

# Humberto Nágera, MD (1927-2016)

## A Psychoanalyst of Distinction

Daniel Benveniste

With contributions from Frances Marton, Michael Poff,  
Francisco Diaz, and María Eugenia Rangel

Humberto Nágera was a Cuban psychiatrist who studied at the London Institute of Psycho-Analysis and at the Hampstead Clinic with Anna Freud. He became Miss Freud's heir apparent but after ten years relocated to the US where he had a distinguished career in Ann Arbor, Michigan and Tampa, Florida and contributed eight books and numerous articles to the psychoanalytic literature.

Humberto was born in Cuba on March 23rd 1927. His father Evaristo Najera/Nágera Valiente was a Spaniard born on July 2, 1902 in Orense, Spain. His mother was Emilia Perez de Nágera, born August 6, 1902. His mother's last name was Perez, which he explained is a common name among Latin American Catholics but is originally of Sephardic Jewish origin.

His father emigrated to Cuba as a child—8 or 10 years-old. In Cuba he became a butcher and later entered the real estate business constructing apartment buildings. As an infant, Humberto contracted whooping cough and his parents took him to Spain for treatment. As a child, he nearly drowned on one occasion and it was his father who saved him. As a small boy he often played in the sandbox with the son of the cleaning lady who came to the house once a week to help his mother. One day his playmate didn't show up. He'd taken ill and died suddenly.

Humberto was raised in Catholic schools where he was a good student but also developed a distaste for religion of any kind. He began reading Freud when he was 12 or 13 years-old. Around the same time, age 13, he met Gloria M. Hernandez-Fernandez (b. August 17, 1927), the middle school sweetheart with whom he would later marry and raise a family. Gloria had a brother who was a close friend of Humberto's. That friend died of a brain tumor at age 14. It was one of several early life events that deeply affected Humberto and probably determined the choice of his career. When he was an adolescent, he also had a friend who died while riding a motorcycle.

His father was a strict and difficult man who did not approve of toys but was encouraging of educational pursuits. He would give Humberto money for books but not for beverages, toys, transportation, etc. Thus, Humberto became entrepreneurial and negotiated selling beverages and snacks at a local club.

Humberto was at the Maristas School for high school from 1939-1943. He did his undergraduate work at the Maristas School and graduated in 1945 at the age

of 18 with a Bachelor of Science degree. He played the violin, formally studied music from 1944-1950 and even considered a career in music. His childhood friend, Francisco Diaz, remembered him as studious and as one of the best in the school. In 1945 he went on to the University of Havana Medical School to begin his medical studies. It was the same year that another young Cuban began his law studies at the University of Havana—Fidel Castro. While studying at the same time and on the same campus, Humberto witnessed the first steps of a well-known gangster on his rise toward eventual totalitarian rule over Cuba.

Dr. Nágera graduated from the University of Havana Medical School in 1952 and completed his residency in psychiatry in 1955. He'd always had a large capacity for work. In Cuba, he went to school and trained to be a psychiatrist while at the same time running a construction company, from which he was able to earn enough to pay for his education, start his family, and save for his future analytic training. In the late 1950s Nágera was already doing research and writing and Castro was preparing for his violent takeover of Cuba with considerable popular support.

Nágera's first publication, on the use of psychotherapy with schizophrenics, appeared in 1954 when he was just 27 years old. During the next five-years he would publish fourteen articles on topics including hypnotism, electroshock, alcoholism and themes related to early infantile sexuality. He also began tracing psychoanalytic concepts through Freud's work and writing them up. Gloria and Humberto's daughter Lisette M. Nágera was born March 29, 1954 and their son, Humberto "Phillip" Nágera was born May 26, 1955.

In 1957 Nágera went to London for his interviews as part of his application for candidacy at the British Psycho-Analytic Institute. He was accepted to the Institute and in 1958 moved his family to London where he began his training.

