A Summer of Mass Murder

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On a hot day in late August 1941, the sun rose on a ragged stream of people clutching their most precious possessions as they left the demolished barracks where they spent the night outside the city of Kamenets-Podolsk, in what is now western Ukraine. There were thousands of them: children and babies held in their mothers’ arms, rabbis carrying Torah scrolls, elderly grandparents struggling to keep pace with younger family members. Their captors formed a cordon through which the weary group marched, and those who moved too slowly were beaten.

In the middle of the winding column were two brothers walking side by side. A Hungarian soldier, walking along the column, turned to the younger one, “I know you, Samu. I can save you. I can procure a Hungarian uniform for you.” The younger brother replied, “Thanks, but I cannot leave my brother.” As they struggled up the low hills outside of the city, they could hear gunfire. Few knew for sure what lay ahead, but a palpable sense of fear ran through the group. Finally, they reached an open area marked by four huge craters, the remnants of munition explosions left behind by the retreating Soviet Army. There, the truth became apparent: Today they would die.

The Hungarian soldier, a simple porter in civilian life, followed the column to the murder site, witnessing the final moments of the two brothers. The younger one, Samu, was shot through the head, stumbling into the crater. The older brother, Karcsi, jumped into the mass grave alive, following his brother.¹

What none of them knew, what they could not know, is that the tragic and violent ending of their lives was only the beginning of an even greater horror—for this would be the largest mass murder, held in the opening phase of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe. Over three days, more than 23,000 Jews, many of them Hungarian, were shot and killed or wounded, and buried—many of them still alive—in the munition craters. This is their story.
“A CLEANSING ACTION”

The Hungarian Holocaust cuts a wide panorama in the public imagination. Most images focus on trainloads of prisoners speeding toward Auschwitz, with its smoke- and flame-belching chimneys. It was in the summer of 1944. These images, though, reveal only the final chapter of the Hungarian Jewish tragedy—the extermination in gas chambers. The mass deportation of Jews from Hungary to the neighboring Galicia region, and extermination of more than 20,000 of them there in the summer and fall of 1941, an opportunity presented by the hostilities between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, is lesser known, yet equally lethal. It was an extermination by bullets, a prelude and an introduction to the main act of genocide three years later. While we know some details about the event, it remains a fragmented story.

As the second chapter lays out, this deportation, and the consequent extermination campaign, did not emerge in a vacuum. Paraphrasing Holocaust historian Peter Hayes, one can note that hostile acts against a minority are based on ideas—how the majority perceives a minority—and circumstances that enable this majority to carry through its “murderous intentions.” In this instance, both factors were in alignment in Hungary. The ideology of restricting immigration from the east and the consequent clamor for expulsion of those deemed “foreign elements” was a common staple in Hungarian body politics since the late nineteenth century. During the postwar period, though, this demand galvanized into a dynamic momentum partly because of the unique, internal political undercurrents in Hungary, and partly because of Nazi ideological influences of the 1930s. The reviled “Galicians,” a catch-all term that exemplified these “foreign elements” in common parlance, could be blamed for all the ills and problems of Hungarian society. In some ways, the question during the interwar period was not if, but when to find the right “circumstance” for their transfer to a country, a territory, or a region that would be willing to accommodate this influx.

The outbreak of hostilities on the eastern flank of Europe between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union provided this highly awaited “circumstance.” On June 22, 1941, Nazi Germany launched Operation Barbarossa, invading the Soviet Union. German military planners envisaged a rapid collapse of the communist state within a few weeks. The war unleashed a chain of events in Europe and the world unparalleled in human history. The upper echelon of the Hungarian general staff was aware of the German leaders’ intentions. In the hopes of safeguarding the territories Hungary reannexed and occupied between 1938 and 1941, and in light of political jockeying vis-à-vis Romania, Hungary joined Germany against its eastern neighbor five days later. Neither Hitler nor the German military had asked for such military assistance. However, following an air raid allegedly by Soviet planes on June 26, 1941, in Kassa (Košice in Slovakian), a provincial town in Upper Hungary, Hungary pounced on the opportunity to join the
military invasion. Some speculation exists that the air attack was instigated by Germany to give Hungary a casus belli for joining war. Hungary was eager to join the war, which was strongly supported by the Hungarian military and political establishment, with or without the prodding of Nazi Germany. On June 27, 1941, Hungary declared war on the Soviet Union.

