Timeless Experience

Timeless Experience:

Laura Perls's Unpublished Notebooks and Literary Texts 1946-1985

Edited by

Nancy Amendt-Lyon

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Laura Perls's Unpublished Notebooks and Literary Texts 1946-1985
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

One of the joys of completing a publication is the opportunity to thank those who inspired, guided, and supported me along the way. The inspiration for this volume—and, of course, the basic material—came from Renate Perls, who dreamt that her late mother wanted me to have the latter's unpublished works. This was the initial spark for what has now been a project of two and a half years. When Renate personally handed over Laura's handwritten notebooks and other texts, she had already gone through much of the material and added some explanatory notes. I consulted often with Renate concerning passages I couldn't decipher, names that were a mystery to me, addresses at which the Perls family lived, and other questions I had about Laura's life history. Both Renate and her daughter, Leslie Gold, were of tremendous support in providing copies of further texts, photos, and facsimiles for this publication, and wonderfully helpful in determining the location and date of many photos. Giving me the unpublished treasure chest of their beloved mother and grandmother was an act of trust for which I am very grateful.

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I am grateful to James Pritchard and the Daniel Rosenblatt Foundation for allowing me to publish the extensive interview that the late Daniel Rosenblatt conducted with Laura Perls in 1972. It has been translated into and published in German, but is appearing in English in this volume for the first time.

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SERIES EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

This book on Laura Perls's papers is the fourth book in the series The World of Contemporary Gestalt Therapy. There has been the *Handbook for Theory, Research, and Practice in Gestalt Therapy* (Brownell, 2008), *Continuity and Change: Gestalt Therapy Now* (Bloom & Brownell, 2011), and *Global Perspectives on Research, Theory, and Practice: A Decade of Gestalt!* (Mistler & Brownell, 2015), all of course published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing. The goal of the series is to expose the thinking and practices of Gestalt therapists to readers—not just the theory or its practice, but the *world* of Gestalt therapy. Thus, the first book in the series described the theory and practice of Gestalt therapy in the context of the growing awareness at that time of Gestalt therapy's need for a research tradition of its own. The second book in the series documented one of the international conferences of the Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy, an international community, and the third provided a hard copy record of most of the contents of one of Gestalt's first online journals, *Gestalt!*, spanning over a decade of material during which the literature of Gestalt therapy exploded and the fine tuning of Gestalt's theoretical base picked up its pace.

This book, edited so carefully and lovingly by Nancy Amendt-Lyon, is a masterpiece in the history of Gestalt therapy and provides insight into the ground of contemporary Gestalt therapy. As contemporary Gestalt therapy perseveres in refining its theory and practice, assimilating elements from the fields of continental philosophy, neuroscience, and kinesthetics, and as more and more Gestalt researchers aim to understand how therapy works, this book looks back at a person and a time from whence Gestalt therapists all came. Part of the development of Gestalt therapy theory involves understanding the thinking of the founders. In reaching for contemporary relevance, the field of Gestalt therapy never severed its tether to its founders. Therefore, this very rich resource that Nancy Amendt-Lyon has produced helps people understand Laura Perls and simultaneously contemporary Gestalt therapy.

The way Nancy writes about Laura is a mix of memoir and science. She writes in scholarly detail of Laura Perls—the "what" and "how" of one of the founders of Gestalt therapy and the person most associated with sustaining the founding institute in New York—and she does so through the very personal writings and reflections belonging to Laura herself.

Furthermore, Nancy shares the story of her own relationship with and her experience of Laura. It is an intimate visitation. It is a piece of qualitative research.

I am immensely happy I could help bringing this book to print and include it in the series on contemporary Gestalt therapy. I believe it will become a primary resource for the work of others for many years.

Philip Brownell, MDiv, PsyD
From Above Mizzentop
Warwick, Bermuda

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

How I became the editor of this book

One evening in the spring of 2013, Renate Perls called me at my home in Vienna from her New York apartment.

> "I have something for you, Nancy," Renate said. I expected news about her well-being, or possibly about something thrilling happening in the New York Gestalt community. Never in my wildest dreams was I prepared for what she said next.
> "Last night, somewhere between sleeping and waking, I sensed my mother with me as she told me in no uncertain terms to give her journals to you, Nancy. I've told you before that from the moment she died, Laura had come to me every now and then with her feelings and messages," Renate said, and then she paused. I held my breath, waiting for her to continue. "So I was not surprised when she left this request. It took me a moment to realize what she meant and in the morning I decided to call you and give you her notebooks."
> "To me? You are giving Laura's notebooks to me?" I managed to ask.
> "Yes, I want you to have them. I know that Laura loved you and trusted you. She would want it this way. The notebooks will be in the best hands possible. Do with them whatever you want. Publish them. Do research. Whatever. They are yours!"

Renate then gave me some insights into the notebooks and mentioned the obstacles she expected me to have in deciphering Laura's handwriting. I was still processing the fact that Laura's very personal writing was being placed in my hands. Although Laura and I had had a deep affection for each other, it was quite a large step from this appreciation to the realization that I had been chosen to be the recipient of such a significant gift. Not only was I surprised, I was overwhelmed. Yet Renate insisted that I accept the notebooks, read through them, and then decide what I could make of them. We arranged to meet in Manhattan during my summer vacation that coming July, when I planned the next extended stay in New York, the city of my birth. As Renate wanted to hand over these notebooks to me personally, sending them by mail was out of the question for her. I immediately understood her reasons. The notebooks were

precious material, and so I had to contain my curiosity for another few months.

Needless to say, Renate's phone call was one of those incidents that I will later recall as one of the memorable ones in my life. The gift of Laura's heretofore unpublished notebooks ranks among the most amazing gifts that anyone has ever given to me.

After several months of fantasizing about what I would one day be able to read in Laura's notebooks, I flew to New York in the summer of 2013. Renate and I had lunch in SoHo and she ceremoniously gave me a sturdy folder with the notebooks. She had already read the notebooks before giving them to me, and left me little notes with her comments, clarifications, reminiscences—all of which I include as such.

