A Review of Bernd Bocian’s **Fritz Perls in Berlin 1893-1933: Expressionism, Psychoanalysis, Judaism.** (2010) Berlin: EHP - Verlag Andreas Kohlhage, Bergisch Gladbach, ISBN 978-3-89797-068-7, 319 pages, $40.01

Charles Bowman, M.S.

Reading a history of gestalt therapy isn't standard pleasure reading for me, even though I am a passionate researcher, writer and student of gestalt therapy’s history. I typically approach historical documents by curbing my cynicism while challenging facts and sources as I develop either rebuttal or concurrence. I begin this review with a confession: diving into Fritz Perls in Berlin was not simply another review, it was a pleasure. I found myself eagerly searching for the next insight, historical detail and theoretical connection. Bernd Bocian has produced an historical account that tells a story in the style of great historians like David McCollough, who said, "No harm's done to history by making it something someone would want to read" (McCullough, 2003).

I must also confess that Bocian plays to a bias of mine - that historiography is the study of the field and as such it is fluid knowledge. Yontef and Jacobs explain how history shapes the present moment: “What happened 3 years ago is not a part of the current field and therefore cannot affect one's experience. What does shape one’s experience is how one holds a memory of the event, and also the fact that an event 3 years ago has altered how one may organize one's perception in the field” (Yontef and Jacobs, 2010, p. 343). This is the promise of history from a field perspective – not only can we grow from attention to process and analysis of the current situation but also through a detailed examination of those persons and events comprising our historical ground. Bocian capitalizes on this concept. “I have concentrated primarily on the background, that is, the experiential world in which Perls moved…” (Bocian, 2010, p. 15).

Another comment on historiography is warranted before proceeding to the essence of this book. Gestalt therapy was not born in 1951 and Fritz Perls was not the founder. Historical accounts in the vein of Martin Shepherd’s Fritz or Jack Gains’ Fritz Perls: Here and Now leave this impression. This is emphatically not the case. While these narratives are interesting accounts of an interesting man they are only a small rendition of the rich ground of gestalt therapy. To consider them otherwise is to do so at significant cost to the advancement of gestalt therapy. “This style of historical interpretation has left Gestalt therapy cemented in the zeitgeist of 1960’s and 1970’s popular psychology” (Bowman & Nevis, 2005, p. 4).

As one might expect, the text, with its grand Germanic orientation, documents in detail the development of gestalt therapy from Goethe to Freud and prominent neo-Freudians such as Horney and Reich. Perls' psychoanalytic training is explicitly detailed, expanding our understanding of psychoanalytic contributions to gestalt therapy beyond standard contributions such as introjection, therapeutic resistance or a theory of repression. Bocian terms Perls' chosen psychoanalytic peer group the "Berlin character analysts" (Bocian, 2010, p. 31), built upon the influence of radical analysts Otto Grosz, Wilhelm Reich, and others. The Berlin character analysts were leftist, politically involved, culturally avant-garde, and innovative in their psychoanalytic techniques. In short, "the blueprint for Gestalt therapy that was mutually developed with anarchist writer Paul Goodman at the end of the 1940s, in some respects represented a continuation of attempts begun in Berlin to develop a socially critical, active, emotion-oriented psychoanalysis which also incorporated body language to a greater degree" (Bocian, 2010, p. 31).

Psychoanalysis rightfully captures much of Fritz Perls in Berlin and the developmental history of gestalt therapy, but it is not the part that determines the whole. The list also includes the integrative atmosphere of the German scientific community, Fritz’s family history, the Weimer culture, the trauma of National Socialism, the Third Reich and the Second World War.

**An Integrative Atmosphere**

The rich exchange of ideas stimulated at the University of Frankfurt in the 1920's glimpses the value of what Bocian calls "An Integrative Atmosphere" (Bocian, 2010, p. 164) where psychoanalysis, Gestalt psychology and holistic biology assimilated diverse ideas such as those of Tillich and Smuts. The fateful blending of Goldstein's holistic biology and Gestalt psychology (Wertheimer, Gelb and Kohler) is traversed, as is the developing bond between Fritz and Lore Posner. Interesting and necessary, these historical accounts are well documented (Bowman, 2005; Wulf, 1996). Bocian digs much deeper into our historical roots. This primordial soup brought exciting new ideas such as Adler's individual holism, the holistic social psychology of Jan Smuts and the aligning of psychoanalysis with Gestalt psychology, prompting Fritz Perls to write to Laura Perls in 1928, "...an experimental psychoanalytic/Gestalt psychological possibility (F. Perls to L. Perls, January 14, 1928)" (in Bocian, 2010, p.166).

