

A History of the Perl Family – Part I

Romania: The Good Life

by Warren Goldie

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AN IDYLIC HAMLET

The four sisters who are the focus of this account—Estie, Susie, Piri and Fritzi¹—grew up in idyllic circumstances in rural northern Romania in the early 20th century, emigrating to the United States following World War II. During their odyssey they endured Nazi concentration and forced labor camps, refugee camps, serious illness, the high life of Havana, Cuba under the dictator Batista, and as Fidel Castro’s revolution took hold, new beginnings were made in New York and Miami.



Perl family, circa 1933. Clockwise from left: Estie, Rose, Fritzi, Shari, Wolf, Anci, Susie, Piri

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, a range also known as the Transylvanian Alps. The area had remained unchanged through the centuries, a medieval landscape of villages and hamlets scattered amid vast forests. Visuel is a few kilometers south of Ukraine (which the locals referred to simply as Russia).



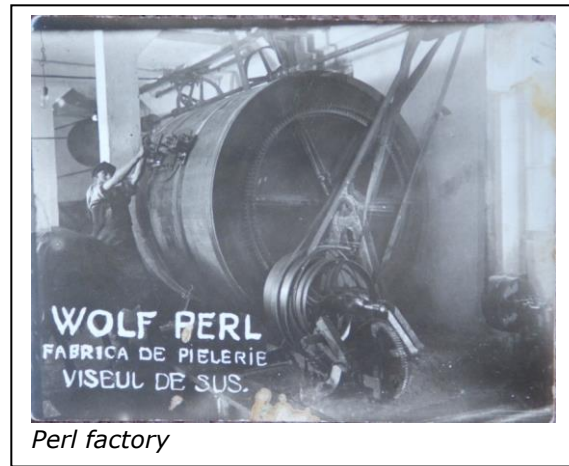
Visuel de Sus, Romania

Tannin extraction, tanning, stone quarrying and flour milling were the dominant industries of Visuel. Wolf Perl, the family’s patriarch, owned a tannin extraction plant that

¹ The author’s mother. Much of the research for this article came from interviews with Fritzi and Piri recorded by Steven Spielberg’s Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation in 1995.

encompassed 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.

When the Perl children were young, Visuel was home to about 10,000 people, a mix of Christians and Jews who had coexisted semi-harmoniously over many centuries. Most of the area's Christians were Romanian Orthodox. Transylvania was also home to large minorities of Catholics and Roma, or gypsies. Historically, anti-Semitism was epidemic in Romania, but the Perls, who were Jews, experienced little discrimination in Visuel de Sus.



Perl factory

HOME AND FAMILY



Romania's counties (Transylvania in green)

The Perl family home was a roomy second-story apartment with a curved ceiling above the factory floor, which was located on the outskirts of Visuel. Most of the neighbors were poor farmers and gypsies. Wolf, a convivial and outgoing man, would have preferred to live in the village center, but Rose, ever fearful for his health (he had an enlarged heart), wanted him as

close to her and their six children as possible, which meant living on the factory premises.

Tannin is produced by sheering the bark from trees and melting it and other plant materials in large, heated vats, creating a thick soup. The process produces a noxious smoke that is belched out of a chimney; thus, extraction plants are always located away from population centers.



Maramures County, Transylvania, Romania

Wolf's business had been handed down through many generations of Perls. It thrived 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.

Visuel's Jews generally received better treatment than their brethren elsewhere in Romania, being neither abused nor merely tolerated but viewed more as co-citizens. Wolf employed many gentiles, including one Romanian family who invited the Perl children to their house every Christmas to decorate the holiday tree.



Rose Perl (left) with cousin, 1935

Visuel's summers were temperate and breathtakingly beautiful (the town was a climactic resort) and during the warm months Wolf limited his business travel, spending leisurely afternoons attending to his apple, plum and pear orchards. He was a self-taught botanist. Often he could be seen painstakingly brushing insect repellent onto the saplings; when he was done, the trees looked as if they had been smothered in white paint.

Relatives from the region's largest city, Sighet Marmatiei, visited the Perls for a few weeks every summer, enjoying the pleasant environs and the clear mountain air at 1,500 feet. The warm months brought thousands of out-of-town visitors to swim in Visuel's sulfur hot springs, which were said to possess healing powers. Brilliant

green oak trees towered high in the rolling hills above the springs, a beatific sight enjoyed by all.

In winter the Perl children ice skated and skied. Sometimes Rose would lean out of the kitchen window looking through binoculars at Fritzi, the youngest daughter as she skied the nearby slopes 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 swam in creeks swollen with the icy waters that flowed down from the mountains. Life was bucolic, lived in harmony with nature and in acknowledgment of an unspoken respect for life.

