Interview with Ernest S. Wolf, M.D., by Jill R. Gardner, Ph.D.
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JG: Ernie, when someone reaches the prominence in his field that you have, many of the rest of us become curious about the path that led him there. I know for you it was a path with many twists and turns – some good, some not so good, some planned, some quite accidental. Tell us something about how you came to become a physician and then a psychiatrist and analyst, starting any place that you think is relevant.

EW: I did not start out to be a psychiatrist or an analyst. I became interested in becoming a physician when the G.I. bill suddenly made it possible for me to go to medical college to get the education. While I was in medical school, our professor of psychiatry was an analyst, Jacob Feinstein. He wanted to get us off in the right direction, so he formed groups of four in the class. And as a group of four, we would go into a medical ward and each of us in the group would sit with a patient for at least one hour every day. During this hour, we would primarily listen to that patient. We would try to get that patient to tell us why they're in the hospital, how they feel about it, how they're being treated – just in a totally unstructured interview. Then we would get together as a group of four with an instructor and discuss what we had just heard with each other. And that's how I became interested in psychiatry, because it seemed to us that even though we were just relatively ignorant medical students, that by meeting with these patients day after day for an hour for two or three weeks, we became the most important person in their lives. The things they told us were much, much more than they ever told the ward doctors. And their welfare in the hospital seemed to depend as much on their relationship with us as other factors that were going on.

JG: So you learned something very early on in your training about the power of listening to people.

EW: Right. And the importance of the doctor-patient relationship. It was a very, very important experience for all of us, but particularly for me.

JG: Why particularly for you?

EW: That is when the decision was made that I would become a psychoanalyst, just from my experience of listening to these patients.

JG: So there was something about the experience of the doctor-patient relationship having so much power to heal that really inspired you to go into a branch of medicine where that would be the central focus.

EW: Right. I wasn't interested in psychoses or neuroses or psychiatric units. I was interested in the power of the doctor-patient relationship, a direct experience. And so when I then finished medical school in Baltimore, at the University of Maryland, I went to the Jewish hospital in Cincinnati for my internship. I went to Cincinnati because the man who ran the internship program there was somebody I had known when I was working as a technician at Hopkins years before. During the internship I applied for residency training. One of the psychiatric residencies I applied for was at Menninger's in Topeka and one was at the General Hospital in Cincinnati, right across the street from the Jewish hospital. I went out to Topeka to be interviewed for the residency, but I decided that I didn't want to live in Topeka. In Cincinnati, I was interviewed by Maurice Levine, who was the Chairman of the Department, and Milt Rosenbaum, who headed the psychosomatic section. At the time, they both were very prominent psychoanalysts. They both had been trained in Chicago and both had been analyzed by Franz Alexander. They commuted between Cincinnati and Chicago for the analysis and for the analytic training. So I decided to follow in their footsteps.

JG: This is a well-worn path between Cincinnati and Chicago for this purpose.

EW: Right. And unfortunately--or fortunately, it's hard to say--on my regular yearly chest x-rays during my residency in psychiatry I came up with a lesion, which turned out to be TB. And the skin test also came up positive for histoplasmosis. The TB meant that it would be too strenuous for me to commute from Cincinnati to Chicago for the training and supervision. So the solution was to move to Chicago.

JG: Is that why you say fortunately or unfortunately, because it brought you to Chicago?

EW: Yes, that's how I wound up in Chicago. I was very impressed with the Institute and I was very impressed with these guys in Cincinnati who were analysts trained in Chicago. They really had the feel for the doctor-patient relationship, which takes me back to the earlier experience as a medical student that I just mentioned.

JG: Well, you're talking about a trend. You know, with this experience in medical school that was heightened by your experience in your residency and then that brought you here. This might be a good place to go back even earlier. I'm sure that thread starts long before that, in terms of what might have primed you to be so responsive or have so much resonance with this kind of relationship being important. What do you think was significant from your earlier life?

