

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

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## Chmielnik

In June 1905, Avram and Rachla welcomed their first child into the world. They named her Malca and affectionately called her Manya. For Avram, having a child was a rite of passage to becoming a family man. New to Chmielnik, he faced several challenges. For starters, he had to be accepted by the Jutrzenkas. After living with Avram's in-laws at first, he and Rachla moved to a modest wooden house which Moshe Aron had rented for the couple. Rachla treasured the proximity to her family and friends. On Friday nights, Holidays and special occasions, they would get together for a celebration or a meal, and in the town's well-appointed synagogue, Avram sat next to his father-in-law. Moreover, Avram had to make his way in a bigger and more prosperous place than Pińczów. There, he had a circle of friends and his family's good name. Here, he had to start anew.

Perhaps Avram's biggest challenge was to provide for his new family. Like other small towns with a predominantly Jewish population in Russia's Pale of Settlement, a western region of the Russian Empire in which permanent residency by Jews was allowed, Chmielnik was a place of trade and craft. There was small-scale industry, but the craft guilds, backed up by the town's owner to whom everyone paid taxes, granted permissions and controlled all activities. There were carpenters, butchers, bakers and fabric guilds among others.<sup>1</sup> There were many small shops either under or in front of two- and single-storey buildings in which goods were produced and sold. Regional market days were held in the town's square thirteen times a year to which peasants would come to sell or trade crops and farm animals and buy everyday necessities. Some of the taxes collected stayed in town and were used for local improvements such as paving roads and digging wells.<sup>2</sup> For



2.1 The synagogue in Chmielnik was renovated and made into a museum of Jewish life in the Kielce region.

many, it was a meagre existence and an impoverished life. The poor had to be supported by charity associations run by the Kehilla, the Jewish community's association.

This was the setting in which Avram needed to start his own business. After the wedding, he and Moshe Aron discussed his intention to open a clothing store, and he visited a few potential locations. But then came an opportunity. One of Moshe Aron's acquaintances, a tanner, was looking to expand his activities and was seeking investment. It was suggested and agreed that, in return for Moshe Aron's contribution, the man would make Avram a partner and teach him the trade.

Tannery, that is, the preparation, manufacturing and trading of leather goods, dates to biblical times where it was widely used to fabricate shoes, harnesses, liquid storage and all writing materials.<sup>3</sup> At the beginning of the nineteenth century, demand for leather goods was high in Russia, where the end products were sold, making tannery a



2.2 The reconstructed altar in the synagogue in Chmielnik.

popular trade in small Jewish towns, employing many. A tanner acquired hides and pelts from peasants and readied them for the production. It was a laborious, smelly process that involved the removal of organic material using liquids, drying and at times dyeing.

With time, Avram seemed to have settled into his new vocation. He did not like the processing side of the business, especially the unbearable odours of the liquids used. Yet, purchasing raw materials and trading final goods was in essence not much different from buying and selling garments, which he knew well. Being an excellent merchant and a trader, he would travel to the surrounding towns to buy pelts, peddle products on market days and then welcome to the shop wholesalers and buyers, mostly shoemakers or harness manufacturers. He also developed his social and business network. Through his activities in the tanner's guild and the Kehilla, he expanded his circle of acquaintances

and added his voice to the discussion about hiring a new rabbi, renovating the synagogue, finding a new site for the cemetery and raising funds for charities.

His income did not offer his family a lavish existence, only the means to sustain them in relative comfort. His relations with Rachla also grew stronger and their early mutual feelings deepened. They established family routines with dinners at the Jutrzenkas, day travel to the countryside in summers or strolling with Manya on Saturday afternoons, stopping to chat with friends. Growing up in large families, they wanted to have one of their own. However, they decided to wait for a while until Avram was more established.

\* \* \*

Seven years after starting their life in Chmielnik, things changed for the Frydmans. First, Avram and his partner in the tannery business struggled. Increased local competition along with lower orders from Russian wholesalers, their biggest buyers, made it harder to generate enough income. Also, things soured between the two partners, who disagreed about trading practices and pricing.

