Coda: Sigismund’s Wolves

As the essays in this issue vividly illustrate, Freud’s “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis”—ubiquitously known as the “Wolf Man” case—can still lead the reader, one hundred years after its publication, down many fascinating yet little-traversed paths. And deep in the forest is the animal that, despite having its name endlessly evoked as the moniker for Freud’s essay and the person whose story is told there, remains largely unseen. So, as we conclude this commemoration of Freud’s well-known case, we will let the wolves have the last word.

To use the occasion of revisiting this text as a chance to consider the complexities of lupine fears and fantasies would seem, in part, to carry forward the way in which these animals figure in the story. After all, “six or seven” wolves appear here in the childhood dream of Freud’s patient, Sergei Pankejeff, sometime between his fourth and sixth years. He recounted: as he lay in his bed, a nearby window suddenly opened, revealing the pack gazing in as they sat on “the big walnut tree in front of the window” (Freud, 1918, p. 29). Pankejeff awoke “in great terror” (p. 29), filled with the fear of becoming the animals’ prey. His associations to the dream included mention of several well-known children’s stories that feature a wolf, among them “Little Red Riding Hood.” Freud noted that in this popular tale the animal appears to the youthful protagonist twice, once in the forest and again, in a shockingly displaced setting, when she encounters it as it “lies in bed in the grandmother’s night-cap” (p. 31). Yet the wolf’s disparate guises are effortlessly subsumed here within Freud’s interpretation, where they are dispensed with early on in the text. He declares that the animal is “merely a first father-surrogate” (p. 32), both in these children’s stories and in his patient’s dream.

Freud’s dismissal of Pankejeff’s wolves occurred a decade after the publication of his Interpretation of Dreams (Freud, 1900) and would appear to corroborate one of the book’s primary
assertions: the images recalled from sleep are a “manifest” hallucination serving to mask the hidden, and far more psychically freighted, latent meaning. Yet Freud qualifies that binary when he accords some attention to the relationship between two aspects of the dream that Pankejeff still recalls most vividly: the wolves’ silence and their gaze (Freud, 1918, p. 33). For Freud, these elements become the nodal points in revealing the veiled “dream thoughts,” as he takes a large interpretative leap and argues that the latent meaning may in fact be the opposite of what his patient recounted. The gaze of the animals is actually Pankejeff’s own act of seeing and the silence is in fact a “most violent motion” (p. 35) that had wakened the child. Based on these claims, the dream transforms into one concerning a child’s witnessing of parental sex, and the ramifications of this “primal scene” become the focus of the case to follow. The only residue of the wolves can be found as an index of the fearsome and complex nature of those in one’s proximity—in this case one’s parents—as well as the suggestion of the animality of human sexual relations.

But what of the reverse, when the animal embodies the human? In framing wolves in this way, we can see how they came to emblematize, even naturalize, certain traits as part of the character, and defamation, of a specific group of people: European Jewry. In recognizing this, we are afforded the chance, through the dream of a Russian (and Christian) child, to examine images of wolves that appeared to Freud in his own youth. For although the dream may be Pankejeff’s, the case is Freud’s and so in the final note to this issue on the case, we will turn things around in two ways—privileging the manifest over what Freud enunciated as the latent, and considering Freud’s own early history of encountering the wolf (as in Pankejeff’s dream) as imagined rather than embodied.

The estates of Pankejeff’s family on the outskirts of Odessa abounded with fauna of many sorts, both those kept as farm animals and others living in the “wild.” In contrast to his analysand, it is unlikely that Freud had direct contact with the latter, including wolves, but he would surely have known Wolfs—a common German-Jewish surname (from the Hebrew ze‘ev, and also found as a given name) in western and central Europe by the nineteenth century. The preponderance of Jewish “Wolfs”
in fact speaks to a strikingly different representational arc that marks this animal, depending on whether it appears in a Jewish or Christian context. This is made evident when we turn to two books from Freud’s childhood—neither one written for children, but both documented as very meaningful to him during his early years—where we encounter quite different lupine depictions. Hebrew sources (in our case, Freud’s illustrated childhood Bible, the *Tanakh*) reveal wolves as potentially compassionate, while the Christian tradition views them as the consummate embodiment of Jewish threat, casting them as dangerous and dangerously close, just as those outside Sergei Pankejeff’s window.

