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The Heroine of Auschwitz

The Life and Resistance of Mala Zimetbaum

(Original German title: Die Heldin von Auschwitz:

Leben und Widerstand der Mala Zimetbaum)

333 pages, hardcover

Publication date: 20 November 2023

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Sample translation by Alexandra Cox

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Chapter 1

Inferences Drawn from a Birth Certificate

20 January 1918: Mala, the youngest child of a Polish Jewish family, is born in Brzesko –

The town's friendly, citizenly character can be felt in its centre to this day

1918

The family was festively turned out and in ceremoniously joyous mood: curiosity was in the air, too. Candles were burning. In the Hebrew Bible, Psalm 121 makes a call to prayer for such a day of gladness: “The Lord is your Guardian /... The Lord will guard you from all evil / will guard your soul. / The Lord will guard your going out and your coming in from now and to eternity.” One week previously, on 20 January 1918, a Sunday, in the small town of Brzesko, some 55 kilometres east of Krakow, Chaja Feigel Schmalzer had given birth, at home, to her sixth child. According to the Jewish calendar, the date was 7 Shevat 5678. It is

utterly possible that her husband, Pinkas Zimetbaum, lent support to his wife during the birth by incanting psalms.

Because it was a girl, the name-giving ceremony took place on 26 January 1918. Usually, a girl's name is announced by her father in the synagogue during Shabbat worship, one week after the birth. However, even for devout, law-abiding Jews, exceptions were possible. In this case, the name-giver's authority warranted a name-giving ceremony at home. That, and all subsequent information pertaining to the ceremony, is recorded with precision in the birth certificate, which is preserved in Brzesko.

Josef Schmalzer, the child's maternal grandfather, who, surrounded by the child's parents and siblings on 26 January 1918, gave his granddaughter the name Malke, Hebrew for 'queen', was entrusted with the office of shamash – Hebrew for 'servant' – in one of Brzesko's four stone-built synagogues.

The shamash is responsible for administering religious proceedings within a Jewish community and ensuring they go without a hitch, and sees to a harmonious social life. Testimony that only an exemplary religious Jew may exercise the office is borne by the gravestone for Josef Schmalzer in Brzesko's Jewish cemetery. The deceased, who passed away in 1925, not only fulfilled all of God's commandments, he "loved the Torah scholars and crouched in their shadow... and his soul ascended to heaven". (The Torah – 'teaching' – contains the five books of Moses, the first part of the Hebrew Bible.)

Remembrance is a cornerstone of Jewish identity, whether that concerns the history of the Jews through the millennia or the generations of the family the individual comes from. Death does not end any life.

In accordance with her grandfather's wishes, the new-born girl was a family pledge of remembrance, for three of her great-grandmothers were called Malka, or Mala. Since there is no source that states which name the little girl's family used as she was growing up, but, looking back, she was known by all as 'Mala', she may go by this name in her biography.

Two daughters and one son celebrate Mala's birth with their parents on 26 January 1918: Gittla (*1908), Salamon Rubin (*1909) and Marjem Jochwet (*1914 in Mainz).

However, the joy over little Mala was indissociably linked with the memory of Chiel (1906–1907) and Juda (1911–1914); the boys who passed away at an early age would be forever remembered as sons and as brothers to the three living siblings.

The child's parents, Pinkas Zimetbaum and Chaja Schmalzer, were born in Brzesko in 1881; they married there in 1905 – twice. For they not only held their betrothal ceremony beneath the 'chuppah', the Jewish wedding canopy: they also contracted their marriage according to civil law, which is why Mala is identified as "legitimate" on her birth certificate.

Her father, by contrast, in accordance with secular law, was deemed "illegitimate", because his parents, Mala's grandparents – Berl Hartman and Marjem Jochwet Zimetbaum – married solely in accordance with Jewish law. The consequence was a fair amount of confusion in public documents that concerned Mala's father: sometimes they were issued to Pinkas Zimetbaum, sometimes to Pinkas Zimetbaum-Hartman. Mala and her siblings took advantage of the opportunity once they were adults, choosing as their surname Zimetbaum or Hartman, as they preferred.

Mala's official birth certificate takes the secular dimension every bit as seriously as the religious: "The child was delivered by Chane Reiser, midwife in Brzesko." The esteem Judaism holds for this female profession can be read from medieval gravestones. Only for midwives is their profession chiselled into their gravestones after death, and again the potency of Jewish remembrance is evident.

The second book of Moses reports that the Pharaoh delivers a murderous command to the Hebrew accoucheuses Shiphrah and Puah, who were living at the time, like the entire Jewish population, in Egypt: "if it is a son, then you shall kill him; but if it is a daughter, then she shall live." However, the two women made a stand against the annihilation of their people and "saved the men-children alive."