Then, news from Pińczów told Avram that his father was in poor health and no longer active in his clothing business. Knowing his excellent trading skills, his brothers who worked with their father invited him to join them. He also learned that Pińczów was experiencing a golden age of sorts. The town's population grew to nine thousand people, of whom most were Jewish, and capital investment was pouring into local industries. A new textile fabrication plant and a cotton-fabric dyeing factory made the town the economic hub of the Sandomierz Region and a trading post with much larger cities such as Leipzig, Danzig (Gdańsk) and Breslau.<sup>4</sup> Urbanistically, the town changed as well. The wealth drew migrants, new homes were built, the town square was paved, and a new synagogue was constructed.

Avram weighed the decision. He found his brothers' offer appealing, coupled with the added advantage that in Pińczów he will be surrounded by his family, his circle of friends and would benefit from the good name that the Frydmans enjoyed. When he shared his thoughts with Rachla, she was not enthusiastic. Leaving behind her aging parents, her siblings, the town she grew up in and loved, and moving to a

new place was not a simple matter. In the end, she decided not to stand in her husband's way. After all, they would be moving to a more prosperous place, which would stand to benefit the family. She then shared her news: she was expecting.

In 1910, Avram sold his shares in the tannery business and Rachla said a teary goodbye to her loved ones and her native town. They loaded their furnishings onto a cart for the ride to Pińczów to begin another chapter in their life in a rented home. In October that year, a midwife was called to the Frydmans' home to deliver Perla, her legal name. Her given Hebrew name was Pnina, but she would be fondly known to all as Pola.

Even though only seven years had passed since Avram left Pińczów, returning was like starting anew. He was no longer his father's helper but a partner with his grown-up brothers. They each had a unique personality, and in the business, a set responsibility. He was made in charge of selling goods to merchants in the surrounding villages and selling stoles in those towns on market days. He was frugal and highly disciplined. Growing up in a home with many siblings, there was not much to go around. He hated waste, believing that one needs to set aside something for tomorrow's rainy day.

The following summer, at the age of sixty-six, Szmuel Lejb succumbed to his illness and passed away. Wolca died shortly after. Avram lost the people he adored, who guided and instilled in him skills and values.

Rachla, now mother of two, settled into her role as a housewife getting to know the large Frydman family. She made new friends whom she hosted on Holidays and special occasions. She also became familiar with the town, where a newly found prosperity led to the paving of roads. She soon found her hands full again. Three years after settling in, a midwife was called again to deliver Chaya, who would go on to be known to all as Hela.

Caring for a larger family placed an increased burden of responsibility on Avram's shoulders. To his misfortune, things did not go as hoped. The income from the partnership with his brothers did not provide sufficient means for his growing family. To a large degree, this was the impact of World War I, which led to regional economic stagnation. Pińczów, now under Austro-Hungarian occupation, was cut off from

Russia, its major market. The occupiers cared little about prosperity of the small towns in the Kielce region with a majority Jewish population, and the region fell onto hard times.<sup>5</sup> Regular plunder, humiliation, and frequent deportations affected half a million to a million Jews. This could intensify into concentrated outbursts of violence when a community, like Pińczów, was on the Russian front lines, was under Russian military rule, or during interludes when the civil authority was contested. Seventy-five thousand Jewish refugees arrived from Vienna as early as 1915.<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that the most intense and widespread pogroms tended to take place a bit further east, and all the more so at the end and immediate aftermath of World War I. Violence here was more ideologically charged than in the past, making it more unrelenting. The ideological anti-Semitism at this juncture was centred on the Judeo-Bolshevik myth – the automatic conflation of ordinary Jews with the newly empowered Bolsheviks, a common denominator between otherwise disparate and opposed anti-Semitic state (Polish) para-state (Ukrainian and White Russian), Cossack and other bandit groups.<sup>7</sup>

It was evening at the Frydmans, and Avram sat with his brothers and partners around the dining table. Rachla, holding little Hela, joined them. Together they contemplated their next move. They drew several scenarios, all of which ended up in the realization that their prospects in Pińczów were limited. The passing of their parents and seeing some of their siblings move away had eroded the family connection to the town. Their economic future in this place looked bleak. If they were to start anew and have a life of comfort, it would be in one of the rapidly mushrooming cities. Searching their fortune in another small regional town no longer made sense. They also knew that, unlike Pińczów, Warsaw and Łódź were under the more favourable German occupation. Avram's brothers, both married men, set their sights on Warsaw. They argued that more opportunities would be available in Poland's biggest city.

