

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

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## Białystok

Emotions ran high when Chaim entered his home. After not knowing his whereabouts since the start of the war, for his family it was as if he had come back from the dead. Unshaven, dirty, skinny and still dressed in peasant clothes, it seemed as if a man different from the one who left for duty a few months earlier had just walked in. It was Saturday night and the family had just finished dinner. Rachla brought more food. Sounding sober and mature, Chaim talked about his training, places he had been since the start of the war, and the fighting. He described the shelling, and the bombed-out towns he passed through on his way home. Recalling the dead, the fleeing marchers on the roadsides and the possible execution of Jewish soldiers, he speculated about what the Germans were capable of doing in Łódź.

His parents and siblings described the horrors that Łódź's Jews had experienced since the invasion. They lived under the daily decrees, noting that they hardly left home. Avram told them about the textile industry's uncertain future. There was anxiety in their voices and fear of the unknown. Rachla said that Manya, Pola, Hela, Yossel and their families were safe. She added that, when Chaim was away, Manya and David Gmach had welcomed Rywka into the world. The Bimkes also had a daughter who was named Wolca after the sister Pola lost, and Yossel and Tova Frydman had a son whom they named Abram Chaim. The conversation spilled into the late evening, after which Chaim washed and went to bed, his mind still racing.

When Chaim woke up, he saw his father praying. The family sat for breakfast.

"Hearing your stories, I am very concerned," Avram started. "I heard people saying that the Germans are looking for Polish officers

and soldiers who did not formally surrender and who had entered Łódź. If someone told the authorities that you are here, you would be taken away or at worst be killed.”

There was quiet. Chaim thought for a moment and then asked, “What shall I do?”

“Run away,” Avram answered, bluntly telling him about the mass exodus and naming people he knew who left. “Everyone who can is escaping to Russia. They are letting Jews in. You are single, have no business and nothing to lose.”

Looking at his father, the thought of leaving did not enter his mind. Fresh in his memory were the horrors from which he had just fled. Why should he go again? He was in the comfort of home and family and knew his way around Łódź. “Looking for former soldiers” sounded exaggerated.

“This is how all new rulers act,” Chaim said. “Hard times at first, then they subside as time passes. Poland is not Germany. Things will get better.”

“Go to see your brother Yossel,” Avram insisted. “Maybe the two of you can go together.”

It was late afternoon, dark and cold, when Chaim went to Yossel’s shop. The place, usually crowded with buyers on Sunday afternoons, was silent. Sitting in his office, with unsold rolls of fabric laid on shelves and leaned up against walls, Yossel’s face lit up. The brothers hugged. Chaim recalled his war stories. Yossel, a chain-smoker, listened quietly, holding his bearded chin. Reflecting, he said that he was not sure about his own and the city’s future. Chaim talked about their father’s suggestion.

“If I change my mind and go, will you join me?” Chaim asked.

“Leaving – it is not so simple,” Yossel said, and suggested they walk to his apartment and see his wife, Tova.

It was dark, and the streets were deserted. Tova greeted them. She noted the weight Chaim had lost and suggested he join them for dinner. Chaim recalled his story and Tova listened, holding little Abram.

“*Tovche*,” Yossel said to his wife, “My father suggested that Chaim and I leave for Russia. The two of us can go, find a place, settle, then send for you and our son Abram Chaim. What do you think?”

Looking at her husband and her brother-in-law, Tova said. “How can you suggest that? I cannot leave my parents, brothers and sister! My disabled father needs me. Besides, we have a small child. Travelling is never simple with an infant, not to mention your business.” She was adamant. Coming to his brother’s defence, Chaim said, “We are young and have some money. I saw what the Nazis can do. When things get better, we will return.” Looking at Chaim angrily, Tova said “Are you here to create a split between us? Running away is not for us. Things will get better. I know that much.”

They dined quietly.

\* \* \*

Trying to go unnoticed, there was not much for Chaim to do in the days after his return. In early November 1939 Łódź was a different place from the city he had left eight months earlier. Posters announcing new decrees were mounted daily on Bałuty’s walls, and random acts of violence against Jews continued. Meir, Reuwen and Lea stopped attending their schools, which were ordered to close. Chaim helped his father in the store, but given the uncertainty, decrees and fear, there were few customers. In the evenings he went to visit his married sisters, who did not venture out much, either. He also met some friends with whom he shared his thoughts about going away.

