A Summer of Mass Murder

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PREFACE

GALICIA OCCUPIES A UNIQUE PLACE AND TIME IN THE HISTORY OF THE Holocaust. The summer of 1941 ushered a chain of events in this so-called borderland that had no precedent in the rapidly unfolding history of the Holocaust. By thrusting more than twenty thousand Hungarian Jews, who were deemed alien—without proper citizenship papers, or just for being Jews—across its eastern border into Galicia, the Hungarian government set a new “first” in Hungarian history as well as in the evolution of the Holocaust. It was a unilateral action by the Hungarians, neither requested by German military authorities nor warranted either by military or economic rationale.

Through four subsequent stages, the transfer into Galicia and a succession of bloodbaths across this region, this book brings into focus the story of these Hungarian Jews and the fate of their Galician coreligionists who tried to provide them shelter. The collection and expulsion of thousands of people, with corresponding brutality and often lawlessness, set the stage for the unfolding genocide. The killing and robbing of the unloaded and abandoned Jews by Ukrainian irregular forces was followed by an unprecedented mass murder by bullets in the town of Kamenets-Podolsk. Between 14,000 and 16,000 Hungarian Jews were among the 23,600 murder victims in the Kamenets-Podolsk massacre—an apt and unique opening salvo for the Holocaust and later Final Solution. The third phase, coordinated campaigns of “population reduction” by murder in various ghettos and settlements—interspersed with “culling” operations that further reduced the number of Hungarian Jews in various towns—was conducted by German stationary security forces during the fall of 1941 and the spring of 1942. The final stage, ushering in the Final Solution, was the transportation of the remnants in cattle cars, together with their Galician brethren, to Belzec. This foreshadowed an introduction to the concept of large-scale industrial murder that later was perfected in Auschwitz. This sealed the fate of these deported Hungarian Jews.

The 1941 deportation and mass murder of more than twenty thousand Hungarian Jews should not be viewed as a mere part of Hungarian history. It is transnational. The events may seem disparate, but in the end, they are interrelated. Their significance lies in the fact that they offer a unique vantage point from which to view the lurches and bumps on the road to the Final Solution. But on the scarred landscape of the Hungarian
Fig P.1  Galicia and surrounding region, August 1941.
and Jewish history, these events also stand out as a portentous milestone that points toward the final phase of the Hungarian Holocaust in 1944. Substantial new material and the reexamination of known sources helps us to reconstruct not only a bloody chapter in Holocaust history, but also a contentious episode of Hungarian and transnational history.

This is by all account the hardest and most challenging book I have ever written, perhaps because it also harbors a personal dimension—my two family members included among those expelled and murdered. Thus, the book transcends the confines of traditional historiography. It aims to present penetrating questions about morality, culpability, and responsibility by giving voices to both victims and perpetrators. The general contours of the story of the deportation and the extermination of the deportees are not a complete “black hole” in Hungarian historiography. However, it has never been fully explored in Hungary and is largely unknown in international Holocaust literature. The immediate puzzle that confronts the researcher is the rationale: Why did Hungarian authorities opt to expel thousands of people in 1941? And why to Galicia? How does this defining episode fit into the Hungarian and general Holocaust narrative? Equally important is the question as to how the behavior of the main perpetrators in Galicia, the mass murderers who were able to combine murder with sadism and greed, conformed to the Nazi ideology of extermination as well as to their dichotomy on morality? How can one reconcile Himmler’s dictum of “kill but remain decent”?

Thus, to comprehend atrocity we need to borrow from disciplines that do not always interlace with historical research. One can find answers only by engaging in a multidisciplinary approach. Similarly, Hungarian Jewish history is not a conventional narrative. In understanding its flow, or rather its unpredictable twists, we need to possess, as the German term Einfühlung would dictate, the intellectual and emotional ability to place ourselves within the perspectives of a specific period, culture, and intellectual system. It requires psychology, cultural studies, and sociology as well as historical methodology. Equally important is the fact that in this case, the personal and the professional are inexplicably intertwined.