One year later, in August of 2014, Renate and her daughter, Leslie Gold, met me and my husband, Gerhard Amendt, at the Manhattan office of Harvey Platt, the charming and committed lawyer who had been responsible for both Laura and Fritz Perls's estate. It was there that I was officially entrusted with the task of publishing the notebooks so that Laura's background as a writer and thinker, who contributed so greatly to the development of Gestalt therapy, could come more clearly to the fore. Compiling a list of Laura's writing and publications that focused on her was another aim, which I have begun as a work-in-progress.

To me, the notebooks represent not only a gift, but also a deep commitment. Being entrusted with the personal writings of one of the founders of Gestalt therapy comes with the enormous responsibility of treating them with befitting respect and prudence. The first decision I took was to scan every page of the notebooks and then I began to transcribe them. The second decision was to have the notebooks published, with editorial annotations.

As the saying goes: Hindsight is easier than foresight. When I began this editorial project, I was not aware of all the obstacles and difficulties that I would encounter. The transcription of these notebooks is easier said than done. Transcribing Laura's notebooks has been one of the most challenging tasks of my life and I have been spending much of my spare time outside of my office deciphering and discussing them since I brought them back to Vienna.

Personal encounters with Laura Perls

Before I describe the contents of the notebooks and how I went about my editorial work, allow me to turn back the clock about forty years and describe several personal encounters with Laura Perls and the impact that

this extraordinary woman had on so many aspects of my own development.

My initial contact with Laura dates back to April 1976 in Manhattan. At the time I had been living in Austria for several years and visiting family and friends in my hometown. Among the people I visited was Ilana Rubenfeld, who had trained with Fritz Perls and with whom I had begun my Gestalt training while I was working on my master's degree in New York. In the meantime, I had resumed my Gestalt training in Austria. During a conversation with Ilana, she mentioned Laura Perls and suggested that I meet her. Ilana was convinced that Laura, who still spent months in Europe every summer and enjoyed vacationing in the Austrian Alps, would be delighted to have the opportunity to speak German with me. At the time, Fritz Perls had been in the spotlight as the representative of Gestalt therapy. His books, his demonstration workshops, and his films had made the rounds in psychotherapy circles and the media.

I didn't know anything about Laura Perls, but was curious. A bit unsure of myself yet emboldened by the excitement of getting to know her, I looked up her phone number and called, introducing myself. With amazing cordiality and warmth, she invited me and my then husband to her apartment on West 96th Street. During this first visit she showed interest in our life in Austria and wanted to know about the curriculum of our training and what professional literature we were required to read. She gave us two books in which she had written chapters: *Gestalt Therapy Now: Theory, Techniques, Applications*, edited by Joen Fagan and Irma Lee Shepherd (1971), and *Recognitions in Gestalt Therapy*, edited by Paul David Pursglove (1971). We promised to see her the next time we would visit New York and remained in informal contact with her by letter.

This initial meeting resulted in my organizing a weekend workshop for her to lead two years later, in 1978, in Styria. Unfortunately, because of the sudden illness and death of my father, I was unable to attend the workshop myself. When the first issue of *The Gestalt Journal* was published in 1978, she gave me a copy. According to the correspondence with Laura that I saved, we agreed for her to lead a weekend workshop the following year. This workshop in 1979 was the first of several that took place in Graz. Laura tried to coordinate her Graz workshops with her annual summer vacation in Leogang in Salzburg's countryside. Laura was more or less incognito in Leogang, and enjoyed not being recognized. She delighted in taking walks for hours in the alpine countryside. In a letter that I wrote to her on May 28, 1982, I arranged with her to conduct a weekend workshop in Graz and then give a talk the following Monday on the "Historical Development of Gestalt Therapy," followed by a

discussion in a room at the University of Graz. She answered my letter on July 22 from her friend Ursula Mayer's address in Pforzheim, where she was staying for a while:

> 7/22/82
> My dear Nancy,
>
> I am on my European tour already since June. Your letter did not reach me until last week. I love to come to Graz and do a workshop Sept. 18-19. I'll come a couple of days earlier and stay with you, want to be with the children. During the workshop it may be better to be in a hotel; I shall need some peace and quiet! Particularly if I do a talk on Monday, Sept. 21. I travel on Tuesday, Sept 22 to Frankfurt for a day or two, and then for my last workshop in Holland Sept 26-27. Then back to N.Y. I hope this letter does not come too late for you to make all the arrangements. You can reach me at the above address and telephone number. Later in August I shall be in the Alps, address:
>
> M. Oberwaller,
> A-5771 Leogang 67
> Tel. 6533/235
>
> Have a lovely vacation!
>
> Love to you all,
>
> Laura

Several days before the workshop, Laura arrived in Graz. She needed exercise and the weather was beautiful, so we went to the park together with my children. I must let on that Laura didn't always practice Gestalt's process-oriented method of diagnosis, which refrains from using psychiatric labels. When an obviously hallucinating woman, who was speaking loudly to herself, passed us by, Laura whispered into my ear, "She's a little schizzy, isn't she?"

As a little thank-you for having organized the workshop, Laura wanted to get me a gift. It should be something that I needed and something that I would use. Together we shopped in the old city of Graz for a small pot with a long handle, so that I could warm the milk for my morning coffee in it and think of her every day. This thoughtful present had the intended effect. Whenever I used it, I thought of her. And this gift is exemplary for Laura's modesty and her unsensational, yet effective way of making personal contact.

During the workshops that I experienced with Laura, she showed an especially admirable quality: While she was working with a group member, she would join this person and was absolutely present, and afterwards, when the episode of working had ended, she removed herself from this closeness in a very matter-of-fact way. The old issue was passé and she allowed for no hanging on. This experience enabled me to get a feeling for the boundary as a location of connection while Laura was working with someone, as well as the location of separation when Laura retreated after work was completed.

