

Freud's Mushroom Hunting Dan Merkur

Earl Lee (1998, pp. 99-102) brought to my attention the little known fact that Sigmund Freud privately took a keen interest in mushrooms. He was knowledgeable about all manner of wild mushrooms, including psychoactive varieties. His son Martin Freud (1957) stated that "the expeditions of young children led by our father, Sigmund Freud, always had a particular purpose" (p. 57):

In late summer our subject was the collection of edible fungi; but we never discussed this with local people outside our circle....

Our attack on the mushroom was never haphazard. Father would have done some scouting earlier to find a fruitful area; and I think one of the pointers he used was the presence of a gaily coloured toadstool, red with white dots, which always appeared with our favourite, the less easily seen *Steinpilz*, which my dictionary tells me is the yellow edible *boletus*...

In a good season we had mushrooms nearly every day (p. 58).

My dictionary too says that *Steinpilz*, etymologically the "stone mushroom," is the edible *boletus*, but one may wonder whether by "stone mushroom" we have an allusion to the philosopher's stone (see Merkur, 2000). Freud's technical terms, condensation, sublimation, projection, and fixation were all taken from alchemy; so too was his metaphoric description of the id as "a chaos, a cauldron." Another reference to the edible *boletus* occurs in a letter to Ludwig Binswanger, dated 10 September 1911, where Freud explained the inspiration of a new project: "The frequency of crucifixes [*Herrgötter*] here in the Tyrol, where they are more numerous than the edible *boletus* [*Herrenpilze*] used to be until recently, has persuaded me to make a study of the psychology of religion, something of which may see the light of day in years to come" (Freud & Binswanger, 2003, p. 74). Here we find a different term for the edible *boletus*, *Herrenpilze*, "men-mushrooms," used explicitly as a pun on the term "crucifix," *Herrgötter*, "divine man." The pun implies that Freud first thought of the project that became *Totem and Taboo* (1913) while he was mushroom-hunting and happened to notice the abundance of crucifixes in the area.

Martin Freud's reference to the red toadstool with white dots certainly pertained to the fly agaric, *amanita muscaria*. Famous for its psychotropic properties, fly agaric was used by Siberian shamans to induce alternate states. Not only was the shamanic use of fly agaric commonly mentioned in nineteenth century encyclopedias that were available to Freud; but John G. Bourke's *Scatalogic Rites of All Nations* (1891) devoted two chapters to *amanita muscaria* and shamanism. Because Freud wrote the preface for the book's German translation in 1912, we know for a fact that by 1912 Freud knew that some mushrooms are psychoactive.

According to Freud's sister, Anna Freud Bernays (1940, p. 141), from his boyhood onward "Sigmund...was an enthusiastic walker and nature lover, and would roam the forest and woods near Vienna with his friends, bringing back rare plant and flower specimens." Freud's expeditions into the mountains during mushroom season began no later than 1873, when he was nineteen and wrote his friend Eduard Silberstein: "Get into the mountains, I say, and eat strawberries. Eat strawberries, I say, and forget you are by yourself" (Freud, 1990, p. 32). Later in the same letter, Freud boasted, "As you know, I am quite an expert on the grasses of the field, and the herbs of the woods and have tasted all sorts of greenery" (p. 33). His correspondence with Wilhelm Fliess in the 1880s and 1890s referred several times to late summer expeditions. Mushrooms were now the only plants that he hunted. In a letter to Wilhelm Fliess dated August 16, 1885, Freud remarked: "Psychology is really a cross to bear. Bowling or hunting for mushrooms is, in any event, a much healthier pastime." Two years later, on June 22, 1887, he expected Fliess to join him in the woods: "In Aussee I know a wonderful wood full of ferns and mushrooms where you must reveal to me the secrets of the world of lower animals and the world of children." On July 30, 1898, Freud complained:

“Unfortunately there are not mushrooms yet, as I convinced myself on a four-and-a-half hour walk through the woods of Salzberg.” The next year, he remarked that his children accompanied him on his mushroom hunts. On August 1, 1899, he wrote: “There are some mushrooms here as well, though not yet many. The children naturally join in the hunt for them.” Five days later, on August 6, 1899, he reported: “There are mushrooms every day” (Freud, 1985, pp. 136, 254, 320, 363, 366).

Because Martin Freud was born in 1889, his memories of family mushroom hunting expeditions must pertain to the 1890s and later. These expeditions continued with the next generation of Freuds. According to Lou Andreas-Salomé, Anna Freud stated that her father regularly treated the mushrooms as sentient beings. “When they went collecting mushrooms he always told them to go into the wood quietly, and he still does this; there must be no chattering and they must roll up the bags which they have brought under their arms, so that the mushrooms shall not notice. When their father found one he would cover it quickly with his hat, as though it were a butterfly. The little children--and now his grandchildren--used to believe what he said, while the bigger ones smiled at his credulity” (cited in Peters, 1962, p. 26). Theodor Reik was present on at least some occasions beginning in 1927: “I remember during the summers on the Semmering we sometimes went collecting mushrooms. I never saw them, but he always knew where they are--he saw them immediately. His glance was very sharp and observant, while mine was not” (Freeman, 1971, pp. 83-84; on the date, see Reik, 1956, p. 645).

Freud’s lifelong practice of hunting wild mushrooms tells us little. My only point is that Freud, who experimented with cocaine (Bernfeld, 1953; Freud, 1974), practiced hypnotherapy for most of a decade, went into intense literary reveries both when he wrote and when he lectured (Mahony, 1987), and invented both free association and self-analysis, was also knowledgeably informed about psychoactive mushrooms. Freud was an extraordinarily accomplished psychonaut. In his final summation of psychoanalysis, he anticipated the use of psychoactive drugs to facilitate the uncovering process of psychoanalysis: “The future may teach us to exercise a direct influence, by means of particular chemical substances, on the amounts of energy and their distribution in the mental apparatus” (Freud, 1940, p. 182). We may wonder whether he had particular drugs in mind.

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