

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

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Litzmannstadt

After Chaim's departure to Russia in November 1939, the Frydmans lived under a cloud of uncertainty and fear. There was not much for Avram to do in the store, since buying clothing for festive times was not on people's minds, and being barred from the textile trade made it hard for Jews to acquire new stock. The family lived off the father's "rainy day" savings. Meir and Reuwen returned to school when it resumed sporadically, and Lea stayed at home to help her parents. Like other Jews who lived outside Bałuty, Manya, Pola, Hela and Yossel were permitted to roam the city freely, but at their own peril. Jews continued to be randomly beaten and abducted to perform degrading work. Having their hands full caring for their young children and fearing for their safety, the married daughters and son rarely came to visit.

Economically, in addition to their bank accounts being confiscated, Jews were still obliged to pay back prewar debts to lending institutions. Other draconian restrictions barred them from using public transit, which limited their movements, and they were ejected from professional associations, curtailing their ability to work. Jewish professors and students were also expelled from institutions of higher learning and others from government posts. Then, a curfew that forbade them to leave home after noon was introduced, further limiting their activities. This was followed by barring them from departing Łódź altogether, effectively making them prisoners in their homes and city.¹ Łódź being part of the Reich, the application of the Nuremberg Laws soon followed. Jews of all ages were required to affix a yellow Star of David to the front and back of their outer clothing. They were also prohibited from communal celebration of religious holidays, and being caught praying in public was severely punished. With their synagogues burnt

or blown up and *Batei Medrash* (small places of prayer) closed, there was no longer a shared place to keep the faith.²

* * *

Freeing the annexed Wartheland Province (where Łódź was located) of Jews while increasing its ethnic German population was one of key objectives of the newly appointed administration, as instructed by Berlin. A champion of the cause and the executioner of the task was Arthur Greiser, the Governor, a fanatical Nazi. As a first step, Jews were to be expelled to the General Government area. From December 1939 to spring 1940, without warning, some thirty thousand people were evicted from their homes with only basic possessions. Placed in transit camps, they were expelled using wagons into the occupied zone in the dead of winter. Arriving at small and large places, they had to look for lodging, often residing in other people's homes.³

In their place, ethnic Germans were welcomed from Volhynia, Galicia and other areas in the territories once occupied by Russia and from within the Reich. They were greeted warmly and directed to processing centres where their lodging needs were taken care of, housing many of them in homes that the Jews were forced to vacate. With the mass exodus that followed the invasion and the evictions, the size of Łódź's Jewish community dwindled from two hundred thirty-three thousand at the start of the war to some one hundred sixty thousand in early 1940, still a sizable percentage of the city's overall population.⁴ Creating an easy-to-control holding place separated from the rest of the city, as a preliminary step in the banishment of the remaining Jews, was another phase in the new rulers' strategy. Much like the anti-Semitic sentiments of earlier centuries, immediate separation was also advocated as a disease-prevention measure, as Jews were often accused of spreading disease.

The Nazi administration headed by Mayor Werner Ventzki foresaw that, once concentrated, the sizeable Jewish community was bound to pose an enormous management challenge. Attending to their daily needs and feeding them would be overly cumbersome and too costly. As a result, a decision was made to appoint a Jewish leadership group, a Judenrat (council of elders), that would run the community's affairs and execute German orders.⁵ Such a structure was not entirely foreign



6.1 Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, the Elder of Litzmannstadt Ghetto, confers with Nazi generals.

