

**Eric Brenman interviewed by Natasha Harvey,
with Irma Brenman Pick and Kannan Navaratnem**

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Psychoanalysis***

NH: You were obviously very drawn to Freud. Somewhere you decided that you wanted to take up psychiatry.

EB: Yes.

NH: But only after ... you then trained as a doctor first of all. Is that right?

EB: Well, I didn't know what I wanted to be, to be honest. I didn't know whether to ever write that down. But I asked my uncle. He said, 'Why not do medicine?' So I did medicine. I liked biology and a bit of chemistry and I thought, I know, I'd learn a bit about what life's about, and how it comes about. I [thought] I'd know everything... And it didn't work ... [Laughter] ... you know, I was... But, my Uncle's son also did medicine, and we shared problems, and talked together.

NH: And was it half way through your medical training that you had to be evacuated from Barts¹.

EB: Yes, to Cambridge.

¹ St Bartholomew's Hospital, London

NH: And then you were in Cambridge, and for how long?

EB: About a year and three quarters.

NH: And then you came back to London.

EB: I came back to Barts, and they had already split their hospital up because the war was on, between St Albans and – what's the Colney Hatch called? Friern Barnet.

NH: And then, shortly after that, you went into the Army?

EB: Well, yes, I had to go and do my gynaecology obstetrics: had to watch twelve babies being born. But I went into the Army ... I was in the Army just at the beginning of 1944, or end of 1943.

NH: What was your experience like in the Army?

EB: Well, I was very lucky in the Army. I was lucky in the sense that in 1941 I thought Hitler was going to win. I couldn't bear it. So a lot of us wanted to go and join the Air Force, because we'd rather go down than be in concentration camps and things like that. But they said. 'No, you go and do your medicine first.' That's how I did that.

EB: And the next time I wanted to join the Army, strangely enough I wanted to go in the Navy. Probably quite liked the uniform, or some silly reason. But everyone wanted to go in the Navy, and the Army had less applicants, and it was easier. You had to go in the Army.

NH: Could we come back to how you came to have some of these thoughts and ideas? Right back to when you started training, and how you had to make a choice, I understand, between being a psychiatrist or a psychoanalyst.

[This now refers to a later time, approximately 1954, after which Eric had qualified in Psychiatry and Psychoanalysis]

EB: You couldn't. You couldn't be a psychiatrist and a psychoanalyst, which seems strange to us now. No, no, no, I couldn't be at the Tavi.²

NH: Oh, you couldn't be at the Tavistock?

EB: And do that [psychoanalysis].

IBP: There was nothing legally stopping you. I mean, it was just you were put under pressure.

EB: You were put under pressure. You were told that you can't be both, and really you've got to be devoted to analysis, and not let other things come in. I think that's not done nowadays.

NH: No it isn't, that would seem very strange [now].

EB: It's very good it's not done. And if you ... if you did something outside, it's not analysis. So what does it mean, it's not analysis? As I made a joke to somebody who was sleeping with their patient. And I said, 'If it's five times a week he's alright, otherwise...' [Laughter] That's the sort of thingwhere it became a thing in itself. Like it's not analysis.

NH: Speaking of five times a week analysis, and this kind of particular rigidity, I understand that when you were training at the Institute...

EB: You had to have five times.

NH: You had to have five times a week. But also, that it was not that long after the heat of the Controversial Discussions.

EB: Yes, yes.

NH: And that there was a lot of...enmity at that time.

² Tavistock Clinic, London.

EB: The controversial discussions were, 'We're absolutely right, and you're absolutely wrong'. It's like the organic psychiatrists say 'you know nothing, Freud's a fraud'. And it's just the same. And the Kleinians were saying, 'We know the truth, we're following, you're not doing it.' It was so total. It's all or nothing, and very, very complicated. It's very interesting because gradually people do think each side has something to offer, and respect each other. I quote Northern Ireland as the best analogy. Because at first in Northern Ireland, Thatcher – who I don't normally approve of – said she wouldn't make any negotiations until they lay down all their guns, and they wouldn't do it. And they said, 'You do it and we'll do it,' and it got like this. But she sent someone to get to know how the other felt. And knowing how the other felt, you could work through it.

NH: Yes.

