

My Illegal Immigrant

by Aviva Miriam Patt

His name was Abba-Choneh. He was the eighth of nine children and youngest of the three boys. Their mother died when he was eight years old and the oldest sisters took care of the younger children. They lived in a large white house with a wrap-around verandah on the most fashionable street in Ilukxt, Latvia. The expansive grounds held a stable for their horses, a carriage house, and gardens where his sisters grew vegetables and herbs. Cooking and baking began on Thursday and continued into Friday, when they would hand out loaves of challah to their neighbors who didn't have ovens in their own homes. The neediest among them were also given chicken soup with boiled meat and vegetables to make a proper Shabbat meal.

Their father, Yisrul, was a [shochet](#), with his own butcher shop that served not only the Jews but some non-Jews in their town. His most important customer was the Catholic abbey, and each week he would load their large order into the wagon to deliver it personally to the Abbess. Custom decreed that he must bow and kiss her hand – a terrible [averah](#) for a [Chosid](#) – but a necessary concession to the dominant culture. His children would remember the weekly ritual as the greatest humiliation of their father's life.

Abba-Choneh and his brothers Azriel and Simin-Itzkeh went to [cheder](#), but the girls attended the public school, run by the Catholic church, and had many non-Jewish friends. It was a fragile coexistence that could easily be set asunder by forces outside their community. Antisemitism was always present and sometimes rose to violence that transcended the family's prominence, taking a terrible toll. One night Abba-Choneh's uncle, a merchant, was set upon by bandits as he returned home. It was not an ordinary robbery – the mutilation he suffered before being killed indicated his attackers had targeted him as a Jew. A cousin and her friends, returning from an outing to Riga, were pursued through a train by a group of men as the other passengers ignored the cries of the Jewish girls. When they reached the last car, the three girls joined hands and leapt to their deaths to avoid being raped. Daily humiliations, random acts of violence, and the ever-present fear of pogroms encroached on what could have been an idyllic existence in another place.

One by one, Abba-Choneh's siblings began to leave for that beckoning existence. The first to go was Azriel, the eldest. He had served seven years in the Tsar's army – a dreadful experience for Jews – and had with great difficulty succeeded in never violating the laws of [kashrut](#). Upon returning home, he fell in love with a neighbor girl and married. While expecting their first child, a notice came conscripting him for another seven years. Azriel quietly slipped away to America, later sending for his wife and baby. The next to go was Shaina, the eldest daughter. She too had married, and when her husband found it difficult to earn a living they also left for the "[goldene medina](#)." Beilkeh and Ziskeh were looking after their younger siblings following their mother's death, but the next eldest daughter, Esther, left for America on her own when she was 16. Chana-Rochel soon followed, lying about her age so she could travel unaccompanied at 14. War was brewing in Europe and families were rushing to get their young daughters out of harm's way. Hinda-Leikeh, still just 10, remained at home.

And the war came. Ilukxt was on the front line and the entire population of the town was evacuated as the Germans advanced. Abba-Choneh's sisters sewed money and jewelry into the linings of their clothes and the family loaded their possessions into the wagon, joining the caravan of exiles. They found refuge in one place, then another, moving as the war raged on. Abba-Choneh's sisters in America were also sewing jewelry into clothing, which they sent as relief packages, hoping authorities would not discover the hidden valuables. The family survived the war and returned home, only to find that the town had become a battlefield, and there was not a house left standing. They would have to begin again.

In their new town, Yisrul opened a butcher shop and his children helped in the store. Abba-Choneh married and had two children, Velvel and Soraleh. Hinda-Leikeh also married, then Beilkeh and Ziskeh. But they struggled in the post-war years. Abba-Choneh's wife left him during the Depression and he began to dream of a new life in a new land where his children could have a better future. He would go to America, like his brother and sisters had done, establish himself in a business, and send for his children to join him. But immigration was not as simple as it had been. After the great war, the United States passed a law limiting the number of immigrants from Eastern Europe, to stop Jews and other "inferior" people from polluting their shores. He would have to find a way around the law.

