

Françoise MINKOWSKA (1882-1950)

Françoise (Franziska) Minkowska-Brokman was born on 22 January 1882 in Moscow into a Jewish Polish family. After the divorce of her parents, she lived with her maternal grandparents in Warsaw where she attended school for her secondary education. In 1901, she went to Switzerland to study medicine, firstly in Bern, and then in Zurich at the psychiatric hospital of Burghölzli, under the supervision of Eugen Bleuler. She was awarded her doctorate in medicine in 1909 and travelled to Kazan to obtain a state diploma which would allow her to work all over Russia. After acquiring this diploma, Françoise Minkowska worked in a clinic for mentally retarded patients in Otwoch, near Warsaw, and afterwards in Munich where she met Eugène Minkowski, whom she had already met in Kazan in 1909. In 1912, she returned to Zurich, where she had secured a voluntary job as assistant to Eugen Bleuler at Burghölzli, and where she spent several months. At his request, she began research on the hereditary medical history of a brother and sister who had been interned at Burghölzli and who both suffered from an atypical form of schizophrenia. Her work entailed understanding these unusual characters through genealogical research. In 1912 and 1913, she worked at the regional hospital of Aarau, followed by a time in the sanatorium of Kilchberg, near Zurich. In 1913 she married Eugène Minkowski and they settled in Munich where they stayed until the beginning of the First World War, at which time they were obliged to return to Zurich. It was during those years in Zurich that Françoise Minkowska pursued her genealogy research work and widened her scope by furthering her study of the relations between the brother and sister.

Whilst she was in Zurich, Françoise Minkowska met another of Bleuler's students, Hermann Rorschach. She thus became acquainted with the ideas of the inventor of the famous Rorschach test, which she later introduced into France, long before he published his book *Psychodiagnostics* in 1921.

In March 1915, she went to Paris to follow her husband who had decided to abandon his quiet and safe position in Switzerland to sign up in the French army. In December 1915, she gave birth to their son, Alexander, and three years later, shortly after the war ended, to their daughter, Jeannine.

After the war, and despite having lived in France for a number of years, Françoise Minkowska's family responsibilities were such that she did not finish her medical studies to become a practitioner. She therefore continued, independently of any official organisation, the research work that she had begun at Burghölzli, with courage, passion, perseverance and determination, and did so over a period of 30 years. She returned to Zurich several times where she met the majority of the surviving family members of the two Burghölzli patients, both maternal and paternal – both those who suffered from illness and those who did not – and completed her genealogical study of over 1000 individuals. She was thus able to work back over six generations to two ancestors of these two families who had been alive in the middle of the 18th century and who suffered from schizophrenia and epilepsy respectively. The result of this vast study was the evidence of a new psychopathological constitution, that of epileptoid or, to be more precise, glischroid, alongside schizoid and syntonik. This also formed the basis of all Françoise Minkowska's future activity, whether it was about Van

Gogh, the Rorschach test, or childrens' drawings. In 1925 and 1927 she published *Les troubles essentiels de la schizophrénie dans leurs rapports avec les données de psychologie et de la biologie moderne* and *Le problème de la constitution examinée à la lumière des recherches généalogiques et son rôle théorique et pratique*. But it was only in 1937 that she completed her major monograph on the subject, *Epilepsie et schizophrénie du point de vue de l'hérédité*.

It was this genealogical research, and her reading of the study by Jaspers on Van Gogh and Strinberg in 1926, that led her to become interested in the life and works of the painter. This veritable encounter with Van Gogh never ceased to remain one of the main threads of her life's work. She wished "to encompass in an indivisible whole the life, works and psychosis"¹ of Van Gogh which led to the conclusion that he suffered from glischroid epilepsy and not from schizophrenia. In 1933, she published *Van Gogh, les relations entre sa vie, sa maladie et son œuvre*². But this study was only a stage in her research into the « world of shapes, [...] a world which ranked beside an instinctive-affective world, brought to the fore by psychoanalysis,... »³.