EB: And if anybody really could make a human being out of Ian Paisley [Laughter] - it's a marvel! It's one of the most marvellous analytic things you could do, and accept that he does 'give and take' with McGuinness. Well, that's not an analysis!

NH: Yes, but you actually did something quite pioneering, I understand, with your wife Irma, a bit later on, after you'd done your training. You set up a group and invited members from the other groups – three from the Freudians, three from the Independents, three Kleinians – to meet at your house. Is that right?

EB: Yes.

NH: And you would attempt to try and discuss things together, and see where the differences and similarities lay.

EB: I'm afraid it wasn't as achieving as we'd have liked it to be. It wasn't. We did get some understanding in this, that and the other, but in a

way I think we all had our tribal things holding us together, and it was difficult.

NH: And who was in the group? Who did you invite?

EB: There was Anne-Marie Sandler, Joe Sandler, Peter Fonagy, Dennis Duncan, Judy Jackson. There must have been all, there must have been others.....Anne Hayman..... You can't win them all can you? [Laughter]

NH: No, quite, but...

EB: But it was something. Anne-Marie... When I became President, Anne-Marie [who was then Vice-President] and I did want to do something like that, and we instrumented something, and we had meetings.

NH: Yes.

NH: So that was round about when you were President, between 1987 and 1990. So, actually that's quite late on, isn't it, after the controversial discussions, for it to be regarded as a bit radical?

EB: It was quite... Yes, yes...

NH: And during your Presidency, would you say that that was one of the things that you were keen to encourage, or promote?

EB: Well, working with Anne-Marie was very nice.

NH: And something that perhaps we'll come to later, but that seems to be important in your thinking – about the need for a patient to have a home. To have a mind that will house them and be with them.

EB: Yes, that's right.

EB: Yes, yes, and be able to face the [] and so on, and so forth, and be like a home, because you can't, I think, when you yearn for perfect provisions, as everybody does. Like you get married, or when you get engaged, you're falling in love, it's marvellous, your two hearts beat as one, you reiterate the intrauterine life you've shared together, and it's normal to like it. But in the end you have to get someone to help you face reality, lest your marriage end in divorce...

NH: That's staying in! [Laughter]

EB: And you come to realise you're an ordinary human being, and someone can even tolerate you. And that's how you review yourself.

NH: Yes.

EB: A mother who worships a child and so on and so forth and this is where I think human intervention is of avail, as it helps a person to contain it [this idealisation] but if she makes too much fuss and [offers too much] reassurance, the child is really encouraged not to face reality, and has to be obedient. And it's very powerful, and I think it comes into religion. You have one God, and everything he does is right, he knows everything, he knew everything, and you avoid having to face reality. That's one of the problems. Or you can have somebody who is an authority. A powerful authority was Truby King. I'm a Truby King [baby]... I was fed every four hours you see.

NH: Really?

EB: Yes. You're to 'do this and that', and you have to fit in. And the way you get love is not by being understood, but by being obedient and following the party line, and so on and so forth. And I think this can be a danger in analysis. The way you get love is to read the books,

'get it', be obedient, and 'oh you're marvellous, you know everything,' but you don't have the experience. And one thing I noticed when I saw the film [interview with Hanna Segal] before, that everyone said, 'analysis is facing the truth, finding the truth.' And Hanna Segal said, 'it's having to face your experience'. That's the only person [who said that]. And I think that's a late movement, you see. And you can actually have that experience, and survive it, and you need it. I think you've got to go through this. I often say, about facing the truth and being realistic; if a man proposes to a girl, and says, 'I over value you as a love object, would you marry me?' he's mad. But if he's head-over-heels in love he's more normal. So I think you have to go through this madness, and then reach a reality. And this is very important because people often start their analysis by thinking the analysis can do everything for you.

NH: Absolutely

EB: Or, do nothing for you. And...

NH: And speaking of starting analysis, and you mentioned Hanna Segal. You, I understand, were in analysis with Hanna Segal yourself.

EB: Yes.

NH: Could you say something about the journey that took you to her, after medical school?

EB: Well the reason I wanted to try an analysis, reading books and things like that... Melanie Klein didn't have a vacancy, Paula Heimann didn't have a vacancy, Segal had a vacancy. She wasn't well known at the time. And that's how I got to Segal. I didn't have much option. But the good thing about Segal is very early on she said to me: 'You feel you can't be depressed in peace.' And how right she was!