His training analyst was Willi Hoffer and he was in seminars led by luminary analysts such as D. W. Winnicott, Melanie Klein and Anna Freud. He showed a friend some of the work he had done on psychoanalytic concepts back in Cuba and the friend showed it to Anna Freud who was impressed. That paper served as his introduction to Anna Freud and the Hampstead Clinic. In 1959 he began his parallel training at the Hampstead Clinic, became a trusted colleague of Anna Freud and collaborated with her for the next 10 years as one of her closest associates during one of the most productive periods of Anna Freud's life.

As Nágera began his training all was going well for this bright and talented 31-year-old who was studying with the giants in his field, enjoying his family and doing it all with the money he had in the bank from his construction company back home in Cuba. While Nágera was away in London, Fidel Castro launched his revolution and rose to power in Cuba, leaving the fate of the country dynamic and uncertain. In early 1960 Nágera received a threatening letter from the Cuban

government saying that in order to continue taking money out of his own bank account he would need to send his wife and children back to Cuba for a time. It was an odd stipulation by all appearances and it forced him to weigh the difficult options. Nágera would never forget the prescient observation that Willi Hoffer offered to him during one of his analytic sessions at that time. Hoffer, a Jew from Vienna who had only recently lost most of his family in the Nazi Holocaust, said, “Dr. Nágera, you do what you want but if you send your family, you will never see them again.” Nágera said, “Well what do you mean?” And Hoffer replied, “Well that’s a totalitarian style of government. I don’t know what is happening there but it’s not what it looks like. That’s a totalitarian regime. You send your family back and you will never see them again. They are not going to send you your money or anything. This is it.”

Nágera decided not to send his family back, Castro took his money, and the analytic community in London rallied. His supervisors and analyst continued to work with him, and waived their fees or allowed him to delay payment until he could figure out a new strategy. He was in England on a student visa, could not work for money and all his money in the bank had just been stolen. Nágera had already become a particularly important student and assistant to Anna Freud. The two of them were loyal to Sigmund Freud, very bright, direct in their communication and extremely hard working. In this sense, they were very much kindred spirits. At the time of the crisis in Cuba, Nágera was working on Anna Freud’s Developmental Profile when Jenny Waelder-Hall, a distinguished analyst and a friend of Anna Freud’s, came into town. Nágera was assigned to show her around the clinic and introduce her to the Developmental Profile work. Waelder-Hall was impressed and when she learned of Nágera’s financial difficulties, she offered to help. She introduced him to her husband, an Australian who had been involved in the League of Nations (before the United Nations) and had many connections in the British government. When Mr. Hall saw the threatening letter from the Castro government he got down to business working his connections in the British government on behalf of Nágera. Within two to three weeks. Nágera was given residency in England permitting him to work and earn money. Anna Freud hired him as a research leader and lecturer at the Hampstead Clinic. On September 6, 1962, Gloria and Humberto’s son, Daniel, was born and by 1964 Nágera was a training analyst and supervisor at the Clinic.

Nágera was supervised by Hedwig Hoffer (wife of Willi Hoffer), Ilse Hellman, and Heddy Schwartz. He was an outstanding clinician and theoretician who participated in the senior clinical meetings in the Freud home. He worked closely with Anna Freud on the administration of the Clinic and was deeply involved with many of the research projects at the Clinic. He worked on Anna Freud’s Personality Profile; and in collaboration with Anna Freud and her nephew,

W. Ernest Freud, he wrote up The Metapsychological Assessment of the Adult Personality: The Adult Profile (1965). Nágera did the writing but the main ideas were Anna Freud's so he put her name on it as the first author, put his name second and put W. Ernest Freud's name third. W. Ernest Freud was Freud's oldest grandson, the only grandchild to become an analyst and an active member of the Hampstead Clinic staff. Ernest and Humberto were colleagues and friends for many years.

The Hampstead Clinic was a hotbed of clinical work, community support and clinical and conceptual research. Nágera led the study group exploring the development of Basic Psychoanalytic Concepts throughout Freud's lifetime. This study group included: Sheila Baker, Alice Colonna, Eleanor Dansky, Rose Edgecumbe, Elsa First, Audrey Gavshon, Alex Holder, Gladys Jones, Maria Kawenoka, Lottie Kearney, Ehud Koch, Moses Laufer, Cecily Legg, Dale Meers, Lily Neurath, Pat Radford and Katherine Rees. They met for years, planned their course of studies, developed a methodology for tracing Freud's basic psychoanalytic concepts throughout his writings, assigned concepts for each to study, presented their summaries to each other, edited the materials and culminated their work in the publication of a four-volume set of Basic Psychoanalytic Concepts, which were published between 1969 and 1970 and translated into German, Italian, Spanish, Japanese and Portuguese.

