

THE FORGOTTEN ANALYST



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Hermine Hug-Hellmuth

(1871–1924)

Prophecy Coles



KARNAC

firing the mind

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For Walter (1928–2023)

With all my love

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About the author

Prophecy Coles trained as a psychotherapist at the Lincoln Clinic but is now retired. She has always been interested in writing about people on the margin of interest to the psychoanalytic world, including siblings, *The Importance of Sibling Relationships in Psychoanalysis* (2003), forgotten ancestors, *The Uninvited Guest from the Unremembered Past* (2011), wet nurses and nannies, *The Shadow of the Second Mother* (2015), stepfamilies, *Psychoanalytic and Psychotherapeutic Perspectives on Stepfamilies and Stepparenting* (2018), and the illegitimate child, *Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Illegitimacy, Adoption and Reproduction Technology* (2021). Now she has written on the forgotten child psychoanalyst, Hermine Hug-Hellmuth, whose life was overshadowed by the hidden secret of her illegitimately born sister who had an illegitimate child, Hermine's nephew. Hermine was the first Viennese child psychoanalyst and much admired by Freud. Her tragic end, when she was murdered by her illegitimately born nephew in 1924, has meant she has been ignored by historians of psychoanalysis until MacLean and Rappen (1991) translated much of her work and wrote a short biography of her.

Author's note

All of the works of Hermine Hug-Hellmuth are referenced in MacLean and Rappen (1991). I have used their cataloguing in my guide to her work. For example, in the case of referring to her paper “The child’s concept of death” I will put (1991), referring to MacLean and Rappen followed by a second bracket [1912d] including the year that the paper was published according to MacLean and Rappen’s categorisation.

Introduction

The illegitimate child soon feels his special position in a cruel society ... and the awareness hurts as the frost does in a spring night.

—MacLean & Rappen, 1991, pp. 271–272

My first introduction to Hermine was in 2021 when I was writing a book about illegitimacy and I wondered if it was a topic that had interested psychoanalysts (Coles, 2021). The first psychoanalyst I could find who had written on the subject was Hermine Hug-Hellmuth. She had written two articles about the psychological problems that faced the illegitimate child in the 1920s, “The importance of the family for the fate of the individual” (1991 [1923]) and the “Libidinal structure of family life” (1991 [1924a]). Her ideas made an immediate impression upon me, as she wrote most sympathetically about their suffering, and yet I had never heard about her. This then led me on a search to find out more about her.

It has been a difficult journey to find out more about her life as she was murdered by her nephew Rolf in 1924 and it was thought within the professional world of psychoanalysis that it was best she

was forgotten. There are few details about her life and I have relied upon two sources. Graf-Nold (1988), who wrote a critical book about Hermine from a Jungian point of view that remains untranslated from German, *Der Fall Hermine Hug-Hellmuth. Eine Geschichte der frühen Kinder-Psychoanalyse*. However, Graf-Nold's transcripts of the trial of Hermine's nephew, Rolf Hug, have been invaluable. I am also indebted to MacLean and Rappen's (1991) *Hermine Hug-Hellmuth: Her Life and Work* and their translations from German of most of her work. They highlight the little factual information about Hermine as a few days before she died she wrote a will in which she said that "no account of her work or life should appear". This has meant that MacLean and Rappen have had to rely upon "a few autobiographical hints and three pages of letters". They also found that there were only a few people "still alive" who could help and there were others, like Anna Freud, who obeyed Hermine's wish that no account of her life should appear. They conclude, "we have tried to present everything factual that we have been able to find about Hug-Hellmuth. We have examined every secondary source of information about her that we could locate" (MacLean and Rappen, 1991, pp. xi–xii).

My aim in this book is to counter MacLean and Rappen's avoidance of "biographical speculation based on her psychoanalytic papers" and to try and imagine Hermine's interior life from the papers she wrote, as well as speculate about the social and emotional conflicts she confronted as she grew up in *fin de siècle* Vienna (MacLean & Rappen, 1991, p. ix). Above all I emphasise something that MacLean and Rappen discovered but never explored. Hermine's father brought an illegitimate child, Antonia, into his marriage with Hermine's mother, Ludovika Achelpohl, and "changed her birth date to make her legitimate". They then comment that "It created what became accepted as the truth, but it was a myth of legitimacy, and her age changed to conform to the truth" (MacLean & Rappen, 1991, p. 4). I take the view that this lie that Hermine was expected to believe is at the centre of her difficulties and that her murder rests upon the historical repercussions of this lie.

There was also something more personal that drew me to Hermine. As I have already said, I was initially moved by her profound understanding of the psychological suffering of the illegitimate child. As I read

on I realised that Hermine was a complicated woman whose writing conveys a deep love of children and this had echoes with my early life.

