

A History of the Perl Family – Part II

Auschwitz and Germany

by Warren Goldie

[Read Part I](#)

Author's note: The following account was drawn primarily from interviews with my aunt, Piri Fiegler, and my mother, Fritzi Goldie, conducted by Steven Spielberg's Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation in 1995.

FATEFUL DEPARTURE

The distant sound of beating drums in the town square awakened Rose Perl and her children on an April morning in 1944. The drumming was faint because the Perl home was located on the outskirts of Visuel de Sus, a village of ten-thousand in the Transylvanian Alps of northern Romania.

The sound was well-known to the residents, alerting them to gather in the square. When Rose and her children arrived there, they found droves of anxious neighbors. Rose and her daughter Piri noticed that something had changed: the town's Romanian soldiers had been replaced by a Hungarian force. Hungary had annexed Northern Transylvania.

"The Hungarians wore feathers in their hats," recalled Piri. "We knew there was going to be trouble. The Hungarians were anti-Semitic."

Visuel's Jews were ordered to relocate to a two-block [ghetto](#) and told to wear the yellow Star of David armband at all times.

The Perls, however, who were Jewish, were allowed to remain in their home. The Hungarian army needed the tannin produced in the family's factory, and only the Perls and their foreman understood its operations.



Perl family, circa 1941. Clockwise from left: Rose, Anci, Susie, Unknown, Wolf, Fritzi (sitting), Shari's husband, Shari, Unknown Boy.

Over the next weeks the Perls received favorable treatment, which meant more food than the Jews in the ghetto. Well aware of their plight, Rose smuggled food into the ghetto, risking her life in the process. All Jews feared deportation. Rumors of the Nazi concentration camps had been spreading all through Europe for months.

In early May, a group of German Gestapo officers arrived in Visuel. Careful to keep out of sight, they arranged for the arrival of the trains that would take Visuel's Jews to the concentration camp Auschwitz, in Nazi-occupied Poland. "These officers not only hid themselves from Jewish eyes but also veiled the fact of the actual trains until the last possible moment," said Piri.

The fateful trains arrived in mid-May. Though the Perls had escaped the ghetto, they would not escape deportation. Along with all Jews, the Perl family

that left Visuel that day included: Rose; her four daughters, Shari, Susie, Piri, and Fritzi; Shari's infant son; and Wolf's elderly father, Yankle Perl.

The journey to Auschwitz took four agonizing days. Up to 150 deportees were packed into a cattle car (although SS regulations stipulated a maximum of 50). Passengers had no drinking water and only a bucket toilet. A small barred window prevented adequate ventilation.

Passengers had to sleep standing up. Many died from suffocation and exposure.

"Our grandfather, Yankle Perl, suffered a nervous breakdown and died," Piri said. His body, along with many others, was unloaded when the train stopped once each day.

AUSCHWITZ

When the train's car doors slid open, Visuel's Jews gazed upon the entrance of Auschwitz. Gestapo [SS](#) agents met the throngs of starving, panicked deportees, ordering them to form up into queues. Crowds swarmed and chaos reigned. Suitcases and belongings were confiscated.

The Gestapo inspected the prisoners, ordering each one to "Go left" or "Go right." The Perls, like most of Visuel's Jews, did not understand German. But it became clear to Piri, by observing what was happening, that going to the right meant survival while going left meant death in the gas chambers. The very young, the old and the infirm were all sent to the left. Standing beside her mother, Piri found a bit of bread in her pocket and offered it to Rose. "Here, you take it," Piri said. Rose responded, "No, you take it..."



What was clear to Piri was not evident to Rose. In the confusion, communication was difficult and it was hard to know what to do. A neighbor from Visuel and her eight children were told to go left, and Rose, wanting to help, went with them. Piri cried out her objection but a Gestapo agent pushed her aside and told her she would be allowed to see her mother at night. Rose, who was 48, was led away, never to be seen again. Shari¹ would not be separated from her son. When she refused to give him to the Gestapo, she and her son were both shot dead.

Youthful and fit from a healthy life in the mountains, the remaining Perl sisters—Susie, 21, Piri, 19, and Fritzi, 17—were ordered to the right. As they passed through the camp's entrance, several inmates, some reduced to near skeletons, gripped the fences and pleaded for food. When the terrified sisters had no answer for them, the prisoners yelled, "Tomorrow you will look like us!"

Piri, Susie and Fritzi were led into a building and into a holding room. The female attendants ordered them to remove their clothes. One woman refused. She was immediately shot.

The attendants clipped off all the women's body hair. Eyeglasses were confiscated but shoes were retained.

Each woman was given a single dress, though no underwear. As they emerged from the building, the Perl sisters clung to one another in the terrified crowd, afraid they would be pulled apart and would never see each other again.



STRENGTH AND SURVIVAL

The Perl sisters spent seven months in Auschwitz, yet were not assigned work. (Auschwitz was actually three camps: a prison camp, an extermination camp, and a slave-labor camp.)

They were assigned to Block 16, C Lager. Twelve women were crowded into each of the upper bunk beds and 12 below. At 4:30 a.m. each morning the Kapo (prison guard) entered the building cracking a whip while yelling "Get out! Get out!" Panicked prisoners hurried to line up outside in rows of five to await inspection by the SS, often having to make their way around the bodies of prisoners who had died during the night.

Piri recalled those who had run purposefully into the electrified fences: "Many people ran into the wire and you found them there in the morning," she said.

¹ Shari's husband managed to survive Auschwitz only to discover that his wife and child had perished there.

Morning lineups lasted until 7 a.m. Some days [Josef Mengele](#)², the Nazi doctor known as the Angel of Death selected prisoners for execution in the gas chambers or to take part in gruesome medical experiments or pseudoscientific racial studies.

Prisoners who collapsed from exhaustion were sent to the gas chambers. Once, in a lineup, Susie fainted. Panicked, Piri and Fritzi took hold of her and lifted her upright, saving her life. The acrid stench of burning flesh pervaded the camp at all times.

Piri and Fritzi recalled the weak coffee served in the mornings. “They put something in that coffee,” Fritzi said. “We didn’t menstruate for a year.” Breakfast was unidentifiable slop, dinner a brick of moldy bread. Sometimes there was rotten cheese or marmalade. The sisters had frequent diarrhea. “You couldn’t get the runs at night because you couldn’t go outside,” said Piri. “If you went out they shot you.” The toilet was two holes in the ground.



The prisoners from Budapest weren’t as hearty as the country-bred sisters. “The city people got sores on their feet,” said Piri. “The Gestapo took them away and they never came back.”

A BRUSH WITH DEATH

On one typically cold morning in October 1944, the Kapo entered the barracks and announced a selection. Piri had a premonition. She believed the sisters would be selected to be gassed. Being the physically strongest of the three—and thus the one most likely to be spared—she stepped back in line behind Fritzi and Susie. “I figured if they’re going to put them to the left, I’m going with them,” recalled Piri.

The SS ordered the women to raise up their arms, and inspected their hands, arms and knees. The prisoners were told to wait.

“The Gestapo came with the dogs and the guns,” said Piri, “and they said they were going to give us a shower.” A “shower” often meant deadly gas instead of cleansing water. Naked and terrified, the sisters entered the showers and waited. Water flowed from the spigots.

A day later, they were told all of C Block would be sent to work at a munitions factory in Germany. The Nazi military needed slave labor. The

² Mengele left Auschwitz in January 1945, shortly before the arrival of the liberating Red Army troops. After the war, he fled to South America, where he evaded capture for the rest of his life.

prisoners waited under guard at the camp's train tracks. But a dispatcher arrived on a bicycle and handed an order to the Gestapo guard. The prisoners would have to return to Auschwitz.

"Now, this was a nightmare," said Piri. "Because if we go back, for sure they are going to burn us."

The women were ordered into a holding room and told to remove their clothes. They waited for 12 hours. Said Piri, "We stayed there and we didn't know our destiny."

If the Nazis were sending them to work in Germany, why remove their clothes? "So, we were ready to die," said Piri.

The naked prisoners were told to bend over as attendants sprayed them with a spray that smelled like petroleum, to remove lice. Humiliated and terrified, again the sisters were sent to the showers. Again, water came.



THE SALZWEDEL FACTORY

The women of C Block waited shivering at the train tracks under SS guard. The train arrived, and set off for a munitions factory in the German city of Salzwedel. It was October 1944.

All of the prisoners, including the Perls, worked making bullets, from 6 AM to 6 PM. "The lead was very heavy," said Piri. "For the gunpowder for the bullets. You had to pick up big things and put them on the machine. The machinists were French war criminals. They were in a French camp. They were Catholics. There were lots of Catholics in the camps."

The French laborers wanted to help the Perls but talking was prohibited. "The Gestapo walked up and down, up and down," said Piri. "We couldn't talk to the French. But they always told us 'Soon, soon...'"

Each bullet was made by 10 women working together at a machine station, and if any action was omitted, the bullet would be a dud. To subvert the Nazis, the women surreptitiously omitted actions, thus creating dud bullets. When it was time to fill a storage barrel, the women would fill it three-quarters full of the dud bullets and top off with working bullets. Inspectors usually only checked the bullets on top. However, the plan was discovered. As punishment, the Nazis selected one woman from each station and she was hung. All prisoners were required to watch. If anyone looked away, SS dogs were set on them.

Winter came, bringing snow and sub-freezing temperatures. Each woman had been given just a single dress and one pair of clogs. There was no soap or

blankets. The sisters washed with ice. At night, they warmed themselves against each other's bodies.

Fritzi recalled always being cold. "And this was fine because there was no gas chamber and they didn't kill people," she recalled. Meals were thin soup and bread. Fritzi stole a potato once, hiding it in her pants. "She was almost hung for it," Piri recalled.

"I don't know how we survived," said Piri. "We never got sick. No one got sick."

'BEAUTIFUL SIX FOOTERS'



Winter gave way to spring, 1945.

Piri came down with a painful toothache. The sisters were allowed to travel into Salzwedel to find a dentist. But no German would treat her. The only one willing to help pulled out her tooth without the use of anesthetic.

In mid-April 1945, the factory's slave laborers paused in their work. Thunderous earth-shaking booms were sounding in the distance, shaking the building—Allied artillery. The Americans had invaded Germany. The prisoners faced their Nazi guards, now frightened.

"The Americans came in and they shot them dead," said Piri.

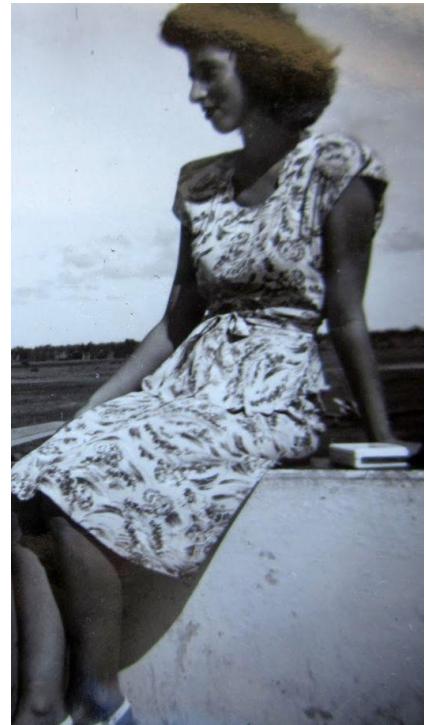
Piri recalls first setting eyes on the American soldiers. "Big battalions came with these men, these beautiful six footers," she recalled. "We wondered, why are they so big? And they told us they were the elite." Following behind was the U.S. army infantry. "And they weren't so tall," added Piri.

The sisters were sent to a temporary displaced persons camp which had been a Hitler Youth Camp. "The Americans," she said, "they gave us food and they cried. We were all sick."

General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Forces in Europe, visited the camp one day. Eisenhower had planned and managed the invasion of France and Germany. He ordered the prisoners to be evacuated because typhoid fever was breaking out.



Clockwise from left: Estie, Susie, Fritzi, Piri



Fritzi in Cuba, late 1940s

“When the general came, the trucks came and took us away,” said Piri. “At this time we were already displaced persons.”

The Perl sisters made their way to another displaced persons camp, this time in Paris. War crimes tribunals began. The sadistic Kapo who had terrorized the prisoners of Block C stood trial and was found guilty and hanged. The Perl sisters, who had befriended French nationals, were presented with a huge celebration cake by the French on which a plastic figurine of a woman hanging in a noose was placed. Everyone cheered the gift.

Before the war, the oldest of the Perl sisters, Estie, had left Romania to live in Cuba. In late May 1945, Estie’s husband Luis received a letter from a displaced persons camp in France, telling of Estie’s three sisters who had survived the war. Luis wired funds to pay for

the sisters’ passage to Cuba by steamship. Piri, Susie and Fritzi made their way to Cuba³ and later emigrated to the United States.

[Read Part I](#)

³ The author’s [personal account](#) of his parents’ lives includes details about this period.