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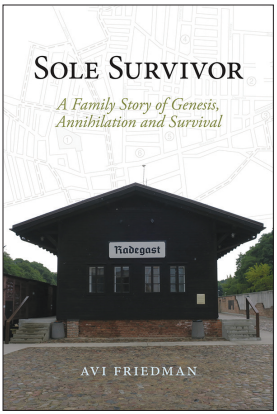

SOLE SURVIVOR: A FAMILY STORY OF GENESIS, ANNIHILATION AND SURVIVAL

by Avi Friedman

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Łódź

Two weeks after Avram returned from Łódź, the Frydmans departed Pińczów to write a new chapter in their lives. Avram bid farewell to his family, and Rachla to her friends. They were young, had some savings, and were headed to a place of promise. Now a family of five, they carried with them essential belongings for a start in a new living place. Manya, just ten years old, helped her mother care for little Pola and Hela during the train voyage.

In Łódź, they settled in and gradually grew accustomed to Bałuty, their new neighbourhood. Built for newcomers like them in the 1850s beyond Łódź's city limits, it was a poorly planned and crowded district. It grew haphazardly without a master plan, running water or sewer lines. It had a dense network of streets, some cobblestone-paved, with alleys and passages that ran in all directions. Rows of four- and five-storey grimy-looking grey plastered apartment buildings projected their balconies over the streets. Many of the place's original wooden structures were also densely occupied. The attached structures formed a continuous wall interrupted only by a tunnel-like entrance that led to a stairway. Stores occupied many of the street corners where food and household goods were sold. More ornate buildings lined the wide Zgierska Street, the neighbourhood main avenue, with small stores occupying their lower level. There, in between the tall buildings, stood clusters of poor-looking single-floor buildings. It was an odd-looking mix of structures.

The Frydmans' L-shaped building enclosed a yard with several outhouses and a water pump for use by all the occupants. A short walk from the street under a passageway led to a wooden stairwell. Upper floors had several apartments on each level with either a street or a yard

3.1 The Frydmans' first residence on Aleksandryjska Street as seen today.

view. Their apartment had a large living space off the main entrance that doubled as a dining area. A cooking nook with a coal-burning stove, a sink and a small window was in the space's corner. A short hallway linked two bedrooms and a bathroom with the living area. The building had electricity and was heated by a central coal-burning boiler. Since the poorly constructed exterior walls had no insulation, the apartment was still drafty, and in Łódź's winters, where the temperature drops to -20°C, warm clothing was worn indoors.

It was a bustling district with people going in and coming out of buildings, children playing in streets and yards, or standing on corners with a tray of homemade baked goods for sale. Men, whom Avram joined at times, gathered to talk politics, marvelled at the wealth of

the textile tycoons, or caught up on news from places they had left behind. In summertime people sat on balconies to watch the commotion below and women hung laundry across the yard or placed bedding on windowsills to freshen up. In winters, the building's caretaker would clear snow off the sidewalk in front and shovel coal into the boiler room from delivery carts. Rachla bought kosher food in corner stores and fresh produce from peasants who came in horse-drawn carriages which passed by regularly.

Jews made up the bulk of Bałuty's population, which also included people of Polish and German heritage. Despite the tall, crowded buildings, the place had a *shtetl* (small Jewish village)-like atmosphere, with Yiddish spoken by most. Rachla had no difficulty fitting in, making new friends with migrants of a background like hers. Aleksandryjska, their street, was known affectionately as Mordeche Gabos Street, after the man who cared for the synagogue and extended a helping hand to the needy. They lived a short distance away from Łódź's main synagogue, which was constructed in 1887 with the support of several wealthy factory owners. It was an impressive neo-Romanesque-style building with an articulated façade and lavish interior that towered over the square in front. The congregation ran a progressive service for members attempting to adapt their appearance and practices to the non-Jewish population.[1] Avram, a traditionalist, kept to his old ways and prayed in a smaller more modest Shul (synagogue) that suited his practices and whose membership fees he could afford.

A short distance from where the Frydmans lived was a vivid reminder of the towns that they had left behind. Stary Rynek (old market square) was the place for weekly market days and two major annual fairs; it had become Bałuty's and one of Łódź's more important commercial and social hubs. The vast area was framed by a two- and three-storey arcade of identical plaster-covered buildings with stores under the residences. The heart of the square had rows of shabby-looking stalls loaded with fruits and vegetables, meat, baked and cooked food, clothing and everyday wear. Yiddish and Polish were the main languages of trade. It was a place to which the penny-pinching locals went to buy used suits or shoes. A tram line traversed the western edge of the square along Brzezińska Street and linked Bałuty with the more affluent part of the city.[2] A short distance away from the Stary Rynek

stood the St. Mary's Assumption's Church. The very tall red brick church with two symmetrical spires designed in neo-Gothic style dominated the street.

