

Irén Jakab – Science and Friendship

To understand Irén Jakab's scientific work, it is important to highlight some of her biographical data: as a psychiatrist (from 1950) and as a neurologist (from 1951), she published papers in the fields of neuropsychiatry, child psychiatry and neuropathology. Meanwhile, she graduated *summa cum laude* in psychology. She left Hungary in 1959, working first in Switzerland and then in Paris. Her scientific career in the United States began in 1966 at Harvard Medical School in Boston. Following her studies at the Menninger School of Psychiatry (Topeka, Kansas) in 1969, she moved to Pittsburgh in 1972, where she developed the John Merck Program for mentally retarded children, the first hospital-based programme of its kind in the United States.¹ She served as a professor at the University of Pittsburgh until her retirement in 1992, when she returned to Harvard in Boston, also lecturing in psychiatry, and became a teaching consultant at Mclean Teaching Hospital.²

Of her extremely rich corpus of scientific works, I would like to highlight just a few of the most important ones, such as the handbook she edited entitled *Mental Retardation*,³ to which she contributed three chapters, which also reflects on her activities in Pittsburgh. The handbook shone a light on a number of hitherto neglected issues, and contains valuable chapters on the differential diagnosis, therapy, education,

prevention, and organisation of the specialist field for people with brain damage and other disabilities. In the multifaceted approach (genetics, pathology, prevention, social care, nursing, education etc.), we can also find some Hungarian authors, such as János Kepes, professor of pathology at the University of Kansas, who wrote an excellent chapter on brain pathology. The other is Magda Gerber, Principal of Pacific Oaks College in Pasadena, who added valuable insights from the everyday areas of education and development.⁴ While all branches of the field have evolved since the volume was published by Karger, the work remains useful today thanks to its many valuable approaches and issues and its practicality.

Irén Jakab's main field was the psychopathology of pictorial expression. This was the main subject of her book *Zeichnungen und Gemälde der Geisteskranken / Dessins et peintures des aliénés*, published in German and French in 1956.⁵ This work was republished in English and Hungarian in 1998 as *Pictorial Expression in Psychiatry: psychiatric and Artistic Analysis*.⁶ The work was based on the collection accumulated by Professor Camillo Reuter (1874–1954) of the Pécs Clinic: the material was produced by patients treated between 1920 and 1956. The original edition is based on fifteen cases, with the later edition including a sixteenth, a schizophrenic patient whose

1 The publications, photographs and film (*Chad...*) produced about the John Merck Program can be studied in the Psychiatric Art Collection of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA). The mission of the John Merck Program, in Irén Jakab's own words, is to develop mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed children.

2 István HÁRDI, "Emlékezés Jakab Irénre" [In memory of Irén Jakab.] *Psychiatria Hungarica*, 26, 2011, no. 4, 269–270.

3 *Mental Retardation*. Ed. by Irene JAKAB. (Karger Continuing Education Series, 2) Basel et al., Karger AG, 1982.

4 The pedagogical work of Magda Gerber (1910–2007) was of

particular importance to Irén Jakab. Gerber began her career in infant care as a pupil of Emi Pikler at the children's home on Lóczy Street in Budapest. In 1956 she emigrated with her family, and lived in the USA from 1957. Irén Jakab regularly referred to Gerber's achievements.

5 Irene JAKAB, *Zeichnungen und Gemälde der Geisteskranken. Ihre Psychiatrische und künstlerische Analyse / Dessins et peintures des aliénés. Analyse au point de vue psychiatrique et artistique*. Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1956.

6 Irén JAKAB, *Képi kifejezés a pszichiátriában. Pszichiátriai és művészeti elemzés*. Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1998.

progress was followed by the author for thirty years; we can witness the unfolding of the patient's talent and development as a painter through a sequence of images. The interesting, high-quality collection reflects the hospital conditions of the time, the patients' attitudes, and the kinds of treatment that were available. Jakab groups the works following Cesar,⁷ as follows:

1. *Symbolic-linear* drawings, which are similar to the images produced by children or by archaic civilisations
2. Drawings with *geometric lines*, which resemble works of abstract art
3. *Symbolic, psychoanalytical* drawings, reminiscent of medieval and Byzantine works, and finally
4. Works that are *more nuanced and academic in nature*.

Jakab was concerned with possible stylistic similarities between the patients' paintings and artistic movements, but did not consider them identical. During mental illness, new (pathological) phenomena appear, which disappear with recovery. Examples she gave of stylistic change were when an abstract style developed during the course of an illness was replaced by a naturalistic style following successful treatment, or when childlike drawing is manifested following electroconvulsive treatment. Disease-specific representation may be considered "nosospecific" where, for example, a patient who speaks incoherently may also draw in the same way. However, *what we have seen can only be understood in the context of a very careful study of the clinical picture*, especially in the world of modern medicine. In itself, no opinion can be formed on the basis of "drawing symptoms", and a single phenomenon can arise from many different causes. In addition to the specificities of style, Jakab was also concerned with manifest, latent, symbolic, and compositional approaches to content. What should we think of this work today, almost twenty-five years after its publication in Hungarian? Even when it was first published in 1956, it was highly valued as a collection. Since then, Irén Jakab's book – now available in four languages – has become a public treasure in the field, and is rightly cited to this day among the pioneering classics of Hans Prinzhorn, Robert Volmat, and others. The author's wide-ranging approach is reflected in the fact that, for the original issue of the work, she consulted both Professor Camillo Reuter, who had established

