

## **Eugène MINKOWSKI (1885 – 1972)**

Eugène (Eugeniusz) Minkowski was born on 17th April 1885 in Saint Petersburg into a Polish Jewish family. At the age of 7 he returned to Warsaw with his family where he did his secondary schooling and started his medical studies at the Imperial University (1902-03). Because of his sympathy with the progressive student movement, which claimed that the Polish language should be used in schools and universities during the 'little revolution' in 1905, he was excluded from Warsaw University, which was later closed due to reprisals. He was therefore forced to continue his studies in Germany and in 1909 finished his medical training in Munich before going to Kazan that same year to have his state diploma validated in Russia. It was during this trip that he met his future wife, Françoise (Franciska) Brokman, also a qualified doctor.

On return to Munich, he studied mathematics and philosophy at university and published his first works on philosophy to which he intended devoting himself fully and abandon medicine. In 1913 he married Françoise Brokman in Zurich and they set up home in Munich where they remained until the beginning of the First World War. As Russian citizens, they were forced to leave Germany and moved to Zurich, where Eugène's brother, Michel (Mieczyslaw), a neurologist, lived. Due to the help of his wife, Eugène Minkowski found a voluntary job as assistant to Professor Eugen Bleuler at Burghölzli (a psychiatric clinic at the University of Zurich) who was the first to identify the concept of schizophrenia. He thus returned to medicine and, in particular, psychiatry, rather than pursuing in mathematics and philosophy despite his interest for these two disciplines. In March 1915, instead of remaining in safety in Switzerland, Eugène Minkowski and his wife decided to move to Paris where he became a military doctor in the French army. He was on the front line for two years and served in the Battles of the Somme and Verdun as doctor to the third battalion of the 151<sup>st</sup> regiment. He received several citations for his courage and acclaimed control in face of the enemy, as well as the Légion d'Honneur and the War Cross, with three citations. At the end of the War, he left for Germany with the occupation troops. As he was far away from Paris, he was not able to be present for the births of his son, Alexandre (1915) or his daughter, Jeannine (1918).

When Eugène Minkowski was demobilised in 1920, his wife convinced him to settle in France, which was considered to be a country of freedom. With no French qualifications, he had to repeat his medical studies in Paris and presented his thesis in 1926<sup>1</sup>. During this period he received his patients at his home and worked in private health clinics such as the present day Jeanne d'Arc de Saint-Mandé clinic. He also gave consultations in different hospitals, including the Henri Rousselle hospital, the first open structure set in Saint Anne's hospital, and worked on a voluntary basis from the day it opened at the Foyer de Soullins, an institution for disturbed children at Brunoy<sup>2</sup>, of which he very soon became the medical director. He introduced new curative pedagogical methods such as the Rorschach test, which was adapted for the psychiatric clinic by Françoise Minkowska. He also carried out analyses and interpretations of children's drawings, which was a concept that his wife was developing. This combined effort enabled the conversion of the hostel and observation centre into an institute for re-education. Eugène Minkowski would continue this activity for 25 years.

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<sup>1</sup> The notion of losing vital contact with reality and its applications in psychopathology

<sup>2</sup> This institution, founded in 1929 by the Olga Spitzer Association, became the Therapeutic, Educational and Pedagogical Institute of Petit Sénart, in Tigery (near Paris) in 1967

At the same time, he actively participated in French intellectual and psychiatric life. In 1925 he became a member of the *Société Médico-Psychologique* (Medico-Psychological Society) of which he became president in 1947 and to which he remained loyal until his death. That same year he founded, together with 11 partners, including his wife, the group known as *L'Évolution psychiatrique* (Psychiatric Evolution). In 1929 he became editor of the quarterly journal of the same name which he directed until 1940 and in which by 1966 he had published more than 20 articles.<sup>3</sup>