Perhaps no individual in the history of gestalt therapy has been as routinely diminished as Salomo Friedländer. A central figure in 1920s bohemian Berlin to be sure, Friedländer (known by his pseudonym Mynona) was the center of attention in regular meetings that included artists, philosophers, filmmakers, poets, philosophers and psychoanalysts. These monthly gatherings featured Mynona. “If no partner or opponent came forward on the philosophical level, he would spew fireworks of linguistically sophisticated, sarcastic-to-frivolous, and always brilliant caprioles and jest (Hoch in Exner 1996, ibid.)” (Bocian, 2010, p. 117). This circle included Martin Buber and Gustav Landauer, two names likely familiar to gestalt therapists. What is also likely familiar to aficionados of gestalt therapy is the structure of the evening. It is reminiscent of the early form of the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy.

The Dadists were prominent in these meetings and in the Berlin culture. Bocian lists the Dada “principle of montage” as contributing to Perls developing ideas of polarity and intrapsychic conflict. This art form, one of contradiction, was used “…to reflect the actual, prevailing contradictions of personal and social life” (Bocian, 2010, p. 114). The montage principle grew from Berlin culture and used common, readily available objects to provoke emotional reactions. The creative use of all media was characteristic and typically offended pedants of the art world. These concepts are familiar to gestalt therapists as a foundation of polarity, experiment, and the centrality of novelty in gestalt therapy theory. The Dada movement in general and Friedländer in particular contributed much to the qualities of a good method in gestalt therapy – “spontaneity, imagination, earnestness and playfulness, and direct expression of feeling…” (Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman, 1951/1994, p. 82)

**Nathan Perls**

Bocian’s historical archeology shines as he builds bridges between Frits Perls and his father, Nathan. Like many German men, Freemasonry was a significant aspect of sociocultural life and Nathan Perls was denied membership in official Freemason’s lodges. He was evidently not interested in the parallel Jewish lodges typically established in Germany at that time. A traveling wine merchant by trade, Nathan Perls seized the opportunity to not only start his own lodge, the Independent Order of Freemasons – Order of Humanists, but to establish Lodges throughout Germany. His Order challenged the traditional lodges by including women (an unprecedented effort), publications, celebrations, and dancing. “As a rule, problems would emerge in the lodges of Grand Master Perls after some time. …one time, a schism arose because a competitor to Nathan had come forward” (Bocian, 2010, p. 63). Bocian gives another example of the striking parallels between father and son in this regard:

Another event brings to mind the later relationship between Fritz Perls and Paul Goodman. The writer Dr. Hans Spatzier was a member of one of the lodges. ‘Due to his intellectual superiority and excellent talent as a speaker, he all too soon became a most dangerous rival for ‘most worshipful’ Grand Master Perls’…” (Bocian, 2010, p. 64).

Fritz Perls trek across America to establish gestalt therapy centers for growth and development is well documented. I have written elsewhere that, “… in keeping with their anarchistic roots, Gestalt institutions invariably self-destruct and reconstitute. Training institutes differentiate into new organizations as a result of theoretical differences, practical considerations, or personality conflicts” (Bowman & Nevis, 2005, p. 17). Perhaps the politics of anarchy offers one explanation for this phenomena but Bocian’s work offers an additional and psychoanalytic interpretation, captured in the words of Freud himself: “I cannot think of any need in childhood as strong as the need for a father’s protection” (Freud, 1920/1989, p. 20).

**Confluence Kills**

No boundary process or creative adjustment is more confused in the literature than the concept of confluence. Occurring “*when there is no discrimination of the points of difference or otherness that distinguish them*” (Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman, 1951/1994, p. 365), the concept has come full-circle from an attitude of “rugged individualism” (see Bowman, http://www.g-gej.org/4-2/editorial.html) to a Levinasian elevation of the other and identifying, needlessly in my opinion, a “relational gestalt therapy.” Yontef (1993) identifies the confusion as both theoretical and practical: “Self-support was often discussed in a manner that confused self-support with self-sufficiency and taught an overly negative attitude toward any hint of confluence. …This confusion may have been abetted by the denial by Perls and other Gestalt therapists of their interdependence” (p. 112).