On November 9, Łódź, part of the Wartheland territory, was officially annexed to the Reich. The reign of terror also intensified. The following day more than twenty Jews, mostly artists who frequented the Café Astoria, were rounded up and shot to death. November 11, Poland’s Independence Day, was particularly brutal. All members of the Judenrat (the Jewish community’s governing council) were arrested and imprisoned. On the same day some fifteen hundred Poles and Jews were jailed, three of whom were publicly hanged in Bałuty. Public hanging, uncommon in Łódź, sent shock waves and prompted deep fear. In mid-November Łódź’s impressive main synagogue was blown up and others were set ablaze by the Nazis. More stories circulated about city-wide random looting of Jewish homes and businesses and beatings of people.<sup>1</sup>

Witnessing recent events, Chaim did not need more convincing; he heeded his father’s advice to leave. He was deeply worried about the

family he was about to leave behind, but Avram insisted that he should go at once. He was now convinced that, as a former soldier, he would be imprisoned or shot if caught. In the evening, he went to bid goodbye to Yossel and meet his two friends who had also contemplated leaving. The three agreed to meet in Łódź's train station the following day and board a train headed to the Soviet border via Warsaw, a route that thousands had taken in the preceding weeks.

There were cries and hugs at the Frydmans' home the morning when Chaim left and talk of reuniting in better times. Avram gave Chaim a thousand złoty, which he hid in his belt. He also gave him the address of his brother Hershel in Warsaw and suggested he stop by. Not knowing where he would end up, Chaim wore his warmest clothing but packed only a few belongings in a small suitcase. He left early the following day.

\* \* \*

In the aftermath of the German conquest, Poland's railroad was still in service. Chaim and his friends boarded the train for the one-hundred-fifty-kilometre ride to Warsaw. The voyage lasted longer than usual, stopping to let German trains pass, loaded with heavy military equipment and soldiers travelling back to Germany. The trees were bare, and a thin layer of snow covered the meadows that stretched on either side of the tracks. The cars were crowded with people, many of them Jews fleeing Łódź. Entire families, some accompanied by older members, carried belongings on which they sat. Seeing them once more, Chaim's thoughts wandered to his family, worrying about what awaited them.

It was midnight when the train pulled into Poland's capital Warsaw's station. Chaim parted ways with his friends who went to stay with relatives of their own. At the station he got directions to his uncle's home. The streets were deserted, and Nazi flags were draped on buildings. He walked by bombed-out buildings and others that seemed deserted.

Unlike Łódź, during the war's brutal offensive Warsaw was placed under siege and endured heavy bombardments from air and land, causing thousands of casualties. The attackers spared no mercy, reducing water works, hospitals, markets and schools to rubble. Some 10 per cent of all buildings were destroyed and forty per cent damaged. The defenders fought heroically but crumbled when the Russians opened

the Eastern Front. Polish troops had to be diverted or ran out of ammunition and surrendered on September 27. The Warsaw region was not annexed but became an occupied territory known as the General Government.<sup>2</sup>

The upscale six-storey row buildings in the district where his uncle lived looked like fortresses. The ornate stone façade had a large wooden arched door in its centre. In the large door, there was a smaller entry door through which the building's occupants entered. They were served by a porter who resided on the ground floor next to the entry. Arriving at the apartment building, Chaim rang a bell. A light turned on in the porter's apartment. While waiting, Chaim reflected on the moment and the circumstances: his first visit to the capital and to an uncle he had never met, and of whom he had only heard stories, was taking place in a war and at the middle of night. Minutes later, the building's custodian stepped out.

"What do you want at this late hour?" he asked, frightened.

"I am from Łódź and here to visit my uncle Hershel Frydman," Chaim answered.

"They are on the second floor," the man answered. Chaim tipped him and entered. Knocking on his uncle's door, Chaim could hear a fearful conversation between a man and a woman in Yiddish.

"Who are you?" A man's voice sounded from the inside.

"My name is Chaim. I am Avram's son," he answered, "I just arrived from Łódź."

The door opened a crack, then wider, and Chaim walked in. He was greeted warmly.

"It is very late. Let's sleep now," Hershel said, "We will talk in the morning."