Although Romania is home to Europe's largest population of large carnivores, including half the continent's bears and more than 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.

Growing up in Visuel, Wolf Perl was a top student at Visuel's Yeshiva, or religious Jewish school. Throughout his life, he remained close to the school and its community, 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.

* * *

Throughout the centuries, political control of Transylvania changed hands many times. From the 11th century until 1919, rule passed often between Hungary and the Ottoman Empire. Wolf and Rose came of age in 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 Jews, spoke Yiddish at home, making the children tri-lingual.

With five daughters and a son (Anci), the Perl household was bustling. Much activity centered around the large kitchen where Rose cooked throughout the day. A smaller adjacent room was used for baking breads 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.

Though the Jewish population of Visuel, as in all Romania, was a segregated minority, Wolf endeavored to bridge the gulf between Jewish, Christian and Roma cultures. He



Anci Perl (left) with friend, 1920s

exploited common ground whenever possible. Though a practicing Jew, he often did not wear a 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 Jews from slavery in ancient Egypt. The family’s ornate and expensive Rosenthal dishes, which Wolf had purchased while in Germany on business, 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.

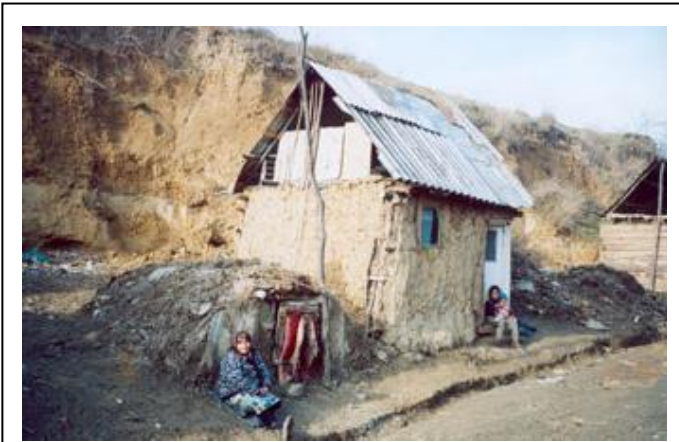
The Perl children, awed and deferential to the patriarch, obediently watched as he performed rituals at the head of the table, wearing his white yarmulke. The family enjoyed sumptuous holiday meals, after which Rose would surreptitiously transfer left-overs to the area’s poor.

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 attained a cultural sophistication. He made frequent business trips and was at home in many of Europe’s cosmopolitan centers.

Rose, or *Riesel* (her Jewish name), was a generous woman who placed the needs of others above her own. Unlike Wolf, she grew up in a larger city, Sighetu Marmatiei, a half-hour train ride from Visuel. The couple were joined in an arranged marriage, or *shiddach*.

The Perls would have been considered affluent for the time and place. The children's needs were well met, in stark contrast to the destitute lives of the peasants and gypsies surrounding them.

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



Roma gypsies, Transylvania, Romania

from the Perl cow. She gave the children pears and apples from the orchard, as well as potatoes and other vegetables.

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

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

Rose loved animals. The family owned dogs and cats. In the early mornings Rose, who was always the first awake, would roused 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, since her head was clean-shaven in the style of Orthodox Jewish women of the period.

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

SIGHETU MARMATIEI

Visuel had no secondary schools, so the Perl children attended high school in Sighetu Marmatiei², a city of 40,000 situated 60 kilometers northeast of Visuel. *Sighetu*, Hungarian for “island,” offered a rich cultural life.

Many generations of Perls attended public school in Sighet as well as Hebrew school. Each Perl child, on first setting eyes on Sighet’s high school, was said to have been speechless in astonishment at its large classrooms and gymnasium, which dwarfed the buildings in Visuel.

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

Rose’s parents, Hershel and Gittle Berkowitz, lived in Sighet. The Perl children regularly visited them, boarding the train in Visuel for the short ride. In summer, Hershel and Gittle stayed with the Perls in Visuel for several weeks. The Perl children frequently visited their many aunts, uncles and cousins in Sighet. Estie, the oldest (and the boldest) of the Perl children, often traveled to Sighet on her own.



Sighetu Marmatiei

Wolf’s parents Yankle and Eka lived in Visuel. Yankle was a stern, religious Hasidic Jew feared by the Perl children. Whenever they visited, they were required to yield to the strict Orthodox law observed in the household.

ESTIE’S JOURNEY

When Hitler came to power as Germany’s chancellor in 1933, he immediately ordered a boycott of all Jewish shops, banks, offices and department stores in Romania. Under his rule, anti-Semitism spread throughout the country and all of Europe.