the collection, and the painter Ferenc Martyn. This is what makes the "artistic analysis" in the subtitle so important in the age of *art brut*, because Prinzhorn, the author of the book that is considered the standard work, avoided the term "art". On the other hand, Irén Jakab's work contains two other important elements: while Prinzhorn's patients date from the late 1800s to the early 1900s, the Reuter collection of Pécs is based on drawings and paintings of patients treated between 1920 and 1956. The pictures reflect two eras of psychiatry, the latter already showing treatments of the active era, such as electroconvulsive therapy and, in the later edition, even art therapy. The new edition is not only significant from the point of view of psychiatric history, but also includes many new sections, such as a chapter on creativity, a topic which she also addressed in more detail later. The connection with *psychoanalysis* is particularly interesting: in the first edition there is only one sentence referring to it, and the bibliography does not include any Freudian work (in accordance with the prohibition of it in the that time in Hungary), while in the new edition there are not only the works of the founder of psychoanalysis, but also the publications of his excellent art historian-psychoanalyst friend and follower Ernst Kris.

Irén Jakab's interest and knowledge in this direction were already evident in the first years of her life abroad, marking the start of her intellectual freedom. Her communique on the representation of the human figure, for example, mentions the role of conscious and unconscious factors.⁸ During her studies at the Menninger Clinic, she deepened her mastery of psychoanalysis, which she used extensively both in her later work and also therapeutically. In her communique *Psychopathology of Expression and Psychoanalysis*, she writes in detail about the transference of the image-creator and the countertransference of the teacher-healer, and its impact on the work and on interpretation.⁹ While her first book deals little with symbols, here she makes extensive use of Freudian ideas, and even Jungian interpretation and mandala imagery. In *Mental Retardation*, the afore-mentioned book of which Jakab was the editor,¹⁰ separate chapters are dedicated to ego psychology. She also delivered a lecture entitled "Humor and Psychoanalysis" at the 1997 conference organised by the Société

7 Osorio CÉSAR, "Contribution a l'étude de l'art chez les aliénés." *Arquivos da Assistência a Psicopatas do Estado de São Paulo*, 16, 1951, 51–64.

8 Irén JAKAB, "Représentation consciente et inconsciente de soi-même dans

les figures humaines dessinées." *Confinia Psychiatrica*, 5, 1962, 112–129.

9 Irén JAKAB, "Psychopathology of Expression and Psychoanalysis." *Confinia Psychiatrica*, 23, 1980, 209–222.

10 JAKAB 1982 (see note 3).

International de Psychopathologie de l'Expression et d'Art Thérapie (SIPE) in Biarritz.¹¹

Jakab also contributed greatly to the field as an *organiser* and *editor*. She co-founded (and later became one of the vice-presidents of) SIPE in 1959.¹² The International Lombroso Congress in Verona was the ideal occasion for this. She participated in the founding alongside Professor Robert Volmat of Besançon, and this was followed by other societies of the same name being formed in several countries. SIPE also has a place in the World Psychiatric Association (WPA) as a separate section. The aim of the Society is to study patient expression, including imagery, to which art therapy was subsequently added. Patients' relationships with music and literature were also explored and used therapeutically. In Hungary, a section of the Hungarian Psychiatric Society with this name and purpose was founded on 22 April 1993.

After the death of the co-founder Volmat, the French psychiatrist and neurologist Guy Roux succeeded him as president of SIPE. He supported the work of the Hungarian section in every way, and delivered lectures at all seven SIPE colloquia in Hungary, as did Irén Jakab, covering the five Budapest and the two very successful Szentgotthárd events.¹³

She founded and became president of the analogous American Society of Psychopathology of Expression (ASPE) in 1964. She organised the congresses of this Society and edited and published volumes of its materials.

Her four volumes of essays published by Karger between 1968 and 1975 are outstanding exemplars of her editorial work. The first book, *Psychiatry and Art*, published in 1968, is a rich collection of articles on the titular theme; the second, published in 1969, deals with the issues of *Art Interpretation and Art Therapy*; the third, of 1971, tackles *Conscious and Unconscious Expressive Art*; and the fourth, published in 1975, discusses matters relating to the *Transcultural Aspects of Psychiatric Art*.¹⁴

The following congressional volumes published by the American Society (ASPE) between 1981 and 2004 are also still of much use today: *The Personality of the Therapist* (1981), *The Role of Imagination in the Healing Process* (1984), *Stress Management through Art* (1988), *Art*



3. The Board of the VI. SIPE Colloquium in Budapest, 2010
Guy Roux, Irén Jakab, István Hárđi

Media as a Vehicle of Communication (1990), *The Influence of Recent Socio-Political on Fine Arts and on Patient's Art* (1995), *Developmental Aspects of Creativity* (2000), and *Mass Media and Mental Health, Their Influence on Each Other* (2004).