EW: Well, you know growing up in Germany as a Jew had its complications in those days. The Nazis had come into power in1933, when I was 12. And it became imperative to prepare oneself for emigration. Nobody thought the Holocaust was going to happen. Nobody in their wildest imagination thought of that. But we did think that we didn't have a future in Germany – a commercial future – that it would be hard to get jobs, Jews would be discriminated against, could no longer study at universities, etc. So it became important to learn something with which one could emigrate and get a job abroad. I got some chemistry laboratory experience, expecting to get a job as a lab tech, if necessary, after emigrating. With that experience as a lab technician, when I was drafted into the U.S.Army, I was put in a lab in a hospital. That's how I became a little acquainted with medicine. Often my job would take me through the hospital and I'd see these guys wandering around in their white coats, with stethoscopes hanging around their necks. It seemed utterly glamorous. I said, "That's what I want!"

JG: When you proceeded through your training, I assume that, like most people in your generation, you were trained as a classical analyst.

EW: Yes.

JG: Certainly nobody would accuse you today of being a classical analyst. So between there and here, I'm sure there's a story. What happened there? What drew you to self psychology?

EW: First of all, I had a very bad experience in my first analysis, which was with a classical analyst who happened to be president of the American Psychoanalytic at the time. He was widely known, very well known, Maxwell Gitleson .

JG: What was bad about it?

EW: The man might not say a word for four or five days in a row. Total silence. And the comments that he made were designed, I thought, to make me feel bad about myself. I mean I thought he was accusing me of all kinds of things. The most common accusation was, "you don't want to be analyzed, you just want to be an analyst," you know, that sort of thing. I became more and more anxious and nervous. After two years of that torture, I was in bad shape and we stopped the analysis.

JG: That was the healthy part of you that got out!

EW: Yes, right. And I went to see Joan Fleming who was the Dean of the Institute, and talked to her about it and she pulled me out of my funk by saying, "You didn't get to know him and he didn't get to know you." She didn't condemn him, but she certainly made me feel that there wasn't necessarily anything wrong with me. I wound up for my second analysis with Charlie Kligerman.

JG: And what was that like?

EW: That was a totally different experience from what I had had with Gitleson. I always had the feeling that he understood what I was talking about. I had the feeling that he did not have any contempt for me, he didn't look down on me, but he was really trying to understand. He made some of the same interpretations that Gitleson had made, only in a different tone of voice.

JG: So is this how you became so interested in the ambiance?

EW: Yes. I was in analysis for six years and at the end of that I just applied to the Institute. The first time I applied, I was turned down. I don't remember what the reasons were. Then they called me some months later saying, "Why don't you apply again?" or something like that. So I did. I was accepted and that's how I got into becoming a psychoanalyst.

JG: I know that Kohut was your fourth supervisor and that you chose him for that. What drew you to him?

EW: He had been an instructor during the second year that I was a candidate. I liked his teaching and I liked him. And remember, he was the fourth supervisor for the fourth case. I had others before him. I was already beginning to understand a little bit about what he stood for before choosing him to be my supervisor.

JG: You were well acquainted with his ideas and his way of working.

EW: At least beginning to be acquainted, yes. My first supervisor was Theresa Benedek. The second supervisor was Fred Robbins and the third case was with Helen McLean. So Kohut was the fourth one, and that was a very productive supervisory relationship, even though we disagreed at times. It was during the time that he was writing his first book and he had a group of young people around him that he would read it to. Once a month they would meet and he would read the book chapter by chapter to this group.

JG: Who was in the group?

EW: Gedo, Goldberg, Paul Ornstein, Paul Tolpin, Mike Gunther, Mike Basch, Dave Marcus. Those were the people in the group. And the most important person was John Gedo.

JG: Did he have a special relationship with Kohut at that time?

EW: He apparently had a special relationship with him. Gedo also had a special relationship with me . We were good friends and we wrote four or five papers together.

JG: On what topics?

EW: They were historical papers in psychoanalysis. Freud and Cervantes, Montaigne--the ideas that Freud was exposed to. At that time, Kohut was giving a paper in German. Gedo got a hold of it, I translated it into English, and we presented that as a present to Kohut.

JG: He must have been thrilled.

EW: Yes, he liked that. And that was responsible for my being asked into the group, my ticket of admission so to speak. I admired him a great deal.

JG: I've heard you say that you felt that Kohut was the greatest genius since Freud. I wonder what made you feel that way and if you still think that?

