
A LIFE CHRONOLOGY

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Frederick Perls

Fritz Perls wrote the following as part of his introduction to the 1969 Random House edition of Ego, Hunger and Aggression. For reasons unknown to us, only the material that followed the chronology actually appeared. We offer it here exactly as Perls wrote it.

We have inserted photographs taken during Perls's lifetime at the appropriate location in the text.

JW

1893 Time of birth. Place: Berlin. Mother loving, ambitious. Loving the arts, hating father. Father hating mother, loving women; also playing grand master of freemasons; heavy and gay. In public, both friendly. Confusing.



Elsa, Margariet and Frederick Perls, Germany, 1900.

1903 Bright boy in elementary school; always best without homework. Tested for high school; never heard of fractions. Dumbfounded. Shock of failure. Confusing.

1910 Gymnasium unloving, cruel teachers. Brightness lost, hate school. Masturbation conflicts; can't conquer forbidden sex. Psychiatrist prescribes bromides and exercise. Don't believe him. Helper is no help. Confusing.

1911 Finding my world. Fall in love. Poetry, philosophy, and mostly the theater. Max Reinhard, founder of modern theater direct with your ears: listen, listen, listen! Canvas and painted props are out. Three dimensions. Make the stage real. Turn the world into a stage. What is reality? Confusing.

1913 College. Uncle Herman Staub, greatest lawyer in Germany. But I hate law, don't want to follow in his footsteps. Study psychology? Nonsense. I agree. Psychology Wundt learning nonsense syllables. Confusing.

And there is Freud. Makes much sense; sees sex problem. Rather study medicine (without interest) this opens the door to philosophy, physiology. Life less confusing; see possibilities.

1914 The world explodes. Life in trenches agony. Desensitized. Horror of living and horror of dying. Confusing.

1918 Survived. Rebelliously involved in politics. Very confused.

1921 M.D. Restless. Don't want to settle. Doctor uncle ridicules ideas of wanting to cure an illness by talking. But smarting souls (you-I) need guidance. Fumblingly approaching psychiatry with drugs, electro-things, hypnosis, and talking. Confusing.

1922 Starting afresh. Most exciting. We We! I enlarge the non-family world. We: bohemians, off the beaten path. Actors, painters, writers. Creating a new world. Bauhaus, Brücke, Dadaism new matter-of-factness movement. Discover a guru: S. Friedlander (Chapter One) "Creative indifference." Discover the zero point as center nothingness stretching into opposite somethings. First time a solid bearing. Groping. And less confused.



Frederick Perls, Berlin, 1923

1925 Started seven years of useless couch life. Felt I was stupid. Finally, Wilhelm Reich, then still sane, made some sense. Also Karen Horney, whom I loved. The rest opinionated imitators, misspelling Freud's good intentions. Confusing.

1926 Kurt Goldstein, Frankfurt neurologist. Genius neuro-psychiatrist. Organism-as-a-whole concept. Gestalt oriented. Makes much sense, but I, still involved and loyal to the Freudians, resist him. Confusing.

1927 Frankfurt, Vienna, Berlin. More analysis, supervision. Fenichel, Deutsch, Hitschwan, Happel, etc. Became a real wisdomshitter. Confuse others.



Frederick & Laura Perls -- In a Park Outside Berlin Shortly After Their Wedding Day, 1930

1930 Marriage. Later two children, four grandchildren. Sideline. No square husband. Wife Laura involved in expressive movement - Gindler. No integration yet of soma and psyche. Mind-body relationship still confusing.

1934 An early refugee from the Hitler regime. Still deeply involved in orthodox analysis, I go to teach Freud's gospel in South Africa. Still confused.

1936 Went to Marienbad for Freudian congress. First paper: "Oral resistances." Rejected. "Resistances are always anal." !!! Resentful. First break with the orthodox ones. Turmoil of confusion, but a center of sureness is born: "I know better." What? Me know better than the Gods? Yes, yes, yes! I can see; they are half-blind. Not as blind as the materialists and the spiritualists, but they too have prejudices galore. Perhaps one day I will find the truth. Yes pompous thought the truth!

