A Summer of Mass Murder

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“Everything that one might have considered once unthinkable, there it happened to us.”

Sitting in the living room of László Zobel, a survivor of the 1941 deportation, these few carefully chosen words in well-balanced, soft cadences sum up his two-months of wandering with his mother in Galicia. Betrayal, endless trudging, hunger, murder, and salvation from an unexpected source led him to ponder these experiences and lessons for a lifetime. I have seen already the video of his testimony, along with those of other surviving witnesses to the carnage in Galicia, before meeting him in Budapest. As in the video, he repeated this sentence again, slowly, as to give additonal weight to his words.

Belying his age, a centenarian, tall, erect, with a mane of white hair and sparkling, intelligent eyes, his story was told in sparse prose, hiding a barely disguised bitterness. With a razor-sharp memory, he recalled precise dates, times, locations, and names. But, reclining on the sofa with crossed arms, he refused to employ superlatives. And, while he chose his words carefully, the word gazság was repeated again and again.

This quintessential Hungarian word connotes equally depravity, villainy, and wickedness, aimed perhaps to convey the feeling of betrayal by seemingly irrational governmental policies that led to the deportation, the chaotic, borderline criminal conduct of the Hungarian military that implemented it, the plunder of the defenseless deportees by the accompanying gendarmes, and the local gentile janitor in Budapest who promptly informed the police upon Zobel’s escape from Galicia, leading to his incarceration in an internment camp. He did not neglect to place some responsibility on the Jewish communal leaders who initially acquiesced to the deportation, and who later refused to fully believe in his story. His words conveyed more disappointment than rancor or anger. Yet, he repeatedly used this word, gazság, for he carried a deep wound that time couldn’t heal, even after seventy-eight years.
Although he endured a harrowing two-month-long, aimless wandering in Galicia, interspersed with Ukrainian atrocities and abuse by Hungarian military personnel, Zobel was one of the fortunate ones to return and tell his story. His journey, though, is not unique, but rather emblematic. He, like the many thousands of his fellow deportees, went through a process that started with labels for creating the image of the Galicianer. In turn, this process evolved into legal exclusion, dehumanization, and, for many, death by bullets.

First, Zobel lost his job in 1938 as a consequence of the First Jewish Law. Although he used a Hungarian passport when he traveled in Europe, that was followed by the revocation of his citizenship. Overnight, he became a stateless person and was forced to report regularly to the offices of KEOKH. Finally, he was arrested during a routine identity check on August 5, 1941. The next day the inevitable happened; he was shipped, together with his mother—whose citizenship papers were in order—to the transit camp in Kőrösmező and consequently to Galicia. He remembers this day well—August 11, 1941. Coincidentally, it was three days after the ministerial order that was deliberately ignored by the commander of the transit camp, and which explicitly forbade border transfer to Galicia.

A VENEER OF LEGALITY

The first official announcement for the impending expulsion was issued on July 12, 1941, by the newly appointed director of KEOKH, state councilor Dr. Sándor Siménfalvy. In contrast to the prevailing political clamor for expulsion, encouraged by the radical-right press, the general tone of this key piece of communication seems almost restrained. What was perhaps most notable about the announcement’s language is that it did not mention expulsion or deportation. Neither were Jews, Poles, or Russian citizens specified as the target. The term Galicianer, the key villains in Hungarian mythological narrative, was also absent. The announcement was succinct and to the point in alluding to the “changing foreign political conditions” that could facilitate in the near future the “removal of unwanted foreigners or foreign citizens.” The memorandum merely instructed all police authorities to commence with the “registration” of these individuals within three days with due legality and diligence. The guidelines concluded that the director “will issue the proper instructions relating to the foreign nationals upon the receipt of the reports.”

This directive did not emerge in a vacuum. Its importance lies in the fact that it established a legal framework, however nebulous, for the commencement of the expulsion. Otherwise, it is hard to ascertain its practical impact because by the time it was issued, the wheels of deportation were in full gear and the preparation for the collection
of Jews in Carpathian Ruthenia was already underway. And while KEOKH’s administrative participation in the project was deemed necessary and crucial, the initiative and operative power to launch the deportation was not within its purview. To embark on such a momentous political endeavor, the planning and execution of it had to come right from officials much higher in the governing hierarchy who had direct access to the highest levels of the Hungarian government.

Almost immediately and parallel with the onset of hostilities on June 22, 1941, and Hungary’s entrance into the war several days later, feverish consultations began between the military leadership and high-level officials in the provinces to utilize this opportunity for the expulsion of unwanted populations, specifically Jews. The war opened a long-coveted door for cross-border removal. Recent Holocaust scholarship, supported by newly discovered documents, places this proposal unfailingly on the shoulders of the military establishment. The most ardent pursuer of the expulsion, and not just Jews, was Colonel-General Henrik Werth, the chief of staff of the army. His aims coincided with those of Miklós Kozma, the government commissioner of Carpathian Ruthenia.

While Kozma’s territorial focus was narrow, limited to the eastern counties bordering the Soviet Union, his was the central spark that unleashed the removal. Werth’s plans were much more ambitious. Such sweeping views of a comprehensive solution for minorities, in which the “Jewish Question” was only one component, were shared by the entire general staff. A revealing diplomatic dispatch by the Hungarian military attaché in Berlin addressed to the general staff resonated this line of thinking. Utilizing the Hungarian occupation of Galicia, it proposed four key points. Two dealt specifically with minorities: (1) it could offer a prominent opening for the repatriation from Hungary of all those who infiltrated from north of the Carpathian Mountains [i.e., Galicianers], and (2) it would be also “very convenient for transferring vocal and unreliable ‘tót’ [Slovaks] and ‘oláh’ [Romanians] living in Hungary”;

Werth harbored an almost pathological impulse for the deportation not only of the Galicianers, but of the entire Jewish community; however, for the time being, he also had to abandon the idea of expelling millions of Romanian and Slovakian minorities along with the whole Jewish community, despite periodically advocating for this step. He was forced to focus his attention on the removal of Jews from the border provinces. Within a few days, though, he expanded the ranks of the intended expellees with foreign nationals from internment camps. A contemporary report by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee estimated the number of such foreign nationals between 2,600 and 2,800, with 10,000 stateless Jews. At this time, no mention was made of Jews living in the interior of the country or those residing in Budapest.

To maintain a sense of legality, the proposal for the cross-border removal of Jews with “Polish and Russian citizenship” needed the approval of the Council of Ministers under the leadership of the prime minister, László Bárdossy. By the time of this meeting of
the cabinet, Hungarian troops, represented by the Carpathian Corps [Kárpát Csoport] were deep in Galicia. As one of the central characters in the unfolding deportation, Ámon Pásztóy recalled during his postwar trial that the “decree of expulsion was initiated by Henrik Werth, who was not a member of the Council of Ministers, but at that time was also present. On the basis of his suggestion, this proposal was presented to the Cabinet as a motion by Károly Bartha, then minister of defense.”

The intervention of Kozma might also have been a key element in the evolution of the initiative, for he was in direct communication with the office of the prime minister as well as the minister of interior. In the last days of June 1941, he openly intimated that a solution for the Jewish Question was impending: “We will see in the future a definite improvement because those groups that are not comfortable due to political or racial reasons in Carpathian Ruthenia will have the opportunity to return soon to places where they could entertain hopes for a better existence and find a homeland more suitable to their allegiance.”

These words were a mere preamble for the decision by the government. The seal of approval by the Council of Ministers for the deportation was almost a formality, a rather anticlimactic affair. During the meeting, the focus was mainly on Carpathian Ruthenia. Since no detailed notes have survived about the deliberations, we are in the dark about individual ministers’ explicit views about the initiative. Subsequently, it was approved with the sole objection coming from the Minister of Interior Ferenc Keresztes-Fischer.

In an effort to assuage his concerns, Bartha reassured those present with the promise that “resettlement from a military point of view is well-prepared and the displaced persons, with the support of the Hungarian military administration, will be supplied all the prerequisites which is necessary for the reconstruction of a devastated territory and the launching of their new existence.” There were also promises made about resettling the deported Jews in recently abandoned homes to a place where “they can engage in agriculture.” In an effort to align KEOKH’s policies with that of the defense ministry, the official line emphasized that in Galicia, empty villages, houses, and furnished apartments would be waiting for the new settlers. There was also a promise made that “these Jews will not be exposed to any danger because they will be under the protection of the Hungarian army stationed in Galicia.”

As we will see later, if these egregious claims weren’t consciously mendacious, they were purposefully misleading, or at best wishfully blind. One of the perverse aspects of this misinformation campaign was that the idea was deliberately circulated to the public. More importantly, a rosy future with abandoned houses, empty villages, and abundance in employment opportunities waiting for the expellees in the newly conquered territories was aimed mainly at the Jewish leadership. The aim was to reassure leaders that the removal would benefit the expellees. In reality, the stringent regulations
of carrying 30 kg, bringing with them only the essential items, and a meagre 30 pengő was not a promising omen that a successful existence in Galicia was planned for the unfortunates.

Such announcements and rumors were disseminated at the outset of the deportation, aiming to alleviate any concern on the part of the Jewish communities in the provinces and the leadership in Budapest. It worked for a while. Commentaries in the contemporary press to the effect that Jews should be removed and would find livelihood opportunities in the occupied territories reinforced this misinformation campaign. They might also be a clear testimony to that fact that the impending removal was not a secret. The most outlandish example was the call by the subprefect [alispán in Hungarian] of Máramaros County, in northern Transylvania, Dr. Gábor Ajtay, for “voluntary” emigration from this eastern border region. On July 8, 1941, he urged local residents to return to their birthplace where they could engage in agriculture. To complete this rosy picture, the authorities also promised that “assistance” would be forthcoming.