The association between "Dr. Nágera" and "Miss Freud" - which was how they referred to each other - was formal and respectful but not devoid of personal warmth. Anna Freud's warmth and appreciation for Nágera is exemplified in the following vignette. At Christmas time of 1964 when the Clinic was shut down, everyone was on vacation and Nágera received a small box from Miss Freud. In it was a remarkable gift accompanied by the note "A small token from my father's collection to sit as a protective goddess on your desk. With best wishes for Christmas and the new year, Anna Freud." The "small token" was the mounted head and neck of an ancient Greek goddess from Sigmund Freud's collection of antiquities!

A topic of long-standing interest for Sigmund Freud, Anna Freud and Humberto Nágera was obsessional neurosis. In the early 1960s Nágera began a systematic study of this topic in Freud's and Anna Freud's writings, in combination with subsequent contributions to the literature by others, and observations of obsessional phenomena in children at the Clinic. In 1965 his manuscript, Obsessional Neurosis: Developmental Psychopathology, was distributed to colleagues who then came together to discuss it on a panel at the 24<sup>th</sup> Congress of the International Psychoanalytical Association in Amsterdam. The discussants were Dr. Arthur Valenstein, Dr. Joseph J. Michaels, Dr. Paul Myerson, Dr. Philip Weissman, Dr. Max Schur, Miss Charlotte Balkanyi and Miss Anna

Freud. The monograph of 1965 was subsequently expanded as a book, to include material from the Amsterdam Congress and later developments, under the title, *Obsessional Neuroses: Developmental Psychopathology* (1976). Additionally, Nágera's paper, "Obsessional Characters and Obsessional Neuroses" was included as one of the *Essential Papers On Character Neurosis and Treatment*, ed. Ruth Lax, 1989 New York University Press.

Nágera talked frequently of his experiences at the British Institute and the Hampstead Clinic from 1958-1968, which brought him into contact with Anna Freud, D. W. Winnicott, Melanie Klein, Dorothy Burlingham, Willi Hoffer, Richard Sterba, Max Schur, and many others. He recalled the unusual climate of excellence there:

*"This was a unique group of people that worked together for many, many years, and they were outstanding. I can't think of anyone there that wasn't pretty remarkable. That was a unique time. It had a lot to do with what happened in Nazi Germany and all that—they emigrated there. But there was a group of distinguished people in England at that point, and particularly at the Hampstead Clinic, though the Institute was not short on distinguished people either. It was a remarkable time. I think it would be difficult to put together a similar group of people ever again."*

In the mid-1960s Nágera was working on his ideas about psychological difficulties in childhood and their manifestations in adulthood. It was then that he introduced his concept of the "developmental interference", about which Anna Freud wrote to him, "Some of your formulations, especially the one about the "developmental interferences" are almost constantly in my mind" (December 11, 1969). Nágera defined this concept as follows:

*"A 'developmental interference' can be defined as whatever disturbs the typical unfolding of development. The term may be reserved to describe those situations that involve gross external (environmental) interference with certain needs and rights of the child, or situations in which unjustified demands are made of the child. In making such demands the environment frequently does not take into account the child's lack of ego capacity to comply or cope with them. The disturbance thus introduced may sometimes affect development in positive ways but usually affects it in negative ways."* (1966, p. 28)

Nágera's work on childhood disturbances and adult disturbances was significantly influenced by his work at the Hampstead Clinic. He recalled:

