

BELLE VUE

Sigmund Freud, Minna Bernays,
and the Meaning of Dreams



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: Sigmund Freud, Minna

2014

a novel by

Barry G. Gale

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P U B L I S H I N G

Belle Vue: Sigmund Freud, Minna Bernays, and the Meaning of Dreams,
by Barry G. Gale

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*To Heather, Megan, and Ian,
with Love and Appreciation*

Do you suppose that some day a marble tablet will be
placed on [Belle Vue], inscribed with these words:
In this house on July 24,
1895, the Secret of Dreams was
Revealed to
Dr. Sigmund Freud
At this moment, I see little prospect of it
—Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, June 12, 1900

*Wien, XIX.
Himmelstraße.*



The Belle Vue resort, on the outskirts of Vienna, Austria, circa 1895
(Reproduced with permission of the Sigmund Freud Foundation)

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It is July 24, 1895

PART I.

AT DINNER

1.

8:15 PM. Renaldo's Restaurant at Belle Vue.

"But don't you think the turn of the century will be critical in world history, Doktor Fliess?" Minna Bernays' azure eyes flashed with excitement as she glanced across Renaldo's faux Italian baroque interior—marble floors, stucco walls and niches, and yellow brocade curtains covering open, panoramic windows.

Sigmund Freud knew how vivacious and alluring his wife's younger sister could be, spirited beyond belief at times, yet also how dangerous, unpredictable. Every time she opened her mouth in company the bottom of his spine tightened. Just one misstep, some inadvertent faux pas about their relationship—the secret out, his life summarily destroyed. He needed to control Minna but realized how futile the hope. Discretion was not in her nature.

"Please call me Wilhelm." A tall, attractive man, with tapered beard, broad mustache and prominent Roman nose, Dr. Wilhelm Fliess was Freud's close friend and medical colleague from Berlin.

"All right, Doktor Fliess. Well?" Minna's smile broadened.

"I don't know. Nineteen hundred—it seems it will just be another year," Fliess said.

"I disagree." Minna sent angry looks to Freud but he refused to engage in what he considered her childish behavior. Minna hated Fliess though until that evening she had never met him, hardly a requirement for her. She liked to call Fliess Sigmund's favorite "boyfriend," which irritated the hell out of Freud.

"I sensed you might not agree," Fliess said.

Minna's handsome head rose, her full, sensuous lips twitching nervously. "It's more than just a new year, it's a new century, a new beginning, a new frame of mind."

"Might you be romanticizing things, dear Minna?" Fliess asked. He

stroked his mustache.

Minna's mood shifted, her eyes serious, face somber. "Romanticizing? I guess I'll have to ask—in what sense?"

"In the sense that a year is just another year," he said.

"Even one which might mark a turning point in human history?" Minna let out a piercing, dismissive laugh. She twirled several ivory bracelets she wore around her right wrist.

Round and round they go, Freud thought, just like her mind, never stopping long enough for anyone to understand what she wanted, who she really was. Was it even possible to appreciate Minna in all her infinite variety? He doubted it.

"Most years mark some sort of turning point in history, wouldn't you say?" Fliess said as he whisked away a pesky fly with the back of his hand. "Why should nineteen hundred be any different?" He seemed uncomfortable as he pulled a stiff collar from his perspiring neck. He looked over to Freud, apparently for help.

Freud straightened his well-worn, light blue linen suit jacket which framed a matching waistcoat and deep blue cravat. One year shy of forty, his friends thought him too disheveled to be handsome and too imposing to be plain, but his appearance, they could attest, elicited the considered attention of strangers almost immediately upon first encountering him. Yet his appearance, he realized, never served to get him what he wanted; what he knew he must have; what he felt the world owed him.

"Minna is not one to take logic for an answer, dear Wilhelm, or even truth," Freud said, hoping to rescue his friend. "When talking to her one must assume that she is right and you are wrong until proven otherwise."