The next day, the Royal Hungarian Army, represented by the “Carpathian Corps” (Kárpát Csoport) crossed the border, advancing far into Ukraine, and later, southern Russia. Attached to the German 17th Army, the Carpathian Corps’ initial goal was to relieve the pressure on the German units and rapidly advance to the Dniester River by securing its bridges. By July 6, they controlled large swaths of Galicia and its forward units, reaching the town of Kamenets-Podolsk on July 10, 1941. As a consequence, Hungary gained territorial control of southern and eastern Galicia, and a corresponding window of opportunity for cross-border expulsion of the so-called undesired foreigners, stateless refugees, or “alien” Jews, Christian family members from mixed marriages, and even a few “troublesome” Ukrainians. Interestingly enough, the word “deportation” was never used in official parlance. Just as with Nazi phraseology, the words that pop up repeatedly were “resettlement,” “repatriation,” and “cross-border removal.”

The rather seamless transition from idea to action incorporated the collection of these Jews, their transportation to Galicia, and the final, abrupt dumping of the expelled along forests, meadows, and dirt roads. Chapter three provides an overall picture of the decision-making process that led up to the expulsion as well as the actual modus operandi in accomplishing this transfer. While the German military onslaught against the Soviet Union indirectly became a significant factor in the relocation of these Hungarian Jews, German authorities were vehemently opposed to their moving into a war zone that had not been stabilized or pacified. The area was still contested territory eyed by Germany as an extended “Lebensraum.” A flurry of German diplomatic communications, military cables, and personal interventions protesting the usage of Galicia as a dumping ground for Hungarian Jews demonstrated the marked displeasure of Germany against Hungary’s and Romania’s actions.

Hungarian participation in the war created optimal conditions for implementing a wave of ethnic cleansing, a phrase coined later and, in another context, on Hungarian soil. The idea of expelling these Jews was common in Hungarian political discourse, and was largely supported by societal consensus. However, to make this happen, three central political, military, and administrative figures—Miklós Kozma, the government commissioner of Carpathian Ruthenia; Lieutenant General Henrik Werth, the chief of general staff of the Royal Hungarian Army; and Ámon Pásztóy, the director of the Külföldieket Ellenőrző Országos Központi Hatóság (National Central Alien Control Office—hereafter KEOKH)—were indispensable. They were the catalysts in promoting, authorizing, and finally implementing the deportation. The prime minister
of Hungary at the time, László Báródy, was supportive of the concept, assuming the role of an enabler in the unfolding expulsion.

While Kozma initiated the idea of cleansing Jews from Carpathian Ruthenia, geographically the closest province to Galicia, the general staff under the leadership of Werth had a much more ambitious design for getting rid of as large a number of Jews as physically possible. Consequently, other regions joined almost immediately. The central role KEOKH played in offering a legal framework for the expulsion, as well as the general policy outline for it, will be discussed in chapter two. The Hungarian army, on the other hand, provided a plan of implementation and the operational “muscle” for the transfer. A directive by General László Dezső, dated July 9, 1941, prior to the removal, gives a clear picture of the preparation for the planned course of action. One of the most staunchly pro-Nazi officers on the general staff, Dezső instructed the invading troops for “the expansion of its military control of the occupied territory as long as possible . . . for the transfer of undesirables such as Jews and Ukrainians.”

The number of expelled can only be approximated, with estimates ranging from 17,500 to 40,000. Official records originating from the files of KEOKH show a more precise number of 17,656, which corresponds with its account about the number of registered Polish and Russian nationals. But this number included non-Jewish individuals also. The demographics of the expelled might be more precisely defined. Approximately two-thirds of those transferred to Galicia came from Carpathian Ruthenia and northern Transylvania. We can add to that thousands of Jews who were collected in Budapest along with a large number of foreign nationals and international refugees from internment camps.

The authorities in Budapest maintained a relatively accurate account of those deported from the capital—estimated at around four thousand. However, they had little control over or knowledge of those whom the military and law enforcement authorities uprooted in the provinces. This was especially true for the military-controlled zones in Carpathian Ruthenia and Transylvania, where entire villages were emptied of their Jewish population—Hungarian citizens included. Military trucks collecting the deportees often proceeded directly to Galicia from the train station with their human cargo and bypassed the registration protocol in the official transfer camp located in Körösmező.

