Benveniste, D. (2000) **Book Review of 'Identity's Architect: A Biography of Erik Erikson by Lawrence J. Friedman**. The Psychoanalytic Review. Vol. 87, No. 6.

Erik H. Erikson: An Outsider At the Center of Things

A review of
Identity's Architect: A biography of Erik H. Erikson
Author Lawrence J. Friedman
Publisher Scribners 1999
US paperback edition ISBN 0-674-00437-X, price $19.95, 600pp.
The Hardback edition was a LIBRARY JOURNAL BEST BOOK OF 1999.

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Just as identifications cluster together to form an identity, so too do the many personae of Erik Erikson cluster together in Lawrence Friedman's new biography to form a portrait or, perhaps more accurately, a collage of a complex and talented individual who dared to be himself. The private Erikson might have been uncomfortable with some of the heartaches of his life being exposed publicly, but as a biographer himself I think Erikson would have felt the care and appreciated the scholarship with which Friedman handled the sensitive material.

Friedman picks up several threads in Erikson's life and connects them in this way and that throughout the book to weave a tapestry that gives us a sense of the configuration that was Erik Erikson - a man who didn't know his father and had complicated identifications with his artistic temperament, his professional affiliations, his Jewish heritage, his German nationality and his adopted country - the United States. To more fully appreciate this biography we must bare in mind that Erik Erikson was a psychoanalyst of such distinction that Robert S. Wallerstein has asserted that, "after Freud, no single psychoanalyst has had a more profound impact on our twentieth-century culture and the world than he." (Wallerstein, 1998) Erikson is perhaps best known for his first book *Childhood and Society* but other books such as *Young Man Luther, Identity: Youth and Crisis, and Ghandi's Truth* are considered classics. He is well known for his formulation of psychosocial development, his play configuration studies, his landmark works in psychobiography, and for coining the term "Identity Crisis."

With such accomplishments to his name, some might assume he was a man of singular purpose and direction. But in Friedman's book we learn of a man moving back and forth across borders between an identification with a father he never knew and a step father who didn't look like him, between his Jewish family heritage and the blond hair, blue eyes and tall stature he had inherited from his unknown father, between art and psychoanalysis, between the University and the Psychoanalytic Societies, between Denmark, Germany, Austria and the United States, between New England and the San Francisco Bay Area, and between being seen as a leader in psychoanalysis on the one hand and being viewed by some as a discredited outsider to psychoanalysis on the other.

To be sure he often felt the pinch but more often than not he continued to follow his passions and his convictions across borders into anthropological, philosophical, religious, and political territory.

Drawing on an unpublished notebook of reflections that Erikson wrote between 1923 and 1924 while wandering about Europe, Friedman demonstrates how so many of the themes Erikson would later develop were part of his independent thinking and completely predate his analytic training. Included in this notebook of a young man in his early 20s are his musings on the life cycle, identity, pseudospeciation and more.

Between his earlier art training and his subsequent psychoanalytic training emerged his configurational approach in which inner emotional life becomes configurationally connected to, or in some way mirrors outer social life. Thus, just as a piece of art is configured in a way that reflects the artist's social set and internal experience, so too do play configurations reflect the child's inner experience and social life. And in this way the young Erikson was establishing himself and constructing a theory on the border between the psychic and the social - that is, toward a theory of the psychosocial. We learn in Friedman's book of a young artist who becomes a wanderer then a teacher in Anna Freud's elementary school then goes through analytic training in Vienna without ever getting any kind of college degree. He then emigrates to the United States where he becomes a university professor at Harvard, Yale and U.C. Berkeley; works as a psychoanalyst; conducts anthropological, play configuration and biographical research; and writes and writes and writes!

While there is no denying Erik Erikson's brilliance and creativity, Friedman helps us to appreciate the extraordinary role his wife, Joan, played in his professional life as a kind of colleague, as his English teacher, and as his editor. (And in this regard we should remember that he was a Pulitzer Prize winner.) Nonetheless she was an artist and he was an analyst. His ideas were his ideas. The one exception, however, was the one idea that they both acknowledged as a collaborative effort - the schema of the 8 stages of psychosocial development.

Friedman demonstrates how Erikson's many research interests and clinical work were woven together by his creative mind in concert with his wife, Joan, to write the classic book Childhood and Society. But Friedman takes it all one step further when he tells us of a painful family crisis and suggests that Joan and Erik's work on the 8 stages of psychosocial development was, in fact, a joint effort to come to terms with that family crisis. It is a compelling thesis but I'll leave it to the reader to go to Friedman's book and discover the details of this painful chapter in the Eriksons' life and its relation to the eight stages of psychosocial development.