Thinking for a while and looking at his wife, Avram said, "If we are to leave this place, I think that our chances are better in Łódź. It is a textile town. Something that I am good at. A letter I got from a friend who moved there several years ago says that riches are waiting for you to find. You know, they say that it is the 'Manchester of the

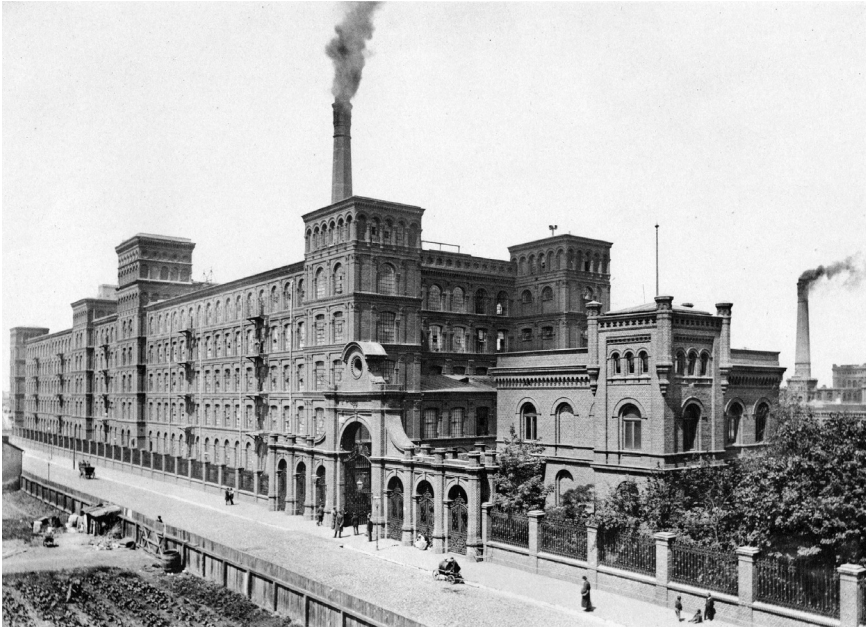
East,” referring to the English city known around the world for its high-quality fabrics. The brothers tried, to no avail, to persuade Avram to join them, but he seemed determined.

Avram and Rachla began their deliberations about a move to the big city. For both, small-town people, it was a major step. They counted the risks involved and the savings they had, which now may have included a share of selling the business in Pińczów. In the end, they agreed that given the economic circumstances, moving to Łódź would be best for their young family. More opportunities might await them in a growing metropolis, to which thousands of migrants, many of them Jews seeking a better life, were headed.

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In 1915, Avram left Pińczów en route to Łódź to find a home and a place to start a business. A train on a newly built narrow gauge rail line brought him to Chmielnik, where he boarded another train to make the two-hundred-kilometre trip, the longest he had ever taken. Passing through towns, forests and fields, he marvelled at the voyage which in earlier times would have taken him several days. The introduction of train transport was one of the notable symbols of the Industrial Revolution that had swept Western Europe decades earlier and had now reached Poland. It was a transformation that saw a nation of peasants with an agriculturally based economy welcome and embrace industry. Power stations, factories and trade led to an overnight expansion of cities and the generation of new wealth.

Łódź, a village of eight hundred inhabitants under Russian rule, was chosen in 1820 by the authorities to be the spot for the development of a textile industry that saw the transition from manual to mechanized production. Attracted by tax relief and affordable loans, many craft workers flocked to the place from Saxony, the Rhineland, the Czech lands and Prussia. Another contributing factor was the abolition of customs between the Polish territories and the Russian Empire. The feudal system also disintegrated, relieving peasants of their mandatory work for the nobility. It meant that they could now select freely where to live and work, making cities magnets for migrants from small towns and farming communities in the hinterland.<sup>7</sup>



2.3 Street view of Manufaktura, Izrael Kalmanowicz Poznański textile sprawling manufacturing plant c. 1890s. Photograph by Bronisław Wilkoszewski.