\* \* \*

Hershel and Mendel had arrived in Warsaw with their spouses and children around the time their brother had settled in Łódź. They did very well there. Hershel left the textile trade when an opportunity came along to buy a candy factory. Mendel joined the textile manufacturing trade with great success. Wealthy, in the mid-1930s he decided to emigrate to Palestine with his wife and young son and daughter, leaving his thriving business and properties to his two older sons.

When morning broke, Hershel gave Chaim *Tefillin* (a set of small black leather boxes containing scrolls inscribed with verses from the Torah), a shawl and a Siddur for the morning prayer. They sat down for breakfast. Chaim talked about his family, his war experience, and the horrors Jews were experiencing in Łódź that had prompted, with his father's encouragement, his decision to leave and this visit. Hershel, who resembled Avram and had a short beard, talked about his family, the war's first days in Warsaw and the decrees that were introduced since then.

"My son left for Russia yesterday. God knows how he is doing," Hershel said. His uncle suggested he introduce him to Shimon, Mendel's son, to whom they went later that morning. Shimon was happy to meet his cousin. They spoke about the odd circumstances of their meeting.

"Why aren't we going to Russia like everyone else?" Chaim asked.

"How can I?" Shimon asked, "I have a young family, properties, a factory full of merchandise and employees. Leaving it all abruptly is not easy. The beginning of wars is always bad. With time things will get better and return to normal," he said.

Chaim, who had heard this argument on several occasions, thought that maybe Shimon would be right after all.

\* \* \*

The following day, Chaim boarded a train to the Chichev stop, the last on the line that ran through the German-controlled territory, from which he was planning to reach Białystok on foot. He selected this crossing place since it was the closest to and the only one to which a train arrived from Łódź. It was also known to be a place where the Russians let refugees enter easily. Much like on the first leg of his voyage, the train was crowded with people, many of them Jews, escaping from many cities in German-occupied Poland. Some were dressed up, as if they were headed to an important meeting. It was a cold day with temperatures hovering around the freezing point.

The territory to which Chaim was headed was established in the aftermath of the German-Soviet agreement, better known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. It stated that the objective of the signing parties was "to establish peace and order in the territory of the disintegrated Polish State and to secure for the nationalities living there a

peaceful existence on the basis of their national particularities.”<sup>3</sup> A separation line between the two nations was drawn, one that ran from the Hungarian border and followed the San River, turned eastward, then ran along the Bug River to Brest-Litovsk toward the town of Chichev, and continued north all the way to Lithuania. The Soviet area included several provinces, among them Wilno (Vilna) and Białystok.<sup>4</sup>

