

The Hidden Child

PUBLISHED BY HIDDEN CHILD FOUNDATION®/ADL

VOL. XXVIII 2020

RECONCILIATION



SEARCHING FOR HOME THE IMPACT OF WWII ON A HIDDEN CHILD

By Joseph Gosler

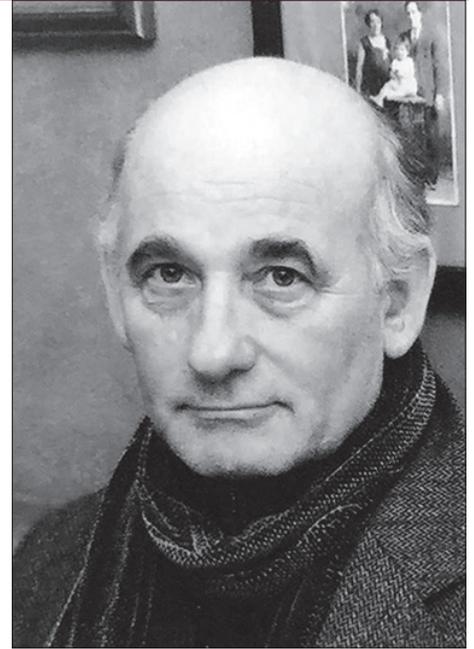
THE NETHERLANDS, 1942 - 1949

I was born on July 27, 1942, to Henriette Swartberg-Gosler and Maurice Gosler, in the provincial capital of Groningen, the Netherlands. My mother tells me the day I was born was a Monday morning, not really distinguished by anything unusual except for British bombers flying overhead. My birth certificate notes the birth name, Joseph Gosler, but my name would change several times during and after WWII. Every new name represented a segment of my life, ever connected like the canals that crisscrossed my birth city of Groningen. Each experience and identity fused into another, shaping me into who I am today.

My mother grew up in the city of Assen, a short distance from Groningen. She came from an upper middle-class family that at one time owned a factory that produced burlap bags, and she had one sibling, her older brother, Leo. She believed herself to be a modern woman: she enrolled in bookkeeping classes after high school, studied to become a beautician, belonged to an athletic club, spoke several languages and was politically aware and socially active.

My father came from Groningen, from a working-class background. The middle child of six siblings, he was stricken with polio as a child and lost hearing in his right ear. He left school in the eighth grade, became a butcher, and like my mother, also belonged to an athletic club. Whether it was due to the polio or leaving school early, he was both timid and cautious with other people, yet unusually sincere. It was common in those days for brothers and sisters to marry into one another's family. After the marriage of my mother's older brother Leo to Maria, my father's older sister, my parents married in 1941.

A month before my birth, in June of 1942, the Nazi administration began



Joseph Gosler

the deportation of Jews, first to Westerbork and then to Bergen-Belsen, or to the various eastern European concentration camps, like Sobibor and Auschwitz. Although people were still employed, more and more restrictions were set on Jews in terms of where they could work, where they could shop and when they could leave their homes.

It became clear that if we wanted to survive, we had to leave Holland or go into hiding. The resistance movement had just developed. False identity papers were difficult to get. In retrospect, it seems strange to have a child during wartime, but I believe the Dutch, including most Jews, were determined to hold on to a sense of normalcy, even if it was out of a sense of desperation. It may even have been a form of personal resistance to have a child at a time of daily Nazi raids and roundups. That was the paradox of life in Holland, at least through 1942, and since I never heard that my birth was accidental, I must assume that my parents felt secure enough to have me.

On the surface, my birth and infancy were no different than any other young child's, except that I was Jewish, and my father, Maurice, had been arrested and sent to a forced labor camp near Kloosterveen at a time when my mother was pregnant with me.

At the camp, he worked 16-hour days and had no means of escape. My mother sent him a letter, stating that she was

Continued on next page

ill, and asked if there was a way for him to come to her. Although the Nazi stranglehold on everyday life was becoming crystal clear, here was an example of the schizophrenia of wartime Holland, because my father received a three-day pass. He came to us in August of 1942 when I was one month old.

After three days, my father was ready to return to the camp, but my mother noticed there was no return date stamped on his pass. My parents argued vociferously for hours about this error. My father, ever true to his word, had every intention of going back until my mother convinced him otherwise. My father's typical Dutch sense of civic duty and honor that was evident through every strata of society would have cost him his life had he not been saved by my mother.

Worrying that the administration at Kloosterveen would find the omission, we and my widowed maternal grandmother, Martha, left Groningen and travelled to Amsterdam. The city still had the largest Jewish quarter in Holland, and they hoped that it still held the promise of shelter, extended family and community.

On the road, we stayed at small family farms, never remaining more than a single night, and usually leaving at dawn. We kept away from train transportation, which was watched all the time, travelling instead in the countryside by foot, bicycle and local buses. The trip, which normally took three hours by train, took us four days.

The Jordaan or Jodenbuurt (Jewish neighborhood) of Amsterdam was still a thriving quarter of nearly eighty thousand Jews. Many families could trace their family roots back four centuries. The Nazis had effectively turned the neighborhood into a ghetto, forcing various restrictions on movement, whether beyond the ghetto or during nighttime, but the mass deportations and the more extreme measures were still to come.