Criticized by feminists for not being feminist enough, criticized by psychoanalysts for not being psychoanalytic enough and criticized by Jews for not being Jewish enough Erikson established his own relation to his primary identifications and in doing so had to answer for himself, What is a feminist? What is a psychoanalyst? and What is a Jew? And from the disparate parts, or multiple identifications, he built an identity. His psychosocial stages were and continue to be misunderstood as discreet boxes rather than the way he

presented them, as conflicts within the dialectic of the intrapsychic and the social and organized in an epigenetic structure. Similarly his concept of identity has come to be seen in popular culture as an essential core quality rather than as a constellation of identifications as Erikson presented it. In psychoanalysis it is not uncommon for original thinkers to often become frustrated with the lack of recognition they receive. But for a select few, like Erik Erikson, who received ample recognition for their work, frustration comes not from a lack of recognition but from being misunderstood.

When we marvel at the multiple identifications that Erikson had to stitch together to form a patchwork quilt that he could call Erik Erikson, it is not surprising that he should have been so interested in identity and the identity crisis. When we marvel at the social pressures he met to conform to one identification or another (artist, researcher, psychoanalyst, Jew, etc.) it is not surprising that he should have been so interested in pseudospeciation. Pseudospeciation is the tendency of groups to split off from other groups, establish a sense of superiority, centrality and immortality in relation to those other groups, and create dogmas to preserve themselves. While identity is a distillation of identifications and pseudospeciation a congealing of group characteristics and values, etc. there is, in fact, a complimentary tension between them. The group seeks individuals for membership and the individual seeks identification with the group. But Erikson envisioned an alternative to pseudospeciation in the formation of a universal identity rooted in the notion that "the test of what you produce is the care it inspires." (Erikson quoted by Freidman, p. 352)

While scholarly critiques challenged Erikson to look at that which he had over-looked, numerous attacks from within psychoanalysis bare the stamp of jealousies, petty ambitions and energetic efforts to marginalize creative thinking in favor of orthodoxy. So, what's new? One of the real strengths of Freidman's book is the way he traces Erikson's intellectual influences and contextualizes Erikson's contributions in the intellectual and cultural climate of his times. Significantly he recognizes the seeds of Erikson's most important ideas in the musings of a twenty-year-old before he came into the influence of psychoanalysis. But he also recognizes and critiques Erikson for not citing some of his genuine intellectual influences. While it is easy for a scholar to forget an important reference, or to be too busy writing to know about each and every contemporary idea that is related to his/her work, Freidman points out that Erikson seemed to routinely not mention important intellectual influences if they were too far outside the Freudian orthodoxy. Friedman points specifically to Erikson's failure to cite the influences of Erich Fromm (identity), Melanie Klein and Michael Balint (object relations), Joseph Wheelwright (lifecycle development, religious interest, Self) and others. I find the omission of Wheelwright particularly alarming as Erikson and Wheelwright were not just good friends but rather best friends during the 1940s when Erikson was living in the San Francisco Bay Area and writing Childhood and Society. But alas, Wheelwright was a Jungian and one can only imagine that Erikson felt a reference to his Jungian friend might open him up to serious criticism and possibly ostracism. While being a free thinker in many ways, Erikson was a man very interested in how others saw him. W. Ernest Freud, Freud's oldest grandson, was a student in the Heitzing School where Peter Blos and Erik and Joan Erikson taught. He has said that Erikson was "very nice, warm, and concerned about us; but he was also very vain: it was

said that he could not pass a mirror without looking into it. He was a splendid man and we adored him." (Freud, W.E., 1985, p. 37)

Erikson's work hangs on words like dialectic, epigenetic, psychosocial, identity, pseudospeciation, and the configurational approach. His configurational approach is widely considered to be an original contribution formed in the mind of this artist-psychoanalyst on the thresholds of inner experience and outer social reality. But following on Friedman's critique, I would like to point out that nowhere in Erikson's collected works does he make reference to the work of Hans Prinzhorn, and it is very hard to imagine that Erikson, the artist who became a psychoanalyst, was unaware of Prinzhorn's work. Prinzhorn was the German psychiatrist and art historian who was first to study the art of the insane. His classic book Artistry of the mentally ill: A contribution to the psychology and psychotherapy of configuration was published in German in 1922, only five years before Erikson's arrival in Vienna. Prinzhorn writes:

> "When we uncover the psychological roots of the creative urge in man we recognize in the need for expression the core of the impulses to configuration, which are nourished, however, by the whole psyche. The configurative tendencies, whose various combinations determine the character of a picture, develop from this core, but the basic axiom (that all compositions are the expressive gestures of their authors and are apprehensible directly, without the interposition of a purpose or any other rational instance) remains decisive" (p.6-7)

Though the following is of no historical significance, I would like to take this opportunity to note one minor error in Friedman's book. This is that Friedman, with whom I shared my research data on the early history of psychoanalysis in the San Francisco Bay Area, referred to me in his book as both a "student" and a "friend" of Erik Erikson. I was, in fact, neither. While I have valued Erikson's research and writing for many years. I only saw him lecture on four occasions and had no other direct contact with him. After his death, however, I did become a friend of Joan Erikson.