*“In it I discussed some of the Kleinians’ ideas, particularly the fact that Melanie Klein, not having a medical background, was not fully cognizant that some of the things that she attributed to the cognitive abilities of infants that were a few weeks old are simply not possible at that stage of development. It’s not that what she said is wrong. If she moved the timetable upwards, she probably was right, but certainly not at the age of development that she was thinking of. In any case, I wrote this monograph and discussed some aspects of Melanie Klein’s work because I was talking about the early childhood disturbances, and I sent it to Winnicott, who at one time had been very attached to Klein and then became an independent. He wrote back a very pleasant letter. He loved the monograph, incidentally; he thought it was terrific. He said maybe I should soften my criticism of Melanie Klein, because though I was right in what I was saying, she had done other things that were useful, which was certainly true.”*

Nágera’s work on disturbances in childhood and adulthood culminated in *Early childhood disturbances, the infantile neurosis, and the adulthood disturbances: Problems of a developmental psychoanalytic psychology*. Monograph No. 2 (1966) in *The Monograph Series of The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*.

Between 1966-1968 Nágera was a visiting lecturer at the University of Leiden in Holland. On flights to and from this lectureship he did research on Vincent van Gogh, whose art had always impressed him. His research took him to the museums and brought him into contact with the van Gogh family. His book-length biography, *Vincent van Gogh: A Psychological Study*. New York: International Universities Press, was published in 1967 and has been translated into French, German, Spanish and Dutch.

After ten years of extensive clinical work, research, writing and teaching at the Hampstead Clinic and assuming many of Anna Freud’s own administrative and grant-writing burdens, Nágera was deeply honored by Miss Freud’s request that he carry on her work as Director of the Clinic. Yet, once again, the fate of Nágera’s homeland, Cuba, would be a determining factor in his decisions. He had recently undertaken the financial responsibility for his elderly parents, in addition to his wife’s parents, all four of whom had escaped, penniless, from Castro’s communism to the United States. The British economy and the financial exigencies of providing for his wife and children in addition to his refugee family abroad made staying in London a practical impossibility. Nágera was forced to begin making plans for a move to the US and he soon found fertile ground at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

Anna Freud, Dorothy Burlingham and W. Ernest Freud all wrote letters of recommendation to the Michigan Psychoanalytic Institute in support of Nágera's application. At the end of Anna Freud's lengthy and glowing letter of recommendation she wrote:

*"I can only say that I found in Dr. Nágera a very welcome combination of clinical skill, capacity for theoretical abstraction and extensive as well as intensive knowledge of our psychoanalytical literature. This, as we all know, is rare. I feel sure that his immense capacity for work, and pleasure in work, will be in the service of psychoanalysis wherever he finds himself.*

*Yours sincerely*

*Annafreud, LL.D., Sc.D."*

In May 1968 Nágera left London, England to start his career in the United States. Before leaving, he met with Anna Freud and she gave to him a unique parting gift, now the second gift from her that had once been among her father's collection of antiquities. It was her own jade letter opener – the very one that Freud had given to her upon her graduation as an analyst in 1922. (Interestingly, in those days a letter opener was necessary just to read the literature. Scholarly books were often bound with the pages folded over in such a way that one needed to cut them on the side or at the top, for example, just to open and read them.) When Nágera left London W Ernest Freud also presented him with the parting gifts of two photographic portraits: one, of Sigmund Freud taken by Ernest's father and signed by Sigmund Freud, and the other of Willi Hoffer, the analyst that Nágera and W. Ernest Freud had shared. As the latter would say, "We were couch brothers". With his characteristic sense of humor and taste for ironic complexity Nágera recalled that Hoffer had once grouched to him—during an analytic hour—because of Miss Freud's and W. Ernest's generosity with gifts to others of antiquities and heirlooms associated with Freud. "If they keep giving those things away there won't be anything left of the collection!" Hoffer grumbled.

Nágera, his wife Gloria and their three children left London in 1968 and went off to their new life in Michigan. At the Michigan Psychoanalytic Institute and Society Nágera became a training analyst and supervisor. He was Director of the Child Analytic Study Program, Children's Psychiatric Hospital, Department of Psychiatry at the University of Michigan; Professor of Psychiatry in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Michigan; and Chief and Director of Youth Services, Department of Psychiatry at the University of Michigan, from May 1973 to July 1979. The Youth Services program included teaching child psychiatry to child fellows, medical students, social workers and psychology students. It also entailed outpatient services, day-care services, a child analytic

study program, as well as a 112-bed inpatient psychiatric hospital for children and adolescents. It was called the Children Psychiatric Hospital and Adolescent Unit of the Department of Psychiatry, University of Michigan.