While references to wolves’ capacity to be predatory can be found in several places in the *Tanakh*, the Hebrew Bible, their best-known appearance is found in a different guise. This occurs in the Book of Isaiah (11:6–9) where the wolf is cited within a visualization of peaceful co-existence. In a scene of small children and animals, many considered fearsome but here very serene, the wolf and lamb recline together. The author’s aspiration is for Israel’s survival among hostile neighbors, where “the wolf shall dwell with lamb”; here the Jewish people are imagined as the more vulnerable of the dyad. The wolf had appeared considerably earlier, in the Book of Genesis (49:27), when Jacob identified his youngest son, Benjamin, as a wolf, an identification that would become widely known as a representation of one of the twelve tribes, those putatively descended from Jacob’s male children. In another traditional Jewish corpus, with numerous lupine references, the Talmud considered wolves to be among the least dangerous of “wild animals” (Berkowitz, 2018, p. 131).

Isaiah’s casting of the wolf’s ability to overcome aggression and find a place of rest was echoed at the conclusion of the introduction of these scenes in Chapter 11, where the author offers the hope that in the future Israel will be revered among these nations, have its counsel sought, and that its “abode [or resting place] shall be honored” (11:10). A reverence for repose came to be applied to both the living and the dead, and this reference to a place of rest came into Jewish tradition as a phrase used to memorialize the deceased. When this passage was penned into a particular family Bible on the death of a
father, in the middle of the nineteenth century, the desire for coexistence with neighbors had shifted significantly westward, with this burial in the earth of what was then on the periphery of Habsburg Europe. The mourned parent, Schlomo (Salomon) Freud, died in February 1856, and his son Jacob, who inscribed Isaiah’s verse on the date of his father’s burial, would return to write in the Bible again less than three months later. This time, the occasion was far more joyful, but no less a gesture of paternal memorialization: Jacob writes that he has become the father to a son, born in early May, who will be named in honor of Schlomo and known by the German name of Sigismund (Rice, 1990, pp. 59–62).

The book in which these passages were written held great significance for Jacob Freud and his son (who would by later adolescence shorten his name to Sigmund) as it was, according to Freud fils, the text with which he had a “deep engrossment” when he first “learnt the art of reading” (Freud, 1925, p. 8). The biblical verses were rendered in both Hebrew and German, but his father, in recalling this text as “opening science and intellect” to his son (Rice, 1990, p. 62), perhaps alludes to the lengthy, primarily German, commentaries to verses here. These may have provided the first step in preparing for the curricular rigors of the Vienna Gymnasium, where Sigismund would be enrolled in his tenth year.

As Freud made these first forays into the written world with his father, their path had a surprisingly visual aspect, one not found in the many versions of the Tanakh published up to that point. Jacob’s choice for the Freud family bible was an innovative one, as the so-called “Philipsson Bible” was remarkable in its departure from Jewish scriptural tradition. The editors—Ludwig Philippson (1811–1889), a Reform rabbi and Berlin-trained classicist, and his physician-brother Phoebus (1807–1870)—created a literary and visual compendium to accompany the biblical text, including commentaries and hundreds of illustrations drawn from an array of sources used to gloss the Hebrew and German verses (Pfrimmer, 1982; Gillman, 2018). This childhood reader was presented to Sigmund in adult life, as documented in its third and final inscription, written again by Jacob, who commemorated passing it on at the occasion of his son’s thirty-fifth birthday in 1891 (Rice, 1990,
pp. 62–84; Goodnick, 1992). When, in the years to follow, as he was writing his “dream book,” Freud would cite the Bible, not only for the well-known story of Joseph, but a less familiar passage in Isaiah (29:8), where the prophet’s notion of dreams as wishes—an idea that Freud espoused as decisive—was cited when he wrote that a hungry or thirsty sleeper will conjure imaginings of satiation.