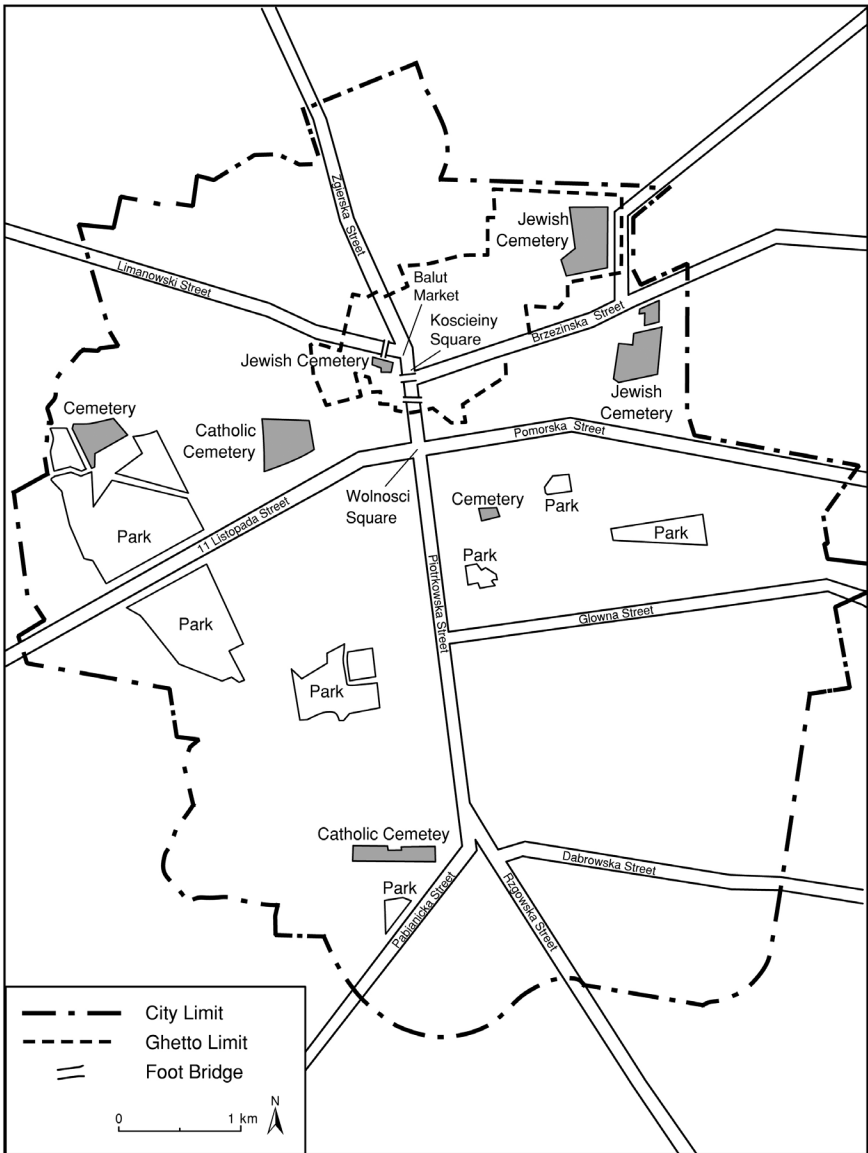
to the city's Jews, as similar tasks were assigned to the Kehilla before the war. Yet, since the leadership group had fled following the invasion, or were imprisoned or shot, a new one had to be put in its place. This body began by appointing a point man, who was to select his deputies and report to the various German authorities.⁶

Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, a widower and insurance agent, was active in Łódź's Jewish community affairs before the war. Born in 1877 in Belorussia, his education consisted mostly of a few years spent in a Cheder (Jewish schoolroom). After moving to Łódź he became involved and made a name for himself in community affairs and in particular the welfare of children, establishing and running orphanages.⁷ A man with an impressive appearance and full of self-importance, he was drawn to the heart of the crisis. When, on September 12, a vote took place for a new community leadership, Rumkowski was elected deputy. He soon took matters into his own hands, overriding the leader and presenting himself to the Germans, who appointed him as the

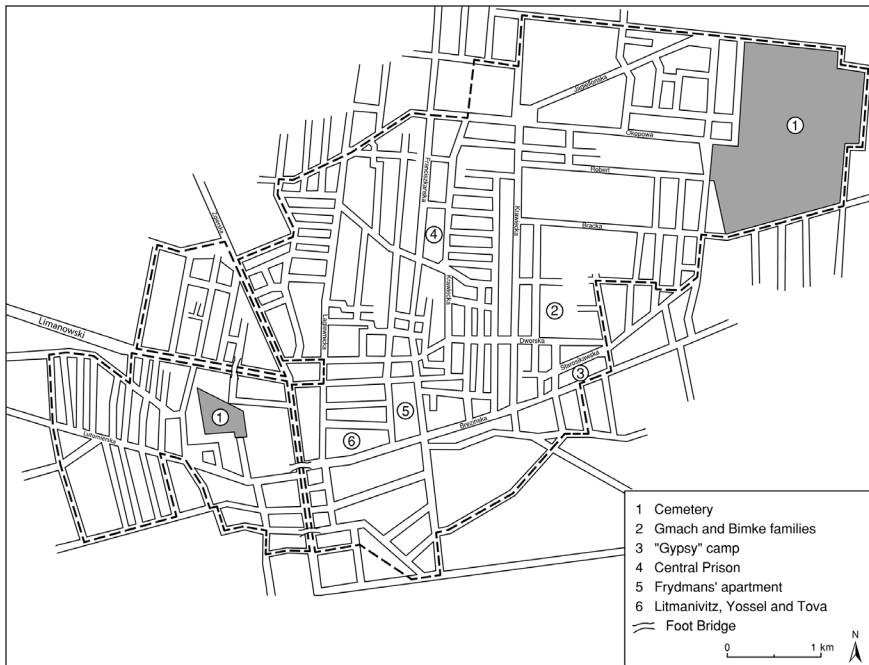
Elder of the Jews. He then moved swiftly to nominate a council which, tragically, was arrested on October 11; some were shot for no reason while others were sent to concentration camps.⁸