From the market square, one could spot the textile magnate Izrael Poznanski's lavish residential palace and nearby, also outlandish, the homes of his sons Karol and Maurycy. The residences were adjacent to Manufaktura, Poznanski's manufacturing textile complex, with its ornate gates, long red-brick buildings with tall smokestacks in which workers laboured day and night. It was a sprawling place with large buildings of various sizes, all with large windows, that followed the design style of industrial for textile production of the era. Their wooden floors were supported by round columns with many textile fabrication machines placed in between. It was a self-sustaining complex with its own fire station and fire brigade. Across the street from the Manufaktura stood a row of highly utilitarian looking four- and five-storey buildings, also built with dark red brick, that housed the labourers.

* * *

Soon after arriving in Łódź, Avram started his clothing business. While still better than Pińczów, it was a challenging time to thrive in a city that, a year into World War I, was run by its German occupiers. Following several victories on the Western front, Germany relocated it troops eastward to defeat Russia. After the battle of Łódź, the Austro-Hungarian and German armies conquered much of Congress Poland's lands. They established a General Governorate entrusted with managing the city's economy and creating employment, which was not an easy task.[3]

The war severely undermined Poland's prime textile centre. First, Russia, the main export market, was closed. Selling to other West European nations, Germany's rivals, was not possible. Then, credit to replace aging machinery dried up. On top of it, fearing competition from lower-cost Polish goods, the German textile industry lobbied its government to impose strict limits on the amount of raw material that could reach Łódź, as well as the flow of replacement parts and the removal of some machinery all together.[4] It dealt a blow to the industry and to workers that only a few decades earlier had flocked to the city in

search of a better life. Factories, including Poznanski's, now run by his sons, sat idle or worked at a much lower capacity. Many labourers returned to their native lands, while others, including Jewish craftsmen, were reduced to an impoverished life in Bałuty. In some Polish territories, the German occupiers introduced a forced-labour system that contributed to the development of war-related infrastructure such as rail lines; many were sent to work in Germany.[5] To the benefit of Łódź's Jews, the Germans lessened or abolished the civil-rights restrictions that were put in place by the Czarist regime. In 1916, a formal recognition of the Jews as a religious community was introduced, giving them voting rights.[6]

Despite the hardship, Avram's menswear business was little affected. By then, enough customers lived in the district to support a steady local economy. He also sold to peasants who came to Łódź from the surrounding villages on market days, or he travelled to sell to them on their annual-fair days. An experienced salesman, he could tell a client's intention from the moment they walked into his store and knew how to make a garment look good on them. He was a master tradesman, believing that once an item was tried on and liked, it must be purchased. Years of apprenticeship with his father and experience gained on his own prepared him to do well and provide for his family.

* * *

The early years in Bałuty were good for the Frydmans. They settled among people of a similar background and faith, benefiting from a well-established social and religious network. By law they had to pay mandatory taxes and fees to the Kehillah. As in Pińczów, the Jews expected little from the central and the municipal governments and counted on their own wealth and initiatives. Their elected community governance included people from a range of political affiliations, from the orthodox Agudat Israel to the left-leaning Bund and the Zionists, who followed the teaching and vision of Theodor Herzl that the land of Israel was the best place for the rebirth of the Jewish people in a state run on their own.[7]

During the textile manufacturing golden age, wealthy Jewish industrialists contributed generously to the community's welfare. Among the institutions built were a cemetery, a mental asylum, an old age

home, several orphanages, children's boarding schools, a hospital, a tuberculosis sanatorium, district clinics, a hospice for the poor and financial support systems such as interest-free loan associations for those who fell on hard times. These initiatives and institutions led to a semi-autonomous existence sheltered from political tendencies or the anti-Semitic sentiments of the day.[8] It was in this relative comfort that the Frydman family grew. On a winter day in 1916, a boy was born. They named him Szmul-Yosef, partially after Avram's beloved father, and affectionately called him Yossel. Another boy was born in May two years later. It was a premature birth that saw the child's life miraculously saved. The parents were hoping to name him Syzman, but as customary at the time, they added a second name, Chaim (life), by which he would be known. The mother, helped by her daughters, had her hands full once more.