When I was five my mother employed a governess to teach my brother and sister and myself as we lived in the depths of the country and there was no school nearby. Ethel Ellis was her name. She must have been in late middle-age when she came to us just after the Second World War. She had had a wealth of experience as a governess to children whose fathers ruled the Empire. Her stamp collection testified to all the exotic places in which she had lived. Her link in my mind to Hermine was that she also loved children and she loved us. “Ellie” as we called her, never tried to mother us and Hermine’s writing about child psychoanalysis makes clear that she never tried to usurp the parents from their place in the child’s mind. I never remember sitting on Ellie’s knee or being given a kiss or cuddle, she was not a motherly person. I believe that Hermine also was not a motherly person. But, unlike Ellie, Hermine was called upon to look after her orphaned nine-year-old nephew, Rolf, and there she failed. She was unable to express maternal love or care and that was the precipitating factor that brought about her tragic end. She could love children at a safe distance but the never-ending care that a mother must give to a child was beyond her reach.

Ellie was never asked to take on the role of a mother but this did not mean we did not feel safe with her. On the contrary, in the nursery we knew she was deeply thoughtful about us and loved us in her more detached way. She made us toys, with her large masculine hands, such as a wooden school with figures made out of plastic wood, and a blackboard and a lavatory with a tiny roll of lavatory paper. She, like Hermine, understood that it was through play that our imagination was set alight. She was fair and just and never took sides in our childish quarrels; the puzzles she made with her pedal fret-saw were always appropriate to our age and so never caused jealousy. Perhaps most importantly she left me with a deep belief that historical origins could help me find some order in the bewildering confusion that surrounded my childhood. It is that idea that she imparted to me and that has stayed with me. Ellie has stood beside me at those complex moments when I have tried to understand Hermine’s history and what went so dreadfully wrong that she ended up being murdered by her nephew Rolf.

The book is divided into fourteen chapters. Chapter 1, “The end and the beginning”, starts with Hermine’s murder and is followed by a brief account of her aristocratic family history, which was extremely important to her. Chapter 2, “Vienna”, describes Hermine’s social and political background, building on her family history from Chapter 1. I gradually came to see that Hermine’s tragic life followed the same contours as the eventual destruction of the Austrian Empire, so this historical exploration of life in Vienna is key—we cannot understand a person’s intrapsychic world without first knowing something about the history of their time. There are no records about Hermine’s early life or her intellectual interests but as an extremely intelligent woman, who entered the masculine world of psychoanalysis, it seems likely that she took an interest in the cultural life around her as she grew up. The history of this period in Vienna illustrates the flourishing and the suffering of men, while women played a walk-on part only.

Chapter 3, “Educational reform”, looks at the educational difficulties that Hermine was up against as she became a teacher; the only career choice open to a woman at that time. Hermine then took up the extraordinary idea of studying physics and gained a PhD in radiology. She returned to teaching but her liberal educational ideals were being crushed as right wing and anti-Semitic forces were being re-instated. She supported her half-sister Antonia’s co-educational school, but after it collapsed and Hermine became quite depressed, she turned to psychoanalysis.

In Chapter 4, “Hermine’s psychoanalyst”, I turn to the influence that Hermine’s psychoanalyst, Isidor Sadger, had on her mind. I describe Sadger’s character through his own writing about his relationship with Freud, *Recollecting Freud* (1930). I also draw on the *Minutes of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society* to fill out his character from the responses of Freud and his colleagues to his work. Plus, Christopher Turner’s book on Wilhelm Reich, *Adventures in the Orgasmatron* (2011), adds invaluable insight into Sadger as an analyst.

In Chapter 5, “Hermine’s autobiographical writing”, I examine some of her pre-psychoanalytic writing to get some picture of her character and perhaps an idea of what she might have told Sadger as he analysed her. Chapter 6, “*A Young Girl’s Diary*”, takes a close look at the bestselling but controversial book Hermine put together in 1915 and

had published in 1919. Chapter 7, “Antonia’s illegitimacy”, tackles that subject and the repercussions it had upon Hermine, and looks more at Antonia’s life.

In Chapter 8, “The Vienna Psychoanalytic Society”, I find myself wanting to rescue Hermine from her unsympathetic treatment of Rolf following the death of Antonia. Antonia’s death came at a moment when she had other battles to fight. Namely, her treatment in the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society.

Chapter 9, “Hermine’s early psychoanalytic work”, explores Hermine’s early psychoanalytic writing as she laid the foundation stones to her method of child psychoanalysis. Chapter 10 addresses war trauma. The First World War was not only a trauma for Austria and the Austro-Hungarian Empire but it was also a personal trauma for Hermine. The war awakened her own earlier childhood traumas of loss and deception and educational frustration, and she also lost Antonia in 1915.

The difficult relationship that Hermine had with her nephew Rolf is the focus of Chapter 11, “Hermine and Rolf”. The chapter is divided into two parts: the first concentrates on Rolf and all he suffered when he was orphaned at nine, and the second focuses on the testimonies of Hermine’s response to Rolf. The bewildering difficulty I have had in writing about Hermine is that I have been appalled by her treatment of Rolf, but I am deeply admiring of the work she was doing during this time. She was establishing original ideas about children and their development and yet she could not respond to Rolf’s needs and distress with warmth and humanity.

Chapter 12 continues my exploration of the original contribution Hermine made to psychoanalysis at the peak of her career. Chapter 13 looks at Hermine’s last year of life, and Chapter 14, “The end”, gives an account of Rolf’s trial in 1925, which was extensively recorded in the popular press.

With the murder of Hermine Hug-Hellmuth, we lost one of the earliest and most original female voices. A woman who tried to be heard above the chorus of male misogyny.