Chapters four and five explore the catastrophe that rapidly overtook Galicia, in part because of the influx of thousands of Hungarians; this influx unhinged an already precarious ethnic mélange in the territory, partly because of emerging Nazi policies making Galicia “Judenrein.” These murders encompassed a full year. Within a half year, a large majority of the deportees were executed in unmarked graves, in forests, and on the banks of the Dniester River by Ukrainian irregulars, or shot over freshly dug mass graves.
and ditches by Nazi execution squads. Many also perished from hunger, maltreatment, and the vicissitudes of wandering across the large expanses of Galicia.

These two chapters provide an account of the final three stages of the saga that include the practical solution for such an unexpected and unwanted influx of Hungarian Jews; an unprecedented mass murder in Kamenets-Podolsk; follow-up massacres in Galicia in the fall of 1941; and the introduction of industrial annihilation of hundreds of thousands of people by gas in the spring of 1942. Thus, this deportation had unintended but dire consequences, both for Hungarian Jewry and for the evolution of the idea and implementation of the Final Solution.

The dry statistics of population displacement cannot convey a sense of the death, destruction, suffering, and misery entailed in the removal. “Emigration” conjures an orderly move, with well-packed luggage and well-laid plans. The state of being evicted from one’s home, with a coffer and three days of food, is something else entirely; there is no common word for it. It is the state of knowing nothing—not how long the journey will last, nor what its final destination might be, nor how one will recognize that destination when it is reached.

The term “ethnic cleansing” is a relatively modern expression. The idea, however, is not. While the dictionary definition implies “systematic killing . . . of national, ethnic or religious group,” it does not have to end in genocide—though it often does. The idea also connotes the removal or exiling of people who, besides the potential physical trauma, are also exposed to mental anguish and psychological shock. It erases a collective memory, a sense of belonging to a national community, a local neighborhood, and a home.

Something very similar happened to the expelled Jews from Hungary. The cross-border transfer of more than 20,000 persons, turning them into refugees in an alien land, cannot be viewed as an out-of-the-ordinary phenomenon—at least not in the context of World War II. Huge demographic shifts accompanied by mass murder were the hallmark of both Soviet and Nazi designs and policies. Following the example of Nazi Germany, all its allies engaged in some form of exchange or forced relocation. In expelling hundreds of thousands of Jews, Romania was a glaring example.

“Ethnic cleansing” on a gigantic scale was an intrinsic part of the war. The expulsion of Jews from Hungary reflected the prevailing norms of the time. The deportation itself did not emerge either in a political vacuum, without an ideological foundation, nor did it lack an indispensable precedent. An equally comprehensive transfer of Serbs and Jews from the southern region of Hungary (Délvidék), in the former Yugoslav area of Backa, to German-occupied Serbia presented this precedent. While there were obvious differences in the motivation and rationale between these two events, the “southern” population transfer served as a prelude and model for the Hungarian military and the Hungarian political leadership for the Galicia action.
In Hungary, and to a large degree in Romania, the persecution and expulsion of Jews was conducted independently from German policies—indeed often against German wishes in both cases. These satellite states, ignoring German requests, used the unfolding war to find their own solution for their “Jewish Question.” The Hungarian action—expelling thousands of people—was an “ethnic cleansing” in the true sense of the word. Indeed, one of the architects of the deportation in Carpathian Ruthenia used the term “cleansing action” in describing the collection and transfer of the Hungarian Jews to an “unknown” destination.

As chapter two will present it, the story of this Hungarian-initiated deportation can be traced back to a political and intellectual ambivalence in the second half of nineteenth century toward the westward movement of Jews from the shtetls of Galicia, at that time an Austrian province. They were considered, for all practical purposes, Austrian citizens, hence it might be termed as internal movement. While the large majority of these migrants ended up in America, sizeable populations also reached Vienna, Berlin, Paris, London, and to a lesser degree Budapest. In Europe, the question of the Ostjuden [Eastern Jews], as they were called, created a political firestorm, both for respective governments and for the established and more assimilated Jewish communities. The majority of these migrants lived in three outlying regions of Hungary: the southern provinces of former northern Hungary (Felvidék), Carpathian Ruthenia, and northern Transylvania (Erdély), forming a semicircle around the periphery of the country. The fulcrum of the deportation concentrated on these regions, and especially in Carpathian Ruthenia.¹⁴

