass of water from a jug beside the archaeological figurines. In between gulps: “Don’t tell me about Gestalt, I know all about Gestalt, Gestalt killed my best friend Ziggi Pflaum!”

The initial interview had taken a quite unexpected turn.

Sinking back into her chair, she sobbed: “D’you want to hear about poor Ziggi?”

“Erm ... yes.”

“Poor Ziggy had a terrible water phobia. He couldn’t swim; he was afraid he would drown. But he was determined to get rid of his fear. So - he hears about ‘Redecision Therapy’ and reads a book about it. Next thing, he signs up for an intensive week-long workshop run by Vince and Kathleen Hawthorne at Mount Magdalene in Nebraska and he flies over there. A week later he comes back and tells me he’s cured.

‘What did the Hawthornes do?’ I ask. He tells me the first session consisted of Kathleen holding him gently by the hand and leading him down the steps into the swimming pool. She tells him to speak to the water: ‘Water, I am terrified of you. What do you want to do to me?’ ‘Now,’ says Vince from the edge of the pool, ‘*be* the water. What does the water reply?’ Ziggi hesitates. ‘*BE* the water!’ Vince commands. Ziggi screams: ‘I want to drown you!’ And so on for a few days, the same scenario, you get the picture. Until, one morning, Kathleen and Vince lead Ziggi down into the water as usual and they decide it’s time to change Ziggi’s negative ‘Script’. They prompt him to tell the water: ‘Water! I am not afraid of you anymore. I will use you for my pleasure, I will swim in you. I refuse to drown in you!’ and so on, you get the picture. All the other clients watching start clapping. The Hawthornes hug Ziggi and he comes back to London - cured. A few weeks later he goes on holiday with his wife Sally to Djerba in Tunisia. And what happens?”

Bluma hunched expectantly towards me. But I dared not give her the answer she wanted, so I shrugged don’t-know shoulders.

“He DROWNS! My poor dear Ziggi - he drowns ...”

She was unable to go on with the interview.

“I’ve got your address.” She started shoo-ing me into the hallway – “Sorry, sorry, I’ll write to you” – and out of the flat.

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## II. I Am Taken On

Almost certain my application to join SAYCHL would be turned down, I received, about a week later, a letter from Bluma announcing that, despite her ‘reservations’ about my ‘way of working’, she was willing to take me on as a volunteer counsellor for a three-month trial period. A client would be assigned to me ‘and we’ll see how things go.’ I was to see this client regularly at a fixed time once a week. Also, I was required to attend a monthly supervision session, together with the other volunteer counsellors, at Bluma’s flat. ‘A rabbi sits in on these sessions to give guidance from a spiritual point of view.’ Fees were to be negotiated with the client according to what she or he could afford and all moneys were to go to SAYCHL. Enclosed was a printed form of ‘Acceptance of Conditions’, which was to be signed and returned.

Bluma’s letter - which included an apology for her behaviour at the initial interview – and the form were on sheets of paper headed with the word ‘SAYCHL’ in bold letters that had Hebraic curls to them. Above was the organization’s logo: a small owl wearing spectacles.

Having always considered ‘saychl’ a Yiddish word, I was interested to discover, on looking it up in my Hebrew-English dictionary, that it was originally a Hebrew word, meaning ‘mind’, ‘intelligence’, ‘wisdom’, or ‘common sense’.

‘Saychl’ was a word my parents used to comment negatively on a person’s stupidity or recklessness: “He has absolutely no *saychl*.”

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### III. Sister and Brother: Two Saychl Clients

My first SAYCHL client was Harriet Glassman, a trainee solicitor in her mid-twenties, caught in an emotional tussle between her attraction to her Finnish personal trainer - whom she dubbed ‘Pilates Paavo’; with whom she was having an affair - and ‘Hendon Herschel’, her parents’ preferred option for her.

Harriet’s conflict subsided when Paavo suddenly left London and returned to his wife and three children in Helsinki.

Finding the sessions with me helpful, Harriet recommended me to her older brother, Terry, who became very anxious to see me. This contravened the ground rules of SAYCHL, which stipulated that, during the three-month trial period, I should see only one client. But because Bluma Helfgot was not to know I was seeing a second client, I went ahead and took on Terry Glassman, who chose to come twice a week. The fees he paid went into my pocket.

Although well-educated at a prestigious public school, and working for a leading London estate agency, Terry had a quite incongruous wide boy aspect. Boasting tattoos on his short-sleeved arms, he told me about the pleasure he got, “after the week’s hard graft,” from going off to pubs and clubs in the East End and getting “totally smashed”. He was proud of having, as “close mates”, quite a few “blokes with criminal connections.”

What made his wish to see me urgent was his having no idea at all how periodically, after a night of hard drinking, he would end up in a five-star hotel suite in Bangkok with a bevy of paid ladyboys “happy and willing” to do whatever he required them to. He had some inkling that all of this might have had to do with “the severe brain damage” that Cassie, his steady girlfriend of five years, gave him over his heel-dragging and reluctance to commit.