EB: And that was a very important...

NH: Very important...

EB: She knew how I felt.

NH: Yes.

EB: And how I felt was very important, and... so somebody who knows how you feel, and being prepared to say they know how you feel, and being known is very, very important.

NH: Yes.

EB: And she was one of the people who you could feel her humanity. Somebody else could say it [the same thing] to you and insult you. Somebody else could say [the right words] "I understand how you feel, and I know how you feel, and what can I do to help you [and you don't feel the humanity]. Now Paula Heimann... Before Paula Heimann analysis was meant to be purely scientific. And Freud had this thing, it's purely scientific, and people [get drawn in to] analysing in this way. And anybody who felt angry, or sorry, or attracted, or got involved was told 'go back to the couch, you need more analysis'. And she [Heimann] stood out and said, 'this human intercourse that goes on is very important', and made it okay to be like that, which had to be trouble.

NH: Yes.

EB: And that is a precursor of projective identification - it's somebody helping you and sharing with you, up to a point. And of course your analyst can only share up to a point.

NH: Yes.

EB: It is always 'up to a point' even if it's your own child. But less up to a point if it's a patient, because you've got about 8, 9, or 10 patients. So all these things are very, very important. And the truth of that ... that is where [as the analyst] you let yourself be known, [but] you

don't speak your heart out. If I take manic-depressive people; if they have problems, they don't have anybody to help, and they don't want anybody to help them, and they don't believe anybody can help them. They're manic, they're on top, they turn not to a realistic human being but to an ideal thing, and they become this ideal thing. They become Hitler, they become the leader, they become this, everybody follows them. And it's very common in some degree or other, and that is a very dangerous mania. Now, you can't be everything, you can't know everything, but if you have that system of judgment – somebody who knows it all, has got it all, or I know it all – you know in the end you've stolen something, you're a false man, and your super-ego – because that's the judge – strips you of everything: 'I'm a liar, I'm a thief, I'm a robber, I'm going to commit suicide, I'm not worth living.' So you get this swing from the arrogant, narcissistic, 'I know everything, and you're nothing', to a super-ego that comes back at you, 'You know nothing, you're a liar, you're a fraud, you stole.' And I think we all do it. In my supervisions, teaching people, [I find] the analyst often gets caught up in this, becomes like that, but they're also not like that. They're also realistic. And the struggle is between the mad side and the understanding, real side.

And I, as I'm talking to you now, I suddenly remember a lot of what Segal said: 'Being sane is being able to deal with your madness. You can't be [only] sane.' Now Freud in perhaps his 1913 or 1915, I'm not sure, paper wrote that hatred was always the strongest instinct. And, I think that's quite true, but I think there is a relationship which comes near to some of Winnicott's ideas too, in which the mother feels for the baby, and is pleased to have the baby, and the baby is pleased to have a mother who can take it [the hatred], who can help them face reality, and help them to commiserate, and [they] do it together, and they value each other, and they need each other, and they don't want to lose that, and that

becomes stronger than hatred. If the double effect of both another person caring for you, and sharing with you, and you doing the same, [and you internalise that] and you know you can turn to that in times of crisis. That is what will hold you in good stead. And that is what I think is very fundamentally important.

[BREAK IN AUDIO]

EB: Well, the thing is, you know I believe, is to take in an object that goes with you, and helps you and directs you, and you can trust each other to do that, for a long time, even though there are differences [between you]. And I, I do still believe that.

NH: Yes, despite... [CROSS TALKING]

EB: And I still believe it collectively, that you can't kill the Afghans, and things like that. You have to understand each other. Every time there is a catastrophe, like War World One, they make peace and say, 'What are we doing? We're killing each other!' They make the League of Nations, 'Never again are we having this.' And in twenty years' time it's gone, and they do the same thing, and they never learn from experience. It's extremely difficult. That's what happened in psychoanalytic groups.

We win, you lose, and we're in the right, and you're wrong. And it's still done today – I'm being biased now – by organic psychiatrists: 'We have given the people this, that and the other, and it's right.' The Gods have ordained, and no human intervention [is possible]. I'm not religious at all, but one of the greatest things is when Christ comes in the Sermon on the Mount, and they're stoning the adulteress and Christ says, 'Let him or her without sin cast the first stone.' And everybody drops their stone.

