

## A HISTORY OF THE PERL FAMILY BY WARREN GOLDIE

### PART I

#### INTRODUCTION

The four sisters who are the focus of this account—Estie, Susy, Piri and Fritzl<sup>1</sup>—grew up in idyllic circumstances in rural northern Romania in the early 20th century. They emigrated to America after World War II via a long and arduous process that brought them through Nazi concentration and forced labor camps, serious illness, refugee camps, the high life of Havana, Cuba under Batista, and ultimately, as Castro’s revolution took hold, to New York and Miami.

The Perl family lived for generations in Visuel de Sus (VEE-show dee-soos), a tiny village in Maramures County situated on the western slopes of the Carpathian Mountains of Transylvania, a range also known as the Transylvanian Alps. This area remained largely unchanged through the centuries, a medieval landscape of villages and hamlets scattered amid vast forests. “Visuel,” as the local inhabitants call it, is just a few kilometers south of Ukraine, an area which was simply known as *Russia* to the Romanians.



Visuel’s primary industries included tannin extraction, tanning, stone quarrying and flower milling. The Perl family owned a tannin extraction plant spread among 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. During the period in which the Perl children came of age, Visuel was home to about ten thousand people, a mix of Christians and Jews who had achieved a semi-harmonious coexistence and symbiotic interdependence over many centuries. The majority of Christians belonged to the Romanian Orthodox Church, and Transylvania was also home to large minorities of Catholics and Roma, or gypsies. Though Romania was rife with anti-Semitism, the Perls, who were Jews, experienced little discrimination in Visuel de Sus.

#### ***The Perls, 1940:***

Wolfe, 52  
Rose, 43  
Estie, 25  
Anci, 22  
Shari, 19  
Susy, 17  
Piri, 15  
Fritzl, 13

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<sup>1</sup> *The author’s mother.*

## HOME AND FAMILY LIFE

Wolfe and Rose Perl and their six children lived in a roomy second-story home with a curved ceiling above a floor of the family's factory. The property was located on the outskirts of Visuel among the community's poorer residents, most of whom were farmers or gypsies. Wolfe would have preferred to live in the heart of the village, but Rose, fearful for his health (he had an enlarged heart), wanted to keep him as close as possible, which meant combining factory and home into a single complex.

Tannin is produced by sheering the bark from trees and melting it and other plant materials into a thick soup, which is performed in large heated vats. This process creates a noxious smoke that is cleared out through a chimney. Due to the strong odor, tannin extraction plants are usually located on the outskirts of towns and cities, as Wolfe's was.

The business, which had been handed down through many generations, thrived throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Year after year, great racks of logs arrived in Visuel by train, which were then hauled to the plant where Wolfe's workers operated bark peeling machines to produce the raw materials of tannin production. The finished product was sealed in barrels and distributed to leather manufacturers all over Europe.

The Jews of Visuel were better treated than their brethren in other Romanian regions, being neither abused nor merely tolerated, but viewed more as co-citizens. This acceptance worked both ways, for Wolfe employed many gentiles, including a poor Romanian family who invited the Perl children to their house every Christmas to help them decorate the holiday tree.

Visuel's summers were temperate and picturesque—the town was a climactic resort—and during the warm months Wolfe limited his business travel, spending leisurely afternoons caring for the family's apple, plum and pear orchards. He was a self-taught botanist who could be seen painting insect repellent on the saplings; when he was done, the trees looked as if they had been smothered in white paint.



Relatives from a nearby city, Sighet Marmatiei, often stayed at the Perl house for a few weeks in the summer, enjoying the pleasant environs and mountain air at five-thousand feet. The warm months brought many out-of-town visitors to swim in Visuel's sulfur hot springs, which were said to have healing properties. Brilliant green oak trees towered high in the rolling hills above the springs, a beatific sight.

In winter, the Perl children would ice skate and ski, dressed in warm coats and waterproof boots. Sometimes Rose or the children would lean out of the kitchen window passing a pair of binoculars between them to watch Fritz, the youngest, ski down the gentle slopes behind the house as the family dogs bounded through the snow after her.

The Transylvanian Alps experience a long spring, and as the snows melted the Perl children would swim in a local creek made swollen with the icy waters flowing down from the mountain snowmelts. The family lived a bucolic life, close



*Maramures County, Transylvania, Romania*

to nature, with an unspoken respect for all life.

Although Romania is home to Europe's largest population of large carnivores, including half of the continent's bears and over a third of its wolves, the Perls experienced no trouble with wild animals.