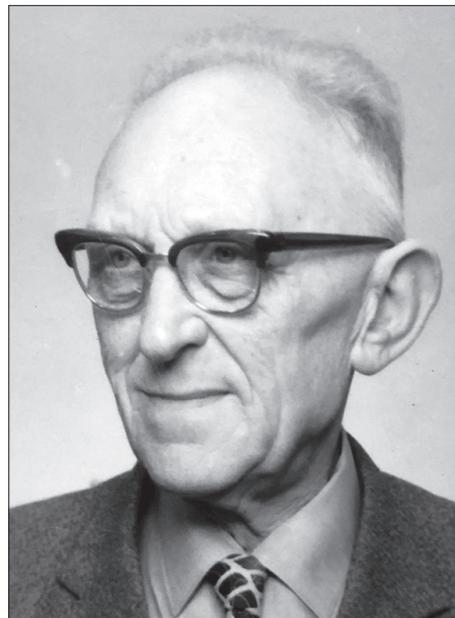
It was October 1942, and though life was more sobering, it was still manageable. We found a place to live and my father found day labor, but my parents could tell this was just a reprieve. The storm was near and more restrictions were placed on the Jodenbuurt.

The Jewish Council, serving as police and record keepers, kept the community in check, while the nightly Gestapo raids surgically removed any "troublemakers." It became somberly clear to my parents

that they needed to remain mobile and flexible and that I undermined that possibility.

The new Dutch resistance movement, although primarily engaged in intelligence gathering for the Allies, also had a mission of saving Jewish children. Through their friends, my parents contacted someone from the Resistance, and a plan and a place to meet were devised.

At seven or eight months old, at an age when an infant can barely see beyond his mother's breast, I was taken from my parents. In March 1943, a nursing student on



Rescuers, Vader Dijkstra and Moeder Dijkstra.

hunters, the Dutch police, and civil servants paid by the Nazis to ferret out the Jews and other undesirables.

My parents and grandma decided to travel to Gelderland, an agricultural province southeast of Amsterdam. They hoped to work and hide on one of the many small farms that dotted the fertile plains. The distance between Amsterdam and Gelderland was less than fifty miles.

Each day, they travelled at dawn, carrying valises filled with their meager belongings. They stayed off main roads and looked for shelter and food for each



a bicycle with a basket came to our house, bundled me in a quilt, placed me in the basket, and peddled off into the darkness.

Much later in my life, my parents told me about their feelings at that time: they were in a state of controlled fear and numbness. Full of remorse, yet relieved, they hoped I would be safe, but there was no guarantee they would ever see me again. From time to time, they received news about me, and once they even got a wrinkled photograph of me sitting next to a fat cat.

Living in Amsterdam became progressively worse. With deportations and nightly raids, my parents remained there for another three months. Each day became more dismal: informers were everywhere; you could trust no one, and work was impossible to find. There were bounty

night. The journey was particularly hard on Oma Martha, who found it difficult to walk long distances.

One night, while sleeping in a small barn, my mother woke up convinced that their host had informed on them. The gut feeling meant they had to leave immediately. Needing more time to rest, my grandmother decided she would meet them later in the day. They never saw her again, and later learned she was taken by the SS police, deported, and murdered in Sobibor. When I was much older, I became painfully aware, as had my parents, that instinct and timing spelled the difference between life and death, and, ironically, that we were born under lucky stars.

My journey was gentle as compared to my parents' and grandma's. I was placed

Continued on next page

with Meneer and Mevrouw Dijkstra, a Christian family in Wageningen, a small city near the Rhine River, and by coincidence also in Gelderland.

My wartime family consisted of “Vader,” a landscape architect, “Moeder,” a housewife, and their two daughters, Anneke and Folie, who were fourteen and eleven years old respectively. Both girls had straight blond hair and blue eyes, in contrast to my wavy dark brown hair and hazel-green eyes.

Not long after my arrival, the Dijkstras added me to their family register and I was called Peter Dijkstra, or Pietje. Safe and content with the only family I knew, I cannot remember whether I missed my



Joseph in hiding with the Dijkstra family, 20 months of age.

mother, or the familiarity of my parents’ home, or the warmth of my mother’s breast and smell of her skin, but my childhood with the Dijkstras was as wholesome as wartime would allow.

I was Pietje Dijkstra, the son of Moeder’s sister, who had died soon after giving birth to me. Some neighbors knew I was Jewish and this awareness frightened Moeder and Vader. They constantly reminded their daughters to be careful to ensure that neither one would accidentally tell Pietje’s true story to one of their friends.

One day, while I was playing with other young children in the street, a platoon of Nazi soldiers and tanks came rolling by. The other children scampered to the

sides, but whether numb, curious, dumb or defiant, I remained in the middle of the street. The other children motioned for me to move to one side or the other, but I didn’t move. Miraculously, the troops divided into two streams as they passed me by. Moeder saw all of this from the front yard, and ran to retrieve me, but they had already passed. These were dangerous times, but from my two-year-old eyes it was part of my everyday existence.

