A Summer of Mass Murder

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RETURN FROM THE ABYSS
Rescue and Survival

“I implore you, spare no effort for we are reaching the end together with 2,000 people.”

The opening chapter of the Hungarian Holocaust did not come to an abrupt close with the three-day massacre in Kamenets-Podolsk or the genocidal convulsion across Galicia in 1941 and 1942. Desperate efforts by the expellees who survived the massacres to return to Hungary continued sporadically until mid-1943. Officially, the deportation came to an impasse on August 8, 1941, by the direct decree of the Minister of Interior Ferenc Keresztes-Fischer. His directive was sent out to all provinces, instructing both civilian authorities as well as police agencies to cease the transborder expulsion. The telegram’s tone is unambiguous: “I forbid the removal of the Jews to Poland [sic] effective immediately . . . those Jews of Polish and Russian extraction that their expulsion is desired . . . in the future, only with [my] approval can be expelled.” On the original telegram, delivered promptly to Miklós Kozma’s office, a curt handwritten note of confirmation stating “I have taken action” was dated August 10, 1941—two days after the original order. During these two days’ lag, and even after, the trucks of the Royal Hungarian Army continued to roll unchecked, transporting another 3,859 people to their predictable fate in Galicia.

This was the first time that a direct communication from the minister of interior explicitly forbade the deportation. Yet the fact that his order was delayed and that removal from the provinces continued intermittently long after this decree should also not come as a surprise. This deliberate obfuscation was not the first instance when regional authorities (and even under the nose of the minister) ignored the minister’s instructions. His decree on July 30 that limited the expulsion to individuals with Polish and Russian roots, requested by the prime minister and conveyed to the American ambassador three days later, remained a “theoretical proposition.” Repeated complaints from the provinces reported disobedience to a sequence of ministerial orders, indicators of an environment ripe for abuses. The blatant disregard of an order to halt the deportation
might also be demonstrative of a deep-seated resentment by Hungarian officialdom at not being able to accomplish the complete expulsion of the entire Jewish community. In a 1942 document from Carpathian Ruthenia, a disappointed county commissioner bemoaned the fact that although “the most welcomed governmental decision of 1941 was the transfer of Jews of foreign nationality [to Galicia]. . . . Unfortunately, this action only lasted for 8–10 days [sic] and so Carpathian Ruthenia’s biggest question has not been solved.”

The flouting of the directive could equally be the result of a dysfunctional political and administrative system, based on privileges and overlapping connections, in which checks and balances were only an illusion. In hindsight, we can also discern “stress fractures” in the political system. There were three distinct jurisdictions, functioning in parallel with each other, which were not clearly delineated and defined. Carpathian Ruthenia was governed by Miklós Kozma who, as government commissioner, ostensibly reported to the regent, Miklós Horthy. As such, he could take autonomous decisions with the proviso that he conferred and updated the government of László Bárdossy. In a surviving memorandum from his office, four days after the minister of interior had already suspended the deportation, he explicitly wanted to explore the possibility of restarting “further shipments of Jews” with the German authorities, effective August 14. He simultaneously proposed the prime minister establish contact with German authorities with the same goal. Two follow-up directives in succession, from August 15 and 17, had to be sent by the head of KEOKH to enforce the minister’s earlier injunction.

The Royal Hungarian Army, on the other hand, was fully autonomous in the military areas it controlled in Galicia. It also claimed authority in the border zones adjacent to the newly occupied Soviet Union—including Carpathian Ruthenia and part of northern Transylvania. The minister of interior had no jurisdiction over the military. As an example, the Kőrösmegő transit camp, located on the border zone and under military control, functioned undisturbed. Its commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Rudolf Orbán, could disregard the instructions from Budapest with the clear knowledge that he was under the operational authority of a staunchly pro-German chief of staff, General Henrik Werth. So, the military trucks continued to roll with their human cargo long after this ministerial decree. A follow-up instruction by the interior minister, stating that refugees or escaping Galician Jews should not be handed over because of the certainty of execution by the German security services, was also blatantly disregarded by border and military authorities.

As far as late October, with corresponding heavy snows and freezing temperatures in the Carpathian Mountains, border guards routinely returned refugees to their death. Kozma’s desperate call to the minister of interior, in October, for urgent intervention with the military leadership for the cessation of cross-border transfer of escaping Jews went unheeded. At the other end of this continuum, military officers could
also use their power to save lives. The example of Lieutenant-Colonel Imre Reviczky, who secured birth certificates, interceded with the local gendarmerie, and unilaterally stopped and returned several trainloads of deportees heading toward the transit camp in Kőrösmező, is one of the rare examples of such behavior.\footnote{9}

Finally, the land within the country’s original boundaries was under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Interior, but his ministerial orders theoretically would apply to the entire country, including the newly reannexed territories. In retrospect, it seems incredible that even relatively low-level operatives in KEOKH and district administrators could refuse the minister’s explicit instruction with impunity. The main architect of the deportation in this region, the state police councilor of Carpathian Ruthenia, Arisztid Meskó, openly boasted to a visiting delegation led by Margit Slachta that “on the personal level he considers the cleansing of his territory from Jews most salutary . . . he knows [the order of the minister] but in the territory of Carpathian Ruthenia the laws and legal rulings are governed by different considerations.” He bluntly added that the “regulations by the minister of interior apply only to the interior of the country; in Carpathian Ruthenia the sole responsibility rests with government commissioner for such matters. In any case, I [Meskó] drew up the instructions relating to the deportation, developed the plans, and instructed police authorities to exercise the utmost rigor and severity in implementing the ‘cleansing action,’ regardless of the individual hardships and tragedies which are not my concern.”\footnote{10}

The most telling sign of the willful contravention of the initial ministerial missive for the immediate cessation of the deportation, from August 8, was, as noted previously, the necessity of sending two follow-up telegrams on August 15 and 17, respectively, to all police agencies and regional KEOKH offices. On August 17, Simenfalvy ordered the “release of alien Jews of Polish and Russian origin that had been slated for expulsion and require them to report once a week in person at their permanent residence.” He further requested weekly reports about their progress and the status of the foreign nationals.\footnote{11}

However, there was an inherent caveat in the minister’s missive. His original telegram spoke only about the cessation of the cross-border transfer. It did not address an equally weighty question: What would be the fate of those marooned in the Galician nightmare or those who desperately wanted to return across the Carpathian Mountains? And, specifically, what should be the fate of those who were able to escape and return to the mother country? László Zobel, one of the survivors of the deportation, succinctly summed up this governmental policy in noting that the “government did not want witnesses to a human disaster they had initiated. It would have been an international admission of a humanitarian tragedy, and a political blunder which would bring into focus the ultimate question of responsibility.” Hence the assiduous hunting down of the escapees, returning them to Galicia or locking them away immediately in internment camps.\footnote{12}
“I HAVE HEARD ENOUGH!”

This exclamation has been attributed to Keresztes-Fischer upon hearing of the atrocities taking place in Ukraine. Consequently, an order was issued for the cessation of cross-border transfer of Jews to Galicia from the transit camp in Kőrösmező. The Hungarian government was under continuous pressure to moderate its expulsion policy and stop the deportation altogether. Protests by religious and political organizations, individual initiatives, Jewish communal efforts, the American ambassador’s intervention, and protest by the US State Department bore fruit.

There are two versions as to how this decision itself came to pass, and it is possible both contain an element of truth. One version comes from the testimony of Dr. Aurel Kern, a ministerial councilor reporting directly to the minister of interior, during the trial of one of the main architects of the 1941 deportation, Ámon Pásztoy. Kern stated that he personally brought the news of the mass murder of the deportees to the attention of Keresztes-Fischer. The enraged minister reacted by “promising an immediate response for this atrocity. It is inconceivable that he would deliver human beings for the slaughter.”

