

# A HISTORY OF THE PERL FAMILY

BY WARREN GOLDIE

## Part I

### GOOD LIFE

The four sisters who are the focus of this account—Estie, Susie, Piri and Fritz<sup>1</sup>—grew up in idyllic circumstances in rural northern Romania in the early 20th century, emigrating to America after World War II via a harrowing, tragic journey that brought



*Perl family, circa 1933. Clockwise from left: Estie, Rose, Fritz, Shari, Wolf, Ancie, Susie, Piri*

them through Nazi concentration and forced labor camps, refugee camps, serious illness, the high life of Havana, Cuba under Batista, and ultimately, as Castro's revolution took hold, to New York and Miami.

For generations the Perls lived in Visuel de Sus (VEE-show duh-soos), a picturesque village in Maramures County situated on the gentle western slopes of the Carpathian Mountains of Transylvania, a range also known as the Transylvanian Alps. The area had remained largely unchanged throughout the



*Visuel de Sus, Romania*

centuries, a medieval landscape of villages and hamlets scattered amid vast forests. “Visuel,” as the locals called it, is just a few kilometers south of Ukraine, which they referred to simply as Russia.

Tannin extraction, tanning, stone quarrying and flower milling were the primary industries in Visuel. Wolf Perl, the family's patriarch, owned a tannin extraction plant spanning several buildings. Tannin is an ingredient used in tanning, the process by which leather is made from raw animal hide. Tanning dates back to antiquity.

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<sup>1</sup> *The author's mother.*

When the Perl children came of age, Visuel was home to about ten thousand people, a blend of Christians and Jews who had coexisted semi-harmoniously over many centuries. Most of the Christians followed the Romanian Orthodox Church, and Transylvania was home as well to large minorities of Catholics and Roma, or gypsies. Though historically anti-Semitism was epidemic in Romania, the Perls, who were Jews, experienced little discrimination in Visuel de Sus.



*Perl factory*



*Romania's counties (Transylvania in green)*

## HOME AND FAMILY

Wolf and Rose Perl and their six children lived in a roomy second-story apartment with a curved ceiling above the family's factory, which was located on the outskirts of Visuel, alongside the poor farmers and gypsies. Wolf, a convivial and outgoing man, would have preferred the heart of the village, but Rose, ever fearful for his health (he had an enlarged heart), wanted him as

close to her as possible, which meant combining factory and home in one complex.

Tannin is produced by sheering the bark from trees and melting it and other plant materials into a thick soup in large heated vats. It's a process that creates a noxious smoke that is belched out of a chimney; thus, extraction plants are usually far out of town.

Wolf's business had been handed down through



*Maramures County, Transylvania, Romania*

many generations of Perls, and had been thriving through the teens and 1920s under his stewardship. Great racks of logs would arrive in Visuel by steam train which were hauled to the plant floor where workers operated bark peeling machines. The finished product was sealed in barrels and shipped to leather manufacturers all over Europe.

The Jews of Visuel received better treatment than their brethren in other Romanian regions, neither abused nor merely tolerated but viewed as co-citizens. Wolf employed many gentiles, including one Romanian family who invited the



*Rose Perl (left) with cousin, 1935*

Perl children to their house every Christmas to help decorate the tree.

Visuel's summers were temperate and breathtaking (the town was a climactic resort) and during the warm months Wolf would limit his business travel, spending leisurely afternoons attending to his apple, plum and pear orchards. He was a self-taught botanist who would painstakingly brush insect repellent on the saplings; when he was done, the trees looked as if they had been smothered in white paint.

Relatives from nearby Sighet Marmatiei often stayed at the Perl house for a few weeks every summer, enjoying the pleasant environs and the clear air at fifteen hundred feet. The warm months also brought many out-of-town

visitors to swim in Visuel's sulfur hot springs, said to possess healing properties. Brilliant green oak trees towered high in the rolling hills above the springs, a beatific sight.

