

Life in Sighet, Romania 1920-1939

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Sighet, Elie Wiesel's 1928 birthplace, still survives — a town in northern Romania near the meeting of the Hungarian and Ukrainian borders. But its character was irreversibly changed by the Holocaust. Once it was a predominantly Jewish community of some 15,000 souls; today, only a handful of the Jewish community remains.

Photos of the old city have survived, some in family collections, including those preserved by Elie Wiesel and his surviving sisters. Others have been contributed to the photo archives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., most of them recovered from the work of an unknown Jewish studio photographer who, from 1920 to 1939, recorded images of the town and the life of its Jewish community.

The recovery of those photos makes this visit to pre-war Sighet possible.

House

"Before me, always, is the photograph of the house in which I was born.

The door that leads to the yard. The kitchen. I want to go inside, but I am afraid.

I want to look at the house, if only from afar. With all that has happened to me, it is essential for me to remember that place."



Town

"Why is it that my town still enchants me so? Is it because in my memory it is entangled with my childhood? In all my novels, it serves as background and vantage point.

In my fantasy, I still see myself in it."



"Sighet, the region's capital...wasn't much of a capital. It did, however, have a penchant for changing — its name, its nationality, and thus its allegiance. When my father was born, it was a proud part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and called itself Maramarossziget. When I first saw the light of day, it proudly bore the name of Sighetul Marmatiei and belonged to the Kingdom of Greater Romania. When I left it, it was Maramarossziget again, a Hungarian city of noisy patriotism. Today, its capital is Bucharest once more, but Budapest demands its return in the name of God-knows-what."



Work

Life in Sighet, in some respects, recalled the popular images of Anatevka, the shtetl made famous in "Fiddler on the Roof".

Many of Sighet's modern Jews worked in shops and offices, schools and synagogues, were musicians, students, doctors, and businessmen. But there were still those who carried out the traditional basic tasks.



Yeshiva boys studied the Torah, but also learned the weaving trade...

...Men worked in the lumberyard...



Lumbermen

...and others tended their cows.



Farmers

Community

In Sighet, there were also modernizing trends — youth groups, sports groups, community leaders, girls' clubs, charitable activities, and Zionist organizations supporting the rebirth of a Jewish State in Palestine.



A visit to a sewing workshop by representatives of the Joint Distribution Committee — an organization established by American Jews to aid Jewish families left destitute after the First World War.



Members of the Samson soccer club.



Leaders of the Sighet Jewish community, circa 1929.



Group portrait of the Mizrahi Zionist movement in Sighet, 1927.



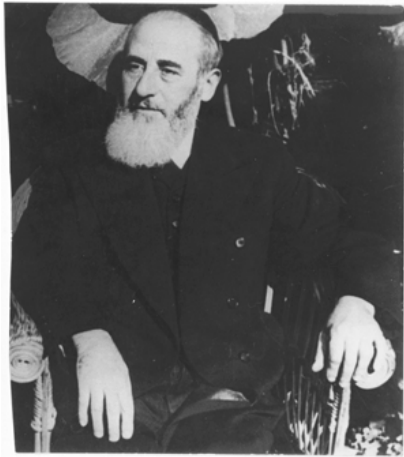
At a summer camp for indigent children, it's time out with camp directors for a mid-day snack.



Members of the girls' club of the Habonim Zionist youth group.

The Known

The group portraits probably come from many sources, but these family photographs were clearly taken by the town's studio photographer, unnamed and unknown, who recorded the faces of the town's citizens over the years.



Many of these families and individuals appear to have been middle class, sitting proudly for a photograph to memorialize a special occasion, or perhaps simply, at Rosh Hashana, the passing of a year. Some of their identities were preserved:

Dr. Rabbi Samuel Danzig, rabbi of the Sephardic community, who was active in the Zionist movement. He perished in Auschwitz in 1944.



A portrait of the Hillman family. Mr. Hillman was a weaver.



The Naiman family, also known as the Drexlers, meaning "wood turners".



The Katz family. The father, Josef Katz, owned a hardware store.



The Freund brothers, vocations unknown.

The Nameless

Among the many other photos of the nameless, some appear prosperous, others worn by years of physical labour. Their faces express pride in their large families, but some eyes may have seen too much, even foreseeing what was to come.



Death

"All that is now gone. The Jews of my city are now forgotten, erased from its memory."

Before, there were some thirty synagogues in Sighet; today, only one survives.

The Jewish tailors, the Jewish cobblers, the Jewish watchmakers have vanished without a trace, and strangers have taken their place."



"In the space of six weeks a vibrant and creative community had been condemned first to isolation, then to misery, and finally to deportation and death."

"The last transport left the station on a Sunday morning. It was hot, we were thirsty. It was less than three weeks before the Allies' invasion of Normandy. Why did we allow ourselves to be taken? We could have fled, hidden ourselves in the mountains or in the villages. The ghetto was not very well guarded: A mass escape would have had every chance of success."

"But we did not know."



A street in the ghetto of Sighet just after the deportation of the Jewish population in 1944.