

A WOMAN AGAINST THE CURRENT: * EDITH LUDOWYK GYÖMRŐI

Anna Borgos

The article below written by Anna Borgos, a psychologist in Budapest, Hungary, gives a vivid account of the life and work of Edith Gyomroi Ludowyk, whose life spans many decades of the 20th century. Edith lived in the Communist republic in Hungary in the aftermath of the 1917 October Revolution. She grew disillusioned with the policies of Bela Kun who headed the new Republic. Edith's subsequent life in Hungary, her homeland, working with opposition communist groups is described in this article. With the rise of Hitler to power and the annexation of the Hungarian Republic, Edith could no longer continue the work she had devoted her life to.

By various means she escaped Nazi rule in Hungary, eventually to find a resting place in Sri Lanka. Here she married Professor Lyn Ludowyk of the University of Colombo, brilliant in his exposition to students of English literature. He was also the founder and live-wire of the university's English Dramatic Society (DramSoc), which produced regular plays for the English-speaking public of Colombo. It was here that I first came to know Edith Gyomroi Ludowyk. Apart from her tremendous contributions in stage management, the design of sets and costumes for Ludowyk's plays, her interests ranged in other directions as well. She joined the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), Sri Lanka's first Left party, which by 1939 espoused the views of Leon Trotsky. She was an active participant in the Eksath Kantha Peramuna (United Women's Front). Through this organization she worked for the poor women of our land. Amongst the youth of the LSSP, she conducted regular weekly classes on the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud which was her passion in life. I myself, along with her husband and others, had the great privilege of being a member of these classes. Unfortunately, the humid climate of Sri Lanka was harmful to her health. Lyn Ludowyk, who loved and respected her greatly, thus decided to resign from his post. Lyn and Edith then very regretfully, as I recall it, left Sri Lanka for good and settled down in Hampstead, London, close to one of the International Centres of Psychoanalysis. Lyn Ludowyk himself earned a living by delivering regular lectures on English Literature at the University of London. It was there that I met them once again, when I spent three years of my life from 1961-64 preparing for a Ph.D. at the Imperial College in London.

Anna Borgos, in the article below, has dealt with the life and work of Edith Gyomroi Ludowyk until her demise in 1987. Sri Lanka must be proud of hosting, even for a short period, a woman of the calibre of Edith Gyomroi Ludowyk. Not many in the present generation would remember her. The life and work of a great left-wing intellectual and psychoanalyst, who graced our shores for at least a couple of decades, is well worth recalling.

Emeritus Professor Osmund Jayaratne

In Hungary, the name of 'Edit Gyömrői' is mostly known as one of the last therapists who treated the great Hungarian poet Attila József before his suicide, and to whom, in his "love transference" the poet addressed several love poems and a series of psychoanalytic notes. I have come to be interested in the life of this woman, apart from her encounter with the poet. In the course of my research, more and more fascinating layers of her knowledge and activities have opened up for me. Her life course was exuberant in

terms of names, places (Budapest, Vienna, Berlin, Prague, Paris Colombo, London) and circumstances of living, languages and career; her manifold activities included psychoanalysis, literature, political activism, philosophy and art. Her individual life course, independent as it was, was also closely intertwined with her personal and intellectual relationships, and the (pressure of) social-political circumstances.