Perls documented well the impact of the trenches of World War I on his development as a person (see Perls, 1969). Bocian’s work cites the whole experience of the German Jewish culture, in addition to the war experience, as he reaches an important conclusion:

“One of his most important experiences, and this was confirmed by the death of family members and his psychoanalytic teachers, was that *confluence can be fatal when it blunts perception and leads to perseverance in a given field for the sake of avoiding risk and conflict.* He continued to impart this insight until the end of his days*”* (Bocian, 2010, p. 245).

The divergent connotations of confluence as both a means of resistance to contact and the positive result of contact is illuminated in Bocian’s discussion of culture and confluence. Context is everything.

**Conclusion**

This book speaks not only to the influences of Berlin culture on Perls and gestalt therapy but to the positive influence of this tumultuous period in German history on the broader field of human experience. Harrington (1996) captures this well:

It is clear that left-leaning, holistically oriented German immigrants to the United States, like Kurt Goldstein, Herbert Marcuse, and Fritz Perls, helped teach a new generation of American youthful discontents to speak an individualistic language of wholeness, human potential, and inner transformation, and that this tutelage would bear new fruit in the 1960s and beyond. (Harrington, 1996, p. 211).

I have highlighted aspects of Fritz Perls in Berlinthat are not readily available elsewhere and have done so to the exclusion of the obvious. In this case the obvious includes notables such as Laura Perls, Max Reinhardt, Friedrich Nietzsche and a multitude of influential psychoanalysts. The interested reader will be at home with the narrative found regarding these familiar characters and pleasantly surprised to learn of the prominence of gestalt thinking in the less familiar people and places that comprised the montage of Berlin at the turn of the century. What is obviously missing is the rest of the story. Fritz Perls’s rich history from 1933 to 1970 is yet to be excavated with the flare and exactitude Bocian brings to this earlier history.

Fritz Perls in Berlin leaves me with a reverence for Perls that, like Isadore From, prompts me to refer to him as Frederick instead of Fritz. In medicine, psychoanalysis, philosophy and politics Perls was well-versed. Finding his niche in the American political environment of the 1950s and 1960s lead gestalt therapy towards a reputation that has been challenging to reverse. Without the historical background that lead Perls to his style of gestalt therapy we will remain only a footnote in the history of psychotherapy. The complexity of our historical development promises gestalt therapy will be otherwise.

History is alive and well!

**Bibliography**

Bocian, B. (2010). *Fritz Perls in Berlin 1893-1933: Expressionism, Psychoanalysis, Judaism*,

Berlin: EHP - Verlag Andreas Kohlhage, Bergisch Gladbach.

Bowman, C. (2000). “The Gestalt Editorial: Relational Gestalt Therapy” *Gestalt!*, 4(2).

Available: http://www.g-gej.org/4-2/editorial.html

Bowman, C. and Nevis, E. (2005). “The history and development of Gestalt therapy,” in A. L. Woldt and S. M. Toman (eds) *Gestalt Therapy: History, Theory and Practice*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Freud, Sigmund (1989/1929). *Civilization and Its Discontents*. New York: W. W. Norton.

Gaines, J. (1979). *Fritz Perls: Here and now*. New York: Integrated Press.

Harrington, A. (1996). *Reenchanted Science: Holism in German Culture from Wilhelm II to Hitler*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

McCullough, D. (2003). “The course of human events." *The 32nd Annual Jefferson Lecture,*

*Washington, DC*. Available: http://www.nch.gov/whoweare/mccullough/about.html

Perls, F. (1969). *In and out of the garbage pail*. New York: Bantam Books.

Perls, F., Hefferline, R., & Goodman, P. (1951/1994). *Gestalt therapy: Excitement and growth in*

*the human personality*. New York: Julian Press/Highland, NY: Gestalt Journal Press.

Shepard, M. (1975). *Fritz: An intimate portrait of Fritz Perls and Gestalt therapy*. New York:

Saturday Review Press.

Wulf, R. (1996). The historical roots of Gestalt therapy theory. *Gestalt Dialogue:*

*Newsletter for the Integrative Gestalt Centre [On-line]*. Available: http://www.gestalt.org/wulf.htm

Yontef, G. (1993). *Awareness, Dialogue and Process: Essays on Gestalt Therapy*. NY: Gestalt

Journal Press.

Yontef, G. & Jacobs, L. (2010). “Gestalt therapy,” in R. J. Corsini and D. Wedding (eds)

*Current Psychotherapies / Edition 9*. Stamford: Cengage Learning.