It was fascinating to experience her work first-hand. Her preferred style of working in small, digestible steps afforded maximal support to the participants. This was the heart of her concept of "contact and support." She was succinct, exact, and sparse in her interventions; she could zoom in on an issue with amazing clarity, and yet she was careful and composed. As in her private life, Laura demonstrated a certain noble restraint while working psychotherapeutically, without creating the impression of being insecure or passive.

I would like to briefly add some observations I made on her concept of contact and support. Laura clearly distanced herself from the formerly frequently practiced confrontational style of Gestalt therapy that "would-be Fritzes" tried to spread as the real thing. She doubted whether this provocative approach was suitable to all patients and disorders. She was skeptical of the supposedly big breakthroughs, since she feared that the resistances of the patients and their self-supports were not being adequately considered by relentlessly confronting them. Laura explained that many forms of resistance resulted from a lack of support. If these deficits in support are not treated with respect, then a boomerang effect might result in even more anxiety. Her motto was to give patients as much support as necessary and as little as possible, so that they can learn to achieve self-support and interdependence.

As I experienced them, Laura‘s workshops were characterized by her unsensational style. By working with participants in incremental, assimilable steps, they were not overwhelmed by the therapeutic process. She enjoyed experimenting with whatever emerged at a given moment. She showed us how something new could emerge from the dynamic of the lack of balance, on the one hand, and familiar certainties, on the other, provided that someone was willing to engage in the experiment. Laura encouraged her trainees to attend to the subjective perception of their patients, told them to pick up the latter where they were emotionally, thereby enabling them to experience their own boundaries and make the

dynamics of how they draw boundaries clear to them (see Schneider, "Meine Wildnis ist die Seele des Anderen," 108).

When a participant was working on an issue, her complete attention was with this person. With the simple question "What's going on here?" she involved the group in sharing their emotional reactions or asking questions about the process. Typical interventions of hers were invitations to speak directly to fantasized others, i.e. to address them as if they were present instead of speaking about them; to do something intentionally, such as breathe, close oneself off, or exaggerate something in order to make it explicit. Laura enjoyed experimenting with language and the body, especially with breathing and posture. She encouraged the group members to realize how their bodies supported them: "Loosen your knees! See how the pelvis supports the upper body so that it can move freely! The lower back is not to be hollow!"

Laura's bodywork concentrated on the jaw, the spine, and breathing into the lower abdomen. She would invite participants to roll their heads around and from side to side while they breathed in and out, in order to get a better feeling for their spines. Moreover, she would invite them to lie on the floor on their backs and first bring their legs up and over their heads, then lower the legs slowly to the ground while constantly attending to their breathing. Laura emphasized that contact is only possible when sufficient support is available, that is, when we have learned how to muster enough support for ourselves. She emphasized the difference between wanting and needing, and highlighted the young child's "No!" as the first ego boundary with respect to the mother. She considered feeding to be the child's first contact with the world. Laura found that biting was an aggressive act, but not in the usual destructive sense of the word. She was fascinated by the way the people ate, how they bit their food off, how they chewed and assimilated, and consequently how they approached other things in their life. She told the group repeatedly that interpretation is at best felicitous intuition, and warned us not to rummage in fantasies, but rather to concentrate on the present. Referring to Paul Tillich and Martin Buber, Laura reminded us that dialogue and the way we address and approach our patients are the crux of psychotherapy. She told us: "You really get to know someone when you know his needs and desires, not just his abilities." If there are difficulties in the therapy sessions, then this is an issue for the therapist, for the patient is already coming to psychotherapy because of his own problems.

In response to a question about human nature and how it influences the therapeutic process, Laura emphasized two crucial issues: the awareness of one's uniqueness as well as one's own mortality. In a trialogue between

Richard Kitzler, Laura Perls and E. Mark Stern in 1982, Laura described a pivotal experience in her psychoanalysis with Karl Landauer:

> To elaborate, the neurotic is really the person who is afraid to cope with the process of dying and therefore he can't live. Being aware of one's own mortality is actually an incentive to being alive. I became aware of that when I was about 24 and I went to the funeral of a young friend who had suddenly died at age 26 from some kind of infection. At the time there was no penicillin or anything like that. It was very shocking and I came away from the cemetery and suddenly everything looked very bright and cheerful and I felt very energetic and I couldn't explain it and I told my analyst the next day. I said at the time that it struck me that if we weren't aware of the fact that we would die we would probably live like the cow—that the zest and the drive toward creation is for human beings allied with the awareness of dying. And my analyst said at the time, 'Now your analysis is finished.' (Kitzler, Perls, Stern. "Retrospects and Prospects: A Trialogue between Laura Perls, Richard Kitzler, and E. Mark Stern," 14)

In 1971, Laura wrote:

> Speaking strictly for myself—the only way a Gestalt therapist can say anything at all—I am deeply convinced that the basic problem not only of therapy but of life is how to make life livable for a being whose dominant characteristic is his awareness of himself as a unique individual on the one hand and of his mortality on the other. (Perls, "One Gestalt Therapist's Approach," 121)

According to Laura, knowledge of being mortal is the force behind the vitality and creative powers of every single person. It seems to me that Laura's emphasis on the knowledge of one's own uniqueness is connected to her view of personal style as the creative expression of this inimitability. She often said: "Whoever has style doesn't need therapy," whereby "style" connotes a comprehensive way of expressing oneself. We develop our own style out of our background and experiences. Discussing with Edward Rosenfeld in 1982, Laura commented: "Style is really the expression of the self-development as it has happened up to that point" (Perls and Rosenfeld, "A Conversation between Laura Perls and Edward Rosenfeld," 28).