In answering the question as to why the Jewish communities, especially those on the periphery, were singled out for expulsion, it is misguided to consider it purely on “religious” grounds. By the late 1930s, “Jew” metamorphosed from a religious to a racial-national designation. As the Hungarian chief of general staff, it was Lieutenant General Werth’s idea to make Hungary an ethnically homogeneous state through a surge of ethnic cleansing that would have encompassed other, much larger national minorities on a massive scale within the borders of the newly reshaped Kingdom of Hungary—a population transfer of close to seven million people. While this initiative was embraced by the upper echelon of the military cadre, the civilian segment of the government refused to adopt it. Indeed, when Werth finally forwarded this proposal to the prime minister, he called him “an irresponsible lunatic.”¹⁵

But anti-Semitism and racism weren’t the sole factors; there were multitudes of victims besides Jews with problematic identities and multiple motives for their removal. The identification of the “Galicianers” for removal did not stem solely from religious hatred or racist ideology, or even from the politics of ethnicity. It was a uniquely Hungarian chapter of the Holocaust that unfolded independently from the Nazi design. It was not based on strict racial doctrine, for it had its own dynamics and rationale.
There was interdependence and interaction among racism, political expediency, and diverse economic factors in the 1941 deportations—along with greed and economic causality. Mass expulsion was profitable on the local level. As Aly Götz phrased it, it came from “the least desirable of the seven deadly sins: Envy.” Yet, we cannot ignore its political usefulness to governmental circles either.

The momentum for expulsion successfully blended racial and political anti-Semitism with blatant and often petty economic opportunism. A contemporary observer summed it up this way: “There were many who dreamed about misappropriating a Jewish pharmacy, and others about Jewish estates, and some just about a Jewish apartment.” The successive anti-Jewish laws that aimed to curb Jewish economic and cultural dominance in Hungary were most severely enforced in the periphery of the country. Revoking Jewish business licenses, confiscating commercial and agricultural enterprises, and dismissing Jews from public employment had disastrous effects on the economic situation in these areas. Coincidentally, these regions were the most impoverished and backward regions, and Jews were the nascent middle class.

A substantial majority of those deported had settled in Hungary in the later decades of the nineteenth century. Yet the deportation also included Jews who had been living in Hungary for many decades but never obtained citizenship documents, European refugees with Nansen passports (who escaped into Hungary after the German annexation of Czech lands in Austria and elsewhere in Western Europe, and were placed in internment camps), scores of Ukrainians who were considered politically unreliable, and many Jews who were in possession of citizenship papers. Because of a rapid increase in intermarriages in the 1920s and 30s, especially in Budapest, Christian family members were also caught in this dragnet.

The civil administration and military authorities conducted the expulsion with unparalleled cruelty and callousness. It led to a subsequent wave of mass murder, both by Ukrainian paramilitary forces and Nazi extermination squads. The collection, transportation, and haphazard dispersion of more than 20,000 deportees across a wide swath of Galicia was, as the American ambassador had also voiced, lawless and against international conventions. Within half a year, 90 percent of the expellees, sharing the fate of the local Jews, were floating dead on the Dniester River or shot in mass graves—randomly murdered by Ukrainian militias or systematically executed by SS squads who were ably assisted by the Ukrainian police forces and German Order (Reserve) Police Battalions.

**WHY GALICIA**

It was not a coincidence that Galicia became the dumping ground for a large number of people. Galicia has always been a “contested territory” with a complex web of
nationalities, religions, and identities. To use Anne Applebaum’s characterization, it was a typical “borderland,” where borders were erased and redrawn like pencil lines. It later became a veritable “bloodland.” Nazi officials entertained a much darker image. SS-Gruppenführer (Major General) Fritz Katzmann, one of the architects of the Nazi genocide in the region, described it: “Galicia, by virtue of the universally familiar term ‘Galician Jew,’ was a speck on the surface of the earth best known for its Jews. Here lived, in large compact masses, a world of its own whichever supplied the next generation of world Jewry.”

The evolution of Galicia from “borderland” to “bloodland,” as Timothy Snyder coined it, is interesting. Somewhat larger than the area of Massachusetts, it was populated by an ethnic mélange of Ukrainians, Poles, and, of course, Jews. At that time, it was a seething cauldron of ethnic, religious, and national enmity. The addition of thousands of Hungarian Jews further inflamed this rivalry. Violence against Jews was not new in this area; it had been part of the political landscape since the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and presaged the horrors of the 1940s.