From ancient Egypt back to Brzesko, which was situated in an Eastern European cultural landscape that had been stamped by the Jewish population for centuries: Galicia. When Pinkas Zimetbaum and Chaja Schmalzer became a couple in Brzesko, where most of their ancestors had been at home, something horrific, but also astonishing, had just happened. The horrific occurrence was the fire that had broken out in 1904, destroyed more than 300 Jewish houses alone, and shattered municipal life. Yet thanks to the drive and energy of its mayor Hensch Klapholz, in the subsequent years Brzesko rose like a phoenix from the ashes as a modernized and all-round renewed town. That was astonishing in two ways: for, in the person of Hensch Klapholz, the Jewish majority of Brzesko appointed the principal mayor for the first – and only – time. Until that point, the town's senior mayor had been self-evidently a Catholic and his deputy a Jew.

The Jews in Brzesko had no problem with missing out on the highest municipal offices, for they were aware that their religious view of life and the world was accepted by the Christian minority. For generations, every Tuesday had been market day in the centre of Brzesko. From the surrounding area, mainly Jewish farmers and traders would arrive in carriages and horse-drawn carts to offer their wares. Jews and Christians would throng the market stalls until sunset, buying and selling, greeting one another heartily and exchanging news – it was a lively place of peacefully cheerful communication. However, if a Jewish holiday ever fell on a Tuesday, the Christians would forgo the market without a murmur. A similar thing happened on Fridays: it was a matter of course for town council sessions to be finished before sunset. For at that moment, for the Jewish representatives, Shabbat began: rest was the highest religious obligation during those hours.

To ensure that communal life was generally conflict-free, it was crucial to have radical social differences kept within limits in both societal groups. The photos in Brzesko's regional museum also portray the more poverty-stricken among the Jewish population, who lived in wooden shacks, had scant employment, and were dependent upon regular aid from the Jewish

community. However, an ample section of the Jewish population lived in solidly middle-class circumstances. They were entrepreneurs, traders and craftspeople; there were Jewish lawyers, judges and doctors.

Sit on a bench in the tidily kept heart of Brzesko, the former market square, today, and you will see the same houses as Chaja Schmalz or Pinkas Zimetbaum once saw, when she went to the market on a Tuesday or when he stepped into a synagogue: a colourful mix, painted yellow and blue; red sandstone, decorative hewn garlands, large round windows, tapering towers.

The houses on the market square are testaments to a past when many Jews contributed to an attractive urban profile for their community. And they were not shy of bearing visible witness to their faith by affixing a mezuzah – Hebrew for ‘doorpost’ – to their front doors. This slim capsule’s silhouette has been preserved in a handful of doorframes of houses near the market square. A central text from the Torah appears on a slip of paper inside a mezuzah: “Hear, Israel! The Eternal is God, the Eternal is One.”

Into this urban milieu, Mala Zimetbaum was born; it was to be her home for ten years. As attested by their children’s birth certificates, her parents possessed no house of their own. A different residence in Brzesko is indicated each time; only with a number, though, meaning it is impossible to find out where in the town the family was living. The trader Pinkas Zimetbaum was not one of the town’s prosperous Jews. The family could only afford rented homes.

Every celebration must come to an end, and convey its merrymakers out of their atemporal togetherness and back into the present day. When the adults put out the candles on that Sunday, 26 January 1918, they became immediately aware again that they, in the small and remote town of Brzesko, were living in a world that was out of joint. A new world order was in the offing, compelled by a war that had been convulsing Europe, in particular, since 1914.

The people in Brzesko were living in the Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy, on a stretch of land that, until the late 18th century, belonged to Poland under the name of ‘Galicia’. The majority of the population had long been of the Jewish faith. In its fourth year in 1918, for Austria and its allied German Empire, this war seemed to be getting ever more deeply entangled in a defeat.

For the Jewish people in Brzesko, that prospect was not unmingled with hopes, sustained as the people were by remembrance of long-past historical episodes that were rooted firmly in their memory. The history of the Jews in Poland across about 500 years was a living legacy, which filled their fellow believers in the early 20th century with pride and self-confident fervour. Like their ancestors, they felt assured: the God of Israel would accompany all who embarked upon new paths. Every Polish Jew was filled with that fundamental assurance; Pinkas Zimetbaum and Chaya Schmalzer were no exception. They naturally passed it on to their children. Mala Zimetbaum’s view of the world and her life was also radically influenced by this shared Jewish past.

Chapter 2

How the Jews Came to Poland

An unprecedented success story, which comes to a bitter end in the 19th century

1264–1900

The year was 1565 when the Papal Legate in Poland wrote up what he had noticed: there were, in that country, “great numbers of Jews who are not as despised as is elsewhere the case. They do not live in a state of degradation and they are not restricted to despised professions.” They were able to study medicine or astronomy without restrictions, and were

not obliged to wear any symbols on their clothing to distinguish them from Christians. And they “enjoy[ed] all the rights of other citizens”.

Jews and Christians with equal rights, treated equally humanely? That was unthinkable for the monk in Wittenberg who had been rebelling against the Pope in Rome since 1518. In 1543, Martin Luther had his treatise ‘On Jews And Their Lies’ published, in which he expounded his theologically based hatred of all things Jewish and stated demands he expected to be implemented by the politicians in charge: synagogues should be burnt down and wiped from the face of the earth. Jews’ houses should be destroyed. Jews should no longer enjoy protection on the empire’s streets. Even better, they should be hounded out of the country. Protestant cities and territories fulfil Luther’s demands and drive out the Jewish people.