This call was an unwelcome intrusion on Kozma’s turf, which he deeply resented. A contemporary report noted that the subprefect planned the transfer of 30,000 people just from his county alone, and regardless of their citizenship. This offer was not coordinated with any governmental entity in Budapest and certainly not with the three main officials entrusted with the removal. Kozma intimated in one of his reports, addressed to the prime minister, that such private initiatives, such as that of the hapless Ajtay who had obviously overstepped his authority, should not be tolerated. Nevertheless, it showed that even mid-level administrators could, and were keen to, remove large number of people and dismiss in the process any legal constraint.

Following the cabinet’s approval, preparations began almost immediately. Three entities—the government commissioner, KEOKH, and the military—were entrusted with carrying out the expulsion. They proceeded along three parallel lines. In spite of some degree of cooperation that was needed for accomplishing the expulsion, there was an element of interdepartmental competition among them. They interpreted the governmental missive independently and loosely on their own terms. During the deliberations of the cabinet, the well-rehearsed official line was (as Siménfalvy from KEOKH testified in his trial) to address the issue of citizens with “Polish and Russian” nationality. Indeed, a sequence of official communiqués from KEOKH followed this line. However, for the next two weeks new groups were added almost daily—and arbitrarily—for removal, often ignoring resident permits or full Hungarian citizenship not only in the provinces, but also in Budapest.

On the one hand, it was an operation of the Ministry of Interior, represented by KEOKH and its ambitious “gray eminence” Pásztói. Kozma, on the other hand, ran a fully independent campaign in Carpathian Ruthenia that was assisted by local police
and the gendarmerie. Finally, the military was supposed to be the conduit for transporting the collected Jews over the border from a transit camp. However, Werth could not stay idle while the two other organizations became fully operational, and unilaterally expanded the population who must be expelled.

It is not easy to create a clear, chronological outline of the unfolding deportation. The main perpetrators were running parallel operations, reported to different superiors, and often bypassed their direct supervisor. When opportunity presented itself, Kozma, Werth, and Pásztóy pounced on it, often without clear coordination among them. The chain of communications, crisscrossing the political landscape in the first two weeks of July, betrays an understated rivalry among the three main individuals.

Tracing the chain of events, we first note a diary entry by Kozma, dated July 4, celebrating the successes of the Hungarian Army on the Eastern Front. The entry also informs us those communications were started with the military for expulsion from a five-kilometer-wide border zone. Then, he cryptically, though with authority, notes that the impending action will include the expulsion of “Jews with foreign citizenship; young single Jews; . . . forcibly, voluntarily.” The note about “young single Jews” was a new twist and signaled a disturbing trend in the implementation of the cabinet’s mandate. Another overlooked recommendation by Kozma was aimed at Ukrainian nationalists who escaped across the border. He advocated stripping their citizenship and expelling their families. This showed that new groups could be added, on the whim of the main architects, to the agreed upon governmental order.15

An order from the general staff three days later, on July 7, followed. It instructed the commander of the Carpathian Corps, Lieutenant General Ferenc Szombathelyi, to coordinate with Kozma for “the immediate removal of non-Hungarian Jews, immigrated from Galicia to Carpathian Ruthenia, to recently occupied Galicia.” Then, the order requested a contingency plan, a blueprint, for the potential expulsion of “non-citizen Jews” (foreign nationals) from the interior of the country “and foremost those from the internment camps—in agreement with the government—to Galicia.”16

This was another new milestone. These foreign nationals were not the hated Galicaners and not from Carpathian Ruthenia. They included citizens of various countries who found sanctuary in Hungary as well as those holding Nansen passports.17 The claim of an “agreement with governmental authorities” is perhaps the most spurious declaration in this document. There is no evidence that he coordinated this step either with Keresztes-Fischer, the interior minister, or KEOKH. Werth was notorious for taking unilateral actions without official consultations or approval. This might have been one of them. As noted earlier, he instructed one of the most staunchly pro-Nazi officers on the general staff, General László Dezső, on July 9, 1941, to issue a directive to the Carpathian Corps. The directive sets the logistical contours of the expulsion, ordering the military to expand “its control of the occupied territory as long as possible
for the transportation of captured military hardware, food, gasoline, and rubber as fast as possible and, on the one hand, for the transfer of undesirable populations such as Jews and Ukrainians.”

Not far behind, the trail of communication lead to the prime minister’s office. On July 10, 1941, Kozma informed Bárdossy about the impending cross-border transfer as a fait accompli: “Next week I will put across the border non-Hungarian citizens, infiltrated Galicianers, exposed Ukrainian agitators, and Gypsies. The details have already been finalized with Bartha, [Secretary of Defense], Szombathelyi, and the commander of the army corps in Debrecen.” In addition to designating new groups for removal, the words “across the border” betrayed the signal for the practical phase of the deportation in specific and unambiguous terms.

In fact, it would seem that the authorities in the capital had no objections to his plans because on the next day, July 11, his diary noted with a degree of satisfaction that “Pest [Budapest] started to move and follows me in this new situation.” He reiterated in his cursory style that the removal is aimed at “1. Foreign nationals; 2. Military zone; 3. Ukrainian agitators; 4. Gypsies.” No reply from the prime minister has survived. The only sign that the prime minister might have had some concerns was a cryptic note in Kozma’s diary on July 16; however, these communications show that Bárdossy was updated and knew that the plans for deportation were expanded to others than the Galicianers.

A subsequent memo from Kozma, dated on July 12, 1941, parallels KEOKH’s instruction but is much more advanced in planning, and indicates that the deportation is about to start. The only unanswerable question is whether Kozma meant the collection or the actual transfer of the Jewish population across the border. The fact that it gives details about the handling of property left by the deported Jews, and already speaks of them in the past tense, points to the arrest of the unfortunates before or around July 12. In comparing this statement with the KEOKH memo, also dated on July 12, which requests only the registration of those to be deported, we can conclude that collection was in full momentum by that time and without discernable coordination or assistance from Budapest. Not coincidentally, the Hungarian military had occupied Kamenets-Podolsk the previous day.

Finally, KEOKH was also ready to spring into action. Two days after the first memorandum, Sándor Siménfalvy sent out a second, more pointed announcement addressed to police prefects and authorities. This mentioned Jews specifically, though “Polish and Russian nationals” and below the age seventy for men and sixty for women. He also set down guidelines that limited the luggage to absolute necessities, including food provisions for three days so that the deportees “would not cause shortages in local food supplies,” and identified who should care for the property left behind. This last proviso was a misnomer, for the gathering was undertaken at such a dizzying speed that the
deportees, plucked out with a half hour of preparation time, were unable to make any orderly arrangement for transferring their property. A revealing report also indicated that there were villages where the entire Jewish population was deported, leaving all their property behind without any lawful transfer or guardianship.

Frantic preparation of lists as to who should be expelled started late—somewhere in second half of July 1941. KEOKH had a rather rudimentary list, mainly relating to Budapest and the internment camps. In its catalog, the number of Polish- or Russian-born aliens numbered only 6,000. Therefore, additional masses of Jews had to be declared stateless even if they had no connection with Poland or Russia. To expedite the deportation so that “the removal could proceed unhindered,” he also dispatched one of his trusted lieutenants, a police officer in the rank of captain, Nándor Batizfalvy, to the hastily organized transit camp on the Hungarian-Soviet border.

How this police officer could expedite the process was not spelled out. As it is, the transit camp rapidly evolved into a humanitarian nightmare. Under the jurisdiction of the military, it was located several miles from the town of Kőrösmező, in Havasalja, and was among three planned collection points, but the only one that became operational. The official name of the approximately 1.5-acre area enclosed by a muddy, clay lath fence was “Royal Hungarian Military Collection and Transit Camp Number 104.” Not surprisingly, it was anything but what the defense minister promised when he declared during the meeting of the ministers, “the resettlement from a military point of view is well-prepared.” For the next five weeks this created a gridlock in the process, overwhelming the capacity of the primitive camp. As the trains started to funnel thousands of unfortunate deportees to the site, it became clear that it turned into a bottleneck, and, consequently, a catastrophe. This foreshadowed the unmitigated disaster that the follow-up transportation to the east turned out to be.

Set up in a former sawmill, the camp consisted of a large, rudimentary shed that could house only several hundred people, at best. There were days when the camp housed over three thousand people. Thus, many of them were forced to stay outdoors in the open air, unsheltered against the rain and the wind. The site lacked basic amenities for the people incarcerated there. Through the eyes of a thirteen-year-old survivor, we learn that the camp had “no water available at the site and we had to fetch in pails from quite a distance away [from the river]... We used this water for drinking only—there was never enough left to bathe in or wash our clothes.” Since the military refused supply food for the prisoners, hunger became rampant. Nutrition was limited to “a bowl of soup a day.” László Zobel arrived at the camp on August 8 and was deported across the border on August 11. During these three days he received no food.

Many families with children and the elderly slept in the open on the muddy ground; a survivor summed up the overall conditions in the camp as “frightful and horrible; especially during the nights, the children’s crying amidst the moaning and groaning of
the elderly were unbearable.” Only by the intersession of Jewish welfare agencies in Budapest, and donations by local Jewish communities, were they able to survive. The guards treated the detainees with utmost brutality. Their behavior is well-illustrated by the fact that the soldiers were equipped with clubs, which were not part of the standard army equipment. These sticks, as Margit Slachta, mother superior of the Order of Sisters of Social Service, sarcastically remarked, were canes, but not for a “stroll in the park.” Her fact-finding delegation of concerned parliamentarians and religious personalities could not ignore the dismal conditions and the abuse the military personnel in the camp meted out to the defenseless people.

The detainees were not allowed to approach the fence, especially when their relatives or lawyers bringing citizenship certificates appeared around the camp. It often happened that these concerned visitors were also detained and consequently interned or outright deported to Galicia. Batizfalvy and the representatives of the civil administration could not prevent these abuses because the camp at Havasalja and the territory east were declared military zones. Their scathing assessment of the site and its arbitrariness, contrary to all legal constraint, can be summed up in their own words: “you could boldly write on the gate of the camp, Lasciate ogni Speranza [Abandon all Hope].”

