

When Albert met Sigmund

Prologue

In 1931, the Institute of Intellectual Cooperation invited Einstein to a cross-disciplinary exchange of ideas about politics and peace with a person of his choosing. He selected Sigmund Freud, whom he had met briefly in 1927 and whose work he had come to admire.

A series of letters followed, which were published in 1933 in a slim limited-edition pamphlet titled, *Why War?*. Hitler would eventually banish both Einstein and Freud into exile. Only two thousand copies of the English translation were printed, most of which were destroyed in Hitler's book burnings in Germany in 1933.

But the gist of the correspondence is preserved in the 1960 volume *Einstein on Peace*, which features a forward by Bertrand Russell.

Correspondence between the two Jewish giants of the twentieth century shows that they discussed human nature and potential concrete steps for reducing violence in the world.

The correspondence was part of the long-running exchange between these two giants of science, medicine and culture, who left their mark on the consciousness of the twentieth century and beyond.

'Come in, come in, sir,' Freud said, beckoning me towards an armchair. I judged we were about the same height, that is to say quite short, and neither of us had ever been fat, but Freud was now thinner, his eyes sunken and his cheekbones more pronounced.

'Do you remember that one time we met, Dr Freud?' I asked once we were settled. 'It's over ten years now. The new year's holiday season of 1927. You were staying in Berlin, at the home of your youngest son, Ernst, and I called on you.'

'Of course, Dr Einstein, of course. You were not yet fifty, I think, and the pre-eminent figure in the physical sciences then living ...'

'And you, at seventy, were a distinguished person in the social sciences.' I smiled.

'With cancer of the mouth and deaf in one ear,' Freud added dryly. 'They fitted me with a prosthesis, you know. It was one of five that I'd had by 1928.' He shrugged. 'I hate this mechanical jaw; it's embarrassing, and the struggle with the mechanism consumes too much precious strength.'

'You were a smoker, were you not?'

He nodded. 'I was smoking twenty cigars a day. They told me to stop, but I refused.' His voice was gruff, which I attributed to his cancer.

'A high price to pay for your pleasure?'

'Perhaps. Over the last sixteen years I have undergone thirty-four surgical procedures. I now have an inoperable

cancerous tumour in my eye socket and cheek. But cigars have brought me a great deal of pleasure.’ He smiled.

‘I’m very sorry to hear of your troubles. It must be uncomfortable ...’

‘The pain is severe, but when it gets too much, I intend to ask my friend — a physician — to administer a lethal dose of morphine.’

I glanced around the room. We were sitting in Freud’s study at his home in Hampstead, London. It was a large double room with red plush curtains. Sunlight poured through the windows, which faced the garden, and splashed brightness on to the floral rug. One wall of the study was lined with floor-to-ceiling bookcases stacked full of books, journals, and papers. Along the opposite wall was a cabinet of Egyptian artifacts. I loved it.

In the centre of the adjacent room was Freud’s desk, with its dark, polished wood, deep drawers, and a large, red blotter covering almost its entire top, which was strewn with objects. The wood was scratched and worn. There were more Egyptian relics on sideboards, photos on the walls, and next to his desk the burgundy couch for patients.

We sat opposite each other on large sagging armchairs, our backs to the bookshelf and fireplace. A small occasional table was set with tea things, and a plate of scones, jam, and cream. I wondered idly who had knitted the tea cosy.

Noticing my glance, Freud busied himself with the tea things, and for a few minutes we concerned ourselves only with milk or

lemon, jam, cream, or butter, and so on, until we were both well provisioned.

Freud was wearing a grey tweed three-piece suit with a watch chain hanging from the second button of his vest leading to his vest pocket. His white hair was brushed back and thinning, and his face beneath the thick white beard and moustache was gaunt. He looked like a slightly withered version of the man I had expected to meet, but he still held a cigar in his right hand. His cane rested on the floor by his side.

‘Pardon my casual dress,’ I said, gesturing towards my navy-blue crew-neck sweater and flannels.

He looked at me then, his brown eyes sombre. ‘It is of no consequence.’ He gave a perfunctory smile.

‘It is warm outside.’

‘It is? I find London cooler than Vienna, and not as wet, despite what they say about the English weather.’

‘You know, my own son was enamoured of you, Dr Freud. He was studying medicine and planned to become a psychiatrist. He even had your picture on his bedroom wall.’

‘Poor fellow, there are better pictures for a young man to hang on his wall ...’

I smiled.

‘He must have found it difficult to grow up in the shadow of such a famous father.’

‘I’m sure you’re right,’ I said, leaning forward. ‘Eduard told me he found it challenging to have an important father, because it made him feel unimportant. Another time he said people who fill

their time with intellectual work bring into the world sickly, nervous, even completely idiotic children, like I did.'

'What happened to him, did he graduate and practise medicine?' Freud asked, as he lifted his cigar from the ashtray.

'He is a sad and gentle soul; he was never well, and sometimes suffered from depression. In 1930, when he was twenty, he began sending agitated, critical letters to me. He blamed me for casting a shadow over his life, and for deserting him. In a letter he told me that he hated me.'

'That must have been very hurtful,' Freud said.

'It was, but what was I to do? His sense of rejection by me and his self-loathing paralysed him. He was unable to work. So, in the end, I consented to send him to therapy.'

'And...'

'He got worse; he tried to throw himself out of the third floor window but was held back by Mileva, his mother. Then, in the following year, when he was twenty-one, he suffered his first acute episode, which plunged him into an intense spell of melancholia.'

'Poor soul,' Freud said, shaking his head.

'By the autumn of 1932, he had begun his final descent into madness. He threatened and sometimes physically attacked his mother. And on other occasions, when Mileva had company or was giving a piano lesson, he wandered into the living room naked. After a particularly violent incident in which he tried to strangle his mother, he was committed to the Burgholzli Psychiatric Clinic, where he remained for many months.'

'He has really been a challenge, particularly for his mother!'

‘He was treated with rest cures, sleep deprivation, forced baths, drugs, insulin therapy and shock treatments. My other son, his older brother Hans, believes that the shock treatment ruined him.’

‘And his diagnosis?’

‘He was diagnosed with schizophrenia in 1932. My ex-wife and I arranged for him to remain at the Burghölzli psychiatric hospital, where he is to this day...’¹

Freud nodded but remained silent.

‘Most of his time is spent working in the grounds of the hospital as a gardener, dressed in faded blue overalls. We concluded Eduard, like his aunt, Zorka, was a hopeless mental case.’

‘That must be very hard for you,’ Freud said, shaking his head. ‘I’m sorry to hear that, Dr Einstein. And what about Hans, what happened to him?’

‘He is studying in the US. He’s married, to Frieda, and they have two sons at present. Both of them healthy. But please, call me Albert. And would it be presumptuous of me to refer to you by your first name?’

‘Please do,’ Freud replied.

‘Now, where were we? Ah yes. Indeed. The mysteries of the mind. You know a friend suggested I undergo psychoanalysis,’ I said. ‘But I preferred to remain unenlightened and not be analysed.’

¹ Eduard never recovered and remained at the Burghölzli psychiatric hospital until his death in 1965.

‘Of course. Analysis is not for everyone.’

‘I must admit I am not convinced by your teachings; I suspect it may not always be helpful to delve into the unconscious.’

‘Why so?’

‘Our legs are controlled by a hundred different muscles. I don’t think it would help me walk if I knew the purpose of each muscle and the order in which they work.’

‘Hmm, I’m not sure I agree with your analogy. I suspect you understand as much about psychoanalysis as I do about physics,’ Freud quipped. ‘Nevertheless, I very much enjoyed our conversation all those years ago and I felt we had a lot in common.’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘If only we were back in Europe now.’ I sighed. ‘But Herr Hitler has seen to our banishment. Because we are Jews — that tired old story.’

‘When did you leave?’

I drew in my breath then said, ‘Let me retrace my steps. In February 1928, two months before the Nazis won ten seats in the Reichstag, I suffered a mild heart attack. At the time I was in Davos, Switzerland, delivering a lecture on physics.’

Freud nodded.

‘In May that year, the Nazis gathered outside my apartment and shouted slogans.’ I could feel myself becoming agitated. ‘Others delivered hate mail to my front door. The halfwits hounded me to the point where I couldn’t draw breath, let alone do any work. They denounced me because I was a Jew, a liberal, an internationalist, a pacifist, a sceptic, and a freethinker.’

A flush spread across Freud's face.

'In January 1930, Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. The streets of Berlin immediately filled with Nazi supporters. And five weeks later, the exodus of the Jewish intelligentsia began. The first group of Jews were purged by Joseph Goebbels, the director of the newly formed Ministry of Propaganda, but I'm sure none of this is news to you.'