## WOLFE AND ROSE

Wolfe Perl was educated at Visuel's Yeshiva, or religious Jewish school, where he achieved high grades. He remained close to the school and its community his entire life, mentoring boys and serving continuously on its Board of Directors. Wolfe and Rose embodied the traditional Jewish values of social responsibility, morality, charity and service, which they endeavored to pass on to their children.

Political control of Transylvania changed hands many times over the centuries. From the 11th century until 1919, its rule passed several times between Hungary and the Ottoman Empire. Wolfe and Rose came of age in what was

called the Hungarian era. Thus, Hungarian was their primary language and the dominant language of the Perl household.

In 1919, Transylvania was taken over by Romania and the Perl children found themselves learning 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 a busy one, with much of its activity situated in the large kitchen where Rose could be found cooking throughout the day. She used a smaller adjacent room for baking breads and pastries. Jewish holidays in the Perl home were festive and congenial, and often included Wolfe's non-Jewish friends and business associates along with boys from the Yeshiva.



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

The Jewish population of Visuel, as in all of Romania, was a segregated minority, yet Wolfe succeeded at bridging the gulf between Jewish and Christian (and even Roma) cultures, finding a common ground in business and personal matters. Though a practicing Jew, he did not wear a yarmulke and his inclination was toward a secular viewpoint.

At Passover, the family congregated at a 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 Wolfe had

purchased in Germany on a business trip, were brought out at such times. Wolfe had in fact made many trips to Germany, where he bought most of the machinery used in his plant.

The Perl children, awed by the patriarch, spoke infrequently and deferentially to him at holiday meals, obediently looking on as he performed rituals at the head of the table, wearing his white yarmulke. The family would then enjoy a sumptuous meal, after which Rose would find ways to transfer the additional food to the area's poor.

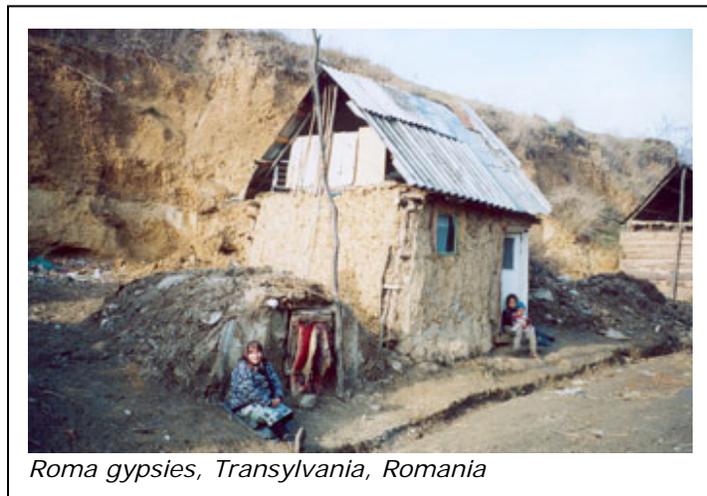
Wolfe was a sensitive, intelligent man and a formidable business strategist. Though he had grown up in the backwoods hamlet of Visuel, which none of his customers had ever visited, he had managed to attain a degree of cultural sophistication. He made many business trips and was very much at home in the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

Rose, or Riesel (her Jewish name), had a habit of putting the needs of others above her own. Unlike Wolfe, she grew up in one of Transylvania's larger cities, Sighetu Marmatiei, about a half-hour train ride from Visuel. The couple were probably joined in a *shiddach*, or arranged marriage.

The Perls were considered affluent due to Wolfe's business successes, and the children's physical needs were fulfilled, in contrast to the destitute lives of the peasants and gypsies that surrounded them outside Visuel—and Rose was acutely aware of their plight.

Neighborhood children routinely arrived at her doorstep with tattered containers and skins into which Rose would pour milk. She would also give them pears and apples from the orchard as well as potatoes and other vegetables.

During fruit picking season, Rose oversaw a large collective effort in which the Perl children as well as many neighbors gathered to help stew pears and apples, and store the stewed fruit in jars. The task took all day and into the night, and was a big party.



*Roma gypsies, Transylvania, Romania*

On Purim, a joyous Jewish holiday, Rose baked many cakes under which she would place bills and coins. The cakes were then delivered by various Perl children to the houses of the poorer residents.

Rose loved animals, and the Perls had several, including dogs, cats and a cow. In the early mornings Rose would be the first awake, rousing the live-in maid, a local gypsy woman, to milk the cow after which Rose would bring fresh milk to the children who would enjoy the warm liquid before getting ready for school. Rose always wore a wig, 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, performed at the gates of Auschwitz, would lead to Rose's death in May 1944.