Speaking of uniqueness, there was a side to Laura that came to the fore when she lacked the support that she otherwise appeared to enjoy. I had the opportunity to experience a bit of Laura's own anxiety when she gave a talk to an audience in Graz in 1982. It was one of the big surprises in my life. Shortly before she was to begin speaking, Laura looked at the circle

of chairs that were set up for her and the audience, then she turned to me and, with a slightly frozen facial expression and frightened eyes, asked me to sit next to her during the talk. The audience was to take their seats in the circle with us. She reached for my hand and asked me in a strange tone of voice to stay by her side until we sat down and she would begin to lecture. Needless to say, I was quite astonished by Laura's panicky reaction. I had idealized her and was certain that someone who had taught internationally for decades was self-assured and cool as a cucumber, even when speaking publicly. In this moment I realized that Laura's stage fright had nearly become paralyzing to her. When I recently discussed this incident with Renate Perls, she supposed that Laura's panicky behavior might have been triggered by a mortifying experience she had endured as a child. Laura had made a slight error during her piano recital, and this shortcoming might have permanently put her off from playing professionally. During the uncomfortable interval before her talk to the audience in Graz, I realized, she used an interpersonal support to assuage her uneasiness. Laura's strong qualities—being constant, consequent, reliable, committed, cautious, and measured—were best applied *behind* the scenes, in the structured, supporting background.

It was here that I got a better sense of what Laura meant when she wrote about embarrassment, as well as about contact and support:

> But I think I realized pretty early and it's really part of my whole approach in therapy and in the training of therapists that embarrassment is the boundary state *par excellence.* There you are with one foot in what you know, and one foot in what you don't know. If you can accept your embarrassment, then you'll begin to make contact with the 'different,' the other. As you go with the experience your boundary expands. If, on the other hand, you try to avoid acknowledging your embarrassment and present a well-structured front, you'll stay within your self-set boundaries, resulting in a feeling of safety and security. But at what a price! (Kitzler, Perls, Stern, "Retrospects and Prospects: A Trialogue between Laura Perls, Richard Kitzler and E. Mark Stern," 17)

In 1983 I wrote the following text on the invitation to a workshop with Laura in Graz, and the translation from German into English is mine:

> During the last few years, it has almost become a tradition that Laura Perls, the co-founder of Gestalt therapy, comes to Styria for a weekend workshop in the late summer. What so impresses me is Laura's style of working, how she conveys the importance of small steps, of digestible, assimilable experiences that enable a free-flowing therapeutic process. Particularly her

> work with ‘contact’ and ‘support’ seems to me to be exemplary for a subtle approach in Gestalt therapy that is in danger of being forgotten.

To my dismay, there was not enough enrollment for this workshop and it had to be cancelled. I will never forget Laura’s reaction to this misfortune. She was angry about it and claimed that this was a nasty shock to her. Since we never discussed her financial situation, I was not in the picture about how financially dependent she indeed was on these workshops taking place. Faced with her anger and despair, I was dismayed by not having been able to fulfill her expectations. However, Laura’s anger dissolved after she expressed it, as if she had written it off to experience.

In private conversations, Laura was composed and aesthetically inclined. She was patient and at the same time precise and knew just what she wanted. Her sense of humor was keen and she could also enjoy it when the joke was on her. Allow me a little anecdote on the “here and now.” Laura told me that she once called her granddaughter, Leslie, who was then a young girl, on the phone, and asked her what she was doing.

> Leslie answered impatiently: “I’m talking to you, silly!” Laura had to laugh out loud!
>
> Another example of her self-irony: When I visited Laura in Manhattan with my daughter, who was just over one year old, Laura presented her with a little stuffed sheep.
>
> Laura asked Rosa: “Where is your sheep?” and my daughter pointed her finger at Laura, who began to laugh and nodded in confirmation: “Yes, yes, I am your sheep!”
>
> Laura was a very sensuous woman, aware of her body and how she moved, and she watched her weight carefully. I remember how she studied the menu in restaurants, looking for the appropriate meal, commenting with raised eyebrows: “In my kitchen there are no carbohydrates, no macaroni!”

Laura was exemplary for the bourgeois, educated class of her era. Her humanistic education was reflected in her eloquent, expressive diction. The German classics and Greek mythology were quoted effortlessly when she expressed her ideas or wrote poetry and prose. To spend time with her was to relish a rich source of culture and knowledge.

In this editorial introduction to Laura’s unpublished notebooks and other literary works, I would like to describe a posthumous encounter with her. For ten years I had worked on a novel, titled *Case Unclosable*, which was published in 2013. What initially gave me the impetus to begin writing were recurrent nightmares about my father, who died at a relatively young age in 1978 and who included in his legacy to me the

typewritten manuscript of a novella. He was a lawyer, not a writer, and this manuscript told the gripping story of one of his cases. After suffering for months from persistent nightmares, I took my Gestalt training and Laura's words about recurrent dreams to heart: I addressed myself to the unresolved situation with my father and lack of closure due to his sudden, untimely death. I realized that the "unfinished business" called for me to engage myself in activities that would help me to attain more closure, and these activities pertained to his novella. Once I decided to publish his manuscript, the nightmares, to my great relief, disappeared quickly. The writing experience that was in store for me, however, was a complex, transformative process. After a decade of writing and revising, what began as a brief introduction to this novella had become quite a different piece of prose. I had interwoven chapters of my own reflections on the relationship to my father and to the characters in his novel with the original chapters in his novella. There seemed to be many parallels and similar transgenerational issues in the novel and my own family history. Vivid dreams comprised the starting point and the ending of the narrative.