Minna stuck her tongue out at Freud. The gesture reddened the face of a waiter busily replenishing the table's wine glasses and elicited a raised eyebrow from Freud's wife Martha. Freud felt embarrassed. Can't Minna ever behave? While her antics could be maddening—she often darted from emotion to emotion with hardly a moment for serious thought—the more difficult she became the more powerfully he was attracted to her. He found her uncensored, irreverent soul and volatile personality refreshing as well as beguiling. Nothing was subtle about Minna, but nothing was dishonest, either.

"But, Doktor Fliess," Mrs. Fleischmann jumped in, "isn't a new year different from any previous ones, or newer than any that came before, though I suspect that every new year is by definition newer than every year that came before?" She giggled. "Or something like that?"

Martha Freud's mother, Mrs. Bernays, had invited Goldi Fleischmann, her best friend, and Goldi's husband, Jakob, to the dinner. Freud had dined

with the elderly couple before. Mrs. Fleischmann, a small, finicky woman who often spoke to the rhythm of her gently dancing hands, frequently peppered her sentences with nonsensical hyperbole and then laughed giddily when she realized that what she said did not make sense. She also had a pronounced lisp, which made even her most sober statements seem less so.

Fliess looked flummoxed. "I guess so, Frau Fleischmann, if I understand your question correctly."

"Probably more than I do myself," she said in response, giggling once more.

"Oh, Goldi!" Mrs. Bernays chastised.

"Just a thought, Emmeline," Mrs. Fleischmann said as she lowered her shoulders.

Jakob Fleischmann seemed about to join in the conversation, but then demurred, his face sad.

Freud felt sorry for the old gentleman. For all Fleischmann's business acumen and accumulated millions—he served as Central European representative of Britain's Consett Steel Works for over thirty years during a period of rapid industrialization—he could barely get a word in edgewise when his wife spoke, which meant all the time Fliess and Minna were not dominating the conversation. But Fleischmann was a jolly good fellow since he also loved cigars and offered Freud several expensive ones.

"I'm not trying to bully you, Doktor Fliess, though my brother-in-law might believe otherwise," Minna said as she gave Freud a snarly look, "I'm just trying to provide perspective. I for one have faith in the future and am staggered just to think what the turn of the century might bring."

"Well, let's hope it will bring progress for all of us. Undoubtedly preferable to any possible alternative, wouldn't you agree?" Fliess said adroitly.

Disarmed, Minna nodded. "Yes, I can certainly agree with that!"

Minna's aggressive behavior toward Fliess irritated Freud but in the end his friend did not seem to mind. In fact, before he left for the evening Fliess whispered into Freud's ear, "About Minna, yes—I now see what you mean." He then winked, which made Freud cringe. Fliess was suspicious of his relationship with Minna, although Freud had never revealed to him how intimate it had become.

During the dinner Mrs. Bernays remained stern and aloof and could hardly contain a look of disdain every time Fliess began to speak, even though when he did he said nothing about his unusual medical ideas, most of which, Freud had learned from Martha, her mother found horrifying.

Periodically, Mrs. Bernays stared at Freud with cold, even suspicious

eyes. Once when he exchanged smiles with Minna he noticed her frowning. She likes to look down her nose at me, set impossible goals which she knows I cannot attain, criticize me no matter how hard I try! A well-proportioned woman who communicated unmistakable authority as well as perceptible power and energy, she was someone he did not wish to fight with but nonetheless invariably did. He had come to see her as an always terrifying specter—someone who could easily impact things, but whom things could rarely impact in turn. A formidable person not to be trifled with.

If only she would go away. Be out of his life forever. But people like her never go away. That would be too convenient.

Mrs. Bernays' clothes looked severe, almost funereal that evening. The deep blue of her dress seemed the most melancholy of colors, a midnight blue. A death-like blue almost verging on black. In stark contrast, her jewelry appeared light and sparkling. In an age when ladies did not own costume jewelry, she wore a pair of Cartier garnet earrings with bracelet to match, her husband's tenth anniversary gift.