Eventually my three-month trial period ended and I was accepted – only the second male – into SAYCHL’s team of voluntary counsellors.

In time, Harriet Glassman succumbed to her parents’ persuasion, became engaged to ‘Hendon Herschel’, and her sessions with me were phased out.

#### IV. Supervision Session

“No matter what tack I take with her, her panic attacks persist; in fact, they’ve been getting worse. I’m really at the end of my tether.” Celeste Langleben, one of the team of SAYCHL voluntary counsellors, was speaking at a monthly supervision session in the rather cramped living room of Bluma Helfgot’s Edgware flat. She was presenting the case of Gertrude Gelehrter, whom she’d been seeing for over three years. “Her being a nutritionist is, I feel, relevant,” continued Celeste, in her New York accent, “because she *spits out* all my interpretations. She will not allow herself to be *fed* by me. She has an investment in my failing, so she persists with her panic attacks, I believe, simply to spite me. In fact, her panic attacks could be seen as *envious attacks* on me and my therapeutic skills ...”

“Just hang on a minute, Celeste,” Bluma interrupted in an attempt to slow down Celeste’s hurtling train of interpretations. “For the benefit of Herve – this is his first supervision session – would you mind, Celeste, giving a potted summary of Gertrude’s case?”

At the beginning of the session Bluma had introduced Herve: a graduate of the Sorbonne, he had recently been appointed Professor of Existential Psychotherapy at Regent’s College. He was short and his button of a face was almost entirely immersed in a massive Afro. Behind unusually thick lenses, the terror-stricken pupils of his eyes cast desperately about, attempting to cling on to the rims of his spectacles.

“Sorry, yes, Bluma.” Celeste’s momentum had been slowed. “Most of you here have heard many times about Gertrude. But, Herve, to give you the bare bones: she works in the NHS - head of the nutrition department in a big hospital in Woodford; in her late fifties; so her big conflict is: when to retire?; her husband Nathan left her a few years ago for a much younger woman, with whom he has a young child; Natie and Gertie have two children, a son and a daughter, whom Gertie feels are not supportive to her; in fact, the son, an architect, lives in New Zealand, and barely keeps in touch with her; by the way, Natie, the ex-husband, is a bookmaker....”

“Excuse me, what is ‘a bookmaker’?” Herve enquired.

“He works at the races; he takes bets on the horses,” explained Celeste.

“Thank you.”

“Celeste,” Bluma went on, “to go back to what we were saying earlier: although envy is an important dynamic in human behaviour, I don’t think *everything* can be interpreted in terms of envy. In Gertrude’s

case, there are some reality factors that we must take into account, and which may be precipitating her panic attacks. For example, Natie left her, so she feels abandoned and alone. Then, she is very anxious at the thought of retiring, leaving a profession she has done well in for over thirty years.”

“Yes,” added Celeste, “I recently pointed out to her that the NHS could be seen as the maternal *feeding* breast that she is anxious about being separated from.”

“Quite,” said Bluma. “And always lurking in the background – and I, as one of the ‘*Kinder*’, can relate to this – is her being traumatised by the Second World War. As a young girl, Gertrude was evacuated from London during the Blitz and didn’t see her parents for two to three years. Ah, before I forget, Celeste – I must make a note of it – what medication is Gertrude on?”

“Some anti-depressant, I forget the name, I’ll phone you, Bluma. And her GP gives her prescriptions for Diazepam, which she should take only in an emergency.”

“Hmm.....” Bluma reflected. Then she turned to Herve: “Let’s throw some new light on all this. Herve, tell us: what is the existential view of panic attacks?”

The others in the room perked up at the promise of a fresh perspective on a stale problem.

“Well, from a Bergsonian standpoint,” Herve got going, “panic attacks may be considered as nothing less than a diminution of the ‘*elan vital*’, which, put another way, is an atrophying of fecundation. Sartre saw panic attacks as ‘explosions’, one might say, of ‘*mauvaise foi*’ in its naked form. Our patient has therefore sadly lapsed into ‘*etre-pour-soi*’, which many contend is the nihilation of Being-in-Itself, whence consciousness is conceived as a lack of being. The ‘For-Itself’ brings ‘Nothingness’ into the world and therefore can stand out from ‘Being’ and form attitudes towards other beings by seeing what it is not. Lacan added that the concepts of ‘Death’ and ‘Lack’ – what he calls ‘*Manque*’ – connive to make of the Pleasure Principle the regulator of the distance from ‘The Thing’ (in German, Heidegger’s ‘*das Ding an sich*’) and the Death Drive that goes beyond the Pleasure Principle by means of repetition; hence, the Death Drive becomes a mirror of the castration complex, which, in effect, is what panic attacks are.”

“Thank you, Herve,” said Bluma. (What else could she say?)