Freud was watching me thoughtfully. 'Goebbels, another henchman!' he scoffed.

'On the 10th of March, I announced that I could only live in a country where civil liberty, tolerance and equality of all citizens before the law triumphed, and these conditions do not exist in Germany at the present time. And so, when I arrived in Belgium on the 28th of March, I walked into the office of the German ligation, handed them my passport, and renounced my German citizenship.'

'Well said, well done!' Freud said.

'A reward equivalent to \$50,000 was offered for my capture as an enemy of the state. And so, Elsa and I immediately went into exile, at the Villa Savoyarde on the Le Cog sur Mer, a resort on the Belgian coast. The king of Belgium ordered that my house be guarded and that I was to be escorted by two plain-clothed policemen at all times.'

He looked at me in surprise.

'I did not know I was worth so much,' I said jokingly.

Freud sat back in his chair and chuckled.

‘And by October 1930, Hitler claimed one million members in his National Socialist Party. I, Elsa, my secretary Helena Dukas, and my assistant Walther Mayer, sailed for America aboard the *SS Westerland*.’

‘And by the way, I have not seen Mileva since then. I am sure she is alone and very lonely. There was something in her heart that made her sad. Maybe it was some loss ... maybe it was her sick son, Eduard, or maybe she missed me. I simply don’t know, but it was unfortunate.

His eyes widened.

‘We arrived in New York on the 17th of October 1933. I went straight to Princeton University and two years later we moved into our permanent residence at 112 Mercer Street. But that’s enough about me. What about you?’

‘I left Vienna for London a few months ago,’ Freud said, taking out his handkerchief and wiping his nose. My wife, Martha, and my daughter Anna are both here in London. It was not so easy to leave.²

Neither of us spoke for a time. ‘But we are scientists, after all, and scientists can often work anywhere,’ I suggested. ‘As scientists we must both hypothesise and then test our theories ... that’s what scientists do.’

² In London, Freud continued to see patients up to a month before his death on 23 September 1939, at the age of eighty-three. Consoling herself after Freud’s death, Martha would say, ‘In the fifty-three years of our marriage, there was not a single angry word between us.’

‘Exactly so, Albert. Hopefully, our pursuits have led to the creation of new concepts that have allowed us, and others, to explore universes, both without and within.’

‘I hope our breakthroughs will change the way we make sense of our existence in the twenty-first century,’ I said calmly.

‘Perhaps,’ Freud responded. He turned away for a few seconds and squeezed his eyes tightly shut, then he turned back to me and said, ‘I discovered the unconscious, but you discovered relativity, which yielded so many baffling concepts — curved spacetime, bent light ... unbelievable.’

‘Well, one of my theories was confirmed in 1919, when a total solar eclipse enabled scientists to measure the deviation of light from normally invisible stars close to the sun. I’d predicted that the curvature of space caused by the sun’s gravitational field would cause light to bend. They confirmed it.’

‘Ah, if only my theories could be confirmed like that. But because I deal with the human mind, there are simply too many variables to allow for an experiment to either prove or disprove my theory,’ Freud said. ‘Thus, your method met the standard for genuine science, and my theory did not — which, of course, does not mean that it is invalid,’ Freud added.

‘Tell me, what led you to your theories about the mind?’ I asked.

‘Well, when I began, I used the scientific method in my research into the brain and nervous system.’ He cleared his throat. ‘It was only when I had reached an impasse in finding neurological causes for my patients’ symptoms that I embarked on the massive

journey to map the invisible but no less real world of the mind,' Freud said.

'Rumour has it that you have been nominated for the Nobel Prize for Medicine several times,' I said. 'But how to be sure about psychoanalysis if we cannot apply the scientific method? It's a conundrum.'

Freud harrumphed.

'But I greatly admire your sharp vision, and passion to ascertain the truth. That is why, when I was invited by the Institute for Intellectual Cooperation to take part in a cross-disciplinary exchange of ideas about politics and peace back in 1931 with a thinker of my choice, I chose you.'

'You are very kind,' Freud said, choosing to ignore my reference to the Nobel Prize and changing the subject. 'But you are no doubt aware of the fate of our letters discussing human nature and the steps for reducing violence in the world, which you'll recall were published in 1933 in a pamphlet titled *Why War?* They were destroyed when the German Student Union organised book burnings in Berlin and other German and Austrian cities.'³

'Ah, so.' I shrugged. 'Prophets are not honoured in their own land it seems, at least not by the National Socialists.'

'But perhaps by the fascists. In 1933, the leader of the Italian psychoanalytic movement brought a very sick patient to me for consultation,' Freud said. 'The patient's father was a close friend of Mussolini's. After the consultation, the father asked me for a

³ The correspondence is preserved in the 1960 volume *Einstein on Peace*, which features a foreword by Bertrand Russell. A copy of the book was found among Mussolini's personal effects.

present for Mussolini, in which I was to write a dedication. I was in a very embarrassing position, for I knew that under these circumstances, I could not deny the request. I chose *Why War?* as the present and inscribed it, 'To Benito Mussolini, with respectful greetings of an old man who recognises in the ruler the cultural hero.'

'Who knows, perhaps it will do some good. Most of my books were tossed into the fire too,' I said.

Freud looked at me. 'Of course.' Then he said, 'Mine also. But at least they didn't burn us!'

'That's progress of a sort,' I said.

There was an awkward silence. Freud looked at me curiously, then said, 'What's on your mind?'

I hesitated for a moment. 'Can I ask you a question?'

'Of course,' Freud replied.

'We have discussed the causes of war in the past, but I'm interested to know if you have had any further thoughts.'

'That is no small subject,' Freud said, offering me the plate of scones. 'Perhaps we should fortify ourselves first.'

After we had dealt with the scones, and I was licking cream from my fingers, I began.

'Regrettably, the area of human activity most crucial to the fate of nations is in the hands of political leaders and governments who owe their power either to the use of force or to their election by the masses. They lack moral or intellectual intent, and our great men have little influence on the course of political events.'

I waited for him to respond, but Freud raised his eyebrows and nodded, indicating for me to continue.

‘Our political leaders’ desire for power is hostile to any limitation of the national sovereignty. Their hunger for political power is often supported by the mercenary aspirations of individuals and corporations who are indifferent to social considerations and regard warfare and the manufacture and sale of arms as an opportunity to expand their personal wealth.’

Freud sat quietly. He was a good listener. After a moment he asked, ‘So what do you consider is the solution?’

‘Perhaps some sort of super-national body where international disputes might be settled by negotiation.’

‘But wouldn’t that require nation states to relinquish their sovereignty?’ Freud asked.

‘A small price to pay,’ I replied. ‘It is the only way to avoid the scourge of war that has plagued humanity throughout history. Every country would have to forego a bit of independence to achieve international peace. Of course, the chief culprits hindering the implementation of this idea are the world’s arms manufacturers.’

‘Well, they do have everything to lose from your idea,’ murmured Freud as he pulled his glasses from his pocket and held them loosely in one hand.

I continued. ‘I offer this suggestion to you, Dr Freud ... er, Sigmund ... because your devotion to liberating man from the evils of war is well known and your sense of reality is not clouded by

wishful thinking; you have the qualities of critical judgment and responsibility.'

Freud forced a small smile. 'You are very kind.'

'So, Sigmund, I ask, what do you consider are the reasons for war and is there any way of delivering mankind from its menace? Is it possible, perhaps, to encourage man's mental growth to deter him from hate and destruction? Furthermore, experience shows that it is the so-called intelligentsia who are most likely to yield to ideologies. Many cultured and intellectual Germans have succumbed to the Nazis.'

Freud settled his glasses on his nose as I went on. 'I am confident that your knowledge of man's instincts may help us analyse this matter and I am convinced that you can suggest educative methods, outside of politics, to resolve this problem.'

Adjusting his glasses on the bridge of his nose, Freud said, 'What I have to say might be seen as pessimistic. But all my life I have had to tell people truths that were difficult to swallow, and I can't see any benefit in sugar-coating the uncomfortable truth.'

'I assure you, Dr Freud, that I seek a psychologically useful reply rather than an optimistic one.'

'Good. Then let me start by explaining what I believe to be the evolutionary path of violence.'

'Please do,' I said.

Freud cleared his throat. 'Throughout human history, most intergroup conflicts were resolved by violence. The methods by which that violence was inflicted changed as technology developed. From stone-tipped spears to bronze, from iron swords

to gunpowder, from armoured ships to aircraft ... throughout, the goal remained constant: at the very least to vanquish one's opponents, and in some cases to exterminate them. The slaughter of a rival gratifies an instinctive craving for dominance.'

The doctor's voice was strong, and I could see a light in his eye.

