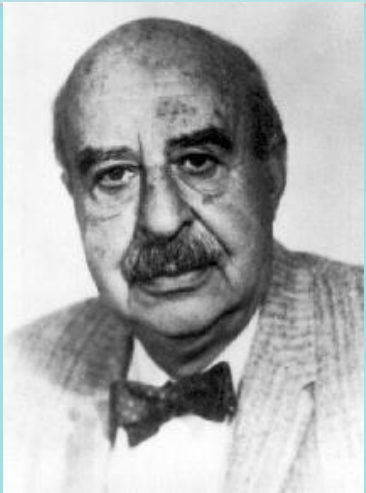


Joe Cook, Cynthia Doney, & John Kennedy  
Regent University  
December, 2007



## Frederick “Fritz” S. Perls and Gestalt Therapy



“I do my thing, and you do your thing. I am not in this world to live up to your expectations, and you are not in this world to live up to mine. You are you, and I am I, and if by chance we find each other, it's beautiful. If not, it can't be helped.” – *Fritz Perls*

# Fritz Perls and Gestalt Therapy

- Gestalt Therapy is NOT Gestalt Psychology.
- Perls resisted claims that he is the “founder” of Gestalt therapy. He preferred the term “finder.”
- Perls took therapy “off the couch” and had the therapist and client face each other ...a radical idea at the time.
- His wife Laura (Lore Posner) and good friend Paul Goodman were partners in the “finding” of Gestalt Therapy.
- There are at least 200 Gestalt Therapy training centers in the world today.
- According to Perls, Gestalt Therapy has been around forever. His new/“old” therapy is now over 50 years old.



*Friedrich Salomon Perls (1893-1970). “Fritz”  
Americanized his name, changing it to  
Frederick S. Perls.*

Image from:

<http://www.gestalt.haller.krakow.pl/counselling.php>

*“Anxiety is the space between the  
“now” and the “then.” – Fritz Perls*

# Fritz Perls: Beginnings

*"Look to this day, for it is life, the very life of life...And yesterday is but a dream, and tomorrow is only a vision..." – Fritz Perls*

- Born July 8, 1893 in a Jewish ghetto on the outskirts of Berlin (Clarkson & Mackewn, 1993; Shepard, 1975). Moved three years later to the fashionable center of Berlin.
- Typical "modern" Jewish family- wanting to be German, maintaining some Jewish customs, but unaccepted by German and Jewish society (Clarkson & Mackewn; Shepard).
- Youngest of three children, having two older sisters (Clarkson & Mackewn; Shepard).
- Close to his sister, Grete; however, never liked Else, his oldest sister, who was legally blind and clung to her mother. When she died in a concentration camp, Fritz wrote candidly that he "did not mourn much" (Shepard, p. 31).



*Else, Grete, and Frederick Perls, Germany, 1900.*

Image from: <http://www.gestalt.org/fritz.htm>

# Fritz Perls: Growing Up

*"To mature means to take responsibility for your life, to be on your own. Psychoanalysis fosters the infantile state by considering that the past is responsible for the illness." - Fritz Perls*

- In personal notes, Perls often describes himself as **"confused"** and describes events as **"confusing."**
- Mother and Father had tense relationship.
- Father was into Freemasonry in secular and Jewish circles. He also had many affairs.
- Perls described his childhood as happy, although he **hated his father** "and his pompous righteousness" (Shepard, 1975, p.33). His father frequently verbally abused Fritz.
- Fritz suspected that his real father might have been an uncle, Herman Staub, a high-profile German lawyer.
- At 10, he stole a gold coin that his father had saved for Else, took it and "spent it on stamps for a Christian boy whose friendship he had hoped to buy" (Shepard, 1975, p. 34).
- Although he was top of his elementary school class, his strong rebellion against hard discipline and anti-Semitic environment of the Mommsen Gymnasium got him expelled from it after three years of failing grades (Shepard).
- Fritz would steal from his mom's purse, skip school, and forge his parent's signatures on school correspondence. He would ridicule his mother, run from her punishment, and mock her.

# Fritz Perls: Influencing Events

"Leave this to the human - to try to be something he is not - to have ideals that cannot be reached, to be cursed with perfectionism so as to be safe from criticism, and to open the road to unending mental torture."

– Fritz Perls

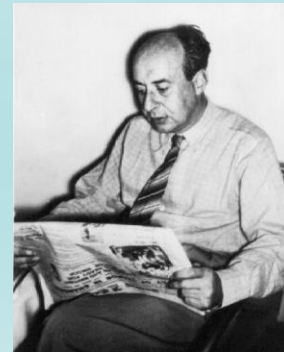
- Humiliation in initial sexual experiences:
  - Simultaneously masturbated with a school friend to stories of friend's older sister's sexual encounters.
  - At 13, induced a prostitute to have sex with him, but she pushed him away because he was too slow reaching orgasm. Fritz's friend was watching, and this humiliated Perls.
- Studied medicine at the University of Berlin.
- World War I broke out when he was only 21 years old. Perls served active duty, seeing first hand the carnage of war.
- Marriage to Laura. Both of them had Psychoanalytic training.