“I must just add,” Herve went on, “in order to clarify further: Julia Kristeva, in her post-structuralist schema, expresses it so succinctly – ‘*La vie est un triomphe de l’etre. Mais a la fin, le triomphe ultime est le triomphe de la mort.*’”

“Quite. Time for tea,” Bluma declared, looking at her watch. “I baked a nice cinnamon *babka* this morning.”

During the tea break I chatted to Polly Resnick, by far the ‘grandmother’ of the group. What I liked about her was the warm Rogerian glow of acceptance she emitted, which reminded me of my Auntie Manya from Bialystock (“Dahlink, my dahlink, it’s always so vonderful to see you.”) The thought crossed my mind: *Everyone should have an Auntie Manya from Bialystock. Perhaps then there would be less need for therapists.*

After tea I presented the case of Zsuzsa Podolsky, whom I’d been seeing off and on for a few months. She had the most mystifying symptoms I’d ever come across: she was able to eat only *away* from home, in a restaurant, or at a friend’s. It had to be food cooked by *someone else* because she was convinced that if she cooked her own food, she would poison herself. Zsuzsa was in her late forties; short; plumpish; still girlishly pretty; a sweet smile; born in Hungary just before the Second World War. Her father had been a successful impresario who’d set up what translated into English as ‘The Beautiful Bathing Belles of Budapest’, which had become the foremost water ballet company in Central Europe. Her mother, Zehavia Podolsky, had been the company’s prima ballerina, Hungary’s answer to Esther Williams. When the round-ups of Jews started in 1944, Zsuzsa’s father was in the process of getting visas to Sweden through the agency of Raoul Wallenberg when suddenly at the last minute he pulled back, suspecting Wallenberg of being a double agent. As a result, tragically, the family – father, mother, and Zsuzsa’s two older siblings – were seized by the Arrow Cross and deported to Auschwitz. Only Zsuzsa eluded capture: her nanny hid her in the cellar of the family home and later took her to the countryside where the two of them were sporadically sheltered by relatives of the nanny, in between subsisting on roots and berries in the forests, till the arrival of the Red Army.

Zsuzsa had no children; she lived alone. She’d been married and divorced three times and ran a matchmaking and marriage guidance agency.

“She’s a bit like a character in an Isaac Bashevis Singer short story,” I commented.

“What exactly do you mean?” asked Rabbi Frank Pomeroy, tugging at a wisp of his straggly beard. Always formally dressed, in a stiff suit and tie, he was the rabbi who most frequently sat in on supervision sessions. “What precisely *is* ‘a character in an Isaac Bashevis Singer short story?’”

I felt like a witness under cross-examination. “Erm.....I say it as a kind of shorthand. Everyone surely knows what ‘an Isaac Bashevis Singer story’ means.”

“Indeed. Do they?” Rabbi Pomeroy challenged me. “Let’s see.” To those assembled in the room, he posed the question: “How many of you have read a short story by Isaac Bashevis Singer?”

Four out of the twelve indicated they had.

“You see,” Rabbi Pomeroy perseverated, “Isaac Bashevis Singer is not known to everyone, as you erroneously have assumed. I’m sorry to have to press you on this but I want to know what you mean by ‘a character in an Isaac Bashevis Singer short story’.”

I was cornered. “Well, Singer’s stories are often rather weird, off-the-wall, with a comic element.....”

“Ah, I see.” He paused and pulled at another wisp of beard. “Tell me: are you serious about your clients?” Another pause; another pull. “Because it strikes me that you may be using your clients as ‘fodder’ for your *own* short stories. I have read one of your stories in ‘The Jewish Quarterly’. Also, I must add that I had the feeling you were, in your case presentation of Zsuzsa - how shall I put it? - somehow making fun of the Holocaust.”

I remained silent.

With full rabbinic authority, he made this pronouncement: “I sincerely believe that it demeans the unique spiritual essence of a human being to liken him or her to a character in a short story, be it by Isaac Bashevis Singer or any other writer.”

No more was said about Zsuzsa Podolsky that cold winter’s afternoon. Nor was she ever mentioned again at a supervision session. Without contacting me, she did not come back to me for another session. Twice I left a message on her answerphone: no reply.

About ten days later I met up with Celeste Langleben at Farquharson’s in Hampstead for coffee. Of all the SAYCHL counsellors, I felt closest to Celeste, probably because she was American and I was South African – neither of us had grown up in England.

“Bluma wants to send Gertrude Gelehrter to see *you*,” Celeste announced.

I was astonished: I was expecting to get a call from Bluma at any moment, informing me that I’d been expelled from SAYCHL after my arraignment by Rabbi Pomeroy.

“How come?”

“I’m done with Gertrude. She stalked out in the middle of the session last Thursday.”

“Why?”

“She started screaming at me.”

“What? Is she crazy?”

“I’d suggested she might be envious of me because *I* have a husband and she *doesn’t*. So she starts screaming at me,” – Celeste leaned across the table towards me and whispered, lest the other



customers in the café should hear her— “I don’t care how many times you and your husband fuck each night! What I’d like to do is take a bread knife and plunge it into your heart!’ And she picks up her bag, grabs her coat and stalks out.”