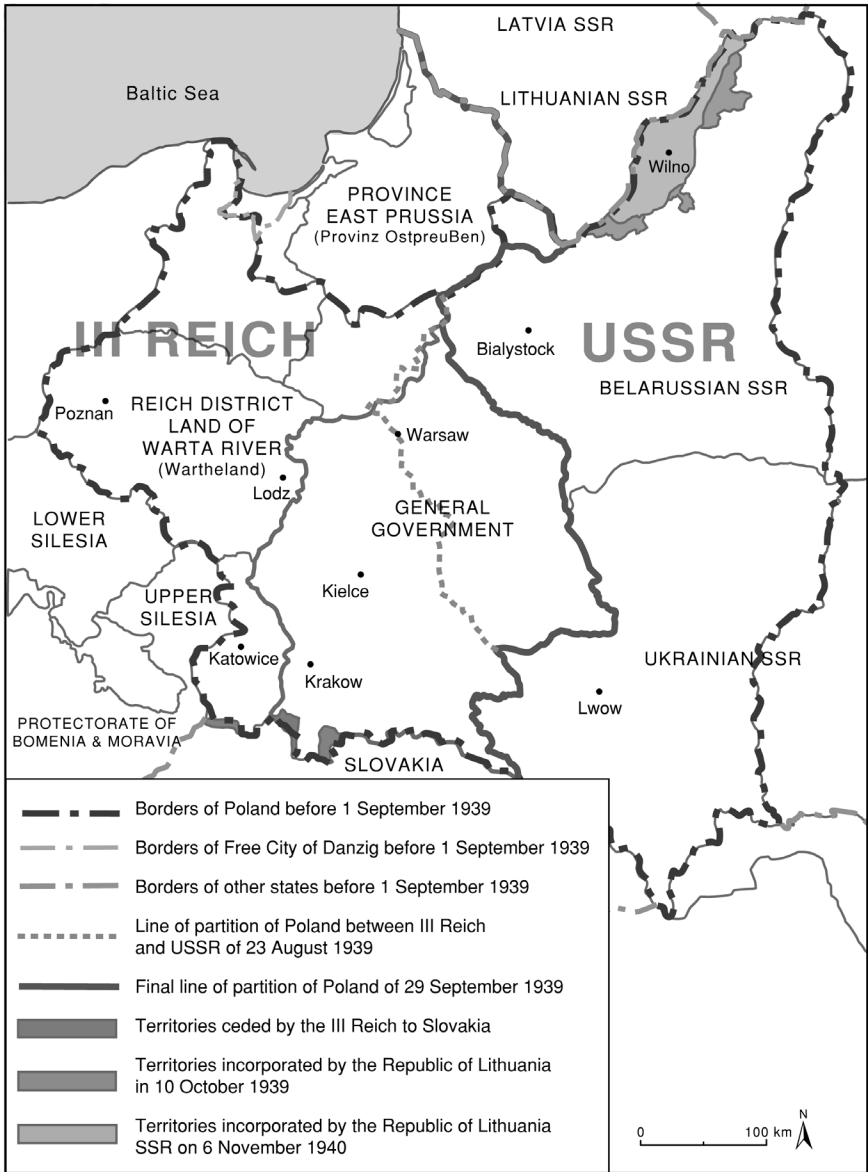
The train reached Chichev in the early afternoon. The passengers got off and headed to the station’s exit. A row of armed German soldiers, some with dogs, stood near the exit. Passengers were made to stand in a row and show their identity documents, while an officer examined each paper and looked at people’s faces. He instructed some to leave and others to wait nearby. Chaim was told to stay. It soon became clear that the people who were instructed to stay were Jews who were singled out based on their names or looks. Recalling the selection process that his platoon’s commander talked about and the violence in Łódź, Chaim’s heart was racing. There was no way to escape or talk his way out. When the process ended, the gathering that numbered about one hundred, and included parents and children, was taken to one of the station’s empty buildings and everyone was made to stand outside. Shouting, a soldier counted and instructed the people to enter in groups of ten, one at a time.

An officer and several soldiers with a baton waited inside when Chaim’s group entered.

“Jews!” the officer shouted in German, “Give us your valuables and money.” Not expecting this to happen, no one reacted, looking at the officer in disbelief.

“I am asking again!” the officer shouted.

No one moved. Beating with batons began. The soldiers opened personal belongings, throwing contents on the floor, confiscating items like silverware and jewelry. Searches of men’s and women’s bodies and more beatings followed. Children, who saw their parents begging for mercy, began crying. When a soldier approached, Chaim pointed to his small suitcase, opened it and gestured that this was all he had. The man continued to search him. Pointing to his belt, the soldier asked him to remove it. Feeling the belt, he discovered the hidden money that Avram gave him. It was taken. Chaim was devastated. Like other refugees, he counted on this money for food and shelter until he could settle



5.1 Polish territories annexed by the Third Reich and the Soviet Union.

somewhere. The officer shouted more orders and people began collecting their belongings. The group was let out and ordered to walk to the newly established no-man's land that separated Soviet and German territories.

The border area was a scene of chaos in the days following the start of the war, with thousands of refugees exchanging sides. At first, the Germans conquered and governed the Białystok region. Then, following their invasion, control shifted to Russian hands. Between September 17 and October 22, the passage in each direction was free, except for Jews who were not permitted to return to German-held western territories.<sup>5</sup> Upon Chaim's arrival in mid-November, he learnt that the border was closed and free entry into Soviet territory was stopped. It was a shock.

The no-man's land was a bare strip some eight hundred metres wide and fifteen hundred metres long. It was an apocalyptic scene with tens of thousands of people crowding the windswept area with no structures to shelter in, nor trees to sit under. A thin layer of snow covered the ground. Those sitting in the perimeter were the only defence against the blowing cold wind. Extended families, some with infants and accompanied by seniors, huddled near their belongings, some covered in blankets in sub-zero temperatures. There was no water, food, assistance of any kind nor any authority to talk to. The villagers who lived on the western side were warned by the Germans that they would be shot if caught assisting or selling food to the refugees. Chaim sat among them shivering, trying to sleep with only his clothes on as the night fell. He watched the lights in the village homes and the Russian guards' cabin in the distance. His thoughts wandered to the home and the family he had left in Łódź.