EW: I really do, because I think more than anybody else since Freud, his ideas are the ones that are dominating psychoanalysis now, even though he's not always getting proper credit for it.

JG: What aspect of his ideas do you see as dominating psychoanalysis?

EW: That it is the relationship, the transference relationship. By transference I mean not transference of libidinal desires or aggressive intentions, but the need for a certain responsiveness in the relationship that is what moves the analysis. That was his idea. That is I think what dominates everybody's analysis nowadays. The pre-genital and what we now call selfobject needs is what Kohut introduced into psychoanalysis.

JG: I remember that at one of the Kohut memorial lectures you gave years ago, you were speaking about the analytic relationship and said that the one-way street has become open to two-way traffic. You have also emphasized the process of mutual empathy in your own ideas. Does this flow directly out of what you're talking about here?

EW: Yes, it's a further development. Kohut himself did not really emphasize that. His analysis was still something going on inside the analysand with the help of the analyst, the analyst's input. He really didn't stress that the interaction was the primary thing. This is what you're referring to. I've stressed that and I think that's true for most people nowadays--that they're stressing the interaction.

JG: Your ideas about how change occurs have certainly evolved over the years. How do your current views differ both from Kohut's ideas and from your own earlier ideas about it?

EW: From Kohut's it's only as a matter of degree, not fundamentally. Kohut was still, to a large extent, hung up on insight, providing insight about selfobject needs. That's what he thought was therapeutic. I got a little further than that. I don't think it's mainly the insight. I think it's the relationship – the experience of the relationship – that is the therapeutic ingredient. Kohut talked about disruption and restoration of the relationship as a therapeutic factor. But it was just one factor, with insight still being considered the most important factor. I have switched that around. I think it's the relationship and particularly what develops in an analysis when the relationship between an analyst and analysand somehow gets disrupted and repaired. That is where the therapeutic action takes place.

JG: How does that happen? What do you understand as the mechanism or dynamic of what happens in that disruption-restoration sequence that leads to change or moves the analysis along?

EW: In that disruption is a major regression of the analysand. Going back to an earlier stage of self, a disorganized self. And as this disrupted infantile aspect of the self interacts with the analyst, who, instead of just pointing the finger, responds in an understanding way, the self will come back together in that ambiance of feeling understood and feeling accepted. But in coming back together, it comes back together with some image of this analyst replacing the image of the rejecting parent or hurtful parent that had been there before.

JG: Besides the importance of the ambiance and the disruption-restoration cycle, what other aspects of self psychology have caught your particular interest in terms of your study and writing?

EW: I think there has been a gradual shift away from thinking about pathology of the self towards expression of the self. Due to our background in medicine, we've been overly sensitive to pathology. We've made that often the cornerstone of our theorizing. We look for pathology, dig in for it, and then we make interpretations that are supposed to move the pathology. I think there is a kernel of truth in all that, but I think what's more important in helping a person is not so much to look for pathology, but to help that person recognize the self, their own strengths and weaknesses, and somehow give them indirectly an incentive to not be afraid to express themselves. That is I think an important aspect and I think that in an overall way, psychoanalysis needs that correction to be more attuned to what Marian Tolpin calls the leading edge of health, rather than the trailing edge of pathology.

JG: This emphasis on the positive, on health and the realization of potentials--is there something in your own life that you feel leads you to particularly resonate with this focus?

EW: What comes to mind is my attitude towards Germany and the Germans. We've gone back many times since the 1960s. I've gotten to know many of the colleagues over there and have some real friendships. And I don't hold any negative thoughts or feelings about them because they're German. In that I'm very different, I believe, from many other people who were refugees. What was bad can be discarded but the positive experience that we have with each other is what counts for me and apparently counts for them, too.

When I was about fourteen or fifteen, the Nazis had come into power and some of my fellow classmates were taking great pleasure in beating me up. So I decided to leave school. In town there was a chemist who had a school in his lab, where he trained technicians. His name was Dr. Heinrich Jüsten. During the first World War he had been wounded. His leg had been shattered. Both his leg and his life had been

saved by a Jewish doctor, so he felt a special kind of gratitude or responsibility towards me as a Jew who was suffering from the Nazi business. After a year of being his student and learning how to do all these analyses, he hired me as one of his assistants. This is just one bit of a very positive experience with a non-Jewish German. I have had others.