Saturnine but at times striking, her face was defined by a broad, convex forehead and an elegant jaw. Her jaw seemed to bespeak, if not truth, then at least conviction, while her skin, tortuous, heavy, and worn, appeared two sizes too large for her body. Wrinkles, deepest along both sides of her short, thick neck, also creased her face and forehead.

"The cake! The cake!" she bellowed. "Let the festivities begin!"

A Renaldo's waiter placed a round yellow cake coated with cinnamon, sugar and walnuts in the center of the large rectangular dinner table and then lit the cake's three candles. "To Martha, Happy 34th!" was written in white icing across the cake's top.

Mrs. Bernays slowly rose, wine glass in hand. She raised it above her head. "Let us toast my daughter on this auspicious occasion. To wonderful Martha, a woman beloved by all, and the mother of such bright and handsome children!" She turned to Martha. "Happy birthday, my darling!"

A chorus of congratulations rang out from the assembled guests.

"Sigmund, don't you want to say something?" Mrs. Bernays said sharply.

"Yes, yes, of course," Freud said as he reluctantly rose, irritated he had not been mentioned in his mother-in-law's tribute to Martha. Should he have been surprised?

He turned to his wife and raised his wine glass. "To Martha, without whom the Freud family could not exist for nary a day. Happy birthday, Princess!" Martha smiled tepidly while Minna, her face sallow, looked away.

“Speech,” Goldi Fleischmann said as she pounded the cloth-covered table with her fork.

“Yes, indeed,” Mrs. Bernays added.

Martha seemed apprehensive as she stood. Adorned conservatively in a light brown dress imprinted with small red roses—a dress her mother had always loved—Martha’s skin appeared moist and shiny from the heat. Speckles of perspiration trickled down her face from several places on the top of her forehead, collecting at the upper ridge of her tight bodice collar, which looked nearly soaked through from the accumulated moisture. From time to time she would discreetly run a finger across her forehead, but the flow would not be arrested for long.

She looked about, her face dour. “I don’t know what to say. It’s all just too wonderful.” She broke into tears as she dropped into her chair.

“This should be a happy time for you, Martha, not a time for tears,” Mr. Fleischmann intoned.

“She’s just so happy, Jakob,” Goldi explained. “Can’t you see that they are tears of joy.”

“Well, I hope so,” Mr. Fleischmann said.

“Yes, that right,” Martha said in a barely audible voice, her sad hazel eyes peering out from under thin, dark eyebrows. “I’m just overtaken. I can’t thank everyone enough.” She wiped her cheeks with her handkerchief and then gently blew her nose.

Mrs. Bernays wrapped her arms around Martha’s shoulders to comfort her, pushing Freud, who was sitting next to his wife, to one side. He bristled at the intrusion but Mrs. Bernays did not seem to care.

Freud’s favorite sister, Pauli, a close friend of Martha’s, and her husband Valentin, were also at the dinner. The Winternitzes did not say much until the birthday cake had been devoured, presents opened and applauded and the conversation had turned to their plans to immigrate to America. Freud noticed his mother-in-law becoming nostalgic when the subject came up.

“We hope to sail next fall, if everything works out. I need to tie up some business arrangements with my partners here in Vienna.” A slim, undersized man with quick eye movements and a ready smile, Valentin spoke in a soft but careful voice, as if consciously trying to explain something to people with limited understanding.

“You’re an architect, Herr Winternitz, yes?” asked Fliess.

“Yes, Doktor Fliess, I am,” Valentin said.

“Where in America do you plan to settle?” Mr. Fleischmann asked.

“Valentin’s got a wonderful offer to work in Chicago,” Pauli Winternitz said, her almond-shaped, reddish-brown eyes bright and

engaging.