“Wow!”

“Bluma thinks Gertrude needs a man.” Celeste giggled. “Sorry, that’s bitchy of me. Bluma thinks Gertrude needs to see a *male* counsellor.”

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## V. Honeymoon

As serial killers and mass murderers almost invariably appear in photographs to be reasonably unremarkable human beings – I was surprised when I first saw Gertrude Gelehrter, after all I’d heard about her, at my front door at 5.30 one Thursday evening in early spring. She was fairly tall, shapely, in her late fifties, with a pleasant face, her blonde hair, going grey, gathered back into a loose kind of bun; ‘*gezund*’ my father would’ve called her. Having come directly from work, she was still in her crisp, starched, white NHS uniform. A rectangular badge, pinned just above her right breast, announced:

GERTRUDE GELEHRTER

Head of Nutrition

I led her up the stairs to the consulting room I shared with my partner Searle, an NHS clinical psychologist.

*Have to put aside all the negative things I’ve heard about her, I decided – Get a fresh view of her.* As I expected, her ongoing panic attacks were the most pressing issue. Out they gushed, all the symptoms: palpitations, perspiring profusely, sensations of constriction across the chest, shortness of breath, trembling, dizziness, blinding flashes ... Often, she told me, an attack would be triggered by an impending journey across London.

“There’s a shocking shortage of public conveniences in London,” she despaired. “It sounds rather pathetic, I know, but I have to plan my route a long time beforehand according to where the few public toilets are.”

“You needn’t apologize,” I intervened. “This is what’s important to you. This is your reality. It’s OK.”

“As you probably know, I didn’t get on at all with Mrs.Langleben. I saw her for about three years and my panic attacks got worse. To her, they weren’t real. She kept saying my panic attacks were because of

my envy of her. Envy, envy, envy, everything was envy. According to her, I was envious of everything about her: her career as a therapist - I have my own successful career in the NHS, thank you; her clothes; her big house in the Vale of Health, looking onto the Heath. Of her being American – I ask you. There was no end to it. And most painful of all: her having a husband and mine having left me. Once she said I was envious of her for having *three* children while I have only *two*. She is completely crazy! How was I to know she had three? I have *two* and I can assure you they have been more than a handful. I just couldn't take it any more with her."

"Yes, it's clear you had to leave her. She does sound rather"— I felt guilty criticizing a colleague and a friend – "rigid."

" 'Rigid' is putting it mildly. I felt choked, suffocated, strangled by her! She left me no air to breathe. I felt blotted out by her, I felt deprived by her of everything, I felt *emptied out* by her: I HATED HER!" Her raised voice crumbled into little gasps, sharp intakes of breath, and weeping.

I indicated the box of tissues on the low table between us. Gratefully she reached over and took a handful.

Once her sobs had subsided, she apologized: "I'm sorry, I've made such a fool of myself." She dabbed at her cheeks.

"Not at all," I reassured her. "There is no need to apologize. It's good to let out your rage, something you've been bottling up for a very long time."

"Yes. Thank you. I'm feeling much better. I do a lot of detoxing work with my patients at the hospital. And that is what I feel I'm doing now – detoxing, getting rid of my psychological poisons, you could say."

"That's good. I'm pleased. That is what this space is for."

We went on to agree that her panic attacks *had* a validity. They were 'giving her a message' about her life situation; about her conflict over whether to retire, and when; about her loneliness and her ageing. And they had their roots in her having been separated in her early teens from her parents and evacuated during the Blitz to a farm near Tenby in Wales.

As she was leaving, she was even able to joke: "I am still having my panic attacks and this is several weeks after I last saw Mrs.Langleben. So this is proof they *do* happen. They are *mine* and they have *nothing* to do with Mrs.Langleben."

In the next few sessions, with the aid of a flip chart and a selection of coloured pens, I schooled Gertrude Gelehrter in the fundamental concepts of Transactional Analysis. She took to them enthusiastically and started applying them to her life. She came to see how Celeste Langleben, rigid in her therapist-as-top-dog position, had related to her almost exclusively from the 'I'm OK – You're Not OK' position. Gertrude's ex-husband Natie – "who everybody said in his younger days was the spitting image of Paul Newman"- had also inflicted this negative perspective on her with his harping on about

her putting on too much weight and stepping up the intensity with which he ogled other women and had, not always clandestine, affairs with some of them.

She enjoyed the greatest mutual exchanges of 'positive strokes', she said, with her beloved eight-year-old grandson Martin – son of Celia, her daughter – who continued to call her 'Googie'. He was going through a Harry Potter phase, so she would indulge him by buying for him anything that was Harry-Potter-related. He also loved puppetry so she would take him to shows at the Little Angel Theatre in Islington. "He is my 'Little Angel'."

With Martin she felt able to express her 'Free Child' and to channel her maternal feelings into being 'Nurturing Parent' to him.