Kozma didn’t concern himself with such trivialities and minutiae. His rapid-fire communications with the prime minister’s office indicate that the cross-border “evacuation” of Jews from Carpathian Ruthenia started on Monday, July 14, 1941. His request for financial assistance on the same day from Keresztes-Fischer, the minister of interior, claiming that “the removal is underway and can’t be stopped,” supports this fact. The urgency in his tone might reveal that the assembling and transportation of Jews to the transit camp was brutally efficient, wide-scale, and labor-intensive. It was conducted with a ferocity befitting the gendarmerie and corresponding capriciousness by local officials, reflecting an attitude that interior ministry directives did not have to be enforced in Carpathian Ruthenia. They interpreted the expulsion as they saw fit.

Fig 3.1 Collecting Jews for transportation to the train station in the city of Hust in Carpathian Ruthenia. Picture by Erzsébet Szapáry. Courtesy of the Hungarian National Museum/Photo Archives.
Two days later, Kozma’s diary reveals that “the transfer is continuing since Monday.” He obviously meant the transfer of Jews to Galicia. The diary made no mention of any similar efforts in collecting various populations from other parts of the country. The military records also remained devoid of any information regarding the evacuation from the eight internment camps spread across the interior. However, Kozma didn’t stop there. He expanded the ranks of those to be removed with Jews who were serving in the forced labor companies that were attached to the military. On July 15, he appealed to the regional military headquarters, mentioning for added weight his cooperation with Lieutenant General Szombathelyi, noting that “it was found that Jews with foreign nationality, whose expulsion is warranted, currently perform labor service. I request from the regional command . . . to remove from their units immediately those Jews who are serving in the military but without Hungarian nationality.” Apparently, this name-dropping worked. The local commander dismissed these servicemen. What seems immediately obvious is that Kozma finally discarded the original designation for expulsion of the Polish and Russian citizens, and resorted to a general term of foreign nationality. As for the targeted labor-servicemen, and because of the shortage of time, the majority were not sent to Galicia. Their families, on the other hand, were not spared. They were forwarded without these servicemen’s knowledge to the transit camp in Körömező and, consequently, trucked east.

Meanwhile, KEOKH’s slow approach for jump-starting the collection of the targeted population paled in comparison with Kozma’s frantic activism. The first explicit order for the “immediate detaining of Polish and Russian stateless persons to be expelled” and their “direct transfer to Körömező” came from KEOKH on July 19, 1941. The fact that the author of this communication, Dr. Sándor Siménfalvy specified “Polish and Russian” but omitted Jews did not disguise the fact that the order aimed to deport Jews only. By that time the transfer of deportees from Carpathian Ruthenia, northern Transylvania, and the internment camps were in full swing. Suddenly, the veneer of judicial legitimacy evaporated. And so did any form of civility.

“A PICTURE THAT IS FITTING DANTE’S INFERNO”

Margit Slachta served as the leader of the previously noted delegation of clerics, civic leaders, and parliamentarians visiting Carpathian Ruthenia in early August 1941. She minced no words in a devastating report to the highest echelons of the Hungarian leadership. The main points of this report were also sent, through the Hungarian Red Cross several month later, to the International Red Cross in Geneva. Through
Countess Erzsébet Szapáry, it also filtered into the American ambassador’s reports to Washington. It described the conditions in the region concerning the local collection, transportation to the transit camp, and border transfer of the wretched multitude of desperate Jews.

She headed an eclectic group that included, in addition to Margit Shlachta, Count György Apponyi, a member of the parliament, Dr. Imre Szabó, papal councilor and Catholic priest, and Countess Erzsébeth Szapáry. The participation of Countess Szapáry was especially noteworthy. Two surviving pictures taken by her demonstrate the process of collection and transport of the unfortunates. As one of the leading members of the Hungarian-Polish Refugee Committee and also the Hungarian Red Cross, she was well-connected with upper strata of Hungarian society. In a status-conscious country such as Hungary at the time, police and military authorities in Körösmező were unable to rein in her activism for saving lives on the ground. Their whirlwind tour of Carpathian Ruthenia, besides the transit camp, for an investigative report during the high point of the deportation in early August, yielded a daunting indictment of Hungarian governmental policies, societal indifference, and an avaricious local officialdom.

Describing the individual despair of the victims as they mounted the military trucks to train stations headed to the transit camp, the ruthlessness of the gendarmerie in smothering any opposition or feeling of sympathy, and the single-minded drive by overzealous public administrators in the provinces, it is a harrowing document to read. Their final conclusion that “as Hungarians, we cannot abide by the tarnishing of the Hungarian honor that these atrocities represent” summed up well the ethical conundrum that enveloped the entire wave of deportation.

The report by no means overdramatized the events taking place on the periphery of Hungary. The campaign encompassed every settlement and village in Carpathian Ruthenia, the adjacent region of Upper Hungary (today Slovakia) and northern Transylvania. The expulsion itself can be summed up as a sweep that was ruthlessly comprehensive, utterly chaotic, and capriciously executed. One can notice, even at first glance, glaring disconnects between the guidelines specifying “Polish and Russian nationals,” issued in Budapest, and the policies introduced by mid-level officials for the nightly or early morning raids by the feared and loathed gendarmerie, who brutally swooped down on unsuspecting residents. The short time limit for preparation, ostensibly for the prevention of escape, was intentional. Arisztid Meskó, the feared state police councilor in Carpathian Ruthenia, admitted that “originally he wanted to give 6 hours . . . for packing and transferring their property, etc., but was forced to shorten this time for one hour, because, according to him, many escaped.” He should have known this, because he was entrusted with drafting the rules and regulations in the province that governed the expulsion.
The arrest usually started with a five-o’clock knock on the door. The list of names, prepared in advance, was not always adhered to, and was followed by a terse command to pack the necessities, secure food for three days, and proceed under guard to an assembly point—a synagogue, a schoolhouse, or even a central square in the village. There was no place for an appeal, protest, or thought of resistance. The arrested were transported to a train station almost immediately. While there were reports of escapes—three villages are mentioned explicitly—resistance, active or passive, was almost nonexistent. As an example, the Carpathian Ruthenian village of Irhóc (Vilhivce in Ukrainian) was raided: “about 500 people, most of the 850-person community, were classified as ‘stateless and arrested.’” While a sizeable number escaped to the mountains, most of them voluntarily gave themselves up.\(^{36}\)

There might have been three loosely interconnected reasons as to why no resistance or mass escapes occurred. First, the official Jewish leadership in Budapest tacitly acquiesced to the removal of the “Polish and Russian” nationals and exhorted the Jewish masses to cooperate in doing that. Also, there was no opportunity to find adequate hiding places for traditionally large families. Finally, individual efforts of escape were constrained by family ties and unfamiliarity with the mountains. The Jewish family credo of staying together—no matter what—was a binding principle. The example of Max Solomon, who made an escape attempt, is instructive for an additional motive. Upon the arrest of his family in the village, he headed for a safe place in the hills. However, an explicit threat to the family by the gendarmerie of brutal retaliation, conveyed from his mother via a childhood friend, convinced the fifteen-year-old to rejoin the family the next day.\(^{37}\)

The first stage was the rapid assembly and removal of the often arbitrarily collected population. A typical description of the procedure by a survivor from the town of Mukachevo (Munkács in Hungarian), who was able to return after wandering for over a year in Galicia, conveys the harrowing experience. Starting with a knock on the door at five o’clock in the morning, he was given half an hour to pack a suitcase, with a governmental prescribed allocation of only 30 pengő [\$6 USD].\(^{38}\)

The trauma of being plucked from familiar surroundings, leaving a home with a little bundle, and facing an uncertain future reverberates in the testimonies of survivors. Irene Weiss, twenty-two years old at the time, reflects the attitude of an adult: “Within two hours we had to leave our entire life behind us.” On the other hand, a single act of forcibly evacuating one from a home that served as the ultimate constant in a child’s life, coupled with witnessing the humiliation of powerless parents, was perhaps the most ingrained and resonant moment in a child’s eyes on the road to being turned into a refugee. Solomon was emotionally compelled to revisit repeatedly such a moment during his testimony. It was perhaps the most distressing point for him in this entire ordeal. Looking skyward, almost talking to himself, he remembered: “You never experience
things like this that out of this place you were born, raised . . . all your family from generations to generations, you have some horses, chickens, and a little dog . . . it was like somebody hit you on the head.”

The process of arrest and removal was deliberate and blatant abuse. Uniform guidelines or their enforcement for the deportation were rarely adhered to. While orders from Budapest, clearly proscribed the target population, neither Kozma in Carpathian Ruthenia nor other middle-level administrators observed these guidelines. Arbitrary arrests based on enmity toward a family and a reprieve due to a bribe or business connection run parallel. In one village they gave a week to prepare, while in most places the expulsion from one’s home was immediate. The executing authorities very rarely, if at all, troubled with the examination of citizenship papers or considered mitigating circumstances.

In one village, like Drahovo (Kövesliget in Hungarian), almost the entire Jewish population of three hundred families were collected in the village school before being forcefully marched to the train station. In this case, all the wives and children were exempted because the husbands were away in the military’s forced labor companies. But even here, there was a caveat. The women had to procure marriage certificates, which in many cases were not available. Since Jews in the eastern provinces, deeply religious, often did not enter their marriages in civil registers, having been officiated by a rabbi, this condition was often a problem.

On the other hand, several miles from Drahovo, in the town of Irshava (Ilosva in Hungarian), the entire population was carted off regardless of the military service. In

![Fig 3.2 Delivering the Jews to the cattle cars for transfer to the transit camp in Körösmézo. Picture by Erzsébet Szapáry. Courtesy of Memorial de la Shoah.](image-url)
Upper Hungary [today Slovakia], like in Moldava nad Bodvou (Szepsi in Hungarian), similar scenes took place. All women and children were sent to the transit camp in Kőrösmező while the men were away in labor companies serving in the Hungarian Army. Corruption in implementing the expulsion was rampant. In one of the most egregious examples, the chief magistrates in several towns collected the citizenship papers from the local inhabitants and then unceremoniously shipped them, deemed as “aliens,” directly to Kőrösmező.  