Chaim's birth year coincided with a notable milestone in Poland's history. On November 11, 1918, World War I ended; the Treaty of Versailles was signed the following year. After more than a century, it re-established Poland as an independent nation. The boundaries included most of the Kingdom of Poland's old lands and added others, all divided into seventeen provinces. A former freedom fighter and military leader, Józef Piłsudski, was made the head of state in what would be known as the Second Polish Republic.[9] After a period of stagnation, the departure of the German occupiers led to the resurgence of Łódź's textile industry. The employment of labourers and craftspeople remained, although well below the rate of its earlier fat decades.

Poland seemed to have reached a period of stability and prosperity, and so did the Frydmans. More children were born in the years that followed. Wolca, named after Avram's beloved mother, was born in 1921. Lea was born in 1923, Meir-Jonas in 1925 and Ruben in 1928. When his last child was born, Avram was forty-six years old, Rachla forty-two, and their family was complete. The Frydmans' large household was typical of many in Bałuty. Rooted in culture and religion, traditionalist Jews lived by the *pru urvu* command of the Torah (in Genesis) to increase their number on earth. Rachla and Avram, who had many siblings, also wanted to have a large family of their own, a source of enjoyment in old age.

3.2 A model showing the Frydmans second address in Łódź's in a court near Brzezińska Street. The building no longer exists.

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In 1929, the Frydmans moved to Brzezińska Street, number 32/34, apartment 53. Still in Bałuty, a short distance away from their first address, it was unlike their previous building. The long two-storey wooden structure was nestled between four-storey masonry apartment buildings. It had a pitched roof with a dormer in its centre and seemed to be the afterthought of a late urban planning decision. The spacious apartment had four bedrooms, living and dining rooms, a kitchen and a bathroom. Water and sanitation were still only available in the common court where a long row of single-storey outhouses stood. It was a crowded apartment with several children sharing rooms and beds. There were many toddlers to care for, with the older ones looking after the younger. Brzezińska was a bustling, wide street with rows of

low-rise brown wooden commercial structures with pitched roofs between taller cement-plastered buildings and a tram line that ran in the middle. Down the street, the two tall steeples of the red-brick St. Mary's Assumption's Church towered over the road and the neighbourhood.

The new home was the place in which the large family grew united. Friday night and Shabbat dinners were cherished, and holiday celebrations were particularly festive. On these days, Rachla hurried to wrap up cleaning, shopping and cooking. The stairwell of their building swelled with aromas of traditional cooking and baking. On Friday evening, after Avram and his children returned from evening prayers, they sat around a long white, cloth-draped table. Shiny silverware was on display for use. Rachla, surrounded by her daughters, lit and blessed the candles and Avram, holding a cup of wine, recited the *Kiddush* (blessing over the wine and sanctification of the day for Shabbat). The handwashing ritual followed and *Hamotzi*, the blessing of the bread, was said on a freshly baked challah. Then, the meal that they all craved was served, at the end of which they joined Avram in songs and prayers.

The neighbourhood also displayed a joyous, relaxed demeanour. On Shabbat, the streets and squares of Bałuty were crowded. Men in traditional attire and women and girls in long dresses walked to one of the many synagogues, met friends or went out for a stroll when the weather permitted. At midday the Frydmans gathered again around the dining table to eat Tcholent, Rachla's hot meat and potato stew. Since it was forbidden to cook on the Shabbat, on Friday afternoon a pot would be taken to a public oven, cooked slowly and brought home for lunch. Other holidays were celebrated memorably as well. Each holiday came with its own set of rituals and traditional food which Rachla mastered. The Jewish new year, Rosh Hashana, saw homes dressed up and new clothing purchased, while at Hanukah menorahs were placed on windowsills. During Passover the home would be meticulously cleaned, and a special set of dishes used. With bakeries closed, matzah (unleavened bread) was eaten instead.

Being a multifaith city, Christian holidays were celebrated in other parts of Łódź and among the non-Jewish residents of Bałuty. The city was lavishly decorated, and Christmas trees and strings of lights were on display over streets, in public places, storefronts and homes. It was

Avram's busiest season at the store, with many locals welcoming the year in new clothing.

* * *

With the passing years, the children grew up to display their unique personalities, also shaped by their parents. The father's time and role were devoted to putting food on the table for his large family. He would leave home after morning prayers to return at dinner time, trusting the daily aspects of running the home to his wife. At home, nothing was to be wasted. Older children's clothing was passed on to young ones. A disciplinarian, Avram expected the children to follow his religious practices, good manners and to contribute to the best of their ability to running the household. On market days in neighbouring towns, he would be joined by his sons Yossel and Chaim. Sitting atop a horse-drawn cart loaded with goods for the overnight ride, they would set up a stall in the morning and learn trade practices, much as his father had done before.

