

CHAPTER SIX

Esther Bick (1901-1983)¹

(1983)

Martha Harris took over Esther Bick's course at the Tavistock in 1960 and continued to remain good friends and to work closely with her until her death. In a discussion with Meltzer about the difference between genius and talent, she said that she was one of the few who had "a touch of genius". The following eulogy is the published version of what was felt by those present to be a "wonderful speech" (Elizabeth Spillius, personal communication). The speech transcript has been lost and there appear to have been differences from the published version. Joan Symington, who was present at the memorial occasion, writes:

"What I noticed in Mattie's very moving eulogy (which had many of the audience in tears) was that she said Mrs Bick had been 'vouchsafed' exceptionally fine internal objects. The word 'vouchsafed' struck me as some quite different way of looking at internal objects. It may link up with Bion's 'third eye'" (personal communication).

Students have testified to the difficulty both Bick and later Harris both had in retaining infant observation as an integral part of the training at the British Psychoanalytic Institute.

¹ An obituary, first published in the *Journal of Child Psychotherapy* (1983), vol. 9(2), pp. 101-102.

Mrs Bick died in hospital on July 20th at the age of eighty-two after a period of failing health and memory after her retirement from practice with patients in 1980. She had no relatives in this country, which became her home after she arrived as a refugee from Austria just before the war.

She was born in a small Polish city of Orthodox Jewish parents and by courage, perseverance and intelligence, she pursued her education without assistance, finally receiving her PhD in Vienna for a study of infant development undertaken with Charlotte Bühler.

Her marriage broke up before she left Austria, her husband leaving for Switzerland. Her only brother and most of her family perished in concentration camps. It was not until many years later, in the 50's, that she learned her niece had escaped and was living in Israel.

Nusia, as she was called by her friends, was happy in her first contacts in this country. She first stayed with Violet Oates, the sister of the Antarctic hero, who became a friend, and who seemed in these last years to be assimilated in her internal world to her beloved grandmother and to Melanie Klein, as admired sources of strength and integrity. She then worked in a wartime nursery in Manchester where she also began analysis with Michael Balint. She completed her analytic training in London while working in a Middlesex child guidance clinic with Dr Portia Holman. She then joined the Tavistock staff and with John Bowlby began the Tavistock training in Child Psychotherapy in 1949. At the same time she began another analysis with Melanie Klein whose seminars at the British Institute of Psychoanalysis had impressed her greatly.

It seems astonishing to reflect now that Mrs Bick was never at the Tavistock for more than four sessions a week, and in the latter part of her time there for two sessions only, because through her personality and her teaching she had a profound effect upon the Clinic. The course which was initiated by her and by Dr Bowlby was then, and for some time, the most thorough and structured training in psychoanalytic work within the Tavistock and within

the Health Service. Her students, who felt privileged to have such an inspiring teacher, tended to become a focus for envy and criticism but also of admiration and respect.

But great talent is not always accompanied by diplomacy. Nusia Bick was never at any period of her life a compromiser and the course came under fire for its narrow Kleinian orientation. When in 1960 she was told by Dr Bowlby that he would not be asking her to undertake responsibility for another intake of students, she decided to leave the Clinic and to concentrate upon her analytic work and on her teaching at the Institute of Psychoanalysis. Nevertheless she continued to give extra-mural and private seminars to child psychotherapists for the next twenty years. During that time she also did a great deal of teaching abroad in Spain, in Italy, also in South America, Israel and Switzerland. Analysts and candidates came to her for supervision from these countries and also from France, the Commonwealth and the United States.

Her introduction of Infant Observation within the family as a central part of the training of child psychotherapists was a stroke of genius which has helped to establish a tradition in child analysis founded upon attention to close observation and description rather than on ideology and theory. This exercise has now for some time been part of the training of all candidates at the British Institute of Psychoanalysis. It is used as a method of learning from experience by many other courses at the Tavistock which are concerned with the professional development of workers in various fields of child care and education. In the past ten to twenty years it has been introduced in comparable fields in a number of other countries—from Norway to India—and is helping to increase internationally a body of professional people who are able to think of child development and of mother-infant interaction from a sustained experience of observation at close quarters which entails appreciation of the emotional issues involved in the growth of the personality.

The two passions of Mrs Bick's life were psychoanalysis and Israel. She had high hopes of both, and to both she applied equally high standards which were impossible to realise, and so inevitably she was disappointed by the imperfections in them. Those exacting

standards she applied also to herself and her writing, which was seldom allowed to reach the printed page. Her papers on child analysis and on infant observation were seminal and remain so. But it is as a teacher rather than as a writer that she will be remembered by many of us who worked with her. Her appreciation of material presented to her, her capacity to seize upon salient points and use them to bring alive the personality of the child or person described, had a poetic quality displayed only by those who love life intensely. She had a vision of how lives might be improved by psychoanalysis, a burning desire to communicate this in her teaching, and little tolerance for attitudes which stood in the way of this. Her uncompromising and sometimes narrow vision gained her enemies and critics, but its integrity and illuminating force won from many others, especially from young people who were eager to learn, a devotion and admiration which few people are able to inspire.

Lest this brief note about her life and complicated personality make her sound too austere, it should be said that she had a great sense of fun and gaiety, and a store of Jewish jokes. She loved to cook, to give parties, and she enjoyed party games. Her gaiety was not so evident in the last years of her life but it did return in the last months of failing health when she became a favourite of the young staff in the home for the elderly in which she was living. They found her both brave and entertaining and were fascinated by her as someone who seemed to have had an interesting life. And so indeed she had. Through that life she has left her profession and the world a richer place.