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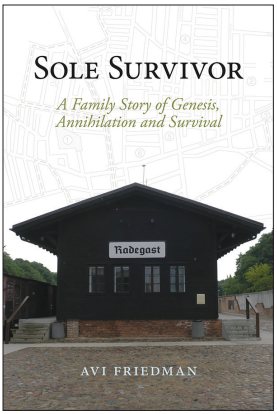

SOLE SURVIVOR: A FAMILY STORY OF GENESIS, ANNIHILATION AND SURVIVAL

by Avi Friedman

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Pińczów

November nights get cold in Pińczów. On some evenings, a heavy coat and a scarf are needed to withstand the westerly winds that sweep over the Nida River, which runs parallel to the town in Poland's Kielce region.

It was on this kind of evening when a tall, slender, bearded man in his mid-forties wearing a black overcoat made his way from the local inn to his meeting place. He crossed the town's empty Plac Wolnosci square and walked along beside two-storey buildings with tiled red roofs and stores on their ground floor facing the square. In the distance he spotted the spire of Kościół św. Jana Ewangelisty (Church of St. John the Evangelist). He continued walking on a muddy road, edged by shabby-looking single-storey white and grey stucco-cladded homes with pitched roofs and chimneys from which white plumes rose. To his right stood the three-storey white-plastered synagogue from which he could see some light through arched windows. Probably a meeting taking place, he thought. Dogs barked in the distance. Through lace curtains, in the flickering lights of kerosene lamps, he could see families at home sitting for dinner.

Pausing to find his way, he turned onto a side street, arrived at his destination, and knocked on the door. Warm greetings were exchanged when the door opened. The visitor kissed the *mezuzah* (doorpost) and walked in. The smell of dinner, just ended, was still in the air. He handed his hat and coat to his host and straightened the *yarmulke* (head cover) on his head. Logs were burning in the fireplace. A large table occupied the centre of the modestly furnished room from which the remaining dinner dishes were removed by the host's wife and her two young daughters.

"How was your trip?" the host asked.

"Fine," the visitor answered. "You know I am not getting younger."

"And family?" the host continued.

"*Baruch Hashem* (thank God). In God's hand. My youngest daughter got married this summer. Good boy. Nice family. They will live with us until they will stand on their own feet."

"This calls for a drink!" the host exclaimed, reaching for a bottle of vodka and glasses in the cabinet behind him.

"How are things in Chmielnik?" His wife asked.

"You know, there is always politics in the Kehilla (the Jewish community's association). And the authorities are never making things any easier. New taxes are levied all the time," the visitor quipped.

"And the *parnassa* (livelihood or income)?" she added.

"*Baruch hashem*," he answered.

The two men were *Shadchans* (matchmakers). The matchmaking business was known in the early modern period, especially in Eastern Europe, as a means of ensuring accord of *yichus* (prestigious lineage) and wealth between the prospective families-in-law.[1] At the end of the eighteenth century, the age of courtship and marriage increased compared to a century earlier – when life expectancy was lower. The age increase over the century was a function of better education and living conditions, and potentially a response to *Haskalah* (Enlightenment) criticisms of matchmaking back then.[1] A discourse of beauty, highly influenced by aristocratic and bourgeois norms, and popular culture in the interwar period, were also significant factors. This allowed a woman to obtain a husband commensurate with her social status. Beauty was a woman's social currency for matchmaking, equivalent to the dowry, and scandal of one's sibling or other close relative its potential opposite.[2]

Finding Jewish brides and grooms of the same *yichus* in Poland's small towns like Pińczów and villages in centuries past was not easy. There were very few children of the same age group in any one place and, using matchmakers, families tried to find suitors in neighbouring communities. The host and his guest shuttled often around the Kielce Region, at the invitation of well-off parents whose sons and daughters needed a match. Business was brisk. Matchmakers knew the places and the families by their ancestry, occupations and wealth, and they would be paid a fixed sum for a successful match. Their skill was in recalling,

and at times overstating, people's qualities to the parents who engaged them, and to other matchmakers.

"So, what do you have for me this evening?" the host asked.

From a leather briefcase, the visitor pulled out folded handwritten pages. The host's wife, who worked with her husband, brought her own paper, ink and a pen and pushed the lamp closer. The three pored over their lists – matching ages, personalities, family backgrounds – and speculated about the dowries that families would be able to afford. As the night wore on, they kept interrupting each other while doing what they knew best: trumpeting people's qualities.