The list for abuses of power would not be complete without quoting from the aforementioned report by Margit Slachta. She informed the government in Budapest that the authorities in Carpathian Ruthenia also carted off children who were only relatives and happened to visit families from other towns: “At present, these children from other parts of Hungary are somewhere in Galicia, if they are still alive. And their parents are tearing their hair out to find them, because they know that they’ll never be found again.”

In such an environment, the orderly transfer of property, as was stipulated by guidelines of the Ministry of Interior or Kozma himself, became only an illusion. Perhaps as a consequence of the American ambassador’s protestations to the prime minister, on July 30 a new directive spelled out specifically that in the future only “Jews whose Polish and Russian origins could be verified by information already in our possession, or by future investigation,” could be expelled. Then the memorandum expanded the rank of expellees by adding those aliens who possessed residency permits. This new document, though, made no impression or impact on the conduct of the provincial administration, or, for that matter, on the military.

Sometimes, local authorities, such as a deputy sheriff or a subprefect of a region, arbitrarily emptied entire villages of their Jewish inhabitants, leaving homes, property, and domestic animals without a caretaker. One of the unenforceable orders promulgated by Kozma was that an individual from the Jewish community should be designated as a warden for the properties left behind. An exasperated county official, in turn, pointed out that in many villages the entire Jewish community was taken away. No one was left to guard the abandoned property. The removal happened so quickly that there was no time to transfer a house or the cattle left behind—not even the keys to the house—to a trusted friend or family member. In one instance, the arresting gendarme himself demanded a distraught mother with gun against her head hand over the keys for her home. It’s not hard to figure out that this “protector of the law” had some plans for this property.

Contrary to the promises made by the minister of defense or some provincial officials, the most traumatic phase of the expulsion, before the border crossing to Galicia, was the transportation to the transit camp in Kőrösmező. If one entertained any illusion for an orderly transfer and human compassion in doing so, it rapidly evaporated
in the reality of being sealed in a cattle car for several days without food or hygienic amenities. It was especially true for the outlying provinces. In many ways, these inhuman conditions in the cattle wagons presaged the notorious train rides to Auschwitz three years later, during the main chapter of the Hungarian Holocaust. The interminable journeys in these sealed and fully packed wagons from the provinces—lasting sometimes five to six days, without food, water, with an overflowing bucket of human excrement, and the stench of dead bodies—very rapidly brought home the realization that “this was a dead train,” and the first inkling that the deportation could lead to inevitable death. Yaffa Rosenthal remembered six or seven dead people in her wagon: “They were packed like 70 or 90 people. . . . They put a small pail for everybody to use as needed, there was no toilet, no water, no food, except what you took along. . . . People were dying. They could not open the door to let the dead be put out any place. It was summer, it was the smell. . . . In our car there were six or seven dead people. It was horrific. Yet the people were praying and praying and praying . . . that’s when I became a non-believer.”

While the Jewish communities along the train routes often came out to extend water and food to the unfortunate prisoners, the gendarmes guarding the train often prevented even that help. An impromptu informational network functioned, though, because often minutes after arrival in a station “several Jewish men and women appeared to distribute fruit, bread, and water.” A communication from the Hungarian train system, addressed to the Ministry of Interior, launched a complaint about this practice, claiming that the “local Jewish communities are waiting for the Jewish expellees with food and presents. This often turns into a festive celebration.” Then, the writers requested the intercession of the ministry that in the “future such gatherings, or receptions should not have been repeated.”

Budapest was a different story. While thousands were collected and shipped to Körösmegő, in the capital the levers of justice, or often injustice, worked differently. Corruption in obtaining citizenship papers became widespread. Large numbers of applications for validating citizenship were shelved and intentionally delayed in the offices of KEOKH. A well-placed bribe, however, could expedite the process. Even the final arbiter of the expulsion, Ámon Pásztoy, was accused of influence peddling. A low-ranking Hungarian officer noticed this contradiction in meeting Hungarian Jews, who were forced close to the line of the Carpathian Mountains on the Galician side by German pressure. He acerbically noted in his diary that this multitude “are wandering like nomads, begging, brutalized and murdered by Ukrainian bands. . . . I had an unpleasant feeling, of seeing young women with pure Christian faces, half-Jews. . . . A 14 years-old, blond, purely Aryan looking girl, they have resided 70 years in our country, and now because of paper-problems she is expelled by herself—fatherless, a half-Jew.” The officer bitterly condemned the policy of targeting the “little people and why not the rich Jews. Sudden enthusiasm and utter disorder.” His observation was not far from
the truth. The bulk of the deportees were “poor Carpathian Ruthenian Jews with their pitiful bundles.”

In Budapest, the real deterring factor for open brutality, comparable to that in the provinces, was the presence of international press organizations, diplomatic observers, and the official Jewish leadership. It dictated a more nuanced approach toward Jews who were deemed to lack proper papers. The arrests of those whose documents were not in order, or were suspicious, was masked more in a façade of civility and seemed more refined than in the country’s periphery. In Budapest, laws were also more carefully observed than in the provinces. The example of my grandfather, who was rescued from the collection center by my mother, is enlightening. He was over seventy years old, a fact that legally exempted him from deportation by law. Yet the collection of Jews in Budapest was equally comprehensive, fast, and uncompromising. The brutality of the provinces was absent, for the most part, since it was conducted by detectives from KEOKH, which relied on the assistance of local police forces. These police forces, in turn, often knew the targeted individuals. Frequently, arresting officers from the district precinct had no information about the ultimate goal of the arrest and reassured the detained individuals that they could return home after a cursory check of their credentials. This was often the approach in other major cities. Living in Budapest, my uncle Samu was on a first-name basis with the policeman from the neighborhood precinct who came to his apartment with an invitation to a brief review of his documents. Upon his attempt to bring a coat, the policeman waved him away with the promise that he would be home by dinner. He never returned. This gives us a hint that he did not go voluntarily, like some who believed in the official propaganda in Budapest that a better life awaited in Galicia with houses, land, and work. That might also be the reason that his wife, Tildi, decided not to join him with their three daughters on this fateful journey. A very similar experience befell Peninah Kaufman in Kassa (Kosice in today’s Slovakia), a sizeable town in the Upper Provinces. The policemen reassured her mother, “there is no reason to bring a thing... only a few questions and you will be free.” Consequently, the family was transferred to an internment camp and from there to the transit camp in Körösmező.

Detectives from KEOKH, augmented by these police forces, fanned out to collect the Jews with prepared lists, but random identity checks in coffeehouses or on the streets also netted hundreds of Jews daily, some of them with resident permits and citizenship documents, who were summarily carted off to collections points across the city. Such raids did not escape the attention of the representatives of the New York-based Jewish relief organization the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, and, consequently, the American press. Through them, the Jewish media became aware of the deportation. Reports by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA), headquartered in New York, noted on July 22, 1941, that “passengers on each train reaching Budapest
from the interior of Hungary are examined as to their identity, in order to prevent stateless and Polish Jews escaping to the Hungarian capital from the provincial towns where they live in constant fear of deportation.\textsuperscript{51} Several days later it reported that even hospitals were not spared. On August 4, the JTA sent a dispatch, quoting German newspapers, that “hospitals and sanatoriums throughout Hungary are being raided by the police and Jewish patients are being dragged from there for deportation to Nazi-held Galicia.” Health resorts that were “patronized by elderly Jews” were also targeted.

The fear was palpable; it gripped the city. The news dispatch stressed that “it is no longer safe for a Jew to appear in the street. All Jews are stopped by police and asked for citizenship certificates. Those who have no such certificate with them, are immediately arrested. On the other hand, the authorities refuse to issue such certificates to Jews even if they are bona-fide Hungarian citizens.”\textsuperscript{52} Like many of the arrested, László Zobel was stopped on the street for a routine identity check, upon which he was promptly transferred to the central synagogue that served as one of the collections points. He was taken without a chance of gathering his meager belongings. Within two days, he was on his way to Kőrösmező.

Contrary to the international media, Hungarian newspapers in Budapest were rather celebratory in their announcements about the success of the deportation. Reporting on the raids in the capital and the provinces, several of them noted that “until now, twelve-thousand Galicianers were removed from the country . . . and the arrests and expulsion will continue until the country will be fully cleansed.”\textsuperscript{53} The daily papers in the provinces followed suit in reporting the deportation in positive tones.

State councilor Siménfalvy from KEOKH broadened the net in Budapest to include the “maximum number of individuals,” which specifically encompassed those who held permanent resident status. Their number is estimated in the thousands. Just as in the provinces, nightly raids in Budapest became the preferred method of arresting entire families. The element of stealth and surprise served the raiding parties well. These Jews from Budapest were perhaps the most traumatized among the refugees. Many of them, having been plucked out of a comfortable middle-class existence in a European metropolis, encountered a wholly incomprehensible situation.

There were seven temporary collection centers set up in the Hungarian capital—mainly synagogues and Jewish institutions, such as the two orphanages for boys and girls. Was it the Jewish community in Budapest that offered these temporary holding centers to the thousands of interned, or an arbitrary and unilateral decision by KEOKH for calming down the international reverberations for the deportations? Either way, placing the community in such an awkward situation was an expedient solution for the authorities. It implicated the Jewish leadership in the deportation, and placed the expenses of feeding and housing, rather conveniently, upon the shoulders of Jewish organizations. And, unlike in the provinces where the expulsion was
immediate, in Budapest those arrested were held for several days. This gave an opportunity for a farewell visit from the family, like Samu’s wife and their three daughters. It also gave precious time to find a legal recourse, like in the case of my grandfather, for appealing the expulsion.