One of the influences on my long writing process can be traced to my preparations for a lecture on Gestalt therapy theory, when I re-read an article Laura published in 1989 in *The Gestalt Journal*. In this article, she paraphrased Erv Polster's popular book *Every Person's Life is Worth a Novel* and turned the premise upside down:

> Long before the establishment of psychology—let alone psychotherapy—as scientific disciplines and methods of problem solving, literature demonstrated and explicated human experience in all its facets: Love and hate, passion and indifference, happiness and suffering, learning and ignorance, innocence and experience, crime and punishment, war and peace, conflict and resolution, failure and success. (Perls, "Every Novel is a Case History," 5)

Laura described how fascinating it can be when transformative dialogues develop between writers and readers of fine literature. Stimulated by reading Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, Laura recounted how the imagination, intellect, and communicative abilities are heightened, how the paths to the reader's emotions become more accessible:

> It begins with a detailed prescription and description of how to read a book, and the book to be read is the book being written at the same moment! Being the writer, the reader and the narrator all at the same time seems, quite paradoxically, not to interfere with the production of a book, but to release the creative powers, for all through these (also quite

> amusing) shenanigans a story is emerging the course of which I don't know yet, as I had to interrupt my reading to produce this paper which is actually the direct result of starting Calvino's book. (*Every Novel,* 10)

Laura went on to discuss Milorad Pavic's *Dictionary of the Khazars*, where she read that it would be better to speak of talented, gifted readers than of talented, gifted writers. She realized that these transformative dialogues between author and reader enable the latter to become "an active collaborator, even the essential protagonist of the book" (ibid.). As yet unknown aspects of one's own life as well as the lives of others may come to the fore.

It took me a while to comprehend what Laura derived from reading Calvino and Pavic: A reader subjectively transforms what has been written and this person's life is transformed by reading. By carefully re-reading my father's novella, I was transforming it and being transformed. Slowly but surely, I grew to become the author, reader, and protagonist of the story.

Now that I have Laura's unpublished notebooks and other writing in my hands, with the intention to transcribe and publish them, I find myself in a situation similar to that of having inherited my father's unpublished novella. Once again I have received an extraordinary legacy in the form of unpublished works from someone who was very close to me. This time they are Laura's own. And once again the story began with a dream, although this time it was Renate Perls who did the dreaming. Hopefully you, the reader, will engage in the kind of transformative dialogue that Laura described with the contents between the covers of this book. As the editor of this publication, I have attempted to illuminate the less well known sides of Laura Perls through the presentation of her heretofore unpublished writing, to offer information about the people with whom she resonated, and to provide some of the rich cultural background which inspired her entire being.

The contents of this treasure chest: Notebooks and other literary texts

The notebooks of Laura's in my possession began in 1946 in Johannesburg, South Africa, where the Perls family lived after having fled from persecution by the rise of National Socialists in Germany in 1933 to Amsterdam. Since they never obtained a work permit for the Netherlands, the Perlses turned to Ernest Jones, who intervened on their behalf and they set out for South Africa in 1934.

Numerous entries were written in pencil. Nearly seventy years later, many pages were often terribly faded and had to be read with great concentration. A good part of the first notebook was in English, and I could decipher Laura's writing reasonably well. However, she also entered a number of pages in German, which she wrote in *Kurrent*, the penmanship of her era, and these pages were practically illegible to me. Luckily, I was able to engage Patrick Fiska, a Viennese archivist and historian, to support me in deciphering her handwriting, particularly the entries written in German.

What I transcribed from the Notebook Number 1, which she began to write in 1946 at her home on 25, Raymond Street, Bellevue, Johannesburg in South Africa, were her own original poems, beginning with "Original Sin" on two loose pages, then an untitled short poem followed by a long poem titled "Jacob's Ladder," which is subdivided into four sections marked in Roman numerals. There are two different sections of "Jacob's Ladder" that are both marked III. The stanza that Laura deleted and substituted with another one is still legible. Since I don't want to deprive the reader of this verse, it has been added at the end of the poem as a fragment and marked accordingly.

Between "Original Sin" and "Jacob's Ladder" is a one-line quote from Erich Fromm, whom Laura knew as a colleague and fellow émigré. Erich Fromm, who was born in 1900 in Frankfurt on Main, Germany, and died in 1980 in Muralto, Switzerland, was a social psychologist in the tradition of the Frankfurt School of critical theory and a Neo-Freudian psychoanalyst. Fromm fled from National Socialism to New York, where he was involved in forming the New York branch of the Washington School of Psychiatry and the founding of the William Alanson White Institute. He also taught at Columbia University and Bennington College. The one-line quote by Fromm after Laura's poem "Original Sin" is not by chance. Fromm's humanistic world view stems from his own interpretation of the consequences of Adam and Eve eating from the tree of knowledge. Instead of viewing them as having sinned, Fromm felt that Adam and Eve had become aware of being part of nature while at the same time separate from it. They realized that they were mortals, and therefore subject to the impact of nature and society, which resulted in their existential anxiety and what is conventionally seen as their guilt and shame. Fromm's solution to this dilemma was the development of human beings' abilities to love and reason. He was a prolific, widely received author. His most famous works include *Escape from Freedom*, *Man for Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*, and *The Art of Loving*, which was an international bestseller.

"Jacob's Ladder" is followed by a text titled "Open the Floodgates of Fear," part prose, part poem. Also included were her translations of German poems into English, for instance Friedrich Hölderlin's "Hälfte des Lebens," which she titled "Turning Point of Life," and Heinrich Heine's "Mein Kind, wir waren Kinder," which she begins with the line "My child, we have been children." In between her translations, I transcribed her own poem, "In Springtime" ("Im Frühling").

Particularly impressive and stirring is the short story titled "Awakening," which was originally interrupted by Heine's poem and other entries on the handwritten pages 41 to 45 in Notebook Number 1. This entry was written on a total of sixteen pages, including blank pages, and did not follow in regular succession. While transcribing, I rearranged the succession of pages so that "Awakening" could be read in one piece. Then, in August, 2014, I was given a typewritten copy of the first chapter of "Awakening" by Renate Perls and Leslie Gold, and realized that *this* was the final version. Instead of including my transcription of Laura's handwritten version in this volume, I have decided to complement the final version by including some of Laura's corrections to her first version as footnotes. "Awakening" appears to be an autobiographical piece, capturing Laura's very palpable experience with her mother, younger sister, and infant brother in their home in Pforzheim. Reading this narrative was an aesthetic and gripping experience for me in the true sense of the word! I can't remember ever having read a text that so convincingly captures the sensory world and emotional experience of a young child. It is truly a kinesthetic piece of writing.

