

## Historical sex object – or undiscovered genius?

John Launer challenges the image of Sabina Spielrein principally as Carl Jung's mistress: was she one of the most innovative thinkers in 20th-century psychology?

Let me take you first of all on a journey of imagination. Supposing there was a young woman who was close to Freud and Jung and suggested to them a hundred years ago that the 'talking cure' should be anchored in human biology. Supposing she felt that being a woman gave her a special insight into this because she understood some of the darker side of reproduction: the fear of sexual and domestic violence, seduction and abandonment, all of which she had experienced. Imagine that she decided to move from the world of psychoanalysis to join the pioneers of child development, working with Jean Piaget, becoming his psychoanalyst, and helping him to develop some of his ideas, before moving on to Moscow and teaching the giants of Russian psychology – Alexander Luria and Lev Vygotsky. Finally, let's dream on and suppose she continued to work as a respected paediatrician, combining ideas from psychoanalysis and child development, and defending Freud publically in Russia, even after psychoanalysis had been proscribed there.

If such a person had ever existed, wouldn't you expect her to be among the best-known women in psychology in the 20th century? Wouldn't you consider it outrageous that she had been forgotten by the time of her death in the Holocaust, and rediscovered later as an erotic sideshow, because she once had an affair with her psychiatrist? Such a woman did exist. Her name was Sabina Spielrein. In

this article I will give a short account of the mythical version of Spielrein's life, most recently publicised by Keira Knightley's portrayal of her in Cronenberg's movie *A Dangerous Method*. Then I will describe the different narrative I discovered when I researched her life to write my biography of her.

The mythical version begins with Spielrein's early teenage breakdown, when she ended up in hospital under the sole care of Carl Jung. He tried out psychoanalysis for the first time, using her as his test case. This was allegedly a remarkable success. She continued to see him for therapy, and this developed into a deep and lasting love affair. Freud interceded and helped them to end their affair amicably. Spielrein later became a psychoanalyst of minor distinction. After she returned to Russia, she turned into a sad and prematurely aged lady.

Every single detail of this version is untrue. It is either unsupported by the documentary evidence or directly contradicted by it. It is largely based on

books written over 20 years ago, before important personal papers became available, and focusing on the two men rather than on Spielrein herself (Carotenuto, 1982; Kerr, 1993).

My own interest in Spielrein started when I first read one of her articles: 'Destruction as the Cause of Coming into Being', published in 1912. In that paper, Spielrein tried to do what many neuroscientists and some psychoanalysts are trying to do a century later: to understand the unconscious mind in terms of Darwin's vision of the two imperatives in life, to survive and to reproduce. I was so struck by the paper that I started to read everything I could about her. Here is the story that I discovered.

Spielrein was born in 1885 into a Jewish family in southern Russia. Both her parents and two of her brothers were violent towards her. There is a strong suggestion that her father's violence was sexual. When she was 16, Spielrein's sister Emilia died suddenly from typhoid. She then suffered what we would now see as a hysterical bereavement reaction: tics, grimaces, alternate laughing and crying. Her family took her to the university mental hospital in Zurich. Its director was Eugen Bleuler, one of the first people to believe mental hospitals should be therapeutic communities. One of his assistants was Carl Jung.

Sabina began to calm down straight away. Within a few weeks, she was able to apply for medical school in Zurich. Jung encouraged her to join him in the hospital laboratory to do word association

tests on other patients and tried these out on Spielrein herself. Jung later claimed in a letter to Freud that he had analysed her while she was in hospital. There is little evidence for this: he saw her only intermittently, and the hospital notes do not read like an analysis at all. Several historians have also pointed out how he avoided exploring abuse in the family, while Bleuler insisted that her father and brothers should keep away from her. Subsequently, Jung wrote several further accounts of her 'case', but they are unreliable because of serious discrepancies between them.

While she was at medical school, Spielrein carried on assisting Jung in the laboratory. It is clear from her letters and diaries that she had a massive crush on him. He started to experiment on her by offering interpretations for her crush. She begged him to stop. The 'therapy' led to precisely the consequence she had feared. Instead of curing her of an infatuation with him, it led to him developing one with her. The affair lasted around five months. Then his emotions changed, and he confessed he had had affairs with several women before. Jung's wife then wrote an anonymous letter to Spielrein's mother, who threatened to show him to his boss. Spielrein confronted him and assaulted him with a letter knife. Jung resigned from the hospital, and started to fire off desperate letters to Freud, calling her a liar, and then blaming her for being a ruthless seductress. Jung and Freud then entered into a conspiracy to neutralise Spielrein. Both lied flagrantly to each other, as well as to Spielrein. She forgave both of them. She resumed erotic encounters with Jung, but in the end she convinced herself that he was a 'Don Juan'. When she qualified as a doctor in early 1911 she left Zurich for good, and of her own accord.