'Brute force can only be overcome by the combined strength of a community,' Freud continued, 'with some sort of mechanism to ensure its laws are observed. This recognition of common interests by a community engenders unity, which is its real strength.'

'So, am I to understand that you believe the brute force of an individual must be suppressed by transferring power to the combined strength of a community?' I asked.

'Precisely, but most communities have an inherent power imbalance that can also generate conflict. The ruling class set themselves above the law and the ruled constantly struggle to extend their rights.'

'But we are speaking about law and order within a community. How does this help us to end war?'

'Just as the community can overcome the individual aggressor, so can a community of nations overcome a national aggressor. This is the only way. Like what you said earlier, we must, by consensus, establish a centralised global body to resolve conflict. This requires, firstly, the creation of a supreme court of justice, and secondly, the provision of adequate authority and force for this court.'

‘What if the League of Nations were to act as a supreme court?’

‘This would satisfy the first condition, but it has no force at its disposal.’

‘Hmm. Regrettably, nationalistic ideas in every country operate in a contrary direction. Therefore, any effort to replace brute force with the might of the law is doomed to fail.’

Freud lifted his glasses from his nose, folded them and placed them back in his pocket. Then he said, ‘My theory of Eros and Thanatos may help to explain how we might end war.’

I looked at him enquiringly.

‘Human instincts are twofold. Those instincts that conserve and unify I call Eros. Those instincts that destroy and kill I call Thanatos; they are aggressive or destructive instincts. Eros and Thanatos are opposites; they do not operate in isolation and together they modify each other. He paused for a moment and turned his head slightly to the garden, as if he had heard something. Then he continued. ‘When a nation is summoned to war there is hunger for aggression and destruction, which I do not think can be eliminated. However, if the propensity for war is due to the destructive instinct, Thanatos, then its opposite, Eros, can balance this destructive instinct. This is the promise of human progress,’ Freud said. He looked at me, perhaps to ensure I was following him. I waited in silence.

‘All that produces ties between man and man must serve as an antidote to war. Firstly, identification; everything that brings out the similarities between people calls into play this feeling of

community. Then, “Love thy neighbour as thyself” — the injunction that Jesus repeated from the Torah. This is hard to carry out, but it is an important bond!’

Freud lowered his eyes for a moment and seemed to hold his breath. I wondered if he was mastering his pain and began to speak to allow him time to collect himself.

‘That men are divided into the leaders and the led is a manifestation of their inequality,’ I said. ‘The led need leaders to make decisions for them, to which they usually bow without protest. We should form a superior class of independent thinkers, not amenable to intimidation, whose function it would be to guide the masses.’

Freud coughed, a long scratchy cough, and spat weakly into a handkerchief. Sitting there, I felt my greater strength and vigour as an unearned advantage.

Freud pocketed his handkerchief and forged on, as if I hadn’t spoken. ‘The ideal conditions to end war are found in a community where every man subordinates his instinctive life to the dictates of reason.’

‘Surely such a hope is utterly utopian.’

‘Maybe,’ he replied. ‘In spite of what you say, your quest is a worthwhile one. The right to life is the most basic of human requirements. But modern war destroys lives wholesale. Young men are shamed by social pressure into military service where they must kill or be killed on the battlefield. And beyond the toll in lives, there’s the economic destruction that casts millions into grinding poverty. War is an affront to decency on multiple levels.’

He paused and sipped his tea. Then he said, 'The social development of civilisation has been progressing, more or less, since time immemorial. The psychic changes that accompany this development have generally scaled down our instinctive reactions. There has been a strengthening of our intellect, and secondly, an increasing understanding of the aggressive impulse. War runs counter to the inclination imposed on us by our social development.'

I took up my own teacup and sipped my tea, trying to absorb the full meaning of Freud's remarks. 'So, you think our hope is that man's social development and a well-founded dread of war may serve to put an end to war?'

Freud shrugged. 'So long as all international disputes are not subject to arbitration with enforceable decisions, we may be sure that war will follow upon war.'

'I see,' I nodded. 'So, unless our civilisation achieves the moral strength to overcome this evil, it is bound to share the fate of former civilisations: decline and decay.'

'We have differing views on the reasons for war,' Freud said. 'I connect violence to basic psychological urges within people. You, on the other hand, focus on the political aspects of the sources of violence.'

'You're right, of course. And I think it fair to say that neither you nor I are confident that war will be prevented any time soon,' I said.

Just then there was a knock on the door.

'Come in,' Freud called.

'It's three o'clock,' Freud's wife, Martha, said as she walked into the room. 'It is time for your afternoon rest.'

'Sorry to have kept you,' I said apologetically.

'Will I see you tomorrow?'

'Yes,' I replied as I stood up.

'I'll walk you to the door,' Martha said. 'Sorry to interrupt your conversation, but he is not well, and he needs his rest.'

'I understand; we can continue tomorrow.'

'He would love that, I know how much he enjoys your visits,' she said as she opened the door.

As I walked down the path to the front gate I thought about the paleness of his skin, the white hair through his beard, and his audible breathing and I wondered how long he would survive.

Next day, Martha opened the door and let me in. She ushered me into her husband's study, where I found Freud sitting in the same chair he'd been sitting in yesterday.

'I'll bring another cup,' she said. 'I think there is enough tea in the pot for two.'

Freud was no longer wearing his three-piece tweed suit, choosing instead a brown cardigan, open-neck white cotton shirt and loose blue corduroy trousers.

'Good morning.' He smiled as I walked into the room.

'It's a lovely day,' I replied, noticing the beams of light that illuminated his face and lit up the room.

Freud smiled. 'This morning Martha and I had breakfast in the garden. There was a slice of sun that fell across the grass that

our bench was on.’ He paused for a short moment to catch his breath and then continued. ‘One of my greatest pleasures in life is to sit on the curved bench, at the table in the back garden, and enjoy the red geraniums in their terracotta pots, the roses in full bloom, the clematis, and the large pine.’ He smiled up at Martha as she quietly entered the room with my cup and saucer, then left.

Freud poured me a cup of black tea, then waited, watching me. His mood had changed and he seemed glum. I did not know what to say, and since he had said nothing about any troubles, I did not ask.

Then he said, ‘The other day we spoke about the causes of war. I connect violence to basic psychological urges within people. You, on the other hand, focus on the political aspects of the sources of violence.’

I nodded in agreement.

Freud took a deep breath. ‘You’re a pacifist, are you not, yet I have heard a rumour that links your name to the idea of an atomic bomb.’

‘I know,’ I said, grimly. ‘A few months ago, I learned that three chemists working at a laboratory in Berlin had split the uranium atom and discovered that the energy released was enough to power an atomic bomb.’

Freud nodded. ‘So, what did you do?’

‘A fellow physicist, Leo Szilard, urged me to write a letter to President Roosevelt and is helping me draft it. I will tell the president of my concerns that the Nazis are working on an atomic bomb. And I am writing of the need for America to do so as well.’

I stopped to clear my throat, then continued. 'It seems probable that the Germans had every prospect of success. If the Nazi regime is the first to come into possession of the atomic bomb, the results will be devastating.'⁴

'So, you feel you have no alternative, despite being a pacifist?' he prompted.

'Precisely,' I replied.

'But enough about that. Can we move on?'

'Of course.'

'I've been thinking about religion,' I said. Outside, I could hear the breeze picking up as it rustled the leaves of the almond tree in the front garden. It was morning, but Freud looked exhausted; his face was pale.

'Ah,' he said. 'Over the years I have taken a keen interest in religion; it has been a life-long fascination. I have written extensively on the subject; perhaps in an endeavour to understand it.'

⁴ The result has become known as the Manhattan Project. Einstein was denied a security clearance in July 1940 to work on the project, and the hundreds of scientists working on it were forbidden to consult with him. Einstein was deemed a potential security risk because of his left-leaning political activism. The Austrian-born physicist Lise Meitner was invited to work on that project. It was her discoveries that led to splitting the atom and, ultimately, to the atom bomb and nuclear power. She was the first to really recognise that the $E = mc^2$ equation explained the conversion of mass into energy. By mid-1945, the United States had developed operational nuclear weapons and used them on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing over 200,000 people. Einstein did not consider himself the father of atomic energy. He considered his part in it was quite indirect. He said, had he known that the Germans would not succeed in developing an atomic bomb, he would have done nothing.

‘I know, I have read most of your work,’ I said. ‘Some time ago I read with interest *Totem and Taboo*, *The Future of an Illusion* and *Civilization and Its Discontents*.⁵

‘I am an atheist,’ Freud continued. ‘I was born to Jewish parents and my personality has been shaped by familiarity with the Talmud and Torah stories from an early age – even before I learned to read. And being the victim of antisemitism when I first attended the University at Vienna in 1873 has also shaped me. Back then, I was expected to feel myself inferior and an alien because I was a Jew.’

