

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This book is the story of an odyssey. It tells of the geographic, intellectual and religious journey that the Freud family, like thousands of other Jews, made out of the ghettos of Eastern Europe. It is the story of how the vicissitudes of this odyssey affected Sigmund Freud, his character, genius, and creativity.

In 1956, Ernst L. Freud wrote the following on the occasion of the one-hundredth anniversary of his father's birthday:

In the last year of my father's life, shortly after his library had been reestablished in his new Hampstead house in London, he was working at his desk while I was rummaging through the shelves. By chance, I came across an insignificant looking volume bound in black canvas, which I found to be a Bible (in Hebrew and German with a fair number of illustrations), an edition which had been very popular on the Continent about the middle of the last century. The volume had been put together from remnants of the Book of Kings, Samuel, and the nearly complete five Books of Moses. What immediately aroused my interest was the discovery of several Hebrew inscriptions on the outer pages—incidentally opening from the left and not from the right. My father, noticing my enthusiasm, presented me with the book . . . The next page shows an inscription in Hebrew and this is followed by a translation into English with the first and last lines written in the shaky hand of Jacob Freud himself . . . That the language of the translation should be English is most likely explained by the fact that it was made by one of Jacob's sons from his first marriage, both of whom settled in Manchester.

This Bible appears to have been a significant factor in the development of Sigmund Freud's ethnic and religious identities. In it, his father recorded notable events of the Freud family. The Bible was also one of Sigmund Freud's first textbooks in childhood, serving as a primary vehicle for his

introduction to the history of the Jews, to the world of antiquity, and to the origins of western civilization. It also came to symbolize a very special relationship between Jacob Freud and his son Sigmund. In presenting the family Bible as a gift to his son Ernst, Freud was reenacting the scene in which his father Jacob gave him the Bible in 1891 on the occasion of his 35th birthday.

The stories related in the Bible appear to have left an indelible imprint on Freud's mind. He repeatedly returned, in his life and work, to biblical themes and heroes which provided him with enduring models and metaphors. Joseph, the interpreter of dreams, and Moses, the first great prophet and leader of his people, are but two notable examples. The Bible also supplied some of the raw material that went into the development of Freud's character and laid the foundation of his ethnic and religious identity. This book will pursue clues to one of the most elusive aspects of Freud—the Jewish aspect—through an examination of the family Bible, his parents' origins and identity, the social, cultural and religious tenor of nineteenth-century Vienna, and Freud's own scientific and literary achievements.

It is one of the themes of this book that the relationship between Jacob and Sigmund Freud owed much more than is hitherto believed to its Jewish contexts, in all its diverse aspects, and that the family Bible, i.e., the Old Testament, was a crucial medium of its expression. As Freud himself noted:

My deep engrossment in the Bible story (almost as soon as I had learnt the art of reading) had, as I recognized much later, an enduring effect upon the direction of my interest. (S.E. 20:8)

Increasing attention has been focused recently on the relationship between Jacob Freud and his son Sigmund, as exemplified by the work of Krull (1986). Since there is no written correspondence of Jacob Freud extant, Krull relied on other sources for her discussion. She is in agreement with all previous and current biographers, e.g., Jones (1953), Schur (1972), Clark (1980), and Gay (1987, 1988), that the tie between father and son was a close and affectionate one, unlike that with his mother which, by comparison, was somewhat distant; that Jacob and Amalia Freud (Sigmund's mother) shed their Orthodox, Hasidic life style by the time they were married in 1855, an initial expression of this break with the past being their marriage by a rabbi of the Reform Jewish movement; that they continued their life style as assimilated Jews, throughout the remainder of their lives, as presumably shown by the almost complete absence of the observance of religious ritual both in and out of the home.

An attempt will be made in this study to show that traditional Judaism may have played a more significant role in the Freud household than the biographers have believed. To do so, one must face the difficult task of

moving beyond an image that the Freud family itself has helped to build up. Freud's daughter Anna, so long the custodian of her father's work and reputation, went so far as to suggest, in a letter to British psychoanalyst Masud Kahn (23 June 1975), the establishment of a "Defense League" to counter the injurious insinuations of unfavorable biographers. It is interesting to note that what so angered Anna in her letter to Kahn was an attempt by the biographer Marthe Robert to explore Freud's Jewish roots:

... she describes my father's father as an authoritarian figure, orthodox Jewish and in every respect the kind of father against whom a son revolts. The true facts are that he was a freethinker, a mild, indulgent and rather passive man, just the opposite, etc. (As quoted in Young-Bruehl, 1988, p. 431).

