

Discovering the Matzevah of Pinchas Chaja (1930-1938)

By Bernard Guyer (Published in [Bnai Gombin 13](#), 13 December 2001)
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Manele Ryzman hy"d, as filmed in [Sam Rafel film 1937](#)

On the tour bus riding to Gombin in August 1999, we were stunned when Ada Holtzman read out the name "Pinchas Chaja, 8 years old" from a recovered matzevah in the Gombin cemetery. This was the name of my mother's first born, the brother whom I had only known as a small boy in old family photos from Gombin, and a story of the survival of our family. Until those words came over the loud speaker, Pinchus was not really a person to me.



Jane and I went to the cemetery as soon as we arrived in Gombin; I knew the way from the old maps of the town and from the discussion I had with my sister Evelyn. We missed much of the festivities and speeches that occurred in the town that day. We went by ourselves and found the stone among those in the cemetery memorial. When I laid my hand on it, I felt as if I were touching my brother. His is the story of the survival of our family.

My mother, **Chana Ryzman**, and my father, **Simcha Chaja**, from Sanniki, were married in Gombin in 1929. My mother always told us that Simcha was handsome and that she had pursued him. She thought of him as “modern;” he smoked on shabbas and wanted her to be well dressed and attractive. By the time they were married, all of my father’s brothers had left Sanniki and emigrated to Uruguay to start new lives. Eventually they took their parents, Berish and Kaila, to Uruguay. My parents went to live in Sanniki in 1930. The registry book of Gombin documents my mother leaving the town that year. Pinchas was born in 1930 and my sister, Chava (Evelyn), in 1932.



In 1937, my father left his wife and 2 small children in Poland to go to Uruguay and start a new life for them all. The plan was for him to work for 3 years, and then send for the rest of the family. My mother moved in with her father, **Manele Ryzman**, to his house on Kilinskeigo Street in Gombin. The house is no longer standing.

Pinchas became ill with fever in 1938. There’s no knowing today what the illness was. The story goes that he suffered an injury during play and developed pain in a leg and fever. It could have been an osteomyelitis. He died in the hospital in Plock on February 8, 1938. My mother smuggled the body out of the hospital (so that no autopsy would be performed) and returned to Gombin where the child was buried in the Jewish cemetery. Before traveling to Gombin, I had asked Evelyn whether she had any memories of the town (she was only 7 years old when they left). Her only memory was that of the funeral of her brother. She was

not allowed to attend but stood in front of the house and watched the procession pass (they lived on Kilinskeiga Street, the street that led to the cemetery).

The period after Pinchas' death was very hard for my mother. She visited the cemetery every morning in a distraught state; often her father had to go and bring her home.



Pinchas Chaja with sister Chava (photo on left) and with friend (photo on right)

When news of Pinchas' death reached my father in Uruguay, he was distraught and sent word for my mother and Evelyn to join him immediately in Montevideo. Money was sent and papers arranged so that they left Gombin in the winter of 1938/39 by bus for Warsaw. Benny Guyer helped them get the train to Danzig. They traveled to London by ship, S/S Warszawa, arriving on February 28, 1939. My mother and sister spent 6 months at the Jews' Temporary Shelter in London before continuing the journey, on the S/S Highland Monarch on August 12, 1939. A few years ago I was able to access the archives of the Jews Temporary Shelter and found the following page in the registry:

REGISTER OF INMATES OF THE JEWS' TEMPORARY SHELTER											
Date of		Name	Age	Birth Place	Nationality	Married or Single	Where last from	Occupation	Date of Leaving	No. of days here	Destination
Arrival in U.K.	Entry into Shelter										
28/12		Fizel Felder	17	Baligród	Polish	-	Warsaw	-	11/3	11	s/s Alcantara
		Ruxen Lewi	9	Otwock	"	-	"	-	11/3	11	
		Chaja —	14	"	"	-	"	-	11/3	11	
		Ira Felder	45	Wetlin	"	-	"	-	11/3	11	
		Chaim —	14	"	"	-	"	-	11/3	11	s/s Highland Monarch
		Pinchas Chait	26	Stepan	"	-	"	-	10/8	12	
		Chana Chaja	33	Galin	"	m	"	-	10/8	12	
		Eva —	7	"	"	-	"	-	10/8	12	
		Shia —	27	Chewink	"	s	"	-	11/3	11	Alcantara
		Sara —	18	"	"	s	"	-	11/3	11	
		Sara —	62	Wasa	"	m	"	-	11/3	11	
		Leiser Riner	58	Wetlin	"	-	"	-	11/3	11	s/s

Evelyn remembers that the war was declared when they were still at sea, and the windows of the ship were blacked out. They arrived safely in Uruguay where the family passed the war. I was born in Montevideo in 1942. We emigrated to Detroit in 1945, sponsored by my mother's brother, Max Rissman. My sister, Marilyn, was born in Detroit in 1948.

So, the story of Pinchas' death is truly the story of the survival of our family. Without the sense of urgency caused by his death, my mother and sister would have remained in Gombin to perish at Chelmno with the rest of her family – my grandfather Manele, his second wife Sarah, daughter Nacha and her husband Mortcha, and another daughter, Zelda, who was my mother's half-sister (pictured below with my mother's brother Shia- far right- who emigrated to Detroit before the war).



Jane and I made a rubbing of the matzevah to take to the family. It was like bringing home our brother. My mother had never seen the matzevah that was

erected by her father a year after Pinchas' death. She had already left by then and never knew it actually existed. It had never been discussed in the family. The Yiddish inscription reads: "*du reht undzer leeb kind, Pinchas, gesht[orbin] elter 8 yor.*" Translated: "Here rests our beloved child, Pinchas, [who] died [at] 8 years old." The family name, "Chaja," is only partially visible in the upper corner of the broken stone; only someone like Ada Holtzman, knowledgeable in the family names of Gombin, could have recognized it.

The reactions to this discovery of Pinchas' matzevah have been fascinating. Evelyn connected emotionally with the older brother whom she had known. She had always carried a small photo of the two of them when they were about 5- and 3-years old respectively. We gave her a small bottle of soil that had been collected from the Gombin cemetery. Others in the family were moved to tears by the story.

None of us can fully know the emotions felt by my 94-year old mother on seeing the rubbing. She passed her old hands over the letters of the rubbing. Jane saw in her face some sense of its meaning. But my mother said nothing. I asked her what the matzevah meant to her. Her reply was simply that she was 94 years old and that it all happened a long time ago. Our interpretation of her reaction was that the death of that child must already be sealed in her heart- not to be reopened. She had lost so many more since then- her beloved father, her husband of more than 50 years, and even two grandchildren. She had outlived everyone of her own generation. The emotions she felt at that moment could not be fully known to us. We did get some insight into the painful memories of that time, however, when she expressed to Minna Packer, not only the grief over the loss of her first child, but also the fear that her husband might have blamed her for the death and abandoned her.

As miraculous as it seems, our brother Pinchas 'survived' Hitler's attempt to destroy all signs of Jewish life in Poland. One can only feel it was *beskert* (detined) that of all the thousands of matzevot originally in that cemetery, one of the few to survive in an identifiable state was that of Pinchas. It was destined that Ada Holtzman was there to research the "universe behind each name." And, of course, it was *beskert* that Jane and I were on that bus riding to Gombin when Ada announced the name, and that we were among the few people in the whole world who could bring that name to life! As Evelyn said, "that stone survived so that you could find it!"



Chana Guyer in the film "[Back to Gombin](#)" 2000 and with all grandchildren in 2003

