Soreanu, R. (2021). From the Archive, Otto Fenichel to Michael Balint: Struggles, Exile, Searching for a New Home. *Journal of the Balint Society, 48(1), 142-146.*

JOURNAL OF THE BALINT SOCIETY, VOLUME 48, ISSUE 1, FEBRUARY 2021

From the Archive, Otto Fenichel to Michael Balint: Struggles, Exile, Searching for a New Home

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A Commentary on the Letters from Otto Fenichel to Michael Balint, 1940 and 1941, Los Angeles[2]

A sequence of letters from Otto Fenichel[3] captures an intense moment in Michael Balint's life, one of dislocation and loss. Shortly after arriving in the UK in 1939, Balint tragically lost his wife, Alice Balint, a partner in life and thought, who was also a psychoanalyst, and an established figure of the Budapest School of psychoanalysis. He initially settled in Manchester, where he felt unhappy and uprooted. While we only have Otto Fenichel's letters, and not those written by Balint, the letters recapture Balint's search for a new home, after his leaving Budapest, and the many losses that followed. In 1941, Balint was seriously considering emigrating to the United States, and Fenichel was advising him on the situation he would be facing in the receiving country, and on the possibilities to make a living there.

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[2] The Balint Archive is held by the British Psychoanalytical Society.

[3] Otto Fenichel, an Austrian physician and psychoanalyst, was born in Vienna in 1897, and died Los Angeles in 1946. In the spring of 1938 Fenichel and his family left for Los Angeles, fleeing Nazi prosecution. There he joined the Los Angeles Psychoanalytic Study Group. In 1942 he had a key role in founding the San Francisco Psychoanalytic Society. He was invested in the development of a form of psychoanalysis that was capable of sociological explanations and of making contributions to politics. His book, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis*, appeared in 1945 and became a reference for analytic training.

The first letter of the sequence is written in June 1940, after Fenichel had received the confirmation that Balint made the crossing to the UK safely, and that he was still alive. The letter marks the tragedy of the times, when the event of survival and the event of making a safe passage to a new country could not be taken for granted. Receiving an envelope with a familiar handwriting was a long-awaited message of life. Being in a historical time without consolation is the atmosphere that Fenichel inscribes for us. It is also a time of profound change and major reorganisations, where the very 'frame' of work is altered: new languages, new countries, new constraints and new forms of negotiating with state institutions and with psychoanalytic institutions.

> I received your letter of June 9, for which I thank you very much. You say I tried to send you 'some lines of consolation and encouragement'. I certainly do not like these expressions in events where there is no consolation. Certainly I anticipated that you will continue living, nevertheless, and I am very glad to learn from your letter, that I was right. Yes, many things happened again in the meantime. We all do not know how it is going to continue, but I think also, we all agree that we cannot do anything else than 'make the best of it', to continue our work without overestimating it and its possibilities as long as it is possible. (Letter of Otto Fenichel to Michael Balint, 14 July 1940)

In a letter written by Fenichel on March 15, 1941, we get closer to understanding the difficulties of crossing national boundaries, in the medical and psychoanalytic profession. Fenichel details for Balint what a new move from the United Kindom to the United States would entail. The medical milieu is not very permeable, and defends the internal logic of the profession and the local realities, faced with the newcomers, the exiled of Europe:

> The conditions for examination and [medical] licence vary in the different states and are in general, unfortunately, becoming more difficult from day to day. They are especially difficult in California, where one year internship in an American hospital is required as a pre-condition for admission to the examination. And it is extremely difficult to get such an internship position, because they are overcrowded with American medical students; if you get one, you must be happy and certainly work the whole day, - so that an attempt to obtain

> the Californian licence means a year without earning any money. (Letter of Otto Fenichel to Michael Balint, 15 March 1941)

One month later, in a letter written on April 11, 1941, Fenichel seems even more pessimistic about the prospect of Balint's coming to the United States. He shares with Balint the hope that the Fund for Relief and Immigration of the American Psychoanalytic Association might grant him a loan for the first half year in America, but he also informs him that 'now ten times more money than the Fund possesses is needed to make possible the passage and the rescuing of persons whose lives depend on it' (Letter of Otto Fenichel to Michael Balint, 11 April 1941). Fenichel adds a hand-written question on the typed letter, marking his own anxiety and the desire to know about Balint's decision in this difficult situation: 'What will you do?'. Indeed, the scribbled question is one that must have been very loud in the minds of psychoanalysts and medical doctors of the time, faced with life and death questions, including the preservation of their own life.

We can reconstitute Balint's resolution from Fenichel's letter of June 13, 1941. Balint decides to remain the United Kingdom, and he also writes to Fenichel that it is his choice not to appeal to the Fund, in a context where other Europeans are still under a death threat, and need it more that he does. Fenichel writes:

> I understand that you, under the circumstances of reality, decided to stay in England, although I am sorry about it. Concerning the Relief Fund of the American Psychoanalytic Association, you certainly are right that it is needed at present for persons whose whole existence of life is dependent of it: but perhaps it would have been possible for you also without this fund's help. (Letter of Otto Fenichel to Michael Balint, 13 June 1941)

In 1941, the 'circumstances of reality' that Fenichel evokes were extremely dark for the European psychoanalysts and doctors fleeing Nazi prosecution.

In another letter of the same period, Fenichel draws Balint's attention to a theme I would call 'infrastructural thinking'. Psychoanalysis will thrive or contract

not in accordance to its practicing the 'right' kind of theory, but in relation to post-war social change, to the new institutional landscape emerging after an important historical trauma.

> […] it seems to me that all this is not of much importance anymore. The future of psychoanalysis, I think, is not depending anymore on the fact whether in this or that psychoanalytic society a correct or wrong theory is advanced – but on the outcome of the war and the structure of societal institutions after the war. Waiting for this future still is much more comfortable here [Los Angeles] than in Manchester.
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> I understand that the disruption of all connections with Hungary make the difficult conditions of your present life still worse. And I am glad to learn that all those difficulties do not deprive you of your courage to work and that you not only have your analyses but also your meetings, discussions and scientific trips to London. I would like that psychoanalytic work here might be done with more libido than it is. In this respect, I am much more content with new candidates than with old analysts. (Letter of Otto Fenichel to Michael Balint, 12 May 1941)

What we are left with is an image of the importance of transmitting the psychoanalytic craft. Political regimes might fail us, and professional organisations might do so as well, but what endures is the transmission across generations of a method and of a way of producing knowledge.

Author Note

The author would like to thank Ewan O'Neill, Judit Szekacs and the Archive Committee of the British Psychoanalytical Society. The writing of this commentary was supported through a Wellcome Trust Fellowship in the Medical Humanities (Grant 200347/Z/15/Z).