In fact, this book was not originally planned. It is the final product of a personal pilgrimage to a remote town in Ukraine. It started with four professors who set out from Uzhhorod, Ukraine, in the spring of 2008 on a 283-mile journey to Kamenets-Podolsk, a faraway town on the border of Galicia and Podolia. I was one of the professors. I asked my three Ukrainian colleagues from Uzhhorod National University—Nataliya Kubiniy, Vasyl Miklovda, and Mykhaylo Pityulych—to join me, both as colleagues and personal friends, on a trip to explore a small corner of my family’s history. Nataliya’s English was perfect, while Vasyl and Mykhaylo spoke only Ukrainian. I wanted to find out, by tearing open a painful chapter of this history, how and why two brothers—my uncles—were murdered in this dusty, nondescript Podolian town in the summer of
1941. It was a harrowing road, even with a car, to retrace the journey of the two brothers and thousands of other Hungarian Jews toward their final destination and mass murder. The landscape was dull, flat, and gray as we passed little villages and dilapidated settlements along the rutted and potholed roads. The most immediate impression was of its featurelessness—wide and empty. My quest was one with no discernable pattern or goals. Why had I come to Kamenets-Podolsk? What did I think I was going to find in this town, which was dramatically reshaped by many decades of communist rule?

The murder site was surrounded by tall, slowly decaying, yellowish, communist-style apartment buildings, built as the city spread outward during the postwar decades. These apartments, cracked, broken, and peeling, as if prematurely aged, seemed to obliterate the past. It was a town that forgot its own history. Or, maybe, was it too tired and worn down to remember all the atrocities—Stalinist or Nazi, interchangeably?

Here was a mass grave, completely surrounded by a modern town. Enclosed by a low wrought-iron fence, thanks to the Israeli government, the murder site was adjacent to a small market and a children’s playground. The memorial monuments in various languages stood in stoic silence. A lonely garland graced one of them. The place was deserted, seemingly oblivious of its history and significance.

Standing in front of one of the monuments, the sole visitor, I was enveloped in silence; I still was not sure why I was there and what I was hoping to accomplish, nor did I know exactly what I was looking for and what I wanted to find. After all, I knew little beyond family lore about the fate of my two uncles, Samu (Samuel) and Karcsi (the Hungarian nickname for Charles), and their final hour. My drive to see the site where the lives of thousands of Jews were extinguished within the span of three days, the two brothers among them, seemed more like a pilgrimage than a scholarly exploration. Visiting a mass grave, where thousands of nameless victims were murdered, demands a forensic passion, as there are multitudes of layers of politics, culture, and, above all, psychology—both that of the victims and of the executioners. I was reminded of the American historian Jill Lepore’s dictum: “All historians are coroners.” To sift through these layers, one needs imagination to picture the terrifying final moments of the victims and the hardened faces of the executioners pulling the trigger, again and again.

Monuments have never moved me; they are impersonal and cold. But, then, an unexpected and serendipitous encounter changed everything. It opened the first crack in a dam that soon became a torrent of information. As I turned my gaze toward my three travel companions, who waited discreetly in the distance, staying behind not to intrude on a private moment of grief or contemplation, I noticed their excitement as they waived frantically. They had found in the adjoining market a simple flower seller, Valentina, who, I came to realize, was an eyewitness herself. She was a seven- or eight-year-old Ukrainian peasant girl at the time, from a small village adjacent to the murder site that took the lives of 23,600 people.
As Valentina recounted her memories, tears streaked down her worn face. Our questions opened long-repressed memories that suddenly burst forth. This was perhaps the first time she was asked to share her suppressed memory fragments. She was there. During the mass shooting. An eight-year-old girl—a mere child. She watched as “the columns of Hungarians [were] ordered to the edge of the mass pit and shot.” In her soft, lilting Ukrainian cadence, she described the nights when “we heard the moans of the wounded who were buried alive. . . . There were cases when people who were thrown into the ditch alive later climbed out, only to jump back in, because they thought that they were on the ‘other side.’ They went insane.” Her father’s horses were requisitioned after the massacre to tamp down the hastily shoveled soil over the heaving, undulating graves filled with victims still alive.¹

I hugged her, almost instinctively. At this moment, I understood that besides those who were killed, and grieving family members who knew somewhat sketchily their loved ones’ final fate, there were other unwitting victims in this brutal phase of history, the so-called Holocaust, or more poignantly, the Shoah. I also realized that I had to come back to this ill-fated town, which became synonymous with mass murder, to ask many more questions of Valentina and of myself.

Meeting her was like a message in a bottle, tossed into the ocean of time that washed up on the dunes many years later. I opened this “bottle,” and this was the moment that I decided to explore the story of the deportation where two brothers disappeared forever. It signaled a transition from a personal quest to an in-depth scholarly inquiry. That was also the moment this book was conceived.