Freud’s turn to Isaiah was likely a return, as this book of the Bible was obviously important to his father, especially the eleventh chapter, and was likely shared with his son for its particular connection to young Schlomo’s namesake. And if that was the case then the occasion also was one of Sigismund’s early—perhaps earliest—encounters with the image of a wolf, as that animal was used to illustrate the scene of co-existence. The Philippson Bible offered an image of the scene much different from the numerous versions of Edward Hicks’s famous painting of the “Peaceable Kingdom.” Instead of depicting the narrative as Isaiah detailed it, they selected one of its principal participants to represent the prophet’s longed-for gathering (Philippson, 1858, p. 753) (Figure 1). This choice would have been made by Phoebus Philippson, a naturalist who had considerable interest in historical flora and fauna. He selected a carefully rendered image of a “Syrian wolf” (Canis syriacus) considered common in biblical times; smaller than most contemporary wolves, it is more akin in size to the jackal. The picture probably was taken from a compendium of “ancient” species and displays the animal’s basic physical attributes. It is without any overlay of a scene or pose that could be read as a reference to the animal’s “character,” unlike the wolf’s appearance in Christian sources.

Sigismund’s early instruction from the Philippson Bible appeared to serve him well. In 1866 he entered the first-year class of a new secondary school in Vienna (Pokorny, 1867, p. 49), one intended to prepare its male students (girls were not admitted until the final years of the 19th century) for the University and on to professional and academic careers. The classically-focused curriculum of the Leopoldstädter Realgymnasium conformed with those of the much older Gymnasia elsewhere in the city. What distinguished Freud’s school was that it opened in one of the poorest areas of Vienna, whose
inhabitants at that time were mostly immigrants from various parts of the Habsburg realm. Many of those settling in the second district—the Leopoldstädt—were Jewish families, such as Freud’s; they had relocated there in 1859 from Sigismund’s birthplace, a market town in Moravia. Other preparatory schools in the city were much older, founded in monasteries or villas and usually associated in some way with the Church. In contrast Freud began his Viennese education in the upper two floors of a building that had previous housed a vocational school for the instruction of neighborhood girls and young women in “handwork” (Czeike, 1990) (Figure 2). When that school moved to a new location nearby, its benefactors bequeathed the building to the city for the new Gymnasium, and Freud was part of the third entering class, a cohort of just under 100 students (Pokorny, 1867, p. 49).

Freud flourished in these cramped rooms. At the conclusion of the first tier of his studies, the equivalent of middle school, he was recognized as the student with the most impres-
sive academic record. His son Martin would recall that the book given to mark this honor was among his father’s most treasured possessions (Freud, 1958, 21). The practice of bestowing such a prize likely occurred in all such schools in Vienna, but it is unclear whether the same book was given throughout the city. The choice was not what one might expect, neither a volume from the classical canon, nor a major piece of literature. Rather it concerned a topic in the “natural sciences” and focused on a place about which these particular students probably had little direct knowledge: the Swiss Alps. Das Thierleben der Alpenwelt (“The Animal Life of the Alpine World”) was written by Friedrich von Tschudi (1820–1886), first appearing in 1853 and going on to numerous later editions in both German and English. Von Tschudi, born in northern Switzerland, initially trained to be a pastor, then became a teacher after returning to study “natural sciences.” The combination of his interests aligned him with what was then known as “natural theology” (Kleeberg, 2007, p. 543), a view of nature as both a reflection of Darwinian determinism (an idea that he embraced) and “God’s great creative powers.” These elements came together for von Tschudi in the Alps, where the majestic mountains spoke to the timelessness of divine presence, while the life around it—animals, people, flora—embodied the materiality of the “natural” world. From the theological perspective, these two realms were unified as part of a divine plan. That said, the emphasis in both the text and the illustrations was on inherent differences among fauna, on serenity in sameness, and the necessity of conflict between different species. In von Tschudi’s mountains, these characteristics were imagined as the natural divide between the domesticated animals, living alongside the farmers and shepherds, and those of the wild, some of them dangerous and disruptive.

