

## "VWI goes to the Sigmund Freud Museum"

Wednesday, 15 June 2016 6.00 pm

Sigmund Freud Museum  
 Berggasse 19 1090 Wien

### Ferenc ERŐS: From War Neurosis to Holocaust Trauma

In this presentation a historical and critical survey of the contribution of psychoanalysis, and other “psycho-sciences”, to our contemporary understanding of the trauma of the Holocaust will be outlined. The theme of mass traumatization effects goes back to the use of psychiatric knowledge and procedures during the First World War. As part of the war machine, psychiatry had special functions in the mobilization of the masses as well as in the treatment of soldiers who suffered *shell shock*, *traumatic neurosis* or *war neurosis*. The main task of psychiatrists at this time was to cure these soldiers as quickly and as effectively as possible – in order to send them back to the same circumstances, which originally caused their symptoms. The treatments often utilized brutal, punitive methods such as electric shocks. Based on archival sources, and on the correspondence between Sigmund Freud and Sándor Ferenczi, the application of these methods will be illustrated using the example of a Hungarian military doctor.



The majority of army doctors regarded war neurosis as a character deficiency, a sign of a “feminine” character. It was believed that this kind of *male hysteria* may also infect “healthy” soldiers, destroying their will, determination, patriotism and heroism. On the other hand, the psychoanalytic approach to war neurosis by Ferenczi and others can be regarded as a humanizing alternative to the dominant, torturous procedures. Psychoanalysts emphasized the importance of understanding the patient’s symptoms, and their unconscious motives rather than external, physical causes.

The psychoanalytic approach to war neurosis anticipated later debates on the nature of individual and collective psychic traumata. The existence of a Holocaust trauma as a separate group of symptoms was, for a long time, not acknowledged, even though there were important initiatives immediately after the war to deal with psychosocial problems of survivors. After the Second World War the main focus of psychoanalysis was on the psychological traits of perpetrators and supporters. The focus from perpetrators to victims shifted only in the 1970s. However, the fight for the acknowledgment of Holocaust trauma as a special case of PTSD led to the dominance of medical conceptualization according to which Holocaust survivors were “ill”, even if not being aware of their sickness. The medicalization of the life problems of the survivors (and, even their offspring) was a dominant trend until the 1980s when the medical paradigm gradually transformed into broader social and cultural approaches.

### Comments by Verena PAWLOWSKY

*Ferenc Erős* is Senior Visiting Fellow at the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute. Ferenc Erős, studied psychology and literature at the ELTE University in Budapest, and graduated in 1969. He obtained his PhD in 1986, and was awarded the title Doctor of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (DSc) since 2002. Currently he is professor emeritus at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Pécs. The focus of his present research includes Jewish identity, the social and cultural history of psychoanalysis in Central Europe, psychoanalytic theory and its application to social issues and the problem of trauma and cultural memory. He is the author of several scientific books and articles in his areas of research in English, Hungarian, German and French.

*Verena Pawlowsky* is a historian involved in research and teaching in addition to being widely published. Research projects include the history of welfare, of disabled veterans of the First World War, of confiscated property during the Nazi era and resultant compensation after 1945 as well as the history of institutions during the Nazi era. Her most recent publications include: *Die Wunden des Staates. Kriegsoffer und Sozialstaat in Österreich 1914–1938* (2015) [with Harald Wendelin]; and *Die Akademie der bildenden Künste Wien im Nationalsozialismus. Lehrende, Studierende und Verwaltungspersonal* (2015). For additional information refer to [www.forschungsbuero.at](http://www.forschungsbuero.at).