The invasion of the Soviet Union by the Wehrmacht changed all this overnight. The subsequent implementation of genocide in Galicia occurred in three waves, as mass murder engulfed Ukraine and other regions of the Soviet Union, closely adhering to the chronology, ideological premise, and dynamics of the Holocaust. There was a discernible pattern in the radicalization of Nazi policies in genocide. The first wave, corresponding roughly with August and September 1941, ran parallel to the commencement of hostilities and the rapid advancement of the German military. The extermination units closely followed the fighting groups, liaising and coordinating with them on their plans for the extermination in Ukraine. The military, in turn, requested and logistically supported these security forces “to deal with security problems in rear areas.” Initially, the methods of killing were haphazard and experimental. These killings were personal—face-to-face. This phase occurred as regional leaders implemented a wave of murders that followed a broad mandate from Berlin, but under the watchful eyes of Himmler. Undoubtedly the largest atrocity, collectively labeled the “Kamenets-Podolsk massacre,” gave an “identity” and cognitive association to the cross-border removal of Hungarian Jews. Within a three-day span, August 27–29, 1941, 23,600 victims, among them an estimated 14,000 to 16,000 Hungarians, were shot and dumped into mass graves.

Following the Kamenets-Podolsk massacre, and with the transfer of power from military to civilian administration at the end of the summer, a second wave of extermination by Nazi security services commenced with equal ferocity in southern and eastern Galicia. Disparate killing units, led by mid-level SS officers who relied on a host of law-enforcement agencies, fanned out across the area, slaughtering more than half a million Jews in the last five months of 1941. That included the remnants of the Hungarian
expellees. Though not as well known or documented, this signaled the systematic ghettoization in Galicia, which could have been accomplished only by reducing the Jewish population. The murders reached a crescendo in the middle of October when a coordinated decimation of communities occurred. The reduction in the size of the ghettos through mass shootings wasn’t carried out by Einsatzgruppen [mobile killing units operating behind the front lines] or the Wehrmacht, but by security officials, along with reserve police battalions, with the enthusiastic cooperation of local German municipal administrations. This stage is best characterized as “community-based” extermination, in which the local Ukrainian auxiliary police assumed a supporting role in the unfolding campaign of murder. In the Nazi plans, the ghetto became inextricably tied to the policy of genocide. This wave swept up the remaining survivors among the deportees. During this second upsurge in murder, the fate of the deportees diverged from the local Jewish communities. The Nazi death sentence hung over both. But the deportees were invariably the first target of extermination.

The third and final wave of extermination, the total annihilation in Galicia, taking with it the last remnants of Hungarian refugees, introduced the concept of the Final Solution—industrialized murder. It was written by the transports to the extermination camp in Belzec in 1942. This was mandated by the decree from the Wannsee Conference in Berlin on January 20, 1942. Although by that time only a fraction of the Hungarian Jews was still alive, they inextricably became an integral part of the Final Solution.

There was a corollary phenomenon in this deportation that has rarely been discussed, yet is equally important. Chapter six describes the wave of rapes and sexual violence, some might use the term “sexualized violence,” that accompanied, or rather preceded, the actual killings. This silence in the scholarly literature is partly due to a paucity of testimonies by the victims themselves. But equally important factor was the silence by the perpetrators about their crimes during the Holocaust. Finally, there was a reticence to open such a painful topic by scholars—mainly men. Indeed, such open discussion about this topic commenced only recently, and mostly by female scholars.

THE HOLOCAUST CONTEXT

There is a wide range of questions connected to the 1941 Hungarian deportation. The most immediate one is how the idea of deporting thousands of people—who were well-integrated into Hungarian society and culture—came about. As noted, the Hungarian military played a crucial role in the collection and deportation of the Jews. Examining Hungarian governmental directives and regional administrative policies sheds further light on motivation and rationale. A corollary question that needs to be
addressed is how this deportation fits into a broad historical context. The Hungarian deportation and the ensuing murders in Galicia were instrumental in influencing the Nazi plans for the full extermination of European Jewry. But were they an aberration or a predictable part of a pattern? How did the Hungarian actions during the summer and fall of 1941 influence the evolution of the Final Solution? And if they served as a catalyst that presaged and triggered the Holocaust in Ukraine, what were the consequences and role of the deportation in igniting the fuse?