In contrast, both her ex-husband Natie, and Celeste Langleben transacted with her from 'Critical Parent'. And when I explained to her the concept of the 'Drama Triangle'- the interchangeable roles of 'Persecutor', 'Rescuer' and 'Victim' – she immediately identified Celeste as her 'Persecutor'.

In the 'Egogram' exercise we did one session, we identified her 'Nurturing Parent' as weak in relation to herself and we discussed ways in which she could be kinder to herself and boost her self-esteem.

After a few months of seeing me once a week, she was pleased to be able to tell me that her panic attacks were happening less frequently. And when I reported this at a monthly supervision session, adding that Gertrude was no longer taking medication, Bluma Helfgot said it was "a real success story."

I noticed Celeste Langleben raising a cynical 'you wait' eyebrow.

On the phone that evening Celeste suggested to me that it may all, so far, be nothing more than "the honeymoon phase". I wondered whether she was implying I was somehow dishonouring my friendship with her.

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## **VI. Problems with Endings:**

I always gave Gertrude a full hour. Traditional practice was the fifty-minute hour, which I'd always felt was mean. So I made a point of giving her a full hour. But usually it would end up with her getting at least an extra five minutes from me and by the time she'd got her coat or jacket on, assembled all her things, said goodbye, walked down the stairs, been to the downstairs loo, and let herself out – it was often a full hour and fifteen minutes in total. I did not dare make an arrangement to see another client until Gertrude had been given a wide berth.

My partner Searle claimed I was not assertive and fed me lines to end sessions with: 'We have just five minutes left'; 'We really need to stop now'; 'That is a big subject – let's go on with it in the next session';

'I'm seeing another client soon so we really do need to draw to a close'; and so on. And he added:  
 "When you say something like this, you really must *mean* it."

But none of this worked.

When, at the beginning of a session one evening, I raised the issue of our seldom finishing on time, she said: "It's because I don't want to leave. It feels so safe and cosy here with you that it's difficult to get myself to return to the dangerous world out there." Because awareness of the issue was in the air, this was one session that did end on time – more or less.

Pretty soon though things returned to their habitual pattern and - hard to believe - got worse! Once, the session over, she stopped at the consulting room door, turned to me, and started speculating, with a deep, soulful sigh: "I wonder what it was that went so horribly wrong between Natie and me. We were high school sweethearts. What do *you* think it was that went wrong?" On another occasion:

"Sometimes I wake up in the early hours and can't, try as I might, go back to sleep. So I lie there in the dark and I ask myself: '*What is it all about?* What is the meaning of it all?' What do *you* think is the meaning of all the suffering we go through?" When I heard the front door downstairs finally click closed behind her, I started punching the nearest cushion to hand.

When I began the following session by raising the issue of 'appropriacy' – "It is not appropriate at the *end* of a session to raise a huge subject like 'The Meaning of Suffering' – she defended herself: "I was simply posing the question. I didn't expect you to give me an answer."

One evening, after a session, while I was preparing dinner in the kitchen, Searle and I discussed – again! - the difficulties I was having.

"How much does she pay you?" he asked.

"Five pounds per session."

"What?! Five pounds? Is that all? How come?"

"SAYCHL's policy is that clients pay only what they feel they can afford. So, at our first session, we agreed on five pounds. She said she couldn't afford more. I didn't mind because none of the money goes into my pocket; it all goes to SAYCHL."

"So, for all the *angst* you're getting, you get nothing out of it financially. Five pounds is, these days, absolutely laughable."

"Well, it's too late to change that now."

"You could put her fees up. Or you could stop seeing her altogether. Why don't you give her an end date and work towards finishing off with her?"

"That would be quite hard on her," I protested. "She finds the sessions very helpful. They've enabled her to overcome her panic attacks ..."

"But her stubborn refusal to end on time sounds utterly exasperating."

“Yes, on one level, she *is* exasperating but ...”

“But what?”

“... sometimes I feel sorry for her. She can also be quite sweet.”

“Sweet?! You must be joking. Now it’s *you* who’s being exasperating.” And he left the kitchen.

Once, after the summer break of several weeks, I told Searle I was seeing Gertrude the following night.

“Ah, ‘The Patient One Can’t Get Rid Of,’” he joked. “It’s like a Hammer horror movie: ‘She Kept Coming Back’.” With arm gestures he indicated a huge billboard before us and melodramatically inscribed the film’s dramatic title across it: ‘THE RETURN OF GERTRUDE GELEHRTER’! Da-dum! A real spine-chiller.”

And from then on, we dubbed her ‘The Return’.

Short exchanges between us would run something like –

Me: “Got ‘The Return’ at five-thirty this evening.”

Searle: “So we’ll eat with The News after that.”

and

Searle: “How was ‘The Return’ this evening?”

Me (with a sigh): “Same old story.”

On Searle’s advice, I broached with ‘The Return’ the subject of possibly stopping our sessions. She did not like the idea at all.