I nodded for him to continue.

Squinting at the sun pouring through the window, he said, ‘Notwithstanding my scepticism about religion, my character has largely been formed by a Judaic cultural heritage passed on to me by my father, with whom I had a fraught relationship. My ancestors were affiliates of Hasidic Judaism going back many generations and included rabbis and distinguished scholars among their number.’ He paused, pushed back in his seat, and sat upright before he continued. ‘My father was liberal and progressive in his outlook, but he retained a deep reverence for the Talmud and the Torah and oversaw my childhood study, which generated in me a lifelong fascination with the story of Moses and his connection with Egypt. Notwithstanding the positive impact of such religious influences, from adolescence onwards I found the observances and strictures required by orthodox Jewish belief increasingly

⁵ *Totem and Taboo* (1913), *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) and *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930). Freud's last book, *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), was on religion.

burdensome and I became overtly hostile to the religion of my forefathers and to religion in general. I suspect this was the principal cause of the estrangement between me and my father.'

As Freud spoke of his father, I could hear in his voice a great tenderness. He raised a hand as though to touch me, but let it fall again.

'My language is German. My culture, my attainments are German,' he said proudly. 'I considered myself German intellectually until I noticed the growth of anti-Semitic prejudice. Since that time, I prefer to call myself a Jew. So, even though I am estranged from the Jewish religion, and every other religion, by nature I am a Jew and I have no desire to alter that nature.'

'I recall reading somewhere that you consider religion is an expression of an underlying psychological neurosis. Is that correct?'

Freud sipped his tea and returned his cup to the tray beside him. 'Religion is an illusion,' he said, 'an attempt to gain control over the external world. It derives its strength from its readiness to fit in with our instinctual wishful impulses. Also, it is an attempt to master our physical world by means of the wishful world which we have developed within us because of psychological necessity. If we attempt to place religion in the evolution of mankind, it appears as a counterpart to the neurosis which children must go through in their passage from childhood to maturity.'

He raised an eyebrow then continued in a strong voice, 'Unfortunately, religion is unwelcoming, harsh and unloving toward those who are not members of a specific religious group.'

He shrugged, as if this were self-evident. 'Our knowledge of the historical worth of certain religious doctrines increases our respect for them. But this does not invalidate my proposal that religion should cease to be put forward as the reason for the principles of civilisation. It is so silly, so foreign to reality, that to anyone with a friendly attitude to humanity it is painful to think that most people will never be able to rise above this view of life.'

He picked up his cigar from the ashtray, inhaled and squinted through the smoke that trickled from his mouth as he said, 'Religion claims to liberate mankind from sin, to ease his sense of guilt. From a psychoanalytic perspective, religion fills a need in our unconscious mind. We're pathetic, insecure creatures who invented a supernatural father figure with the power to erase our guilt. It is humans who created God, not the other way around.'

Through the window the sun picked out the bright green of the new leaves; I could almost see through the leaves, they were so fresh, but I returned my gaze to the man opposite.

Freud examined his cigar before continuing. 'Religion and neurosis are similar creations of the human mind. Religion, with its repetitive rituals, is a universal mental illness. Neurosis, with its compulsive behaviour, is an individual mental illness.'

'I'm curious to know what you meant when you said there are two universal taboos in our society – incest and patricide – that underpin modern society,' I said. 'How do these prohibitions relate to religion?'

He exhaled, again squinting against the smoke, and replied, 'The original act of killing and devouring the primal father was the beginning of social organisation, moral restrictions and religion.'

He paused to tap his cigar on the ashtray. 'We can clearly see the psychological basis for aspects of Christianity, where the ceremony of the totem-feast still survives in the form of Communion.'

Glancing at me he noticed my grimace, but went on, 'Religion is an attempt to control, or find a resolution to the oedipal complex in which the male child forms a sexual attachment with the mother and comes to view the father as a hated and feared sexual rival. That resolution entails the repression of the drive away from the mother as a sexual object and the male child's identification with the father. The emotional connection between father and son is central to understanding religious belief.'

'So, God is a father figure?' I asked.

'Precisely,' nodded Freud. 'God is a function of the underlying father complex and is an unconscious human construct. The psychoanalysis of a human being teaches us that a person's relation to God depends on his relation to his father and that God is nothing other than an exalted father.'

I gazed at the father of psychotherapy and thought how thin and sick and grey he looked, so diminished from the great man he had once been.

Then he shrugged and with a half-smile said, 'Religion is an illusion that is perhaps the most important item in the spiritual inventory of a civilisation. In my estimation, religion provides a

defence against the crushing force of nature and motivates the urge to rectify the shortcomings of civilisation. However, all religious beliefs are impervious to proof.'

'Hence the conflict between science and religion,' I murmured.

'Hmph,' he said. 'Dogmatic religious training contributes to a weakness of the intellect by excluding lines of inquiry. In the long run nothing can withstand reason and experience, and the contradiction that religion offers to both is all too palpable. I hope in the future science will go beyond religion, and reason will replace faith in God.'

'Hear hear,' I said.

Freud lowered his voice as if to tell me a secret and said almost in a whisper, 'Man's need for religion can be explained by a need to feel something limitless. It is nothing more than the fulfilment of a wish related to a child's egoistic need for protection.' Then he sighed and leant back in his chair and said, 'The mental labour of developing a belief in one God prepared the Jews to achieve distinction in law, in mathematics, in science and in literary art. It gave them an advantage in all activities that involved making an abstract model of experience and working with the abstraction to achieve control over nature and bring order to life. This internalising process, which is an advance in intellectuality, can be directly attributed to religion.'

'That's an interesting idea,' I said, hoping he'd enlarge on it.

'Science relies on observable fact, which places it in conflict with the inherent subjectivity of art. And while philosophy strives

for logical coherence, it cannot escape the realm of unprovable theory. Of course, religion is little more than superstition that revolves around faith.'

'Your scepticism doesn't surprise me,' I said. 'What I find most interesting is your psychoanalytical perspective. Your insights and arguments are compelling.'

He looked over at me. 'And what do you make of religion?' he said quietly.

I hesitated, to gather my thoughts, then said, 'The question of God is the most difficult problem in the world. It is a question that cannot be answered simply with yes or no. The problem is too vast for our limited minds.'

'Did you go to a Jewish school?'

'The only Jewish school in Munich was closed in 1872 for want of students, and in the absence of an alternative I attended a Catholic public elementary school. I received a Jewish religious education at home and was equally impressed by the stories of the Torah and the Passion of Jesus.'

'And your parents?'

I was raised by Jewish parents who were irreligious. But despite them, I became very observant, although that ended abruptly at the age of twelve. Through the reading of popular scientific books, I soon concluded that many stories in the Torah and the Talmud could not be true. The consequence of this realisation was a celebration of freethinking coupled with the impression that youth is intentionally being deceived by the state

through lies. I came to distrust power and authority, an attitude that I retain to this day.'

He seemed to really listen, and I thought he was interested in what I had to say.

'The so-called word of God is simply the desperate concoction of a frail humanity yearning for an island of certainty in a sea of doubt,' I said. 'To me, belief in a God who concerns himself with the fates and actions of human beings is childlike naivete.'

I waited to see if Freud had anything to say, but he remained silent. Choosing my words carefully I continued, 'I see myself as an agnostic, which is quite different from an atheist.'

Freud shifted in his chair to make himself more comfortable but said nothing.

'However, I believe in Spinoza's concept of God,' I continued. 'For me, God is not the creator of the universe; the universe is part of God. I'm a Pantheist. I believe that God and the universe are the same thing.'

He simply raised his eyebrows at me and smiled.

'If there's anything in me that can remotely be called religious, it is my admiration for the structure of the world so far as our science can reveal it,'

A smile of approval spread across Freud's face.

I returned his smile. 'Clergymen of all religions must abandon faith in God in pursuit of ethical goodness. They must relinquish that source of fear and hope which has placed such enormous power in their hands.'

I watched him carefully as I spoke, and I could not help feeling fascinated by this man, with his serious face and great insight and understanding.

‘I don’t know whether I can define myself as a true Pantheist because the subject of ontology is too vast and complex for our limited minds. The physical universe operates according to laws that we cannot fully understand. But I’m attracted to Spinoza's ideas about Pantheism. He was the greatest modern philosopher because he was the first to comprehend the fusion of the human soul and body.’

He looked at me calmly, curiously, and we sat quietly for a moment, then I continued.

‘I have admiration for the logical simplicity of the order of things. I believe that we must content ourselves with our imperfect knowledge and treat our values and moral obligations as the most important of all human problems.’

Freud nodded and turned his attention to the side table and a plate of sandwiches. He picked up a sandwich in one hand and with a gesture invited me to do the same.