Sunrise unveiled misery and sadness. People woke to find that their infant child or elderly parent had frozen to death. They hovered over or held the dead body, sobbing and refusing to let go. There was no place to put the deceased, nor burial arrangements in the frozen soil. People sat next to dead loved ones, shocked and bewildered.<sup>6</sup> There was not much to do during the day but listen to rumours, wait and shiver. Another night came and went. Chaim ate some leftover food that he still had from home, and what Hershel's wife had given him.

On the morning of the third day Chaim joined a group of men who decided to walk to the crossing point and demand entry. Desperate,

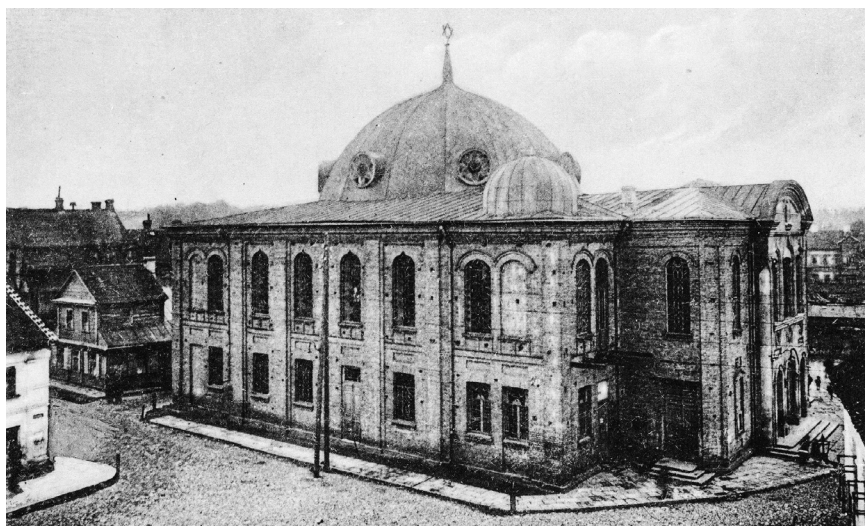
they knew that another day and night might spell death for them or their families. Some argued with the Russian officer on duty saying that they were loyal members of the Polish Communist party and were at risk of being executed by the Nazis if they went back. The plea went unanswered and, with pointed guns, they were ordered back. A larger group of agitated people, which Chaim joined, gathered and approached the crossing-point later that afternoon. Anger simmered and some began shouting loudly, accusing the Russians of intentionally trying to freeze them to death. Suddenly, people began charging toward the border crossing, entering Russian territory. Those sitting a short distance away saw what happened. They grabbed their children's hands, their belongings and ran with the crowds. No shots were fired.

\* \* \*

After a short walk, Chaim arrived at Białystok. A mid-sized city, it was a scaled down version of Łódź; an industrial town in the heart of an agricultural region whose economy relied heavily on textiles. Since the mid-nineteenth century, its governance had shifted between the winning powers of wars and, along with the rulers' harsh or favourable decrees, its population also fluctuated. About a hundred thousand people lived there, of whom approximately half were of the Jewish faith. Not permitted to own land, the Jews worked in industry and commerce and some seventy per cent of the factories were Jewish-owned. It was a place of hard-working labourers with most residing in the centre.<sup>7</sup>

Like many Polish cities, Białystok sustained bombardments when the war broke out. The Germans entered the city on September 15, 1939, and left on September 22 when the Red Army took over, as previously agreed between the two nations. During the Germans' brief stay more than a hundred Jews were murdered and two hundred homes and factories were ransacked. The Russians introduced their own governance measures and made the city part of West Bielorussia.<sup>8</sup>

When Chaim walked into the city in December 1939, Białystok was in a state of chaos. Some four hundred thousand refugees had passed through the place on their way to Russia's hinterland or to Vilna, from which some were planning to leave the continent altogether. Most of those who stayed in Białystok were from Łódź or Warsaw and hoped to find employment in the textile industry.<sup>9</sup> Standing in the