Under the occupying Germans' ruthless demands and their view of Jews as disposable slave labour, Rumkowski was pushed to make decisions based on horribly utilitarian conceptions of the value of life. In his decision-making process there was an increasing crescendo of the dogma of productivity, emphasizing sweatshop factory labour and mainly providing sufficient rations only to those in his circle. Łódź Ghetto survivors have described Rumkowski's personality as highly mercurial (a "Mad King") based on his deceptiveness, corruption, success in productizing the Ghetto, mixed with occasional glimmers of charity. In cultivating his self-importance, he instructed his subordinates to have his image and signature printed on the Ghetto's official currency and stamps.⁹ Rumkowski, not recognizing that the Germans needed him as a mere instrument to follow their orders and as a conduit to the community, was under the illusion that he would be able to deal with the Nazis on equal terms. He naively believed that with proper relations he could make things work out to the mutual benefit of his new masters and the people he was made to lead. Like others, he hoped that eventually things would get better once the Germans' actions fell into a routine. He soon discovered that his role was that of a servant who was asked to fulfill never-ending harsh demands and strict orders. His personal and community goals were to endure at all costs despite the hardship, while obeying instructions. To manage the community's day-to-day affairs, Rumkowski went on to appoint a new subordinate leadership group and assigned to each a responsibility that replicated a city's departments, effectively making him a mayor. The group was made of "yes" people whom he knew and who were willing to obey his orders blindly

To deal efficiently with the 'cleansing' of Jews from Łódź as their master plan directed, the Germans needed a designated area into which they could be forced. Concentrating Jews in one location was not new in history. In 1516 the Venetian authorities forced the city's Jews to live in a quarter of their own that was sealed at night, called the *Ghetto*. In the centuries that followed, other European rulers confined Jews to a specific part of town in, among other places, Frankfurt, Prague and Rome.



6.2 The Ghetto location in the city of Litzmannstadt.



6.3 A map of Litzmannstadt Ghetto. The 4.13 square kilometre area was selected among others since it already housed approximately two-thirds of the city's Jewish population.

During the war years, in German-occupied Poland and later in Russia, some one thousand ghettos were established.

The location of the Łódź Ghetto was announced on February 3 and 8, 1940.¹⁰ The four-square-kilometre area was selected from among others since it already housed approximately two-thirds of the city's Jewish population. It included the districts of Stare Miasto (old city); Bałuty, where the Frydmans lived; and Marysin, all poor districts with run-down housing at the city's northern edge. The area included numerous small workshops and several factories, and the Jewish cemetery. Many of the thirty thousand homes were single-room units much like the one that the Frydmans lived in when first arriving to Łódź,

constructed of wood. Some ninety-five per cent had no indoor plumbing, and gas and electricity were limited.¹¹

After drawing the Ghetto perimeters, the Nazi rulers did not waste time in putting their urban ethnic-cleansing agenda into action. The plan was made of two phases. The first would see non-Jews leaving their apartments and moving out of the designated area. The second was to include eviction of all Jews from locations outside the Ghetto and their resettlement within it. Given the large number of people involved in the human exchange, meticulous plans per city block and building were drawn up, and weekly orders were issued by the police. Non-Jews were ordered to report to designated assembly places with their belongings from which, in groups, they were escorted away after undergoing disinfection.¹²