In 1944, on the Eastern Front, the Red Army and a particularly harsh winter combined to freeze the Nazi machine from pushing forward into Russia. At the same time, Canadian forces were nearing the Rhine River from the west. Food was scarce, and the Canadian bombing flights meant that we spent much time in our tiny cellar.

During those evenings I sat quietly on Moeder’s lap, while Anneke and Folie sat between her and Vader. We wore extra layers of clothing to ward off the damp cold. A single overhead light bulb flickered, but surprisingly remained lit for long periods of time. Vader or Anneke would read books to us; songs were sung, and the collective hum of airplane engines overhead blended to create white noise that lulled me to sleep.

My underground family began to pack valises and trunks with the idea of going further north, to Moeder’s family, who lived on a small farm in Friesland. Nestled in the countryside they hoped would spare us from the bombing, the harshness of daily life, and the fear of betrayal.

My life seemed relatively normal. In contrast, my parents were not as fortunate. They lived with false identities: my mother, Yetta, was now “Dina Elisabeth Buttikhuis,” and my father, Maurice, was “Sijbe Wjaarda.” My mother, Dina, was a small woman, about five feet tall with brown hair and thick glasses. Her grey-blue eyes and plaster-white skin suggested she was not of Jewish descent, and this allowed her a degree of safety. On the other hand, my father, Sijbe, was a little taller and muscular, nearly bald, and the hair that was left, was dark and almost kinky. His brown eyes, full lips and tanned skin, betrayed Judaic ancestry.

Sijbe worked in an institution for the insane in Rekken (Gelderland), while Dina lived on a farm not too far away. Between late 1944 and early 1945 as the Nazis began their retreat, life became even more

perilous, and they often moved from one farm to another in the surrounding countryside.

Their luck ran out when they were arrested in Doetinchem in March 1945. My father was sent to Westerbork the following day, and my mother—believed to be a Christian—was beaten for living with a Jew. She received a stern warning that if she was ever caught associating with a Jew again, she would be killed.

In the beginning of spring 1945, in the south of Holland, near Maastricht, the fighting had stopped and the people were free to walk the streets. It was not until May 11 that the rest of Holland was freed.

It was a period of euphoria. It was also a period of hysteria, hate and vengeance. These were frantic times, and many victims felt all these emotions simultaneously. Adding to this and the physical turmoil, the economy was in chaos.

It took weeks before my mother knew if my father was still alive. They reunited after he made his way back to Gelderland on a bicycle with wooden wheels.

The two months at Westerbork had taken a toll on him. His feet were bleeding, his lower back was debilitated, and he had lost 35 pounds. The stress and despair he felt, and the oppressive labor, had left him gaunt and listless. But at least they were together again, and my mother was ten weeks pregnant with my sister, Marja. It took my parents another four weeks to find me and to finish the legal paperwork before they could embrace the child they had given away.

Three years had passed. The baby they remembered had not only changed physically, but had wrapped himself, emotionally and psychologically, in the arms of the Dijkstra family. My parents were strangers. I did not recognize them, and wanted to return to my “real” parents. I was confused and angered by the loss of my underground family.

We were back together again, but each member was forever damaged by the experience of war. We went north to Groningen. My parents were shattered by the loss of their family—parents, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Moreover, they lost their homes, jobs, careers, friends and—more importantly—their spirit. Each day bled into another and they were consumed by painful memories. My parents were in an endless state

Continued on next page

of mourning.

At three years old, I was still wrapped in my own innocence, but cracks were beginning to form on my porcelain psyche. Although reunited with my real parents, I felt abandoned by the only family I knew. I cried for Moeder. I was angry, anxious, distant and confused. I trusted no one.

The war had ravaged us all. In early summer, my mother suffered a nervous breakdown. The feelings she held in so valiantly during the war, tied up in neat, little, sealed boxes, now popped out like a grotesque jack-in-the-box, and she was overwhelmed by sadness and rage. She could barely move; her thoughts were absent and her spirit was not to be found.

My father, emotionally void, could not help her either, and was desperately looking for work. My parents were so needy and self-absorbed that the normal bonding between me and my parents did not occur until much later in life. It is also possible that my longing for Moeder and Vader and my inability to forgive my own parents, delayed the bonding process even more.

Struggling with severe depression and fatigue, my mother experienced the life forming inside her, and the healing grace of time itself helped her regain some emotional footing. My father found a job as an electrical supply salesman and a semblance of order developed in our home.

I did not know it at the time, but the cracks in my psyche were ever more recognizable. What could a three-year-old know about the after-shocks of being a hidden child. For that matter, what could anyone know? I was confused and could not understand or accept why I was separated from Moeder and Vader.

Within weeks after they claimed me, I found a box of matches and promptly set the bathroom window curtains on fire. My parents were alarmed, but this was not a time when adults were psychologically aware. They did not understand it as a cry for help, an expression of my inner anguish, my way of displaying rage, or my longing for Moeder and Vader. I wanted to go home. I yearned for my other life. The pain was overwhelming, cumulative and remained raw.

In time, the family gained some normalcy, if not vibrancy: Poppy had his job and Mommy tended to us. Marja was nearly two and I made friends with Dimo,



Joseph with baby sister Marja; Groningen, 1946.

a boy who lived nearby. Still, my restlessness persisted. I felt stuck, controlled, and possibly still exposed to danger.

