

## Ruth C. Cohn, Pioneer and Trailblazer

Author Phien Kuiper

Published in Dutch: *Pionier Ruth C. Cohn, baanbreker en wegbereider*.

2022-05-01. [www.psychosociaaldigitaal.nl](http://www.psychosociaaldigitaal.nl)



Ruth C. Cohn, Honorary Doctor, Hamburg 1979. Source: Matthias and Michaela Scharer from the estate.  
In: Matthias and Michaela Scharer (2020) *Ruth C. Cohn, eine Therapeutin gegen totalitäres Denken*.

Ruth Charlotte Hirschfeld was born in Berlin on 27 August 1912. In late March 1933, not yet 21 years old, she takes the train to Switzerland to find a safe haven in Zurich. Her mother travels with her. In 1941, she manages to flee with husband and child on one of the last ships from Portugal to the United States. Trained as a psychoanalytic therapist, Cohn likes to call herself 'social therapist'.

A pioneer opens new roads and explores unknown lands. The synonyms trailblazer and pathfinder highlight different aspects of the pioneer in Cohn's career: in the US years from 1941 to 1966, she made great strides and pioneered with small steps. In the years that followed, shuttling between the US and Europe, she passed on her system of 'living learning'. The road is prepared and will get side, winding and dead ends in the years to come.

### *TCI in the Netherlands and Flanders*

From the outset, Ruth Cohn wanted to make pedagogic-therapeutic elements from psychoanalysis usable for larger numbers outside the treatment room. She wanted to reach more people; the divan was too small. With a pedagogy for many, she envisioned a better world; her work had to have political significance.

Theme-centered Interaction (TCI) became known in the 1970s as a method of working with groups that merges 'living learning' with personal development. Since then, TCI has developed into a concept for developing 'own leadership' and for analyzing and directing processes in teams and organizations. The Ruth Cohn Institute Lage Landen is being transformed by some enthusiastic trained members of the younger generation into an International Hybrid TCI Community, a group of planetary citizens who meet (online) to work out current world themes using TCI as a method ([www.tcicommunity.com](http://www.tcicommunity.com)). With English as the working language, this group is open to interested parties from all over Europe and beyond (India).



What moved this therapist to devote herself encouraging people in their struggle against totalitarianism?

For the book *Ruth C. Cohn: Eine Therapeutin gegen totalitäres Denken*, Matthias Scharer (2020) drew on unknown material he found in Cohn's intellectual estate. From 2016, Scharer worked with his wife at Humboldt University in Berlin to open this vast archive to the public. The flap text of Scharer's book reads: 'Fear for the future, concerns about national and religious identity, demonization of foreigners and a host of other issues lead today to black-and-white thinking that splits society and makes totalitarian patterns visible. In contrast to these fears and against the background of her fate as a refugee, the German-Jewish therapist Ruth C. Cohn (1912-2010) sets an art of living that connects all-and-everything.'

The opening of the archive took place in Berlin in October 2022 with an international symposium. [www.ruth-cohn-institute.org](http://www.ruth-cohn-institute.org).

### *On the road to study*

The 'lived history', which Cohn worked on around the age of 70, begins by describing her first psychotherapy experience. At a summer camp, almost nine years old, she befriended another girl. They confided in each other their 'greatest sins' and promised to write to each other if they sinned again. Words like 'psychotherapy' and Freud were unknown until she was 19. Then, at her first boyfriend's home, she heard the stories of his mother, a psychoanalyst. Ruth knew immediately: helping people with their difficulties while hearing their stories - that was what she wanted to become, she told her mother on returning home. Her drive to help people led to volunteering at a 'center for private care'. The poverty and powerlessness of the people made her especially sensitive to the looming political situation - it could come to an outbreak of violence. "The extended arm up of the Hitler salute was seen by some as salvation, by others as a threat," she said. She feared that part of the population would be tempted, read *Mein Kampf* and decided to flee.

### *Refugee in Zurich*

Cohn spoke about the train journey to Switzerland in a lecture in 1957. So we know how risky it was to take money from Hitler Germany across the border. She was allowed to keep only part of her father's inheritance, which died in 1930; enough to live and study in Zurich and to help refugees as well. There she trained as a psychoanalyst, spending fifty minutes on the sofa six times a week. In addition to this learning analysis and her commitment to helping refugees, she did an internship at a kindergarten; she wanted to be able to imagine what her patients had been like as children. It was there that her interest in pedagogical issues was awakened. In 1941, she emigrated with husband and daughter to the US.

