

## The Case of Daniel Paul Schreber

Daniel Paul Schreber gained permanent status as a famous psychiatric patient by virtue of the attention given to him by Freud. The only source of information used by Freud in his renowned analysis of Schreber was a book authored by Schreber himself describing his thoughts and beliefs. Before Freud discovered Schreber's book, Freud had kept a woman with a classic case of paranoia in psychoanalysis in order to learn about her condition, even though he believed she was unable to benefit from therapy. When Freud discovered Schreber's work, he became consumed with writing Schreber's case history as a classic example of paranoia.

Freud was captivated by the eloquence with which Schreber wrote of his condition. Phrases used by Schreber to describe his condition such as "soul murder" and "nerve contacts" delighted Freud, who introduced them into his written communications. Every page of Schreber's grandiose descriptions of his affairs and the universe was an opportunity for Freud to amplify the sexual aspects of his psychoanalytic theory. Freud believed Schreber's paranoia caused him to explain the universe as a survival mechanism.

Daniel Paul Schreber was born on July 25, 1842, as a second son and the third of five children into a family of many generations of professionals. There is little direct evidence of what occurred in Schreber's childhood. It is known that he was gifted as a student. His father, Dr. Schreber, was a successful and well-known physician and reformer. One of many books written by Dr. Schreber had to do with how to raise children between infancy and adolescence. Dr. Schreber's first advice in that

book, which he asserts with pride he used on his own children, is to put as much pressure on children during the earliest years of their lives in order to avoid trouble later. Dr. Schreber stated that infants should be bathed in cold water to toughen them up, and, to make sure children never cry, parents must startle children from crying by knocking on the bed or simply punish them through physical beatings, until no emotion is again shown. He stated that children should undergo intense physical training and learn to restrain their emotions.

One of Dr. Schreber's favorite topics was making the child have perfect posture at all times. Between ages 2 and 8 especially, children should wear an orthopedic device made of iron intended to create an extremely erect and straight posture. He emphasized that this must be maintained while the child is sleeping, and he created a device with iron rings and a chain to ensure the child's sleeping posture.

In addition to extremely rigorous restraints and exercises, Dr. Schreber's philosophy was to control every waking moment of a child's day. The child should be completely organized and well groomed at all times. If the child does not adhere to each activity at the exact time interval allotted to it, the child is to be denied the next scheduled meal for that day. Harsh physical punishment was recommended if the child deviates from the schedule at all. When the child is punished, the child must hold out his or her hand to the person who is administering punishment to ensure that the child will not be bitter. Dr. Schreber said a list must be maintained on the child's wall, detailing every act of disobedience, and

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at the end of each week the child should be punished accordingly. This was also to ensure that the child will not grow up to masturbate.

As a result of the views of their father, Daniel Paul Schreber and his siblings likely grew up in complete passivity, and Schreber was described as nervous in his childhood. In 1858, when Schreber was 16 years old, Dr. Schreber's head was injured when a ladder fell on him. After that, he was known to have severe headaches, hallucinations, and stated homicidal intentions. Dr. Schreber was never the same; some believe that his peculiar behavior following the accident was a nervous breakdown. Three years later, when Schreber was age 19, his father died.

Schreber became a successful lawyer and later an esteemed judge. His older brother, Gustav, committed suicide when Schreber was 35 years old. At age 42, Schreber was defeated in a race for political office. It was after this defeat that he suffered his first mental breakdown. He started having hypochondriacal delusions, such as believing he was emaciated and that he was going to die of a heart attack. During this first hospital stay, which lasted six months, Schreber had speech impediments, two suicide attempts, hypersensitivity to noise, and high emotionality. Even when Schreber was discharged, he believed he had lost 30 pounds (when in fact he had gained 2 pounds).