At our home, Marja and I would play together, though our age difference dictated that I would play or perform and Marja would watch. At the time, I liked playing with finger and hand puppets, using different voices to personify different emotions and characters, and to develop my own fantasy world. Marja was a great audience. But she was more than that, she filled part of the emptiness that I felt. Guiding her, and being the “big” brother, gave me stature and meaning, which helped counterbalance the distance I felt towards my parents—a separation I could not understand, a distance that narrowed only when I was much older.

My parents were planning to move. The post-war economy in the Netherlands had not rebounded. My father was dissatisfied with his job, and the nightmare ghosts of war were ever present. They needed a new environment, to distance themselves from the memories that continued to haunt them.

They attempted to get visas for America, but applied very late. It would be years before a “host” could be found and visas to America were secured. On the other hand, Israel was in its first year of existence and was eager to embrace new arrivals. After months of planning, packing and a series of goodbyes to a small group of family and friends, the Gosler family waved their final goodbye and

boarded the train for Marseille, France, for the cargo ship that would take them across the Mediterranean. Once again, I was displaced, separated from all that was “home” and secure.

ISRAEL, 1949 – 1953

We were not prepared for kibbutz life, and we each experienced it very differently. The separation of children from their parents, a heavenly reality for me, was hell for my parents and sister.

I craved the distance from my parents, the independence to wander, and looked forward to the camaraderie of children my age. The distance from my parents allowed me the precious psychological space to sort things out and to begin to understand who I was. I felt totally smothered, bewildered, and resistant to my parents’ attention, and subconsciously still mourned my own losses. The kibbutz was a perfect haven.

Yet, my parents and sister found it difficult to adapt. The traditional family unit so ingrained in their consciousness, was undermined and everything they used or wore was communally shared. While I needed distance from my parents, Marja’s needs were just the opposite. Even in Holland, Marja intuited that Mommy was emotionally fragile and self-absorbed, and Marja felt neglected. At least a few evenings per week, for quite a while, she made her way to our parents’ bungalow and would wake up sleeping in their bed.

As she grew older, she became more independent, so much so that at age five she was hitchhiking and wandering off by herself along the main road outside our kibbutz, Beit HaShita.

This sense of independence, that I also shared, was very much the result of living on the kibbutz. Experiencing relationships beyond the nuclear family, as in this communal setting, was as much a transition of emotional connectedness as it was a shift in one’s political consciousness. To my mother’s chagrin, no longer was the traditional home and family the only place of safety, the kibbutz and the surrounding community were as well.

My father, now “Moshe,” worked with the livestock and spent most days outside. He was a shepherd, and each morning he would take his flock to the valley and fertile hillside where there were many streams and lush grasses. The

Continued on next page

warm breezes, the sounds of turtle doves and the incessant baas of sheep, created a soothing rhythm to his day.

Moshe was at peace when he was outdoors, whether tending to his sheep or planting seeds in the earth. He was energized and was deeply consoled by nature's hum. My father flourished in the kibbutz, but the same could not be said for my mother. She was prone to sinus- and stress-related headaches, and depending on how hot and humid it was, would sometimes have difficulty breathing. Her daily work shifted between the cafeteria, the laundry and the library. She washed the dishes and pots, and washed and ironed the clothing. She didn't mind working indoors—in fact she preferred it—but it certainly wasn't as fulfilling as my father's work. Besides, my mother felt that this work was not up to her stature. When she worked in the library it was different, because there she could take time to read a magazine or rifle through shelves of books. She felt lonely and found it difficult to adapt to kibbutz life. In Holland, she had her own home, her own clothing, and her children. Now everything was shared, clothing, property, and children. Her children no longer identified only with her, they identified with an extended family, a whole community. This was hard to accept, especially for a woman who had survived the war.

One individual who had a profound impact on me was Beersheba, my Hebrew tutor. A soft-spoken woman in her thirties, Beersheba had black hair, speckled with grey that she wore in a single long braid. I don't know whether I was the only child being tutored at that time, but I felt special. I soaked up the affection and understanding, and because I was deeply bruised, I thought I kept my true self hidden from view.

Daily, this woman tutored me in Hebrew, gave me books, allowed me to come late to class, and basically nurtured me in a way my mother could not, or I would not allow. I became a prolific reader. The greater command I had over the Hebrew language, the more I read. I was eager to learn, to escape and to block out what I couldn't control.

The daily routines for a six-year-old were quite consistent. I didn't mind it being so specific; in fact, it gave me structure and security. I knew what to expect and what was expected of me. I awoke



Class trip in Israel; Joseph is in the second row, in front of the teacher.

at 6:30, washed, brushed my teeth and dressed. We were all dressed alike: short khaki pants with shoulder straps that buttoned in front and back and a short-sleeved light-colored shirt. After dressing we went out, and led by an adult or a teenager, we ran barefoot, through various terrain in and around the kibbutz.

I enjoyed those vigorous runs, and looked forward to the breakfast that followed. After a morning of classes, we would take our lunch to the fields. I never grew tired of the black bread, slathered with mayonnaise and filled with scallion greens, that was "baked" by the noonday sun.