Though formal religion in terms of theological belief and ritual practice was not a major constituent of the family life style, it was nevertheless an important one as embodied in a home environment that was pervaded by Jewish culture and tradition. Both Jacob and Amalia Freud came from a traditional Orthodox and Ḥasidic background in Galicia, the Eastern European part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, he from Tysmenitz and she from Brody. Though religion was not as all-encompassing as it was in Galicia, much of the tradition will be shown to have been retained when, after their marriage, they resided in Freiberg. Jacob Freud may well have been attracted to the enlightenment of the West and did actually become somewhat assimilated, i.e., as compared to religious life in Tysmenitz, but he never removed himself from his tradition.¹ (From 1844 to 1848 he had residences in both Tysmenitz and Freiberg and in 1848 became a permanent resident of Freiberg with his first wife Sally, who may have died in 1852 or earlier, and their two sons, Emanuel and Philipp.)

There is evidence that when Sigmund was eighteen years old the Freud family observed religious festivals and rituals. On September 18, 1874 he wrote a jocular letter to his friend Eduard Silberstein on the subject of the gratification of the senses provided by religion:

... even the atheist who is fortunate enough to belong to a moderately pious family cannot deny the festival when he puts a New Year's Day morsel to his lips. One might say that religion, enjoyed in moderation, stimulates the digestion, but that taken in excess it does damage to it.²

However one may define what Freud meant by 'a moderately pious family' observing the holiday of Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year), given the context of his parents' Orthodox tradition, it is certainly not indicative of an assimilated family. The food may well have been kosher as it

would have been ludicrous to associate non-kosher food in Jewish Vienna of the 1870s with religious holiday observance.

Ernest Jones (1953, I:19) noted that although Sigmund Freud's children had assured him that their grandfather had become a complete freethinker, there is some evidence to the contrary. Freud's mother, Amalia, also preserved some belief in the Deity. Judith Bernays Heller (1956), Sigmund Freud's niece, in describing the years she lived with her grandparents, noted that Jacob spent a good deal of his time studying the Talmud in the original Aramaic, the language of ancient Babylon, there being no printed translation of the Talmud in existence at the time. She also recalls the festivities of the Passover Seder, Jacob reciting the Hagaddah (the story of Passover in Hebrew) by heart and she reading parts of it. Contrast this with Martin Freud's comment (1957) that there was no religious observance in his grandparents' household. Krull (1986) notes that they also celebrated Christmas. She based this on Martin Freud's (1957) comment that the entire family gathered for dinner at the grandparents' home on Christmas and New Year's days. No other evidence is given that would substantiate the claim that it was the holiday Christmas as such that was being celebrated. The contradiction between the perception of Judith and her cousin Martin may, in part, be explainable by the difference in age, the former having been born in 1885 and the latter in 1889. Presumably Judith may have had more distinct memories of the events. Jacob Freud died in 1896 and the observance of religious ritual may have undergone some change after Amalia became a widow. Martin, for reasons unknown, may have had a need to sustain an image of the family history that would be in accord with a preconceived assimilated status.

To the contrary, Hanns W. Lange, the keeper of the family tree, has informed me (personal communication) that Freud's grandson, Walter Freud, with whom he is in close contact, has assured him that Amalia came from a strictly Orthodox household and stayed *fromm* (Orthodox and ritually observant) until her death in 1930. Given this information, it would seem absurd to claim that Jacob and Amalia, or even Amalia herself after the death of Jacob, would have celebrated Christmas.

It is indeed gratifying for an author or investigator to receive independent corroboration for his hypotheses. Such is the case with my serendipitous encounter with Henry S. Bondi. Bondi was moved to write a lengthy letter to Sophie Freud, daughter of Sigmund's son Martin, in which he stated his disillusionment and disappointment, after reading Krull's (1986) book on the Freud family, at the conspicuous omission of the extent of the Jewish dimension of Freud's life by some members of his family and biographers. He felt that before his generation, especially those who had personal intimate contact with the Freud family, pass from the scene, that the 'cover' of the secularized perspective of the Freud 'religious' story be removed so that it can be seen for what it really was.³

As noted above, the only surviving writings of Jacob Freud are the inscriptions written in Hebrew that are to be found within the covers of the Freud family Bible. Through a study of these inscriptions, I will attempt to show that the relationship between the biblical patriarch Jacob and his son Joseph served as a paradigm of great importance for that between Jacob and Sigmund. They both shared a fantasy based on their respective conceptualization of the Jacob and Joseph relationship.

Some comment on methodology is in order. All of Freud's writings have been examined, along with some published correspondence, as well as two of his letters to Yehuda Dvosis-Dvir, his Hebrew translator, and excerpts of letters to his childhood friend Eduard Silberstein. Most crucial are the few Hebrew inscriptions of Jacob Freud, which will be analyzed for the first time in an exegetical and dynamic manner. The Hebrew text and its origins in biblical sources, of which Jacob was apparently a master, will be used to reveal information about Jacob and his relationship with his son. From a biographical perspective, resort will be made to all available data as well as to anecdotal and previously unpublished information that has been made available to me. Jacob Freud was quite typical of that generation that was raised in the East European ghetto, was exposed to the Enlightenment, tasted of the learned fruits of the West and shed some of the restrictions of his religious past.