Eugène Minkowski continued his research on schizophrenia that had begun during his stay in Burghölzli, under the leadership of Eugen Bleuler. In 1927 he published *La Schizophrénie* (Schizophrenia), a first fundamental work in which he claims the importance of psychopathology, compared to traditional psychiatry. The concept of schizophrenia, which was the fruit of Eugen Bleuler's research, became that of Eugène Minkowski, a Parisian Minkowski whose work was intriguingly complementary to that of Françoise Minkowska who upheld the epileptoid theory. His originality was visible in a new domain that bypassed the context of psychiatry as such and where psychiatry, philosophy and phenomenology were all brought together. This was first to be seen in the *Temps Vécu* (*Lived Time*) (1933) in which, under the influence of Henri Bergson, he demonstrated the understanding of the crucial importance of comprehension as well as the normal structure of pathological deviations of the psyche. It was in 1936 that he published *Vers une cosmologie* (*towards a cosmology*), which looked beyond matters related to psychiatry and psychopathology, without forsaking them in any way. He then moved towards an anthropological philosophy in order to "place his particular and unique style in the genre where the human being is situated in and opens up to the world." It is in this way that the phenomenological study of the symptom that he developed explains how mental illness can be the subject of philosophical reflection. Psychiatric phenomenology, of which he was a founder, does not seek to discover the cause of mental troubles, but rather how to understand them. These three major works form a trilogy that constitutes, as he said himself, "a tripod upon which future efforts shall be made". These efforts have been conveyed in numerous articles published in different philosophical and psychiatric journals, in both French and other languages. They conclude with the *Traité de psychopathologie*, published in 1966, which was also inspired by these same trends and was dedicated to his wife, who died in 1950. These four works were re-edited in the 1990s which was a clear proof of his originality and modern way of thinking. It should also be observed that out of the 250 or so articles that he wrote, a certain number have been compiled and edited into two volumes: in 1997, *Au delà du rationalisme morbide* (*Beyond Morbid Rationalism*), which included his medicine thesis in Paris (hitherto unpublished), and *Écrits cliniques* (*Clinical Writings*), which show the variety of subjects on which Eugène Minkowski expressed himself and illustrate how his thinking has spread over the years.

Before going any further, one event which could appear trivial but which is of significance and, in the eyes of Eugène Minkowski, "has taken on a symbolic value and which, like a torch, shed light on the path<sup>4</sup>" which he and his wife had taken: "One grey morning in September 1915," in the trenches of the Champagne area, a French soldier held out his hand to prevent Eugène Minkowski from tripping over in the mud. In this spontaneous gesture, he saw a tangible sign of human solidarity, a state from which he so often benefitted, but which he himself was also so often the advocate.

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<sup>3</sup> *L'Évolution psychiatrique* (The Psychiatric Evolution) continued to exist and is currently a high-level international journal whose present editor is Dr. Richard Rechtman

<sup>4</sup> Response by Eugène Minkowski during a tribute to him in honour of his 70th birthday at the Saint Anne Psychiatric Centre in Paris, 1955

Eugène Minkowski's activities within the Union-OSE (Oeuvre de Secours aux enfants), a charity for children, are one way of illustrating this<sup>5</sup>. As soon as the Union-OSE was established in France in 1933 he was contacted by this international health aid organisation for poor, Jewish children and became the President of its Executive Committee. From the start he "presided over the French branch of the OSE as well as over those for whom it was intended during the first years of its existence"<sup>6</sup>. As a psychiatrist he helped orphan children who had often been smuggled illegally from the other side of the Rhine and he worked towards setting up a centre for problem children. When the war was declared, he refused to follow the general direction of the OSE in the southern zone, and represented the OSE Committee in the northern zone despite the increasing risks this entailed for the "bearer of the yellow star" and for his family under the German occupation. With the Gestapo's full knowledge, together with a small dedicated team of doctors, educational therapists and social workers, he pursued his charitable activities in different health centres<sup>7</sup>. He also set up a clandestine network to place children in non-Jewish families, with the help of the Amelot Committee, of which he was also a member, and with the financial help of the *Service Social d'Aide aux Emigrés* (SSAE) (help for immigrants' social service). The symbolic gesture of the French soldier who had held out his hand to help him was therefore still very much alive.

On 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1943, Eugène Minkowski and his family were arrested at their home for deportation but were fortunate enough to be liberated the same day thanks to the presence of mind of their daughter and the interventions of both Michel Cénac of the Psychiatric Evolution group, and Marcel Stora of L'Union générale des israélites de France (UGIF) (general union of Israelis in France). This did not prevent him from continuing his consultations at the Henri-Rousselle hospital, his actions at the Foyer de Soullins hostel, and his clandestine activities at the OSE until the Liberation. It was under his presidency that over 600 children and countless adults from the northern zone were able to be freed from persecution.