In winter, the Perl children ice skated and skied. Rose would sometimes lean out of the kitchen window, passing a pair of binoculars to one of her children to watch Fritz, the youngest, ski the gentle slopes behind the house with the family dogs bounding through the snow behind her.

The Transylvanian Alps experience an extended spring, and as the snows melted the Perl children would swim in a creek swollen with the icy waters flowing down from the mountain. Theirs was a bucolic life, spent in harmony with nature and acknowledging an unspoken respect for life. And although Romania is home to Europe's largest population of large carnivores, including half the continent's bears and over a third of its wolves, the Perls experienced little trouble with wild animals.



## WOLF AND ROSE



*The Perl family home and factory, Visuel de Sus, Romania, circa 1938. From left to right: Susy, two cousins, Shari, Anci, Rose, cousin (boy). Sitting: Fritzi.*

As a boy Wolf Perl excelled at Visuel's Yeshiva, or religious Jewish school. He remained close to the school and its community for his entire life, mentoring boys and serving continuously on its Board of Directors. Wolf and Rose embodied the traditional Jewish values of social responsibility, morality, charity and service, which they endeavored to pass on to their children.

Over the centuries, political control of Transylvania changed hands many times. From the 11th century until 1919, its rule passed several times between Hungary and the Ottoman Empire. Wolf and Rose came of age in what was called the Hungarian era. Thus, Hungarian was the primary language spoken at home.

In 1919, Transylvania was annexed by Romania and the Perl children found themselves having to learn Romanian in school. The family, like most European Jewish families, also spoke Yiddish, making the children tri-lingual.

With five daughters and a son (Anci), the Perl home was bustling, with much of its activity centering around the large kitchen where Rose cooked throughout the day. A smaller adjacent room was used for baking



*Anci Perl (left) with friend, circa 1920*

bread and pastries. Jewish holidays were festive and congenial, and often included Wolf's gentile friends and business associates as well as boys from the Yeshiva in town.

The Jewish population of Visuel, as in all of Romania, was a segregated minority—yet Wolf worked to bridge the gulf between the Jewish, Christian and Roma cultures, exploiting common ground whenever possible. Though he was a practicing Jew, he did not often wear the yarmulke and inclined toward a secular viewpoint.

At Passover, the family congregated at the long oak dining table for the Seder meal, a traditional feast celebrating the liberation of ancient Jews from slavery in Egypt. The family's ornate and expensive Rosenthal dishes, which Wolf had purchased while in Germany on a business trip, were brought out at such times. Wolf had in fact made many trips to Germany, where he purchased most of the machinery used in his plant.

The Perl children, awed and respectful of the patriarch, spoke deferentially to him, obediently looking on as he performed rituals at the head of the table, wearing his white yarmulke. The family would then enjoy the sumptuous meal, after which Rose would find



*Roma gypsies, Transylvania, Romania*

ways to surreptitiously transfer the left-over food to the area's poor.

Wolf was a sensitive, intelligent man and a formidable business strategist. Though he had grown up in the backwoods hamlet of Visuel (which none of his customers had ever visited) he managed to attain a cultural sophistication. He made many business trips and was at home in several of Europe's cosmopolitan centers.

His wife Rose, or *Riesel* (her Jewish name), a very generous woman, often put the needs of others above her own. Unlike Wolf, she grew up in one of Transylvania's larger cities, Sighetu Marmatiei, a half-hour train ride from Visuel. The couple were probably joined in a *shiddach*, or an arranged marriage.

The Perls were considered affluent, and the children's physical needs were well met, in stark contrast to the destitute lives of the peasants and gypsies that surrounded them, and Rose was acutely aware of their plight.

Neighborhood children routinely arrived at the Perl doorstep bearing tattered containers and water skins into which Rose would pour milk from the

Perl cow. She would also give them pears and apples from the orchard, as well as potatoes and other vegetables.

