Sophie Freud, Simmons professor who called psychoanalysis ‘a narcissistic indulgence,’ dies at 97

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Sophie Freud with Israeli Stage founder Guy Ben-Aharon (left) and writer Savyon Liebrecht (right) at a staged reading at Boston Playwrights’ Theatre. HANDOUT

Though Sophie Freud was a granddaughter of Sigmund Freud, she made clear that she wasn’t a Freudian, professionally speaking.

“I’m very skeptical about much of psychoanalysis,” she told the Boston Globe in 2002. “I

think it's such a narcissistic indulgence that I cannot believe in it."

A professor emerita at what is now Simmons University, and the last surviving grandchild of Sigmund, Dr. Freud was 97 when she died Friday in her Lincoln home.

Her daughter Andrea Freud Loewenstein told the New York Times that she died of pancreatic cancer.

A psychosociologist who devoted her career to the protection of children and to introducing feminism into the field of social work, Dr. Freud was one of the few surviving members of her family to have known her grandfather Sigmund personally. She grew up in Vienna in a turbulent household in which her parents led separate lives and her grandparents, aunts, and other relatives from all sides mingled.

"My grandfather had cancer of the mouth. He didn't waste words," Dr. Freud told the Globe in 1982.

"We had no real relationship," she added. "There was no baby-sitting, no riding on his knees, no long walks together."

Though she only spent time with him until her early teenage years, "it was like being a granddaughter of a king. It gave me a place in society."

In her youth, Dr. Freud endured her parents' estrangement, bitter feuds with her brother, a rocky relationship and reconciliation with her mother, 40 years of marriage until she divorced her husband ("because I could not imagine becoming old with a man at my side"), and raising three successful children — all without ever having undergone psychotherapy herself.

"I'm still patting myself on the shoulder for that," she said with a chuckle in the 2002 Globe interview.

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Decades after her grandfather's death from cancer in 1939, Freud considered many of his fundamental theories to be outdated — "brilliant as well as questionable," as she put it.

In the 2002 interview, she said of her grandfather's theory of transference: "Women are forever falling in love with their male therapists … regardless of whether there is abuse or not. Freud sanitized it by calling it 'transference.' He said it doesn't matter, women get over it afterward. But I disagree. Women then go to another therapist to get over that one."

She ratcheted up her criticism in an interview for a Canadian television film, "Neighbours: Freud and Hitler in Vienna" (2003), saying, "In my eyes, both Adolf Hitler and my grandfather were false prophets of the 20th century." They shared, in her words, "the ambition to convince other men of the one and only truth they had come upon."

"Never could he be wrong," she said.

She did, however, embrace her grandfather's precise attention to time spent on tasks. Just as he kept an eye on the clock, she stationed an old-fashioned alarm clock at the front of her Simmons classroom as a reminder to her students and herself.

"I'm very particular about time," she said in 2002. "My students always know to come to class ahead of time. I try not to waste any time."

Miriam Sophie Freud was born in Vienna on Aug. 6, 1924. Her father, Jean Martin Freud (known as Martin), was Sigmund Freud's eldest son and a lawyer who became the director of Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalytic Publishing House. Sophie's mother, Ernestine (Drucker) Freud, known as Esti, was a speech therapist.

Vienna was seething with virulent antisemitism by the mid-1930s and largely welcomed Germany's annexation of Austria in March 1938. Only after his daughter, Anna, was detained and interrogated by the Gestapo was Sigmund Freud finally persuaded to evacuate the family.

He, his wife, and Anna settled in London, where he died at 83 within weeks of the outbreak of World War II.

In May 1938, Sophie’s father also fled Vienna for London, taking her brother. Sophie and her mother embarked on what in peacetime might have been an idyllic odyssey but was instead a harrowing pursuit for sanctuary. An initial stop in Paris was followed by a 400-mile bicycle trip to the French Riviera, a cruise to Morocco, a flight to Portugal, and finally a third-class crossing to the United States.

“It would have been so easy to be discovered, to be killed,” Dr. Freud said in the 1982 interview of the escape by bicycle. “We were always running. At that time it was dangerous to be Jewish, deathly dangerous.”

Dr. Freud and her mother arrived in New York in November 1942, homeless and virtually penniless but soon to reunite with Esti’s sisters.

Sophie applied to Hunter College in New York but was rejected because her mother had not yet established legal residency. But her uncle, Edward Bernays — a nephew of Sigmund Freud’s who was a public relations pioneer and the father of Anne Bernays, the novelist, writing teacher, and longtime Cambridge resident — arranged for her admission to Radcliffe College, and paid her tuition. (Dr. Freud’s introductory English course was taught by poet Delmore Schwartz, who was then a young professor.)

In 1945, the summer before her last semester at Radcliffe, from which she graduated with a degree in psychology, Dr. Freud married Paul Loewenstein, an engineer and Jewish émigré who had escaped from a French prisoner of war camp. They had met in France.

They divorced in 1985. In addition to her daughter Andrea, a novelist, Dr. Freud leaves a son, George Loewenstein, who teaches economics and psychology at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh; another daughter, Dania Jekel, head of the Asperger/Autism Network in Watertown; five grandchildren; and two great-granddaughters.

Sophie Freud graduated with a master’s in social work from Simmons College in 1948 and a doctorate in social welfare from Brandeis University in 1970. She went on to work

in clinics and mental hospitals and as an adoption specialist in a welfare agency. She also worked at Tufts University, helping teachers of young children deal with parents.

After finishing a doctorate, Dr. Freud was hired as a professor at Simmons and named head of the human behavior program. “As soon as I was teaching my first class, I knew that I had finally found my true calling,” she wrote.

“I said goodbye to the psychoanalysts,” she recalled.

Initially, Dr. Freud taught under her married name, telling the Globe in 1982 that she only began using Freud after establishing her professional credentials.

“Teaching is a way to have impact,” she said. “One has certain ideas. The joy of teaching is being able to reach people’s minds, to widen their perspective.”

For years, Dr. Freud rode a red motorbike to campus until she begrudgingly relinquished it to a student when she was in her late 70s. She officially retired in 1992 but continued to teach.

While she regularly exercised to ward off illness — swimming in and jogging around Walden Pond, near her home in Lincoln, she was also a great believer in fate.

“I think that one has only 5 percent liberty in how to control one’s life,” she wrote.

Upon her death, she said, she would reflect on a litany of what she viewed as inevitable natural and man-made catastrophes: global warming, deforestation, plagues.

“I shall think of the sorrow of my children, and of the sorrow of my grandchildren for their children, in this harsh new world,” Freud wrote, “and I will leave the world with relief thinking of all that will have been spared me.”

Material from the New York Times was used in this report. Bryan Marquard of the Globe staff contributed to it.