

## A DRAMA UNDER THE LAWN OF THE STADIUM

**The brand-new football field where the Eurocup is played hides the story of a family who resisted the Nazi's and was expropriated by the Communist regime in Poland after 1945. A descendant claims for his rights from Argentina.**

**RAMY WURGAFT / Buenos Aires**

In his last trip to Warsaw, some years ago, Andrés Chowanczak went by the brand-new National Stadium where the Eurocup 2012 would take place.

A group of tourists had stopped there and the local tourist guide proudly explained the effort that the construction of a crown-shaped coliseum in record time meant. Chowanczak, an Argentinean of Polish origin, felt an irresistible impulse of telling them that the wonder of sports architecture facing them was being built on the land expropriated to his family. He really wanted to condemn publicly before these people the ingratitude of the Government towards a family that gave up their fortune and risked their necks in honor of Poland's — always precarious— independence! Andrés held back; the tourists would consider him insane if he told them a story that seemed to be inspired in his imagination.

Joanna Modzelewska is a qualified professional that would not take a minute to deal with a fantasy. The lawyer, native of Warsaw, who represents the Chowanczak, states that the compensation the Government owes her clients —Andrés, his sisters Karina and Marisa and his mother— rises to more than 1,000 million dollars for the 10 acres occupied by the stadium where the Eurocup is taking place today. It would be necessary to add to that basic reparation, another for the 60 years of usufruct that went by since the time that her clients were deprived of that plot of land, located in one of the most expensive areas of the capital city. Joanna has her hands full of work, since in addition to the claim for this plot, her clients request for the restitution of more than 20 properties that had been expropriated to one of the richest families in Poland. A family of wealthy patriots.

The story dates back to 1884, when Arpad Chowanczak left his home in the Tatra Mountains, at the current border between the Republic of Poland and the Czech Republic, to try his luck in Warsaw. The rustic highlander came from a lineage of righteous people; his great-grandfather had protected or belonged to the Janosik's band, the Slavic Robin Hood.

At the Capital City, Arpad sets up a small fur workshop and after eight years he opened a company in the stylized building currently occupied by the Ministry of Culture.

**Arpad Chowanczak started to forge his Empire in 1884.**

**“IF THEY HAD AT LEAST HAD THE COURTESY OF INVITING US TO THE EUROCUP”, SAYS JOKINGLY HIS GRANDSON**

### LUXURY AND EXPANSION

While his son Wladislaw traveled all over Alaska buying skins to the hunters, Arpad created some designs that caused a sensation between the monarchs, magnates and artists of the time. Pola Negri, star of the silent films, was one of the most regular customers of Chowanczak & Sons, as the company name became, after the

incorporation of Jan Daniel. The young lawyer, who was in prison for conspiring against Czar Nicholas of Russia, was the one who decided to build, in the 10 acres that his father purchased in an area under development, a residential complex for the 500 workers of the fur workshop.

At this expansion stage, the family founded a bank entering into a partnership with the Overseas Bank of London. On the other side of the border, Germany increased its military power under the rule of Adolf Hitler. Joseph Stalin did the same in his domains. The British partners of Jan Daniel recommended him to escape from a Poland that was gripped by the Soviet Russia and the Nazi Germany and to move his fortune—greater than 2,000 million dollars in current terms—to London. By then, the Chowanzcak's were the owners of valuable properties, among them a mansion called Arpad Villa and a palace formerly owned by Napoleon.

“My grandfather said (to the British) that he would neither withdraw a cent nor leave the country. Instead of keeping his family and fortune from danger, Jan Daniel, together with his friend and the mayor Stefan Starzynski, organized the civil defense of Warsaw against the German invasion. Once the Nazis took over the city, he became a member of the Polish government secretly; bought corrupt German officers, a complete arsenal to equip the Armia Krajowa (the Polish resistance movement) and sheltered in his properties those persecuted by the Nazis, mainly the Jewish families”, says Andrés. Due to these actions, the Polish Heroes Remembrance Center, a polish-jewish association, has recommended Israel to include Jan Daniel in the mausoleum of the Righteous among the nations.

### **SAVIOR OF JEWS**

As from the statement before notary public provided by Sofia Ciercierski, a neighbor of the family in Poland and witness of the case, it is possible to infer that the participation of Jan Daniel in defense of his fellow countrymen was as courageous and compassionate as that of Oskar Schindler, the German entrepreneur who saved approximately 1,200 Jews of the Nazi Holocaust, hiring them at the factory of munitions for the Wehrmacht, which he had in Poland.