NH: I'm going back to one of the things you were saying earlier about it being a very hard journey, being in analysis. And it's hard to know

about the truth, and to face the truth. You might, or might not want to seek it, but if you do, it is a very hard journey. And I think that that also applies to becoming an analyst, and the journey of becoming an analyst.

EB: Absolutely.

NH: And, I wonder what you think are the qualities that make for a good analyst.

EB: Are you a born analyst? I hate that sort of thing. I know a lot of people rate it. But I won't mention any names; I'm dying to. I don't believe much in a born analyst. Obviously there are potential [qualities]. You know [as a patient] that someone can think and on the whole, will struggle to get it right. And somebody will know they can talk to you because you'll listen to them, and try and do the best you can. And you won't be perfect... And this is the problem... This is the situation being human. It's of no avail against great, primitive forces; but if two people get together and value that, and appreciate each other, they can do it.

NH: Yes.

EB: And that's very, very important. Herbert Rosenfeld was a good supervisor. And, well... I had a patient who was committing suicide and I was able to run round to Herbert at 9 or 10 o'clock at night, and he'd see me, and reassure me. And he didn't commit suicide in the end.

IBP: The patient, not Herbert [Laughter].

NH: He's ringing on the door again at 10 o'clock [Laughter].

EB: Yeah, yeah...

NH: So Herbert Rosenfeld was one of your key supervisors.

EB: He was the person I was not ashamed to come to and say, 'I'm frightened...' You know, I could be myself with him.

NH: Could you?

EB: That's right. I could tell him, 'I wish he'd go away, what can I do? Tell me what to do.' You know.

NH: So he allowed you to be honest.

EB: Yes, yes, he allowed me to be honest.

NH: I imagine you needed to have two supervisors when you were training.

EB: Well you couldn't, at that time, have two of the same [group].

NH: Ah.

IBP: But Herbert was later, wasn't he? Not for the training.

NH: Not for the training?

EB: I had... I had a supervisor who was [??] and I had Paula Heimann, and I changed to Herbert. And then I was told that there was a break up between her and Melanie Klein, so I was let off from having her, so I got Herbert. I told you about Bion in a seminar.

NH: Can you tell me again?

IBP: The person presenting the material was talking to the patient about projecting, here, there and everywhere, and asked Bion, 'What do you think the patient was saying to me?' And he [Bion] sat there and said, 'I think she's saying you're a bloody fool.'" That was marvellous.

NH: You became very friendly with Bion, didn't you?

EB: When a lot of people went to L.A., because they were inviting people to go and form a Kleinian [group there] and Bion, for lots of reasons, was going there. He had a son at Harrow and young wife and there was a lot of money there. Bion said that he had said what he had to say to our Society. He had children, and a younger wife, and a there was a lot of money there.

NH: So partly for financial reasons you think he went there, to support his family.

EB: I don't know. I've never been told by him 'why'. And I got to know him about this time, because I went to consider going to LA too. I hated it in L.A. It's much better now, but...

NH: What did you hate about it?

EB: Well, they're all 'clever' in inverted commas, money making... I wouldn't let my children grow up there. And I know people who did let their children grow up there who were very sorry about what happened to the children. So anyhow, Francesca - that's Bion's wife - went to get this house in LA and stayed there for six months, while he was winding up his practice. During which time Bion was being painted by my first wife [Ishbel McWhirter], in fourteen sittings, and I used to sit there at weekends talking to him, and asking all the questions I was afraid to ask in front of a class. And I became very friendly with him. And it became even slightly personal... I thought he was the most brilliant person I had ever met.

NH: Really?

EB: Genius! Wonderful! Miles ahead! But he didn't feel, from the heart... I mean, something that Segal did.

NH: Really?

EB: But I loved him very dearly.

NH: Yes.

EB: I always wanted him to come [and help me] when I had problems. I had many problems. I always thought, where's Bion? I can go and talk to him, because he was nice like that.

NH: You're talking about Bion. I also understand that you came to know Klein.