On occasions, at the consulting room door, she would open her bag, take out her purse, lift out of it a five-pound note and almost dangle it in the air, holding me in suspense as to whether I would eventually receive it or not. All of this as she attempted to initiate another loop of discussion on some major theme or other. Or, if she didn’t have a fiver, she would fumble around in her purse, cobbling together the requisite amount in coins.

When I told Searle about this teasing, tantalizing behaviour, he exploded: “It’s pathetic! Five pounds is an absolute pittance. You have got to get rid of her!”

I could have aired the problems I was having at SAYCHL supervision sessions. But these had changed in character. Bluma Helfgot had retired as the Clinical Director and her place had been taken by Bryan Schmeruk, a chartered accountant, with no experience of counselling and little interest in it. He had taken on the title of ‘Executive Director’ and SAYCHL was acquiring a more streamlined, corporate image. Meetings, now every *three* months, with a rabbi still in attendance, were held in his office in the wooden Alpine-style chalet at the end of the garden behind Bryan’s large house in Finchley Central. Here he would install himself at his capacious desk furnished with gadgets and electronic equipment of all kinds. Framed certificates and diplomas made a giddy ascent up the wall behind him. We, the team of voluntary counsellors, ranged on collapsible wooden chairs round his vast desk like humble petitioners.

At these sessions there was hardly any analysis of client material; mainly just factual report-back and 'business'. So I felt disinclined to talk about the problems I was having with 'The Return'. Also, some foolish pride in me wanted to maintain intact the almost legendary reputation I'd acquired as 'The Counsellor Who Cured Gertrude Gelehrter Of Her Panic Attacks'.

And at these sessions there was certainly no cinnamon *babka*.

Sometimes at the end of a session with 'The Return', she and I would engage in what I can only describe as a kind of weird dance. I would stand by the consulting room door, allowing space for her to pass by me and out onto the landing. She might then, in the flickering of an eye, dodge to the other side of me. I would have to stand back in order to let her pass by the other side of me. On one occasion, for several seconds, she disappeared entirely from view, leading me to conclude that she must've slipped between my legs. But that's impossible, my reason told me. And as I heard her descending the stairs, I panicked that I was losing my mind.

After this unfortunate event, I would on occasions wake – my throat parched, feeling I was suffocating - in the early hours from the following nightmare: I'm lying on the ground, unable to move because some shapeless monster – something like a prehistoric hippo – has straddled me and is settling on my life. It is squatting on my being.

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## VII The Catastrophe in Paris

Meanwhile, my T.A. training was in tatters.

My relationship with Stewart McElhone, my trainer, had never been easy. On a one-to-one level, I found him closed and unapproachable; I felt unsupported by him. To make the situation a great deal worse, he'd recently been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. As a result, he was in the process of radically scaling down his practice. One of the groups he stopped running was a gay men's group, which I'd been in for over five years, and found very validating.

Of the two groups I was running, the Wednesday night one suddenly crumbled away in a dramatic fashion. Members started fleeing after a new member – what a mistake to take him in! – recounted, at his second session, how he had to be careful, when walking down a street, to steer clear of red, letter boxes. If he passed in front of their slots, he claimed, this would initiate the emission of beams transmitting undermining messages to him.

Then, my membership of the British Counselling Society lapsed. The requirements for membership had been revised: a minimum of 150 client hours had, without explanation, been upped to 450 hours! No way could I meet such requirements.

But the worst blow of all was The Catastrophe in Paris.

Having got a Distinction in the T.A. Written Exam – a lengthy theory paper and a detailed case study – I'd been encouraged by Stewart to enter for the Oral Exam. The next one was scheduled for November in Paris.

So I booked a return flight and three nights over a weekend in a hotel in the Rue des Batignolles.

Early Saturday afternoon I made my way on the Metro to the Quai de Grenelle, to a large brutalist concrete building lowering near one of the feet of the Eiffel Tower.

Up to the second floor and an hour's wait till my Oral Exam, timetabled to begin at 3.45pm. I was to be examined by: Carlo Stuzzicadente, Professor of Psychiatric Medicine, University of Pescara; Marianne Westerborck, T.A. psychotherapist, Leyden, The Netherlands; and Juliana Zarzuela-Horovitz, Senior Lecturer in Mental Sciences (*sic.*), University of Buenos Aires.

I was so nervous that the exam passed as a complete blur. I found myself unable to answer most of the questions posed to me, samples of which I lay out below –

Stuzzicadente: "What side effects, *inter alia*, would you expect a patient to suffer from when prescribed a three-month-long course of Protastosol Metacycline B for a severe recurrence of Script Reversal, *mutatis mutandis*?"

Westerborck: "What elements do the following have in common: Steinberg's Taxonomy of Chronic Stroke Deprivation and a diagnosis of Bi-Polar Disorder Stage 4?"

Zarzuela-Horovitz: "If Genghis Khan comes to you for therapy, what is your Treatment Plan for him?"