Simultaneously, Jews from the city's other parts were ordered to leave behind big items such as furnishings and to congregate in specific locations with whatever they could carry in their hands, on their backs and in push carts. Upon arrival, they had to hand over the keys to their apartments, along with a list of items they left behind. Then, in groups of three hundred under armed guard, they were marched to the Ghetto. The guards were given permission to shoot anyone if they were to encounter resistance or if orders of any kind were disobeyed. Having been so abruptly uprooted, people on either end of the eviction process were bewildered and devastated, not knowing what to expect next. Scenes of parents holding crying infants and extending hands to toddlers with belongings on their back, and of old people who could not carry much, walking in the dead of winter on snow-covered cobblestone-paved streets under pointed guns, were repeated daily for several weeks.¹³

Upon arrival in the Ghetto, families were directed to an apartment that had been commandeered from Poles or ethnic Germans, left vacant by a family who fled to Russia or was expelled to the General Government areas some weeks earlier. Most of the incoming families saw their accommodation sharply diminished compared to their previous lodging, with unheated, poorly constructed buildings and no indoor plumbing. When places could no longer be assigned to a single family, several households were crammed into one.

6.4 Jews
being moved
into the
Litzmannstadt
Ghetto in
February 1940.



Despite the constant, on-schedule move to the Ghetto, the Germans were still unhappy with the pace of the Jewish resettlement. On the night of March 6-7, they initiated a brutal forced eviction. In what came to be known as Bloody Thursday, which resembled the violent acts of the first days following the invasion, Jews were literally thrown out of their apartments onto the street in a chaotic raid. Once out, two hundred slow-moving people were shot on the spot. Another group of 150, selected at random, were made to walk to a nearby forest where they were killed. Awakened in the middle of the night and fearing for their

lives, people did not have time to collect basic articles. Poorly dressed, terrified and beaten, including children and the very old, they were made to march on a wintry night into the Ghetto. The Judenrat did not dare to intervene on their behalf, possibly fearing for their own lives.¹⁴

As they already resided in Bałuty, Avram, Rachla and their three children were spared relocation. The Gmach, Bimke, and Kane families and Yossel Frydman's family, were not as fortunate. Like others, they had to obey the abrupt order to move. It was particularly hard for Manya and Pola, scheduled to move on the same day, who had, with little help, to care for their young children while readying for the march. Their husbands desperately attempted to hire a horse-drawn cart on which to load heavy belongings, but very few were available. Like most people, they carried things by hand and on push carts while leaving behind their furniture. Lea, Meir and Ruven were not permitted to come to their sisters' aid. Upon arriving at the Ghetto, fearful and exhausted, they waited for their assigned new location. Declaring themselves to be sisters, the Gmach and Bimke families asked for and were given a one-room apartment each in the same building on Towiański Street (renamed Blechgasse), number 12, a very short walking distance from their parents' home. Hela was also housed nearby. Under horrible circumstances, the Frydman daughters were made to return to the neighbourhood in which they grew up. The state of their building which formally housed poor renters was appalling, with dark kitchen, lightly painted walls, broken doors and windows and cracked uneven floors. Tova and Yossel decided to relocate with their son to the apartment of the Litmanovitches, Tova's parents' and siblings' place, on Brzezińska Street (renamed Sulzfelder), number 7, the street on which Rachla, Avram and their three children also lived.¹⁵

Much like those of other forcibly relocated families, the living conditions of the Gmach, Bimke and Kane families were horrible. It was a sad irony that saw them returning to the cramped impoverished neighbourhood where they grew up and most likely glad to leave once married. The apartments were poorly maintained even by Bałuty's standards. Like most dwellings in the district, they had to use outhouses for toilets that due to the crowded conditions filled up rapidly. Leaving behind their best furnishings and accessories, their units looked bare. They nonetheless considered themselves lucky since in many cases several



6.5 One of the Ghetto's foot bridges.

families who were late to arrive had to share apartments. Later in the Ghetto life, this led to the spread of infectious diseases.