‘Thank you,’ I replied as I reached for one.

‘Scientific research can reduce superstition by encouraging people to think and view things in terms of cause and effect,’ I said, taking a bite of my sandwich. Egg and lettuce – a favourite. ‘A belief in the rationality of the world lies behind all scientific work. This belief represents my conception of God. In other words, Spinoza’s Pantheism.’

I waited to see if Freud would respond, but he lifted a handkerchief from his pocket, coughed into it and wiped his lips in silence.

‘The word God is for me nothing more than the expression and product of human weakness, the Torah a collection of primitive legends. No interpretation, no matter how subtle, can change this.’

Freud sat there, nodding slowly, as if he were engaged in some kind of interior dialogue with himself. Then he looked at me and said, ‘Exactly.’

‘It should be remembered that the belief in God intervening with natural events cannot be refuted by science. And as a result, religion can always take refuge in areas that science cannot yet explain.’

‘The refuge of weak minds and impoverished souls,’ snorted Freud.

‘It has its uses,’ I said. ‘You, more than most, should understand the value of emotion and belief to the human psyche. In my own way, I see myself as a religious man.’

‘How so?’ challenged Freud.

‘Because I recognise there are things in nature that defy human comprehension. And that recognition brings with it belief in some sort of higher power.’

‘An amorphous higher power you can’t define or explain?’ asked Freud.

I shrugged. ‘Let’s just say I use the word *religious* to describe my spiritual feelings.’

‘Go on,’ he prompted.

‘I haven’t found a better word to describe my trust in the rational nature of reality. I often define my belief system as cosmic religion because I recognise the miraculous order that manifests itself in the universe. But I draw the line at the idea of a God who intervenes in human affairs by rewarding good behaviour and punishing evildoers. The briefest glance at the state of our world reveals that idea to be complete nonsense.’

Freud indicated I should continue. ‘This belief rejects the conflict between science and religion and holds that cosmic religion is necessary for science.’ I sipped my tea to moisten my lips, then said, ‘It should be remembered that science without religion is lame and religion without science is blind. God is a mystery. I have nothing but amazement when I observe the laws of nature. There are not laws without a lawgiver, but how does this lawgiver look? Certainly not like a man. Some centuries ago, I would have been burned or hanged. Nonetheless, I would have been in good company. I have a theology for cosmic religion, wherein the rational discovery of the secrets of nature is a religious act.’

Freud was silent for a long time, then he took a deep breath and said in a soft enquiring voice, ‘Do I understand you to say your religion and your philosophy are a part of the same package as your scientific discoveries?’

‘Yes,’ I nodded. ‘For me the Jewish religion, like all others, is an incarnation of the most childish superstitions. I am very happy to be a Jew and I am fond of many Jewish traditions. But in

my view Jews should be viewed as a people like all others, neither better nor worse.'

Freud lifted another cigar from the box, performed the ritual involved in its preparation, lit it and placed the lid back on the box as he inhaled deeply. He exhaled and said, 'So they aren't the chosen people?'

'I believe not,' I said. 'But our Jewish culture of learning is antithetical to the dogma of fascism now prevalent in Europe. Individual learning produces individual thought. And this the Nazis cannot abide. To Hitler, the Jews are a non-assimilable element that cannot be driven into uncritical acceptance of dogma. This threatens their authority because fascism relies on subordinating the individual to the collective.'

I noticed for the first time that Freud's eyes were rimmed with dark circles and his face was pale. 'Is something wrong, Sigmund?' I asked, but he slowly shook his head and took another drag on his cigar.

'I'm not well,' he said in a subdued voice, 'as you know.' Then he lapsed again into silence, his eyes staring at me but not really seeing me.

'Would you like us to finish?' I asked quietly. 'I can leave, and we can resume tomorrow, or at some other time.'

He hesitated for a moment then shook his head. 'That won't be necessary. Let us continue.'

Collecting my thoughts, I said, 'When asked if I consider myself a German or a Jew, I say it's possible to be both. When asked if Jews should assimilate, I say, we Jews have been too

eager to sacrifice our idiosyncrasies to conform. As a child, I studied Talmud, so when asked if I accept the historical existence of Jesus, I say, unquestionably! No one can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. But I reject the Christian belief in his divinity.'

'I don't understand,' Freud murmured.

I looked him straight in the eye. 'Sometimes I think it would have been better if Jesus had never lived. No name was so abused for the sake of power!'

'But didn't you work in collaboration with a Belgian priest on your research?' asked Freud.

I nodded. 'Father Georges Lemaitre of the Catholic University of Leuven was the first proponent of the big bang theory. He was a pioneer in applying my general theory of relativity to the universe.'

'Yet you're highly critical of the political role taken by the Catholic Church,' Freud prompted.

'Very true,' I conceded. 'The Catholic Church has always been political. Remember the Papal States existed as a sovereign nation until the final unification of Italy in 1870. And the Vatican signed its Concordat with Nazi Germany soon after Hitler's rise to power.'

'And, of course, the treatment of our people by the Church has been a two-thousand-year scandal,' Freud volunteered.

'Oh yes,' I agreed. 'Because it is a hierarchical institution in its own right, the Catholic Church has a natural affinity for authoritarian rulers ... so long as they favour the Papacy.'

'You sound angry,' said Freud.

'Just a little,' I said with heavy irony. I sighed and continued, 'The new pope negotiated the Concordat with the Nazis. And let's not forget the case of Edgardo Mortara.'

'Wasn't he the Jewish child kidnapped by the Pope?' asked Freud.

'Yes!' I nodded. 'And not during the Middle Ages, but only eighty years ago. So if I had the pope's ear ...'

'A very unlikely scenario,' Freud interjected with a mischievous smile.

'No doubt,' I laughed 'But if I did have his ear, I'd urge him to focus on the spiritual wellbeing of his own flock rather than political machinations.'

'A valid point,' sighed Freud.

'Thank you,' I replied. 'I suppose at its most basic, I'm too much of an individualist to accept the dogma of organised religion.'

Freud drew deeply on his cigar. 'You feel this very strongly.'

'I am a physicist, first and foremost.' I shrugged. 'And as I once wrote to my colleague Max Born, I don't believe in a God who plays dice with the universe.' I looked at my wristwatch. I fear time has gotten away from us.'

'Perhaps we should finish,' Freud said.

I stood up and reached for my coat, 'May I visit again tomorrow?'

'Yes, please do.'

The sun was shining when I knocked on the door of Dr Freud's house the following morning. As I walked into his warm study the good doctor sat hunched over a journal, his thin shoulders showing through his suit. He was sitting in his usual chair, but looked up and took the cigar from his mouth to greet me with a slight smile.

'Have you enjoyed your time in the UK?' he asked. 'When do you return to Princeton?'

'Regrettably, I leave in a few days,' I replied. 'My wife, Elsa Lowenthal, passed away two years ago, and I had very much looked forward to my visit to recover from the loss. I visited parliament, Westminster Abbey and Buckingham Palace. And my time with you has been most rewarding.'

'I too have enjoyed our time together,' he said in a croaky voice. 'I will miss our conversations, but I trust we can continue our correspondence.'

'Of course,' I answered. 'I still have a few days and lots to talk about. I was hoping you might find time for me in the next few days?'

'I will make time,' Freud smiled. 'Please, sit down.'

'I've been thinking about the afterlife. Do you believe death is the end of everything, or that the personality survives death? I'm curious to know your thoughts.'

He gazed at me narrowly. There was a short uncomfortable silence. Then he said, 'This question doesn't interest me. Everything that lives must die. I have little to say.'

'But wouldn't you like to be reborn?'

He gazed at me intently. 'Truly, no. I have not the slightest wish to be reincarnated in any form whatsoever. All human behaviour is driven by selfish urges and desires, so my next life would differ very little from this one. I'm perfectly content to know that this tiresome business of living will end one day.'

'Your composure at the prospect of your own mortality is most impressive,' I said.

'Don't misunderstand me,' said Freud. 'I still enjoy life's little pleasures – my children, my garden, what relief from pain I am granted – but there is no reason to prolong life; I am far more interested in the blossom on that tree than in anything that may happen to me after I am dead.'

'You have described the afterlife as wish fulfilment,' I said. 'What do you mean by that?'

'The afterlife can be safely dismissed because, to my mind, it is nothing more than wish fulfilment.' He picked up his cup and realised I didn't have any refreshment. 'Let me get you—'

'No, no, Sigmund, please, I've had my morning coffee. I don't need tea as well.'

