Tomas Böhm: 1945–2013

Arne Jemstedt

To cite this article: Arne Jemstedt (2013) Tomas Böhm: 1945–2013, The Scandinavian Psychoanalytic Review, 36:2, 139-140, DOI: 10.1080/01062301.2013.852888

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/01062301.2013.852888

Published online: 05 Nov 2013.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 239

View related articles
OBITUARY

Tomas Böhm
1945–2013

Tomas Böhm died suddenly and unexpectedly on 29 May 2013. This was a painful shock and a deep loss for his wife for 30 years, Suzanne Kaplan, also psychoanalyst, his children, stepchildren and grandchildren, his brother with his family and his many friends.

It was, and is, also a great loss for the Swedish Psychoanalytical Association. Tomas was a much appreciated and much liked member of the Association, where he through the years held several important posts. At his death, he was its Vice President.

Tomas’ parents fled from the increasingly anti-Semitic Vienna in 1938 after the Nazi troops had invaded Austria. They were Jews and social democrats and came to Sweden through the help of Swedish social democrats. They settled down in Solna, a suburb outside Stockholm, where Tomas and his elder brother grew up. After college, Tomas studied for the medical profession at the Karolinska Institutet in Stockholm, specialising in psychiatry. He had an early interest in literature, music and politics, and after meeting psychoanalytically trained psychiatrists, he decided to apply for psychoanalytic training at the Swedish Psychoanalytic Society. He began this training when he was 28 years old in 1973; he became a full member in 1979 and a training analyst in 1992.

Tomas was an appreciated teacher and requested supervisor, and as mentioned above, he held several important positions, first in the Swedish Society as chairman of the Admission Committee and from 1994 to 1997 as the Director of Training at its Institute. The two Swedish psychoanalytic societies (the Society and the Association) fused in 2010 to form the new Swedish Psychoanalytical Association and in 2012 Tomas was elected its Vice President.

Tomas worked as a psychoanalyst in private practice and in later years also as a couples’ therapist together with his wife, Suzanne Kaplan. For several years in the 80’s he worked as a teacher and supervisor at the Institute of Psychotherapy in Stockholm, which was then a well-renowned institute for psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapy training.

Tomas was a very communicative person and he had many contacts in the international psychoanalytic world. From 2002 to 2010, he was engaged in the “Working Party on Comparative Clinical Methods”, an initiative of the European Psychoanalytical Federation, which developed a method to describe and compare different psychoanalytic approaches and which resulted in a book Psychoanalysis comparable and incomparable (2008), where Tomas contributed with a chapter.

Tomas was constantly writing. In an interview from 2005 in the Society’s Bulletin, he says that, apart from psychoanalysis, writing is his main interest and that he has a need to write, otherwise he would get restless. His writings covered several different areas. He published many papers in Swedish and international psychoanalytic journals, not least on psychoanalytic technique. And he wrote fifteen books.

His experiences from working both with individuals and with couples inspired him to write several books about love relationships, the difficulties that couples face, how to handle them and how to deepen the relationship. Three of them were collected in one volume Kärleksrelationen [The love relationship] (2001). For many years, he managed a readers’ queries on relational problems in a monthly magazine, which was very popular, as were his books. For the general public in Sweden, Tomas was one of the most well-known contemporary psychoanalysts, not least as a result of his books on relationships.

Tomas had a strong engagement concerning racism, xenophobia and intolerance, an engagement that deepened through the years. He saw and had a mission here: to reach the general public on these central issues, to explore the mechanisms behind these tendencies and forces, both on individual, group and societal levels. He wrote two books in this area: Inte som vi! – psykologiska aspekter på främlingsfientlighet och rasism [Not like us! – psychological aspects on xenophobia and racism] (1993) and Att ha rätt – om övertygelse, tolerans och fundamentalism [To be right – on conviction, tolerance and fundamentalism] (1998). The focus in these books is psychoanalytic concepts based on the theories of Freud, Klein, Chasseguet-Smirgel, Grunberger, Arieti and others with an emphasis on psychic processes like splitting, projection, projective identification and destruction of reflective space and of tolerance for uncertainty. He described these complex processes and phenomena in a language accessible to the general public without loss of depth and complexity. These books were widely spread and used in Swedish schools.
Tomas lectured extensively on these topics both in Sweden and abroad, by himself or often together with Suzanne Kaplan. They had a common engagement here. Suzanne had written a doctoral thesis on child survivors in the Holocaust which was published in the book *Children in genocide – Extreme traumatisation and affect regulation* (2008) and a number of articles on this subject.

Tomas’ focus was the psychology of the perpetrators and the mechanisms behind racial actions, while Suzanne’s focus was the victims and the effects of extreme traumatisation. These two perspectives come together in their book *Hämnd eller upprättelse* (2009) [English title: *Revenge – on the dynamics of a frightening urge and its taming* (2011)], which was also translated into German. A central concept in this book is “the revenge spiral”, where traumatic events or humiliations – real or fantasised – lead to revenge fantasies and actions which tend to reinforce themselves and become increasingly destructive. Tomas and Suzanne discuss what can be done to counteract this destructive spiral, to give room for reflection, restoration and reconciliation. Together they explore the revenge spiral on an individual level, in couple relationships, on a group scale and on a large group scale, not least in the Nazi regime in Germany and in the genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda.

Tomas was member of the Committee on Prejudice (including Anti-Semitism) of the International Psychoanalytical Association and he was engaged by the National Swedish Institute in the celebration last year of the 100th anniversary of the birth of Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who saved the lives of thousands of Hungarian Jews. An exhibition was shown in several cities in Europe and North America in which Tomas participated as a lecturer.

Tomas also published some novels; the most famous one is *The Vienna Jazz Trio* (2000), where the main threads are politics, jazz and psychoanalysis in Vienna in the 1930’s. It has been translated into English and German. During 2012, Tomas was invited to several German cities, mainly to psychoanalytic societies, to read from his book and to perform jazz music, playing the piano and singing, together with a couple of musicians.

Music was always a central part of Tomas’ life. His piano playing was inspired and improvisatory. He played in several groups; in the 80’s with the Klezmer group “Freilach Express” and for 35 years in the jazz band “The pleasure principle” together with other members of the Swedish Psychoanalytic Society.

Tomas had a fine personality. He was talented, creative and playful and at the same time reliable and a faithful friend. His humorous and witty speeches, full of drastic and unexpected associations, entertained the guests both at public and private parties.

At the IPA Congress in Prague last August Tomas was scheduled to read from *The Vienna Jazz Trio* and to play the piano. In its place an evening was arranged with the title “Psychoanalysis, Jazz and 1930’s Vienna: an evening in memory of Tomas Böhm” where Tomas’ brother and two colleagues participated describing Tomas’ family history, discussing his writings and reading excerpts from the book and where two videos with Tomas playing the piano and singing were shown. More than a hundred colleagues from different countries attended. It was a moving evening. It showed how appreciated – and I would say loved – Tomas was.

*Arne Jemstedt*

arne.jemstedt@telia.com