1937 Back in South Africa. Struggle to get out of the quicksand of free associations. Fall back on Goldstein's organism-as-a-whole approach. Still too narrow. Our Prime Minister, Jan Smuts, has the answer: ecology. Organism-as-a-whole-embedded-in-environment. This becomes the Unit. The

objective-subjective identity is born. Freud's catharsis notion is the emerging Gestalt. Not in the Unconscious, but right on the surface. The obvious is put on the throne. The neurotic is a person who is blind to the obvious.

1940 I am teaching myself touch typing, slowly getting bored. Why not let thoughts flow onto sheets of paper? Doing so, I discover idea after idea. Chapter after chapter forms itself. Concepts I had assimilated, objections I had discarded. A new approach to man in his health and plight emerged. I ceased to be an analyst. I understood aggression not a mystical energy born out of Thanatos, but a tool for survival. Concepts such as reflexes (stimulus-response) and instincts as stable properties became obsolete, tumbled down, making room for a new perspective, although still in dominance today. Mechanical, causal thinking of the last century had to give way to process, structure, and function to the thinking of an electronic age. The "how" replaces the "why." Perspective and orientation supersede rationalization and guesswork. Even the "I" (and to Freud the Ego is "I", and not a concept of self) is dissolved into identification function. (Part II, Chapter 7)

1941 The book is finished. To revise and edit, or let it stand as it is? No. Let it be. It has many faults, my English is often clumsy, the examples badly chosen but it is "me." My confusion begins to lift, but still, often, I am depressed and confused until an idea emerges clearly and solidly.

The theme of Ego, Hunger, and Aggression must be unacceptable to Freud, for it leads to assimilation. Foreign material becomes a part of the Self and its growth. Freud's Ego idiom is the accumulation of parts: introjections (Part II, Chapter Five and Seven). Traceable, analyzable. But assimilation is integration. Insufficiently applied aggression at the input stage (hunger) and destructuring (destroying, grinding down, preparing for making one's own) of external mental and physical food, prevents maturation and becoming "self." The idea of assimilation undermines Freud's model of the structure of man, mainly the Super-Ego Ego instinct relationship, and his lopsided view of life as the Eros-Thanatos struggle. Psychoanalysis turns out to be a closed, unchanged and unchangeable system, full of explanatariness but missing self-evident understanding. Psychoanalysis is an illness that pretends to be a cure. Unsuccessful treatments, from three to over twenty years, far outweigh the scant success.

I am less confused. I begin to see. But many problems remain.



Reading a Newspaper in South Africa, ca. 1940

1942 First publication of this book in Durban, South Africa. Good reviews, but not much sale. Show the book to Maria Bonaparte, a friend of Freud. Result: "If you don't believe (!!!) in the libido theory any more, you had better hand in your resignation." Libido theory a matter of faith? I can hardly trust my ears. But, smugly jeering at that silly, unscientific pronouncement, I accept the break and fizzle out.

Enter the army as a psychiatrist. Here, psychoanalysis is a white elephant. Still, psychotherapy has its place. At first, the internists say: Behind every neurosis is a stomach ulcer. But in the end they say: Perls, you are right. Behind the ulcer is the neurosis.



Frederick Perls in the Uniform of the South African Army, 1944

1946 Discharged from the army, I go to the States. Allen & Unwin publishes the book. Premature again: not much response.

1950 The awareness theory crystallizes itself. Coin the term Gestalt Therapy. Design experiments relating to the topology of awareness to the mix-up of self and world awareness. Gestalt Therapy with R. Hefferline and P. Goodman as co-authors appears as a book. Jeered at by the academic Gestalt psychologists. But Gestalt Therapy is no fly-by-night. Sales increase from year to year.



Frederick Perls, New York City, 1955

1960 Psychoanalysis begins to recede. Too many disappointments. A wave of existential psychiatry comes over from Europe. Gestalt Therapy gets the beginning of recognition, too. Wilson Van Dusen writes: "Gestalt Therapy supplements phenomenology by giving it a practical basis."

Existential psychiatry, too, turns out to be disappointing. Too much verbiage and too many concepts.

1962 Existence: a rose is a rose is a rose. The experienced phenomenon as the ultimate Gestalt!! Not religion-oriented like Buber, Tillich and Marcel; not language-oriented like Heidegger; not communist-oriented like Sartre; not psychoanalytically oriented like Binswinger

Where is the non-verbal?