"We have someone special for you!" the host said. "We know them well. They live a few streets away. Avram, the son of Szmul Lejb Frydman. His mother Wolca, you know, hails from the illustrious Ejbuszyc family. Many generations of well-known rabbis in her line. Good stock. Have money. There you have a mix of brains and money. Avram is a nice, serious boy, twenty-one years of age. One of many children, all healthy. They are in the clothing business. They have a store here and sell in other towns. Avram works with his father, travelling, helping."

The guest paused and combed his beard with his fingers. Shuffling his pages, he said, "I think that I have a fine *shidduch* (match) for him: Rachla Jutrzenka, the daughter of Moshe Aron and Ryfka Novak from Chmielnik. I also know them well. Good-looking girl. Eighteen years old. Blonde hair and blue eyes, almost like a *shiktze* (gentile women)." He reached to his briefcase and from a stock of photos pulled one and handed it to his hosts. They looked at a soft, smiling seated young woman with light hair, dressed in a white blouse.

"Moshe Aron is in the grain business," the guest said. "Very rich man." He went on describing the family ancestry, rank in the community, and what a well-suited groom could expect to get.

"It looks likes a *bashert* (predestined marriage partner) to me," the host's wife said: "let's make a *shidduch*."

I will see Wolca Frydman tomorrow and show her the photo," said the host's wife.

"God willing, I will talk to Moshe Aron the day after tomorrow and arrange a meeting soon," the guest said.

Glasses of vodka touched again "*L'Chaim* (to life)!" After putting on his coat and hat and thanking his host, the guest stepped into the cold night.

***

A layer of snow covered the ground when a horse-drawn sled coach carried Szmul Lejb Frydman and his son Avram on an early December day in 1903. They left Pińczów at dawn for the twenty-kilometre ride to Chmielnik. Heavy clothing and blankets kept them warm in the belly of the carriage. Dense forest interrupted by clusters of farmhouses, some wooden, and open fields edged the narrow path. They could hear the coachman hurrying his horses to bring the two to their destination on time.

Szmul Lejb knew these roads well. Like his father Icek, he would load a carriage with fabrics and tailored menswear and head to the towns and villages near Pińczów on market days. When they grew up, his sons joined him. This trip was also a sales trip of sorts, he thought. He was about to vaunt Avram's qualities and potential as a family man to the Jutrzenkas, of whom he knew little. A father of fifteen, he had gone through courtships with eight of his older children already, visiting future brides and welcoming would-be grooms.

Very few words were exchanged between the two. Avram, about to be introduced to a person with whom he might spend the rest of his life, was tense. In his head, he mulled over the second-hand accounts that he had heard from his mother about Rachla Jutrzenka's character. She seemed pretty in the photo. Will he like her? And perhaps more importantly, will she be fond of him? He felt, and was told by his father, that the time was ripe for him to start a family. After working with his father for several years, he was hoping to strike out on his own one day. Arriving in Chmielnik in the late afternoon, they checked into an inn and got ready for the evening.

* * *

The Jutrzenka family had lived in Chmielnik for generations. Their ancestry and whereabouts mirrored that of the Kielce Region's and of Poland's Jews more generally. Their presence in these lands was a result of voluntary migration. They had arrived in medieval times at the

invitation of princes and kings who had expected them to settle the vast uninhabited lands and to actively aid in developing Polish commerce.[3] With time, their number grew to constitute the majority population of these towns.

The fiefdom system appealed to Jews since they were not subject to an entire country's laws but rather to those of a local ruler. Waves of Ashkenazi migrants came to Poland from Western and Southern Europe, places where limits were imposed on their religious freedom, and where they faced financial hardship and persecution by the local population. Their story through the centuries was one of survival and adaptation. For all the privileges that they were granted, they still had to pay levies and taxes. Despite living in these lands for generations, they were still looked upon as an ethnic minority who could be persecuted or expelled at the whim of someone in authority.[4]

One of the reasons for their invitation to Poland would go on to become a source of hatred for them. In the Middle Ages, the Church forbade Christians from lending money for interest. Yet, money lending was instrumental in economic development. The Jews, commonly at the invitation of wealthy landowners, were trusted with the task of being the intermediary between the lender and the borrower.[5] Running other people's estates brought the wrath of the peasantry, who regarded Jews as their direct oppressors, which led to deep-seated anti-Semitism.[6]