As noted earlier, the 1941 expulsion is not a completely unexplored chapter of the Hungarian Holocaust. However, neither an in-depth analysis based on personal recollections of the events, nor a comprehensive and interdisciplinary account about the deportation and murders, nor the placement of the event in the context of the unfolding Holocaust been written. Nor have the accounts of survival, rescue, and ultimate responsibility been explored.

This is also a narrative that transcends the narrow confines of Hungarian history. There are several compelling reasons for exploring this story: (1) this deportation and subsequent mass killing introduced quantitative and qualitative “firsts” in the annals of the Holocaust—it was the first instance when the number killed reached five digits; (2) it introduced for the first time a new concept of “total” genocide: men, women, and children were systematically murdered; (3) Hungarian authorities also expelled international refugees who were accorded asylum, in clear contravention of international norms; (4) the massacre in Kamenets-Podolsk, was initiated and directly requested by the German military as a response to the influx of destitute refugees, implicating it fully in the unfolding genocide. The Wehrmacht’s cooperation with the SS in implementing genocide reflected the understanding between Heinrich Himmler and the leadership of the Wehrmacht in solving the “Jewish problem”; and (5) finally, the entire expatriation, culminating in bloodbaths of unprecedented magnitude, became almost instantaneously known not only to various Jewish communities in Galicia, but also within Hungary, the British, American, and Soviet governments, and, later, the international press.

There are many sources for exploring this tragedy: trial transcripts, personal narratives of survivors, and recently discovered documents, all of which offer new windows for our understanding. On the ground level, during the deportation of Hungarian Jews, soldiers or forced labor personnel serving in the Royal Hungarian Army were also intimately acquainted with the details of the Galician nightmare. They often met their Jewish neighbors or their own families in Galicia. The indigestible horror of the Holocaust sinks deeper in the human consciousness with a “personalized dimension” to the tragedy. It is natural to want to look at both the victim’s and the executioner’s points of view. For one glimpse of the tragedy, we have a group of prisoners from the ghetto in Nadwórna forced to return to the site of the massacre eight month later, tasked with piling more dirt over the killing sites that already held their families. Many of the buried
were Hungarians. Coming close to the ravine, a ghetto prisoner remembers “we saw a chewed-off hand, pointing towards heaven, stick out of the mass grave . . . raised like an accusation against God and men.”

The trial proceedings against policemen and SS officers who actively participated in the massacres provide the details of the technical elements that allowed the mass murder to happen. But very little remorse. The “personalized” angle is seen in the image of a soldier with an initial ambivalence in killing Jewish babies, which rapidly escalates into a routine when “by the tenth try I aimed calmly and shot surely at the many women, children, and infants. . . . Infants flew in great arcs through the air, and we shot them to pieces in the air before they fell into the ditch and water.”

This soldier saw the killing of the infants as a sport, a form of target shooting and amusement, rather than an efficient elimination tactic. We know with the clear knowledge that children and babies were routinely thrown into the pits alive. As testimony from those in Rovno illustrate, “they did not shoot the children—they didn’t want to waste the bullets—and instead just hurled them live directly into the pit.” These can be viewed against the lists of executed Jewish children on the meticulously typewritten reports of the Einsatzgruppen.

There were also eyewitnesses. The yellowed and hand-written pages of their testimonies, deposited in archives in the Soviet Union, are valuable. More recently, a witness who was a mere child at the time had to face their childhood trauma in describing the murder site as an “anti-tank ditch freshly filled, that where the Jews were shot. The earth was still moving, it [looks] like it was breathing as if they were not all dead.” These are unwitting participants and sometimes victims as well, who provide the connecting filament between the two. Their reports illuminate with a human touch a complex historical reality. The Ukrainians who were forced by the Germans to dig or cover the mass graves in 1941 are also the witnesses who were present at the opening of the same graves in 1944. Standing in front of an open pit in Kamenets-Podolsk, holding the remains of Hungarian Jews in 1944 for whom “there was nobody to cry,” a member of the investigative committee saw “the corpse of a little boy, buried alive. . . . This can be seen by the pose as his little hands were cupping his head, his knees brought up to his chin, his back bent as he tried to lift the weight on top of him.”

Thanks to these witnesses, we can verify the mind-numbing statistics of the Soviet investigators that during the killing process “35 percent of the victims were shot dead on the spot, 50 percent of the people were injured, and 15 percent were buried alive.”