During the fruit picking season, Rose oversaw a collective effort in which her children worked closely with neighbor children to help stew pears and apples; the stewed fruit was stored in jars. The task took all day and into the night, and was treated as a big party.

On Purim, a joyous holiday, Rose would bake cakes under which she placed bills and coins. The cakes were then delivered by the Perl children to the poorer residents.

Rose loved animals, and the Perls had dogs, cats and the cow. In the early mornings Rose was the first awake, rousing the live-in maid, a gypsy woman, to milk the cow after which Rose would bring fresh milk to the children before they headed out to school. Rose wore a wig at all times, her head clean-shaven in the style of Orthodox Jewish women of the period.

In a tragic irony, a gesture of kindness typical of her nature which she offered at the gates of Auschwitz would lead to Rose's death in the gas chambers in May 1944.

## SIGHETU MARMATIEI

Since Visuel had no secondary schools, the Perl children attended high school in Sighetu Marmatiei<sup>2</sup>, a city of forty-thousand situated sixty kilometers northeast of Visuel. *Sighetu*, which is Hungarian for "island," offered an exciting cultural life.

Many generations of Perls attended school in Sighet, as well as going to Hebrew school there. Each Perl child, on first setting eyes on Sighet's high school, was left speechless in astonishment at its large classrooms and gymnasium.

Whereas Visuel was looked down upon as a backwoods village, Sighet boasted theatres, restaurants, speciality shops, and even a Yiddish newspaper.

Rose's parents, Hershel and Gittle Berkowitz, lived in Sighet and the Perl children regularly visited them, traveling by train which they caught at the station at the center of Visuel. In summer, Hershel and Gittle would stay in Visuel with the Perls for several weeks. The children had many aunts, uncles and cousins in Sighet, whom they frequently visited. Estie, the oldest of the Perl children, often traveled to Sighet on her own.



<sup>2</sup> *Sighet Marmatiei was the childhood home of Holocaust writer Elie Wiesel, who, like the Perls, was deported to Auschwitz in 1944. Estie's daughter Daisy married Alex Gross, a Holocaust survivor who was a childhood friend of Wiesel and remains his friend still.*

Wolf's parents Yankle and Eka lived in Visuel. Yankle was a stern, highly religious Hasidic Jew. When the Perl children came to visit, they yielded to the strict Orthodox law in the household.

## ESTIE'S JOURNEY

In 1933, when Hitler came into power as Germany's chancellor, he immediately ordered a boycott of all of the country's Jewish shops, banks, offices and department stores. Under his rule, anti-Semitism spread not only in Germany but in all of Europe.

During the mid-30's, however, remote Visuel de Sus remained an island removed; the trouble brewing in Germany and the approaching European conflict was still far off. Life continued as usual. The Perl children attended school in Visuel and Sighet, and Wolf's business thrived.

Estie was the most glamorous of the Perl daughters, possessing movie-star beauty, self-assurance and an adventurous spirit, not unlike her father. Feeling stifled and bored in tiny Visuel, she traveled often to other Romanian cities for fun and excitement. In the summer of 1937, the 22-year-old and an aunt took a train to Vatra-Dornei, a resort town in the neighboring region of Bukovina. Vatra-Dornei boasted a popular summer spa with a kosher restaurant and Jewish owned hotels and businesses.

While there, she unexpectedly ran into a friend from Sighet who introduced her to a nephew from Cuba, a diminutive, effervescent, ambitious young man named Luis Rosenthal.

Luis, who was also Jewish, had grown up in Budapest. In 1924, fully energized and eager to seek his fortune—and desperately wanting to avoid serving in Hungary's anti-Semitic military—he hatched a plan with several friends to sail for America and make his mark there. On approaching American shores, however, they were denied admittance because the quota for Hungarian immigrants had been filled. Dispirited, the boys landed in Cuba instead. Nine



*Steamship, Cuba, 1938*



months later, when Luis's visa for travel to America came through, he already owned a successful watch repair shop in Havana and decided to stay put. Over the next decade he would build the business into a prosperous jeweler's supply business. Luis lived a full, contented life but remained unmarried through his twenties and most of his thirties.