5.2 The synagogue on Sienkiewicza Street in Białystok.

city centre, Chaim looked for a place to stay the night. There were few lodging options for a penniless person, so he headed to the synagogue on Sienkiewicza Street. It was an imposing two-storey stone structure with rectangular windows at the lower level and arched ones on top. A large dome with the Star of David marked the centre, and two small domes topped the front corners. Off the main Sanctuary on its decorated wooden ark and beautifully painted ceiling there were small rooms for community gathering. The second floor housed the women's section with a full view of the space below. The place was very crowded, entire families among them, lying on the floor of the main and side halls. He recognized known stage actors, musicians and artists who had left the big cities, fearing the worst. With no upkeep at the place for weeks, the scent of feces and urine was unbearable. Leaning against one of the walls, exhausted, he fell asleep.

When the morning arrived, hunger struck. There was no community support of any kind or even a soup kitchen. The Jews of Białystok were clearly overwhelmed by the influx of people who had descended on them so suddenly. Being a poor community, they had few means

and no places to house these people. Every vacant public building, often informally, became a shelter and immediately filled up. The municipal and Soviet central authorities did nothing to help. The horrible conditions kept taking their toll and many, primarily the very young and the very old, succumbed to diseases, hunger and cold, and died.<sup>10</sup>

Along with another young man from Łódź, Chaim walked to the city's outskirts where fewer refugees congregated and there were better chances of finding food. Near one of the homes the two saw a just-baked loaf of bread, placed outside to cool. They stole it. Returning to the city, Chaim reflected on to what hunger reduced him to and decided that he needed to secure food or an income. He spent the following days looking for employment, returning to his corner at the synagogue for the night. Having been brought up in a frugal home, after repeated requests he finally got a cleaning job in a Jewish-owned workshop for which he was paid with food.

It was winter and Białystok lay under a thick layer of snow. Chaim recognized that his current living conditions could not last, and that survival would be difficult. He had to leave this place. Since returning to Poland from where he had just fled did not make sense, the obvious option was to travel to Russia's hinterland. He met recruiters from the mining region of Donbass in southeastern Ukraine who were looking for young men, to whom they offered fair wages and lodging – which he found suspicious. When he inquired about travel documents, he found out that he would have to make a difficult choice. First, very few Soviet passports were issued to the thousands who applied. Those who got them had to give up their Polish citizenship and sign a declaration that they would not seek residency in big cities. That meant that he would be forced to travel deep into Russia, not knowing what was awaiting him there.<sup>11</sup>

Chaim was adamant that he must leave Białystok but did not want to give up his Polish citizenship, thinking that if things started to look up and some normality was to return, he would not be able to return to Łódź. He also recalled his father's warning about being drafted into the Red Army and serving for years. At night, his thoughts drifted to the family he left behind, hoping to sleep again in a bed with clean sheets. Maybe Yossel and his wife and his cousin Shimon were right after all, and things will get better soon, he thought.

It was early April when Chaim made up his mind. He was going home. He was not alone. Many Jewish refugees, including those who promised to loved ones they left behind to bring them to Russia once settled, were disillusioned, and simply gave up trying to stay. To relieve the refugee crisis in Białystok, the Soviet Government announced that, from March to May 1940, those who wished to return to Poland would be able to do so on condition they signed a declaration promising not to come back. It was not made clear if the Germans would let them in. News from Łódź and Warsaw also said that things had begun to stabilize and calm down somewhat.<sup>12</sup> Recalling his experience getting into Białystok, Chaim was afraid of what might happen if he was caught entering German-controlled territory. He finally decided to cross when he met a group that was planning to go the following night.

The group left after midnight. Hoping not to be noticed, they bypassed the no-man's land clearance and walked in a forested area. Moving quietly in deep snow for a few hours, they arrived at the Chichev station at dawn, where a train was stationed and ready to start a voyage east. German guards patrolled the place. The group hid and waited for the opportunity to approach the ticket-vending cabin. Some asked a non-Jewish member of the group to buy them tickets. Chaim did not have enough money. When the train began moving, he opened a door and entered one of the cars. He found a place in a compartment with two facing rows. He pulled a scarf over his head, pretending to be asleep. A while into the ride, a German soldier passed by and asked if there were Jews among them. One of the passengers shook his head that there were none. Chaim was saved. Fortunately for him, a conductor did not pass by that morning asking for tickets.