### *US: From psychoanalysis to theme-centered interaction*

The first few years were tough. Additional training was needed to set up a practice as a recognized psychoanalytic therapist. Cohn's poor knowledge of English did not make those early days any easier. Things were not easy for her privately either: her relationship with Hans Helmut Cohn deteriorated. Another child, a son, arrived in 1944. As a single mother, besides physical problems, she also lacked financial leeway. She saw a link between poverty and illness: "We need a therapeutic pedagogy and fairer economic relations."

Cohn was denied a work permit by the psychoanalytic institute as a non-medical but was allowed to work with children. Outraged, she was; in her view, children's problems were no more trivial than those of adults. Nevertheless, she accepted an appointment as a teaching assistant at Bankstreet Schools: "Living learning: I had not found this concept at that time, nor had I heard it from others. Looking back, I know that Bankstreet has been the source of living learning for me: following the trail of the child's interest."

Seeking financial security, she started her psychoanalytic practice in a makeshift room. Circumstances brought her into contact with a psychoanalyst to whom she could turn for support. There she got to know the interpersonal relationship with the therapist as participant observer and experienced"... what she had long been looking forward to in her own visions: more commitment to reality, solid work on concrete problems and a warm yet appropriately detached involvement."

And more happened: the founding in 1948 of a psychology-based training institute, the National Psychological Association for Psychoanalysis (NPAP). Cohn was involved in building the NPAP and the training institute, and as leader of the training committee was responsible for the curriculum.

The first "radical change in my psychoanalytic practice" occurred through an experience with a patient in the early years of her American practice. After a year of therapy in which the young woman was almost exclusively silent, Cohn interrupted the therapy due to illness. At the first session thereafter, the woman fell around her neck, leaned her head against her shoulder and began speaking fluently. Cohn was confused, unsure: how would her colleagues react if they saw her like this? "I was living with the uncertainty of being a non-medical person and an eight-year stateless - seven of them 'undocumented' - former refugee with no right to citizenship." Yet she had the audacity to present this case at a congress in 1948: nothing but rejection. It would be years before she integrated attention to physical signs into her therapy.

The decisive turn was therapy in groups. On new developments in psychotherapy, Cohn writes: "... every new development arises through an internal and an external dynamic. An example of the internal dynamic

is the insight of many child therapists that therapy was unsatisfactory if parents were not also involved. An example of the external dynamics that contributed to the development of group therapy was the need to look for other forms of therapy that (...) enhance the contact skills and creativity of the 'lonely crowd'. Added to this was the fact that the need for therapy continued to grow in and after World War II." Despite initial skepticism, Cohn became increasingly impressed. Meeting Moreno's psychodrama excited her. "... in the 'Psychodrama Theatre' (...) was a stage, an audience space and two 'directors' who managed to get someone from the audience to bring in their own conflict each time. The roles of the people involved in the conflict (...) were distributed among voluntary participants from the audience. I was fascinated by the genius of this method." This creative elaboration of therapeutic group work saw movement in psychotherapy.

Slowly but surely, by now well into her 40s, Ruth Cohn felt more room to move. Thus, the countertransference workshop came into being in 1955, a dare: countertransference had traditionally been regarded in psychoanalytic training institutes as a problem of the aspiring analyst that belonged in learning analysis. Cohn saw that training candidates had nowhere to turn with their experiences of countertransference, while a large number were stranded on this. She did not get permission to organize anything in the curriculum; a woman from the NPAP course organized the workshop outside the institute. Twenty-five years later, she writes: *'That I had the courage to bring up my difficulties with a patient freely associating to put forward, was a tough but undoubtedly the most fruitful decision of my professional life.'* Her experiment became a success, the workshop existed for nine years as an ongoing group of young analytics-in-training; for several years her only theme-centered interactional workshop.

More followed. In the newly founded American Academy for Psychotherapists, Cohn met colleagues in the workshops of this AAP, venue for experiential therapists and progressive psychotherapists of all schools. The first workshop's theme was The Continued Growth of the Psychotherapist. Cohn jubilated, *"An unprecedented invitation! In my analytic circles in New York, there was only talk of the healing of the patient and not the growth of the psychotherapist. After all, that was the implicit theme of the countertransference workshop!"* The encounter with humanistic psychology, with Fritz Perls and gestalt therapy was also important then. Under his guidance, she experienced being alive in the here-and-now, the 'impasse' you must endure, and other gestalt techniques that were later adopted in TCI practice.