Immediately following "Awakening" is a text marked "II.," therefore I concluded that this is the second chapter of "Awakening." Judging from the contents of this story, this appears to be the case. In this text, I discovered what appears to be an autobiographical experience of the author as a young girl with two elderly women running a handicraft shop in the neighborhood where she was born and spent her early years. This chapter has been heavily revised by the author, including an alternative paragraph towards the end of this chapter, which I have included. The subsequent chapters III., IV., and V. of "Awakening," unfortunately, merely consist of two- or three-word ideas for their plots.

Following "Awakening," Detlev von Lilienkron's poem "In einer großen Stadt" was translated into English by Laura as "In a big city." In this notebook are two humorous poems of Laura's and several other, more serious poems of hers, all untitled. A German-language version of Section IV from the poem "Jacob's Ladder," which appeared at the beginning of Notebook Number 1 in English, follows various brief contributions.

Sketches, doodles, words written in Greek letters also appear in the notebook. As an explanation for her bizarre poem titled "Even-song," Laura noted on the opposite page with a connecting arrow: "Written with 'flu, temperature, temper, lucid confusion and enjoyable exasperation; August 30, 1946."

In the case of the initial notebook from 1946, the first half of the notebook is mostly filled with her own writing. Then I had to flip to the back cover and turn the notebook around in order to resume reading from the back cover. The main body of the second half of Notebook Number 1 consists of quotes from other writers. Here Laura begins with quotes from Erich Fromm's book *The Fear of Freedom*, as it was known outside of North America and which was published by Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., London, in 1942. It was first published in English as *Escape from Freedom* in 1941 by Farrar & Rinehart. What follows seem to be Laura Perls's notes and quotes that she took from this text, the numbers referring to the pages in Fromm's book.

I found myself transcribing drafts of her personal letters, dreams, names and addresses of persons she wanted to contact, fragments of thoughts that she jotted down, her own short stories, as well as quotes from Rainer Maria Rilke's *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, T.S. Elliot's "East Coker," Heinrich Heine's poems, Palinurus's (Cyril Conolly) *The Unquiet Grave*, and Julian Green's *Memories of Happy Days*. Laura also muses about Ferenc Molnar's play *Liliom*, which was adapted into the musical and film *Carousel*, and a poem by Eduard Friedrich Mörike.

By repeatedly reading these texts, I have realized that these authors provide the background and resonance for her reflections and her own writing. When I make mention of Laura's own writing, I am referring not only to her professional publications, which have been published elsewhere, but also to her prose and poetry, which will be published in this volume for the first time. This realization is what excited me most: Now it is finally possible to publish the rich treasure of Laura's personal reflections during the decades of her life from 1946–1985.

Although most entries were in English back in 1946, judging from the fluidity of her handwriting, I imagined that writing in the penmanship of her youth, in her native German, came easier to Laura. Moreover, Laura had her own system of writing, which prevailed throughout her notebooks, creatively marking passages to insert on other pages, changing the order of words, sentences, paragraphs or entire pages, flipping the notebook over and upside down in the middle and beginning anew from the back of the notebook, interrupting a story or poem with a new entry and continuing

the story—unmarked—several pages later. Sometimes she would enumerate the pages, sometimes she didn't. At times, Laura drafted an initial version of a poem or story on the left-hand page of the notebook, only to write the final version on the right-hand page.

Notebook Number 2 was written during the years 1954 to 1956 at Laura's New York address on Central Park West in Manhattan. This notebook includes a pensive letter to a colleague and friend named Paul, yet it is unclear whether she is referring to Paul Goodman or Paul Weisz. Paul Goodman (1911–1972) was a New York social critic, philosopher, and writer whose works not only strongly influenced education, community planning, and political movements in the 1960s, but also the classic textbook on Gestalt therapy, *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality*, which he wrote with Fritz Perls and Ralph Hefferline in 1951. Viennese-born Paul Weisz had training in internal medicine, neurology, and biochemistry. He worked as a research scientist in New York. His education was humanistic, his outlook European, and he was particularly interested in the practice of Zen Buddhism. Laura considered him to be a Renaissance man. Through his wife, Lottie Weisz, a psychiatrist, he met both Perlses and began Gestalt training with Laura. Paul Weisz was one of the founding members of the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy in the 1950s and among the trainers of the group that founded the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland. After several years of estrangement, Goodman and Weisz resumed their friendship in the mid 1960s. During a "conciliatory dinner" at Goodman's apartment in 1965, Weisz died suddenly of a heart attack. For more information about this era in the development of Gestalt therapy, the interested reader is referred to Taylor Stoehr's book *Here Now Next*: *Paul Goodman and the Origins of Gestalt Therapy*, which was published in 1994 by Jossey Bass/Gestalt Institute of Cleveland in San Francisco, and to an article by Paul Weisz titled "The Contribution of Georg Wilhelm Groddeck," published in *The Gestalt Journal* XIII, no. 2 (1990): 85–98.

Following this letter are the notes for a publication of two case studies that first appeared in *Case Reports in Clinical Psychology* (1956) of the Department of Psychology, Kings County Hospital, Brooklyn, New York, and were then published in 1971 as "Two Instances of Gestalt Therapy," a chapter in *Recognitions in Gestalt Therapy*, edited by Paul David Pursglove, and finally in Laura Perls, *Living at the Boundary*.