In Michigan Nágera did clinical work, research, administrative work and taught extensively. The books written on the Basic Psychoanalytic Concepts at the Hampstead Clinic were not published until Nágera was already in Michigan. They were eagerly greeted by the psychoanalytic world and were used extensively in training and senior analysts used them as well to fortify their understandings and develop their ideas for presentation in lectures and writing. The published series included:

Nágera, H. et al. (1969). *Volume I: Basic psychoanalytic concepts on the libido theory*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.

Nágera, H. et al. (1969). *Volume II: Basic psychoanalytic concepts on the theory of dreams*. New York: Basic Books, Inc.

Nágera, H. et al. (1970). *Volume III: Basic Psychoanalytic Concepts on the Theory of Instincts*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.

Nágera, H. et al. (1970). *Volume IV: Basic psychoanalytic concepts on metapsychology, conflicts, anxiety and other subjects*. New York: Basic Books, Inc.

Through the 1970s and '80s Nágera's productivity blazed. In 1975 he published a book on female sexuality and in 1976 his work on the obsessional neurosis was also published in book form.

Nágera, H. (1975). *Female sexuality and the Oedipus complex*. New York: Jason Aronson, Inc.

Nágera, H. (1976). *Obsessional neuroses: developmental psychopathology*. New York: Jason Aronson, Inc.

Dr. Nágera remains to this day the only psychoanalyst whose bibliography includes seven publications that contain a Foreword written by Anna Freud. In 1981 Nágera published a massive volume on what he called the "developmental approach" to child psychopathology. It was a continuation of his work with Anna Freud but by this time Miss Freud was old and frail, so this book contains no Foreword by her.

Nágera, H. (1981). *The developmental approach to child psychopathology*. New York: Jason Aronson., Inc.

In 1979 Dr. Nágera helped Dr. María Eugenia Rangel from Monterrey, México to create the Mental Health Institute. It is a non-profit organization with a 3-year training program in child and adolescent psychotherapy modeled after Anna Freud's Hampstead Clinic with the appropriate modifications for Mexican culture. The trainees they started with were 10 psychologists, 2 psychiatrists and Dr. Rangel as Director. Dr. Nágera invited many visiting lecturers to this program including: Drs. Barrie Biven, Cecily Legg, Charles Brenner, Otto Kernberg, Paulina Kernberg, James Anthony, Charles Socarides, George Pollock, Robert Stoller, Jorge De la Torre, Efrain Blaiberg, Frances Marton, Werner Prall and Dr. Samuel Roll. They had visiting professors every weekend for 3 years. The three-year program has been offering a Master Degree for many years now. It is a program that not only benefits the trainees but also the welfare of the broader community and specifically the unprivileged children they serve.

At the end of 1986 Nágera left his teaching position at the University of Michigan and was named Professor Emeritus. Upon conferring emeritus status to Dr. Nágera the University of Michigan's Board of Regents said:

*“Dr. Nágera's contributions and achievements as a clinician, teacher, and researcher have been internationally recognized. He is considered to be one of the foremost scholars of Freud. Among his publications are several chapters in the highly regarded book, Psychoanalytic Study of the Child. He has served the department and the field of child psychiatry in a highly dedicated fashion, and has been the inspiration for many clinicians now committed to the study and treatment of problems in children.”*

In January 1986 he and Gloria moved to Tampa, Florida, where Nágera became professor of psychiatry at the University of South Florida and Director of the Child and Adolescent Inpatient units at the University of South Florida Psychiatry Center from 1987-1993. From 1993-1998 he was Director of the ADHD Clinic and Director of the Child and Adolescent Outpatient Clinic, both at the University of South Florida.