Missing his parents in 1938 he sailed across the Atlantic to visit them in Budapest. The family then traveled to Vatra-Dornei where he met Estie.

Luis, 13 years older than Estie, fell in love with her. But he only a few days before he would have to make his return to Cuba. Sad and love-struck, he departed. Back in Cuba he wrote to Estie, and the couple commenced a year-long, cross-Atlantic letter-writing courtship in their native language of Hungarian. When he mailed her a marriage proposal in 1938 she happily accepted. Within a month the adventurous Estie was sailing for Cuba to an unknown destiny.

At the time, the Goga-Cuza government had seized power in Romania, a regime that not only preached anti-Semitism but made it state policy. The tide was starting to turn for the Jews of Transylvania.

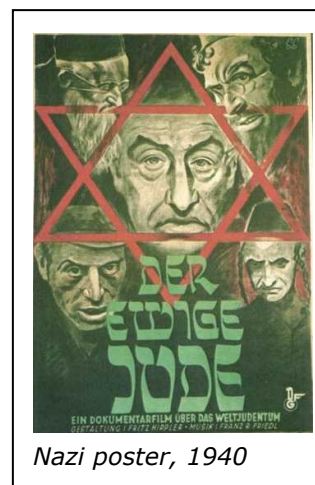
Estie, like all Romanian Jews, had known that war was coming, that Romania would soon be thrown again into horrific circumstances and that murderous pogroms against Jews would commence. Her hope was that once she was settled in Havana she could arrange to get her family out of Europe. But war came too fast.

In late 1938, Estie arrived in her new Latin American home and was greeted by her largely unknown husband-to-be, Luis, whom she towered over by four inches. A genial, generous and wise man, Luis managed to win her over completely. The marriage was rock solid, lasting 62 years until Luis's death in 1999 at the age of 99. In 2015, Estie turned 101.

## WAR

In September 1939, a year after Estie's departure, Nazi Germany invaded Poland to start World War II. The next year, Hungary took over Transylvania and once again the Hungarians ruled the region. Romania entered the war in November 1940, joining the Axis Powers of Nazi Germany, Italy, Hungary and Bulgaria. With Romania now allied with the Nazis, all Romanian Jews were in peril.

A year later, in 1941, Wolf suffered a heart attack in Sighetu Marmatiei, collapsing while playing chess with a physician friend in a hotel room. A few weeks later he died, spared the coming nightmare. The following year, the only



Nazi poster, 1940



Perl son, Anci, was forcefully conscripted to serve in the Russian army after he escaped north into Ukraine<sup>3</sup>.

Over the next three years, fueled by Hitler's campaign to obliterate the Jews of Europe—his genocidal “Final Solution” to the “Jewish problem”—anti-Semitism spread in Romania and many thousands of Jews were murdered.

Romania's ruler, Marshal Ion Antonescu, who was a loyal supporter of Hitler and a fierce opponent of the expansion of Soviet Communism, viewed the Romanian Jewish population as Judeo-Bolshevik, and putting this image in the minds of average Romanians, had a free hand to kill Jews.

Antonescu's Iron Guard carried out many pogroms—massive, large-scale violent attacks against Jews. The Romanian army and gendarmerie (police) massacred thousands in northern Romania. In arguably the deadliest of all Holocaust-era pogroms, 14,000 Jews were killed by Romanian citizens, police, and military officials in the Iasi pogrom. However, no pogroms were carried out in Visuel.

More than 360,000 Romanian Jews were killed in World War II, more than in all other countries except Poland (3 million) and Russia (1.5 million).

## **End of Part I**

*To be continued...*

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<sup>3</sup> Anci would survive the war and move to Haifa, Israel, where he helped to build that nation following its establishment in 1948.