The Gestalt Journal Press, which owns the copyright to this book chapter, has unfortunately denied publication permission for this volume. In Laura's handwritten notebook, the actual first names of her two patients appear. If I had been permitted to include this transcription, I would have

omitted these and kept the pseudonyms in order to protect their identities. The draft for the above-mentioned book chapter, which I had intended to include in the present volume, is followed in her notebooks by notes that she made that have *not* been included in the published versions, whereas sections that have already been published in *Living at the Boundary* are missing in my transcription. In the sections in which my transcribed text overlaps with the above-mentioned book chapter, it is nearly identical, with minor exceptions in punctuation, the beginnings of paragraphs, and choice of vocabulary. The interested reader is referred to the published text, either in *Recognitions in Gestalt Therapy* or in *Living at the Boundary*.

Also in this notebook is a brief poem titled "Provincetown Problem," describing the obstacles to writing that Laura experienced, apparently during a vacation at the beach in Provincetown. The New England town of Provincetown is located on the outermost tip of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, and is famous for fishing, magnificent beaches, and as a popular vacation spot on the East Coast. Since the end of the nineteenth century, more and more writers and artists began to make their homes there, not only during summer vacations, but all year round. In the 1960s Provincetown attracted many hippies, and in the 1970s the gay and lesbian community began to grow rapidly.

In Notebook Number 2 the reader will find other journal entries, some lively childhood memories, and notes for writing projects. There is also a short story titled "Fire Escape" which begins mid-sentence in the notebook and may be a fragment of a longer piece. The myriad of characters that Laura depicts in this text could be her own case studies. With sensitivity and irony she depicts a critical event of their life as tenants in an apartment building that had been set on fire.

The two brief letters from Laura to Fritz in Notebook Number 2, which were possibly never sent to him, comprise particularly heartrending contributions to this notebook. They give the reader insight into how Laura emotionally handled the declining relationship to her husband. Further treasures, such as the poems that Laura wrote in Notebook Number 2 about love, ageing, and death, are also deeply moving. They become all the more vivid when seen in light of Laura's stroke in 1955. She contemplated Gottfried Benn's thoughts on the differences between early accomplished artists and artists who are most productive as mature individuals. She drew on the treasure trove of what she read by such English writers as Gerald Manley Hopkins, D.H. Lawrence, George Granville Barker, Emma Orczy, and William Butler Yeats, by the German author of children's books Tony Schumacher, the German writers

Christian Morgenstern, Erich Kästner, and John Höxter, the German philosopher Paul Tillich, the American writers Peter Viereck, Maxwell Bodenheim, and James Agee. In addition, Laura drew on works by the German-American philosopher and social scientist Herbert Marcuse, a fellow émigré who is associated with the Frankfurt School of critical theory along with Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno. Herbert Marcuse was known as an important theorist of the New Left and a leading figure in the student movement in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Laura recollects the vicissitudes of friendships during her years in South Africa, and mused about old friends from Germany, among them Tilly and Max Ludwig Cahn. Max L. Cahn, who was born in Mainz in 1889 and died in Frankfurt in 1967, was a lawyer and notary public who brought home medals from fighting on Germany's side in World War I. In 1938 he was briefly interned in the concentration camp in Buchenwald, but released thanks to his important consulting services to British firms. He survived the war years, reduced to activities as a "jüdischer Konsulent," German for Jewish legal advisor. Cahn avoided deportation in March 1945 by going underground. After the war, he became co-founder of Frankfurt's Jewish Community and resumed his work as a lawyer. His wife, Tilly Cahn, née Schulze, who was born in 1892 and died in 1980, was not Jewish. Their diaries and letters from the years 1933 to 1943 have been published in 1999 in German as „Tagebuchaufzeichnungen und Briefe von Max L. Cahn und Tilly Cahn aus den Jahren 1933–1943," in the *Archiv für Frankfurts Geschichte und Kunst*, Bd. 65, in Frankfurt am Main, 182–221. The interested reader is also referred to Jay H. Geller, *Jews in Post-Holocaust Germany, 1945–1953* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), and to *Die Deportation der Juden aus Deutschland*, edited by Birthe Kundrus and Beate Meyer and published in 2012 by Wallstein as Volume 20 of *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Nationalsozialismus*.

In her journal entries Laura reflects on what she has in common with some of the characters she created in her short story "Fire Escape." Moreover, in Notebook Number 2 a dream is included that stimulated Laura to write lively descriptions of childhood memories with relatives. Listening to classical music, South African landscapes are conjured up and written down. Furthermore, I found various rough drafts of the beginning and a longer version of the short story "A Peg to Hang My Hat On," an associative, convoluted tale. In this story, Laura is inspired by such artists and writers as John Höxter, Max Bodenheim, and James Agee, whose tremendous talents were impacted by their abuse of either alcohol or drugs, to create a character named Isaac Rosenfeld.

In the interview with Laura that Daniel Rosenblatt conducted in 1972 (Perls, *Meine Seele ist die Wildnis des Anderen*, 92–93), Laura states that the protagonist of her short story, "A Peg to Hang My Hat On," was indeed based on the writer, Isaac Rosenfeld. Born in 1918 in Chicago, Rosenfeld studied at the University of Chicago and went to New York City to study philosophy, which he gave up shortly thereafter. Rosenfeld held a prominent position in the elite circle of intellectuals and writers in Greenwich Village, writing poetry and fiction, but mostly book reviews and essays. He published in the *New Republic*, *Partisan Review*, *Commentary*, *New Leader*, and *The Nation*. Rosenfeld returned to live in Chicago before he died unexpectedly of a heart attack at age thirty-eight.

Fearing that his writer's block was caused by sexual inhibition, Rosenfeld began reading Reich's publications, ventured into psychotherapy with a student of Reich's, Dr. Richard Singer, and hoped that orgone therapy would cure him. He applied an orgone box he produced himself. Laura described a friendly get-together with Rosenfeld during which he agreed to be blindfolded and have the others experiment with the orgone box on his arms and legs. Regretting that he overexerted himself to the point of exhaustion, she mentioned in the 1972 interview that Rosenfeld wrote a piece in *Partisan Review* about fantasy being like riding a bicycle uphill. In her short story, "A Peg to Hang My Hat On," Laura picked up this metaphor to create her bicycle-riding protagonist. In *Adventures in the Orgasmatron: How the Sexual Revolution Came to America*, published in 2011 by Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Christopher Turner describes the overlapping social circles of Rosenfeld and the Perlses, suggesting that at least Fritz Perls went to see Rosenfeld's orgone box in action.