Possibly at the same time, the minister heard a report in person from a deportee who was smuggled back to Budapest. This may have been the “final straw” in convincing the minister of interior to suspend the deportation. The plot to inform and influence the minister started out as an individual rescue effort to smuggle back two people who were deported to Galicia. The rescue attempt was initiated by Hansi Brand, a remarkably fearless woman and a Zionist leader, whose sister and brother-in-law were deported within twenty-four hours from Budapest to Galicia. She was assisted by her husband, Joel Brand. As Joel Brand recalled during the Eichmann trial, Hansi insisted on finding someone who could rescue her sister. In a wholly unplanned encounter in one of the many cafés dotting the capital, Joel Brand found a counterintelligence officer, József Krem, who was willing to find and bring back the two for a hefty fee—10,000 pengő, an enormous sum at the time. The officer made four trips, each time bringing back people who were willing to pay the money for their rescue, until he found the two relatives of the Brands: “He went with his automobile to fetch them. I had only a photograph to give him. But when he returned from there the first time, he had not found my relatives. He was, however, clever or dexterous enough to bring back with him other Hungarian Jews who had been deported there. They had also promised him a lot of money. These Jews told us for the first time clearly about the mass shootings and about the horrors, so that we understood that this was a systematic operation . . . but up to this point had not really believed it.”

Joel Brand arranged through an intermediary a meeting directly with Keresztes-Fischer and Hansi Brand’s brother-in-law. The intermediary was Samuel Springmann,
a mysterious and colorful character in Budapest of the 1940s. He was an influential diamond dealer, who, in spite of being Jewish, had unfettered access to the highest circles of the government as well as the German military intelligence, the Abwher. Brand asserted in his testimony at the Eichman trial that only four people were present at the meeting: the minister, Joel Brand, Samuel Springmann, and Lajos Stern, the rescued brother-in-law. However, it might be more likely that several leaders from the Hungarian-Jewish Assistance Committee (Magyar Izraeliták Pártfogó Irodája, MIPI) were also present. Stern told Keresztes-Fischer about the situation in Galicia. Upon hearing the graphic tales of the atrocities and mass killings of local and Hungarian Jews, the minister’s alleged response, “I have heard enough,” signaled his decision to put an end to the deportation.  

There were other factors, of course, that could have played crucial role in this decision. For one, we cannot ignore the role Margit Slachta, supported by several prominent public figures and parliamentarians, may have played in this decision. As the influential head of the Order of the Sisters of Social Service and an astute politician, she had access to the highest levels of the Hungarian government, including the minister of interior. Equally significant was her personal friendship with the wife of the de-facto ruler of Hungary, Miklós Horthy. In forceful words, invoking Christian morality and national pride, she implored the reigning couple to intervene on behalf of the deported. Consequently, she gained an audience with Mrs. Horthy. There are no surviving documents that could testify, indeed, if Horthy became involved in the affair. However, he knew about the events and had continuous communication with his government. Equally important was the sending of her report to the attention of the International Red Cross in Geneva in late 1941, requesting humanitarian assistance for those deported in Galicia.

The intervention of Herbert C. Pell, the American ambassador, in pressuring the prime minister for the cessation of the deportation had also had an impact on Hungarian thinking. The transfer of information to Washington and its dissemination to the American press only reinforced the perception in Budapest that the continuation of this mishandled adventure might be politically untenable.

Finally, the political and military reality on the ground in Galicia—we might also term it an element of “real politics”—might have also influenced the thinking of the government. The territory controlled by the Hungarian military was reduced to a narrow zone that could not permit the delivery of convoys across the Dniester River. An exasperated deputy to the government commissioner in Carpathian Ruthenia conveyed this information to the minister of interior by claiming that until then the deportees’ return could be “easily prevented by guarding the crossing-places [Dniester River].” Equally important were the ongoing and relentless German objections, reinforced by the introduction of German military control in Galicia and its incorporation into the
General Government on August 1, to the deportation. Although some Hungarian military presence remained and outposts continued to function in the areas formerly under Hungarian occupation, their operational control was taken over by the Wehrmacht and, consequently, the German security services. This was followed soon after by the transition to German civil administration. Not surprisingly, then, in the deliberations by the Parliament, the loss of control over large swaths of Galicia was listed by the minister as one of the cardinal reasons for the halting of the deportation.\textsuperscript{18}

As an interesting footnote to the rescue, a lively trade in human smuggling and the transfer of letters, packages, and money arose among the military personnel stationed in Galicia. József Krem, the counterintelligence agent, continued to pop up periodically in the annals of the 1941 deportation and rescue activities. He routinely conducted his undercover business in the ritzy Café Savoy, a trendy hangout for the rich. According to the testimony of László Zobel, Krem appeared in a sports car in Kolomea on October 3, 1941, dressed in a fitted black leather coat. He was looking for a specific client, whose rich family had paid for his services for transportation back to Budapest. Everything was ready with fake counterintelligence papers, only the intended individual was nowhere to be found. Realizing that the deportee might have been moved somewhere else and not wanting to return empty-handed, the enterprising agent offered to Zobel and his mother transportation across the border for the sum of 5,000 pengő. Zobel masqueraded as a counterintelligence agent, under identity papers provided by Krem, while his mother hid in the luggage compartment of the little sports car, as they deftly made the journey back to Budapest safely.\textsuperscript{19}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{LászlóZőbel.png}
\caption{László Zőbel was twenty-four years old when he was deported to Galicia with his mother. After wandering in Galicia, they were smuggled back to Budapest by a Hungarian intelligence officer. \textit{Courtesy of George Eisen.}}
\end{figure}
Some tales did not end as happily. Enterprising officers of the Royal Hungarian Army repeatedly approached families of the deported to supposedly assist the unfortunates in Galicia. The diary of a young girl, Éva Hyman, mentions the expulsion of her close friend, Márta Münzer, with her parents to Kamenets-Podolsk. She recorded that Hungarian officers often visited the grieving grandmother with offers to deliver money to the deported Münzer family: “A lot of soldiers have already dropped in on them quite a few times, and after asking her for money they told her that they had seen Márta, and her mother too, in some Polish town called Kamenets-Podolsk.” The grandmother gave every time, despite the fact that by this time, it was common knowledge that the Hungarian Jews in Kamenets-Podolsk, including the Münzer family, had been exterminated.

THE PERILOUS JOURNEY

The opportunity for flight, survival, and the successful crossing of borders, like all Holocaust experiences, was serendipitous. This might hold especially true in Galicia, an alien land with a hostile population, where the drive to plunder and murder often extinguished all semblance of empathy. Individuals found wandering across the open countryside of Galicia were often denounced and captured. Thus, the journey toward the border had to be conducted during the night while hiding in the fields or forests during the day. One of the critical elements in a successful return was to find a Jewish home in the darkness. Numerous narratives described how the worn-down refugees floundered in the dark, going “from door to door” in order to touch a mezuzah on the doorpost—the sign of a Jewish home. Finding such a home meant a temporary shelter and was often a lifesaver. Yet we also encounter examples of spontaneous assistance even on the part of the feared Ukrainian militia. However, this was more the exception than the rule. Successful escapes were a matter of being at the right time, in the right place, along with a dose of luck and personal resourcefulness. Some decided to take the long road to the Hungarian border on their own. Others were saved by members of the Jewish forced labor companies, or by relatives from Budapest who were rich enough to afford a rescue operation. As mentioned, military officers and enterprising counterintelligence agents had unfettered access to the occupied territories and were paid handsomely for their assistance.

Most of the refugees, however, did not have the financial means or personal connections to be rescued by high-level officers or agents of the Hungarian counterintelligence services. In these prevailing political winds and social conditions, it’s a miracle that by some estimates less than 10 percent of the deported, around 2,000 survivors, were able to return, illegally, through the Carpathian Mountains. This number may be inflated because the ratio of survival and successful return of the expellees was low.
Listening to the testimonies of survivors, it is clear that very few were able to return. For instance, from a group of forty that escaped from Czortków, only five individuals could be traced. Another sobering example from a small village in Carpathian Ruthenia shows that from more than 217 Jews deported, only a family of seven and two individuals trickled back. Or consider the fate of one family of twenty-one, also expelled from a small village in Carpathian Ruthenia—only one person came back. This was a woman named Helen Dub who lived in hiding in the forest in a makeshift bunker and returned after the war—she was the only survivor from her family.11

Escape was an individual initiative, a decision that often led to tragic consequences. It could signify life and death. The eight-member family of Max Solomon had to split up because of the smugglers’ concern that such a large group might attract too much attention. As the first group, the mother and three daughters were dispatched in Ukrainian peasant attire and successfully reached Hungary. The men, however, were caught in the second attempt and, consequently, were killed in the mass execution in Orinin. Max was the lone survivor among three brothers and the father. He realized only after the war that the women miraculously survived the journey and the war.23