After what must've been about twenty minutes of this inquisition, Professor Stuzzicadente, spurred on by nods from the two colleagues flanking him, drew himself up a few more inches above his pert, red bowtie and addressed me: "Let's stop this. You are clearly a good man. You are very intelligent – I see here you got a Distinction in your Written Exam; congratulations – and your trainer, Stewart McElhone, says your case study was "unusually sensitive and perceptive". But we must wish you all good luck with your future efforts. You are not in the right category. You are falling – what's the English expression? – between two chairs. You are the victim unfortunately of a long argument between the British T.A. practitioners and us on the Continent. We want to see T.A. practised therapeutically only by medical doctors or people at least with a doctorate in clinical psychology. You are a teacher and so your Special Field is 'Education'. Your place is in the classroom. You have entered here for a Special Field called 'Counselling', which we here on the Continent do not recognize. You should not be here. Thank you for coming this afternoon."

I was convinced that the Exam had been intended to trip me up. The rain camouflaging my tears, I walked all the way back to the Batignolles, to my dismal hotel. With its single overhead light, with its battered furniture and frayed fabrics, and its dark brown paisley-patterned wallpaper, my room, I was convinced, had been the setting for several suicides. Stripping off my damp clothes, I crept between the sheets, crystallizing my resolve, immediately on returning to London, to activate my fall-back plan – to make *aliyah*. And with images of myself on a kibbutz, picking oranges and milking cows, I cried myself to sleep.

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### **VIII The Blue Bridge**

When Stewart McElhone learnt about the humiliation I'd been subjected to in Paris, he was livid. He initiated a correspondence with Carlo Stuzzicadente, contesting the outcome of my Oral Exam. This dragged on for several months but nothing came of it.

The teaching career I was planning eventually to discard now became more important to me as virtually my sole source of income.

St Cuthbert's College in Shepherd's Hill, where I'd been teaching for several years, was conveniently located on the other side of Queen's Wood, which our house looked onto.

Most days I would finish at the college by 4pm, make my way home through the Wood, have tea, and then see clients in the evening. Invariably, at this time of the day, I was tired; not the ideal state in which to practise counselling.

On several occasions Gertrude Gelehrter, whom I saw every Tuesday at 5.30, confronted me about my tendency to nod off during sessions. I had no choice but to apologize.

So, she was aware that I put in a full day's teaching.

One evening, after an especially trying day, I went beyond merely nodding off. I actually fell completely asleep.

My brain was swooning with exhaustion....."Natie couldn't get enough of me when we were young"..... *I'm really battling to stay awake.....*"I used to have him eating out of the palm of my hand"..... *I've heard it all before, many, many times before.....* "he wanted me to wear stockings and suspenders and pretend to be a prostitute"..... *All I want is to lay my head down on my pillow.....* "a stack of dirty magazines he'd stuffed behind the boiler"..... *Oh no! more than half the session still to go. How am I going to get through?.....* "disgusting things you wouldn't want to know about".....



I don't know for how long I was asleep. All I know is that for some stretch of time I was completely out of it. When I finally came to, Gertrude was glaring at me.

*Apologise, apologise to her, again!* my brain urged. But in yet another swoop of tiredness, I madly set about pretending that I had *not* fallen asleep. *Say something* - but I had nothing to cling onto – *say.....anything* -

“So why did you cross the blue bridge?” was what came out of my mouth.

There was a very long pause. Her glare became incandescent.

“WHAT - BLUE - BRIDGE?!”

“The blue bridge.....” I started improvising recklessly. “Come on, the blue bridge..... Surely you know about the blue bridge?”

There was no give on her part.

“The blue bridge, come on, you know what I mean.....”

“NO! I DO NOT KNOW WHAT YOU MEAN!!!”

“The Blue Bridge.....It's.....It's a common metaphor.”

“A metaphor for WHAT?”

“It's a metaphor for.....Life.”

She reached down for her bag, grabbed her coat from the chair next to her and stalked out of the room.

A moment later I heard the front door slam.

That session was the only one with her that finished well *before* time.

And she never came back.

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## **IX Expulsion**

Early the following week I got a call from Bryan Schmeruk, the Executive Director of SAYCHL, informing me that he'd received a letter of complaint from Gertrude Gelehrter. We arranged for me to see him at his home in Finchley Central late that Thursday afternoon.

The air in his office at the end of the garden bristled with the hum of electronic equipment as his thick-lensed spectacles glinted at me.

Across his desk he handed me the letter from Gertrude. In it she accused me of dozing and sometimes actually falling asleep during sessions. This was, she claimed, due to my “fundamental lack of interest” in her and my “wish to get rid of” her. Shrewdly she used against me the very T.A. terminology I'd taught her. She felt “discounted” and “negatively stroked” by me. My “rigid insistence on ending

sessions on time”, as well as my “urgency” to get her “out the front door”, were, she protested, “damaging” to her “sense of OK-ness”. Most hurtful of all was her contention that I was “not a *real* counsellor” – “he is just a teacher.”