Rachla was an industrious, gentle, warm and generous person who saw into her children's minds and hearts, the way only a mother could. She held the family together. While also looking after several toddlers, she attended to her adolescent children's daily needs. At times she stepped in to guard a child from Avram's wrath and at others she acted as a go-between for her children. When her daughters grew up, she was the one to advise them on matters of the heart and made sure they toed the modest lines that the faith, to which she and husband adhered, expected. Some of the children took after Avram's level-headed and rational manners, while others displayed a softer side. Growing up in a crowded household they had to make room for themselves if they wanted to get noticed and gain the favour of their parents. Manya, the oldest, was a "take charge" type of person, her mother's trusted helping hand.

The formal education they received set the Frydman children apart from earlier generations. Like their parents, at a young age they frequented a Cheder (study room) where they were tutored to read the Hebrew scriptures. Growing up, like most of Łódź's Jewish children, they attended public schools where they were taught secular subjects and instructed in Polish, a language that their parents, who spoke

mostly Yiddish, were not formally taught in their native towns. The city's large Jewish population justified the establishment of, and it financed, specialized schools. In 1912, the first Hebrew secondary school (a Gymnasium) was founded, and in 1918 a Yiddish school welcomed students.[10] The opening of other schools followed, often taking after the political associations that funded them, creating a rich tapestry of educational options and subjects. Another marked difference from earlier times was girls' education, which few had received prior to World War I.[11] In addition to the boys, the five Frydman daughters joined the many women who attended public schools.

Education was only one of the pillars of Łódź 's rich Jewish cultural life. The city became a vibrant centre of literary, theatrical and other artistic endeavours. Daily newspapers and newsletters were published in Hebrew, Yiddish and Polish as well as rabbinical texts, prose and poetry collections. Theatres such as the Groyse and Skala hosted renowned stage personalities, and musicians performed original plays and scores such as Szymon Ansky's *Dybbuk*. Smaller venues hosted comedy sketches such as those by the duo Drzygan and Szumacher. Jewish movie producers and directors helped develop the Polish film industry. Painters and sculptors also made their contribution to the local artistic scene.[12]

Unlike the Shtetl, where education and cultural opportunities were limited and to some degree confining, life in the big city exposed the young to new thoughts and expressions and personal relations with non-Jews. There were also assimilation tendencies, a desire to cast aside the external markings that distinguished them from the general population, a common cause of anti-Semitism. A fault line emerged between Avram's and Rachla's generation; their children wanted to keep up with the times and leave behind traditions which they regarded as relics from a distant past. Being educated and knowing Polish, the children had an advantage of a sort over their parents.

The Frydman children wanting to move away from traditional life is part of the prevalence of intergenerational conflict in interwar Poland, especially in major urban areas such as Łódź. The tendency was for the father's traditional authority to be pushed back against, a yielding to discourses of modernity such as Zionism and socialism.[13] Quite importantly, the linguistic aspect of the divide between generations

heightened this phenomenon – youth usually spoke authoritative Polish, while adults spoke intimate Yiddish. Secularized young Polish Jews often looked down upon traditional religious garb, which was still quite common, even in large urban areas.[14]

The generational conflict found an expression in a desire of the girls to wear modern dresses and of the boys to go out without a traditional Jewish cap or to avoid joining Avram for synagogue services on the Shabbat. Whereas for the parents Bałuty was the geographic centre of their existence, when their children grew up, they found a job and became less dependent on their parents' support. They ventured beyond their district to meet people their age, to visit a movie theatre, dance halls or just stroll along Piotrkowska Street on Saturday evenings. Avram was hopeless in redirecting them to his old ways. A disciplinarian that he was, he gave them a silent look or ignored them altogether.

* * *

On a spring day in 1932 Wolca, then nine years old, returned home from school telling Rachla that she was not feeling well. She pointed to her lower abdomen and complained about persistent pain. The mother touched her child's forehead. Sensing a slight fever, the mother suggested that Wolca lie down and offered her a cup of tea and a pain remedy. A mother of nine, she was not alarmed. The pain persisted and got worse. Wolca could be heard crying out loud as her belly became swollen. Pola and Hela set on the bed to comfort her. Rachla sent Manya to call in a local medic who treated her children on occasion. A stern-looking man carrying a bag arrived shortly after. He talked to the crying Wolca and felt her stomach. Avram arrived and was told by his wife about the goings-on. The other children gathered to catch a glimpse of the conversation. The medic conferred with the parents and said that Wolca was experiencing the effect of food poisoning. He gave her some medication and suggested that a heated lid of a pot wrapped in a towel be placed on her stomach to ease the pain. He assured them that the pain would subside overnight. He promised to visit early in the morning. The mother rushed to do as told. As the hours past, the pain kept worsening and Wolca's cry grew louder, as she experienced severe diarrhea and vomiting.