A somewhat different, though equally harrowing fate befell a family from Budapest. Upon receiving a desperate plea from their daughter languishing in Galicia, with a husband and two children, her parents in Budapest reassured them, “there is a solution, hold out a little longer.” Three weeks later, two Ukrainian peasants, Hutsuls, appeared and were ready to lead the family to the Hungarian border, but in order to save them, they had to hand over their children to smugglers. It was April 24, 1942. Since the husband was in no condition to undertake the arduous trip, she decided to entrust the two children to the care of the smugglers to deliver them to Budapest, which they reached safely. Upon her request to send a car, because of her husband’s health, the parents were able to arrange a truck, two months later, which brought them to the Hungarian border, which they had to cross with smugglers on foot. After safely arriving in Budapest, they were arrested on July 22, 1942, imprisoned with the threat of cross-border transfer back to Galicia. After bribes, she and the two children were released. Her husband, though, was expelled again and, in the words of the survivor, “disappeared without a trace.”24

Obviously, the family back in Budapest was able to muster the resources that were needed for such a rescue. The majority of refugees, however, coming from more modest circumstances, especially from the provinces, would not be able to hire rescuers. A letter from Kolomea gives a sobering assessment about the obstacles facing a family with children. The writer informs his relatives in Budapest that the situation is dire: “All our luggage was stolen, and only Rozsi [the nanny that accompanied them voluntarily] succeeded to save her belongings. She sold everything so that the children could be fed, so she remained with very few articles of clothing.” The children had winter coats but no gloves and shoes. Basically, the family was destitute. The letter was dated on November
13, 1941, when the daily collection of Jews and their execution was already a familiar routine in Kolomea. Having a special work pass, the anonymous writer reassured his contact in Budapest that in spite of the murders, she should not be frightened, “because I feel that I will escape from this hell and we will reunite in Budapest for starting a new life.” Then, the writer pleaded for the family in Budapest to write an appeal and deliver it in person to Miklós Horthy, requesting permission for their return.55

Leaving behind loved ones in a ghetto in Galicia, in the last moments before escaping and with the knowledge that this might be the final time they would see each other, required a deep degree of emotional detachment. Elizabeth Lubell, a twenty-year-old woman from Budapest, survived a full year also in the Kolomea Ghetto with her parents. Originally, there were over “20,000 people [Jews] in Kolomyja.” By the time of her decision to depart, “there were only a couple hundred left.” She knew instinctively that this would be the last time she would see her parents alive. There was an unspoken bond of silence between daughter and mother:

The last night when I knew that I’m leaving in the morning. . . . In order to survive you have to lose your—certain feelings disappear from you. But that was the last night and mother just touched me so because she had her own thoughts and I had my own thoughts. The only thing what I remember that I just wanted to—that nobody should touch me and nobody should kiss me. Just to push it away because one more touch and one more kiss, I’m not going to leave. . . . I never explained it to her but I hope she understood it. Because

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Fig 7.2 Elizabeth Lubell and her mother, Brona Buchsbaum. She escaped from the Kolomea Ghetto with the help of smugglers that her parents hired. The parents remained behind and were among the last Jews to be shipped to Belzec extermination camp and killed. *Courtesy of Barbara Lubell.*
when she wanted to touch me, I just like—I pushed it away. I did it in order that I should be able to leave.\textsuperscript{16}

She never saw her parents again. They were deported to Belzec several weeks after her departure and murdered there.

Her experience, harrowing as it was, showed individual daring, sacrifice, and deep faith. Beyond financial constraints, the routes toward the Hungarian border were long and perilous—especially if one considered the crossing of the Dniester River, the most formidable natural barrier. Indeed, this was one of the considerations of Hungarian policymakers for dumping the refugees on the other side of the river. Boatmen were willing to transport the escapees over the raging river for a hefty fee. There was always a well-founded concern, though, that these smugglers would throw the returnees overboard into the river after taking their money.\textsuperscript{27}

Attempts to cross the Carpathian Mountains in late autumn and early winter harbored their own dangers. Besides the challenge of the cold weather and snow, there were recurring reports of massacres of entire families by their Ukrainian guides. By some estimates, half of the escapees, Hungarian and Galician, were murdered by their guides along the way to the border. Rumors were widespread on the Galician side of the border that Hungarian border guards routinely robbed and murdered arrested Jews.\textsuperscript{28}

One Hungarian mother and daughter were captured and imprisoned across the border by a Hungarian unit, alongside Galician Jews. The Galicians, who had attempted the perilous journey across the border, harbored no illusions by that time about their fate. They were resigned. However, the mother and daughter, upon overhearing the guards’ detailed discussion in Hungarian about the impending execution of the entire group, made a desperate effort to break out with the help of these Galician Jews. They literally created a human pyramid to reach the window. They were able to escape to safety.\textsuperscript{29}

An unlikely voice of conscience should be interjected. Surprisingly, it came from Carpathian Ruthenia. Miklós Kozma finally became aware of the enormity of the human tragedy that was unfolding on the border. He instructed all officials under his control to “strictly adhere to the minister of interior’s explicit instructions” relating to Jews. In his desperate appeal to the minister of interior, on October 22, 1941, for intercession with military authorities, he informed Keresztes-Fischer about the horrors taking place in the “no-man’s land where mothers bury their children that died from hunger with their own hands.” He also warned the minister of the uncompromising behavior of the military and the gendarmerie, which “continuously transport escapees back to Galicia.”\textsuperscript{30} He was also familiar with the dictum by Major Helmut T anzmann, as the head of the Security Police in Lwów who ordered the shooting of every returnee, whether Hungarian deportee or a Galician escapee. The German border police carried out this command to the full extent. Elizabeth Lubell’s return from Galicia in the
autumn of 1942 shows that Kozma’s warnings were credible. Part of a group of returnees, the last survivors of the Kolomea Ghetto, could see already the Hungarian border when somebody betrayed them to the German border guards: “we were ten of us who were escaping from the ghetto—they came up, the German guards and they shot everybody on sight.” She hid in a hollow three trunk for four days and four nights in the woods, waiting for her rescue. She was the only one who lived to tell the tale.15

There were instances when Hungarian refugees joined their Galician coreligionists in attempting to cross the border to Bukovina, with the aim of reaching Chernowitz, on the Romanian side. We know the fate of one group from Mielnica, where some “local Jews and some who were refugees from Hungary attempted to cross the border into Bukovina with the aid of Ukrainian smugglers in exchange for large sums of money. . . . Most of the escapees, however, were caught there by the police, brought back to the border point at Sniatyn and handed over to the Germans, who murdered them on the spot.”16 There were other examples of local Jewish assistance for the deportees. In Kosów, the community successfully bribed the German border police to let close to 400 Jews escape back to Hungary. Some were successful while 149 were returned to Kosów by Hungarian authorities, to share the fate of the entire community several months later. What was unique about the Kosów affair is that the Jewish community responded to the German border post in Zabie, which demanded the repatriation of these Hungarian Jews.17

The most harrowing part of the trip was the border crossing. A shocking report from October 1941 described how the border guards, the gendarmerie, and even armed youth groups (leventék) hunted for and transferred the unfortunate returnees to no-man’s-land, many with proof of their Hungarian citizenship: “In this respect, they know no mercy. . . . The returnees’ situation is beyond shocking. They arrive half-frozen, emaciated, in rags, or sometimes completely stripped of clothing . . . based on local information the no-man’s land is covered with dead bodies that no one can bury anymore, sometimes just covering them with tree branches.”18 Another report by the Hungarian general staff almost at the same time provides exact numbers of Jews for the first two weeks of October who were captured in crossing the border and redeported to Galicia: “The total number reaches two thousand.”19

A brief note needs to be inserted that can shed light on the behind-the-scenes decision-making process in Budapest. A flurry of directives and proposals by Pásztóy during September might testify to his drive to finish the task that he started in July 1941. His missive to the officials in Carpathian Ruthenia, instructing them by telephone to thwart the return of both Jews and Christians, indicates this uncompromising attitude: “the return of the expelled Jews is non-negotiable, and similarly their Christian family members. The only mode of their return can be through German diplomatic channels.”20 The recognition that military efforts alone would not be sufficient to curtail the
number of desperate returnees from recrossing the border propelled him to approach directly the prime minister (also holding the portfolio of foreign minister) with the proposal of a 20–30-kilometer-wide “Jew-free” border zone on the Galician side. Pásztóy’s communication, transcending the chain of command with Keresztes-Fisher also advocated for convening a joint German Hungarian governmental commission that could produce a diplomatic solution to the issue of the returning refugees. Upon convoking such a consultative body in Berlin, though, one can sum up the functioning of this committee as mutual recrimination and finger-pointing. While the first communication from the Hungarian Embassy in Berlin started on October 3, 1941, by early November it became clear that no resolution could be reached. Parallel with these rather fruitless diplomatic negotiations, German Hungarian contacts have commenced on the military level on October 11 in Körösmező, on the Hungarian–Galician border. A follow-up meeting at the end of October in Stanislawów, in which SS-Captain Krüger was also a participant, was more productive. It concluded that in case of their unlawful return, “the Jews cannot be handed over but should be interned and later an arrangement could be found for their cross-border transfer.” As we have seen, and perhaps reflecting this “arrangement,” there were numerous instances when families were sent to internment camps upon their capture, and later transferred back to Galicia—as late as 1943.

CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE

The Hungarian refugees made every attempt to return to Hungary, which was, after all, still home, and familiar territory. But the foreign nationals who were plucked out of Hungarian internment camps or arrested in periodic raids could not do the same. They had no supportive familial network, no friends who could assist them in going underground. Even for those few Hungarian Jews who successfully evaded border patrols and snuck back to their home villages and towns, life did not return to normal. Carrying the psychological and physical scars of the deportation, they were forced silently into hiding for months by the genuine fear of being transported back to Galicia. Their fear was justified. Often the details of the clandestine return of a deportee were kept under wraps for understandable reasons. Some told or wrote about their experiences in Galicia years later. As a Galician survivor later recalled, one of the unexpected escapees was the noted and colorful Hungarian boxer Zsiga Adler, whose girlfriend was able to bribe his way back to Budapest. Ironically, Adler never mentioned this detail during his lifetime.

A vexing aspect of the tragedy was a prevailing “hear nothing, know nothing” attitude during and after the deportation. The Hungarian authorities, naturally enough,
did not want eyewitnesses to the crimes. No one in a position of power wanted to face the “inconvenient truth,” about a political and humanitarian failure. The public media was also complicit in this silence. Aside from a terse announcement by the Hungarian radio on August 3, 1941, and in some regional newspapers, the mainline news media was silent, or at least circumspect about the deportation and atrocities in Galicia. This reticence was partly due to the strictly enforced military censorship introduced in 1939. There was also, especially on the part of the Jewish press, a self-censorship. They wanted to pursue discrete diplomacy by interceding with various governmental forums and, simultaneously, informing the American Embassy.

On the individual level, relatives and friends were afraid of being arrested for sheltering loved ones, since they risked prosecution themselves. This was not an idle threat. Those caught inside Hungary were either deported back to Galicia, shipped to internment camps, or, in rare instances, were ordered to report weekly to the gendarmerie. In a twisted logic, a family that was able to return in 1942 was sentenced to prison for the crime of “illegal border crossing.” Consequently, they were interned for a year. In another instance, the consequences were more lethal. A father, who refused to divulge where the rest of his family was hiding, was beaten so savagely by two gendarmes that he died soon after his release from the internment camp. Some returnees were interned and consequently expelled again to Galicia. A survivor testified during Pásztóy’s trial that “we were able to return in the summer of 1942. Following the advice of the Hungarian-Jewish National Aid Action (Országos Magyar Zsidó Segítő Akció, OMZSA) we reported to the police upon which we were interned immediately. While my mother and I were freed, my father and brother . . . were transferred in September 1942 to Poland [Galicia] again, from where they have never returned.”

No one dared to talk openly about the horrors they witnessed and experienced due to an ever-present network of informers. László Zobel, upon his return to Budapest, was denounced to the police by the janitor of his apartment complex almost immediately. Following his arrest, he was sent to an internment camp. Everyone was intimidated into silence. Even the representatives of the Jewish communal organizations, not able to initially comprehend the gravity of the situation, tacitly acquiesced to the governmental directives for the deportation. A rousing homily, delivered by a representative of OMZSA, was seared in Zobel’s memory. As the despairing detainees lined up to board the waiting military trucks for the transfer from Körösmező to Galicia, he exhorted them “to build a new life in your new homeland with ample of opportunities while remembering with pride and gratitude that you lived in Hungary.”

In this light, the silence seems sinister. The survivors who filtered back tried to share their stories of horror, but they were rebuffed by the Jewish communal organizations and the community at large. The words of a survivor that “nobody wanted to believe us” are typical in reconstructing the survivors’ post-Galician life. Neither relatives nor the
The role of the Hungarian occupational authorities and German military and civil administrations in the occupied territories confounds any preconceived assumptions about the Hungarian deportation. One might assume that the entire German military, security, and civilian apparatus was bent on the destruction of the refugees. Additionally, one could entertain hope that the Hungarians were engaged in saving their compatriots, but the situation on the ground was more complex. The German authorities, from self-interest, often made genuine efforts to repatriate the Hungarian Jews in 1941—even giving them travel assistance on German military vehicles.

Hungarian authorities, meanwhile, were equally adamant about returning those who were caught on the border to certain death. Travel documents, the highly valued Passierschein, signed by military authorities and district commissioners (Landkomisar and Kreishauptmann), were clear testimony that not every German was a murderer. German border posts in Galicia and the General Government sent frantic requests from Krakow and Lwów to Berlin requesting intercession with the Hungarian government.
for the cessation of the deportation and return of those deported. A memorandum sent directly to Berlin claimed that 20,000 Hungarian Jews had crossed the border at Jablonica Pass and another 17,000 were waiting along the Hungarian side of the border. While this number is an exaggeration, highly inflated, the panic of the official was real. And, to add to the absurdity of the situation, Hungarian officials stubbornly protested this assistance given by German authorities to the returnees. They spared no efforts to intercept the few who attempted to recross the border to send them back to their death. The diary of a Galician doctor recorded that “325 Jews [Hungarian] reached Kosów on the eve of Rosh Hashanah in 1941 [September 21]. . . . The Hungarian Jews spent a short time with us. Then, at the demand of the German border guard in Zabie, we arranged to have the Jews returned to Hungary.” The Jewish community bribed the Germans to facilitate their escape: “Some of the Jews managed to cross the river, others were apprehended by the Hungarians and sent back to us. Unfortunately, we have evidence that the returned Jews were executed soon thereafter.”

In the middle of the carnage of Kamenets-Podolsk, a surprising document that instructs a mother and son to proceed to the border with military transportation shows the willingness of German officers to save Hungarian refugees. The order was signed by Lieutenant Colonel Meiler, the German military commandant of Kamenets-Podolsk, on August 29, 1941. At almost the same time, Meiler signed travel documents jointly with his Hungarian counterpart, Major László Darnay, for eighteen people, including the already mentioned Fein family. This points to a perplexing contradiction. While the chief executioner in Kamenets-Podolsk, Friedrich Jeckeln, moved with murderous zeal to perpetrate genocide, there were many German administrators in the conquered territories who gave transfer documents and transportation to the Hungarian border.

In retrospect, it is hard to reconcile the contradictions within the Hungarian Army toward Ukrainian abuses and the German killing operation. There were serious German concerns, for example, that Hungarian forces, including the 16th Bicycle Battalion stationed in Kamenets-Podolsk, would intervene in the massacre of Hungarian Jews. Unfortunately, they opted to sit on the sideline and even participated in the collection of the Jews. Yet the Hungarian commander sheltered a Jewish family. To save them, he gave travel papers to an entire group to the border, which included Albert Fein’s family and a dozen more Hungarian Jews. They requested permission from the Hungarian commander to travel back to Hungary as Christians, and the Hungarian commandant, he had a family—a Jewish family. This means a wife with two sons. Her husband was a wrestler champion in Budapest. This was his friend—the general’s. He was not a general, he was a colonel. So, he says, “Okay, I know you are Christians and I’ll make out everybody—I make for you papers,” and he made papers. Only the problem was
why he made those papers? He wants those—this lady with the two sons to send out in a group. . . you can’t get through if the Germans does not permit us. So we have to make sure that the Germans put stamp on it, you know?  

We don’t know the identity or the fate of the mother with the two sons, but her chances of crossing the border were grim indeed. Albert Fein remembered that upon arriving at the border, the Hungarian guards brusquely shipped them back to Kolomea—despite the German and Hungarian commandants’ document stating that they were Christians and as such given the permission to return to Hungary.