Reading in Friedman's book about the conflict between Joan and Anna Freud, in relation to Erik, I was reminded of Joan's distaste for complicated theory and her preference for direct care, kindness, and responsiveness. She was, after all, an artist. As a teacher at the Heitzing school, she explained to me that she warded off psychoanalytic interpretations of the children's creative expressions. Years later she set up the arts program at Austen Riggs, banned all psychological interpretations of the art, and stripped the program of any illusions to therapy of any kind. David Rappaport agreed with her approach and she was proud to have his support. She set up a similar program years later at Mt. Zion Hospital in San Francisco. When art therapy became popular she was a vocal critic saying that art had its own healing quality and did not need to be appropriated by any therapeutic technology.

In reading Friedman's book I was impressed by the constellations of charged interpersonal triangles at the Heitzing School. Not only between Joan and Erik and Anna

but also between Anna Freud, Sigmund Freud and Erik, between Erik and Peter Blos and Anna Freud, between Joan and Dorothy Burlingham and Anna Freud (Dorothy, we learn, was quite taken with Joan), and on and on.

One of Joan's last creative acts was to announce that she and Erik had formulated their eight stages of psychosocial development when in middle age and that they didn't know anything about really old age. She then did the unthinkable. She took the eight-stage schema, which is a standard item on licensing exams for psychologists, and others I presume, and added a ninth stage! Her ninth stage was not framed as a dialectic as the preceding eight stages but simply recognizes that when people get into their 80s and 90s their bodies and minds fall apart and the negative pole of each conflict comes into ascendance such that mistrust, shame and doubt, guilt, inferiority, identity diffusion, isolation, stagnation and despair increasingly predominate. It is an observation as bold as anything Erik would have made. But unlike Erik's characteristic style, it is far from upbeat. The most upbeat part of Joan's contribution is that she wrote it and pushed it into publication with the last of everything she had left, when she was in her 90s and racing the clock.

All of Erik Erikson's biographers have made much of his name change from Homburger to Erikson but Friedman's research opens the issue with new data, interviews with the family and a rich elaboration of the conflict. Interestingly enough in my visits with Joan I learned that she was, in fact, born Sarah Lucretia Serson but didn't like the middle name Lucretia so she changed it to Mowat, the name of a friend of her mother's. So she became Sarah Mowat Serson. But then she changed her name from Sarah to Sally and became Sally Mowat Serson. Then she changed it to Joan to become Joan Mowat Serson. Later she married Erik and became Joan Mowat Homburger and then, in 1939, the family changed the family name and she became Joan Mowat Erikson!

One point that I think many child therapists will find curious is Friedman's statement that Erikson's play configuration research led to his "flawed formulation" (p.128) about the correlation between children's play configurations and genital structure. In this now famous research study, Erikson observed that girls playing with blocks tended to construct enclosures and circles that Erikson described as organized around the feminine modalities of the "open" and the "closed" while boys, on the other hand, tended to erect tall structures and demonstrated an interest in tearing them down or allowing them to fall down. Erikson said these play configurations were organized around the masculine modality of the "high" and the "low." Friedman says that "... replication studies of Erikson's play constructions of young boys and girls ... indicated that the children did, indeed, make constructions that reflected "inner" and "outer" space. However, the types of constructions bore no correlation to their genders; Erikson's observations simply did not hold up." (pp.424-425) While Freidman did not cite the replication research that failed to confirm Erikson's observations many child therapists have confirmed Erikson's observations in their own work and more recently, Elizabeth Lloyd Mayer and Daphne de Marneffe have replicated, in intent, Erikson's play configuration research by creating three block structures: a tower, a cross and an enclosed space which were then presented to 21 girls and 21 boys. Among several other questions, they asked the children, one at a

time, to pair a boy doll and a girl doll with the structures. Twenty girls matched the girl doll with the enclosed space and 15 matched the boy doll with the tower. Eighteen of the boys matched the girl doll with the enclosed space and 16 matched the boy doll with the tower. The rest of their study is equally compelling and I refer the reader to Dr. Mayer's article in *Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Thought* for a fuller description of their work (1996).

Erik Erikson's life is perhaps now, even more than Freud's, a life for our time. Friedman's biography of Erik Erikson is not only a beautifully written and scholarly biography but it is also a piece of Eriksonian scholarship with Erikson as its subject. Like all good psychoanalytic history it transcends hero worship and goes much deeper than the superficialities of a psychoanalytic family scrapbook. It is psychoanalytic history at its best. It contextualizes a man and his ideas in relation to his childhood and society.

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ABSTRACT

In this book review of Identity's Architect: A biography of Erik H. Erikson written by Lawrence J. Friedman, the reviewer calls attention to a scholarly biography of one of the giants in psychoanalysis. The book presents a detailed account of Erikson's personal life, his work, his intellectual influences and the intellectual climate within which he lived. Friedman, who is also the author of Menninger: The Family and the Clinic, has a deep understanding of psychoanalytic concepts and psychoanalytic history. The reviewer evaluates the book positively and offers a few of his own comments on the life and work of Erik H. Erikson and his wife Joan.

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