Schmeruk brushed aside my attempt at self-defence. I’d suggested that Gertrude’s at first positive transference towards me had turned sour.

“Look, I don’t have much time; I’ve got a meeting at 5.30. I’m sorry but I don’t do psychology. I’m a finances man. SAYCHL called me in to sort out their finances, which frankly were in a parlous state.” He glanced again at his watch.

What clinched matters was: “I’ve spoken to Rabbi Pomeroy about the situation and I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but he wants you out. He believes you do not have a serious enough attitude. I’m sorry, we’ll have to leave it there.”

Rising, he extended his right arm across the desk to me, compelling me to shake it. Clinging on to my things, I was hurried across the garden, through the kitchen and into the hallway. Another firm handshake, a curt “Thank you for all the work you’ve done for SAYCHL; all the best”, and I was out the front door on the path to the gate.

It had all happened so quickly - my expulsion from SAYCHL, which I’d come to regard as my Jewish counselling home.

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## **X. ‘What is the universe telling me?’**

Shortly after my expulsion from SAYCHL, Stewart McElhone, my T.A. supervisor died. Of his funeral at the Golders Green Crematorium, I remember nothing except for a recording of ‘Send In the Clowns’ being played as his coffin moved slowly out of sight into the furnace; a final display of his mordant sense of humour.

To Stewart’s credit, he had eventually succeeded in negotiating on my behalf a compromise arrangement with Carlo Stuzzicadente and the continentals. This was because I’d put in several years of training and done so well in the Written Exam. Also possibly, Stewart had felt guilty about accepting me for training on shaky, not clearly defined ground. To qualify to retake the Oral Exam to become a ‘Clinical Member’ of the Institute, I would be required to complete 7,500 hours of supervised practice at a mental hospital.

I had no hesitation in rejecting this absurd sop because it would've meant giving up my teaching job, now my sole source of income. Further, my worst fear has always been that I might end up in a mental hospital – as a *patient*!

To lift myself out of the slump I sank into following the collapse of my training, I managed to get some perspective by doing an analysis of what had happened to me, in T.A. terms.

I had passively been the recipient of negative strokes from people playing 'Critical Parent'. Having got into a seriously 'not OK' space, I'd ended up in the role of 'Victim'.

'What is the Universe Telling Me?' was an exercise that Stewart had frequently done with clients facing a serious 'life stage' problem. It was a Gestalt two-chair exercise, in which the client acted out two roles: 'Myself' and 'The Universe'. Through this self-generated dialogue, the client learns to listen to and accept the messages being spoken to him by what is happening in his life. I'd witnessed Stewart, in his characteristic histrionic, even revivalist fashion, help a woman accept the painful break-up of her twenty-year marriage; a man deal with the bankruptcy of a cherished business project; and a young man in his early twenties come to terms with the inevitability of his death from a rare blood disease. When I set up and acted out this exercise on my own, it became quite evident to me what the Universe was telling me: *I was not meant to be a psychotherapist.*

With time came a sense of release from having to listen to one person after another recounting their woes. Even better was being freed from the compulsion to *do* something to make them feel better. The dictum 'Physician, heal thyself' stayed with me; it was more than enough to take care of myself. Let it all go, I said to myself. After all, what a strange way to earn a living – from the suffering of others.

I had come to agree with Bluma Helfgot's claim that Transactional Analysis was a glib, superficial theory of personality, inadequate to equip one to penetrate deep, encrusted layers of hurt. My experience with Gertrude Gelehrter had confirmed this. From time to time, my mind wandered back, with cringing embarrassment, to what happened between her and me. Is she still alive? I wondered. If so, she must be very old. I considered tracking her down and apologizing to her for what had happened in our last session.

"Gelehrter?" Searle, my partner, once said to me. "What a strange name!"

From my rudimentary knowledge of German I knew that 'lehren' meant 'to teach' and a 'lehrer' was a 'teacher'. My Yiddish dictionary went further: 'gelehrnt' = 'learned', while a 'gelehrnter' = a 'scholar'. So – what had I 'learnt' from my encounter with Gertrude Gelehrter?

She had, I concluded, confirmed what was already becoming increasingly apparent: it was not my destiny to be a therapist. While I may have had the intelligence and the sensitivity, I lacked the requisite resilience and toughness.

All through the training, my feelings of insecurity had led me to fear one day I would be exposed as a fraud. I felt that, with all my inadequacies, I had no right to aspire to the awesome status of being a healer of souls. Over and over, I replayed Gertrude Gelehrter's accusation, in her letter of complaint to Rabbi Pomeroy – perhaps he'd been right: my attitude may *not* have been serious enough – that I was “not a *real* counsellor.” And so it was that, eventually, I came to accept being – “just a teacher.”

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**Written by Anthony (Tony) Fagin**

**Posted on the CHOL Share Your Story Site in January 2023**