Two interesting factors stand out in this testimony. The immediate one is that the Hungarian commandant had no authority without his German counterpart’s signature to release and dispatch the family from Kamenets-Podolsk. The second factor was that they had to declare that they were Christians. As a further contradiction, the commandant of Kamenets-Podolsk, Meiler, was responsible for the establishment of the ghetto, yet he vehemently objected to the massacre. A survivor recounted how his staff saved a group of sixty young Hungarian Jewish workers, among them this survivor, locking them in his headquarters during the mass execution in the end of August. Meiler pointedly refused to participate in or attend the three-day slaughter. Another survivor remembered how common Wehrmacht soldiers were shocked and stunned by the massacre: “they have never seen such a thing.”

This confirms the often-mentioned paradox that the attitudes toward extermination were nuanced within the German military, and sometimes even in the Gestapo, which alerted and occasionally protected its Jewish workforce before an impending aktion in the ghettos. While we know that the German Army aided and abetted the extermination, it sometimes represented the “human” face of genocide: in these small and rather insulated “work communities,” contact with the people whose fate depended on the authorities' sympathy, rage, kindness, or cruelty was frequent, close, and occasionally ambivalent. SS Police Leader Fritz Katzmann, the butcher of Galicia, bitterly complained that “the Wehrmacht authorities in particular aided the Jewish parasites by issuing special certificates without proper control.”

Hungarian policies during the war years, both governmental and military, and their approach to the Jews in Galicia as well as to the deportees, was also rife with contradictions. As indicated earlier, the officers on the Hungarian general staff were staunchly pro-Nazi and rapturously anti-Semitic. Chief of Staff Henrik Werth’s successor, Colonel General Ferenc Szombathelyi, stated about the general staff: “[it] was Nazi-oriented to its core in its political outlook. . . . High ranking officers and generals around me were in every respect pro-Germans.” There were also repeated instances in which Hungarian troops on the ground, especially the field gendarmes, robbed the deportees upon delivering them to Galicia. The same can be said for their behavior toward the
Ukrainian population. The officer corps and the common soldiery, on the other hand, were much more sympathetic to the plight of the deportees and local Jewry. The six weeks of Hungarian rule over a large area of south and east Galicia provided a sense of security for local Jewish communities against the ferocious anti-Jewish sentiments and violence of the local population. This was in direct opposition to German policies that encouraged the local population to vent their simmering resentment and frustration by launching violent anti-Jewish pogroms all across eastern Ukraine.

Native Jews, remembering nostalgically the benign Habsburg period, viewed the entrance of the Hungarian soldiers with relief, often turning to them for protection against the marauding Ukrainian militias. A young boy’s recollection could sum up the general view of the difference between the Germans and the Hungarians: “On the night of July 2nd, the Hungarians entered the town [Tluste]. By the morning they robbed many of the Jewish homes but did not kill.” Indeed, Hungarian soldiers routinely entered Jewish homes and confiscated various items with the full permissions of their officers.55

A more idyllic view of the occupation from Kolomea, the headquarters of the Royal Hungarian Army, remembered by a Galician survivor who recalled a peaceful moment of the Hungarian occupation: “one beautiful summer evening, soldiers and officers were sitting on the lawn around bonfires. . . . One soldier picked up a violin and began to play a hauntingly sad melody, The Last Letter [Utolsó Levél]. . . . From the balcony where I was standing, I could see men crying. Tears began to run down my own cheeks.”56

Overall, the Hungarian occupation was a tense calm before the storm—at least in comparison with subsequent Nazi conduct. This was an uneasy military alliance because Hungarian policies at the local levels often led to confrontations with German military personnel, both on a personal and organizational level. On the one hand, Hungarian troops were the first ones to introduce, immediately after entering a town, arm bands for Jews: “ALL JEWISH MEN AND JEWISH WOMEN, anyone over the age of 12 must wear a 10 cm wide bright yellow ribbon on the right arm and on their outer clothing in the streets, roads and public places.” It was accompanied by officially sanctioned plunder of Jewish homes that included food supplies, radios, and anything valuable.” On the other hand, the Hungarians did not tolerate unbridled violence against the Jewish communities. The German operational reports reflect this as they filtered back not only to the Nazi military headquarters in Berlin, but also reaching the German Foreign Office. First, the behavior of the Hungarian troops created a conflict: “Hungarians confiscated all food, so that the cities of Kolomea and Stanislawów, as well as the Dolina mountain district, will soon face famine, even according to Hungarian information. In Kolomea it was found that Hungarian soldiers were breaking into shops and plundering.” What was more grievous is that these reports depicted the Hungarians as “pro-Jewish.”
On July 15, 1941, for example, the same report to Berlin clearly pointed a finger at the Hungarian military, which “intervened immediately” if “actions against the Jews were carried out by the militia [Ukrainian].” This might have been the result of a visit by a Ukrainian delegation from Zablotow to “the German command in Lemberg (Lwów) demanding the expulsion of the Hungarians who befriended the Poles and the Jews.”

One flashpoint was the influx of thousands of Hungarian Jews into Galicia who were relocated over a six-to-eight-week period by the Hungarians themselves. Although a German Operational Situation Report from August 25, 1941, clearly indicates that there were some negotiations between the two sides, these were purely for the repatriation of the Jews. A Hungarian missive, dated two months later, indirectly reconfirmed that deported Jews who were able to return to Hungary could not be handed across the border again, but should be interned in Hungarian camps. This agreement, however, was never fully implemented, and in reality, Hungarian authorities continued to expel refugees—months or even a year after they successfully returned from Galicia. Thus, the deportation itself was neither coordinated with nor approved by either the German military establishment or the political leadership in occupied Ukraine. The simultaneous expulsion of Romanian Jews in the Southern sector, reaching all the way to Kamenets-Podolsk and further north, complicated German planning even more.

This set the tone for awkward encounters and tense situations between the two allies. As mentioned earlier, simultaneously with the mass murder in Kamenets-Podolsk, an Operational Situation Report noted that “members of the 10th Hungarian Pursuit Battalion have expelled more than 1,000 Hungarian Jews over the Dniester to Galicia. Einsatzgruppe Tarnopol promptly pushed them back.” However, these Jews were not allowed across the border into Hungary. The majority of them ended up in towns close to the Carpathian Mountains, which might have saved their lives—at least for the moment. A Hungarian officer met them in Tatarow, close to the border. On October 1941, he recorded in his diary that “as the Germans found these wandering masses inconvenient, they drove them back to the lines of the Carpathians.”

One of the immediate disagreements between the two militaries concerned Hungarian unwillingness to cooperate directly with the politics of genocide—at least in their sector of occupation. In Zhitomir, for instance, they stopped an action by the Ukrainian militia against the Jews on July 15, 1941. At almost the same time and closer to the Hungarian border, the Hungarian commander, upon the imprisonment of large number of Jews from the small village of Richka, “immediately had the Jews released. In response, the Ukrainians complained to the Germans that the Hungarians were supporting the Jews . . . the upshot was that the Germans replaced the Hungarians with military police of their own.”

Such interference into Ukrainian and even German operations against local Jews did not escape the attention of the German security agencies. An Operation Report dryly
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noted that “the Hungarian army . . . was apparently patronizing the Poles and the Jews . . . the police action launched against the Jews was halted by the Hungarian army.”61 As a matter of principle, Szombathelyi opposed the atrocities against the Jews, and especially Hungarian participation in them. He was convinced that such actions negatively impacted the spirit and morals of the army. Hence, he considered it as his primary task to ensure order in the territory controlled by the Carpathian Group—the occupied territory between the Hungarian border stretching along the Carpathian Mountains and the Dniester River, where military rule was introduced on July 12. 66

A rather telling episode of a curious encounter, or rather conflict between him and a newly arriving Gestapo attachment in Kolomea from Stanislawów, reverberated in contemporary Jewish documents on the diary pages of his staff officers, as well as his own recollections. True to the well-rehearsed modus operandi of newly arriving German security teams, an immediate bloodbath was planned: a distinct “Intelligenz Aktion,” which was orchestrated, most likely, by Hans Krüger himself around mid-July. It aimed to decapitate the Jewish intelligentsia in Kolomea. The SS detachment conspicuously ignored the fact that the headquarters of the Hungarian military in Galicia was located in the town. Szombathelyi cryptically mentioned this affair and his role in saving two hundred Jews from Kolomea “from the hands of the Gestapo, who were to be executed, in spite of the vehement German protestation.”67 This encounter rapidly became the material of legends among the Jews of southern Galicia, inflating the number of those saved even higher. A Hungarian general saved Jews who were in the process of digging their own grave. A contemporary account by a Galician survivor noted that when the Hungarian arrived, “he found the two hundred men, stripped naked, standing before graves they had been forced to dig for themselves . . . after a brief exchange between the SS and the Hungarian commander, one of the German officers turned to the men standing in their graves. ‘All right. Jew-swine, get your clothes on and get out of here.’”68