After his discharge, Schreber spent the next eight years happily with his wife. His only disappointment was that they had no children. He reached the top of his profession when he was appointed presiding judge of the country's highest court. Immediately before this appointment, Schreber dreamed that his mental illness had returned. When his insomnia and anxiety became worse, Schreber contacted Dr. Paul Emil Flechsig, his former psychiatrist. Schreber's condition worsened and he was again hospitalized, this time for eight years. Schreber was 51 years old—the same age of his father when he suffered the

blow to the head from which he never fully recovered.

It was during this second hospitalization that Schreber wrote *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, a book recording his thoughts, delusions, and hallucinations, written "to acquaint my wife with my personal experiences and religious ideas" so that she would understand his "various oddities of behavior." It is from this book that we have information about Schreber's psychological condition. Schreber's medical records reflect that when he began his second hospitalization, he feared he would soon die and had delusions of persecution. He believed he was a woman and his penis had been twisted off with a nerve probe. He had constant auditory and visual hallucinations. He believed he was being tortured to death and that God spoke openly to him.

Schreber often screamed out of his window statements such as "The sun [or God] is a whore." His thoughts about his body began to change from death and destruction to flowering into the body of a female, which made him pleased to show his doctor his naked chest. He became preoccupied with sexual thoughts.

While Schreber was spending much of his time with ribbons over his naked body in front of a mirror, he was able to write letters to his wife and family, wherein he spoke of his illness with amazing insight. In addition, when he was age 53, Schreber filed and ultimately won an appeal of his permanent commitment, which had been done without his knowledge. Schreber argued he had a nervous illness that resulted from problems that were objectively true. The court found that Schreber was mentally ill but agreed with him that mental illness was not determinative, since he was able to convince the court he could care for himself. In response to the argument that Schreber's intention to publish his *Memoirs* was evidence of his lack of judgment, the court ruled that the publication might be

financially beneficial to Schreber and that despite the obvious lack of reality in the book, it did reflect a genuine interest in finding the truth.

The content of Schreber's *Memoirs* alternated between three levels: (1) the history of his illness and his efforts to appeal his order of involuntary commitment, (2) his personal experiences, and (3) his analysis of the cosmos. Schreber received information about the cosmos from souls that spoke to him, but unfortunately not in complete sentences, forcing Schreber to do so, which he said caused him to think compulsively:

I meet a person I know by the name of Schneider. Seeing him the thought automatically arises "This man's name is Schneider" or "This is Mr. Schneider." With it "But why" or "Why because" also resounds in my nerves.

When humans die God appears and sucks the nerves out of the body to return and be purified. Sometimes God, who sees all humans as corpses, makes a mistake and attaches Himself to living humans. When this occurs, there is danger because some living human nerves have such a powerful attraction that God will not be able to disconnect Himself. If this happened, God would cease to exist and there would be a rip or tear in the cosmic order.

The process of being transformed into a woman was one of Schreber's continuing pre-

occupations. Even though he believed this process was initiated by Flechsig, as a soul murder, with an intent to make him a prostitute, Schreber said that through a series of miracles, he agreed to become a woman to ensure his survival. He described this transformation in terms of many attacks on his body—for example, the destruction and replacement of his internal organs, the pumping out of his spinal cord from his body through the assistance of little men in his feet, and the saturation of his body with female nerves. When he would ultimately surrender to this force, Schreber referred to himself as a joint of pork, and said his ultimate goal was to become pregnant by God.

Schreber's second stay in the hospital ended when he won his appeal of the permanent commitment. Eight years after entering the hospital, at age 60, Schreber went home. He lived there for five years. His mother, with whom he had been living, died, and soon after, his wife had a stroke and died. After his wife's death, Schreber reentered the hospital at age 65 and stayed there until his death at age 69, the same year that Freud's essay on paranoia based on Schreber's *Memoirs* was published.

Schreber's last position was as the president of a panel of judges at the Superior Country Court (court of appeals) in Dresden. Throughout his life, Schreber continued to publicly protest anyone using the devices his father used on him.