### SIGHETU MARMATIEI

Sighetu Marmatiei<sup>2</sup>, a neighboring city of about forty-thousand, offered far more cultural life than Visuel (*Sighetu* is Hungarian for "island"). Since Visuel had no secondary schools, the Perl children attended a Christian and Jewish high school in Sighet. Many generations of Perls attended school in Sighet, as well as going to Hebrew school there. Each Perl child, on first seeing their Sighet high school, expressed astonishment at its large classrooms and gymnasium.



*Sighetu Marmatiei*

Whereas Visuel offered precious little cultural life and was seen as a backwoods village, Sighet boasted many theatres and restaurants as well as newspapers, one of which was written in Yiddish.

Rose's parents, Hershel and Gittle Berkowitz, lived in Sighet and the Perl children regularly visited them, walking the half-mile to the center of Visuel to catch the train to Sighet. In the summers, Hershel and Gittle came to stay in Visuel with the Perls. The Perl children had many aunts, uncles and cousins who lived in Sighet, whom they frequently visited as well. Estie often traveled to Sighet on her own to visit relatives.

Wolfe's parents lived in Visuel. Yankle Perl, Wolfe's father, was a stern, highly religious Hasidic Jew who lived with his wife Elka. Whenever the Perl children came to visit, they would have to observe strict Orthodox law in the household.

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<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 JOURNEY

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

During the mid-thirties, however, remote Visuel de Sus seemed an island of calm. The trouble brewing in Germany and the approaching European conflict was still far off. Life continued on as usual. The Perl children attended school in Visuel and Sighet, and Wolfe's business thrived.

Estie, the oldest Perl child, possessed movie-star beauty, self-assurance and a headstrong manner. She had always felt confined in tiny Visuel, and traveled often to Sighet. For a time she was courted by a gentile boy, against her parent's wishes. With the exception of her father, Estie was the boldest and most adventurous of the Perls. Feeling restless in the summer of 1937, the 22-year-old and an aunt from Sighet traveled by a train to Vatra-Dornei, a resort town in the neighboring region of Bukovina. Vatra-Dornei was a popular summer spa which offered a kosher restaurant and Jewish owned hotels and businesses.

While there, she unexpectedly ran into a friend from Sighet who introduced her to her nephew from Cuba, a diminutive, effervescent and well-to-do jeweler named Luis Rosenthal.

Luis, also Jewish, had grown up in Budapest, Hungary. As a young man in 1924, he was ambitious and eager to make his fortune—and to avoid serving in Hungary's anti-Semitic military. Hatching a plan with several friends, he decided to sail for America. On approaching American shores, however, they learned that the quota for Hungarian immigrants had filled up, and were denied admittance. The boys landed in Cuba instead. Nine months later, Luis's visa for travel to America came



*Steamship, Cuba, 1938*

through, but he already owned a watch repair shop in Havana and was content to stay in Cuba. Over the next decade he built it into a jeweler's supply business that made him wealthy. Though Luis had a full and contented life, he 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. Luis and his family then traveled to Vatra-Dornei where he met an aunt who introduced him to Estie.

Luis, 13 years older than Estie, immediately fell in love with her. But he had only a few days to get to know her before he had to make his return trip to Cuba. Sad and love-struck, he departed. When he arrived home 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 and an unknown destiny.

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

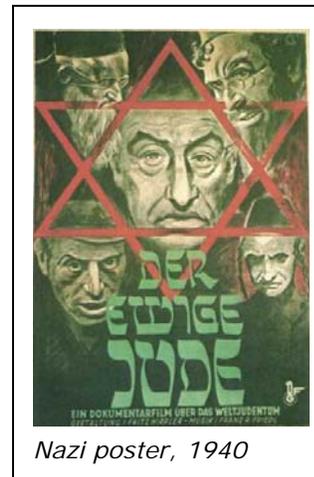
Estie, like all Romanian Jews, knew that war was coming, that Romania would soon be thrown again into horrific circumstances and that murderous pogroms against Jews would commence. Her hope was that once she was settled in Havana she could somehow arrange to get her family out of Europe. But war came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

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

## WAR

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

A year later, in 1941, Wolfe suffered a heart attack in Sighetu Marmatiei. He collapsed while playing chess with his physician in a hotel room. A few weeks later



*Nazi poster, 1940*

he died, spared the nightmare that was to come. The following year, the only Perl son, Anci, was forcefully conscripted to serve in the Russian army and disappeared 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 thousands of Jews were killed.

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

Antonescu's Iron Guard carried out many pogroms—massive, large-scale violent attacks against Jews. The Romanian army and gendarmerie (police) massacred thousands of Jews 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 Israel, where he would help to build that nation following its establishment in 1948.*