Increasingly, Cohn led non-therapeutic groups with the aim of fostering a tolerant climate in which a case could be worked on together. In one large company, she was asked by a staff member, fellow psychoanalyst: could she not use her method to work on problematic relationships in management? With no idea what she could do there, she accepted the assignment to attend a meeting without any instruction. *"After more than half an hour, I decided to do something. After a short silence, I declared that Business was not my business, but Feelings. I explained that I had been watching what people were expressing as if behind a soundproof glass wall. I had seen boredom, resentment and anger on their faces and in their attitudes. I assumed, I said, that such feelings were disrupting the communication needed for our work. After a brief silence, a storm of feelings broke loose in the previously suffocating atmosphere. My observations were confirmed and rejected, my interventions applauded and dismissed."* In those years, her need to know what made her approach, even with non-therapeutic groups, so successful grew. *"One night (...) I dreamt of an equilateral pyramid. (...) I immediately understood that I had seen the basis of my work in my dream. The equilateral pyramid meant to me: four points define my work with groups. All four are connected and of equal importance."* She was elated: now she could pass on her approach. Together with befriended colleagues, she founded the Workshop Institute for Living-Learning (WILL) in New York in 1966. Group therapists and supervisors now joined her in teaching TCI to non-therapeutic groups, teams and educational institutions. One of the first WILL workshops was called 'Segregation - Collision - Co-Existence - Integration' and aimed to integrate blacks and whites in social institutions. This important event had a downside. Years later, she wrote to a Swiss colleague: *"When WILL was founded in New York, I cried tears because my colleagues wanted to scrap the philosophical and transcendental aspect of my approach, for which I invented TCI precisely. I let it happen and then felt I had sold myself. I still do. Essentially, for me, TCI is the ability to influence the masses. And I still consider TCI a political concept and a political method even today..."*

### *US - Europe - US - Europe*

In 1968, Cohn entered European soil for the first time in 27 years, invited to an international congress for group psychotherapy in Vienna. She felt oppressed in the German-Austrian milieu after all those years without German. The warm welcome put her at ease; new invitations to congresses and workshops in Germany followed. The curiosity of psychotherapists for new approaches, after years devoid of contact with the US, was great. It was not only the experiential approach that appealed, but also her holistic view of man.

The path to influence in society was not easy. To her surprise, Cohn faced interest from pedagogues, teachers, social workers and theologians in Europe, whereas not long ago it was taken for granted that TCI would be passed on by psychotherapists. Didactic questions arose.

### *Switzerland, Goldern, Hasliberg*

In 1974, Cohn, then 62, decided to settle in Switzerland, in the small house with the big view. She supported the teachers and leadership of the École d'Humanité in Hasliberg Goldern with supervision for many years. In 1999, she moved to Düsseldorf, where she lived with her friend Helga Herrmann until her death.

### *Honorary doctorate 1979*

Cohn's appointment in 1979 as an honorary doctorate at the University of Hamburg marked the end of her work as a pioneer: she established her place in the German-speaking countries as someone who listens and is listened to. "... when she (...) was awarded an honorary doctorate at the University of Hamburg, Friedemann Schulz von Thun recalled that the laureate had come on her own initiative two days earlier, when she had heard that a lingering conflict between students and teachers had led to a boycott of the discipline. Ruth Cohn did not want to receive an honorary doctorate without learning about the "hornet's nest" of the ceremony's context. In separate student and faculty groups she had spontaneously organized, and in a 'meeting group' with the warring parties, she tried to mediate. 'For me, she thereby made it impressively clear that TCI can address problems in everyday reality and is not something for group dynamics islands,' Schulz von Thun said." With this, he was alluding to what has always remained a tension for Cohn; a tension between the direction she wanted TCI to take and the methodical-didactic usefulness of TCI. And yet, "However much Ruth Cohn considered political engagement necessary, in her view, respect for each individual's own choice and responsibility is absolute: in her view, no one should be obliged to take political action when he or she cannot fully consent to it (...) The dilemma that Cohn herself faced has (...) been transferred to TCI and has since been sharpened. It is (...) important to know this dilemma and to find a responsible way to deal with it, each for himself and with others. Either-or solutions were in any case alien to Ruth Cohn."

### References

Cohn, R.C. (1957) *Courage – the Goal of Psychotherapy*. [www.tcicomunity.com](http://www.tcicomunity.com)

Cohn, R.C. & Farau, A. (2008). *Lived histories of psychotherapy: Two perspectives*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta (only available in German: *Gelebte Geschichte der Psychotherapie. Zwei Perspektiven*).

Scharer, M. & M. Scharer (2020) *Ruth C. Cohn: A therapist against totalitarian thinking*. Ostfildern: Patmos (only available in German).

Schneider-Landolf, M., J. Spielmann, W. Zitterbarth (eds.) (2017) *Handbook of Theme-Centered Interaction (TCI)*. Translated by Joseph Smith. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. ISBN 987-3-666-45190-4.

Available as pdf-document at [www.ruth-cohn-institute.org](http://www.ruth-cohn-institute.org)

Translated with DeepL by Phien Kuiper, checked by Mical Sikkema

---