He shrugged, sipped his tea, and continued, 'An error is a mistaken belief; an illusion is a belief rooted in what you hope will be rather than what is the case. For example, if a milkmaid whispers, 'I'm going to marry a king,' is she making a mistake? No, because she *could* marry a king, but it's an illusion. The chances of this are absurdly low, so it reflects her wishful thinking rather than any clear-eyed view of the facts. The point is, we all have a

juvenile desire to survive our deaths, so we made up this idea of an afterlife.'

'So, it's purely a human invention?' I asked.

Freud nodded. 'The idea of heaven fits the notion of wish fulfilment because it's a place where you live forever without suffering or pain. But what about hell? Hell should be a lot worse than what we endure in life, sickness, or even death because while death is just the end, hell is eternal separation from God. So, my detractors say it would be dubious for a group of people who are trying to come up with a better life to compensate for the difficulties of this one by inventing the idea of hell. In other words, they say, when you look at what religions believe about the afterlife, my thesis that it is mere wish fulfilment doesn't hold up.' But what about you, Albert? What do you make of those who argue in favour of the afterlife?'

'I completely agree,' I nodded. 'Such beliefs are a triumph of hope over rationality. One life is enough for me.'⁶

'So, you completely reject the ontology of Judaism?' Freud asked.

'Judaism tries to explain the existence of human evil by arguing that God has given us free will and moral autonomy. But how does that mesh with the idea of an omnipotent God who bestows punishment or reward on the basis of those actions taken as a result of that same divinely awarded freedom of will? The

⁶ On 17 July 1953 a woman who was a licensed Baptist pastor sent Einstein a letter asking if he felt assured of attaining everlasting life with the Creator. Einstein replied, 'I do not believe in immortality of the individual, and I consider ethics to be an exclusively human concern with no superhuman authority behind it.'

whole scheme reminds me of a sadistic game, so I would hope to have the strength to reject it, even if true.'

Glancing at him, I saw that he was pale and weary. There were other topics that I wanted to talk about, but I wondered I should cut short our meeting.

'Should we finish for today?' I asked.

He was silent a moment. 'No, let's continue.'

I wondered where we should go next in our conversation, then after a moment I said, 'The Church has often accused science of undermining morality, but I reject that charge. Scientific knowledge is based on research and empirical knowledge, which makes it an antidote to the crude mysticism of organised religion. This, I believe, is the source of clerical hostility to science.'

'Too true,' he murmured, more to himself than me.

'We must always strive towards morality,' I continued, 'but our ethics cannot be based on myth and unreasoning belief.'

Freud simply nodded with closed eyes, making me wonder whether this might be what it was like to be in analysis with this man.

'Human behaviour mustn't be governed by an irrational desire for reward after death because that would transform even the most altruistic act into nothing more than a self-serving exercise.'

'So, you're saying that religiously motivated good deeds are really motivated by a selfish desire to purchase entrance into heaven?'

'Precisely!' I nodded.

'Very interesting,' Freud smiled, 'but I think my mind is fading along with my body. Didn't I send you a copy of my manuscript, *Moses and Monotheism*?'

'Yes, you did,' I confirmed.

'Well, I am curious to know what you thought of it. Can we talk about this tomorrow? I'd like to rest now.'

'Of course,' I said as I stood up.

'Thank you for coming,' he said, his eyes tired.

As I turned to go, Martha appeared and escorted me to the door.

I returned the following day and the day after. I looked forward to these visits more and more. Despite his failing health, Freud was very hospitable, and always made me feel welcome. Our conversations were interesting, and his insights and perspective fascinating.

'Good morning,' I said as I walked into the studio one morning.

'How are you?' he replied. 'Take a seat. Martha has made us some raisin toast and tea.'

'She is very kind,' I said.

Freud was wearing the brown cardigan and open-neck white cotton shirt, but he had a mohair blanket on his lap, covering his legs, and his normally close-trimmed beard seemed to have grown.

'It is fresh this morning,' he said.

'I believe the forecast is for rain,' I replied.

Freud was silent for a time, then he said, 'We are yet to discuss my book, *Moses and Monotheism*. Have you had a chance to read it?'

'Yes, I have, thank you. For what it's worth, I agree with most of it.'

'I need every bit of support I can get,' Freud smiled. 'I fear many Jewish intellectuals will be annoyed by my claim that Moses was an Egyptian nobleman. Yet I don't deny that Judaism is fundamental to the development of Western culture and ethics.'

'So what are the implications?' I asked.

'Simple,' Freud smiled. 'Moses was the conveyor of the foundational principles on which Western ethics are constructed.'

'Agreed,' I replied. 'I made the same point during my eulogy for Gustav Stresemann in 1929. I described Stresemann as a Mosaic leader who led the Weimar Republic on a path towards liberal democracy and freedom.'

'I see your point,' nodded Freud. 'After all, it was Stresemann's diplomacy that guided Germany's reintegration into the international community after the war.'

'And won him the Nobel Prize for Peace,' I added. 'But let's talk about you, Dr Freud. Your seventieth birthday was publicly celebrated in Vienna. Austrian radio transmitted an appreciation of your work, and the social democrat Mayor Karl Seitz congratulated you personally. I heard that schoolchildren presented you with an award of 30,000 marks raised from public contributions.'

Freud snorted, but I could tell he was pleased to be reminded of these accolades. 'That's true. And from Otto Rank, I received a luxury edition of Friedrich Nietzsche's works. Also, the Jewish B'nai B'rith movement held a festive meeting and issued a special edition of its newsletter in my honour.'

'So, how did you feel about your celebrity status?'

He looked solemn. 'I wrote to my nephew in England in 1926 and said, 'The Jews all over the world boast of my name, comparing me with Einstein,' Freud replied.

I stared at him, not quite believing what I had heard.

He looked gaunt as he sat there, his thin body slumped, and I was suddenly reminded of his age. As if reading my mind he said, 'In the weeks before my eightieth birthday, I told my biographer, Ernest Jones, that I didn't consider my birthday a cause for great celebration.'

'Surely not. It is a good age – a great age,' I said.

He shrugged. 'I did appreciate the expressions of goodwill I received.'

'From ...?'

'Oh, from Thomas Mann, H.G. Wells, Virginia Woolf, Stefan Zweig ... and many others.' Freud's eyes were moist, and he pushed his glasses up on the bridge of his nose.

'So, except for the University of Vienna, you've been lauded and honoured around the world. Does it upset you that your own alma mater failed to recognise one of its most notable alumni?'

Freud shook his head and smiled soberly. 'The University of Vienna is under no obligation to support me or my work.'

‘Does that mean you are indifferent to public fame and professional renown?’

Freud smiled wryly. He was quiet for a long time, then he inhaled deeply on his cigar. Smoke curled from his mouth and nostrils as he spoke. ‘Let me put it this way, I am far more concerned about the future of my six children and their families than the future of my own name and reputation once I am dead. But birthdays, what do they mean to you? And fame?’

‘On 14 March 1919, I celebrated my fortieth birthday,’ I said. ‘Fortunately, that milestone passed quietly, and only my household was aware of the event. But it was the last birthday I could enjoy in comfortable obscurity; later that year I became an international celebrity, with all the nonsense that brings.’

Freud gave a grunt of amusement.

I sighed. ‘Success had not come easily to me. I received no job offers after I graduated from college and even after I published my work on general relativity in 1905 it took four more years to find work as a physicist. I laboured for another decade to bring relativity into the fold, and even then my critics complained that there was no proof that it corresponded to reality. It wasn’t until May 1919, two months after my fortieth birthday, that English astronomer Arthur Eddington set up his telescopes and cameras on Príncipe, an island off western Africa, and my theory was confirmed. Eddington and his astronomers not only confirmed a key prediction of my theory of relativity, they said their results suggested that Newton’s theory of gravity was wrong, and my new theory was correct. The newspaper spread the news around the

world, and it seemed to catch the imagination of the public. Suddenly, I became a celebrity.'

'From that moment on, you became the face of science worldwide,' Freud said with a smile.

'Yes, but as a Jew, I became a magnet for anti-Semitism in Europe and relativity was denounced as Jew science.'

'It happens to the best of us,' Freud said wryly.

'Nevertheless, within six years of Eddington's confirmation, hundreds of articles and books on relativity appeared. A book-length biography was published in 1921, and crowds seemed to gather wherever I went. One Hanukkah a few years ago I drew 15,000 people to Madison Square Garden. Even churches displayed statues of me.'

Freud did not respond to that.

'Most admirers cheerfully admitted they didn't understand relativity. I heard Proust admired the way I turned time on its head, but he couldn't make head nor tail of the maths, so perhaps that story is apocryphal.'

Freud's face broke into a delighted smile, and his eyes gleamed. He looked suddenly a different person. I was not certain I understood why, but there was the same light in his eyes now as there was when he talked about psychotherapy.

'How did you feel about all the attention?' he asked.