Once forced into the designated area, an order forbidding them to leave was issued. According to plan, sealing the Ghetto was the next step. The German surrounded the entire eleven-kilometre perimeter with a barbed-wire and wood fence. Guards, placed at fifty-to-one hundred-metre intervals, were under orders to shoot anyone trying to enter, leave or smuggle goods, and those coming within fifteen metres of the fence. It was an incredibly crowded place with a density of 40,105 inhabitants per square kilometre.¹⁶ To further isolate the Ghetto from outsiders' view, buildings in several blocks were demolished to create a clear no-man's buffer, effectively turning the place into a giant isolated prison. Unlike some other Polish cities' ghettos, there were no forests around Bałuty to which people could escape and hide. Once inside

Block No. A-5 Sulzfelder Str. **Str. No. 32/34** ^{418 3}

Lauf. Nr.	Wohn. Nr.	NAME	Vorname	GESCHLECHT		Geburtsdatum	Alter
				M	W		
226	53	Frydman	Abraham	x ²		1882	58
227			Rachel		x ²	1889	52
224		Ewa Frydman	Róża	x ¹		31 8 1915	25
225			Chaim Yeman	x ¹		15 8 1918	22
226	53	Frydman	Laja		x	1922	17
227	"	"	Elżbieta Jemas	x		1925	15
228	"	"	Róża	x		1928	12
229	54	Baum	Julia		x ²	1873	67

28 **Sulzfelder Str. Nr. 32/34 (From str. 32)** ^{418 3}

Wohn. Nr.	Name	Mädchenname oder Name des Mannes	Vorname	Geschlecht		Geburtsdatum	Beruf	Frühere Adresse	Karten Nr.	Bemerkungen
				m.	w.					
52	Frydman		Abraham		F	12. 8. 1882	Handwerker	A 21	18	gut verhalten
"	Frydman		Rachela		F	1888	Handwerker		19	
"	Frydman		Róża		F	31 8 1915	Handwerker		22	Handwerker
"	Frydman		Laja		F	1922	Handwerker		23	
"	Frydman		Elżbieta Jemas		F	1925	Handwerker		24	
"	Frydman		Róża		F	1928	Handwerker		25	

6.6 Ghetto Census records of the Frydman family's apartment. Their street's name was changed from Brzezińska to Sulzfelder Strasse.

there was no way to escape. In order not to interrupt the tramway's public-transit route that crossed the zone, two inner streets were left untouched; people were only allowed to cross in two spots, and in July large wooden foot bridges were constructed over them. Non-Jewish riders could travel and through and view the place where their fellow citizens were imprisoned. On April 11, 1940, following Hitler's decree, Łódź was renamed 'Litzmannstadt' after Karl Litzmann, a German general in World War I who won an important battle in the area. Subsequently, all the city street names, including those in the Ghetto, were changed to German.

* * *

Once the Ghetto had been sealed, supplying its one hundred and sixty thousand inhabitants' daily needs become one of the main preoccupations of Litzmannstadt's Judenrat. In addition to food, other necessities such as medicine and sanitary products to prevent outbreaks of diseases that might extend beyond the Ghetto to engulf the city, had to be supplied. A special civic-administrative structure was put in place and included the city's relevant departments to oversee its management.

The responsibility for acquisition and distribution of supplies in the Ghetto was left to the Judenrat under Rumkowski. It had become clear that the Germans wanted very little to do with the running of the place beyond dealing with their point man.

A question that rose to the forefront in Litzmannstadt's administration was where the money to pay for the supplies, food primary among them, would come from. Once imprisoned, the Ghetto's local economy was diminished and the Judenrat's coffers were empty. Still, the Germans did not care and decreed that the Jews would have to pay with any money they still had, further robbing them of their remaining wealth. In the early days of the Ghetto's existence, some food was still available in stores. Sold at enormous markups to those who could afford it, it was soon gone and dependency on outside supplies became unavoidable. Finding large sums of money to pay for food and its distribution soon became a central activity of the Judenrat. A rate per person was established by the Germans and collected when products, often poor in quality, were delivered. Once delivered, the food was distributed and sold to the population by streets and buildings.¹⁷

Early on, feeding the imprisoned Ghetto's population who paid for food worked reasonably well. Soon, people ran out of savings and, believing they were hiding their money, the Germans started to employ methods to extract it from them. On May 21, a new legal tender was introduced by the authorities for use in the Ghetto only. Called the Mark-Quittungen, featuring Rumkowski's face, it forced Jews to trade in their hard currencies at an enormous loss. In parallel, violent collection means were introduced by the Kriminalpolizei (Kripo), the Nazi authorities' order arm. The notorious unit was headquartered in a building known as the Red House, just behind the now vacant St. Mary's Assumption Church. Named for the exterior red brick that distinguished it from neighboring buildings, it had a central projected single floor structure that housed the entrance way and a large central dormer in the middle of a sloped metal roof. A low brick wall with a top metal fence stood at the front. Using a network of informants, people suspected of hiding money were brought in for interrogation in the middle of the night. In specially fitted cells, they were tortured and asked to declare money they had or to reveal others who hid wealth, then escorted to their homes for collection.¹⁸



6.7 The notorious Kriminalpolizei (Kripo) unit was headquartered in a building known as the Red House, just behind St. Mary's Assumption Church.