These somewhat impersonal numbers also reflected exiled Hungarians. This, in turn, brings into focus the complex question of what could have been done to stop the deportation and save the remnants. Corollary to that is the thorny issue of primary responsibility. As chapters six and seven chronicle, in some ways rescue and responsibility present two sides of the same story.
The great paradox facing Hungarian history is to explain how the land of “wonderful opportunity” for Jews in the second half of the nineteenth century transformed within several decades into a land that irrevocably banished them, and three years later sent them to the gas chambers. From a judicial vantage point, the Hungarian government became complicit in mass murder by launching the 1941 deportation and the follow-up refusal to repatriate the survivors, Jews, and their Christian family members alike. This was done in spite of the fact that they were privy to information about the genocide taking place in the recently conquered territories. In retrospect, the 1941 deportation stands as a testament to the follies of a dysfunctional political system that pursued short-term political gains by subscribing to a “culturally constructed” perception, a mirage of its own creation, about an internal enemy, the “Galicianer.” This mirage distorted historical realities and contravened international norms and laws.

In Hungary proper, save a few voices of conscience and individual attempts at rescue, there was initially an eerie silence. This silence—perhaps disbelief would be a better word for it—was gripingly expressed by Elie Wiesel in the image of Moishe the Beadle who returned from the inferno of Galicia to a wall of silence. The removal of these unfortunate people went smoothly. There were no burning synagogues, no broken storefronts, no looted stores, mass riots, or demonstrations—only disappointed provincial officials who complained that the job was not completed because of the shortage of time for removing the entire Jewish community.

This lack of response rapidly gave way to a concerted momentum to modify or stop altogether the expulsion. The Jewish community, under the leadership of Baroness Edith Weiss, made every effort to intervene, mainly behind the scenes, to limit the scope of deportation first and, afterward, to assist the thousands who were abandoned in Galicia. For some, like Margit Slachta, one of the most respected moral and religious voices of the times, a raised and accusing finger was not enough. She also posed the question of moral responsibility. As early as July 29, 1941, she addressed this issue in a letter sent directly to the wife of the reigning head of state, Miklós Horthy. She minced no words in labeling the deportation as “the defilement of the Christian religion and Hungarian honor.” As one of the pivotal figures in the efforts of stopping the removal and rescuing the exiles, her unsparing letter bring into focus Hungary’s accountability. She was not alone in questioning the moral and legal underpinning of the deportation. Besides the leaders of the Jewish community, parliamentarians, civic leaders, some members of the aristocratic elite, and, equally significant, the American ambassador Herbert C. Pell also joined in Slachta’s efforts to stop the deportation.

Mass murder is not a twentieth-century invention, but, in the Holocaust, it is the tragic hallmark of the century. When viewed against the background of Europe’s relatively peaceful period after 1815, the first half of the twentieth century seems like a
sharp drop into an unprecedented moral chasm — a descent into apocalyptic violence. Even if we discount the carnage of World War I and the Stalinist purges, we have to contend with an estimated 55 million who died in World War II. The centrality of the Holocaust, with six million Jewish victims within this 55-million-person total, is undisputable. Given the countless atrocities and massacres, as well as the inimitable specter of genocide, the mass deportation of more than 20,000 people in these tumultuous times might seem a minor matter if not for its dire consequences.

The Nuremberg Trials are perhaps the most visible demonstration of holding those that designed, initiated, and perpetrated atrocities accountable. We are all familiar with the main architects of the Holocaust: Hitler, Göring, Goebbels, Himmler, and many others. The newly minted words “genocide,” “crimes against humanity,” and the “Holocaust” are themselves also a testimony for an emerging awareness that something tragic and extraordinary happened during this war for which routine expressions would not suffice. Intertwined in this new awareness was the issue of responsibility.  

Research into the Hungarian Holocaust and the 1941 deportation poses unique challenges. Chapter eight, about the perpetrators of the deportation and their ultimate responsibility, is a needed conclusion for the book, but here we have a recognition problem. After all, the names of those responsible for the Galician deportation, such as László Bárdossy, Henrik Werth, Ámon Pásztóy, Miklós Kozma, and many others, in Hungary are not an immediate informational commodity for the uninitiated — especially outside Hungary. Yet, these Hungarians were as much, or perhaps more, responsible for the early phases of the Hungarian Holocaust as the Nazi murder squads. There was a rather short postwar window through which the Hungarian courts attempted to call upon those responsible for war crimes in general and the 1941 deportation in particular. The Hungarian People’s Court, as judicially weak as it might have been, made concerted efforts to address their guilt or innocence. And there were many officers, regional administrators, and government officials who ensured that the vision of these leaders become a bloody reality, but they were never brought to justice.