In the afternoon, we worked in the fields, harvesting grapes, eating some and taking little snoozes in the shade of the vines. Sometimes, we spread large tarps around olive trees, milked the branches of green olives, then scooped them off the canvas and packed them into wooden crates.

Free time after dinner was devoted to playing games on the big lawn near the dining hall. The lights would go out in the dorms about 8 p.m. Although it sounds monotonous, to me the daily experience was rich, sweet, predictable and secure, and created a rhythm that was as soothing as it was exhausting. The sky was clear and I slept deeply.

One night after the lights were turned off, I snuck out of the dorm and climbed a concrete wall. There was a full moon and my shadow was long as I walked on top of the wall connecting the two dorms. The wall was meant to divide the rest of the

kibbutz from the dorm area, so that the children could feel secure and intimate within their surroundings. It was a foot thick and over nine feet high but I didn't have any trouble navigating it.

Where was I going, especially at that hour? The mystery was resolved a few days later. It seems that I quietly strolled into the other dorm and came back a few minutes later with a large stamp album. But, unlike other thieves, I shared "my" new stamp album with all the other children.

Naturally, I was caught, embarrassed and forced to return the album to its rightful owner. I still felt like the outsider, envious of the popularity of other children, and I had hoped the album would make me accepted by my peers. It did the opposite.

Every day of those first six months was fraught with conflict and awkwardness. There were bullies everywhere, and I was the new kid, the Dutch boy. The more conflict I experienced, the more I distanced myself, and the more time I spent in the library with Beersheba. I felt lost as in the middle of a bridge, stuck between an alienating kibbutz experience and the distance felt towards my parents. It came as no surprise that I rarely visited my parents' bungalow.

There were exceptions though, and on one such occasion my father could tell that I was unhappy, and more importantly that I seemed hurt, physically. I had a large welt and a couple of scratches under my left eye, a bruised arm, and a slightly

Continued on next page

swollen lip.

My father, not known as a big talker, teacher or supervisor—preferring the role of simple worker and problem solver—asked me what had occurred. Never wanting to show my vulnerable side nor wanting to add to their burdens, I said, “I fell into a hole.” There was a pause, and he replied, “Well the next time you fall in a hole take a stick with you.” I took the hint.

A week later, I no longer had problems with these boys, and one of them, Alon, became my close friend. My childhood, uneven at best until then, now flourished. I felt as though a major weight had been lifted off my shoulders. A burst of energy I never experienced before enveloped me. New friendships formed, adolescent adventures abounded. It was an exhilarating time. Finally, I felt I belonged!

But this bounty of joy was not to last. Although my father, sister and I were thriving in kibbutz life, my mom couldn’t adjust. Four years had passed and she still suffered from headaches and occasional shortness of breath. She still longed to be closer to her extended family and was less happy with the climate and the communal nature of kibbutz life.

In early 1953 we left the kibbutz, with the intention of immigrating to the US. The move itself seemed quite simple because all we carried was some clothing, photos, jewelry and other small mementos. Marja and I felt a tremendous loss. Uprooted yet again, I felt a loss of community, security and friendships that I had finally attained. Those feelings could never mend, and trust was ever fleeting.

AMERICA, 1953 - 1960

Our family stayed in Brooklyn with Tante Judith and her husband, Oom Caballes. I do not remember much of our stay, but I had a sense that our hosts and my parents were glad, after a five-month stay, that we left when we did.

In late spring we moved to Rockaway Park, to a house where other relatives had stayed previously. The red brick house was close to the beach and boardwalk. We lived in the basement and entered the house through a concrete paved rear yard. My parents were eager to find work and my mother began cleaning nearby homes, while my father got a job (through Tante Rose) in the garment industry.

During that summer, I combed the beach for empty bottles, two cents for

a small bottle and five cents for a large one. In my pursuit of pocket change, I was keenly aware of life on the beach. My observations, like a voyeur, made me acutely aware of how detached I was, not just as a foreigner, but how empty I felt inside. I wanted to recapture the independence and camaraderie of the kibbutz, of belonging to a community and working on shared goals. I longed for Israel! I sensed



Joseph in Israel, age 7.

that my parents were at a crossroad, though happy to be in America, they were neither comfortable nor content, and they argued a lot.

The following summer, in 1955, our family moved to a chicken farm in Monticello, NY. Poppy was eager to get away from the garment industry work and looked forward to working on the farm, where he was hired as the foreman. For me it was yet another emotional earthquake, where I had to once more leave the familiar, all that had become home—my friends and my neighborhood—and move to places unknown. I entered Monticello Central High as a seventh grader—again, the outsider in a tight-knit community that had many unwritten rules.

The owners of the 150-acre farm were Russian Jews, who tended to 150,000 chickens. Although the farm was mostly acres of open fields, the coops and other

buildings, including several trailers, were concentrated on approximately three acres near our living quarters.

The main house was large enough to accommodate all of us; the two households of the joint owners, as well as the grandparents, who had a separate apartment in the back. At first, we lived on the first floor, squeezed in between the two owners’ families. I am sure that my mother must have thought she was back in the kibbutz, where she had a lack of privacy, and little she could call her own.

Both grandparents died within two years after our arrival, and we were given their modest apartment. At last we had a separate entrance, privacy and a place we could call home.