Spielrein then embarked on a psychiatric career which included publication of around 37 papers. She married a doctor called Pavel Sheftel although the marriage was never a happy one. When the First World War broke out Pavel returned to Russia, leaving her in Switzerland with a baby daughter. It was a decade before they were reunited.

If the first half of Spielrein's life commands interest because of its personal dramas, the second half does so because of her phenomenal output. For her MD

dissertation, she wrote the first extended study of schizophrenic speech and its internal logic. It was the first ever to be accepted for a doctorate using a psychoanalytic approach, and the first doctorate published in a psychoanalytic journal. It was to be another 50 years before psychiatrists like R.D. Laing showed how such speech is a vital form of communication for psychotic people. The following year, she wrote two more significant papers. One was an article on



Sabina Spielrein

childhood fantasies about pregnancy and childbirth: the first systematic attempt to describe the imagination of children. The other was her most significant paper: 'Destruction as the Cause of Coming into Being.'

In that paper, she proposed that we are caught up as human beings in a tension between the instinct to survive as an individual, and the instinct to reproduce. She also argued that the reproductive

instinct is destructive as well as creative, particularly for women, as it challenges their psychological and physical identity. She disputed Freud's idea that the pursuit of pleasure underlies all our actions, proposing that only the reproductive drive can adequately explain all our instincts. This has become a common view in modern biology and evolutionary studies. Later on, Spielrein expanded on her ideas in a letter to Jung, where she described how children seek attachment with parents in the interests of their survival and, ultimately, of reproduction. What she said was impeccable in terms of the way attachment theorists now understand how negative behaviour can contribute to survival and the prospect of descendants. There were some flaws in Spielrein's argument, but she understood that talking therapy would make no sense unless it fitted a theory that had universal acceptance in the scientific world.

Around the beginning of the First World War, Spielrein published 10 further articles. A paper on 'The Mother-in-Law' appears to be the first to take a feminist perspective on family relationships. An article she published on the treatment of a boy's phobia about monkeys is the first known report of a child being treated for an emotional problem through talking and the use of memories and associations.

In the early 1920s Spielrein joined the

Rousseau Institute in Geneva, alongside the founders of child psychology. Jean Piaget joined the team shortly afterwards, and she took him on for a training analysis. She produced around 19 further papers there. These included articles making links across psychoanalysis, child development and linguistics. They include a paper on the origin of the words 'Mama' and 'Papa,' where she seems to have been the first psychoanalyst to write of the importance of the infant's relationship with the mother's breast. During this time, Spielrein was one of the pioneers of observational research into how children speak. She is likely to have been the first person to use play therapy with children.

In 1923 Spielrein returned to Russia. She joined the staff of the world's first psychoanalytic kindergarten. She influenced the young Alexander Luria and Lev Vygotsky. Later on, they both achieved fame for the ways they combined objective and subjective approaches to psychology, in the manner she introduced. Within a year or so of joining the kindergarten, Spielrein got caught in a dispute between Stalin and Trotsky about its future, and returned to her home town of Rostov. Her husband Pavel was in a relationship with another woman, and they had recently had a baby daughter – although Pavel returned to live with Sabina and Renata. A year after Sabina's return, she and Pavel had a second daughter.

Spielrein next worked in the new field of pedology – a synthesis of medical paediatrics, child psychology and developmental studies. She created her own adaptation of psychoanalytic methods to address the circumstances of the Soviet Union. She continued with observational research of children into the late 1920s. She spoke about this publicly in 1929, when psychoanalysis had virtually been banned by Stalin. She continued to work until shortly before the German invasion.

In June 1942 Spielrein and her two daughters Renata and Eva were murdered by a Nazi death squad, along with almost the entire Jewish population of the city. Her terrible death makes it even more important to rediscover her legacy, and replace the fictionalised version of her as a sex object with the story of a woman of genius.

**I John Launer is a doctor, systemic psychotherapist and writer. He is an honorary lifetime consultant at the Tavistock Clinic and associate dean for Health Education England.**  
johnlauner@aol.com



Keira Knightley in *A Dangerous Mind*