When the day broke, Avram and Rachla were worrying and at a loss. The medic returned, examined Wolca and suggested she be taken at once to the nearby Anna-Maria children's hospital. An ambulance was called. Upon arrival she was taken to the emergency ward for examination. Anxious, the parents, accompanied by Manya, waited outside. Hours later, a doctor stepped out to see them. In Polish, in a laconic tone, he told them that their child's appendix had ruptured, and that the infection had spread throughout her abdomen. It was too late for surgery, he added, noting that they gave the best that the medical services of the place could offer. Manya translated some medical terms. He offered another sobering assessment that their daughter would not survive. The three broke down crying. If only they could have brought her to the hospital earlier, they thought. After a short discussion, the parents decided that it would be best to bring Wolca home where she could pass away peacefully.[15]

On April 8, in row 14, grave 5 of Łódź's Jewish cemetery, the Frydmans buried their daughter and sister.[16] Avram, heartbroken, said Kaddish for a child he named after his beloved mother. In a graveside ritual, a rabbi talked about the kind heart and the smile that Wolca displayed during her young life. They returned home to mourn their loss in a *Shiva* (the traditional seven days of mourning).

* * *

The passing of time helped dull the sorrow of Wolca's death. Her cheerful smile and kindness were etched in everyone's memory as life's stream continued to flow. Avram's short beard turned grey and his dark eyes seemed to have deepened. He still laboured hard to provide for his family but kept more to himself. Losing a child changed Rachla in some ways. She kept the family anchored to life's routines, but her beautiful face wrinkled, and white lines were visible in her blond hair.

The Frydmans now knew their way well around Bałuty and Łódź. There were starts and ends of school years, holidays and personal celebrations. When Yossel and Chaim turned thirteen, they had their Bar Mitzva (the right of passage to adulthood) with a Torah reading and Kiddush (informal reception) at the synagogue and a festive dinner at home to which guests were invited.

When the children grew up and ended their schooling, as was expected, they found employment and contributed to the running of the household. Manya, Pola and Hela found clerical jobs, while Yossel worked in his father's clothing store. Chaim, using his father's connections, worked in the Frankel dyeing factory accompanying a truck driver on the delivery of fabric rolls to garment manufacturers around town. Taking after their father, they kept some of their earnings for tomorrow's rainy day. The younger ones Meir, Lea and Reuwen, still attended school.

Then, the time to start new families had come. Unlike their parents, the three older Frydman daughters did not follow their parents' mating rituals. Being a city with a large Jewish population, there was no need to search a suitor in other towns. Young men and women attended community events and celebrations in which they spotted each other, found out about them or were introduced to them by a friend or a relative. They often talked afterwards. At times, the service of a matchmaker was called on; while getting parents' permission to meet others was still a must, modern practices began to settle in.

Rachla and Avram met would-be grooms to measure their maturity, character and ability to provide for their future families and, of course, they highlighted their daughters' skills and qualities. There were also meetings with parents where Avram, this time on the giving end, was asked about his material contribution to the newlyweds' start of life together. Like their parents, the Frydmans were good in preparation for and in attending these meetings. Commonly the grooms were sons of migrants from small towns who came to Łódź seeking a better future and did well.

Pola got married first. Her husband, Aron Szmul Bimke, managed a small shoe-making factory with his father. Then it was Manya's turn. She wed David Gmach, whose family had a sweater-making shop. Hela, loved by all for her wit and admired for her beauty, married into the Kane family, who had a shoe store and owned properties. Yossel married Tova Litmanowitcz and with his in-laws help started a shop for knitted fabrics.

These were happy years and Rachla and Avram had their hands full. There were wedding celebrations to plan and hearts to fill with joy. For the mother it was hard to see them depart. The three newlyweds not

only left their home but also the crowded streets and alleys of Bałuty to move into the new and more affluent parts of Łódź. They still came to holiday festivities at their parents but less often, as time needed to be shared with their in-laws. But soon Manya and Pola were busy, too.

In the ensuing years another generation joined the world. Pola and Aron Szmul become parents to Israel Mose and Sura Rojsza, Manya and David welcomed Mojsze, and Yossel and Tova become parents to a baby boy name Avram Chaim. It was the turn of the Frydman daughters and sons to instill in their young families the values that guided their own upbringing, including kindness, hard work and discipline. Rachla and Avram waited for Saturday afternoons to see their married daughters and their grandchildren. Rachla showered the young ones with warm hugs and sweets. On holidays there was a large gathering of married siblings, their spouses and children who joined those who still lived at home.