Finally, we also encounter vocal and sometimes unwitting saviors amid the destruction, who are slowly fading into the mist of history yet coming to life, for a fleeting moment, through the voices of these survivors in the videos. With a full communist takeover of Hungary, ideology and enforced silence limited access to their stories — mostly for political reasons.

In recent years, the investigation of the Holocaust has fostered innovative approaches toward understanding the political as well as individual motivations for mass murder. This book presents a micro-history centered on a pivotal “first”: the opening act of the Hungarian Holocaust and its far-reaching consequences for the evolution of the Final Solution. Yet even a micro-study needs a wide canvas: a multiplicity of experiences and motives to accommodate the nuances of the 1941 deportation.
After the fall of communism, this subject remained the domain of a handful of Hungarian historians. Writing history in Eastern Europe, though, can turn into a reimagining of the past as painted on a black-and-white canvas. Snyder’s question is pertinent: “Can truthful historical accounts resist the gravity of politics?” He provides no answer, but the question implies that there is an inherent danger in seeing history as the instrument of the present, in which national histories are, as Applebaum opined, “re-appropriation of history.” As is frequently the case in Eastern Europe, everyone feels victimized in some form or another—both on the individual and national levels. This hinders national soul-searching for the crime of expelling thousands of innocent people or becoming complicit in their murder.

This “national soul-searching” becomes even more complicated, because during the waves of extermination in Galicia, Jews were not the only victims and Germans were not the only enemies. The main goal of the Nazi plan was to eradicate Jews. But during the occupation, Ukrainians massacred Poles, Germans massacred Ukrainians and Poles, and Ukrainians massacred Ukrainians. Without overinflating the indigenous anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, including the murder of Hungarian Jews, would not have been as successful or even accomplishable without local assistance. Add to that an uneasy alliance with conflicting priorities among the three invading armies: Germany, Romania, and Hungary.

The psychological and political underpinnings of the deportation, as well as the corollary governmental and military policies, highlight the uneasy alliance between Germany, Romania, and Hungary. There is also the question of how the Hungarian deportation fit into the German design of the Holocaust in Ukraine. This Holocaust was a “remarkably low-tech and non-capital intensive” affair; by the time the death factories of Treblinka, Chelmo, Majdanek, and Auschwitz began to function, more than million and a half Jews had been killed in the occupied territories in the east.

In Snyder’s phrase, Auschwitz has the power to blunt the face-to-face “individuality” of the killing during this early period. Holocaust by bullets was raw murder. It took place within communities where neighbors knew neighbors and, often enough, the accomplices were acquainted with the victim. In the process, the whole communal entity became co-opted for murder. A complex interaction of four “players” can be identified: the victim, the executioner, the witness, and, sometimes, the rescuer.

This book is based on extensive archival research, interviews, and corresponding literature across countries and languages, incorporating many hitherto unknown documents that present uncharted territory in Holocaust scholarship. Along the way, readers will hear the voices of the victims who survived the bloodbath, but not the trauma; look at the images of the perpetrators whose motivation for murder is still a riddle; and read the long-forgotten testimonies of contemporaries, not simple bystanders, swept up in the nightmare unwittingly, who recorded the horror in simple words. Built on a
historical narrative, the book attempts to share human voices and a history of human feelings. We can weave major and complex stories, but it is the human element that cements them truly together.

After examining the history of the 1941 deportation and the consequent mass murder, the most pertinent question might not be why it happened, but how could it happen in the first place? Historians have written a great deal on the regional implementation of genocide and its links with Nazi policies of extermination. Yet we still know very little about what took place in communities that came under German occupation, especially in Galicia. By expanding our attention from the ominous shadow of the largest mass murder, in Kamenets-Podolsk, to the smaller towns and communities where the deported Hungarian Jews intermingled and lived, the question as to where the Hungarian Jews fit in the policies of the Holocaust finds its answer. This book is guided by the maxim that history contains one kind of truth and human stories another, and that only the combination of the two can create a comprehensive picture and add texture to this tragic historical event.