Preserving the Hunger. An Isaac Rosenfeld Reader, published in 1988 by Mark Shechner, offers an unexpected reference to Laura and her short story. In addition, it features a heart-warming foreword by Rosenfeld's boyhood friend and rival, Saul Bellow, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature and the Pulitzer Prize. In the editor's preface, Shechner describes the responses he received in 1976 from readers to his essay on Isaac Rosenfeld. Shechner

> got letters, reminiscences, tips on obscure publications, and offers of unpublished material. The psychotherapist Dr. Laura Perls sent me a story she had written shortly after Rosenfeld's death: 'A Peg to Hang My Hat On (Requiem for Isaac Rosenfeld).' (18)

This short story is to be published in this volume for the first time.

Isaac Rosenfeld inspired not only Laura to base characters on him. Saul Bellow's King Dahfur in *Henderson the Rain King* (1959) and Wallace Markfield's Leslie Braverman in *To an Early Grave* (1964) were modeled on Isaac Rosenfeld. Sidney Lumet's film *Bye Bye Braverman* (1964), starring George Segal, was based on Markfield's novel.

Other sources of inspiration for this story were comments by a friend of long standing about Laura's own restlessness, Laura's reflections on the Wandering Jew, and the deeper meaning of wearing a hat. According to Christian legend, the Wandering Jew is a figure who was condemned to live until the end of the world because he derided Christ on the way to crucifixion on Mount Calvary. This legend has been dealt with in numerous works of poetry and prose, as well as in many works of visual art. As for the significance of wearing a hat, it can be noted that in Jewish tradition, a head covering must be worn during prayers. Observant Jewish men wear a hat or skull cap and observant Jewish women cover their hair with a scarf or hat, or wear a wig outside of places of worship as well. Allusions to Laura's Jewish roots become figural in this narrative, including her own transliterated version of Kaddish, an essential part of Jewish prayer services. There are many forms of Kaddish, but when one "says" Kaddish, this refers to the ritual of mourning, "Mourner's Kaddish." This Hebrew prayer for the dead comprises a hymn extolling God despite the loss of a loved one. The timeless nature of God, his eternality, and his greatness are praised in the congregation's response in this prayer: "May His great name be blessed forever, and to all eternity."

The notes for the short story, "A Peg to Hang My Hat On," begin with an entry on March 12, 1956 and continue till July 18, 1956, and I have included them. Laura resumes her writing with several entries comprising a more substantial version of the story, authored during the period of July through December 1956. During the summer months, Laura was writing in Provincetown, Massachusetts. In the middle of an entry dated December 1, 1956, Laura notes down the name Elsie Clark and the address 11 West 65, N.Y.C. Unfortunately, I have neither been able to determine who Elsie Clark was nor whether or not she had anything to do with the entry for the short story.

To my astonishment, among the newly discovered treasures that I received in August 2014 was a final, polished version of the short story "A Peg to Hang My Hat On (Requiem for Isaac Rosenfeld)," that I had already transcribed with great difficulty from Notebook Number 2. This typewritten text comprised several loose pages and was dated 1955. I was surprised to see this text attributed by Laura to the year 1955, considering the fact that all the handwritten drafts of the story "A Peg to Hang My Hat

On" in Notebook Number 2 are spread over the year 1956. I assumed that the carefully edited, typewritten last version of the text was simply misdated as having been written in 1955. I decided to include the transcription of one of the early handwritten sections of this story and substitute the typewritten final version for the other transcribed drafts.

There follows a letter from Laura to Rochelle M. Wexler in Brooklyn with her curriculum vitae in which she is introducing herself and describing her professional career. I searched the internet successfully for clues to Ms. Wexler's identity. I found a psychoanalytically oriented publication by Karen Machover and Rochelle M. Wexler titled "A Case of Manic Excitement," published in the *Rorschach Research Exchange and Journal of Projective Techniques* 12, no. 4 (1948): 179–201. Ms. Wexler is noted as a staff psychologist at the Psychiatric Division of King's County Hospital in Brooklyn, New York. In my search for further information about Ms. Wexler, I checked the U.S. Federal Population Census over several decades, and found information from the 1940 census about a woman named Rochelle Wexler, born in 1923 in New York, residing with her parents, Louis, who emigrated from Rumania, and Sarah Wexler, who emigrated from Poland, in Brooklyn. Rochelle Wexler died in 2006. I strongly suspect that the woman listed in the 1940 is also the co-author of the article on manic excitement as well as the recipient of Laura's letter. A clue to the mystery of the connection between Laura and Rochelle Wexler is the fact that Laura's publication of "Two Instances of Gestalt Therapy" was first published in *Case Reports in Clinical Psychology* of the Department of Psychology at Kings County Hospital in Brooklyn. Ms. Wexler worked for the Psychiatric Division of this hospital as a staff psychologist.

A list of names and numbers are also to be found in Notebook Number 2, possibly group members and the fees they paid. At the end of this notebook I found two loose pages with what I found to be a sensational text: a hand-written dialogue, written alternately, between Laura and a deaf-mute female patient.

From Laura's duplicate copy of her application for *Who's Who of American Women*, I learned that she became a naturalized American citizen in 1955, the year that she suffered a stroke and her self-image was so profoundly shaken.

Notebook Number 3 comprised the years 1957 to 1958 in Laura's life. Some of the entries have been paginated by Laura Perls. However, if there is pagination, it is quite idiosyncratic, skipping from left to right, ignoring the sequence of pages and numerical order. Sometimes the page numbers skip around from left to right, sometimes Laura Perls backtracked and