The Christian underpinnings of Das Thierleben der Alpenwelt were unmistakable, but since this perspective had been assumed by the author to be shared with his readers, its presence became as naturalized as the alpine landscape itself. Awarding this as a book prize in a school with an overwhelmingly Jewish student body may speak to the same motivation on the part of the school administrators and teachers (nearly all Austrian Catholics) to inculcate classical literature into these students
as a way to “elevate” and assimilate them into Viennese culture and to introduce the pleasures of outdoor, rural life—something little-known to many of these boys. Freud certainly embraced this latter aspiration, spending considerable time in later life on hikes in various parts of Austria and beyond. But there was a significant subtext here that echoed age-old sectarian difference and anti-Semitism (Geller, 2018, pp. 188–220), found in particular attributes embodied by one of the slyest and most threatening of the wild creatures, according to von Tschudi: the wolf.

Before looking at two relevant examples appearing in Freud’s prized book, it is necessary to provide a bit of background on what would have been for von Tschudi and his peers an acknowledged Christian understanding of the ways in which wolves and Jews had a particular connection. We will trace its origins back to the earliest chapter of Christianity, but it is worth noting that its pernicious legacy would continue in the era of the Nazi genocide, from which Freud narrowly escaped, when all Germans, adults as well as children, were expected to read Grimms’ Fairy Tales (Helfer, 2009, 32) with the official version of Little Red Riding Hood displaying a “Jewish star” on the grandmother’s nightgown (Tatar, 2003, p. 41). This image was a projection of a belief in the shared proximal malevolence of wolves and Jews that emerged nearly two millennia before Hitler, in writings of first followers of Jesus. The passage in Isaiah was reframed by the apostle Matthew into the image of the lion reposing with the lamb, a phrase that is ubiquitously cited in Christian sources. The lamb, as the sacrificed Jesus, is paired with what was imagined as the new “Lion of Judah”—claiming him as the rightful messiah of the Jews—and the wolf was recast as the figure of those who resist and attack these claims. Matthew recounts that as Jesus dispersed his followers, he sent them out as “sheep against wolves,” warning them of possible encounters with a “wolf in sheep’s clothing” (7:15). Because this verse follows on Jesus sending the twelve to the Israelites exclusively, “the Jews hostile to his kingdom are now implicitly cast as wolves” (Davies and Allison, 1991, p. 181).

This early connection became more explicit in writings of another Jewish follower of Jesus—Paul—who identifies as having come from the Tribe of Benjamin and who is a complex
figure in his attempts to convert the Jews (Jacobs, 2006). Paul retained a very clear Jewish heritage, and as such was considered in the subsequent centuries a crucial figure in asserting Christianity as the legitimate successor to the religion of Moses. Writings in the first centuries after the death of Paul extolled him for his ability to attract converts among his own people, to lure his Christian flock away from the Jewish “wolves” trying to rip them apart:

For when many wild, savaging animals, hiding under the shrub, happen to hear the sound of the hunter, they leap up from fear [...] So too your brothers, hiding in another “shrub”—Judaism—might hear Paul’s voice, and I know well that they will fall quite easily into the nets of salvation and reject all Jewish error. (Jacobs, 2006, p. 271)

