EGOS AND IDS

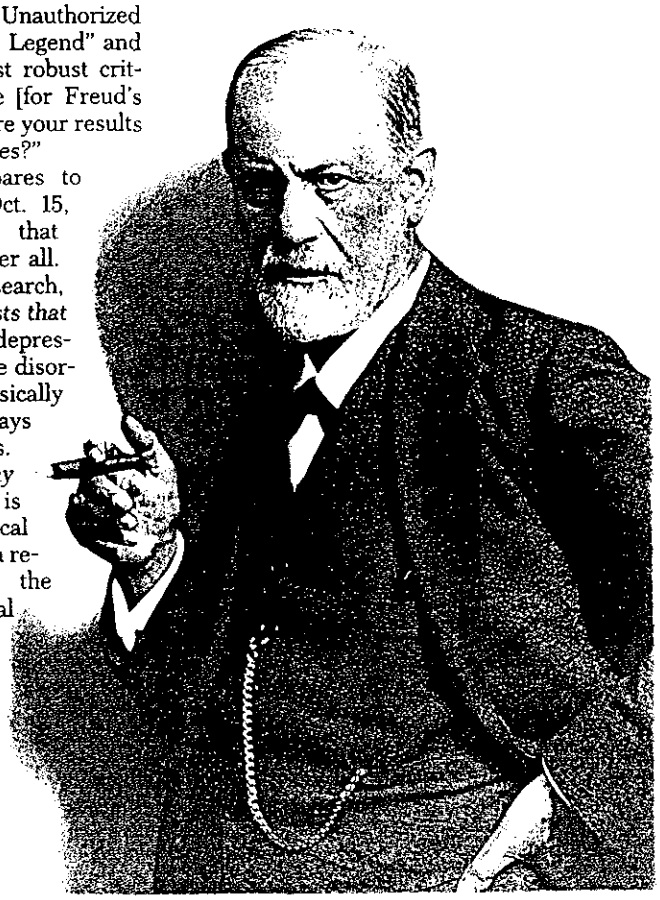
Herr Doktor, What Does It All Mean?

A controversial Freud show opens. BY JOHN LELAND AND CLAUDIA KALB

IN A NONDESCRIPT WORKROOM BENEATH the Library of Congress, Irene Chambers produces two thin, crisply folded pieces of contraband. It is two weeks before the opening of the library's long-anticipated exhibition "Sigmund Freud: Conflict and Culture," and the basement room bristles with old papers of iconic resonance. Even so, these two creased envelopes stand out. They are packets of cocaine. Inscribed by Freud to his mentor, Josef Breuer, the packets are historical artifacts of one of the doctor's early enthusiasms. But a little history can bring a lot of trouble. FBI agents, says Chambers, the library's director of exhibits, spirited the powder away for testing, and found it inert. Freud's cocaine, at least, has lost its power to inflame. About his ideas, the same cannot be said.

Is Freud still relevant? In recent years the doctor has been declared out, done in by a combination of Prozac, managed care and posthumous revelations that he willfully ignored patients' testimonials of child abuse, misstated some evidence, even fell asleep during sessions. "Once we treat Freud's ideas as we would treat any other body of scientific thought, they fare very badly," says Frederick Crews, editor of the withering new collection "Unauthorized Freud: Doubters Confront a Legend" and one of psychoanalysis's most robust critics. "Where is the evidence [for Freud's claims]? How do you compare your results against those of other therapies?"

But as the library prepares to launch its exhibition on Oct. 15, some new signs indicate that Freud may have a pulse after all. Recently published brain research, still very preliminary, suggests that in patients suffering from depression or obsessive-compulsive disorder, "talk therapies" may physically alter brain chemistry in ways similar to antidepressants. "There's evidence that any long-term memory process is likely to involve anatomical changes," says Eric Kandel, a research neurobiologist at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute in New York. "Insofar as psychotherapy works, it presumably does so by producing



Shrink wrap: *The office, sans couch, moves to D.C.*

COLLECTION OF THE FREUD MUSEUM, LONDON (TOP); LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

anatomical changes in the brain. What we need to do is find a way to image those changes."

As drugs like Prozac reveal their limitations, many patients are seeking talk therapy in addition to pills. In a small scattering of limited studies, patients given drugs have responded only marginally better than those on the couch; patients who got both treatments did better than either group. "A lot of people who've done medication, they feel better, but they don't feel different as people," says psychiatrist Susan Vaughan, author of the 1997 book "The Talking Cure." "I feel like there's a pendulum swing back; people are more willing to work in intensive psychotherapy."

The Library of Congress exhibit lands in the thick of the debate. When it was first announced three years ago, 50 critics, including Freud's own granddaughter, petitioned curator Michael Roth that the advisory board was too pro-Freud, ignoring the critical scholarship of the last 30 years. A group of Freudians cried censorship, especially after the show was delayed for financial reasons. They accused the critics of everything from Freudian repression to anti-Semitism—an inopportune slur, says Adolf Grünbaum, one of the leading critics, "considering I am Jewish and I came here to flee the Holocaust."