Since 1969 Humberto Nágera remained a member of the Cuban Medical Association in Exile. His efforts on behalf of this community were sustained and vigorous for the remainder of his life, and included: vocal opposition to the Castro Communist totalitarian regime in Cuba; a psycho-biographical sketch on the psychopathology of Fidel Castro, entitled “Anatomy of a Tyrant”; distribution of information on the truth of Cuba before its fall to the Castros and the truth about the Cuban people and deterioration of their country ever since then.

In 2001 Nágera became Director of the Carter-Jenkins Center, a nonprofit educational organization with partial affiliations to the University of South Florida.

At the University of Michigan, University of South Florida and at the Carter-Jenkins Center Nágera maintained the psychoanalytic spirit of Anna Freud's Hampstead Clinic in his many functions, including director of clinical treatment, seminar leader, professor and supervisor. It was also in this spirit that he assisted the Florida Psychoanalytic Society and Institute in becoming independent of the Washington-Baltimore Institute/Society and was a founding member of the Tampa Southwest Florida Psychoanalytic Society and its first President from 1993-1995. Those who knew Humberto Nágera understood that few things inspired him more than building lasting structures on behalf of psychoanalysis in a manner that honored and carried forward his work with Anna Freud.

He was a man of many talents. He painted, wrote an unpublished novel "The Eagle's Council", hybridized daylilies and hibiscus, was a builder, an investor, and a collector of violins, watches, music, paintings, and oriental rugs.

On October 17<sup>th</sup> 2007, Gloria, his wife of 63 years died. In his sorrow for this loss, he characteristically threw himself into a flurry of activity at the Carter-Jenkins Center (CJC), delivering and recording lectures and developing psychoanalytic and psychiatric educational materials on the CJC website for the Carter-Jenkins Center. In 2014, in tribute to his wife Gloria, Nágera self-published *Versos del alma*, a collection of love poems written to his wife, Gloria, throughout their 67 years together.

Nágera, H. (2014). *Versos del alma*. Bloomington, Indiana: Palibrio.

Tragically Humberto and Gloria's son, Danny, died on February 6, 2012. During the last three years of his life Dr. Nágera suffered a stroke and had difficulties with congestive heart failure. He knew he did not have long to live and devoted himself to assuring the continuation of the Carter-Jenkins Center and seeing to it that the letters Anna Freud had written to him were annotated and published.

Benveniste, D. (Ed.) (2015). *Anna Freud in the Hampstead Clinic: Letters to Humberto Nágera*. (Foreword by Humberto Nágera) New York: International Psychoanalytic Books.

Nágera suffered congestive heart failure and died on November 7<sup>th</sup> 2016. Dr. Nágera had had no illusions about death and he was not a religious man, yet the pursuit of truth regarding life's most fundamental and significant questions was an extraordinarily driving force in him and he developed a great appreciation for the teachings of Buddhism in his last years. Inspired in part by this affinity to Buddhism, Nágera wrote perhaps one of his most interesting psychoanalytic papers

in which he applied the Japanese legend of *Ajase* to a reassessment of the Oedipus complex:

Nágera, H. (2005). The Oedipus complex Revisited: Suggestions for its Amplifications and its Role in Later Malignant Acting Out and Conflicts (2005, online lecture, Carter-Jenkins Center website).

Nágera was a man of culture who showed his love through his extraordinary capacity for sensitive and intelligent clinical work, inspired teaching and highly efficient clinic administration. He was a man of great complexity. He had an infamous temper (“They say I’m a fiery Cuban”); at the same time he was a man of principle, not known to be impulsive, erratic or inconstant. He was a man who pulled few of his punches and his capacity to wage an aggressive battle when engaged over causes dear to him – both professional and personal - was widely recognized. One knew where Nágera stood on matters of consequence and he had little penchant for retreat once engaged in a charge. And this indomitable side of his character was matched by an equal capacity for understated yet undeniable acts of love and care, great tenderness and generosity, unfailing loyalty, dedication, and affection. He was a lovely man who leaves behind his two surviving children Lizette Nágera and Humberto “Phillip” Nágera, a substantial contribution of scholarly books and articles, many grateful students and supervisees, and countless admiring colleagues.