My father took his job with the same sincerity, dedication and loyalty that he displayed to everyone and everything. He collected the eggs, put them in round metal mesh baskets, and dutifully dragged two baskets, each weighing about 30 pounds, in his hands to another building, where they were cleaned and candled by the owner, Florence, and my mother.

Marja, now aged eleven, attended the same school I went to, and slowly she developed her own set of friends. Somehow, though younger, she was less restricted by my parents than I was. I was not allowed to stay overnight at other people’s homes. My mother always waited for me to come home at night, even when I turned seventeen. But Marja, as a young teen, slept over at her friends’ homes quite often.

Giving me away as an infant, and having me return as an angry and disoriented three-year-old, had made my mother even more protective. I think she knew I had not forgiven her for abandoning me, and for taking me away from the Dijkstra family. What we had, at best, was a *détente*.

On weekends, the Concord Hotel was where I wanted to be, and realizing I could earn good money there, I applied for a position. My first job was hard to describe: one day I was serving hot cocoa, the next day I was handing out boots, skis and poles. I was willing to try anything and often convinced my supervisor that I was an expert at doing just about everything. Soon I became an elevator boy in the main building, then a page boy, and at times, I bell-hopped. I brought soda and ice to guests as part of room service, and

Continued on next page

I was a cabana boy who adjusted lounge chairs and umbrellas at the poolside. When I delivered phone call notices to the professional gamblers, I always got a tip in the form of a crisp dollar bill.

Those weekend jobs gave me plenty of spending money. In fact, I was earning more than my father. My father, who received free housing, eggs and chickens, had a modest salary. Sometimes I earned as much as \$100 a weekend. Although I would give most of it to my parents, the fact that it was all cash tips allowed me enough control to keep a chunk for myself.

As my contributions to the household grew, so did my demands. I had an opinion about everything, and realized that I carried an inordinate amount of authority in the family. I do not know what my father was like before the war, I do know that his spirit was crushed by the physical and psychological pain he had endured during the war and he never recovered from it. Reluctantly, he simply followed in my mother's footsteps. At the same time, my mother became more and more an advocate for me at my father's expense. I was her prince!

A wide gulf developed between my father and me, the Oedipal Complex was in full bloom as I competed for my mother's hand. I eclipsed my father's authority and became the center of our family. In fact, I loathed my father and felt embarrassed by him. It was no wonder that he sought refuge in his 1955 second-hand Buick. The Buick, became his private space, his sanctuary. My father spent more and more of his free time waxing and preening his big gleaming idol, while I filled the parental void as the disciplinarian and guardian of my sister.

I saw my father as a weakling and strived to be different and stronger. I understood that in this country, money was all powerful and worshiped. It was through those narrow lenses that I measured and evaluated people and the world I lived in, and my moral compass became further obscured.

Besides the role of financial supporter, I took on the roles of advocate and cheerleader. As a confidant and counselor, I not only advised my parents, but also became their representative when it was necessary to communicate with the outside world. My English language skills were quite good in contrast to my parents'

abilities, and they were happy to have me speak for them.

The more I played out these other roles, the more they distorted my fragile identity. What happened to that little boy who grew into a teenager, whose sense of self free floated between the ages of ten and twenty-five? Who was he really? Who was guiding him; who had his back? There were no role models. Where were the trusted elders to seek counsel from, or to bounce ideas off? There were no echoes, no responses, just the grinding of teeth at night.

NEW YORK CITY, 1974

I was determined to maintain my current lifestyle, but like "Mr. No Where Man" in the Beatles "Yellow Submarine," I was going in circles. With my long thinning hair, and wild mustache intact, I continued to work part time, smoke weed, play basketball, and I wanted to believe that I was still "on top of the moment." The sunshine was gone; I began to feel progressively isolated, fragmented and disconnected from myself, so much so, that it affected my sleep.

The walls seemed to shake at night, not just metaphorically, but literally because the bar below us had new ownership and shifted from great jazz to Latin disco.

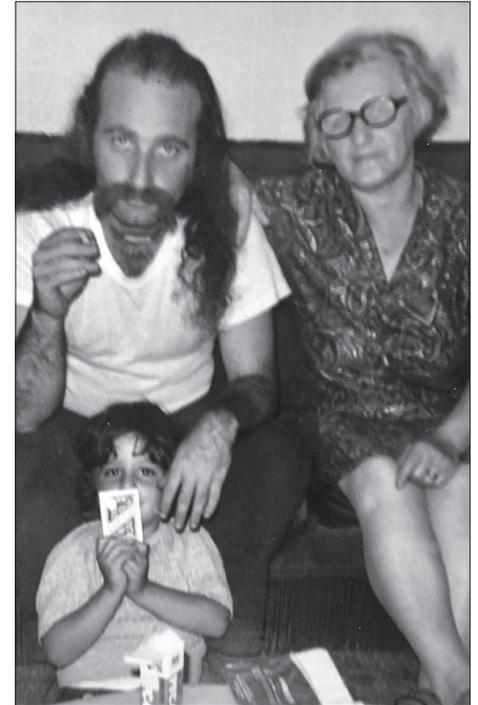
At about three AM every morning, a booming microphone announced, "last dance," and suddenly the music amped up and the walls vibrated. There were uncontrollable vibrations running inside of me as well, as wave after wave of anxiety washed through my chest and stomach, making it difficult to breathe.