'It was flattering, puzzling, and tiresome all at once. Ever since I visited England after the war, I've been the focus of public attention.'

'And what of your Nobel?' Freud asked.

‘Despite receiving repeated nominations, I was dismissed by a few Nobel committee members because my theory was supposedly too theoretical. I was told that certain committee members considered the work too “Jewish” to warrant the prize.’

‘Even the sciences are not immune from bigotry and antisemitism,’ sighed Freud.

‘As we see today in Germany,’ I replied. ‘Ultimately, the committee honoured me in 1922 for my work on the photoelectric effect, which describes how electrons are ejected from the surfaces of metals.’

‘And for your services to theoretical physics, I thought.’

‘You’re right.’ I confirmed.

‘Few scientists in history have achieved your status. Your work touches the deepest chords of our imagination: the nature of time, the origin of the heavens, the fate of the universe.’

I smiled modestly. ‘Thank you, Sigmund. I think the same could be said about your work on the universe within.’

It was Freud’s turn to shrug.

‘But I don’t think you’ve met Charlie Chaplin,’ I said with a chuckle. ‘I met him in 1931. He invited me to a movie premiere in Hollywood a few days later. I recall the crowds as we walked into the theatre. Chaplin turned to me and said, “They cheer me because they all understand me, and they cheer you because no one understands you.”’

Freud laughed quietly. ‘Why is it nobody understands you, yet everybody likes you?’

‘Who knows? When I was young, all I wanted and expected from life was to sit quietly in some corner doing my work without the public paying attention to me. And now look what has become of me. I object to the cult of individuals but accept my celebrity status with grace, I hope. With the help of my secretary, I answer scores of letters each day and greet a constant flow of visitors.’

‘I understand the shock of unwanted celebrity,’ nodded Freud, ‘but has there been nothing worthwhile in it for you?’

‘It had its moments,’ I conceded. ‘Like when Princeton awarded me an honorary doctorate. I was in my early forties and President John Grier Hibben was effusive in his praise, comparing me to Pythagoras, Galileo and Newton! Someone else described me as a Columbus voyaging through strange seas of thought alone! I was pleased and uncomfortable in equal measure.’

‘It must have been quite an event.’

‘Yes, the room was packed. There were hundreds of attendees including visiting scientists, members of the public and reporters. All there to see the man reputed to have overthrown Newton, rewritten the laws of physics, eradicated classical notions of time and space, accurately predicted the bizarre bending of starlight.’

‘And you did all this with nothing more than the power of your mind,’ Freud added.

‘A lot of it was nonsense, of course. It’s not true that I overthrew Newton. And I didn’t appreciate being put on display by some members of the Jewish community as if I were a ... prize bull or something.’

'Kosher, of course,' quipped Freud and we laughed.

'I remain ambitious for my work. There are so many mysteries in this universe. That is far more important than fame, but for some strange reason my status as the preeminent scientific celebrity has solidified.'

I feared Freud might think I was boasting, so I changed the subject abruptly.

'But I enjoyed my time at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. I had no firm lecturing hours and there was no pressure on me to do research. So, I was able to further my work on my theory of gravity with the aim of enlarging it to a unified field theory.'

'I believe you became known as the pope of physics,' Freud said. 'Princeton was fortunate to have you. You will have burnished their reputation.'

'I liked the working conditions at the Institute. I was there most mornings, and in the afternoon, I liked being at home, meeting friends and famous persons from science and politics. I took long walks in the park to think and relax. It was pleasant.'

'Your private life is, and has been, the source of rumour and speculation,' Freud said, raising an eyebrow.

I looked at him quizzically, unsure to what he was referring. 'How so?' I asked.

'Well, the women of course, and I have heard a rumour about a child, born out of wedlock, prior to your first marriage,' Freud said.

'Lieserl,' I replied with an awkward smile.

'And what became of her?' Freud asked.

I took a deep breath, looked around the room, and said, 'Lieserl was born in Vojvodina.'

Freud nodded.

'Mileva was a devoted mother and would never have given up a child for adoption as some people have suggested.' I stalled for a short moment and continued, 'Lieserl was part of the family until she was about eighteen months old.'

'And then...'

'Sadly, Lieserl was born with a mental handicap. She died at the age of 21 months of scarlet fever aggravated by a secondary infection. As you know, very few children survive scarlet fever,' I said.

The room felt drained of air. I swallowed and ploughed on. 'Mileva's family lived with the shame of Lieserl being born out of wedlock. Mileva made a mistake – we made a mistake – and they took it personally. Her parents found it difficult. In 1922, her father died at the age of seventy-six. At the end of his life, he considered himself a failure, apparently. He believed his children had dishonoured him.'

Freud looked at me curiously for a moment but didn't comment. Then he said, 'But you were married in 1903 were you not?'

'Yes, but that didn't erase the shame apparently. We separated in 1914 and we divorced in 1919. And in that same year I married Elsa. She died of kidney disease and heart failure two

years ago. Regrettably, ten years after our marriage, our relationship had become a replica of my marriage with Mileva. Our romance was over. I moved into a separate bedroom as I had done with Mileva. Our marriage became one of convenience. Illness had aged Elsa prematurely. She was stout, her face haggard. Her hair was grey, like mine, and dishevelled, also like mine.'

'You were cousins, were you not?' Freud asked. 'It's not surprising that you resembled one another.'

'Perhaps,' I said. 'Her prettiest feature was her vivid blue eyes. She knew it, because she refused to wear glasses, even though she was both far and near sighted.'

'Rumour has it that you have had many lovers,' Freud remarked calmly.

'It is true, many women showered me with unwanted attention. When I was forty, women left flowers at the door and love notes under the matt and provided me with magazines for my private use.' I hesitated and saw Freud give a dismissive shrug. 'So, what was I to do? Between the two of us, I had an affair with my secretary, Betty Neumann, and Estella, Ethel, Toni and a Russian spy named Margarita. Margarita was beautiful, blonde, full of life, and radiated sexuality.'

Freud smiled at my boast.

'And I don't forget Ethel Michanowski, the Berlin socialite, with whom I was involved in the late 1920s and early 30s. She was about fifteen years younger than me and was friendly with my

stepdaughter. She followed me to England and, really, her chasing after me became too much.'

'You've been busy,' Freud said. 'I wonder how you found the time to do your work!'

'Out of all these women, I am, in fact, attached only to one, who shall remain nameless and who is absolutely harmless and decent.'

'Did you wine and dine them?' Freud asked.

'I must say I sailed with them on my boat, the *Tümmler*, at our summer house in Caputh, read books and attended many enjoyable concerts.' Before Freud could ask for further details, I said, 'And you, Sigmund?'

'What about me?'

'You must be aware that there is much controversy about your relationship with Minna Bernays, your sister-in-law ...'

'Minna became an integral part of the family after coming to live with me and Martha in 1898, in our tenth year of marriage. She often holidayed with me⁷ while her sister remained at home with the children, which she preferred,' he added hurriedly.

I glanced at Freud to see if I could read anything in his face, but he remained expressionless. He looked at me over the top of his glasses. 'People are obsessed with sex.'

I decided it was time to change the subject. 'I am curious to know where you think you stand in the history of psychology?' I asked.

⁷ Freud apparently stayed at an inn and registered himself and Minna as Dr Sigmund Freud u frau. Jung claimed that Minna confessed to him that she and Freud's relationship was an intimate one. <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/24/world/europe/24freud.html>

Freud settled himself more comfortably. 'I think it's fair to say I am the undisputed founder of psychoanalysis as a method of curing mental illness.'

'You discovered previously unknown features of the human mind.'

'And yet some have also tried to discredit me and claim that my methods are unscientific.'

'Does that concern you?' When he didn't answer, I added, 'How do you feel your research holds up today?'

'I believe in the truth of my ideas,' Freud replied. 'What about your ideas?'

'The fascinating magic of my work will continue to my last breath.' I thought for a moment. 'I will leave it to future generations to solve the lingering questions raised by my theories. I fear my work on developing a unified field theory will never be completed.'⁸

I looked at my wristwatch. It was a little after 2 pm. We had been talking for almost four hours.

'I never realised the time,' I said suddenly.

'When do you go back to Princeton?'

'The day after tomorrow,' I said, as I put on my coat.

'So, will I see you tomorrow?'

'But, of course,' I said as I stood and walked towards the door.

The next day was Friday. I arrived at Freud's home, knocked on the door and Martha let me in. I followed her to the study and as I

⁸ Einstein's unified field theory never materialised.

walked in behind her the sun lit up the room. Just then, the phone rang. It was clear I was not the only person interested in talking with the father of psychoanalysis. I waited while he dealt with the caller.

‘You know, Albert, now my life is drawing to an end, people still want things from me.’

‘I’m not surprised,’ I said.