"I thought that place burned down." Mrs. Bernays looked surprised.

"It did—some time ago—but it is being rebuilt using the latest architectural and engineering designs," Valentin explained. "For an architect it is a veritable *tabula rasa*. Some of the new techniques are amazing. I expect one day buildings will stand thirty, even forty stories high. Some perhaps even higher."

"Bah! Not in my lifetime!" Mrs. Bernays said.

"Oh, I wouldn't be so sure about that, Frau Bernays," Valentin said.

"Valentin's got an offer from Adler and Sullivan, one of the most prominent architectural firms in Chicago," Pauli announced proudly.

"Dankmar Adler, the principle partner, is a distant relative," Valentin explained.

"Sigmund, did you hear that?" Mrs. Bernays said. "Valentin's a success even before he sets foot in America!"

"Wonderful," Freud murmured.

Mrs. Bernays turned to Valentin, "I assume you will be disembarking in New York?"

"That's correct," Valentin said.

"Maybe they can visit Eli?" Minna suggested, looking at her mother.

"Just what I was thinking." Mrs. Bernays turned to Pauli. "Do you think you'll have a chance . . . ?"

Pauli looked uncomfortable. She turned to her husband. "I don't know our schedule . . ." Valentin nodded. "But I'm sure we can make time," she added.

"Magnificent!" Mrs. Bernays addressed the assembled group. "That's where my son Eli is. He emigrated there with his family last year. He's very successful, you know."

"He's into commodities," Minna added. "The trade side of that, I believe."

"I miss him so," Mrs. Bernays said, her face forlorn. "Pauli, if you could just say hello, just touch him, that would mean so much. Someone from home!"

"Give us his address and we'll make certain we do," said Pauli.

"Let me know when your plans are firm and I will write him immediately," Mrs. Bernays said. "I'm certain he'd love to meet you at the dock."

Good luck in that regard! Although close friends at one time, in recent years Freud and Eli had become arch enemies, to Martha's great dismay, since she had always been close to her older brother, much closer than she had been to Minna. Yet Freud felt the ever petulant Eli would never go out

of his way to help anyone and he knew what little regard Eli had for Pauli and Valentin. He also hated the fact that his mother-in-law habitually compared him unfavorably to Eli. It was as if Eli, with halo in place, could never do anything wrong, while Freud, with horns protruding, could never do anything right.

When Josefina, the Freud's Catholic *Kinderfrau*, ensconced with the children at one end of the table, came close to say something to Martha, Minna, sitting directly across from her sister, shuddered and turned her head away, and Freud knew why. Josefina had been running her mouth again. Spreading ugly rumors about Minna and him. Gossiping with anyone willing to listen. Minna wanted to kill her; he'd like to kill her, too. How many people has she already infected with her poisonous chatter?

At one point during the dinner Mrs. Bernays mentioned that she heard, from time to time that evening, many strange, frightening sounds which had come to haunt her of late, something she described as the Horn of Death, though when she inquired no one else seemed to hear anything. Freud maintained a straight face but inwardly chuckled. People will think she's a crazy old biddy, a fact I already know.

Pregnant with their sixth child, Martha looked listless and unhappy, which worried Freud. She also tried to avoid eye contact when he happened to glance her way, stretching her neck one way and then the other, which she did when nervous. I'm tired of her always looking so pathetic, so needy. Always making me feel so damn guilty! She also seemed fidgety whenever Minna spoke, which made Freud anxious as well. Does she know something now she didn't know before?

Dr. Hermann Rosenthal, a heavysset, usually ebullient man who Freud had invited to the dinner, looked as uncomfortable as Martha; angry as well. Freud didn't like the expression on Rosenthal's face. He'd been cold to Freud lately, chillingly so. A friend since their early medical days—they had hated all the same doctors at Vienna's General Hospital, where they had interned together—Rosenthal had counseled Freud about Minna, so he knew all the sordid details. And people who knew were also people who could tell. Freud hoped he could trust him, but given human nature . . . ?