Jewish history in Poland was mired in periodic violent hostilities that saw many killed or expelled and properties destroyed. The Church played a key role in limiting their religious freedom and inciting hatred, best articulated in the 1267 canonical laws of Breslau (Wrocław) which suggested that the Christian population would become easy prey to the evil habits of the Jews who lived among them.[7]

Blood libels were a common occurrence, the crux of medieval symbolic violence against Jews that could easily translate into physical violence. They were never self-contained incidences of anti-Semitism, rather they were fed by the particular or regional forms of anti-Semitism and overarching crises in a given era. The first recorded, and typical of many that followed, took place in Posen (Poznań) in 1399. A rumour was spread that the Jews bribed a Polish woman to stab three men so they could use their blood. Following a trial, the local Archbishop condemned the rabbi and thirteen elders to death by fire,

1.1 Map of the Congress Poland's Kielce and Radom Regions and the locations of Pińczów and Chmielnik.

and a recurrent fine was imposed. Blood libels during this time are understood as owing much to crowd psychology, a collective delusion in an era of racialized anti-Semitism.[8]

The severity of the hardship varied with the ruler. Some were sympathetic to the Jews to whom they extended equal rights. King Casimir

the Great (Kazimierz Wielki, 1333–70) favoured them. He removed all legal articles restricting Jews from exercising many activities and granted them permission to settle in cities and towns from which they had been excluded.[9] These overtures were self-serving and were meant to contribute to the development of Polish communities and the economy. And indeed, they worked. During his reign, Casimir transformed Poland: cities expanded, and their economies grew. As Polish merchants became wealthier, they started to notice and to resent competition from their Jewish counterparts. They actively lobbied guilds and authorities to impose restrictive laws and tariffs. Things were markedly different in the small towns. As a result of repression in the cities, many Jews migrated to small towns where the population swelled, and people of the Jewish faith were in the majority, hence freer to exercise commerce, communal life and their religion.

Chmielnik was one of these places. The start of the Jewish settlement there can be traced to 1630 when the town's owner, Krzysztof Gołuchowski, granted Jews permission to build a wooden synagogue. Following Napoleon's 1815 defeat, in the Congress of Vienna, lands there were partitioned, and the Kingdom of Poland under Russia's Czarist rule was established. The Kielce Region and the town of Chmielnik became part of this kingdom.[10] The town's location on important trade routes was also a draw. Jews were given full rights to run businesses and enjoy communal life. Major industries run by Jewish owners included limestone mining, breweries, wineries and grain trading, which Moshe Aron Jutrzenka and his ancestors practised. Prosperous community members funded the local welfare associations. Testimony to the wealth of the place were the architecturally lavish synagogue just off the market square and the large number of brick houses. At the time of the Frydmans' visit, Chmielnik numbered eight thousand people of whom eighty-two per cent were Jews.[11]

* * *

The Frydmans wore their Saturday best when they left the inn. The sky was clear and the air crisp and cold. The snow-covered dirt road cracked under their feet on their way to their hosts' home.

The Jutrzenkas' home stood apart from the others that lined the narrow street. Located off the old market square, it was two storeys tall,

wide and well maintained. Moshe Aron welcomed them in. Greetings were exchanged and coats and scarves removed. Avram's heart was racing. Tall, slim, with dark eyes and a trim beard, he stood quietly surveying the home's interior trying to spot Rachla.

Ryfka, Moshe Aron's wife, joined them. "How was the trip?" she asked.

"Uneventful," Szmul Lejb answered. "Each time I come here I see more houses," he added.

"Yes," acknowledged Moshe Aron, "Chmielnik is doing well."

They were ushered into the parlour, which had been made welcoming for the important guests. A corner fireplace warmed the space. Two landscape paintings hung on the walls. A rug covered the wooden floor on which heavy sofas and chairs rested. China and silverware were on display in a glass cabinet. The men sat. Ryfka, holding a tray, offered homemade sweets. Rachla, wearing a black dress with white lace collar, and with her blond hair held with a pin behind her back, followed her mother. There was a silence. Szmul Lejb and Avram looked at her. Avram's and Rachla's eyes crossed and then quickly turned away. Avram stood up and Ryfka introduced the two. They nodded to each other. Brief smiles punctuated the exchange.