Two of his staff officers separately recorded this incident—though somewhat differently. In the recollections of his second-in-command, one of the victims’ wives, who spoke French with him, “prostrated herself, embracing and kissing the boots” of this officer and beseeching him to secure the release of the group.69 Upon being informed, Szombathelyi promptly sent another staff officer with an attachment of Hungarian soldiers, in the company of a military judge, in hot pursuit of the Gestapo contingent with the captive Jews. These diary notes confirm the details in a graphic reminder of an impending execution: “The Jews were lying already face down on the ground in groups of four, well covered by thick bushes, 30–40 meters from the road. Their foreheads pressed to the ground, as their hands clasped behind their necks.” The timely and forceful intervention resulted in the release of the Jews who, after digging their own graves, were waiting for the coup de grâce. They returned with the Hungarians to Kolomea. While Szombathelyi’s action can be construed as outright compassion, it might have also been a prestige and control
issue. The notes of his second-in-command betrayed this motive for the Hungarian general was incensed that “the German commandant did not report to him and he had no knowledge of their presence on his territory.” He not only demanded the release of the captive Jews, but ordered the SS “to leave the area since it is under his authority.”

The rescue of a group of Hungarian Jews in the village of Yazlovets from the hands of the Ukrainian militia, as recounted by László Zobel, might have not been motivated by purely humanitarian impulses either. The timely appearance of a Hungarian detachment stopped the execution of the group. This last-minute reprieve was prompted by the concern for the hundreds of corpses carried slowly by the currents of the Dniester River: “The Hungarian troops noticed and saw that masses of corpses were carried downstream by the River Dniester. There was a pontoon bridge resting on wooden pillars in the territory of Usechko, where these corpses got caught and endangered the bridge itself.”

In assessing the Hungarian military’s attitude toward the deportees, it is hard to reconcile the official policy, which was uncompromisingly anti-Semitic, especially from the general staff, with individual rescue attempts by common soldiers and officers who were motivated sometimes by greed but often by compassion. Again, Szombathelyi’s views are enlightening because they betray an ongoing disagreement between himself and the general staff about the magnitude and rationale of the deportation. He sounded the alarm on July 14 about the mass expulsion, its wisdom, and it futility, especially without the establishment of consultative channels with the German military authorities. In his letter to the general staff, Szombathelyi suggested that they should ask the opinion of the Germans “before we begin this ambitious and long-term operation […] lest there should be complications later on.” He saw the passing of control of Galicia to the German forces as inevitable and, based on German responses to this unilateral Hungarian action, his words were prophetic.

As for the soldiers on the ground, the repeated warnings against offering assistance to the refugees indicated that common soldiers served as a main conduit of communication between the expellees trapped in Galicia and their families in Hungary. Soldiers also became involved in rescue work. A court-martial of Dr. Béla Deák, a Hungarian second lieutenant, caught while attempting to smuggle a mother and small child, shows that compassion among the soldiery toward the unfortunate refugees existed. Dated August 29, 1941, their permit carried, again, the official signature of Meiler, and the mother and son were listed as Christians. As arranged by the second lieutenant, they were transported on a Hungarian military vehicle to the border. During a meticulous search by border guards, the pair was discovered. The officer was arrested, and mother and child were expelled again to Galicia. The records of the trial also show that the husband died in Galicia and the expulsion across the border was done despite the mother being pregnant with her second child.

The Jewish forced labor companies attached to the invading Hungarian Army became a vital informational pipeline between the deported and their families in Hungary.
A report to the minister of defense noted that family members requested information about, as well as assistance for, their loved ones from members of the labor battalions stationed in Galicia. In turn, these forced laborers viewed the fate of their unfortunate coreligionists with a mixture of bewilderment and compassion. There were conflicting emotions when Jewish drivers in the Hungarian military, who served as regular soldiers and still could wear uniforms, were ordered to report to the transit camp in Körösmező to transport their fellow Jews to Galicia. In some cases, while these drivers were serving in the military, their families were deported in spite of pleas to spare them.

A Jewish forced labor company that was stationed in Kolomea in 1941–1942 provided both material and psychological support, albeit temporary, to the beleaguered local Jewish community. While the sympathetic company commander closed his eyes, they shared food, supplied medicine, and provided an informational window to the world. The accidental meeting of deported family members and forced draftees was not uncommon. The story of a family dispatched to the transit camp, and the frantic search by their family members who were serving in the military following the deportation train from station to station, just one step behind, is one of the most heartrending episodes of the expulsion. Samuel Gottesman’s sister was also transported to Kamenets-Podolsk while her husband served in the military. The husband’s initial effort to locate her by a Rusyn peasant and to smuggle her back was unsuccessful. Finally, on the second try they were able to bring her back through the Romanian border. After her return, though, she spent several months in hiding while separated from her young child.

This shows that a successful escape was not without consequences. One of the forced laborers, who successfully smuggled back two deportees, was later arrested and court-martialed. A memorandum by the general staff, dated February 18, 1942, clearly blamed Jewish military drivers for the smuggling of refugees across the border back to Hungary. It also implemented preventive measures as well as corresponding penalties for such practices. News of the atrocities filtering back to Hungary often came through these forced laborers and regular soldiers as well.

**BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE: THE RESPONSE OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY**

The Jewish leadership in Budapest was cognizant of the inevitability of a deportation. The question was not *if* but *when* and *how extensive* it would be. Contrary to governmental announcements, there was no discernable emigration from Galicia across the Carpathian Mountains between the two world wars. Rather, by the end of the 1930s, Jews had been arriving primarily from Germany, Austria, Slovakia, and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, because of their “foreign” citizenship ending up in neighboring
countries. It was obvious that in Hungary, there was an uncertain future for these Jews because they could not prove their Hungarian citizenship with the documentation required by the authorities. As for the ever-quoted Galicianer, it remained in the realm of a neurotic fixation, if not a common staple in the Hungarian political discourse, which only became more vocal with the outbreak of the war. The only imponderable question was how comprehensive the expulsion would be. In gearing up for such a prospect, two organizations were set up at the end of the 1930s: MIPI and OMZSA. While MIPI concentrated on the legal issues facing large number of Jews in securing citizenship papers, OMZSA handled humanitarian aid to the rapidly expanding underclass within the Jewish community as a consequence of the Jewish Laws. With the onset of the deportation, though, both organizations were forced to retool and expand the scope of their rescue and relief work. OMZSA’s role rapidly encompassed families of the deported who were left behind, especially the aged and the infirm. Such aid was not limited to the distribution of monetary aid for the elderly, but also finding accommodation and food for those who were unable to work.  

If we can characterize the initial responses from Jewish organizations to the lawlessness and arbitrariness with which the collection and deportation was carried out in the provinces and the consequent rapidly evolving humanitarian disaster, “circumspect” might be the proper word. Their approach to confronting the issue head-on was confounded by an uneasy relationship between the community and the ruling class. The trope of “dual loyalty” is perhaps a mild expression in this context. On the eve of World War II, governmental circles leveled ongoing and open accusations that the long-established and assimilated Jewish community in Hungary “felt more affinity toward the newcomers [Galicianers] than toward their Hungarian compatriots.” By 1941, this accusation of dual, or perhaps outright disloyalty, was entrenched in the common discourse. Even the prime minister at the time, Count Pál Teleki, who was considered staunchly anglophile, wrote that Hungarian Jewry “must choose between Hungary and their co-religionists, who are foreign to us and infiltrated into the country.” One of the unfortunate by-products of the emphasis on differences between the “old” and “Galicianer” Jews was a deepening rift within the Jewish community itself. We cannot find a more poignant example for this split than the comment by Dr. Lajos Láng, a noted Jewish financier, during a heated debate in the upper chamber of the Parliament about further economic restrictions on Hungarian Jews. Representing the assimilated segment of Hungarian Jewry, he rejected the planned anti-Jewish laws by stating that “it stigmatizes us, who have resided in this country for the past three hundred years, speak Hungarian, think Hungarian, and have nothing in common with the so-called eastern—caftan-wearing Jews.”