This vivid imagery persisted long after the threat of Judaism to a nascent belief system had ended. The anti-Semitic association was bequeathed to Christianity along with other founding ideologies, and in the diaspora the elision of European Jewry as embodied by the wolf continued. “The devil acts like a wolf, as do the Jews,” was first written in the thirteenth century, and inspired many subsequent sermons and images (Rubin, 1999, 25). A century after this, hungry wolves were a common characterization of Jews who were accused of attacking and killing children. As Miri Rubin noted, “A sinister world which associates Jews with the slaying of the innocent is reinforced here by the prevalent fear of wolves” (Rubin, 1999, p. 26). This connection flourished in text and image from the medieval period onward, and thus when the six-pointed star appeared on the wolf in a grandmotherly disguise, it would have been understood as an obvious animal of choice.

The cover of von Tschudi’s book shows an animal kingdom where the peaceful coexistence is reserved for like species—clusters of mountain goats, a family of birds—while a bear and mountain lion face each other with their teeth bared, and a raptor circles above, all seemingly on the verge of combat (Figure 3). Emerging out of the shadows near them is the stalking wolf, its head down and an air of stealth danger about it. The
formal composition is notable here, with the upper portion of the cover displaying the harmonious, more domesticated animals and the soaring landscape, while the possible animal combat, the “natural enemies,” appear in the foreground to the left. Between them is the wolf, as though unwelcome in either world, pictured in an in-between place, seemingly threatening to either portion of the scene.

But it is the illustration devoted to the wolf inside the book (Figure 4) that bespeaks its history of sectarian association, a legacy that would surely have been known to von Tschudi, who had trained for a ministry and served as a clergy for a number of years. This image has been cited by previous authors who have looked at the Wolf Man case (Davis, 1995; Johnson, 2001), but none have noted the odd setting where the animal is shown: running beside a village chapel. The wolf appears to be chased by a farmer and his family, perhaps having been discovered in their barn or roost. At this moment the wolf is turning back to face those in pursuit, with a menacing pose, as one of the family dogs closely follows it. The choice of a village location, with snow-covered crosses on the graves of the small cemetery and on the spires, adds to the proximity of the encounter and of the danger. The wolf has entered a domesticated space, defiling both the barnyard and the churchyard, but is chased away by those attached to both. Of all the animals featured on the cover, it would have been highly unlikely that any other would have been shown this way, especially in such an obvious “Christian” setting; it was the wolf that was the transgressor here.

When Freud proudly received this book, it is unlikely that he saw anything anti-Jewish in the illustration bearing the simple caption of “Wolf.” But the sentiments that informed it intensified in the fifty years that separated his childhood award and the publication of the “Wolf Man” case. The fears of closeness and danger that Freud brought to his sexualized interpretation of the wolves at the window turned the focus inward, leaving the animals and their outside world as the dream’s veneer. But threats that lurked there would become the undeniable content of a nightmare, feeding on the malignant presence of anti-Semitism that spanned millennia and culminated in the forced exile of Freud and his family, twenty years after the
Figure 3. Cover, Friedrich von Tschudi. (1853). *Das Thierleben der Alpenwelt.*

Harvard College Library
Figure 4. Illustrated plate ("Wolf"), Das Thierleben der Alpenwelt, opposite p. 400. Harvard College Library.
case appeared, in London. In the autumn of the next year, 1939, he would die surrounded by his collection of objects and books. By then, he had given the von Tschudi volume to his son Martin, but the Philippson Bible remained with him, its wolf still marking the site of a fantasy of peace.

**Notes**

1. In the period of Freud’s early life that we will focus on here, he had a classmate named Berthold Wolf (Pokorny, 1867, p. 49), one of several students with that name who attended this Gymnasium during Freud’s years as a student there.

2. In his recent book, Jay Geller connects the lupine surname directly to Freud’s case, noting the importance of “an article by Dr Moshe Wulff” of Odessa (Geller, 2018, p. 210), extolling Freud and his work, that was read by Pankejeff’s physician, Leonid Drosnes; on the basis of that article, Drosnes suggested Freud to his patient.

**References**