The dynamic and theoretical frame of reference that is used in this study is the classical psychoanalytic position; with the focus on the centrality of the Oedipal conflict in the etiology of neurotic symptoms, the partial but important role it plays in the formation of character and in the understanding of biographical and historical phenomena. This is not to lessen the contributory significance of genetic factors. Those readers who adhere to pre-Oedipal, narcissistic and object-relations approaches may endeavor to fruitfully apply them to the data and draw complementary conclusions from them. They will only serve to enrich this study.

I have not limited myself to a psychoanalytic conceptual frame of reference. Use has been made of the most recent historical and archaeological findings, especially in the last section of this book.

Sigmund Freud's journey from his Jewish origins was both universal and particular. Throughout the course of human history people have had to pass through different cultures and adapt to them. The command of God to Abraham in the Bible is a beautiful and succinct expression of this experience (Genesis 12:1-2):⁴

The Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you.

*I will make of you a great nation,
And I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
And you shall be a blessing."*

It is my contention that though one cannot in actuality go home again, one never really leaves it. Freud's childhood and adolescent home was typical of the East European Orthodox Jew in its transplanted character—first to Freiberg, Moravia and then to Vienna. Freud's attempt at emotional and external departure from this milieu began, rebelliously, in early adolescence. It was a long and arduous journey, but for him, most productive. The world too has been the better for it. Toward the end of his life, as so often happens, he began the return journey, first with a renewed interest in religion in general, and finally, in Judaism in particular. *Moses and Monotheism*, one of the very last creative productions of his life, exemplifies the final stages of this return.

... the writing of the Moses book was for Freud one last, valiant effort to set straight within his own mind the deeper conflicts and ambivalences that had plagued him all his life. His relationship to the figure of Moses and the basic psychological issues it reflected are distilled in this last flamboyant gesture of defiance. (Meissner, 1984, p. ix)

Freud's major written demonstrations of his concern for religion in general appear in *Totem and Taboo* and *Future of An Illusion*. Religion is seen as arising from the helplessness of childhood. It is the universal expression of the child's conception of the omnipotent father. Religion is seen as the vehicle for the gratification of infantile drives and yearnings in an institutionally acceptable way. This results in a conversion of inherently unacceptable thoughts and feelings to the phenomenon of a feeling of virtue and righteousness. It is also a means of resolving nearly all of the basically unresolvable fears of humankind. In short, it is a universal neurosis. It was only at the end of his life that his rebelliousness towards Judaism was particularized and he attempted to deliver what he thought would be the *coup de grace* in *Moses and Monotheism*. But, strangely enough, some of his most positive feelings about Judaism are expressed in this presumably destructive work. Hints of the emergence of positive feelings toward Judaism appear in a letter to his Hebrew translator in 1930. I will attempt to demonstrate that *Moses and Monotheism* reflects an attempt to resolve his feelings towards his father and that it is an autobiography in disguise. If East European Jewry (*Ostjuden*) is substituted for the pre-Moses Egyptian Israelites, then one will have a 'master key' to the unlocking of the 'door' leading to the latent, highly personal

motivation, meaning and significance of *Moses and Monotheism*.⁵ Part of my methodology will be to use Freud's own words to help in the analysis of his texts, words used in other contexts, but nevertheless, quite appropriate to the task at hand. It was, indeed, a long and tortuous voyage home and I have sought clues to this journey in many realms.

The central themes of this study which will be developed are the following:

1. That Jacob and Amalia Freud came from a strictly Orthodox Jewish background and, contrary to prevailing opinion, retained many of the traditional religious practices to the end of their lives.

2. That Jacob Freud had attended a *Yeshiva* (Talmudical academy) in his youth and was a scholar of the Holy Writ.

3. That they were not adherents of the Reform Jewish movement, nor were they assimilated Jews.

4. That Sigmund Freud himself had a more traditional upbringing than he openly admitted.

5. That Sigmund Freud and his family, either through misinterpretation, unawareness or possibly conscious misrepresentation, were somewhat less than open about the extent of the Jewishness or religiousness of his background and created an impression of an assimilated status that was not quite in accord with reality.

6. That his biographers perpetuated this myth because they appear not to have grasped the full implication of the available data.

7. That self-consciousness about one's East European origins (due to the most intense prejudice on the part of the established middle class who looked upon *Ostjuden* as primitive and inferior) motivated a pressing need on the part of the Viennese Jewish middle class to overcompensate by being as German and middle class in their cultural and intellectual interests and values as the non-Jewish middle class, if not more so. The Freud family even went so far as to create a myth, a family romance, in which their background was elevated to a most noble status.

8. That *Moses and Monotheism* was a very personal drama, and yet, though methodologically and factually flawed, a work of genius and ingenuity. It represents his attempt to come home again to his Jewish roots but on his own terms and in his own way.

I now invite the reader to join me on a voyage of a different kind, one of investigative pursuit, one that goes back to the beginning of history as expressed in the Bible and Western Civilization; to the intellectual, cultural and emotional ascent of man, all of which went ultimately into the creation of one of the great all too human geniuses of our or any age, Sigmund Freud.