It would be a mistake to ignore or minimize this anti-Galicianer sentiment, which was reinforced by a divide between the highly assimilated and traditionally religious communities, within the Jewish community itself. Because of this, the expulsion was
accepted initially by official Jewish circles as a necessary evil. The deportation was cloaked in euphemistic terms, such as resettlement and repatriation. The return of stateless Jews to their “homeland” and the refrain of secure employment and housing was aimed to blunt any Jewish communal or international protest. Thus, it was tacitly accepted. The responses by the two leading Jewish organizations reflected this governmental line by terming the expulsion in official Jewish documents as “resettlement,” “removal,” and “repatriation,” or the “return of the foreign Jews to their birthplace.”

Jewish officials felt reassured that it would be conducted lawfully, in a well-organized manner. Their official pronouncements were cautious and muted due to a concern that a confrontational approach could hamper their effectiveness in moderating governmental policies. The key word here was “moderating,” because there were also Jewish circles who, if not supportive, nevertheless acquiesced to the relocation of the “stateless” Jews. How this translated on the street level can be found in the recollections of Natan Blum, a rabbinical student. After escaping from a horror-filled time in Galicia, including a stint in a slave labor camp, he was arrested again and confined in the central internment center in Budapest. Sharing a cell with a fellow prisoner, he was astounded to hear his Jewish cellmate, who was in the same predicament, openly advocating for his expulsion with the rationale that he was not a true Hungarian. Blum, on the other hand, incredulously posed the question: “How can a Jew do this to another Jew?”

The tone of the Jewish leadership rapidly changed after the dramatic reports from the field offices in the provinces filtered back to Budapest. The list of blatant abuses was a long one, and damning. The reports described the law-breaking by provincial authorities as they collected and transported Jews regardless of the guidelines from Budapest. During the court proceedings after the war, it came to light the pressure the Jewish community, individual and collective, exerted on the main architects of the deportation. Among the officials, Siménfalvy and Pásztóy were specially targeted and repeatedly visited by Baroness Edith Weiss and other prominent leaders of MIPI. A particularly acrimonious meeting between Pásztóy and Margit Slachta, alluded to in a letter to Edith Weiss after the war, left a lasting negative impression on Slachta. They were joined by Károly Rassay and Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky, politicians from the opposition in the Hungarian Parliament who also approached Keresztes-Fischer personally.

One of the most influential and vocal figures within the Jewish community, Samu Stern, also directly approached the minister of interior less than a week into the deportation, on July 17, with information about the lawlessness in arresting and dispatching the Jews to the eastern provinces. A successful businessman, holding the honorific title of Hungarian Royal Court Councilor, he had access to the highest levels of conservative aristocratic circles. He noted that the arbitrary policies in “Carpathian Ruthenia and eastern Hungary . . . expanded to Jewish individuals who, on the one hand, should not
fall legally under expulsion procedures, and, the other, who were called upon to prove their citizenship or expanded to those that have clearly proven their citizenship.” One of the sore points in this narrative, as Stern pointed out, was the deliberate attempt by the authorities in Budapest, without naming KEOKH, to slow down the review and approval of citizenship applications for thousands of individuals. He summed up his meeting with the minister by requesting a waiver from expulsion for those who are “neither from Poland nor Russia . . . and especially for the ones whose Hungarian citizenship is verified, or is being verified, or is pending.” However, he did not challenge the basic rationale for the expulsion.

The caveat of all these meetings was not that the deportation should be stopped, but only the collection of those that possessed Hungarian citizenship papers or were in the process of obtaining them. Furthermore, the deportation of large numbers of family members who served in labor companies within the Hungarian military was nowhere mentioned. In private meetings, though, this issue was brought up, as we learn from the postwar trial of Pásztóy. In his testimony during the trial, György Polgár, the head of MIPI, indicated that his primary grievance about the accused was that the wives of servicemen in the labor battalions and foreign-born women married to men holding Hungarian citizenship had been also taken away. What neither of these Jewish leaders, or anyone else for that matter, addressed was the deportation of spouses, mainly husbands, from mixed marriages in which the Christian spouse held Hungarian citizenship. At least in Budapest, the Christian spouse children had the option to remain. As in the case of Samu, one could stay or follow their Jewish partner into exile voluntarily.

During the next several weeks, a further and perceptible shift in the Jewish approach toward the deportation became more pronounced. It was prompted by frightening reports now filtering back from Galicia. By early August, the stream of information about the dire economic plight of the deportees and the hellish atrocities committed by Ukrainian irregular forces in the occupied territories moved the Jewish leadership to a more proactive stance. It evolved from protesting the abuses, especially in the provinces, to asking for the outright cessation of the deportations, and from assisting in identifying individuals with Hungarian citizenship at the ramp in Kőrösmező to channeling financial support to the remnants of Hungarian refugees in Galicia.

A report from Galicia on July 23 informed Budapest that “the Ukrainian population already protests the arrival and settlement of the deported Jews. In many places they expelled them brutally from the villages so that they had to find refuge in the forests. . . . In some places actual pogroms have started.” These graphic descriptions of the horrors taking place across the border were disseminated to various governmental entities as well as international channels; however, frantic appeals came also from other Jewish and non-Jewish sources. Slachta has been mentioned already relating to her unstinting efforts to stop the deportation, both on moral and religious grounds. Because of her
contacts in the ruling circles, her often quoted report also reached the highest echelons of the Hungarian government as well as international organizations. Her unflinching prose, describing in hellish detail the conditions in Carpathian Ruthenia in general and the transit camp in Körösmező in particular, was also brought to the attention of the Jewish leadership, the Hungarian Red Cross, and later the International Red Cross, which suddenly realized that something had gone dramatically wrong.

Such evolution in Jewish thinking can be best understood by reviewing the actions MIPI took during and after the deportation. On July 27, 1941, the organization forwarded a circular requesting information about deported individuals who “possessed Hungarian citizenship,” were above the age of seventy, or were seriously ill and “wrongfully removed.” This aimed to eliminate the abuses taking place in collecting the Jews for deportation. A week later, on September 2, 1941, they became more proactive. Three regional representatives of MIPI from Carpathian Ruthenia approached Kozma with a set of grievances pertaining partly to the obstacles officials willfully placed on handling or forwarding citizenship applications and the arbitrary withholding of official assistance for crucial documents related to such applications. This was, of course, within the purview of the government commissioner to handle. The two additional points, however, dealt with the desperate situation across the border, which was not a provincial issue anymore. The petitioners rather boldly appealed to the government commissioner for the return of Hungarian citizens who were unlawfully thrust across the border. As for the rest of the refugees, the representatives were looking for permission to supply “doctors, medicine, and extend humanitarian aid.” Kozma’s response, burying the request in official obfuscation, was predictable. He instructed the three to submit an application that should be directed to the Ministry of Interior but transferred via his office.

After the intelligence about the bloodbaths sweeping across Galicia in October, and with the knowledge of Kamenets-Podolsk that had been wiped out almost completely of the Hungarian exile communities and their Galician coreligionists, the Jewish leadership in Budapest changed tactics again. While they still toed the official line in labeling the transported Jews as evacuees, in reality the proper term should have been “survivors.” By November of 1941, they aimed to directly address the plight of these scattered individuals or families who might still be alive—with or without citizenship. Now the time came to fight for the remnants. A circular from November 9, 1941, solicited from the families of the exiles information about the “exact address at present of the ‘evacuees’ who have been known to you at the time of this letter’s arrival.” In this case, the aim was to identify and extend financial aid to all refugees across the region. In a surprising twist, MIPI, with the help of the Hungarian Red Cross, and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) succeeded to convince the ruling circles to allow the actual transfer of letters, packages, and money to the refugees if they could be located. Thus, on a follow-up circular, on November 17, MIPI informed its regional offices across
the country that “as a result of our lengthy efforts, we succeeded to move the directorate of the National Bank of Hungary to approve the transfer of M. 30 [thirty marks/ to our co-religionists that were ’relocated’ to Eastern Galicia.”

