

Contexts Interview

Here, Contexts co-editor Peter Zelaskowski (PZ) interviews (by e-mail) Dr. Vivienne Cohen (VC) on being honoured on 27th August 2014 by East London NHS Trust, which named its official premises of the City and Hackney Specialist Psychotherapy Service ‘Vivienne Cohen House’.

According to her UK secretary Suzanne Benjamin, who acted as a go-between and put our questions to her, Dr Cohen was delighted to be asked to be interviewed.

PZ: First of all, many congratulations on receiving this wonderful tribute. Were you surprised to be honoured in this way?

VC: Yes – very much so – I was bowled over.

PZ: As the new editor of Group Analytic Contexts, I am delighted to be in a position to interview you on behalf of GASI. In 1989, you let me through a very special door in accepting my application to complete my internship at Barts, working with you and your group of IGA trainees and newly qualified group analysts. A number of people have commented on just how nurtured and well-taken-care-of they felt by you...a feeling I certainly share. ‘Once Vivienne adopted you, you really felt adopted’, as one person put it. Is this familiar to you?

VC: Yes – I enjoyed it – if I didn’t like the people then I wouldn’t have been able to do it – they were a lovely group.

PZ: Am I right in thinking you retired from the NHS in 1994?

VC: Yes

PZ: How have you been enjoying your retirement?

VC: Well I live in Israel much of the year with my children, grand-children and great grand-children. I currently have 15 great-grandchildren with one on the way. I started off in retirement by painting but I suffered collapsed vertebrae from Osteoporosis which put an end to that. I haven’t got a hobby that replaces

work as such, but spend much time with my family as well as going to museums, opera, ballet and I'm still enjoying travelling.

PZ: From a position of being less involved is there anything that you would like to share about the current interests and activities of GASI?

VC: No

PZ: On the GASI forum, where this tribute was brought to our attention, a number of people have commented on how fitting that the East London NHS should honour you in this way. Please, say something about your experience and history within the NHS. I understand you started in 1962.

VC: I qualified in 1951 and started in psychiatry in 1954. I then had children and in 1962 went to work under Prof. Linford Rees who ran the acute ward at the Maudsley. He was a marvellous man to work for. I was teaching at the beginning – supervising psychiatric social workers. I then joined the Psychotherapy unit of Dr SH Foulkes at Barts. He totally inspired me to get involved with Group Psychotherapy. I only ever wanted to work for the NHS – I didn't work privately because I don't like the idea of giving people what they could afford. I wanted to give them what they needed.

PZ: Could you say something about the challenges you faced in developing a service, a 'service-on-a-shoe-string' as I remember you proudly describing it, largely based on the work of trainee and newly-qualified group analysts.

VC: The truth is that I didn't really face challenges – everyone knew that they would not be paid – they were very happy to work for nothing in order to get the experience and my supervision which was obviously valued.

As an aside, Dr Cohen then went on to describe how they initially had 3 tiny rooms in the hospital, one of which was a converted bathroom. It had a ledge which originally must have carried the water from the urinals or such-like. One day one of the senior Dr's was leaning back on his chair and got the chair and therefore himself stuck in the ledge – he had to be rescued – Dr Cohen was in fits of giggles as she described the scene – she said we did have a good time and a good team!! She said they then moved to

a building adjacent to the hospital in Little Britain called William Harvey House – this was luxurious and elegant.

PZ: As one of the pioneering women both within NHS psychotherapy as well as within our field of group analysis, it would be fascinating to here you say something about your experience of some of the other pioneers (men and women) you worked alongside. Who influenced you? And how?

VC: Firstly I have never seen myself as a pioneer or anything special. Dr S H Foulkes whom I trained under at Barts was very influential in my career. He developed Group Psychotherapy during the war, at the psychiatric hospital for the RAF and Army at the Military Neurosis Centre at Northfield. He turned it into a series of interlocking groups – each ward had a group and a music group etc. He was a complete pioneer in the field.

Largely speaking there were no women before me in the field of Group Psychotherapy except Jan Abercrombie who was not clinical in her teaching – she was a Reader in Architecture at University College.

PZ: Looking back, do you have any regrets?

VC: No!

PZ: Do you have any comments on the current challenges facing group analysis, particularly in relation to the NHS?

VC: Group Psychotherapy is facing challenges as it is considered too time consuming. Nowadays people look for quick cures which is why behaviour therapy is popular – it rarely works long term.

PZ: Many thanks for giving us some of your time. Is there anything else you would like to add before we finish?

VC: Many thanks.

PZ: With deepest gratitude.