Edith (Gelb) Gyömrői was born in Budapest on 8 September 1896 in a middle-class Jewish family. Her father was Márk Gelb, a furniture manufacturer, her mother Ilona Pfeifer. At her father's request, she began studying interior design at a school of applied arts, but later dropped out. In 1914, she married chemical engineer Ervin Rényi, divorcing him in 1918. She had one son from this marriage. Through her uncle, psychoanalyst István Hollós, she began to learn about psychoanalysis as early as the 1910s and attended the 5th International Psychoanalytical Congress in Budapest in 1918. From 1918 onwards she participated in gatherings of the Sunday Circle, a group of left-wing intellectuals, and befriended poet and painter Anna Lesznai and psychoanalyst René Spitz among others. In 1919, a collection of her poetry was published as *Rényi Edit versei* (The Poems of Edit Rényi). During Hungary's short-lived Soviet Republic that same year, she worked for the Commissariat for Education. After the fall of Hungary's Commune, she emigrated to Vienna, where she managed to make her way under difficult circumstances. She was a worker at a parachute factory, and then a sales assistant at the Heller Verlag bookshop. Among her friends were Hermann Broch, who translated some of her poems into German, as well as composer Hans Eisler, Czech writer Egon Erwin Kisch, Austrian translator and Communist activist Ilona Duczynska, and Hungarian writers Béla Balázs and Ervin Sinkó. This was followed by brief sojourns in several Hungarian-speaking towns in both the former Czechoslovakia (Uzsgorod/Ungvár) and Romania (Timișoara/Temesvár and Cluj/Kolozsvár). After she was expelled from Romania for her Communist involvement, she moved to Berlin with her second husband László Tölgy (Glück), living there between 1923 and 1933. In the early years, she was a costume designer at the Neumann Produktion film studio (she designed costumes for the films of Elisabeth Bergner, an important and popular actress who would eventually flee Nazi Germany). She was also involved in translating, interpreting and photography, and worked on the staff of the *Rote Hilfe* Communist party newspaper for a time. Although she was thrown out of the German Communist party in 1934, she remained true to the principles of Communism.

As of 1923, she saw Otto Fenichel for psychotherapy, then went to him for training analysis between 1925 and 1929, and then opened her own practice. Officials of the German Psychoanalytical Association did not take to her political views. Her admission to the Psychoanalytical Institute in Berlin was therefore delayed; nevertheless she attended all the lectures and seminars there for three years. She was

eventually admitted to the institute. Her immediate circle of friends included Marxist and other leftist peers, such as Annie and Wilhelm Reich, Otto Fenichel, Edith Jacobson and Siegfried Bernfeld. She was part of the legendary 'child seminar' set up for younger psychoanalysts by Otto Fenichel and Harald Schultz-Hencke in 1924, in which psychoanalytic topics were elaborated and discussed outside any institutional framework. This discussion forum was maintained until 1933 when Hitler took power. In Berlin, Gyömrői also came into contact with the individual psychology group, where she met Annemarie Wolf. After half a year in Paris, Gyömrői organized Hungarian painter Lajos Tihanyi's first Paris exhibition.

After Hitler came to power, the fact that Gyömrői was Jewish along with her political views and activism placed her in jeopardy several times. In 1933 she and several female colleagues decided to emigrate to Prague. While there, they laid the groundwork for a psychoanalytic training institute and held seminars and lectures on psychoanalysis and pedagogy. She maintained contact with Fenichel and the Marxist psychoanalysts' group; she was among those, along with Edith Jacobson, Kate Friedländer, Annie Reich and Barbara Lantos, whom Fenichel was addressing his secret *Rundbriefe*, or circulars, after 1933.

In 1934 Gyömrői returned to Budapest, where she was made a special member of the Hungarian Psychoanalytical Society. Between 1936 and 1938, she held seminars and discussion evenings, organized by the Hungarian society, for mothers and educators on practical educational issues. She often attended discussion evenings in Vienna held by Anna Freud. In 1935 Gyömrői took over the treatment of Hungarian poet Attila József from psychoanalyst Samu Rapaport. The poet's symptoms grew stronger during analysis and his condition worsened; some blamed this on Gyömrői, but there is no clear evidence to support this. The poet wrote several love poems and the self-therapeutic and self-analytical "Szabadötletek jegyzéke két ülésben" (A catalogue of free ideas in two sessions) for his analyst. Psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Róbert Bak took over his therapy in late 1936.

When anti-Jewish legislation was passed in Hungary in 1938, Gyömrői, like so many other analysts, requested assistance in settling elsewhere. She received a measure of funding from London psychoanalyst John Rickman and then emigrated to Ceylon with her third husband, journalist László Újvári, who died in 1940. Unable to leave Hungary, her son would die in a labour camp.