Large-scale textile manufacturing was introduced to Łódź in 1838 by Ludwik Geyer, an industrialist of German origin. He went on to build a sprawling plant powered by steam. Known as the White Factory, it was a marvel of industrial architecture and engineering, with a four-winged mill, a boiler house and a central smokestack.<sup>8</sup> Seizing the opportunity, other entrepreneurs soon followed. Karol Wilhelm Scheibler, Henryk Grossman, Chaim Wiślicki, Markus Silberstein and Izrael Kalmanowicz Poznański built their own enterprises. The latter went on to expand a modest warehouse and a shop into a thriving fabrication place of an immense scale, known as Manufaktura. Thousands of fabric-making spindles filled floors of multi-storey brick buildings. Poznański also built thousands of apartments for his employees adjacent to the plant. He became a valuable patron of the Jewish community, contributing funds to the building of many institutions and charities.<sup>9</sup>

In just a few decades Łódź's textile industry earned a continent-wide reputation for its high-quality, competitively priced fabrics and garments. Bundles of cotton and wool that arrived from afar were turned into threads which were woven into raw textile, which were then printed using roller printers.<sup>10</sup> Talented craft workers took part in all stages of production, including patterns and fashion design, in the tailoring of clothing made of cotton, silk and wool. The city was also known for its production of leather accessories such as belts, shoes and purses, some of which were fabricated in numerous cottage industry-type shops. Those shops were part of a multi-stage production process that saw partially finished items ferried across the city to an assembly place.

Łódź was called "The Promised Land" by Polish novelist Władysław Reymont, and its prosperity attracted migrants of several nationalities and origins.<sup>11</sup> The city became a melting pot for Poles, Germans and Russians and people from places like Latvia and Ukraine, who brought along their culture and language. Jews, too, came to Łódź in large numbers. The Czar's abolition of location restrictions meant that they could live anywhere on Russian territory and in cities like Łódź, rather than in small towns like Pińczów in the Pale of Settlement. By the time Avram's train reached Łódź, the population of the city numbered five hundred thousand of which 170,000 were Jewish.<sup>12</sup>

Walking the streets of Łódź, Avram was taken by the place's bursting energy. People crowded narrow streets and wide boulevards. On Piotrkowska street, one of the city's main arteries, he saw tall buildings, homes to tycoons and plant owners, and office buildings of a kind he had never seen before.<sup>13</sup> Horse-drawn carriages and trucks loaded with goods came and left factory yards, people started or ended work shifts, and tram lines passed in bustling streets, alerting passersby with a loud bell ring. It was a wide road, like Łódź's other main streets. At the top of the street the town Hall with its central clock tower and Zesłania Ducha Świętego (Descent of the Holy Spirit) church faced Plac Wolności (Liberty Square). The three-, four- and five storey-tall buildings with ornate stone facades on either side of the street were designed in the Late Renaissance style. They had large arched windows, some with porticos, at their lower floors, many of which housed a lavish store. The corners of many buildings were marked by a round extended structure with a pointed cupola. Well-dressed people sat in restaurants, enjoying

the company of each other over a meal. At night, decorative light poles illuminated the street, which made the place feel welcoming and safe.

After checking into his hotel, Avram went to meet an acquaintance whom he knew from Chmielnik to assist him in finding an apartment. Being a frugal man, he soon realized that the city's new, more wealthy sector was beyond his means. Like many Jewish immigrants, he headed to the Old Town and the adjacent Bałuty district where, at Aleksandryjska Street number 23, he rented apartment number 3, a two-room furnished apartment.<sup>14</sup> On the ground floor of another building just around the corner, he found a space with a street-front window for his future clothing business. The next morning, he boarded a train to Pińczów to tell Rachla about Łódź and what he had accomplished.