JG: The whole rise of the Nazis and then subsequently the Holocaust, having lived in Germany and having needed to flee it in order to pursue the kind of life that you wanted -- how did that impact your views of human nature, of mankind?

EW: Somehow I always knew that with mankind there were good people or bad people. The business with the Holocaust and the Nazis just confirmed that. Where I initially got that, I don't know. We were not a religious family. On the one hand, I had some conviction that the Jews were smarter than most others and that much of the progress of mankind had been brought about by the Jews. But on the other hand, I also had the impression that the Jews were perceived as less honest in business, less upstanding citizens, and that therefore the majority of the population looked down on them and really didn't like them. This does not come out of books, you know, this comes out of experience.

JG: Did you feel yourself to be Jewish?

EW: Oh, yes. It was part of who I was. I joined a Zionist youth group when I was in high school because that was one way to get out of Germany. They were going to send us all to a Kibbutz. But when it came time for me to go, I got cold feet and backed out. By that time, I was also trying to get an American visa.

JG: So it was less an interest in going to Palestine than it was in finding a route out of Germany?

EW: Right.

EW: Most Jews are still very obsessed at the German feelings and so forth and so on. I'm not.

JG: Well, the fact that you do not retain the same kind of animosity towards Germany that many other people do seems to grow directly out of your experience with Germans. Even in the midst of the closed doors and getting beaten up by kids at school and a variety of other bad things about the Nazis, there were many Germans who still welcomed and helped you, who helped you move forward in your life.

EW: Not only that. The night before Kristalnacht, the wife of a Gestapo officer, somebody we had shared an apartment with years before, came to our house to warn us that they were going to arrest all the Jewish males between 16 and 60. We were warned and so we reacted accordingly. When they came through our apartment the next day to inspect us and to arrest the males who were between 16 and 60, I was sitting at a table in short pants made up to look like I was only twelve or something like that, doing homework, and they passed me right by. So she saved my life. There have been many such incidents of Germans being very positive and helpful. That's experience. You see why I put so much emphasis on experience rather than theory?

JG: Yes. You know, in thinking about these positive experiences with Germans I am reminded of what you said about the importance of focusing on the leading edge, on the health rather than the pathology, and on the positive rather than the negative. It strikes me how consistent that is with the major shift that Kohut made from the psychoanalytic thinking that preceded him. I wonder if perhaps this led his ideas to be a particularly good fit for you, if there was some resonance you felt with his general attitude towards life and people.

EW: Yes, he was of a very similar frame of mind. When he met a person, he wasn't searching for their flaws or for their neuroses. He was looking for the positive side of their being. I usually feel that way too. But also, I would be foolish to deny that there was a personal aspect, a personal relationship, between him and me. He very often felt bad, and particularly he very often felt lonely. He felt that he needed some selfobject responsiveness. I was here on the 24th floor and he was on the 23rd floor. I get here early in the morning, usually about an hour before my first patient, to avoid the rush hour traffic. Well, Kohut would get here early too. He usually got here around 7:00 a.m. And as often as not, the phone would ring around 7:00 and he'd ask whether I was alone or did I have a patient yet, and if not, could I

come down. He needed to have somebody that he could resonate with, to come down, talk and listen to him – but mostly listen to him. He loved to talk.

JG: And how did you feel about being chosen as the one to listen?

EW: I felt I was one of his favorite boys. I liked that. It felt great, though I know I wasn't. In the evening, he would call Arnold Goldberg.

JG: So you were breakfast and Arnie was after dinner?

EW: Right.

JG: You know, we were talking about some of these influences of your experience on your ideas and the path you took and so forth. We haven't talked much about your family. What kind of role did your early experiences with them play in determining the beliefs and values that you came to embody in the course of your life's work?

EW: Well, a generally very positive role. My mother had three children. I was the oldest and the other two were girls. So I had sort of a special place as being the oldest and being the boy. In general, I think she was very fond of me. I had an intense sibling rivalry with my next-youngest sister. She's two years younger than I and was born one day before my second birthday. So she always robbed me of my birthdays. My father was a very intelligent man, but somehow weak. He was not weak in intelligence or in willpower, but he was not a good business man. Twice his businesses went bankrupt.