"She is pretty," Avram thought, confirming what he recalled from the photo about his would-be bride. "He is handsome, a serious-looking man," Rachla reflected.

"How is life in Pińczów?" Moshe Aron asked. "Baruch Hashem," Szmul Lejb answered, thanking God.

"And Chmielnik?" Szmul Lejb asked. "We are doing well here. Business is also good," answered the host.

The two men talked about their respective trades, relations with the authorities and local politics. "How is your family?" interrupted Ryfka. "Baruch Hashem," Szmul Lejb answered. He went on to name Avram's fourteen siblings, their ages, occupations and the living places of those who got married and moved in with their brides or grooms. "Wolca, my wife, may God bless her, is keeping us and the home together."

Dinner was called and the party moved to the dining room. Candles brightened the beautifully arranged table that was set to impress. Rachla's older brothers Itzek, Joseph, Samuel, and the youngest one, Emanujel, were introduced by their father. Ryfka directed everyone to

their appointed seats. Avram and Rachla sat across from each other. Moshe Aron invited Szmul Lejb to say "Hamotzi" (the blessing of the bread or whole meal). Assisted by a domestic helper, dinner was served.

"What are you doing for a living, Avram?" Moshe Aron asked.

"Helping my father in the store," Avram answered. "Learning the trade."

Once again the conversation turned to business, and this time Avram contributed. There was a pause. Ryfka suggested that Rachla and Avram might have a private conversation in the living room. They followed her. She stepped out, closing the door behind her, leaving the two alone. They sat across from each other.

"You have a nice home. Nice family too," Avram noted. Rachla smiled. Their conversation started timidly but grew more confident. Shorter sentences at first were followed by more animated expression. The two seemed to hit it off. They talked about their brothers and sisters, things they loved about their respective towns, the fast-approaching Hanukah holiday, and places they had visited. Rachla took charge of the conversation. Avram noticed it but did not seem to mind. In fact, he liked it. His mother was also like that.

After a while Ryfka walked in and invited the two into the dining room for dessert and tea. It now felt like a gathering of people who had known one another for a while. Moshe Aron and Szmul Lejb liked each other's company. The wine and the vodka helped, too. They exchanged funny anecdotes about their dealing with authorities and told old stories that they heard from their parents.

Rachla and Avram were also relaxed. Picking up on their earlier conversation, they talked to each other across the table. Rachla's brothers joined in and engaged Avram.

Soon it was time to part ways. An evening that had started as tense and formal was now relaxed and joyful. But more importantly, Rachla and Avram had a feeling for each other.

* * *

On a mild winter day in February, Rachla and her parents traveled to Pińczów. A thick layer of snow covered the ground. In the early evening Avram met the three at the inn and walked them to his home. As if meeting old acquaintances, he was excited and less tense when he

greeted them. On the short walk, he and Moshe Aron had a light conversation about the town.

* * *

The history of the Jews in Pińczów resembled that of Chmielnik and other small towns in what would eventually be known as the Kingdom of Poland. An invitation to settle was extended in 1574 by the landowner Zygmunt Myszkowski, who also granted them the right to buy land for the building of a synagogue and permission to engage in certain activities, including brewing mead and distilling vodka. As a result, Jews flocked to the place. At the time of the Jutrzenka visit some seventy per cent of the five thousand who lived there were of the Jewish faith.[12] Wolca (née Cukier), Szmul Lejb's wife, could trace her pedigree through the Cukier, Diament and Edelman families to Chaim Najberg, who died in 1743. The Frydmans were known and respected in Pińczów and Sandomierz where Szmul Lejb's father, Icek, was born and lived before moving to Pińczów.

Pińczów, not as strategically located and having fewer resources, was smaller and less prosperous than Chmielnik. Its form had the urban features of a small town of the era with a market square framed by single- and two-storey buildings with shops at the ground level where people gathered on a market day to trade. Families knew each other well, intermarried and enjoyed the comfort that a small town's life had to offer. Like other towns with majority Jewish population in the region, the synagogue was the heart of communal life. Built between 1594 and 1609, the three-storey white stucco-clad structure with a square footprint and thick walls stood on a large plot surrounded by single-storey homes occupied by Jewish families. It had an arched entryway and square, arched windows. A prayer room at the front was designed to accommodate about two hundred seated worshippers. The arched ceiling was painted light blue, and there were Hebrew inscriptions on the wall among brown-and-white decorative paintings. Facing the entrance and embedded in a wall, up five cement steps, there was the *Aron Hakodesh* (ark) that housed the prayer scrolls. To the left of the entrance there was an inscription in Hebrew that read כי שמה ישבו כסאות למשפט (there will be seats for justice) where disputes between community members were aired and settled.