At times, it would also come on without warning during the day. I could not eat for fear I would suffocate, and at night when I finally fell asleep, I feared I would never wake up. This fear, which I was always able to tuck away and hide neatly inside fissures of my soul, now reigned unchecked, like a punishing wind across a barren landscape. I felt increasingly vulnerable, porous and defenseless, as if air could pass through me, and I feared I would be overwhelmed. I felt as though I had no body, no frame, that I was ethereal, wasting away, and susceptible to anything and everything.

The winter of 1974, we visited Amsterdam—as we did every year until 1980, while my parents lived in Holland. Crossing a heavily trafficked street, I asked my

mother to take my arm so I could guide her. She said, with an annoyed tone, "I don't need you; I can cross the street by myself." She may very well have said the same words before, or maybe I heard them for the first time.

In any case, I felt like my head was cut open and my brain was oozing out onto the cobblestone street, splattering my identity. My childhood had prepared me



Joseph with his mother and nephew Steven, 1972.

to function well on a landscape filled with moving objects; like the dancing bear, I was trained to dodge the bullets. But I was not ready for this! I felt profoundly rejected, disoriented, and angry. Didn't she realize I was her prince, her advocate and her protector? Now I felt gutted, diminished and demoralized.

A couple of months went by and I remained in the same dark and dank place. If not for Sheila, I don't know where this would have gone. I asked her to stay awake every night until I would fall asleep. Somehow, Sheila's love and patience gave me a sliver of serenity, so that I could sleep for a little while. Wine, which I had always loved, now served another purpose. It became a form of daily self-medication, dulling my senses. I realized that these actions were superficial and that I

Continued on next page

needed help.

I had never been in therapy. Whether out of fear of what might be found out, or the macho myth that real men didn't need outside help, I loathed and despised the idea of therapy. I was distrustful of the whole therapy process and this exacerbated my agony until I saw no other way. Fortunately, both Marja and Sheila, separately, were in therapy with the same ther-

apist, Millie. That the two people dearest to me knew a therapist was all important and made my decision easier.

My first group session was more like a parody of the Bob Newhart show. I felt as though I was hovering above the room, observing these people sharing their trivial problems, and questioned why I was there. As I did under most circumstances, I assessed the room, watched the clock, and studied the faces of each person, including Millie's, and how they interacted within the group.

by what someone else said. It seemed like an archeological dig where each week I discovered a new foundational layer, revealing a mosaic of my feelings. I began to experience emotions other than anger. Eventually I owned them and gained the confidence that they were real and part of me.

My nightly anxiety waves did not cease, but were shorter. I felt that I could breathe without gagging, and I continued to participate in the group therapy sessions. I was no longer the outsider. I knew as much about each person as he or she was willing to share, and I appreciated the dynamic of the group and its commitment to honesty, without ceremony.

In that trusting environment, I exposed my feelings. I talked about my sense of loss, of abandonment and my lost innocence. I revealed my inability experientially to differentiate between pity and love, between anger and depression.

It wasn't until I entered group therapy, that I could focus on the anger deep down that I felt towards my parents, most notably my mother. I was guilt ridden and terrified to face my anger towards them. How could I be angry at them, after all they had gone through?! They had to send me away, for my safety as well as theirs, I rationalized. But they had done more, they took me away from Moeder and Vader, and without calculation, robbed me of my childhood.

It was not until I dealt with the anger I felt towards my mother that matters changed. At first, the anger towards her felt forced, but with time, effort, and support from the group, it began to feel real. The anger was washed with tears of joy, apprehension, and self-pity.

It also opened me to the feelings of love. No longer a frozen slab of marble, I was thawing out, able to distinguish my feelings and bursting with new vitality and hope. Not too surprisingly, our annual trips to Holland became more difficult to tolerate. My anger towards my mom made these brief gatherings awkward and bitter.

Concurrently, though my parents had moved to Amsterdam to be nearer to our extended family, they felt more and more lonely. Like many other WWII survivors, they could not overcome their wounds, lived solely through their children, and were psychologically unable to develop new roots, interests or friendships. This

Continued on next page



Left to right, Sheila, Marja, Mom, Pop and Joe at a family celebration in 1980.

After my first visit during which I described my background, my recent experience with my mother, my confusion and vulnerability, I met with her again. Therapy felt more like a game of chess where one observed the other player for clues about their state of being, before revealing something about one's self.

The process felt artificial to me and at some point, maybe in our fifth session, I felt as though we were in a verbal duel. I believed that I was more intelligent and my sense of superiority or intellect served as a wall, rather than a gateway, into the realm of the subconscious. I was defensive and did not trust anyone else to guide me, yet I understood that I needed to continue therapy.

It was clear to me that I could not

I forced myself to go back the following week. Each week thereafter, at least for the first few months, was a revelation. I was astounded to find myself at times crying, venting in anger or deeply touched

created a dilemma for me and Marja. Although we wished them well, we, surprisingly, found the physical distance between us to be therapeutic. It lifted a burden we had carried since childhood.