In Ceylon (Sri Lanka), difficult as it was at the outset, Gyömrői tried to continue her psychoanalytic work. She held introductory lectures and seminars and gave radio talks on childhood education for mothers. She became a member of the Indian Psychoanalytical Society. In 1940, she met her fourth husband, Professor Evelyn Frederick Charles Ludowyk, Shakespeare researcher and head of the Department of English at the University of Colombo, and later Peradeniya, who became her lifelong companion. It was essential for her to get closer to the culture of the place that she lived in; she began to show an interest in Buddhist religious history and wrote a dissertation on the subject in 1944 entitled "Miracle and Faith in Early Buddhism." 1955 saw the publication of her ethno-psychoanalytic study entitled "Pubertätsriten der Mädchen in einer in Umwandlung begriffenen Gesellschaft" (Adolescent Rites among Girls in a Society in Flux). She also took up weaving. She founded a weaving school for women in the village of Menikdiwela in Kandy. She even won prizes for her tapestries at international exhibitions.

Edith and Ludowyk were members of the Trotskyist Lanka Sama Samaja Party. She joined the women's movement, as well. In 1947, together with several women of the three Marxist parties, she founded the Eksath Kantha Peramuna (United Women's Front), the first autonomous socialist women's association in Ceylon, which was primarily engaged in protecting the interests of women workers. This group was short-lived, as the various Left parties were at loggerheads and disapproved of the women's association, and of the women's section of the LSSP as well. In 1948 she published an article in the *Times of Ceylon*, entitled "Feminism or Socialism?". She also became famous in Ceylon for her collaboration with Ludowyk in a series of modern plays in English for the University Dramatic Society. Edith did the set and costumes.

In 1956, due to the humid climate affecting her health, the couple moved to London. Here Edith became a recognized analyst, and continued her practice until she was 80. She was part of the Anna Freud circle, joined the staff of the Hampstead Clinic trained analysts, attended international congresses, and published studies. The best known among these was the case study "Analysis of a Young Concentration Camp Victim," which was translated into numerous languages. She was a member of the British Psycho-analytical Society. She returned to Hungary several times in the 1970s. At the 1971 International Psychoanalytical Congress, in Vienna, she exchanged views with psychoanalyst György

Hidas on re-integrating the Hungarian psychoanalytic community into the International Psychoanalytical Society and was active in the committee set up for this purpose.

In her old age, Edith discovered a new passion: restoring derelict country homes to their original state. She lived in some of them with her husband after they moved from London, and sold others to friends for a small sum. After the death of her husband (in 1986), she moved into the London home of her colleagues and friends, Annemarie and Joseph Sandler. She died on 11 February 1987.

Edith had a strong affinity for writing, not so much in professional genres, but rather in autobiography and fiction. The loss of language was her constant problem and pain. She had lost her relationship with live Hungarian language, while she was not a native speaker of any of the languages of the places where she lived. She wrote two novels in German. One with a biblical theme is entitled *Versöhnung* (Atonement) (published in Hungarian in 1979). The other, an unpublished autobiographical novel, is aptly called *Gegen den Strom* (Against the Current) (1941).

Edith Gyömrői's diverse and colourful life, with her participation in areas just opening up to women, her passages and links between a variety of groups and places, her manifold personal and professional attachments, at the same time her autonomy – indeed, her swimming 'against the current' – is an example of the modern intellectual woman who refuses material, social as well as intellectual dependence, but who is capable of productively accepting human relationships and influences. Her femininity is just one layer of her varied identities. Her political and professional commitments, artistic skills and her changing Jewish identity, influenced by historical circumstances, belong equally or even more importantly to her personality. Although her adaptation to the changes in her lifestyle, profession and relationships was not without conflicts, her new beginnings did not fail or question her 'old' identities, but rather demonstrated her capacity for constant development, and the exploration of new experiences and knowledge.

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Edith Ludowyk Gyömrői in Sri Lanka