The show itself, now in the final stages of preparation (the rug from Freud's couch is en route from London; the couch, sadly, is too fragile to travel), is less partisan than documentary. Besides Freud's manuscripts and artifacts, it offers video loops showing how notions like the unconscious and repression have filtered down to everything from "Vertigo" to "The Simpsons." Says Roth, "I hope we're past people getting on their soapbox, saying 'Freud is dead,' 'No, Freud is a hero.' What is interesting is a body of work that wrestled with problems we can't make go away by taking a pill."

Besides, says philosopher and psychoanalyst Jonathan Lear, Freud's work, however flawed, still affords the best map to our layered, often irrational mental landscape. In his new book, "Open Minded," he offers a rousing defense of Freud, discarding the egregious errors like penis envy and castration complex, while reassessing Freud's broader conception of the unconscious as a repository of repressed meaning. "There's been a tremendous need to trim the sails in the claims of what psychoanalysis can do," he admits. But still, "when we see the irrational behavior of Lewinsky and Clinton and Starr, we want to know not what their serotonin levels were or what evolutionary imperative they were following. We want to know what was going through their minds." For this, he argues, we still rely on Freud. Without him, after all, a cigar would be just a cigar. ■

Harriet Barovick

A Man and His Couch

A disputed Freud exhibit finally makes its appearance in Washington

THE IMPORTANT THING," SAYS TV'S HOMER SIMPSON TO his daughter, "is for your mother to repress what happened, push it deep down inside her so she'll never annoy us again." Though he may not grasp all the nuances, Homer turns out to be just another disciple of Sigmund Freud. That, at least, is one of the revelations to be found in "Sigmund Freud: Conflict and Culture," the largest ever exhibition on the founder of modern psychology, set to open next week at the Library of Congress in Washington. Along with some 200 TV and film clips that document Freud's impact on popular culture, visitors will get to peruse 170 artifacts from the library's 80,000-item Freud collection. They include home movies of the Viennese doctor as an old man, facsimiles of his desk and couch, handwritten notes on his famous cases, and little-seen letters, among them one in which Freud comments sympathetically on homosexuality to a woman who had written him about her son.

It all may seem a perfectly apt tribute to the inventor of psychoanalysis. But three years ago it appeared in danger of never opening at all. A band of scholars objected that the exhibit, though still being assembled, would be a fawning tribute to a figure who was outdated at best, a dishonest quack at worst. Library officials, stunned to find themselves thrust into a battle they were not prepared for, postponed the show, claiming lack of funds. Yet now the exhibit is about to open with hardly a peep. What happened?

Certainly the debate over Freud rages on. His theories of the unconscious and the impact of early-childhood experiences on our adult psyches, his methods of psychoanalysis, his very vocabulary—the id and superego, repression and libido—are the foundation on which modern psychology is built. Yet most practitioners no longer adhere strictly to his approach. Some critics have claimed that his theories were based on shaky science or were contaminated by Freud's mistakes and manipulation of patients. Traditional Freudian analysis is now practiced by only a small cadre, overshadowed by drug therapies and short-term counseling more likely to be covered by managed care.

MARK PATERSON AND ASSOCIATES—LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

A.W. FREUD—LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

FATHER FIGURE The doctor's debunkers distanced themselves three years ago, but cool heads prevailed

As word of the Freud exhibit began to emerge in 1995, one combative anti-Freudian, Peter Swales, a media-savvy Freud scholar and former "business assistant" to the Rolling Stones, charged that the advisory counsel was stacked in favor of the Freudians. He circulated a petition, signed by 50 academics, requesting representation of the "full spectrum of informed opinion" on Freud. Curator Michael Roth, while insisting that he had consulted with a range of scholars from the outset, responded by adding two Freud critics to the advisory panel, even as he questioned the motives of some of the protesters. "In the Freud industry," says Roth, "some people get a lot out of being angry." Swales in particular is known for his curious battling tactics, mailing opponents long, single-spaced letters, with copies sent to colleagues or the media; to Freud biographer Peter Gay, Swales added a cutout picture of Gay with his hand colored red. But several signers of the petition have since distanced themselves from it. Nathan Hale, a psychoanalytic historian, retracted his name, saying the petition had become "an excuse for indiscriminate Freud bashing." Another signer, author Oliver Sacks, said in an interview that he was distressed to be "linked to the angry anti-Freudians"; he has written an essay for the catalog that accompanies the exhibit.

Roth says only minimal changes were made in the exhibit, though the catalog now includes several additional essays critical of Freud. Swales, who bridles at suggestions that he wanted the show killed, still thinks "the public has been terribly shortchanged." But another prominent Freud critic, Frederick Crews, who called the original effort a "propaganda campaign" in need of rehauling, says Roth has so far made impressive "good-faith efforts" to create a balance.

"The questions Freud asked turn our attention to problems that remain important for us," says Roth. "We didn't try to determine whether the answers he gave were always correct but how his questions influenced the 20th century. I'm not one of those who think we should forget about Freud entirely." Indeed, the whole brouhaha shows how difficult it is for everyone to forget about him. "The passion over this topic is amazing," says Ingrid Scholz-Strasser of the Sigmund Freud Museum in Vienna. "For a dead science, it seems pretty lively to me." ■

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I started my professional activity as a neurologist trying to bring relief to my neurotic patients. Under the influence of