1.2 Early 1900s image of the synagogue in Pińczów.

1.3 Current view of the of the synagogue in Pińczów.

The Frydmans' home was smaller and not as lavish as the Jutrzenkas'. It was Wolca's turn to impress. She pulled out all the stops. The house, nice china and silverware were on display and sparkled. Hugs were exchanged between Szmul Lejb and Moshe Aron who acted as if they had known each other for a long time. Szmul Lejb knew that the Jutrzenkas' travel on a winter night to Pińczów was an indication that Rachla wanted Avram to be her suitor and a son-in-law to her parents. They were pleased with the *shidduch*. Rachla, all dressed up, was wearing a long-sleeved blue dress, a head covering, a pearl necklace and a gold bracelet. She was tense. After all, she knew that it was her turn to impress the Frydmans. After the greetings she handed Wolca a table cover she had embroidered. The two hugged warmly.

"She is good in all that she does. Magic fingers!" Ryfka said, looking at Wolca.

Szmul Lejb introduced his well-dressed children to his guests. The formality seemed to have worn off. They sat down to dine. Blessings were made and wine poured. A conversation to which Avram contributed flew among the men who were seated at one end of the long table. The women held their own exchanges. When the dinner ended, Wolca, noting that it was not too cold, suggested that Rachla and Avram might want to step out for a walk. The two agreed. Accompanied by Wolca and Ryfka, who walked a distance behind, the two held a lively conversation. This time it seemed to have taken a more pragmatic tone. They talked about the family they hoped to have, their home and life.

An animated conversation also took place in the house, where Szmul Lejb and Moshe Aron sat next to each other at the dining table. More wine was poured.

"So, what does my son get?" Szmul Lejb asked boldly. The question did not surprise Moshe Aron. In fact, he had expected it. Having married off Rachla's two older sisters, he knew that he would have to give. It was a horse-trading of a sort that the two men were good at.

"Look," Moshe Aron said calmly. "I will furnish their home and help your son stand on his feet, to start a business."

"That's all?" asked Szmul Lejb "He is a serious, nice-looking boy, good family, knows a trade," he added. The conversation between the two turned more animated. Szmul Lejb talked about what other Pińczów men of similar age and distinction got while Moshe Aron

trumpeted his daughter's qualities and her potential contribution to a family life.

"Here is what I can do" Moshe Aron said after a while. "They will start their life in a nice home that I will rent and furnish for them in Chmielnik. It is better that they be near us. Ryfka can help. I will also rent for him a store in town so he could start a clothing business. We need it. Needless to say, I will pay for the wedding." The two men went on ironing the details and dates of their plan as if choreographing Rachla's and Avram's early married life.

The door opened and the four women walked in. Head scarves and coats were once again removed. Moshe Aron asked his hosts to confer with his wife and daughter. The others left the dining room, closing the doors behind them. The father shared the discussion he just had with Szmul Lejb. After a while, the door opened and the three stepped out. "It is going to be a summer wedding in Chmielnik!" Moshe Aron exclaimed. "*Mazal Tov*!" everyone shouted.

More wine was poured, and greetings, hugs and kisses were exchanged. Rachla and Avram stood at a distance looking at each other, beaming with happiness.

* * *

On Monday, July 19, 1904, Szmul Lejb, Wolca and their soon to be married son travelled to Chmielnik for the wedding. Suitcases and a trunk holding Avram's belongings were tied on the carriage roof. It was a sunny day. The trees along the dirt road were in full foliage and the fields and orchards were ready for harvest. There was a festive mood in the carriage. Avram knew that within days he would be a family man. The marriage was preceded by announcements published in the Pińczów and Chmielnik synagogues on three June days to ensure that the couple were free from other obligations to marry.