JG: Did you idealize him in other ways, or was that sort of a de-idealization for you – his failure in business?

EW: That was a de-idealization. I idealized his intelligence. I idealized his goodwill. I idealized that people in the family – aunts, uncles, cousins – would come to him when they needed advice. They all looked up to him about family matters, but not business matters. After he had gone bankrupt twice, he worked for his older brother, my uncle, as his traveling salesman. He was the brother that was given a job because you have to support your brother.

JG: You left Germany before your parents did, didn't you?

EW: Yes.

JG: What did they think about your decision to leave Germany? Was it their idea? Did they support it?

EW: They supported it, but it was my idea. I was fifteen when I went to the American Consulate to apply for a visa.

JG: So you saw the handwriting on the wall before they did?

EW: Yes, absolutely. I urged them to apply for visas, too, but they were not interested at that time. My father couldn't see going to a strange country to make a living when he could hardly make it in Germany and my mother wasn't going to leave the girls and him. So I went on my own, but they did not put any obstacles in my way. It took three years almost to get that visa. I went to the U.S. early in '39. My sisters went out about 6 months before I did, on a children's transport to Sweden. The people that they stayed with in Stockholm managed to get Swedish visas for my parents too. So in August of 1939, they went to Stockholm, a month before the war broke out.

JG: So the same year that you came to America and just before the War, the rest of your immediate family was able to get to Sweden. Ernie, I've heard you say that you feel like you've had a guardian angel looking out for you. What makes you feel that way?

EW: I wasn't one of those who got caught in the Holocaust. And I think it was a stroke of luck to come to Chicago and get acquainted with Kohut. A guardian angel guided me into the Chicago Institute and guided me to marry the right kind of wife.

JG: Tell me about Ina and your kids.

EW: When I was a resident in Cincinnati, there were a number of social workers in the department and one of them gave a party. At this party, I met Ina. She was in the College of Music because she has a beautiful soprano voice and she was training to be a soprano. I don't remember who she came with to that party, but she went home with me. We very quickly developed a very close relationship and when, about six months later, I turned up with a TB lesion and they sent me back to Baltimore to the sanitarium, Ina came with me. She lived with my mother and we got married two days after my discharge from the sanatorium, in 1953.

Our oldest child was born in 1957, and he's now in Boston. He went to the Illinois School for Professional Psychology and then went to Boston for his internship. He also helps people with and consults about computers. My daughter went to London after college, met her husband there, and stayed in London. She's just finished her second year of analytic training there. Each of my children now has two children of their own.

JG: Ernie, going back to some of the things that you've done in the field, what have you gotten the most notice for and what gives you the most pride and pleasure?

EW: I have to admit it's the book.

JG: *Treating the Self*?

EW: Yes, it gives me a lot of pleasure because, even after eleven years, it's still a best seller.

JG: Yes. This book has become a classic and has been enormously helpful in clarifying and making accessible the theory of self psychology to all kinds of students and practitioners in every mental health discipline. It certainly has made you the most widely known – not only in analytic circles, but in mental health circles in general. What's your own feeling about the book and its success?

EW: I'm very pleased. I enjoy that and I think that there are basically minor aspects of the book that I would write differently, that could be updated. But on the whole, I think it is okay the way it is. Perhaps not enough emphasis on what I mentioned earlier, not enough emphasis on the positive, on self-realization, and still too much emphasis on self-pathology. But that's just a matter of emphasis. I'm very pleased with the book. I just got a letter from Japan from a group of four psychologists who want to translate it into Japanese.

JG: How wonderful. Has it been translated into other languages?

EW: German, Italian and French.

JG: You also teach all over the world.

EW: Yes, I enjoy doing that. Talking about enjoyment of work, another thing I enjoyed greatly was my work with John Gedo. You know, the papers about Montaigne, Cervantes, Fliess, those historical papers. Freud, Freud's development and so forth – very, very enjoyable. I would have been very happy as a historian.