As the Ghetto's occupants were progressively stripped of their money, Rumkowski issued a public order requesting people to bring in their valued possessions. Items like silver, gold, furs, crystal and textiles were traded for the local currency at a much-reduced value and were handed to the authorities and shipped to Germany for sale as payment for food. Another order demanded that people pay rent for the places they were forced into, but few did. Even with these measures, the Judenrat could not make up the shortfalls in the regular payments needed for food. As the situation grew desperate, some two-thirds of the Ghetto population needed to be fed. The number included people in welfare institutions such as orphanages and old-age homes and the wives of Jewish soldiers who did not return from the war. Further challenging Rumkowski, the Germans asked him to supply them with able-bodied men for forced labour. The quotas amounted to thousands. Young men, including heads of families, were either volunteered or taken against their will, or under the pretext of better living conditions taken elsewhere and sent away. The Ghetto's prison, from which Chaim was taken, was another source of manpower.¹⁹



6.8 Children labouring in one of the Ghetto's workshops.

A solution to the pressing food situation was suggested in May 1940. Recognizing that the Ghetto housed many small workshops and thousands of skilled people, Rumkowski suggested to the authorities a trade: food for work. It cemented his belief that the only path to communal survival was to demonstrate that the Jews could be made useful to the Reich's economy by employing as many people as possible. The suggestion by the head of the Judenrat caught the attention of Hans Biebow. A coffee trader from Bremen, Bibow was put in charge of the Food and Economy Office's Ghetto Division in Litzmannstadt's civic administration, effectively overseeing its supplies. Approaching interested groups in Germany, he obtained orders and raw materials that were passed on to the Ghetto administration. Chief among the clients was the Wehrmacht (army) for which uniforms, boots, gloves, belts, earmuffs and camouflage jackets were produced, among other things.²⁰

Starting with a single textile workshop and three hundred workers, the number rapidly rose to seventy-three thousand in ninety sites as more orders and materials progressively arrived. Production soon expanded to civilian goods to be sold through clothing manufacturers

and department stores throughout the Reich. These products included coats, dresses, underwear, stockings and carpets. Woodworking, paper and metal products were added later. While some of the work demanded specialized skills, most was made to follow an assembly-line process to employ many unskilled people.²¹

Using their prewar skills, members of the Frydmans' extended family were actively engaged in the workshops. Yossel's knitted-fabric manufacturing trade came in handy in the production of undergarments, which were tailored in his converted shop. Aaron Bimke's shoemaking skills were employed in boot production, as David Gmach's expertise in the making of sweaters and jackets. They were all required to have their photo taken, to register in the Ghetto's labour offices and obtain a work card. Manya, Pola and Tova (Yossel's wife) cared for their children, yet at times, some work was given to them for in-house production.

Work at the shops was gruelling and wages meagre. People, including children, laboured in cramped conditions with no ventilation and poor lighting. On their way to work at dawn they lined up to cross one of the Ghetto's foot bridges and start a labour-intensive twelve-hour shift. When proper machinery was unavailable, tasks had to be performed by hand. An attraction for the labourers was a lunchtime soup poured into a tin can that they had to carry with them. For most, it was the only food that they would have during work. In exchange for the goods produced, the Ghetto was supplied with food. Here, too, the authorities went on to establish a rate per person which was equivalent to the amount that German prisons spent on feeding each inmate. Despite the appalling conditions, people were eager to work. The fear of what might happen to those who stayed at home and, sadly, dependence on the soup, made them want to be part of this massive, slavery-like production process.²²

* * *

The days at the Frydmans, now in a Ghetto apartment, were grim, and the initial hopes that things would get better were dashed. Hunger and the struggle to put food on the table were constant. Like the rest of the Ghetto's population, the family lived off food rations. Standing in a long line for the delivery wagon to pass, Rachla collected food in

quantities equivalent to the number of household members according to the Ghetto's census. Rations included some bread, a few vegetables, noodles, artificial coffee and a bit of sugar – enough to feed a single person but not a family of five. To be eligible to receive food, Rachla applied for and obtained an ID card.²³