Both the Frydmans and the Jutrzenkas practised traditional Orthodox Judaism. Like the majority of Polish Jews of the time, primarily those who lived in small towns and villages, Szmul Lejb and Moshe Aron adhered to the practices of their faith. They grew beards and wore traditional clothing which included a black *kapote* (caftan) and an undergarment which resembled a prayer shawl. Their head was covered with what was known as a Jewish Cap, common among

central and southern Polish Jews. When entering a place, the cap was removed, and a yarmulke remained. Their distinctive clothing and appearance made Jews a visible minority, which indirectly contributed to anti-Semitic sentiment among the Polish population, primarily in big cities.[13] Women's clothing was not so distinctive from the general population respecting modesty rules, with long dresses and sleeves. Married women covered their hair all the time with a wig or *sheytl* (cloth).

A change in the practice of Judaism that swept Poland and reached Chmielnik was the rise of the Hassidut. Founded by Israel Ben Eliezer, known as the Baal Szem Tov (1700–1760), it was an indigenous movement that preached emotional expression of Jewishness through joy, song and dance. In some way, for small-town people, it was a way to escape the abject poverty in which they lived. Hassidic Jews were organized around different rabbis who formed their own dynasties. Chmielnik had become one of their centres and a home among others to Dov Ber, who was known as the Maggid.[14] As for education, children were taught in a *cheder* (study room) by a *Melamed* (a tutor) who, in Yiddish, the common native spoken tongue, separately educated women and men to read the Hebrew scriptures – the Torah. It was uncommon to have children receive general education in Polish or Russian, and in many small towns there were no institutions of higher learning. Most of the population did not read or write these two languages, and those who did only practised it when dealing with the authorities or during business transactions.

In the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, the *Haskala* critiqued and disrupted the Kehilla system, promoting secular education in the languages of the land, and trying to change Jewish self-perception to be more modern, aligned better with a modernizing state. Jewish courtship and marriage practices were also in the ambit of the *Haskala*'s critique. In Congress Poland, there were possibilities of both Polonizing and Russifying intellectual currents, and a sense that gaps between the Orthodox and the *Haskala* were severe but bridgeable.[15]

Regardless of how they practised their faith or where they lived, for Polish Jews, religion was a unifying means against oppression. They knew that their distinctive language and attire set them apart, yet most adhered to it for generations despite persecution and pressure

to assimilate. From an early age people were told that their allegiances were toward God, family and the community.

* * *

It was a mid-week wedding. In the morning Avram, flanked by his father and Moshe Aron, stood on the decorated stone *bima* (altar) of Chmielnik's elegant synagogue to read the *Haftara* prayer. It was a more lavish place reflecting the community's wealth. The polygon-shaped *bima* stood in the centre of the prayer room. Its six flower-decorated columns supported an open-top wooden circle to form an attractive freestanding structure. Drawings in blue and grey covered the plaster walls. The ceiling had an embossed plaster work including two lions facing each other on either side of an oculus. Rachla's brothers and other male family members sat in the front rows. Ryfka, Wolca and Rachla heard the reading and watched the men from the upper-level women's section. When the ceremony ended, a *kiddush* (informal reception) took place in one of the side rooms. By tradition, Avram and Rachla had to fast on the day of their wedding.

The Jutrzenkas' home was the place of the formal marriage ceremony and celebration. The *ketubah* (marriage contract) was signed under the watchful eyes of Rabbi Abram Itssek Silman. The *chuppa* (a wedding canopy) was set in the centre of the living room. The bride, in an ivory-white dress, her head covered, circled the groom seven times to represent the building of a wall around him. The *Sheva Brachot* (seven blessings) were recited by the rabbi, a glass wrapped in white cloth was crushed under Avram's right foot as a reference to the destruction of the temples in Jerusalem. "Mazal Tov!" everyone chanted.

A *yichud* (seclusion of the bride and groom) followed. It was the first time that Rachla and Avram were alone together, as the married couple were permitted to eat after the day's fast.

The celebration lasted into the night with men and women dining and dancing separately to the sound of Klezmer music. In addition to relatives, Moshe Aron's guests included many of Chmielnik's most distinguished community members. It was a joyous event with the parents of the bride and groom, now one family, happy to send their offspring on their life's voyage. The following morning, Szmul Lejb and Wolca returned to Pińczów.

On August 2, 1904, in Chmielnik's city hall, a civil marriage certificate was signed in the presence of Moshe Aron and two invited witnesses. Illiterate in Russian, the bride and groom did not sign.