JG: I was just thinking that. The whole interest in how things develop, how people develop, how ideas develop. Isn't this the heart of being a psychoanalyst?

EW: Right. And working with Gedo in those days was good. I thought he was one of the most brilliant people I'd ever met and I still think so. Unfortunately, his psychological requirements were to be the most important person. He sincerely believed that Kohut got his ideas from him, Gedo, and that he is the lead originator of self psychology

JG: So it was a loss that these kinds of issues ultimately separated you, because you enjoyed your collaboration, both intellectually and personally. Speaking of collaborators, how did Joe Lichtenberg become a collaborator and friend of yours? How did you hook up with him?

EW: We were cadaver mates in medical school. That was the beginning of a long friendship going back to 1946. I wanted to introduce him to Kohut. I brought him from the beginning to the annual self psychology conferences. I insisted that he come to Chicago, and he met Kohut, gave papers, and became involved very quickly.

JG: So you feel you introduced him to self psychology.

EW: Right.

JG: Now what about the Ornsteins? You talked about training in Cincinnati. Did your paths cross there?

EW: Not in Cincinnati. In the Spring of 1955 there was the annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association in Atlantic City. Paul Ornstein was there, having recently come from Hungary the year before. So I met him then. I liked Paul and tried to persuade him to go to Cincinnati and have a residency there where I just was finishing up, because the Chairman of the Department, Maury Levine, was a wonderful person. My life is just one idealization after another and at that time it was Maury Levine. Paul and Anna went to Cincinnati, finished their training there, and came on the faculty. Now in Cincinnati, every faculty member who counted had commuted to Chicago for analysis and training. So they both commuted here as well.

JG: You know, when you said, "one idealization after another," it made me think about that first German chemist taking you under his wing and this man, who was head of the department in Cincinnati, and then later, of course, there was Kohut. It seems like you have been guided and moved along in your own life course by idealized mentors in very important ways. Now you have become that yourself, through your own writing and teaching.

EW: Yes, it's nice.

JG: Ernie, are there interests that you have within the field that we haven't talked about that you'd like to mention?

EW: Within the school of dynamic psychiatry rather than psychoanalysis, I've always been interested in psychosomatics and psychosomatic sequences. One year of my residency was a fellowship in psychosomatic medicine in Cincinnati. We had medical patients and we tried to see what psychological factors were causing the illness. I've always been interested in that. Again, it was the doctor-patient relationship that seemed to be at the bottom of it all.

JG: When you think of the state of our field, both in terms of psychoanalytic thinking in general and self psychology in particular, what do you think are the most exciting ideas that are coming out now and what are the biggest challenges that we face?

EW: I think we should shift much of our emphasis to a self-psychological appreciation, if not interpretation, of other activities like drama, fiction, music, the whole world of the humanities. I think we have a big contribution to make there. That's where I think we should shift to. I think clinically, we've gone as far as we can go, at least as far as I can see it. We emphasize our clinical interaction with our analysands, helping them realize their selves, their creativity, and their potential. If I had another life to live, I would pick things in history, or pivotal cultural movements, and try to give them my self-psychological interpretation.

JG: Kind of like your analysis of the Arab-Israeli conflict in your book, where you talk about the role of narcissistic injury and rage in what makes that conflict so interminable?

EW: Right, that sort of thing. Only much expanded and, you know, one would really have to read up more on history than I have.

JG: And what interests you outside of psychoanalysis?

EW: I like to read philosophy and I like to read politics and I like to read history. I don't read novels very often. It may seem surprising to somebody who is a psychoanalyst and is interested in the inner life of people.

JG: You listen to novels all day long!

EW: That's true. Music is also very important to me. I have a very nice collection of records and CDs and as often as not, if you come into my library, there's either some Bach or some Mozart or Beethoven playing.

JG: You've accomplished so much in your life. What do you want to do now?

EW: You know, I used to say, sort of jocularly, "I want to live to and see the year 2000." I have to set myself another goal now. Probably what I want to do is write a decent autobiography for my grandchildren. That project is on my mind because I think my grandchildren, and if there ever should be great- grandchildren, they ought to know who their great-grandfather was.

JG: Well, there's a lot to tell. Thanks for sharing so much of it with us for this Newsletter.