However, this was a rare exception. For one well-established furrier from the inner-city there was no such an option. He was awoken in the middle of the night and transferred with his wife and fifteen-year-old daughter within a half hour to one of the main synagogues of the city. Several days later, they were on their long journey to exile. In a chance encounter deep in Galicia with a Hungarian soldier, the despondent father confided that his “father settled in Budapest around 1867. He was already born there, and cannot speak anything but Hungarian. His wife was also born in Hungary.”

The transportation of the deportees from Budapest to Kőrösmező was also more discrete than in the provinces. Every day, after several hundred were collected, second-class carriages were coupled to ordinary passenger trains. László Zobel remembered that the accompanying guards had no objections to let the passengers accept food from the Jewish communities along the train route. This courteous manner, however, changed dramatically upon arrival to their final destination, Kőrösmező. At that time, all pretense was dropped. There were no international observers nor the press to contend with. The only counterweight for the rampant abuses was the already mentioned representative of KEOKH, Captain Nándor Batizfalvy, who was assigned to review citizenship papers and made valiant efforts to curtail some of the excesses. His authority, however, was limited to the train station where the majority of the deportees disembarked—the camp itself was a military zone. He was assisted by two detectives and the representatives of the Hungarian-Jewish Assistance Committee (Magyar Izraeliták Pártfogó Irodája, MIPI) for ferreting out the unlawfully deported Jews and providing them with travel papers for their return. Those who worked with him in the transit camp—the representatives of MIPI and the delegation led by Margit Slachta—paint a picture of heroic rescue work, an uphill struggle, striving against the obstruction by the military commander of the camp.

His task was not enviable. Because of the rapid delivery of thousands of Jews, he soon became overwhelmed. The office of the government commissioner of Carpathian Ruthenia was also actively hindering the rescue work. Following several cables, the ubiquitous Arisztid Meskó reinforced this by personally visiting the transit camp with corresponding threats and intimidation of Batizfalvy. The camp itself was under full military control. The commander of the camp, Lieutenant Colonel Rudolf Orbán, openly refused to cooperate and, often, obstructed or outright counter-commanded the work of Batizfalvy. His announcement that “from the camp Jews have only one way to go: Galicia” well sums up his attitude.
Military personnel, mainly from the ranks of the gendarmerie, took over from regular police forces, and a rigorous search and thorough examination commenced at the platform. All items of value were confiscated. A survivor recounted how detailed and systematic was such a hunt, which included bodily and luggage searches. This might have been a local initiative, but it was an officially sanctioned plunder. They were “looking for valuables and currency. . . . One family was beaten for hiding a gold watch on a chain and several rings; this was discovered when a policeman dipped his bayonet into a jar of jam and pulled out the hidden valuables.”

To comprehend the desperate situation of the newly arriving detainees, we should resort again to the description provided by the delegation led by Slachta: “If one has really seen the despair on the faces of the people that have been brutally plucked out of their homes, transported like cattle to an unknown destination, probably to their death, and one who was a witness to the hopeless silence, that is more meaningful than any word, with which they walk toward their inevitable doom, this image, that is so fitting of Dante’s Inferno, will remain in one’s memory for the rest of his life.”

The delegation’s visit took place on August 10, two days after the issue of the explicit instruction from Budapest for the immediate cessation of the deportation. By that time, though, testimonies filtering back from the occupied territories already painted a grim picture of the dire situation awaiting the expellees. The delegation was cognizant of the looming threat over the fate of the unfortunates in Galicia. By August 10, the date of the visit of the transit camp, the atrocities taking place in Galicia became common knowledge. Their report gives painful details of the full scope of the expulsion.
in Carpathian Ruthenia—from the large number of “houses that were boarded up” in
the villages and towns, to the brutality of the gendarmerie, and from the meticulous
search of the deportees for valuables, to the final act of mounting the trucks for the
journey into the unknown.

The trucks were loaded with as many as possible, “75 or a 100 . . . standing on the
truck like herrings, pressed together.” This concluding moment was especially etched
in the minds of the observers: “we also saw the tragic image of the truck convoy in the
pouring rain, without tarpaulin, as they were leaving the camp and heading out toward
Galicia, loaded with the unfortunates who lost all hope.”

THE EXPULSION: “JOURNEY ACROSS
THE ‘DARK MOUNTAINS’”

The mystical “Dark Mountains”—the Carpathians—are a semicircle of towering
mountain ranges encircling Hungary, straddling the border between Hungary proper
and the interminable steppes of Ukraine. It was through them that the deportation
proceeded toward Galicia. In the minds of the expellees, they loomed both as a phys-
ical and psychological divide. The range’s narrow passes and forbidding primeval for-
est presented a formidable physical barrier in both directions. It also signified an ir-
retrievable crossing between east and west, between home and exile, and between the
familiar and the unknown.

This divide also denoted in the minds of the deportees, especially those from cos-
mpolitan Budapest, a transition from civilization to a forbidding territory that they
had never seen before. Indeed, the picture of Galicia that emerges in the memories of
the survivors is extremely dark—a bleak landscape, populated by poor, depressed, and
embittered people who were ready to settle scores. A Hungarian military observer dryly
noted: “There is a sense that in Kamenets-Podolszk we have left Europe behind. . . . In
the so inviting villages from the distance, misery, poverty, hunger and millions of flies
beckon us. Neither letter nor microphone nor camera can convey the true reality. . . .
Even if a visual recording could give back some of it, the stench that comes out of that
misery would be missed, and we wouldn’t be able to express it in any way.”

Finally, the realization that one became a stateless refugee by crossing a line was per-
haps the hardest to rationalize. There is no word in English for the state of being a ref-
ugee. Immigration to new countries anticipates an orderly move, with passport and
visa, well-stocked luggage, and final destination plans. Losing one’s home within a half
hour and being transported to an unknown destination without provisions is some-
things else entirely. In the words of Elisabeth Asbrink, “Existence has exploded.” The
Hungarian refugees in Galicia knew nothing—not how long the journey would last,
nor what their final destination would be, nor how one would recognize the end of the journey when it was reached.

From the start, the transportation was chaotic, ill-planned, and carried through haphazardly at breakneck speed. The ensuing chaos in loading up the trucks had dire consequences. A report by MIPI provides graphic details of how families were separated during the utter confusion of the rapid transfer: “parents are not connected with children, children with the parents and there is a concern that during the evacuation they are deposited in different locations.” This report might have been the source of the scathing statement made by the American ambassador to László Bárdossy in his memorandum on July 24: “children are separated from their mothers, husbands are separated from wives and children, and wives and children are deported while the husbands and fathers are absent working in the labor camp.”

During the loading, a father protested to the military personnel of this separation. He was reassured that they would meet up at the end of the journey: “all of them will go to the same place.” Of course, it was a patent lie. Cipora Brenner’s family was also split; father and brother were sent in different directions while she, her sister, and her mother wandered in Galicia, ending up in one of the most notorious murder sites, the ghetto of Stanisławów. As the report somewhat prophetically predicted, “because the evacuation is taking place to various regions of Galicia, they [the parents and children] will never see each other in this life.” Not surprisingly, in many Galician communities, the hundreds of separated children found home in orphanages hastily arranged by the local Jewish communities.

A reserve second lieutenant, Alajos Salamon, in October 1941, framed this criticism of the military leadership about the conduct of the deportation: “short-lived enthusiasm, on the one hand, lack of order and any system, on the other.” One can only wonder how a relatively low-level officer was able to grasp so well the essence of the failure of the deportation. On average, fifty military trucks were allocated for the transfer of the expellees from the transit camp to any given direction in Galicia. In addition, there were instances of forcing the expellees across the border on foot. The pace was dictated by the availability of trucks, which were also needed to supply the rapidly advancing troops through a bottleneck of a road across the mountain. In a note jotted down by one of the officers attached to the commander of the corps, Lieutenant General Ferenc Szombathelyi, he complained that the requisitioning of the required number of trucks for the deportation “interfered with the reinforcement of the troops on the front.”

By the time the cross-border removal started, Hungarian forces had reached the farthest point in their advance — Kamenets-Podolsk on the border of Galicia and Podolia. The troops controlled a large swath of Galicia, which made the continuous dispersal of the Hungarian Jews across the land much easier. However, there was no settlement plan
or clear rationale for where and when a convoy stopped. The overall idea, as Kozma has pointed out, was to deposit the refugees as far as possible from the border and, preferably, across the Dniester River, which provided a natural barrier for potential attempts to return to Hungary. Since there was no master plan developed for such an undertaking and the bridges were blown up by retreating Soviet troops, truck drivers accompanying officers and military gendarmes deposited the people all across the region by whim in the Hungarian-controlled zone.