Study some Zen in Japan. Disappointing too.

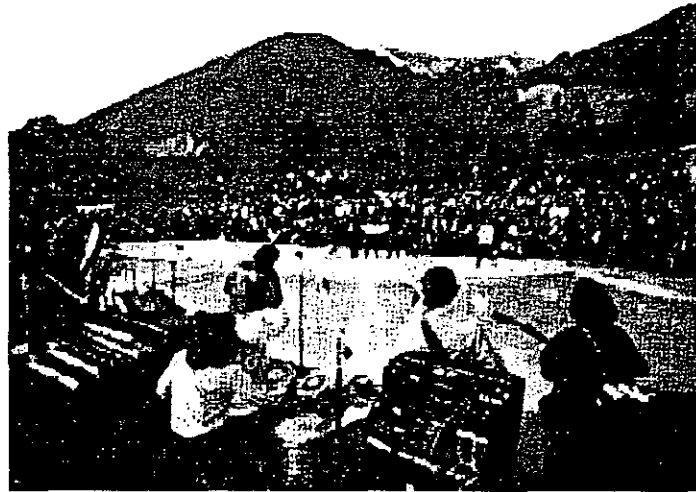
1964 I join Esalen Institute. What the Bauhaus was in Germany for the creation of a new style in architecture and the arts, Esalen is as a practical center of the third wave of humanistic psychology.

1966 Gestalt Therapy begins to be known all over the States. Have we come to fill the existing void after psychoanalysis and existentialism? Can we deliver the goods? Are we here to stay?





"Fritz" Perls on His First Visit to the Esalen Institute in 1964



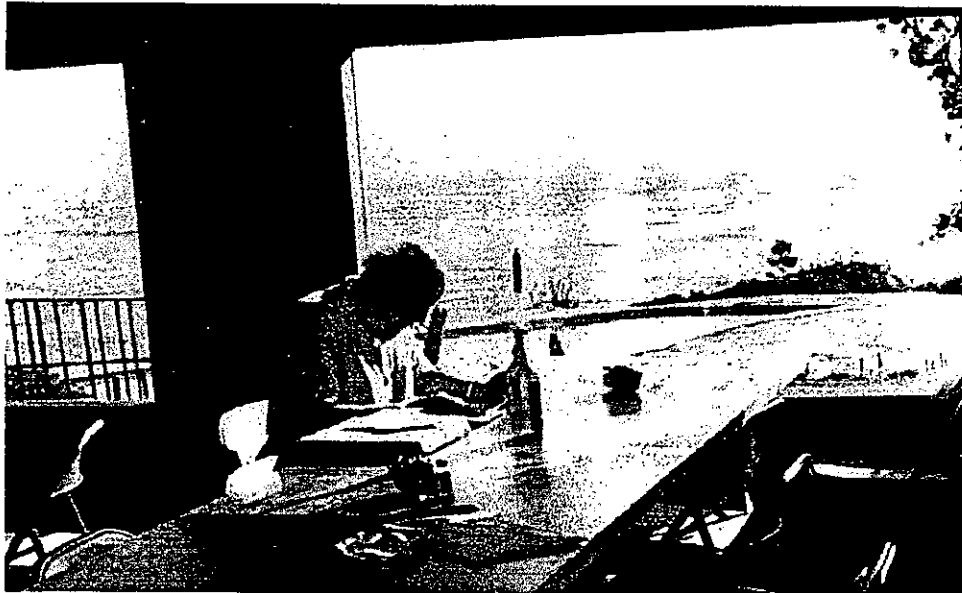
The View of the Big Sur Mountains from the Stage at the Big Sur Folk Festival Held at Esalen in 1967



"Fritz" Perls and a Performer at the 1967 Big Sur Folk Festival



*Taj Mahal & Joan Baez at the Big Sur Folk Festival "One Hand Clapping."
Esalen Institute - 1967*



"Fritz" in the Esalen Dining Room -- 1968





Dressed to Kill -- Escalen, 1969



*Perls with "Little Fritz" Doll During the Last Workshop He Ever Ran
Lexington, Massachusetts -- February, 1970*



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