In accordance with the testimony of Ciercierski, “under the German occupation, he sheltered several people in the building at Pulawska street. Many of them saved themselves under the care of workers of his company”.

Jan Daniel had the cleverness to appoint a German as one of the directors of the company. Hans Schultz turned a blind eye to the subversive actions of his boss before the occupation troops. Finally, the architect of the fur empire ended up with his protégés to the concentration camp of Buchenwald, where the guard dogs bit one of his legs. The injury became gangrenous and it was necessary to amputate that limb, more than once (in several limb reductions). Jan Daniel never recovered from his injuries—he died of a hemorrhage—, but he lived enough to be witness of how, towards the end of the war, the Soviet Union created a puppet government in his beloved Warsaw. By the Bierut Decree, the new regime confiscated the properties of the middle class, among them the 10 acres of the working class neighborhood (reduced to debris due to bombs) and built the Tenth Anniversary Stadium in its place.

“In 1945, my grandfather found certain irregularities in the expropriation decree, based on which he filed a lawsuit against the Government. As incredible as it may sound, nine years later, a Bolshevik judge ruled in his favor. However, the ruling was not fulfilled. The old stadium was demolished to build the current one”, states Andrés. The engineer says that the original stadium, which the Bolsheviks built soon, became an illegal market, where the Russian mafias of those days operated.

Andrés Chowanczak lives together with his wife and his mother in a modest House at the neighborhood of Olivos in Buenos Aires. When he was a child, he listened to the vibrant stories of the senior Polish officials who had emigrated to Argentina and got together every now and then to recall their old achievements. Many of the stories had, as main character, his father who would listen to them in silence as if it were of someone else.

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Estanislao Chowanczak was born in 1925 in the midst of wealth accrued by the family. He had both English and a French governess, reason why he managed to command the two languages, as well as Spanish and German later on. A limousine would pick him up from school where he befriended the offspring of the Polish aristocracy. By then, Warsaw was a cosmopolitan city, with beautiful buildings and refined culture.

The German invasion (1939), and the Soviet occupation later on (1944), change his life forever. From being a “rich kid”, Estanislao became a partisan who lived hidden in drains infested with rats and confronted the German tanks with firebombs. “The Germans used to throw grenades by the sewer grates as well as charges of carbide which, upon making contact with water, became acetylene gas. Many partisans died suffocated inside the underground channels. My grandfather’s only fear was to die there and that his body would be devoured by the rodents”, says Andres.

After participating in the Warsaw Uprising (1944), he was captured by the Gestapo and, miraculously, he saved himself from being executed like many of his comrades. He was taken to the Sandbostel prisoner camp, where he managed to escape after a couple of months. After a stay in Belgium, where he studied Economy, the ex-partisan emigrated to Argentina.

“I could not return to Poland because the communist regime persecuted the Resistance veterans fearing that they would want shrug off Stalin’s yoke. Besides, the family had lost all of its possessions. In Buenos Aires, he worked as a builder and he then opened a plumbing store. He missed his homeland, indeed. But I never heard him complain about something”, says Andrés.

In 2003, having the grandfather already died, the engineer filed a lawsuit against the Polish State for the expropriation of the family properties.

Although in 2007 the Law considered the claim legitimate, the government of Bronislaw Komorowski does not recognize the rights of the Chowanczak family.

“I do expect neither the stadium to be removed nor the old fur shop of my grandparents to be rebuilt. If they had at least had the courtesy of inviting us to the Eurocup... But not even that. It is sad to witness how authorities forget about the heroes who helped to forge the independent and prosperous country that Poland is today”, concludes Andrés, with that slight Slavic accent he received from his ancestors as only inheritance.

### **A stadium built by FCC**

Even before the end of the Eurocup, there is already a winner: FCC, the Spanish company *Fomento de Construcciones y Contratas*, owned by Esther Koplowitz. Through Alpine, its affiliate for Central and Eastern Europe, it has built the Warsaw National Stadium, which hosted the kick-off match between Poland and Greece (1-1). It was constructed on the land expropriated to the Chowanczak family (above in the photograph), and two

other plots. In total, an investment reaching 600 million Euros. FCC has also remodeled the Henryk Reyman Stadium in Krakow, a “reserve” stadium of the UEFA.