Eyewitness testimonies by survivors, locals, military officers, and members of forced labor battalions paint a uniform and vivid picture of the routine indifference and callousness with which the military authorities deposited the unfortunates across Galicia. The transports reached their distant destinations either by direct marches through hundreds of miles or by shipping them to Kolomea first, and from there by train, or more often by foot, to various end points. If I want to retrace the journey of my two uncles from Budapest to the transit camp in Körösmező, and from there to Kamenets-Podolsk, their final destination, I can only estimate the general direction and the means of reaching it. From Budapest, the Jews were transported by train, then mostly by trucks to Kolomea. As the headquarters of the Hungarian Army located in Kolomea, it became an important transit point to Kamenets-Podolsk. Max Solomon described arriving in Kolomea by truck, then continuing by train to Horodenka. From there, long marches awaited the deportees, mostly in the direction of Kamenets-Podolsk.67

A survivor’s recollection of the long line of trucks disgorging their living cargo and the utter despair of those deposited provides a snapshot of the process: “During the journey we noticed that some of the trucks stopped. We thought they had stopped for a break. We travelled up to Chortkov, where our truck came to a halt as well. We had to get off, and the first lieutenant who escorted us said that there was a castle nearby, and that we should go there for accommodation. . . . Of course, it was not true.”68

Baruch Milch, a Jewish country doctor from Tluste, Galicia, observed with disbelief the caravans of trucks passing by his home. He jotted down in his diary, as he termed, the “terrible sight.” He observed that

for two weeks in a row, groups of trucks, 5 to 10 cars, full of Jews, the elderly, the cripples, women and small children, were driven under an army escort or the Hungarian police [military gendarmes] in white gloves and comical costumes, in hats with long feathers tucked in. They were left in little towns and villages on the other side of the Dniester [River] starting all the way from Kamieniec Podolski. Sometimes they were dumped from the trucks in some woods or field, from which they made their way in waves to the nearest small towns. Often the Hungarian soldiers robbed them of everything, but they were tormented the most by Ukrainian peasants, who waited
for them in bands everywhere on roads and fields, robbing and killing without mercy.\textsuperscript{69}

It was a well-rounded summation of the Hungarian deportees’ tragic odyssey, which did not escape the attention of Hungarian military personnel either. An eyewitness from a Hungarian motorized unit recalled in his diary an unexpected meeting in Skala, on July 23, 1941, with a newly deposited, or rather, dumped, group of Jews, many of them from Budapest. Having served as a driver, he might have been himself Jewish. His immediate impression of the group was of “tired, sad, civilians . . . haggard elderly, children dragging bundles, tearful, hesitant women . . . . The men, sitting on the ground, are blankly staring into the distance.” He still grappled with this sight, almost a month later, when he recalled this disconcerting meeting: “Perhaps the most shocking encounter was again with the Jews . . . beneath the trees by the roadside, they were sitting along a drainage ditch, whole families, old people and children, because the lorries, that had not received any instructions, got tired of carrying them further into Russia . . . therefore the only thing that remained for them is the trench along the road, at least that tolerated them.”\textsuperscript{70}

These are accounts by outside observers. They cannot convey the personal pain, the sense of betrayal, which was the most devastating for those cast off. The bewildering realization that the end of the road led into a void as the group of refugees got off the trucks reverberates in a bitter comment by a survivor: “So this is what Hungary, our homeland did to us: they dropped us off in the forest of an entirely strange country and our transporters fled without an explanation. They were much too cowardly to tell us openly that we had been kicked out and abandoned.”\textsuperscript{71}

The scenes depicting the arrival of various groups are eerily similar: “They dropped us off in a meadow, in the middle of nowhere,” a lone survivor recalled. “We were perhaps three hundred people. We set down on the edge of a drainage ditch.” In this case, an accompanying military gendarme gave them a not-so-subtle warning: “This is your country now, and here is your messiah. Do not drink from the water because the wells are poisoned and do not try to return home because you will be shot! With that, he left us there.”\textsuperscript{72} From this and all accounts, a certain predictability filters through about the dispersal.

At the end of the unplanned journey, almost invariably at the side of the road along a meadow or a forest, a thorough search of the deportees included robbing the unfortunates of whatever was still left from the earlier searches in the transit camp. Moshe Deutsch described the scene upon arriving at Kamenets-Podolsk: “Hungarian gendarmes watched over us all night. At dawn the men were ushered into a nearby church, and the gendarmes closed the doors on us. They took us out, one by one, and commanded us to raise our hands as they searched our pockets and robbed us of our money,
Fig 3.4  Hungarian Jews arriving in Skala: “The Jews were dumped alongside of the road . . . the soldiers got tired of transporting them . . . the only thing remaining for them is the ditch by the road. At last this tolerated them.” July 23, 1941. Hungarian National Museum/Photo Archives, courtesy of Béla Somló.

Fig 3.5  Deportees abandoned by the Hungarian military in Skala. While the women tended to the children, the “men sat on the ground with vacant stares looking into the distance.” July 23, 1941. Hungarian National Museum/Photo Archives, courtesy of Béla Somló.
coins, and watches.” A similar experience befell László Zobel, who, along several hun-
dred deportees, was stripped all valuables “in a shed in Horodenka.”

“THEY PULL FROM THE DNIESTER JEWISH CORPSES DAY AFTER DAY . . .”

We do not know the identity of the writer of the report that contained this sentence. It was dated August 30, 1941—some six weeks after the start of the deportation. It conveyed a horrifying experience after the Hungarian military trucks disgorged their human cargo. The sichacks, as the Ukrainian irregular forces were called, often rough bands of young toughs, and sometimes peasants, clad in black shirts, pounced almost immediately on the defenseless multitude for free plunder. Armed with old rifles and knives, they encountered little resistance from the women, children, and elderly—the majority of the expellees. Sometimes they offered protection for money, which rapidly evolved into increased demands for payment. The expellees became both wards of and easy prey for the Ukrainian irregulars.

Besides the impulse for plunder, rape, the lust for power, and a deep-seated anti-Semitism, there were no ideological motivations for the ensuing wave of murders perpetrated by the Ukrainian militia. The immediate conflict between the two groups raises a fundamental question about inserting a foreign population into a system that was not ready to absorb them. In addition, Galicia was a fertile ground for ethnic dis-
content. By the time of the commencement of the deportation, bloody anti-Jewish ri-
ots were erupting across the region. Fueled by accusations that the Jews wholeheartedly supported the Bolshevik regime, these riots were also encouraged by the German military forces. They reminded the local population that after the Red Army’s entrance, in September 1939, the Soviet system was introduced in this region, which aimed to eradic-
icate any semblance of Ukrainian nationalism. Consequently, tens of thousands were deported to the far east of the Soviet Union. Part of the Jewish population welcomed the new regime at first, because for them Communism seemed like a sort of emancipa-
tory offer. The weightiest accusation that was leveled against the local Jewish commu-
nities was the “complicity” in the murder of political prisoners before the pullback by Soviet forces. Thousands of such prisoners were shot to death. Their corpses had to be dug out by the local Jewry.

Thus, the Germans viewed this as an opportunity for the Ukrainian masses to vent their simmering resentment and frustration by launching violent anti-Jewish pogroms. A horrified Hungarian officer recorded in his diary on the first day of the occupation (July 4, 1941) of Kolomea about a pogrom that was orchestrated by German military authorities: “everyone is beating up everyone . . . they are collecting and concentrating
the Jews in the central park for dismantling the statues of Lenin and Stalin, while unceasingly beating them . . . while I want to save a crying Jewish girl, a German soldier has threatened me with his submachine gun . . . in the ensuing mayhem, she was able to escape.”

This episode took place less than a week before the start of the deportation from Hungary. Similar scenes left their mark on the pages of the extant diaries of Hungarian military officers from every corner of Galicia. A Hungarian military observer identified these “irregular forces as armed national guards wearing yellow-blue armbands [who] often committed atrocities against the population, especially against the Jews, and took revenge on those against whom they held a grudge for some reason.” To their credit, the Hungarian military’s attitude toward such disturbances was overwhelmingly negative, putting an end to anti-Jewish excesses under their occupational authority almost immediately. However, for the despoiling and random massacres of the aimlessly wandering groups of Hungarian Jews by marauding gangs of Ukrainian irregular forces, there was rarely protection.

We have no estimates as to the number of Hungarian Jews who were slaughtered by Ukrainian paramilitary groups. In assessing contemporary reports by Hungarian military officers and Ukrainian observers, an estimate in the thousands might be correct. The surviving accounts present in graphic detail the horrific pictures of Jewish corpses floating down the Dniester River. But descriptions of mass executions, the shooting of entire families, or groups of men pulled out of the meandering columns in ravines or prepared mass graves also provide a sobering reminder of the various forms of the carnage that took place in Galicia in July and August 1941.

Not surprisingly, the native population resented the unwanted intrusion of thousands of foreigners, especially Jews, which rapidly escalated into interethnic clashes. A poignant example for such conflict is described by the already quoted country doctor. During a visit to a sick patient in a small village, thus trusted and somewhat protected by the Ukrainian population, he encountered several hundred Hungarian Jews. They were facing an agitated peasant population of a small village, perhaps thirty households. The pandemonium that could have developed into a bloody conflict between the villagers and the deportees was averted by the doctor who learned, to his utter surprise and consternation, that “Hungarian soldiers unloaded the Jews in the village, told them that it was theirs—houses, fields, and all—and left in gales of laughter.” The soldiers reassured the deportees that “this village is designated for them, and these fields and houses will be theirs.”

The doctor wrote, “On one side of the open square stood about 300 Hungarian Jews, women, the elderly, and children with bundles. One corpse already lay among them, above whom a young woman was crying—as I later learned, [it was] the wife of the murdered—and next to them, the wounds of other men and a woman were being
treated.” By the time the doctor averted further bloodshed and defused the situation, several Hungarians had been shot, killed, and wounded. Upon the pleas of the deportees, the doctor successfully bribed the Ukrainian paramilitaries to accompany the column to the neighboring town, from which they were chased further east by the next day.

This accidental skirmish was temporarily resolved, but in the general atmosphere of anti-Semitism, the local inhabitants felt hostility toward the newcomers arriving unexpectedly and in droves. Fear, exacerbated by the scarcity of food, also played a role. Based on information received from the deportees, a report by MIPI noted that “in many . . . places the remaining Ukrainian population objects already to the staying of the Jews transported there; they were driven out from many villages, and they were forced to run away into the woods . . . the Ukrainians do not want to let the Jews in at all in their villages, they drive us away from everywhere, and even our life is in danger.”

This report, posted on July 23, relatively early in the deportation, and forwarded to the Hungarian government, was only the precursor of more detailed descriptions of the atrocities taking place in Galicia. Upon approaching the first Ukrainian village, László Zobel was introduced almost immediately to the horror: “They [the local Ukrainian militia] thought we were their enemies . . . so they attacked us at once and started shooting at us and several of us were injured and one of us even died.”