Remote Visuel de Sus, however, remained an island removed into the mid-1930s; the trouble in Germany and the approaching cataclysm remained a few years off. Life continued on as usual. The Perl children attended school in Visuel and Sighet, and Wolf’s business thrived.

² *Sighet Marmatiei was the childhood home of Holocaust writer Elie Wiesel, who, like the Perls, was deported to Auschwitz in 1944. Estie’s oldest daughter Daisy married Alex Gross, a Holocaust survivor and a childhood friend of Wiesel.*

Estie was the most glamorous of the Perl daughters. She possessed a movie-star beauty and a self-assured, adventurous spirit not unlike her father's. Perpetually stifled in tiny Visuel, Estie traveled often to other Romanian cities for fun and excitement. In the summer of 1937, the 22-year-old rode the train along with an aunt to Vatra-Dornei, a resort town in the neighboring Bukovina region. Vatra-Dornei had a popular summer spa, a kosher restaurant and several Jewish-owned hotels and businesses.



Steamship, Cuba, 1938

It was there that Estie unexpectedly ran into a friend from Sighet who introduced her to her nephew from Cuba, Luis Rosenthal. Luis was a diminutive,

effervescent and ambitious young man, also Jewish. He had grown up in Budapest.

Thirteen years earlier, in 1924, desperately wanting to avoid serving in Hungary's anti-Semitic military, Luis hatched a plan with a few friends to sail for America and seek their fortune. But when the ship approached American shores, it was denied admittance; the quota for Hungarian immigrants had been filled. Dispirited, the boys landed in Cuba instead.

Nine months later, when

Luis' visa to the U.S. came through, he already owned a successful watch repair shop in Havana. He decided to remain in Cuba. Over the next decade he would build his business into a prosperous jeweler's supply shop. Generally, Luis was contented, though unmarried, through his twenties and most of his thirties.



Wolf operating machinery in the factory, 1920s

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

Luis fell in love with her. After their short time together, he traveled back to Cuba. Sad and love-struck, he wrote to Estie often. They 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 accepted. Within a month the adventurous Estie was sailing for Cuba and an unknown destiny.

Around this time, the brutal Goga-Cuza government had seized power in Romania. It was a regime that not only preached anti-Semitism but made it state policy. For Jews of Transylvania, the tide was turning.

Like all Romanians, Estie had known war was coming and that the country would soon be thrown into horrific circumstances. Her hope was that once she was settled in Havana she could arrange to get her family out of Europe.

But war would come too fast.

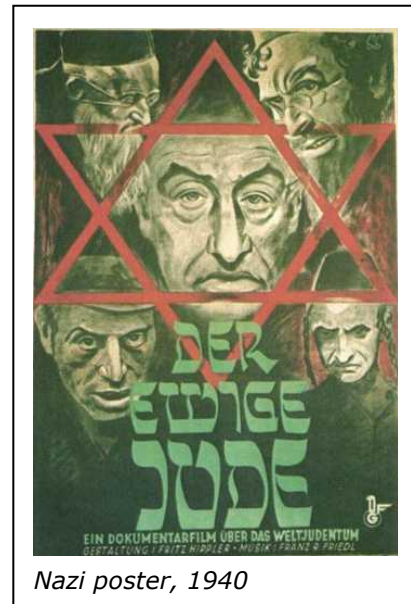
WAR

In September 1939, one year after Estie's departure, Nazi Germany invaded Poland. The following year, Hungary annexed Transylvania and once again Hungarians ruled the region. Romania officially entered the war in November 1940, joining the Axis Powers of Nazi Germany, Italy, Hungary and Bulgaria. With those alignments, Romanian Jews were in peril.

A year later, in 1941, Wolf Perl suffered a heart attack in Sighetu Marmatiei. He collapsed while playing chess with a physician friend in a hotel room and died a few weeks later, spared the coming nightmare. A year later, the only Perl son, Anci, fled into Ukraine. He served as a forced conscript in the Russian army.

Over the next three years, fueled by Hitler's campaign to erase the Jewish population of Europe—his genocidal "Final Solution" to the "Jewish problem"—anti-Semitism spread and many thousands of Romanian 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, declared



Nazi poster, 1940

the Romanian Jewish population as Judeo-Bolshevik. Placing this image in the minds of average Romanians, he gave anyone a free hand to kill Jews.

Antonescu's Iron Guard carried out many pogroms. In these large-scale violent attacks against Jews, the Romanian army and gendarmerie (police) massacred many 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 the country hamlet of 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).

The Perls, now absent the patriarch, lived under Hungarian rule. The time of harmonious coexistence was over.

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