He coughed. ‘I’ve still got my faculties, but my body is failing me.’

I don’t know why he welcomed my visits, but I appreciated our time together and he also seemed to enjoy our conversations.

‘Today is our last day together,’ Freud said, suddenly solemn.

‘Yes. Tomorrow I leave for Princeton.’

‘How are you?’ Freud asked.

‘I’m well, thank you, and you?’

‘I am at peace with myself,’ Freud said, forcing a smile. ‘I am not afraid of dying. I’ve had a good life, and we all know it’s going to happen to each of us. I may have one or two years at best. I am fortunate to have meaning in my life; I have devoted myself to my family, and I have created something that gives me meaning. But let’s not dwell on me, there are many more interesting things to talk about.’

I knew he was right; after all, he had created a new way of thinking about the mind and its workings.

‘I have been thinking about Zionism,’ I said.

Freud raised his eyebrows. 'For what it's worth, I reject Zionism.'

'But can you see nothing good about Zionism?'

'I sympathise with the goals of a Jewish state, I am proud of your university in Jerusalem and I am delighted with the settlement's prosperity,' Freud said quietly. 'But I do not think that Palestine can ever become a Jewish state, nor that the Christian and Islamic worlds will ever be prepared to have their holy places under Jewish care. It seems more sensible to me to establish a Jewish homeland in a less historically burdened land.' He closed his eyes and shook his head. 'I know that such a rational viewpoint would never gain the enthusiasm of the masses or the financial support of the wealthy. Sadly, the fanaticism of our people is in part to be blamed for the distrust of the Arabs.'

He stopped talking for a moment to cough. Then he said, 'A belligerent state permits itself every misdeed, every act of violence, as would disgrace the individual. A civilisation that leaves many participants unsatisfied and drives them into revolt neither has nor deserves to have the prospect of a lasting existence.'

I hesitated a moment. 'There's truth in what you say. Militant Zionists act counter to Judaism and the teachings of the Hebrew prophets, and I too am put off by any hint of Jewish chauvinism.'

'Absolutely,' Freud said.

'I embrace spiritual Zionism, but not the idea of a militarised Jewish political state that would disenfranchise Palestinian Arabs,

rob them of their land, or deny them equality and justice,' I said firmly.

Freud nodded in agreement.

'But I remain a proud Jew,' I declared. 'My bond with the Jewish People transcends religion.'

'You helped the Jews create a homeland in Israel, did you not?' Freud asked.

'I did a two-month tour of America in 1921 to raise money for the World Zionist Organization to help the Jews settle in a national homeland and assist with the establishment of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.'

'Clearly, you are passionate about this cause.'

'Yes, I am I suppose. I was certainly passionate in my support for the creation of the Hebrew University. It was devoted to the pursuit of Jewish values of justice and human dignity, and I believed it would be a beacon to the world. I was present at its inauguration and, as you know, together we served on its first board of governors, along with Chaim Weizmann and others. I was also the first honorary chairman of the board of trustees, chairman of its academic committee and very involved in raising funds for the university's development. And in 1923, I visited Mount Scopus and gave the first scientific lecture at the university to help raise money. You could say I was passionate.'

Freud smiled. 'Your trip to America to raise funds for the university was essential to its establishment, was it not?'

'I was pleased to help.' I shrugged. 'But I suppose it would be fair to say that my relationship with Judaism is ... complex.'

'Opportunists, no doubt,' observed Freud.

'Probably,' I shrugged. 'I have no time for Judaism as a religion, but Jewishness is far more than mere dogma and faith. I think the creation of a Jewish state will lead to disaster, but I have supported the Zionist movement.'

Freud leaned forward and pushed his glasses up on the bridge of his nose. 'It sounds like you need therapy!' He chuckled.

'But seriously, I always felt held back as a Jew. I suspect that I was passed over for the position at the University of Prague in 1910 because of anti-Semitism. In 1920, a group of nationalists formed the Study Group of German Scientists for the Preservation of Pure Science. Their first target was my general theory of relativity, published in 1915, which Nobel laureate Philipp Lenard disparaged as being "infected with an alien spirit".'

Freud snorted.

'Because of my personal experience of anti-Semitism and the anti-Semitic attacks on my European Jewish peers, I became convinced that we Jews need a homeland in Palestine,' I said.

Freud nodded. His face was grey, and his eyes were dark. Then he said, 'I guess as inflation took hold in 1921 and unemployment rose, more people were casting around for a scapegoat and focused on Jews.' I noticed the strength was rapidly leaving his voice.

'As National Socialism spread in Germany, the atmosphere for Jews grew toxic. At one point, the police warned me that the nationalists were targeting me for assassination. These

developments helped me overcome my misgivings about Zionism.'

Freud sat, nodding slowly as if engaged in some kind of internal dialogue, but he remained silent.

'I am no longer sceptical of the Zionist movement,' I said. 'Today I am an outspoken advocate for a Jewish homeland in Palestine.'

Just then I heard a knock at the door. 'Continue,' Freud said. 'My wife will deal with it.'

'The Jewish people have for centuries been victimised, denied all the rights and protections that most people enjoy,' I said. 'It's my view that Zionism offers the means to end this discrimination and suffering. Jews would no longer be pariahs if they had their own homeland. A Jewish homeland in Palestine creates a spiritual centre and provides a refuge for Eastern Jews. It would enhance the cultural identity and social cohesion of Western Jewry.'

'So, you've clearly changed your attitude towards Zionism,' Freud said.

'My support for Zionism is not straightforward and some people look upon me as a traitor.'

'Why so?' Freud asked.

'I was concerned that the influx of Jews to Palestine during the 1920s could lead to friction with Palestinian Arabs. In 1929 I wrote a letter to my friend Chaim Weizmann, the Zionist leader, saying that if Jews could not coexist peacefully with Arabs, then we have learned absolutely nothing during our two thousand years

of suffering. I told him that if the Jews do not learn to live in peace with the Arabs, the struggle against them will follow them for decades in the future.'

He looked at me thoughtfully and nodded. He looked utterly exhausted.

'Let's finish,' I said in a soft voice and began to stand up.

Freud asked suddenly, 'How are your children, have you been able to provide for them?'

'When Mileva and I were divorced in 1919, I made provision for their financial support. At the time, it had been made clear that I was in line for the Nobel Prize, something that happened two years later in 1921. So, I agreed to put the Nobel money into a trust account that would generate interest for Mileva and the boys.'

'And how much was this?' Freud smiled apologetically.

'Just over 120,000 Swedish Kronor.'

'A respectable sum,' he observed.

'Indeed, it was. Until the entire amount was lost during the Depression.'

'That's terrible,' Freud said.

'Mileva earned a little money from giving piano lessons and tutoring in mathematics but I know she struggled to make ends meet. But what of your family?'

He smiled wryly. 'I hope that my children's lives will be easier than mine.'

'Isn't that the wish of every parent?' I asked rhetorically.

By way of explanation, he said, 'My father was a textile merchant who came from a long line of rabbinical scholars, although he had no business sense.'

'What happened?' I asked.

'A series of poor business decisions sent him bankrupt. We moved to Vienna where we lived in diminished circumstances. Ever since I have been a bit obsessed with providing financial security.' Freud shrugged. 'My upbringing taught me that life is always a struggle.'

Glancing at the open window I could feel the light breeze through the leaves of the almond tree. The sky was overcast; the sun was hidden behind slow-moving clouds. It started to rain and I felt a thick and oppressive gloom.

I wondered what regrets Freud had now that he knew his life was coming to an end. Looking back, would he have done anything differently? Selfishly, I wondered if I were in his shoes, would I be consumed with sad thoughts of all that I had missed? Would I regret any of the things I had done?

When I mentioned this to Dr Freud, he nodded. 'It's what everybody worries about. What if today was my last day on earth?'

'I had this vision of myself collapsing over my desk one day, partway through my work on unified field theory, my colleagues studying my notes as the medics carried my body away.'

'Albert,' Freud said in mock reproach.

I shook my head but said nothing.

‘Albert,’ he repeated, ‘We’re wrapped up with our career, family, the hundreds of little acts necessary to keep going and have enough money to meet our everyday commitments. So, we don’t get into the habit of standing back and looking at our lives and saying, “Is this all, is something missing?”’

I paused. He was right, of course, but this didn’t address my concern.

‘I have had a life full of purpose, meaning and family; it has been rewarding,’ he said. ‘I believe I have contributed to my fellow man.’⁹

Bernard Marin A.M.

25 July 2023

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⁹ Dr Sigmund Freud died in London on 23 September 1939, at the age of eighty-three. The final year of his life was a time of upheaval and struggles with illness. Albert Einstein died at Princeton on 18 April 1955 at the age of seventy-six.