The narrative of the endless marches from village to village and from town to town was interspersed with periodic killing sprees upon a stop or during the nights. A member of a large group, estimated at close to two thousand people, Yaffa Rosenthal’s testimony sums up this nightmare:

> Wherever we went, we went by walking carrying bundles, carrying the sick people . . . As we walked, we were big, big transport. When they gave us sometimes a rest, anybody who did not get up fast enough was killed right there. There was a young man, I don’t know his name, he was 14- or 15-years old boy. He carried his mother who had very swollen legs, she had problems walking. He carried her on his shoulders for about 3-4 days. And one time she could not get up fast enough, they killed her right there, in front of the son. They would not let him bury her. They left her on the site of where we were . . . Anybody who fell or did not go along fast enough were killed on the road.

Again, it’s hard to find ideological principles for such escalating waves of violence. The words of the Hungarian poet Miklós Radnóti come to mind: “I lived on this earth in an age when man was so depraved that he pursued murder for pleasure, not just for complying with orders.” But, then, where inhumanity starts and where it ends is, at best, a nebulous proposition. Is it when little girls are raped and mutilated “beyond recognition,” as encountered in contemporary reports, or when the Dniester overflowed
with Jewish corpses that literally clogged up the river? Idl Feuer testified after the war
that “early in August of 1941, Jewish refugees from Hungary came to Tlumacz, some
1,200 to 1,500 of them. Tlumacz Jews who were ready to help the refugees were sent
with them to the same camp, in the direction of Horodenka. Later we learned about
the fate of these Hungarian refugees: they were tied in groups with barbed wire and
cast into the Dniester. Ukrainians lying in wait on the banks of the river grabbed the
survivors and threw them back again.”

Perhaps not by coincidence, Ukrainians butchered local Jews the same way. In many
villages along the Dniester virtually each and every Jew was slaughtered. They were
herded from the villages to the river, where hands and feet of the elderly were tied with
barbed wire. Additionally, “they tied stones to the children and pushed them into the
middle of the Dniester from a ferry. The profound hatred felt for the Jews is well re-
flected by the fact that only a local priest was willing to help the doomed—but only if
the drowning Jews promised to convert to the Christian faith.”

It became almost routine for the Hungarian exiles to be hounded from village to
village with little respite. The accompanying militia members worked in shifts, replac-
ing one crew with a fresh team from town to town. For the unfolding atrocities com-
mited by the militia, often transcending human imagination, it is hard to find ratio-
nal explanation. It is also hard to find the right word for the periodical “culling” of the
men from the transports along the march or collecting them from the villages that they
stopped in for a night.

Moshe Zelmanovits, nine years old at the time, remembered the long, arduous jour-
ney of several hundred people through forests and villages interspersed with daily kill-
ings. While the leaders of the militia were overseeing the march from horseback, the
common militiamen accompanied the column on both sides. Those on horseback spe-
cifically targeted the tall and strapping fellows in the column, shooting them as they
walked without any provocation. As Zelmanovits surmised, this was “a deadly form of
attrition” to eliminate any potential problem or resistance from the men.

Along the march, passing village after village, they distributed scores of refugees in
each settlement with the aim of making them work for the local farmers. Without giv-
ing a reason, three days later, in the middle of the night, they took the Zelmanovits fam-
ily and several additional refugees, sixteen people altogether, to an outlying area and
“simply, they shot us into a ravine.” The story, however, did not end there. The father,
sensing what would happen, “threw himself on the ground . . . as they started firing. I
stood behind my brother Ezra, who, got a bullet in the back, which passed through him
and grazed my side. He fell on me and, apparently, he knocked me into the mass grave.
I thought, that’s it . . . that is death. I didn’t feel pain, I didn’t feel anything.” The mili-
tia concluded its ghastly task by covering the grave with branches and leaves. Finally,
the young boy and his father were able to climb out of the mass grave, deathly silence
all around them, by holding onto tree roots and low branches. They left behind seven members of their family. In recalling these events, Zelmanovits’ voice was calm, almost detached, without rancour or bitterness. He never asked or gave thought to the central question: what was their motive for this mass murder?\footnote{85}

It was not an easy task to find shelter in the summer of 1941 in Galicia. A survivor remembered, in 1945, that the large group she and her immediate family was traveling with stopped at Chortkov—a large town in eastern Galicia. Upon finding shelter in a synagogue and being warned that Ukrainian bands routinely murdered Hungarian Jews, “young peasant boys came with weapons and took most of the men, but many women as well. We never saw those people again…. We hid the other men in the wardrobe; that was how we stayed in there crammed together and in unspeakable panic. For anyone could attack us and go unpunished.”

Apparently, Chortkov was especially dangerous for Hungarian refugees, because another survivor’s story supports this testimony. Cipora Brenner remembered how “they came and rounded up the men, 200 people. They took them outside the town. They made them dig a pit and buried them alive. We learned this the next day from a Christian butcher who was coming into the town. He told us that he saw a covered pit and papers lying around it. He took them to the Jewish community. Then the fate of the 200 men was revealed. Later they dug up the pit and saw that the men had not been shot to death, but buried alive.”\footnote{86}

One group found temporary respite from the endless wandering in two villages, after having been made to march in columns from village to village. On August 8, which was a Friday, “the Hungarian Jews were driven out from the two villages at about 20 km from each other. Between lines of Ukrainian peasants, they were beaten brutally during the length of their march with cudgels [so] that about 15 of them died and all the others were injured (with broken arms and ribs, etc.).” Jewish doctors who treated the wounded could not provide medicine for the injured since pharmacies were forbidden for the Hungarian Jews. The source that described this macabre scene was a Hungarian labor serviceman who witnessed firsthand this death march.\footnote{87}

Complementing the horrors was the gnawing hunger that became an ever-present companion of the exiled. The original missive limiting the deportees to three days’ worth of food ensured that hunger was a constant torment for the roaming groups or individual families. The contents of their bundles quickly vanished during the forced migration, and after a few weeks of wandering, the personal belongings of the deportees were exchanged for food. After that everything was bartered, and then only begging remained.

Yaffa Rosenthal recalled that the Ukrainian militiamen “did not give us any food or drinks. Sometimes we stopped on the places where there were waters. We drank what we could grab on the fields.”\footnote{88} A Hungarian soldier, encountering groups of Jews around
Kamenets-Podolsk, recorded in his diary of seeing “great number of Jews, wandering in masses, with an escort, of course. It is like seeing the living garbage of humanity marching to the gallows. Many of them, especially women, in rags but wearing jewellery and with lips painted red, ask you for bread in Hungarian, and they would be willing to pay any price for it.” As we will see later, the German commandant of the city promised to supply food but never delivered it to the rapidly swelling Hungarian refugee population. By the time of this diary note, in the second half of August, the commandant had forbade the purchase of food items by Hungarian Jews.

In a letter to relatives, smuggled out by a labor serviceman, a deportee raised a rhetorical question: “what we carried along with us has allowed us to survive for a month. And then what? . . . We are destined to starve to death; that will be our fate.” There was a going rate for objects to be exchanged. Clothing had the highest value. A suit would buy its seller a chicken. The price for a family to be taken over to the western bank of the Dnieper by boat, for those who made the decision to return to Hungary, was a winter coat.

A survivor remembered vividly that on their way back to Hungary, in a last-minute escape from extermination, her mother bartered her camisole, the last item that she had for an exchange, for a pitcher of milk. That saved the two of them. Thus, survival hinged on one’s ability to exchange objects brought with them from home. When the deportees ran out of items to be bartered, though, they had no choice but to beg.

After they had been abandoned by the Hungarian soldiers, the deportees encountered them only sporadically. Based on a few accounts, these encounters generally still proved to be useful and sometimes even lifesaving for the deportees, because the soldiers not only gave them food, but sometimes helped them to find accommodation, and reined in the violent Ukrainian militia. They were also instrumental in creating a communication lifeline between the deportees and their families in Budapest and elsewhere. Finally, some soldiers were willing to smuggle deportees back to the mother country, some driven by money, others by humanitarian impulses.

But there were also cases when the soldiers forced them to work for the army. When the Dniester flooded, washing away the military equipment stocked along the riverbank, the soldiers drove not only the local Jews into the river’s strong current, but the deportees lingering in the area, too, so that they could save the valuable supplies. When a pontoon bridge was washed away by the rapid currents, the Hungarian deportees were forced to tow the ferry substituting for the structure. When the new bridge was mounted, the soldiers let the Jews go.

Members of the Jewish labor companies viewed the torment endured by their Hungarian coreligionists, and sometimes their own immediate families, with a mixture of sympathy and a sense of powerlessness. One of them wrote: “When we stop somewhere, hundreds and hundreds surround us for bread; whatever we can collect we distribute among them, but what is it compared to the needs? For the sake of illustration,
here is a typical scene: We bartered cigarettes for raspberries, and we dumped the bad ones. Grown-up people picked them all up from the ground, stuffing them into their mouth—they are on the verge of starving to death.”

Complicating the situation of the Hungarian refugees was a steady stream of Romanian Jews who were expelled from Bukovina, which later also reached Kamenets-Podolsk. Marion Samuel characterized it as “two rivers meet, the Romanian and Hungarian Jews . . . united.” Both group were left to their fate, rejected by the Ukrainians and the Poles, and persecuted by armed militias.

In this bleak landscape, the only ameliorating factor for the plight of these Jews was the support of the local Jewish communities, who extended badly needed humanitarian aid to the refugees. Sometimes, though, their numbers and the neverending columns were overwhelming even to major Jewish population centers. During the deportations 700 to 800 Jews arrived daily in the region situated 200 to 300 kilometers away from Hungary, because most of the deportees were taken beyond the Dniester. An example of the magnitude of this humanitarian disaster, conveyed in a letter by a woman to relatives in Budapest, described the arrival of a group of two thousand people in the region of Kamentsk-Podolsk. While the German commandant ordered the newly arrived to leave the area immediately, the local Jewish community, comprising mainly of women, children, and the elderly, was powerless to extend any humanitarian help.

HELPING HANDS

During the early stages of the expulsion, the wandering multitude was met with a genuine sense of bewilderment. The dramatic entrance into a town by the refugees, often joined by thousands of Romanian Jews expelled from Bukovina, left everlasting, though perplexing, impressions on the host communities.