But there was a second crack in this proverbial dam, which had a major influence on my decision to explore the deportation and mass murder of Hungarian Jews in the summer of 1941. Almost by chance, I stumbled upon a work that changed my view of writing this book. Daniel Mendelsohn, in his book The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million, made me realize the importance of the human dimension and corresponding narrative in writing history—the victims’ voices need to be heard. As he so adroitly proved, the chasm between the personal and the historical can be bridged. The final product, this book, is not a mere history of the Holocaust, but a multidimensional view of the fate of thousands of people who were swept up and away in this tragic moment.

The main challenge was, of course, to reconcile the scholarly with the personal. It’s never easy. As a scholar, I have written and spoken about the Holocaust extensively: books, articles, lectures. On the other hand, the Holocaust on the personal level is not unfamiliar to me. I also carry its DNA. Having been born in Hungary during the war, I became a part of its narrative. And this narrative is a painful one, which can either be repressed and never mentioned, as many did during the postwar decades in Eastern Europe, or shared with future generations to fulfill the biblical commandment: “Don’t forget the things that you saw with your own eyes and so that they do not fade from
your mind as long as you live. And make them known to your children and to your children’s children.”

The ability to process and deal with this trauma was often an individual choice. Many refused to share their Holocaust experience because of fear of anti-Semitism or to repress painful memories. After the fall of the Soviet Union, suddenly everything opened up with often heartbreaking results. When a grandmother wears long-sleeve dresses all her life, a grandson could not have guessed that she tried to hide the number that was tattooed on her arm in Auschwitz. Even her daughter did not know that they were from an Orthodox Jewish family. It was a rigorously maintained and self-imposed silence. The Hungarian government, following the example of the Soviet Union, was also complicit in this silence about the public memory of the Holocaust in the hope that the wounds of the past would not impede the building of a utopian proletarian paradise. Based on the Stalinist dictum that one should not “divide the dead,” social scientists wrote Jewish victims out of history books. In reading contemporary reports by the Soviet Investigating Commission of Nazi Crimes, one is struck by the fact that no Jews are mentioned, but only “peaceful Soviet Citizens.” Consequently, a whole generation grew up without an awareness of their family’s fate in the Holocaust or even that they were Jewish.

Fortunately, my family belonged to the group that resisted the temptation to remain silent. For me the Holocaust always lurked in the background. I grew up with its stories, spellbound by the yarns told during the long evenings, far into the night. They were tales of pain, humiliation, hiding, defying, heroism, and, above all, fighting for survival. The words about my father’s incarceration in the Mauthausen concentration camp and my mother hiding under false identity with Christian papers, and with two children, in Budapest were casually woven into a tapestry of survival at all costs. There was nothing hidden, nothing cloaked in protective euphemism, and yet the tone of these stories remained subdued, almost understated, without a sense of rancor, accusation, or a quest for revenge. I was perhaps more incensed about the stories than were my father and mother.

Wrapped within these wartime accounts, there was a story of two brothers who were swept up in the looming genocide, never to return. They were killed in a faraway place, mentioned in hushed tones only, Kamenets-Podolsk. The word “genocide,” like the term “Holocaust,” fails to fully convey the enormity of the crime of which they became victims. Cesarani struggled with this definition, noting that “it might be too broad, encompassing many national and racial groups besides the Jews.” In Israel, the Hebrew word “Shoah” is preferred, used widely for the first time in Claude Lanzmann’s magisterial documentary. It connoted utter devastation, a world in flames, consumed by an inferno. Ian Kershaw’s words reverberate in this context: “the murder of Europe’s Jews was the lowest point of mankind’s descent into the abyss of inhumanity.”
The two brothers were deported and killed ostensibly for not being Hungarian citizens. They were simple people, born in Budapest, one eking out a living by working with horses and wagons and the other a tailor. With three little daughters, Samu was married to a Christian woman with impeccable Hungarian roots. Karcsi was the older one, the tailor by trade. In family stories, and by looking at old sepia photographs, Samu was the outgoing one, the drinker, a ladies’ man, with a radiant smile, deep-set blue eyes, and often with a bottle of wine in his hand. About Karcsi we know the least. He was the introvert, the quiet one, never married. Their story just didn’t add up in my mind. Neither was my grandfather’s fate of being arrested and hauled off at the same time to an impromptu collection camp in Budapest, waiting for transfer to Galicia. His second wife accompanied him (voluntarily or by force, we do not know). Leiser, as he was called by everyone, was born, indeed, in Galicia. But being over seventy years old and ill, he should have been exempted by law. Only through my mother’s fearless intervention was he sent home, where he would die several months later, perhaps of a broken heart over losing two sons and his wife, and maybe knowing the exact details of their final moments.6

I argued with my mother. They were Hungarians, just like my father — why was he not taken? Later, I discovered that my father was saved by a bureaucratic oversight. I also came to know that my father wanted to go also, upon hearing official rumors that in Galicia “there are free houses and employment” that would be distributed to those who were being sent there. Thankfully, he was sternly warned not even to think about this. Two years later, I was born.

