

OBITUARY

Jerome Liss, 1938–2012¹

By **Morton Schatzman**

Jerome Liss was an American medical doctor and psychiatrist, who practised body-oriented psychotherapy and led direct-action encounter groups. He was based at first in London, then in Nice, then in Paris, and finally in Rome.

His first book in English was *Free to Feel*, published in the UK in 1974.² This was an introduction to some widely practised therapies. Included among these were Reichian therapy, the bioenergetic analysis of Alexander Lowen, the primal-scream therapy of Arthur Janov, gestalt therapy, encounter groups and psychodrama. He also reported on Synanon, a community that started in Santa Monica to deal with drug addiction, and on Re-evaluation Co-Counseling, a form of co-operative counselling started in America by Harvey Jackins, and introduced to London by Californian sociologist Thomas Scheff. Liss also reported on the rising of 'kundalini' energy in some forms of yogic practice.

Liss also had a chapter on his own form of therapy. He began by describing how a psychotherapy session can itself be viewed as a work of art:

The patient, as an artist, is creating an experience for himself that can be measured by aesthetic criteria: balance, harmony, comprehensiveness, and dramatic relevance. The patient is also spectator to his own creation. This means involvement and at the same time aesthetic distance. The therapist is like an older colleague, a past master at the art, there to help in some magical fashion, offering his own experiences when needed while he is employed in that more subtle art of learning how not to hinder.

He said that he had been using body-oriented methods when doing individual psychotherapy. He would hold patients, massage them, and suggest assertive exercises like shouting.

Liss explained that he did not feel responsible for his patients, nor were they responsible for him:

I do not take care of my patients, though I care for them. I am responsible for myself and my actions, and my patients are responsible for themselves and their actions. To my mind this means a continuous respect for freedom; freedom revealed, acted upon, and acknowledged in a relationship of trust is a supreme experience.

Free to Feel brought Liss much recognition in the UK, and he became highly sought after as a therapist and group leader.

Another of his books, *Family Talk*,³ reported on his work as a family psychotherapist – a book in which he also discussed world politics, about which he held strong views. He saw the United States as a 'father' in the world, who might benefit from a 'therapist doctor', 'referee' or 'arbiter' in its relations with other nations; and England could serve that role.

He wrote many self-published books thereafter, including *Creating a Self-Directing Society*, *Mutual Participation*, and *Reciprocal Collaboration and Self-Help Groups*.

Liss was a New Yorker, born 23 July 1938, to Jewish immigrant parents from Europe. He was educated at

Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan, then at Bard College in Annandale-on Hudson, about 90 miles north of New York City. I first met 'Jerry', as he used to call himself, at medical school, where we were flat-mates and fellow students at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the Bronx, New York.

At medical school he and I, together with some fellow students and friends, started a protest group about the resumption of nuclear-bomb tests in the atmosphere by the United States. As future doctors we were concerned about the long-term effects of radioactivity on health. We went to the White House in Washington, D.C. to picket there, and we also started an ongoing seminar and forum at the medical school.

Liss graduated with a medical degree in 1963, and went on to train as a psychiatrist in Boston at the Massachusetts Mental Health Centre. He married Barbara Cohen in New York in the winter of 1963–4. They had a son, Aaron, in January 1966, and the marriage ended when Aaron was six months old.

Liss moved to London in 1967, where he spent the last year of his psychiatry training working with Drs R.D. Laing, David Cooper and John Heaton. He stayed on in London after getting his psychiatry diploma.

He moved to France around 1973–4, and wanting to be in a sunny area, he chose Nice. There he lived communally and worked two days a week leading groups at the CDPH, a centre for the development of human potential. He organised conferences among psychoanalysts and neuroscientists, and was particularly interested in the work of Henri Laborit, a French neuroscientist who had pioneered early research with chlorpromazine, one of the first drugs used to treat psychosis. Liss retained his interest in neuroscience throughout his career, with a persistent interest in exploring the relationship between brain chemistry and states of mind.

From Nice he went to Geneva, where he stayed for a few weeks, and then moved to Paris, where he lived for five years. He went to Rome in 1981, where he married Rita Fumara, who was his partner and soulmate until the end.

Wherever he was, Jerome Liss organised conferences and inspired friends, colleagues and

students. In Rome he founded the Biosystemic School of Psychotherapy, which is still active and which offers a diploma certified by the Italian government.

He endured much suffering in the last year of his life, mainly from the pain of cervical spondylosis, which crippled him, and shortness of breath as a result of fluid in his chest. He was diagnosed with lung cancer in July, and died on 20 October 2012. He is survived by his son, a grandson and a granddaughter.

He was a great friend of mine, always available, always trustworthy, always interesting. His death is a loss that I will never fully get over. ☹

Morton Schatzman is an American medical doctor and psychiatrist working in London as a psychotherapist in private practice. He co-founded the Arbours Association, which offers places to live for people in emotional distress and has a training programme for psychotherapists.

Notes and References

- 1 Another detailed obituary for Jerome Liss can be found at: <http://www.eabp.org/news.php>
- 2 Liss, J. (1974) *Free to Feel: Finding Your Way through the New Therapies*. Wildwood House.
- 3 Liss, J. (1972) *Family Talk*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Stop Press

When going to press, the editors learnt the sad news of the recent death of Daniel Stern. We will be including substantial appreciations of Dan's life and work in the next issue – eds.