Contemporary accounts routinely designated the refugees as Carpathian Ruthenian or “Carpatoros” in the local lingo. While the refugees included those from various foreign countries, from the upper and eastern Hungarian provinces, and a sizeable number from Budapest, for the Ukrainian Jews they were all deported from the camp in Carpathian Ruthenia. Their initial ambivalence rapidly metamorphosed into a sense of urgency for a call to action, especially by Zionist youth groups. Saving lives often hinged on finding an immediate host family with some contacts in the local Ukrainian power structure who were willing to share accommodation and food with the refugees. Making contact with these families was facilitated by the fact that most of the Jews, at least from Carpathian Ruthenia, spoke or understood the language of the local Jews, Yiddish. Some were also able to communicate in Rusyn, a Ukrainian regional language that was spoken on both sides of the Carpathian Mountains.
The number of refugees crossing daily into the little or midsize towns was staggering. In the town of Borshchiv (Borszczów in Polish and Austrian), for example, “within two weeks approximately seven to eight thousand Hungarian Jews went through the city.” Most of the Jews traveled on foot. Some of them were housed overnight in tobacco warehouses. Responding to the humanitarian needs, the community brought “cooked food and bread” and later “hired wagons to take the old and weak to the border [Kamenets-Podolsk].” Complicating this humanitarian gesture, almost simultaneously, some Jews who had escaped pogroms in Romania started to arrive. Unfortunately, “most of them had perished on the way.”

Even in relatively small towns, such as Mielnica, the local community responded to the plight of the expellees with immediate aid: “The Hungarians brought to Mielnica several truckloads of Jewish refugees from Carpatoros. These refugees were starved and weak, shoeless and threadbare, and had been robbed and beaten on the way by the Ukrainians. The Jews of the town aided the refugees as much as their means allowed, inviting them into their homes, feeding them, and collecting clothing for them.”

The rapidly emerging Jewish Councils (Judenrat) and ghettos—set up upon German order—also provided badly needed support. From Kolomea to Skala, from Horodenka to Kosów, and from Nadwórna to Buczacz, public kitchens, distribution of clothing, and housing assistance were extended to the refugees. Equally important was the establishment of orphanages for the hundreds of children who were separated from their parents, or, in the later stages, whose parents were murdered. One of the unforeseeable consequences of these hastily arranged shelters for the children, though, was the tragic fact that orphanages became death traps during the final liquidation of the ghettos.

The Jewish leadership in Kolomea made special efforts to create liveable conditions for the deportees. They were given soup and bread for breakfast and lunch, and they could spend the nights in the corridors of the building of the religious community. Kolomea was unique in Galicia. Having the headquarters of the Royal Hungarian Army might have had some moderating, though limited, influence. Also, in addition to the Hungarians, Jews from Austria, Czechoslovakia, Slovakia, and Germany made the town an international refugee hub. Altogether, two thousand of them crowded the town. They were placed with host families who shared accommodation, food, and clothing. Among the children there were one hundred orphans who posed a special problem because they understood only Hungarian.

There are dramatic descriptions of their arrival in Stanislawów, mainly from the Máramaros region, which straddled Carpathian Ruthenia and Transylvania. A diary note about their entrance into the city is especially gripping: “The refugees were in a dreadful situation: broken, worn-out, frail, hungry, ill, and destitute, since they have been plundered en-route by the Hungarian [military] and Ukrainian population.”
Initially, they were housed in religious institutions and synagogues. However, the swelling of their numbers as more and more groups were directed to this city forced the Jewish Council to move them to the Rudolfsmühle, a flour mill that was owned by Samuel Rudolf, an unfinished building several stories high. “This building turned into the house of death, due to hunger and the cold... About 1,000 sick and frail Jews lived in this building until the main Aktion of March 31, 1942, they were the first to be killed in the Aktion.”\textsuperscript{100} While the \textit{Judenrat} formed a “health committee to lighten their lot,” and organized a communal kitchen and other necessary facilities, the local Jewish community faced such challenges that “very little was done for the Hungarian Jews.” Abraham Liebesman’s diary conveys in tragic details their fate: “their lot was constant hunger, cold, not enough clothing to cover their bodies, exposed to all sorts of sickness like typhoid, dysentery, they were short on everything, hardly any similar situation on earth.”\textsuperscript{101}

Indeed, the deteriorating social and humanitarian conditions in the host communities and in the rapidly mushrooming ghettos, German food restrictions, and periodic killings imposed a reduction and elimination of support to the Hungarians—dictated by an almost atavistic or natural instinct to give preference to the host community. In Stanisławów, the \textit{Judenrat} understood that by their own power alone they could not sustain support for the Hungarian refugees. This city held the largest concentration of Hungarian Jews after Kamenets-Podolsk, around 2,300 in number. In their letter to the Hungarian Jewish Baroness Edith Weiss, the \textit{Judenrat} appealed for assistance, describing the rapidly deteriorating conditions in the city in which the local community’s needs could not be met, as well as the situation in the Rudolfsmühle. It is unknown if this appeal was honored by the baroness or MIPI, but we have information about her appeals to both the Hungarian and the International Red Cross for support of the deportees already transferred to Galicia.\textsuperscript{102}

The fact that the entire region was under military administration, first Hungarian, and then German, might have excluded any potential for organized support from Hungary. Most of the surviving sources about the fate of the deportees came from main population centers like Kolomea, Stanisławów, and Kamenets-Podolsk. An interesting memoir from a rather ordinary Ukrainian village, Bilah Solta (Biľche Zolote in Ukrainian), provides a unique vantage point of the column of Hungarian Jews passing through a small village where no organized leadership, like a Jewish council, could provide assistance: “These were religious and poor families, taking care of many hungry and tired children.” The group was escorted by the Ukrainian paramilitaries who “allowed them a short rest in the village. They seemed worn out, pitiable and the hunger struck them hard.” The local Jews were “afraid to come out” at first, until one of their leaders decided to act by contacting the only moral authority in the village, the local priest. He, in turn, ordered the people in charge to allow the distribution of the refugees...
A SUMMER OF MASS MURDER

among the Jewish families in the village. The respite was temporary, though, because the paramilitaries forced them to continue their deadly journey: “They were deported to the depth of Ukraine, there they were killed. Many of them died of hunger, others died during the war.” The cryptic allusion of “there they were killed” implied that the massacres across the region, and which culminated in Kamenets-Podolsk, took their deadly toll on the Hungarian refugees.

THE FINAL DESTINATION

Kamenets-Podolsk was the end destination. We cannot ignore the question as to why and how thousands upon thousands of Jews from Hungary ended up in this faraway place. The direct distance between the transit camp in Körömező and Kamenets-Podolsk is around 150 miles. However, the majority of the deportees were led through circuitous routes, without a clear target destination in mind, which often took two to three weeks and ended up in various towns where they shared the fate of the Jews of Galicia.

The stated aim of the Hungarian military and political leadership was to deposit the thousands of expellees as far as possible from the Hungarian border. This translated, as we can learn from correspondence and reports, into removing the Jews over the Dniester River, which provided a natural barrier for desperate attempts of return. It is difficult to ascertain the reason for selecting Kamenets-Podolsk for the destination, because no explicit or implicit military correspondence survived that could point to a central missive selecting this nondescript border town, a former tsarist outpost, on the border of Galicia and Podolia. Part of the answer might lie in the fact that Kamenets-Podolsk was the farthest point in the short Hungarian military conquest. Indeed, many Jews were deposited there by columns of military trucks, brusquely ordering them to proceed to the “castle,” which in reality was an imposing tsarist fortress.

The majority of people, though, were mercilessly driven by Ukrainian militiamen across eastern Galicia, through muddy “country roads, some of them walking 40 km on foot . . . with their bundles. . . . I saw one who was holding a bundle even between his teeth, it was pouring, and he was barefoot.” Unfortunately, these words of a Hungarian labor serviceman do not reveal the reason as to why these Ukrainian bands also drove the ill-fated Jews toward Kamenets-Podolsk. But, by the second half of August, a large segment of these so-called repatriated Jews, close to two-thirds of the exiles, arrived and finally settled into a precarious existence in an already overcrowded, poverty infested, and plague decimated ghetto located in the Old Town of Kamenets-Podolsk. At first, the local Jewry made every effort to accommodate the newly arrived Hungarians in synagogues, community halls, and private homes. The
deportees were also able to secure provisions by bartering in villages around the city with local peasants.

By the middle of August, though, when everyone had to move into the newly created ghetto in the Old Town, the full weight of overcrowding, poverty, hunger, and epidemics erased any distinction between Hungarians and locals. On August 26, 1941, the Hungarian Jews “were lined up in rows in military fashion and taken to the destroyed train station. . . . Rabbis with Torah scrolls led [this procession], followed by mothers with their children, and ill and old people supported [by others]. All the people moved along with difficulty; the majority of them believed that they were going to be returned home.”

They did not know the final destination of their journey, though, since they were reassured, somewhat nebulously, that they were going to be relocated—even as far as Odessa or maybe taking a train home. Instead, the next morning,

they were driven out of the barracks with rubber clubs and taken to an open field where there was a ravine surrounded by hills. There all of them were shot by SS men. . . . [The site of the three days massacre] was full of smoke coming from the constant shooting. Many people were thrown into the grave while still alive, some of them having been wounded only slightly. Several days afterward, both day and night frightful noises were heard from the graves. Then SS men forced peasants from the surrounding villages to cover the graves. The railway workers said that the earth was heaving for several days. 105

Orchestrated by a hitherto unknown SS general, Friedrich Jeckeln, this massacre set a new high in the rapidly evolving waves of mass murder. This three-day “event” also heralded a new phase in the Holocaust: the total annihilation of Jews as well as the opening salvo in the Hungarian Holocaust. Thus, these 23,600 victims, among them 14,000 to 16,000 Hungarian deportees, became a statistic in the art of mass murder and, in turn, the history of the Holocaust.