Fig P.2A and P.2B  Two brothers, Samu, with a customary bottle of wine, and Karcsi (standing on the left), who was the “quiet one.” Courtesy of George Eisen.
But then, there was a third approach for making sense of the trauma of the Holocaust in which the conflict between faith in God and the Holocaust became central. Through the haze of the rapidly disappearing decades, I can still remember an encounter between one of our neighbors, a highly emotional, Seventh-day Adventist woman, and an official, perhaps thirty years old, who was sent by city hall to assess the value of her house. The neighbor lady loudly, almost hysterically, invoked the name of God, which she often did, imploring the official to remember God and how he would punish them if her property was confiscated. There was a moment of silence. Then, the woman from city hall turned to our neighbor sternly: “You should not talk to me about God! I was in Auschwitz. . . . After Auschwitz, there is no God. There cannot be a God.” This moment, etched indelibly in my memory as a seven- or eight-year-old, reminds me of Primo Levi’s reasoning that in the absence of God, the world itself becomes void of humanity. Auschwitz became perhaps the ultimate metaphor of this “absence of humanity without a god” or the “silence of god amidst atrocity” for many survivors.

This memorable outburst brings me to several questions. Why are we fixated on Auschwitz? Is it because of the audacity of industrial murder cloaked in impersonality and facelessness? Or because the process was hidden from the world and “hygienically” conducted almost like a clinical trial in a medical experiment? If we view the Holocaust in its totality, this sense of an “absence of god” could not have been more obvious than during the first two years of the war and the first phase of the Holocaust when people were murdered by bullets, face-to-face, one by one. It was in Eastern Europe, far away from the probing eyes of the world. Here, there was no need, as in Western Europe, to take the Jews somewhere else to kill them. Entire local communities were co-opted to do the dirty work of the Nazi executioners. These were “the neighbors,” as Daniel Mendelsohn so insightfully phrased, “the intimates, with whom the Jews had lived side by side for centuries, until some delicate mechanism shifted and they turned on their neighbors.” Or, in the same light, the Hungarian neighbors who didn’t protest, who looked away or even lined up, waiting to see what was available for plunder as the family being deported filed out of their home.

The Holocaust was not just a historical event. It was a test for our humanity and soul. The storyline of this book is full of this void of humanity and futile search for God. These killings in the East reduced extermination to its bare essence. Yet, if we dissect the “Holocaust by Bullets,” as Father Patrick Desbois coined it, we can still see a well-orchestrated process—the proverbial German obsession with orderly conduct that started with digging the ditches a day before by Jews or Ukrainian forced labor, who also covered the mass graves. The Germans were preoccupied, meanwhile, with an evening planning session prior to the Aktion, a hearty breakfast, and a final “corporate meeting” after the mass murder to evaluate the efficiency with which the extermination was carried out. This established a certain cadence and ritual for murder.
And let’s not forget an important ingredient of these mass murders: bottle upon bottle of schnapps, consumed before, during, and after the murders. In Galicia, the image of an SS officer orchestrating the killing and running up and down in the front of the mass grave with a gun in one hand and a bottle of vodka in the other is rooted in reality, not in cinematic fiction.

In researching and writing this book, I often was faced with utter incomprehension about the rationale for actions that, in retrospect, cannot be rationalized. I came to realize that the Nazi rationale and justification for mass murder that overlaid the ideology of mass extermination of inferior races, not only Jews, exemplified a distorted worldview. In Galicia, even this “cosmic struggle” was interspersed with the unbridled urge for plunder.

On the other side of genocide is the question of the eager participation of the Ukrainian paramilitary forces, who harbored no ideology, tormenting and butchering defenseless Hungarian refugees, mainly women, children, and elderly, and their own Jewish neighbors. But the Hungarian motives for expelling thousands of people, and then preventing them from escaping, remained the most puzzling mystery. The recurring questions on my mind were obviously unanswerable. What was it all for? This spate of unbridled violence, costing the lives of thousands of people? I wondered what they were thinking—all these well-educated officials, masquerading as statesmen, officious, petty, regional bureaucrats, and the legendarily brutal gendarmerie that managed the expulsion? A sense of frustration hit me every time, for there are no answers that can explain the human avarice, depravity, and shortsightedness that enveloped this first stage of the Hungarian Holocaust.