FERENCZI’S “A LITTLE CHANTICLEER”:
A CHILD’S FAVORITE SONG RECALL

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In response to the recent special issue of The American Journal of Psychoanalysis dedicated to Sándor Ferenczi’s works, this article highlights his essay entitled, “A Little Chanticleer” as a first-of-its-kind legacy of a description of conscious and unconscious dynamics linked to a child’s musical preferences in daily life. In addition to its historical value, Ferenczi’s essay merits study from contemporary viewpoints on infant developmental research, including implications for treatment of adults. It is hoped that at least in the context of song recall Ferenczi’s essay will gain its due recognition.

KEY WORDS: Ferenczi; songs; child development; Chanticleer.

Recently, Giselle Galdi, guest editor of the special issue of the American Journal of Psychoanalysis on the contributions of Sándor Ferenczi (Vol. 58, 1, 1998), expressed her hope that the issue would be a harbinger of future articles about Ferenczi. Her desire for a continuing, belated honoring of Ferenczi’s seminal ideas triggered this response article. It brought to mind a unique, rarely mentioned case Ferenczi presented and which Freud included in great detail in “The Return of Totemism in Childhood” in Totem and Taboo (1913 [1912–13]) to make a different point than the one to be proposed here: It remains to be recognized that Ferenczi’s (1913a) “Ein kleiner Hahnemann” (“A Little Chanticleer”) is a historical example of unconscious and conscious determinants of a 5-year-old child’s preference for particular songs in everyday life.

Freud (1913 [1912–13]) cited Ferenczi’s essay considering it, “an interesting history of a single case which can only be described as an instance of positive totemism in a child” (italics in original, p. 130). The child’s interest in songs were only mentioned in passim; “They [chickens and other kinds of poultry] were his only toys and he only sang songs that had some
mention of fowls in them” (italics added, p. 130), and thus this issue could be easily overlooked. Afterward, Ferenczi’s (1913b) work was published in the Zeitschrift.

Besides its contribution to totemism underscored by Freud, however, Ferenczi’s essay also supports Freud’s (1901) seminal remarks about the interpretation of tunes that come to mind, added in 1907 to the second edition of The Psychopathology of Everyday Life:

If anyone takes the trouble, as Jung (1907) and Maeder (1909) have done, to note the tunes that he finds himself humming, unintentionally and often without noticing he is doing so, he will pretty regularly be able to discover the connection between the words of the song and a subject that is occupying his mind. (p. 215); latter reference added 1910

Ferenczi, a favorite pupil of Freud, was accepted in the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society on October 7, 1908, and founded the Budapest School of Psychoanalysis. He presented lectures in Budapest about Freud’s Everyday Life; by November 1909, Freud recognized that Ferenczi had contributed much to its third edition. Also, as is well known, Ferenczi accompanied Freud on the trip to America and was present at the Clark Lectures in which Freud mentioned the humming of tunes in passim (Díaz de Chumaceiro, 1998). That Ferenczi was aware of Freud’s contribution to tunes that come to mind may have become evident to German readers in 1939 with the posthumous publication of his brief paper, “On the Interpretation of Tunes that Come Into One’s Head” (circa 1909), and to English-speaking readers in 1952.

THE FREUD–FERENCZI CORRESPONDENCE

The English publication of the Correspondence of Sigmund Freud and Sándor Ferenczi, Volume 1, 1908–1914 (Brabant, Falzeder, & Giampieri-Deutsch, 1993) reveals some reasons for the original destiny of Ferenczi’s report of Bandi’s case, alias Árpád in the essay, which Freud referred to in his letters as the Rooster-Man. In spite of Freud’s prediction that the Rooster-Man essay had “a great future” (Freud to Ferenczi, February 1, 1912, Letter 275; Brabant et al., pp. 339–340), apparently it remained buried in the psychoanalytic literature.

On November 17, 1911, Freud wrote to Ferenczi that the fourth edition of Everyday Life was needed in 1912. Then, in a letter to Freud on January 18, 1912, Ferenczi announced that he now had “a sensational case, significant enough to be a brother of Little Hans” (Brabant et al., 1993, p. 330), of which he offered him a summary. Freud responded on January 23, 1912: