

Irvin (Israel Chaim) Perl
b. 23 June 1902, Alsóapsa
Courtesy of Joan Perl Gray, USA

My Grandfather, Irvin (Israel Chaim) Perl was born in Alsóapsa, Austria-Hungary (today, Nyzhnya Apsha, Ukraine) on 23 June 1902 to Josef and Henje (Helen) Einhorn Perl.

Due to economic hardship, my grandfather went to Pittsburgh, Pa to work for his brother who started a grocery a few years before. He traveled on the SS Britannic arriving 7 November 1937.

His intention was to work in the US a few years and return to Europe with the money he earned. My Grandmother, Ethel Roth Perl remained in Alsóapsa with her 4 children. She ran the small store and farm. Her Father-in-law and Brother-in-law (Herman Perl and family) lived a few miles away.

During this time the town became Romanian briefly and then Hungarian. The schools changed the language they conducted classes mirroring the change in nationality. Ethel did not want to leave despite the news from America that the future was bleak for the Jews in Hungary. No one could believe that they would be sent to concentration camps and killed. Herman, her brother-in-law, convinced her to join her husband. The only reason they were able to obtain visa's to the US was that my grandfather was already working there. No other family in Europe was able to escape the Holocaust.

Herman Perl was shot in Buchenwald one week before liberation. Only one son and one daughter survived. My father's cousin and best friend "Red" Morton was probably gassed when he arrived at Auschwitz along with his grandfather and all of the younger children.

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My grandmother sold her beloved cow, left her farm and traveled by cart with 4 children age 5 to 13 to Budapest and then by train to Genoa Italy. Legally, they were only allowed to travel with enough money for water on the train, but in reality, it was necessary to bribe border guards to continue their journey. My Dad, Morton, was 7 years old. He had never seen electricity and was awed by the live fish swimming in the hotel lobby. He would love to find the hotel again, but this is really all he remembers about it.

Initially, they had tickets on an Italian ship, but at the last moment, passage became available on the SS Manhattan. It would be the last US ship to leave Italy due to war. The Italian ship, the Orazio suffered an explosion at sea and 106 passengers died. Bad weather impeded rescue efforts and the ship sank. My grandfather had not yet learned that his family was on the Manhattan and for a terrible time he believed that he lost his entire family.

My father traveled second class and remembers the waiters were especially kind to them. They gave him a box of Matzo to take as a gift for his father. One night, alarms went off on the ship. A German sub was spotted and everyone had to put on life jackets and go up on deck. They arrived in New York on 20 January 1940.

At any point in this story, there were so many times their journey to Pittsburgh Pa could have become another tragedy. My father still looks at their escape as a miracle.