Abba-Choneh went to Riga, where he paid a substantial bribe to stow away on a ship to America. His plan was to sneak into the country and make his way to Chicago to join his siblings. But he was found out while the ship was still at sea and when he reached the United States was immediately put in a jail cell to await deportation. He pleaded his case to the officials. "My brother is Azriel Fine – he will vouch for me. Please, I want to live in America." But the name that was so respected in the town of his childhood meant nothing to these officials who did not even understand his foreign tongue. So Abba-Choneh returned, his hopes crushed, facing an uncertain and, ultimately, unimaginable future.

Within a few years, another war broke out, but this time there was no evacuation as the Germans advanced. Simin-Itzkeh's elder daughter Minna and her baby died in the bombardment of Dvinsk. Within days of the occupation, Hinda-Leikeh, her husband, and their children Sora-Tzilinka and Yossel-Bereleh, were killed – beaten to death in their own home by Nazi collaborators. Beilkeh and Ziskeh were transported to Auschwitz with their husbands, where they were gassed. Simin-Itzkeh's son-in-law managed to get passes for his family to enter Russia, but Simin-Itzkeh hesitated, promising his younger daughter he would follow in a few days. His fate is unknown.

Abba-Choneh and his children were interned in the ghetto in Kovno. Soraleh was still in school but Abba-Choneh and Velvel were conscripted into forced labor. Velvel was shot to death while walking down the street, in one of the gratuitous acts of violence deployed by the Nazis to terrorize the populace. One day Abba-Choneh returned from work to discover Soraleh was gone, rounded up with her classmates and taken from the ghetto, presumably murdered in the forest and dumped in a mass grave. "Abba-Choneh lost his mind when they took away the children," a surviving neighbor would later recall. Then Abba-Choneh also was taken, in a collection of the feeble-minded and the feeble-bodied to be exterminated.

I've known Abba-Choneh's story for as long as I can remember. In my grandmother's room, the words flowed in a wave of tears born of grief and self-recrimination. Her life was haunted by the horrifying deaths of those she loved and left behind when she came to America, but her little brother's fate was the hardest to bear. "He was **here**," she would cry. "We could have saved him. But we didn't know." She rocked back and forth sobbing and I put my arms around her, my head on her shoulder, absorbing her tears.

When I was a child, there was a superhero, a cartoon character who fought injustice and protected the weak from the strong. His name was Mighty Mouse, and he was tiny, like me, but had powers I could only dream of. When danger threatened, he would raise his little mouse fist and cry out in his little mouse voice, "Here I come to save the day!" and fly up, up, and away to vanquish the forces of evil. In my dreams, I was Mighty Mouse, and I would fly across the country and across the bounds of time to find my uncle's prison. I didn't know what Abba-Choneh looked like. His face was not on the picture postcards the family had sent to America. But in my grandmother's room there was a large portrait of their father. It was a youthful face with a short beard and familiar eyes – my grandmother's eyes, my own eyes – that I imagined would be Abba-Choneh's as well. In my dream, I found my uncle's cell, and with my little mouse hands, pried open the bars and flew him up, up, and away to Chicago and my grandmother's arms. His terrible fate was averted, and her tears dissolved in his embrace.

My grandmother is long gone, and I am now older than she was when I first heard her stories. But I still dream. Other people in other lands still live in peril and untenable situations. Like Abba-Choneh, they turn to the United States for refuge, only to be deported to an uncertain fate. In my dream I fly to the border prisons, searching the cells. A hand reaches out and I peer inside to see a face I do not know. But it has familiar eyes – my grandmother's eyes, my own eyes – beseeching me. "*Ayúdame, por favor, quiero vivir en los Estados Unidos.*" I grasp the hand and we fly up, up, and away – across the miles from the border, across the span of my uncle's life, and my grandmother's life, and my own.

In my grandmother's room, we three embrace the stranger, who joins us as we open our mouths in songs of praise: "[*Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, matir asurim.*](#)"

And my grandmother weeps no more.

Aviva Miriam Patt, Chana-Rochel's granddaughter, is the Executive Director of the Decalogue Society of Lawyers and a 50-year veteran of the struggle for social justice.