Lea, Meir and Reuwen, employed at the workshops, did their best to support themselves and their parents. Resourceful, with their small income and by trading valuables, the children were able to buy additional food items from smugglers in Bałuty's Rynek Square on Sundays. On one occasion Meir was able to buy half a kilo of horse meat, but Avram refused to eat it for not being kosher. Returning exhausted at day's end, dinner time was subdued. The joy and animated conversations that once filled that space were now gone. The winter was especially hard, as coal for heating was no longer delivered. Wrapping themselves up in blankets was the only way to keep warm in the drafty apartment. By decree, lights had to be turned off at 8 p.m., at which time they went to sleep. Breakfast included a hot beverage, bread and, at times, margarine. The forcible relocation of the Frydman siblings into the Ghetto united the extended family in a cruel way and rekindled some old habits. To survive they formed a bond of mutual support, especially with their aging parents. They tried to resume their get-togethers for Shabbat and holiday dinners. These were now sad-looking gatherings with grandchildren sitting on their parents' laps. The animated conversations of the past were replaced by long silences, little food to share and a need to obey orders and switch the light off when it got dark.

Worries about Chaim, who was not heard from for long periods, and about their married daughters' families, were constantly on the parents' mind. Now that they all lived in proximity to one another and a walk in Ghetto streets was less risky, mutual visits took place. Rachla, to the best she could, offered love and affection as only a grandmother could give to her very young grandchildren during unsettling days. Unlike in the past, very few children played in Bałuty's yards and streets on weekdays. The very young ones were at home and the older ones were at the workshops.

From the start of the war, Avram's state of mind was in a gradual decline. The proud, authoritative man lived through the disintegration of everything he had laboured for. The hardships that his relocated

married daughters and their families went through were difficult to bear. With his shop gone, he could no longer provide for his family or have a place to go to daily. Forbidden to gather and pray in public and with his *Shul* (synagogue) set ablaze, he was unable to meet his old country friends. Too weak to work and very thin, he lay in bed, his thoughts drifting to the brothers and sisters he left in Pińczów and to Hershel in Warsaw, wondering what was happening to them. Rachla and the children did their best to encourage him, but his depression overpowered him. He lost interest in his surroundings.

On August 22, 1941, at the age of fifty-nine, succumbing to prewar ailments, hunger and exhaustion, the patriarch of the Frydman family passed away in his sleep at 2:30 a.m.²⁴ At dawn, Lea, Meir and Ruven gathered the other family members and announced his death to the Ghetto authorities in charge of burial. Later in the morning a horse-drawn, black-painted box-like cart with two men arrived. Avram was wrapped up in his prayer shawl and taken to the cart where other people who died that night rested. The cart headed to the Jewish cemetery at the Ghetto's north-east edge where several families waited in line to bury loved ones.

The simple burial service suited the time. It took place in the large hall, a two-storey brick building with large, glazed arch façade that faced the vast burial area. The stretcher bearing the body was placed on a low, long, black-painted table in the middle of the checkered tiled floor. It faced a podium that stood under four ornate windows with yellow glass and a Star of David near the ceiling. Following the *Taharah* (ritual cleansing), and *Halbashah* with *Tachrichim* (shrouding the body with white cloth) Avram's slim body was carried on a stretcher by four pallbearers to his final resting place. From the main building, the procession solemnly passed the textile magnate Izrael Poznański's tall mausoleum and those of other community notables, tombs under rows of leafy trees. They then turned left to the new Section J, a vast area where long rows of fresh graves were dug for the many Ghetto dead. Sobbing, Rachla wore a black dress and a black scarf to cover her white hair, was supported by her daughters, and looked confused. She had lost the man she loved, to whom she was married for thirty-seven years, and who she had followed to Pińczów and Łódź. And with whom she bore nine children. Arriving at Row 7 and the grave site, Avram

was lowered into the ground, and each child took part in covering him with soil. His three sons recited the Mourners' Kaddish (a prayer for the dead). Their clothing, to which front and back yellow Stars of David were attached, were torn as part of the Keriah (the rending of garments, a Jewish expression of grief). They were unable to fully follow the Shiva (seven days of mourning) as they needed to return to their workplaces. No stone was laid on Avram's grave.