Freud exchanged playful looks with Minna from time to time. Perhaps too many times. Yet he could not stop staring at her. Those happy eyes, that vibrant face. Did Martha catch one of these exchanges? He wasn't sure.

From time to time Freud would fantasize about running away with Minna, but then grim reality would set it. Where would they go? Who would support his large family? Everything seemed so impossible. Yet he needed Minna, as much as he needed light and air. She brought him hope,

confidence; ignited passions he never knew he had; transformed him in ways he never thought possible. Her mischievous smile brightened his darkest moods.

Yet he feared her as much as he desired her. She tore at him constantly, with small but lethal doses of sarcasm, menacing jocularly, reckless nonchalance that both attracted and disturbed. He never knew what she might say or do. Her actions kept him in a breathless state, desperate for reason and moderation. He had no comfort with her, no life without her. Is that why he found her so attractive? Why he saw her as so essential to his own happiness?

Freud felt awash in the inconsequential, the practical, the mundane—too many people dragging him down, needing his help, pushing him to do better. Everybody wanted him to improve their lives, but what about his own? He could not warm to family life, which he found boring, distasteful; too many conflicting personalities, so many hurt feelings which needed patience and tender care. Can an adventurer also be a nurturer? He didn't believe so.

He was tired of playing Job, suffering, righteous. Although he came naked out of his mother's womb, he would not go into eternity unclothed nor unaccomplished. Nor, he hoped, unhappy, which at times seemed his only destiny. He craved professional recognition, the joyous comfort that comes with acceptance by one's peers. He'd been a rebel long enough. To what end? For what purpose? Sheer arrogance and pride! He was on the verge of great discoveries, notions which would upend the common understanding of who people are; insights which would illuminate the true nature of human motivation, the very structure of the unconscious mind, mankind's eternal other self.

Those ideas were sacred, immutable and he would fight to protect them. After so much sacrifice, turmoil, struggle, to do otherwise would be madness! Yet could he have both—Minna and fame? My wife's sister! It's not done! It's absolutely forbidden! Loving Minna was daunting and filled with peril; not loving her was as well.

Everything was coming to a head. The pressure was becoming unbearable. People were talking. Josefine was spreading gossip like the plague. Minna was demanding a commitment. He felt attacked, cornered. He knew he had to decide. But was it already too late? Was what he and Minna wanted becoming irrelevant? Was time finally catching up with them, no matter their hopes?

Emil Fluss, Freud's friend since childhood, was also at the dinner. With thick lips and a pink cherubic face, a mass of disorganized light brown hair covered everything above Fluss's grayish-green eyes, so much

so that Freud felt his friend looked like a child's string-puppet. Two large dimples which appeared in each cheek when Fluss smiled tended to reinforce the impression.

Outside of a few pleasantries, Fluss did not say much that evening but seemed to absorb the atmosphere of the dinner with equanimity if not actual comfort. On his way out of the restaurant, he quipped to Freud, "So that's our intrepid Doktor Fliess, eh Sigmund!"

"Yes," Freud said impassively, not looking up, "and it best you keep your mouth shut."

Emil liked to make fun of Fliess and his strange ideas, almost as much as Minna did. What both refused to understand was that Fliess was one of the few people willing to give Freud's ideas a fair hearing, which at this point in his career he desperately needed. When Emil and Minna disparaged Fliess they were criticizing Freud as well, for many saw them in a similar light, ambitious dreamers concocting harebrained ideas at the very margins of respectable medical thought. Untrue, but who cared what Freud thought!

Martha, arms overflowing with presents, approached her husband on her way out of Renaldo's.

"Can we talk tonight, Sigmund? I think we really need to talk." Martha looked grim.

"We can always talk, Princess, you know that."

"Unfortunately, Sigmund, I'm not sure that's always the case."

Freud felt immediately uncomfortable.