EB: I didn't know Klein so well. My first wife [Ishbel] did paintings of Melanie Klein, and drawings of Melanie Klein; one is in the National Gallery. And she came and she sat there and she did these drawings. And, she [Mrs Klein] didn't like the painting. She said she looks really depressed, which is rather funny. [??].

NH: Where is the portrait now?

IBP: In the National Gallery, isn't it?

EB: Not the, not the oil painting. Not the oil painting.

IBP: Where's that?

EB: I don't know where it's got to. I really don't know. She took it.

IBP: Ishbel?

EB: No, no. Melanie.

IBP: Mrs. Klein.

NH: She took it.

IBP: But Ishbel also did Bion.

EB: Ah yes, she did, my wife did Bion. Now Bion is a very interesting... In my opinion, is very interesting, because he was rather angry with me when I was talking to him. Because I said to him at the time, 'Look, in your theory of the container/ contained, you stress the

containing is everything; but a normal mother would also reach out, and want to embrace the baby. And he said, 'I'm not such a bloody fool as not to know that...' And in that painting he looks a bit angry. At least I think he does...

NH: And what's happened to that painting?

EB: It's under Betty Joseph's bed [Laughter].

NH: Is that right [Laughter].

EB: She doesn't like it, and for some reason she keeps it there... She's got no right to have it.

IBP: It was bought by the Klein Trust, so...

EB: It was bought for £300.

NH: We'd better ask Ms Joseph if we can have a look at it [Laughter].

IBP: You and Elizabeth Spillius would each like to have it.

EB: Elizabeth Spillius and I would take it in turns if we got it.

NH: Yes, six months each on a loan basis.

EB: But I think it's very, very good.

[BREAK IN AUDIO]

KN Can I digress and bring you back to something you were saying before? Something that I have a particular interest in, it's a 1978 paper that you wrote.

EB: On what?

NH: It's called 'The Narcissism of the Analyst'.

KN: 'Its Effect in Clinical Practice'. Something that you said there, which was that, 'To eat from the Tree of Knowledge carries with it the danger of attempting to be, or to become God.'

EB: Yes.

KN: I found it a very powerful statement.

EB: I think, you see... Bloody hell, somebody wants to kill me. We always have narcissistic problems. I mean, if I find my patient getting better I think, 'Oh marvellous, I know everything.' I come back the next session and I've changed my mind. You can't help wanting to give yourself these things. But if you know that, you're, alright... You know a little bit about that patient, and if you carry on, it could be useful, but you'll find there's a hell of a lot you don't know about that patient. But you do have that experience. Sometimes I felt, just when the patient was going, [I wanted to say] 'come back, I've just got an idea'.

NH: Yes.

EB: Because you can't not get high. You can't win a football match without wanting to. And I think this is where I come to Greek tragedy. From the tragedy of a state of omnipotence where you believe you know all the answers, to having to recognise that you don't. But it's natural to want to know everything. You want to know... You want to be the one that knows. And the only sensible thing written by Lacan is when he talks about being the one that knows.

NH: Yes. One of the themes that seems to run through your book, which I'm very struck by, is the idea that the analyst needs to be able to tolerate, and bear, and listen to the patients' criticisms of them, or their observations [of the analyst].

EB: Yes.

NH: And not just to see these as being a defence, an attack, and even necessarily a pathology.

EB: Giving them time to really explore it. Why they thought the way they did. They can examine me. I can be examined on this thing. And it may be that there are elements of that [of which they complain, yes. And what are you [the patient] going to do, write me off? Or do I work through it and take that knowledge to improve, and broaden my understanding? And that experience [for the patient] is really the better experience, better than saying, 'I do this, and I do that'. You have to live it.

NH: Yes.

EB: And I should say one thing about Hanna Segal. [??]. You knew when she was doing it. You knew she was human. And I think that's very, very important.

NH: Yes.

EB: There's something I like best from [Moreau] a French philosopher, who said: 'He speaks of love like a blind man speaks of colour.' And that's very true [??]. You get all the things right but you don't know what it's like. And you [the analyst] can be an 'expert' like this.

NH: I think that's a lovely place to stop. Thank you very, very much. Thank you, it's been lovely.

IBP: I enjoyed listening to that.

NH: It was beautiful, thank you.

END AUDIO