*Frederick & Laura Perls, shortly after their marriage in Germany, 1930.*



*Frederick Perls in his South African Army uniform, 1944.*



*Perls in South Africa, ca. 1940.*

Images from: <http://www.gestalt.org/fritz.htm>

# Fritz Perls and Gestalt Therapy

"Lose your mind, come to your senses." - Fritz Perls

- **Theater, dance, movement, and psychodrama, study with Max Reinhardt** – provided impetus for Perls' dynamic style, attention to body language and voice inflection in therapy
- **Freud and orthodox psychoanalysis** – the starting point for Gestalt therapy, but there were signs that Fritz & Laura Perls were moving away from Freud. Their first publication, *Ego, Hunger and Aggression*, originally carried the subtitle *A Revision of Freud's Theory and Method*.
- **Gestalt psychology** – representative of the philosophical split between practitioners and psychologists in the field. Gestalt psychology was primarily European while Gestalt therapy spread from Europe to the United States. However, Gestalt psychology seems to share some of the same theoretical elements as Gestalt therapy.
- **Central Tenets of Gestalt therapy:**
  - **Reich and "Organismic self-regulation"** - considered a renegade analyst whose concepts are thought to have contributed directly to Gestalt therapy. Organismic self-regulation became a central tenet of Gestalt therapy.
  - **Goldstein's theory of organism as a whole** – a scientist and psychologist who studied the recovery of brain function after injury and concluded "that only a method that placed the total organism of the individual in the foreground...could be fruitful" (Woldt & Toman, 2005). Gestalt methodology was this method.
  - **Kurt Lewin's field theory** – his work led to the concept of the inseparability of the organism from its environment, assisting Perls in the creation of the field theory perspective in treatment.

# Fritz Perls and Gestalt Therapy

*"Lose your mind, come to your senses."* - Fritz Perls

- **Existentialism**- "[Life]-indeed, all of existence-occurs in a perpetual, present moment, that all things are transient, ever-changing, and that the past and future are concepts that we think of in some *present time*" (Shepard, 1975, p.16).
- **World War I** – uncertainty of life, horror of war, visceral reaction to violence may have contributed to Gestalt's focus on the present in order to avoid painful memories of past events that Perls might be motivated to forget (Shepard, 1975)
- **Fascism and anti-Semitism in 1930's Germany** – Perls' focus on individualism may have been a reaction to being rejected in his society, both by German and Jewish social circles.
- **Eastern religion** – Perls was highly influenced by Karen Horney during psychoanalysis training, and he adopted her interest in Eastern religions. Buddhism and Gestalt share many common philosophical underpinnings. He also spent time in Japan studying Zen and Tao principles. He viewed Gestalt as a therapeutic martial art, using the clients' energy to defeat their own problems.

# Fritz Perls and Religion

- Born Jewish, but thought of his parents' religion “*an undignified insurance policy*” against “*some vengeful God lurking about*” (Shepard, 1975, p. 35).
- Joked in his later years of being a “Zen Judaist,” even denied his Jewish-only heritage (Shepard, 1975).
- Gestalt is very similar to the Eastern concept of Tao (Shepard, 1975). Perls spent time in Japan to learn Zen (Woldt & Toman, 2005).
- Declared himself an atheist by age 13, and remained atheistic to his death.



*Perls with his “Little Fritz” doll taken during the last workshop he facilitated. - February, 1970, Lexington, MA*  
Image from: <http://www.gestalt.org/fritz.htm>

# References and Additional Resources

- Clarkson, P. & Mackewn, J. (1993). *Fritz Perls*. Key figures in counselling and psychotherapy. London: Newbury Park.
- Fagan, J., & Shepherd, I. (1971). *Gestalt therapy now*. New York: Harper.
- Perls, F. S. (1969a). *Ego, hunger, and aggression: The beginning of Gestalt therapy*. New York: Random House.
- Perls, F. S. (1969b). *In and out of the garbage pail*. Lafayette, CA: Real People Press.
- Perls, F. S. (1973). *The Gestalt approach and eye witness to therapy*. Ben Lomond, CA: Science and Behavior Books.
- Perls, F. S., Hefferline, R. E., & Goodman, R. (1951). *Gestalt therapy: Excitement and growth in the human experience*. New York: Dell.
- Shepard, M. (1975). *Fritz* [Electronic book]. Available from: <http://www.fictionwise.com>
- Sinay, S. (1997). *Gestalt for beginners*. New York: Writers and Readers Publishing.
- Woldt, A., & Toman, S. (2005). *Gestalt therapy: History, theory, and practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage Publications.
- <http://www.gestalt.org/fritz.htm> - provides some personal notes written by Perls as part of his book *Ego, Hunger, and Aggression*, that were supposed to have been included in its introduction, but were omitted for some unknown reason. Also includes photographs.
- <http://www.gestalt.org/wulf.htm> - Rosemarie Wulf discusses the historical roots of Gestalt Therapy theory.