We weren't ready for them to come back to New York, even though the Dutch government had changed its guidelines for WWII reparation eligibility. Now, recipients no longer needed to live in their native country, but could return to the countries they had adopted. When our parents approached us about returning to the US, with trepidation and awkwardness, I told them that we needed more time apart from them. The fragile child in me wasn't ready yet to forgive and forget. To our surprise, they did not go against our wishes and dutifully remained in Holland until 1980.

Anger and pity were no longer the only feelings I experienced. Love and empathy created a new balance for me. Skyscrapers cannot be built on quicksand, nor could my personal development be achieved without reducing my subterranean anger. Through trial and error, and even mechanically counting to ten before responding, my smoldering anger slowly subsided. Although mistakes were landmines that needed to be avoided at all cost, I became less rigid and relatively more tolerant.

With anger becoming more sporadic and less explosive, I experienced the pervasive fog of depression. For the first time, I no longer viewed myself as the last of the buccaneers, but instead as someone who was only good enough to wash toilets, a perspective that disturbed me deeply. Of course, neither of these self-sketches truly represented me, since they were extreme opposites.

I resisted change. I cherished my wild mustache and long hair and savored living in our tenement home. When an opportunity arose that would allow us to move two blocks north to an apartment building with an elevator, I envisioned that it was a move "uptown." The idea of recognizing and greeting people in the hallway and elevator, holding doors open and helping people carry their shopping bags, all the hallmarks of civility and good citizenship, were an anathema to me. I believed that these conventions would stunt my daily rhythm and enslave me once more, diminishing my spirit as it did when I was forced to work after school each day at

age fifteen. Sheila, on the other hand, was ready to move into an "adult" apartment, especially since it was affordable, rent stabilized and most importantly, had rooms with doors and privacy.

The change from the tenement to the apartment building was less traumatic than I thought it would be. Our sixth-floor, two-bedroom apartment was sunny, had oak parquet floors, an eat-in kitchen plus a real bathroom. The furniture and carpeting we brought over was scattered as neatly as we could, but we could still hear an echo whenever we spoke or moved about.

I quickly learned to tolerate the elevator greetings and small talk. In fact, we became part of a group of neighborhood people who formed the Good Food Co-op, a food co-op that has been functioning for over forty years. Moreover, I helped Saylor, our neighbor and the quintessential good citizen, to mulch the trees on our block. Living in our new home brought about some obvious and subtle changes in my life.

My mustache and long hair, which until then were my façade, my symbol of rebellion, counter-culture, and independence, now felt like a glued-on mask. I felt imprisoned by it. One night I could bare it no longer and unbeknownst to Sheila, I slowly, painstakingly, removed the mustache. At first the thick mustache resisted the razor, but eventually succumbed. It was astonishing how this small alteration changed my appearance and opened up new opportunities. The following morning Sheila shrieked with anger to find a different person in her bed. Her anger stemmed as much from not being told of what I was planning to do, as from the radical difference it made in my appearance. Soon thereafter my long hair was shortened as well, but this time I gave Sheila plenty of notice. The mask ripped off exposed me to new ideas, risk taking, and heightened my sense of self awareness. A new face, no longer hidden.

Whether it was the move to the apartment building, the results of therapy, or simply waking out of an endless slumber, I no longer wanted to live on the edges of everyday life, hiding within my own shadow and licking my wounds. Instead, I wanted to become a complete person, a mensch, regardless of the risks involved.

As my confidence grew and I understood myself more fully, I wanted to grow

in many ways, to gain new skills, find meaningful work and start a family. But what kind of work did I want to do? I enjoyed management and collaborating on projects, as well as bookkeeping and accounting, but hated the idea of "business." My work experience was spoiled by feelings of servitude and enslavement to my parents, by the boredom felt while doing mundane tasks, the narrowmindedness of fellow workers, and the general concept of making a profit. Flustered, I found it difficult to envision what direction was best for me.

During one of my therapy sessions, I shared my frustrations and paralysis with my group. Someone who worked as an executive 'head hunter' said, "You mentioned that you were good in business matters and enjoyed working in day care centers and Head Start. Why not find a full-time job in a school, possibly as a business manager?" The title, Business Manager, Finance Director or Chief Financial Officer, was a revelation and I mulled it over. Business manager sounded just right. I had always enjoyed a nurturing school environment with people who had dreams and interests that I could identify with and whose collective purpose was to guide and support the development of children, and by extension, my development. ■

This article has been excerpted from the author's newly published book, Searching for Home: The Impact of WWII on a Hidden Child (ISBN 9789493056343) published by Amsterdam Publishers as ebook and paperback, available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble and in brick and mortar bookstores worldwide. Mr. Gosler's journey has often been a circuitous one, exemplified by the 20 years it took him to achieve his BA in History and MBA in corporate finance through the City University of New York.

For nearly 40 years he has worked in educational settings ranging from day care centers to private schools in the capacity of Business Manager. He and his wife Sheila founded a pre-school called Beginnings Nursery, have one son and live in New York City. Mr. Gosler retired from Friends Seminary in 2004, and today is actively involved in several Quaker projects, writing, gardening, traveling and walking his dog. "Searching for Home," the story of his life as a result of having been hidden during WW2, is his international debut.