The train pulled into the Warsaw's station in midmorning. With a few hours to spare until the departure of a train to Łódź and not having money for a ticket, Chaim thought to ask his uncle Hershel for help and headed to his apartment. People were going about their affairs in crowded streets. On the arm of some he noticed a white band with the Star of David marked on it. He arrived at the building and rung the bell. The custodian came out. Chaim reminded him about his previous visit and said that he was here to see the Frydmans again.

"They are no longer here," the man said.

"Where are they?" Chaim asked.

“I have no idea. The Jewish families were evicted, and their apartments were given to German officials,” the man answered.

Chaim returned to the station, waiting for his train to depart. German soldiers patrolled the place and Nazi flags hung from the rafters. Standing at a corner worrying, he thought about the armband, the evictions, and what awaited him in Łódź. He wondered if he was right to travel back. He boarded the train minutes before its departure, without a ticket. Hoping not to be caught, he sat in the last row. When the conductor came, Chaim showed him his empty wallet and told him that he was robbed. The man nodded and moved on.

It was just before midnight when the train arrived in Łódź. Chaim, carrying his small suitcase, waited until everyone disembarked and then walked along a deserted ramp to the exit.

“*Halt!*” he heard being shouted behind him.

Pretending that he did not hear, Chaim kept walking. Seconds later he heard a rifle being loaded and another shout to stop. His heart dropped. He stopped. A soldier approached and demanded his papers.

“Are you a Jew?” the soldier asked, “What are you doing here?”

Not sure whether it was permitted to return to Łódź from Russia, Chaim said that he was planning to depart to Warsaw for an urgent family visit.

“Don’t you know that Jews are not permitted to leave Łódź? Why aren’t you wearing a Star of David?” he shouted.

“I did not know that that I could not leave the city. I left my Star at home,” Chaim mumbled.

Pointing his rifle, the soldier ordered Chaim to walk to the station’s main building and wait. The soldier called a military vehicle that arrived and took him away, under guard. From the vehicle Chaim could see some of Łódź’s illuminated buildings. He was so close to home. He agonized about his misfortune and could not forgive his mistake. After a short drive on the deserted streets, the vehicle arrived at a police station. He was put in a cell with other Jews who were rounded up earlier that day for not obeying various decrees. He was now a prisoner accused of wanting to leave a city to which he had returned.

The following day he was summoned for interrogation. He was asked about the purpose of his travel to Warsaw, and whether he or his family had money. There were hard beatings between questions.

He begged for mercy, explaining that his trip was not maliciously intended. In the cell, exhausted from recent events, he fell asleep on the floor. Days passed and Chaim lost count of time, surviving on the meagre prison food.

Days later, he was put on trial by a tribunal of three judges and was sentenced to three months of incarceration. He was handed over to the Judenrat's Order Service, who ran the prison on Czarnieckiego Street. With the help of one of the guards he was able to pass a message to his family. Rachla and Hela rushed to the prison for a brief, emotional meeting where they all cried. They were saddened to see their son and brother in jail looking so poorly, and he was remorseful for the sorrow and worries he had caused. He told them about his recent trip, the reasons for his return and how much he wanted to be at home and see them all. He recalled his meeting with Hershel in Warsaw, and they told him about the going with the family. His mother gave him a care package with some clothing, food, and a few family photos, then left.

One morning, two weeks after beginning to serve his sentence, Chaim's name was called. A warden walked him to the prison's front office where a uniformed Jewish Order Service man waited. They left the prison's gate and walked to a building that looked like an assembly hall a short distance away, which was crowded with hundreds of men. With suitcases and backpacks, they looked as if they were ready for a voyage. Chaim, holding his own small suitcase, was made to join them. He recognized some of them from Bałuty. They were made to stand in rows, and their names, six hundred in all, were read. Shortly after, a well-dressed man with a Star of David attached to the front and back of his outer clothing arrived. Standing on a box he cleared his voice and said in Yiddish: "You have been privileged to be selected by our community for labour duties in the Wartheland. Shortly you will be taken by German soldiers to a station where you will board a train to your place of work. Since today is the eve of Passover, each of you will get a food package that will include matzoth."

When the man ended his speech, people wanted to know about their destination and the type of work they would do. None of their questions were answered.