It is also worth mentioning some of her films, such as *Imaginary Dwellings* (1975), which presented special houses and castles built by patients, reflecting the idiosyncrasies of the creators. Such works include the strange towers built by an American Italian mason Simon Rhodia in the suburbs of Los Angeles over a period of thirty-five years, or the astonishing structure made of broken plates and pieces of glass by a French schizophrenic postman near Chartres.

Jakab maintained close relations with her home country, and her excellent lecturing skills were further highlighted by the fact that despite her long stay abroad, her Hungarian speech remained dialect-free, clear, pure, and modern. She was a regular participant, chairperson and highly popular speaker at the six colloquia held in Hungary within the framework of SIPE. One noteworthy outcome was her 1992 lecture *The Role of Art Expression in Psychiatry: The Past, the Present, and the Future*. She was

11 Irène JAKAB, "Humor and Psychoanalysis." In: *L'Humour. Publication de la Société Internationale de Psychopathologie de l'Expression et d'Art-Thérapie*. Ed. by Guy ROUX–Muriel LAHARIE. Biarritz, SIPE, 1998, 15–22; Irén JAKAB, "Humor és pszichiátria." [Humour and psychiatry.] *Psychiatria Hungarica*, 19, 2004, no. 5, 380–389.

12 In 2010 Irén Jakab also published a history of the founding of SIPE: Irène JAKAB, "The History of the Founding of Société de

Psychopathologie de l'Expression (SIPE) and the Early Development." *Psychiatria Hungarica*, 25, 2010, no. 4, 276–290.

13 The seventh SIPE event in Hungary was held in 2013 (editor).

14 The study volumes listed were published by S. Karger Verlag (Basel, Munich, Paris, London, New York, Sydney), and are available in the library of the Psychiatric Art Collection of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, as part of the legacy of Irén Jakab.

also one of the editors of the volume commemorating the colloquium.¹⁵

During her visits to Hungary, she always travelled to Pécs to visit the Psychiatric Clinic, where she gave lectures on several occasions. She was also a member of the board of the István Környey Society, whose meetings she attended regularly.

She kept in close contact with her Hungarian friends and colleagues, and during the hard times she helped them while abroad, invited them to the American congresses she organised, and hosted them on more than one occasion. My wife, Dr. Margit Saághy and I, for example, stayed with her twice during congresses in Boston.

I saw Irén Jakab for the first time in 1948, when the country celebrated the centenary of the 1848 War of Independence, as did our Neurological and Psychiatric Society, as it was called at the time. On this occasion, she delivered an insightful lecture on intelligence tests at the celebratory scientific meeting held in the clinic. The second time, in 1956, in the lecture hall of the then National Institute of Psychiatry and Neurology, the so-called "Lipót", Professor István Környey presented her afore-mentioned German (and French) language book. Amidst great interest and questions in the crowded room, the book, and with it the Pécs collection, embarked on its tour of conquest. The importance of the work, which has been quoted all over the world, is underlined by the new edition published in 1998 in Hungarian and English, which sold out in a short period of time. The work is also of note today from the point of view of psychiatric history: it reflects the fate of the patients in the old closed wards, and their condition as represented in their works. On the other hand, its topicality in the era of *art brut* is also

reinforced by the "artistic analysis" indicated in the subtitle.

I met her personally at a SIPE congress in Verona in 1979. Thereafter, we met regularly at events both abroad and in Hungary. She was always present at the events of our section, as a welcome guest, president, and speaker.

Of Irén Jakab's many talents, I would highlight three: firstly, her language skills. She was a native-level speaker of French, German and Romanian, and acquired an excellent command of English. In spite of all this, and despite her permanent residence abroad, she spoke Hungarian without any foreign influence or accent. It was not by chance that she gave many lectures on humour: she was always cheerful, and she loved hearing and telling jokes. Finally, we must not forget her hospitality. We always felt welcome in her tastefully decorated Boston home.

As can be seen from the above, Irén Jakab enjoyed great international recognition and esteem. This was evidenced by her numerous honours from the German and American Societies, the SIPE Award, and the American Psychiatric Association's Benjamin Rush Award in 1980 for her work for children with cerebral, intellectual, and emotional disabilities.

Irén Jakab was active until the very end of her life; she organised an international congress for 2012, in which she intended to include Hungarian participants in the presidency and management, but she was unable to bring this to fruition. It is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that Irén Jakab lived for science and worked for it all her life. It is customary to say goodbye to our loved ones by "preserving their memory", but here, there is more to it: the lectures, books, and communiques of Irén Jakab are largely permanent, and they will remain and live on with us.

15 Irene JAKAB, "The Role of Art Expression in Psychiatry. The Past, the Present, and the Future." In: *Psychopathology of Expression and Art*

Therapy in the World. The Budapest SIPE Colloquium, 1992. Ed. by Irene JAKAB–István HÁRDI. Budapest, Animula Kiadó, 1992, 11–32.