1. Biography

Though renowned for his contributions to the development of contemporary infant, child and adolescent psychiatry in France in the years that followed the Second World War, René Diatkine liked to say he was both an adult and child psychoanalyst psychiatrist. He was born on April 6th, 1918 in Paris into a Russian Jewish family with revolutionary sympathies that had left Tsarist Russia at the turn of the century to find refuge in Paris via Geneva. He died in Paris on November 2, 1997.

He began his medical studies in 1939, left for the free zone during the war went to Marseille, then became an intern at the psychiatrist hospital of Pierrefeu (Var), at that time an asylum. During those years, his encounter with Rudolph Lowenstein, a psychoanalyst from Vienna, was crucial to the way his thinking would develop. As was the horror, he experienced when he was confronted with the psychiatric asylums of his time. He often recalled, years later, the tragic destiny of the mentally ill who died of famine during the war years [1].

After the war, once again in Paris, he became an intern in psychiatry at the Saint-Anne Hospital, then worked as a senior psychiatrist in Professor Georges Heuver’s ward at the Necker-Enfants-Malades Hospital and began his training in psychoanalysis at the Paris Psychoanalytical Society. At the time, Saint-Anne Hospital, guided by Henry Ey, had become a training ground for talented students. Strong friendships are rooted in this period – Serge Lebovici, Jean Favreau, René Angelergues, Evelyne and Jean Kestemberg, Denise Kalmanson who will become his wife and many others – united by their shared passion for intellectual debate, the development of psychoanalysis and, for René Diatkine in particular, the wish to extend analytic practice to the institutional field. Julian de Ajuriaguerra, a psychiatrist and neurologist who founded the discipline of neuropsychology, is another important encounter that will determine his interest for a truly multidisciplinary approach to psychical development. Jacques Lacan, an influential figure in the 1950s becomes René Diatkine’s first analyst and he will pursue his training analysis with Sacha Nacht before becoming a full member of the Paris Psychoanalytic Society in 1952, just before the split provoked by Daniel Lagache, followed by Jacques Lacan et al. with whom René Diatkine was in profound disagreement. With Serge Lebovici and Sacha Nacht, he is the author of a report for the XVI Conference of French speaking psychoanalysts in 1954 on the “study of the fantasies in children”. He founded the Colloquium of Deauville in 1964, named the René Diatkine Colloquium after his death. He became president of the Parisian Psychoanalytic Society in 1968. Yet, he did not neglect his commitment as a psychoanalyst psychiatrist in adult psychiatry. In 1978 he succeeded Serge Lebovici, who left the ASM13 to assume new responsibilities elsewhere, as its associate general director. He was particularly interested in schizophrenia and establishes numerous international collaborations, particularly in Geneva, where he was named associate professor in 1972, then part time professor and finally honorary professor in 1991 [1] (Fig. 1).

2. Communautary psychiatry

In 1958, he joins Philippe Paumelle and Serge Lebovici at the Mental Health Care Centre, now called the ASM13 (mental health association of the 13th district of Paris), that represents for both adult and child psychiatry, the first model on which will be based mental health care for the rest of the country. There in 1963, he helped establish the Centre Alfred-Binet where he worked until the end of his life.

The Alfred-Binet Centre is an outpatient mental health centre for children, adolescent and later on, babies living in the
13th district of Paris based on a psychoanalytic comprehension of psychopathologic disturbances and a multidisciplinary approach to treatment. That is, psychoanalytic therapy occupies a preponderant but not exclusive place and though psychoanalysts provide individual psychoanalytic therapies, psychodrama and therapeutic groups, a large place is made and in particular by Diatkine, for the treatment of language and learning disturbances (Fig. 2).

3. Scientific contribution to child psychiatry

First, he had an important editorial contribution [3]. In 1958, he founded with Lebovici, Crémioux and Ajuriaguerra a review that became a reference in the field of child psychodynamics: La Psychiatrie de l’Enfant (Child Psychiatry). In 1972, once again with Ajuriaguerra and Lebovici, he edited the child section of the famous collection “Fil Rouge” published by the French University Press. Major works will be edited including “Psychoanalyse précoce” with Janine Simon in 1972 [2]. He also founded the texts of Alfred-Binet Centre (textes du centre Alfred-Binet) in 1982 known today under the name of “L’enfant, la psychiatrie et la psychanalyse” edited byorth Press.

Second, he considered access to treatment crucial. Confronted with psychosocial problems that burden the development of children, he created in 1971 with the help of the Martine-Lyon Foundation the USIS (for intensive evening care unit) that received children with important language and behavioural disturbances and born into socially disfavoured families. It aimed at preventing stigmatisation and exclusion. In this same spirit, he founded in 1982 with Marie Bonnafé and Tony Lainé ACCES, acronym for “actions culturelles contre les exclusions et les ségrégations” (cultural activities to counter exclusion and segregation) an association that aimed at putting the child and the mother in contact with books as early as possible [4].

Third, he contributed to the history of child psychoanalysis and child psychiatry. Both a fascinating and passionate clinician, he urged an open attitude. He refused closed theoretical systems and rigid classifications. He was particularly interested in the status of unconscious fantasies in the analysis of children and adults, he theorised the psychic object in an original way, he reflected on transference and interpretations and constructed a personal theory of the analytic cure. According to Diatkine, analysis allowed, in successful cases, for patients to become interested in their own mental functioning in which heterogeneity represents an essential aspect. His conception of psychic reorganisation and mobility, of latent mental potential and the effects of significant encounters broadened the field of psychoanalysis [5–8].

Disclosure of interest

The authors have not supplied their declaration of conflict of interest.

References