Françoise Minkowska needed a method to study this world of shapes and she drew her inspiration from the main lines of Rorschach's work, forcing herself to pursue her efforts by adapting his method to problems posed by both the clinic and by psychopathology: *Le test de Rorschach appliqué à l'examen clinique*, published in 1941, is a first proof of this⁴. She applied this method first and foremost to epileptic patients but also to other patients at the Bicêtre Hospice and at Saint Anne's psychiatric clinic. She continued relentlessly with these studies, which had begun in 1938, during the terrible years of the Occupation and of racial persecution, despite the risks and fear of being arrested and deported at any time. "Her basic research on essential mechanisms of epilepsy and schizophrenia, brought to the fore with the help of Rorschach, date from this sinister period."⁵ These works were published in 1945 and 1946 and form part of the works assembled by Eugène Minkowski in a book published posthumously, *Le Rorschach, à la recherche du monde des formes*. She also applied this method to the psychic exploration of the individual in general and of children in particular, whether it be problem children from the Foyer de Soullins or, from 1945 onwards, children who had been deported or whose parents had been deported, but also children who had lived under normal conditions with no serious trauma caused by the war. In 1947, together with Eugène Minkowski, she published *La psychopathologie infantile et le test de Rorschach* in *L'Evolution Psychiatrique* and *Le Test de Rorschach chez les enfants juifs victimes des lois raciales* with Dr. Fusswerk in *Le Journal de Psychiatrie Infantile*⁶.

During a trip to Zurich in 1945 to attend the International Weeks for Childhood Victims of the War, she visited an exhibition of children's drawings organised for the occasion. The forever present example of Van Gogh led her most naturally towards new research, and

¹ E. Minkowski, preface of *Van Gogh, sa vie, sa maladie et son œuvre*

² This dissertation was re-published posthumously by Eugène Minkowski in *Van Gogh, sa vie, sa maladie et son œuvre* together with two other studies by F. Minkowska about the painter

³ Françoise Minkowska, *La typologie constitutionnelle vue à travers le test de Rorschach et les dessins d'enfants*, extracts from the acts of the first international congress on differential anthropology (fasc. V), September 1950

⁴ This study is published in *Le Rorschach, à la recherche du monde des formes*

⁵ E. Minkowski, *Françoise Minkowska, In Memoriam*, Cimetière Bagneux-Parisien, 17 November 1950

⁶ These two studies were published in *Le Rorschach, à la recherche du monde des formes*

children's pictures would provide her with an enormous amount of material. On return to Paris she applied the method brought back from Switzerland to some of the children at the Foyer de Soullins, associating it with the Rorschach test and, afterwards, in partnership with Dr. Fusswerk, with Jewish orphans from children's homes in the outskirts of Paris. Afterwards she applied this method when following the development of very young, normal children over several years, seconded by a group of associates and students. Her most outstanding research results were seen in the exhibition of children's drawings organised in 1949 at the Pedagogical Museum. For this exhibition she edited an annotated catalogue-guide which was a publication in itself, entitled *De Van Gogh et Seurat aux dessins d'enfants. A la recherche du monde des formes (Rorschach)*.

While pursuing her work with the same ardour and passion, on the occasion of the first international congress of differential anthropology in which she participated only two months prior to her death, Françoise Minkowska wrote:

"It is through genealogical research into children's drawings, via constitutional typology, that we have always done our utmost to better understand the interior world of adults as children do, and look for both resources and deficiencies."³

She died on 15th November 1950 in Paris.

"Françoise Minkowska accomplished her far-reaching work in often very difficult and sometimes tragic conditions, which was rich in results, but also in promises for the future".⁷ "Nothing stopped her in her passion for research, to understand".⁸ "Her enthusiasm and force of conviction, her selflessness, her courage during very painful experiences, the strength of her personality, together with her gentleness, captivated all those who met her."⁹

⁷ Professor Michel Minkowski, *Dr. Françoise Minkowska, In Memoriam*, Meeting of the Swiss Society of Psychiatry, Hérissau, 9 June 1951

⁸ Dr. A. Répond, *Dr. Françoise Minkowska, In Memoriam*, Commemorative ceremony at the psychiatric hospital of Burghölzli, 26 January 1951

⁹ Dr. Xavier Abely, in the name of the Medico-Psychological Society, *Dr. Françoise Minkowska, In Memoriam*, Bagneux-Parisien Cemetery, 17 November 1950

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