When the Liberation was declared, he took up his position again as President of the Executive Committee of Union-OSE, where he remained until 1952. He became Honorary President until the organisation was dissolved in the 1960s. He worked with both children and adult prisoners, in order to evaluate and try to limit the psychological damage they had suffered, using special medico-pedagogical methods. He concentrated especially on the future of the 427 surviving children from the Buchenwald Camp who were taken in by the OSE at Ecouis in 1945, and dedicated a publication to them that was produced in 1946 in Geneva.<sup>8</sup> That year, in Basel, he gave one of the first lectures

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<sup>5</sup> The Society for the Health Protection of Jewish Populations (in Russian, OZE) was established in 1912 in St. Petersburg, by a handful of doctors, intellectuals and social workers to help needy members of the Jewish population. From the start its activities were meant to address issues on education, medical and social help. In 1933, while the Nazism movement was rising, the Union-OSE, which existed as from 1923 in Berlin, came to France and became *l'Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants (OSE)* (<http://www.ose-france.org/divers/OSE-dates/historique-1.swf>).

<sup>6</sup> Speech on the « Activités de l'Union-OSE » (the activities of the Union-OSE) given by Eugène Minkowski in Geneva, 1947

<sup>7</sup> Health centre offered by the OSE at 35 Rue des Francs Bourgeois ; Health Centre at 36 Rue Amelot and the Tomkine Health Centre at 11 Rue Saulnier, in Paris

<sup>8</sup> *Les enfants de Buchenwald* (The Children from Buchenwald), in collaboration with Ernest Jablonski, Union-OSE report, Geneva, 1946

on consecutive psychological suffering due to Nazi persecution.<sup>9</sup> In his role of expert, he was afterwards involved in numerous cases that were taken to court for judgment.

In 1950, Eugène Minkowski lost his wife and “fellow traveller”, Françoise Minkowska.

In 1952, a medico-pedagogical service was established at the Tomkine clinic, at 11 Rue Saulnier in Paris, making official the consultations that he was already giving for Central European refugees. These consultations were intended for “all refugees with nervous or psychiatric illnesses under international protection, with no distinction between nationality or religious belief”. In 1962, this department, dedicated to the memory of Françoise Minkowska, became the Françoise Minkowska Centre, and was supervised and managed by the Association of the Friends of Françoise Minkowska<sup>10</sup>, which from then onwards became for Eugène Minkowski “one of the supports on which his life depended”, and which remained so until the day he died (see *History of the Association*).

Alongside this considerable amount of social work, Eugène Minkowski pursued his clinical and scientific activities. Apart from the *Traité de Psychopathologie* (Psychopathology Treaty) which he finished in 1966, and numerous articles, he completed and harmonized the works of his wife that remained unpublished. *Le Rorschach, à la recherche du monde des formes* was published in 1956.

In 1965, Eugène Minkowski received an honorary doctorate from the Academy of Medicine in Warsaw, after having already received the same honour from the University of Zürich 10 years previously. The year was, as he said, “triplely jubilatory, because I was 80 in April, and it is 50 years since my wife and I came to France to start our family and spiritual home, and it is also 50 years since I became a psychiatrist.”<sup>11</sup>

Eugène Minkowski died on 15<sup>th</sup> November 1972 in Paris.

Eugène Minkowski, philosopher, doctor and a great humanist, was “one of the most significant French-speaking psychiatrists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century”.<sup>12</sup> He was a “man of honour and a man without honours”, “a personable and erudite scientist, erudite enough that he did not need to be seen at the centre of controversies and dogmatism”<sup>13</sup>, “an honorary member of Humanity.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *La psychologie des déportés* (The Psychology of deportees), Union-OSE, Geneva, 1947

<sup>10</sup> The association became the Association Françoise and Eugène Minkowski, following the latter’s death

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Eugène Minkowski, *l’Information Psychiatrique* (Psychiatric Information) (1965), No. 10, 809-813

<sup>12</sup> Professor Bernard Granger, *Eugène Minkowski, Ecrits Cliniques*, Erès, 2002

<sup>13</sup> Dr. Henri Ey, speech on the occasion of a tribute to Eugène Minkowski in honour of his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, Sainte-Anne Psychiatric Centre, Paris, 1955

<sup>14</sup> Speech by Abraham Alperine, in *Du temps de l’Etoile Jaune*, 1945

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