This hard-fought humanitarian transfer system became operational, though on a very limited scale, in the latter part of 1941. Part of the problem was the dramatically reduced number of survivors who were saved from the periodical bloodbaths, conducted either by Ukrainian irregulars or by German killing squads all across the region. By mid-November, the estimated Hungarian “diaspora” could not have been more than several thousand people, at best, dispersed and intermingled with the local population in various ghettos. Another problem was the lines of communication, which were intermittent between the deportees and their family members back in Hungary. While a letter, dated on November 13, 1941, indicated that postal service, though heavily censored, between Galicia and Budapest began to function, the main conduit between the refugees and their family members in Hungary remained soldiers and forced laborers, who were banned explicitly to do so by military authorities. A testimony by a woman from Budapest, with two children and a husband, described how she was able to exchange letters with her parents, conveying their plight, in the spring of 1942. To her surprise, her parents informed her that “they received permission from the Hungarian authorities for the transfer of 40 zlotys [Polish currency] per month.”

Just how effective this new initiative was in saving lives in Galicia is at best an open question. By that time, as noted, the deportees still alive were so dispersed and so few in number that locating them was beyond the capabilities of MIPI. In any case, the transfer of this monthly stipend was suspended after a few months, and while it was a lifesaver for this woman and her family, the fate of the other Hungarian refugees, as she summed it up, was grim: “they died one after another from hunger.”

Based on communication to and from the Hungarian Red Cross, one may assume that this organization actively supported these humanitarian efforts. While its archives were destroyed during the 1956 revolution, two extant letters requesting its intercession on behalf of the refugees, both in the transit camp and over the border in Galicia, testify to an ongoing cooperation. We know that as early as July 31, MIPI directly approached the organization, encouraged by Baroness Edith Weiss, to extend humanitarian aid to the deportees. Among the list of urgent issues in the transit camp was “health and social care.” For those over the border, the list was more expansive, encompassing food and nutritional support, health services, communication, transfer of money, and delivery of care packages.

This communication came on the heels of Slachta’s appeal to one of the influential leaders of the Hungarian Red Cross, Countess József(né) Károlyi, who was also a member of the committee dealing with Polish refugees. While cloaked in deferential language so characteristic to a status-conscious society such as Hungary at the time,
Slachta did not mince words. She requested the countess’ direct participation in the rescue of Hungarian citizens being removed to Galicia and a more humane approach toward those who by law could be deported. Again, Edith Weiss’ name is mentioned in this context. Slachta did not fail to remind the countess of the responsibility of two organizations in this task: the Hungarian Red Cross and the Hungarian-Polish Refugee Committee.\textsuperscript{96}

However, neither MIPI nor the Hungarian Red Cross were effective in moving the military authorities controlling Galicia, which were not impressed by such humanitarian concerns and considerations—neither in the transit camp nor in Galicia. As late as January 1942, the Hungarian general staff still threatened soldiers and forced labor men with court-martial for even delivering a letter.\textsuperscript{97} The fact that MIPI was able to send monetary support, as short a period as it was, to a selected few was a veritable achievement. Otherwise, with Galicia being a military zone, civilian authorities were rendered powerless. A communication from the US State Department to the headquarters of the JDC in New York on September 26, 1941, summed up well the powerlessness of the Hungarian Red Cross: “The efforts of the Hungarian Red Cross to alleviate the situation have been quite ineffective. We believe that the situation should be made known to the International Red Cross and other groups.”\textsuperscript{98}

Thanks to Margit Slachta, Edith Weiss, and Erzsébet Szapáry, though, that was not the last word. By early December 1941, the International Red Cross in Geneva was informed about the dire situation of the survivors and, consequently, took up the issue of the Galician deportation and the potential support, if not salvation, of the remnants.

\textbf{THE INTERNATIONAL DIMENSIONS}

In a meeting with the representative of the International Red Cross, an emissary from the Hungarian Red Cross Mary Dobrzensky presented a confidential report on or around December 3, 1941. In the discussion, the number of refugees was appraised at “about 17,500.” In order to send “relief supplies to these deportees,” the Hungarian Red Cross requested the assistance of the international organization to obtain “prior authorization from the German authorities.” In addition, the Hungarians intimated that such a mission should be headed by a representative of the International Red Cross and accompanied by a Hungarian “adjunct delegate.” Finally, Dobrzensky emphasized the necessity of obtaining “lists of names of deportees with their addresses, in order to be able to send news to their parents in Hungary.” In appealing for international involvement, the Hungarians understood that the government in Budapest would be more amenable to humanitarian involvement if the International Red Cross headed the efforts. Consequently, and reflecting on the urgency of her request, her appeal was referred to
the Coordinating Committee for prompt action. Unfortunately, the response within two days was not favorable. The International Red Cross demurred, perhaps justifiably, from getting involved. They defended this inaction with the fact, as they stated in their official reply, that “Galicia, being a war-zone, where they have neither jurisdiction nor power to intervene. It’s beyond the organization’s mandate.” In addition, the rationale for rejecting participation in the support and rescue activities was based on the enormity of the task at hand in the first place and “he [president of IRC] would hesitate to give the impression that we can do something. On the other hand, Hungary is the ally of Germany. It would have been easier for her to obtain something [permission] from the Germans than we could.”

The Hungarian efforts did not stop there. On December 14, 1941, a confidential letter from Budapest specifically requested the intercession of one of the influential leaders of the International Red Cross, Dr. Professor C. J. Burckhard, for the support and rescue of the survivors. While the initiator of the four-page plea was Sarolta Lukács, the vice president of the Hungarian Red Cross, the fingerprints of Slachta were all over the document. The deeply passionate appeal was based on the report that was penned by her and the delegation that had visited Carpathian Ruthenia and Kőrösméző four months earlier. Among the issues that the letter emphasized was the need “to send food-stuff, warm clothes, medications and the help of doctors to the deportees who currently lack everything,” and “to go on site and make exact lists of the deportees and provide them with news from the family members from whom they are separated.” This request and urgent plea unequivocally noted that the initiative needed to come from Geneva, because it was impossible to act alone from Budapest. If the initiative came from Geneva, the Hungarian Red Cross could join in. Lukács had already appointed a delegate, “Miss Hanna de Végh, who is well informed on the issue as she has worked for the Red Cross specifically on the question of Jewish deportees.” Unfortunately, no extant reply can be found in the archives in Geneva. However, one of the ominous comments in the letter is a request to keep all the names of the central actors confidential, for there would be potential retribution and “persecution” in the event of a regime change in Hungary. The writer concludes with a final plea: “I truly hope that some help can be provided to the poor deportees who are victims of the worst tortures and whose situation reminds us that it is our Christian duty and simple humanity to intervene.” The letter came from the crème de la crème of Hungarian aristocracy, yet considering that by that time Slachta had been placed under “discreet surveillance” by police authorities, their concern for potential retribution if an extreme right-wing political party would come to power was a justified one.

The “internationalization” of information about the deportation did not start with the impassioned appeals to Geneva by the Hungarian Red Cross. The complex role that the JDC played, in partnership with MIPI, from the earliest stages of the expulsion
introduced a new dimension to the saga of the 1941 deportation. It was a partnership that started in the late 1930s for extending assistance to thousands of people who needed citizenship papers. It rapidly evolved into providing badly needed humanitarian and financial support for the beleaguered Jewish community in Budapest and the provinces. Finally, it aimed to reach across the border to save the remnants of the Hungarian exiles.

Transcending the humanitarian domain, in the dissemination of vital information and stopping the ongoing atrocities, MIPI aimed to reach two somewhat opposing entities. As we have seen, they made contacts directly and indirectly with various governmental agencies and, especially, with the minister of interior. It was, however, a delicate balancing act. After initial hesitation, the various communal organizations within the Jewish establishment took the initiative of forwarding information emanating from the provinces, mostly from Carpathian Ruthenia, where the most egregious arbitrariness and disregard of governmental directives took place. Consequently, they also supplied firsthand reports on the shocking atrocities against the wandering expellees in the occupied territories.

Equally important was the informational channel that Jewish organizations had established through the JDC with the American Embassy in Budapest and the US State Department in Washington, DC. While the reports to the US State Department were covert, the information provided to Ambassador Pell was aimed to promote an American intervention on the ground. Thanks to this stream of reliable and timely intelligence, the Americans were well acquainted with the Hungarian actions. Working in tandem in the dissemination of intelligence about the situation within Hungary and in Galicia, MIPI and the JDC also had aimed to save the deportees and simultaneously aid their relatives.

If we can reconstruct this information flow, the reports from regional offices in the periphery kept pouring into the offices of MIPI about the conditions under which the collection and expulsion were conducted. On the other hand, military officers and forced labor battalions serving in the territories across the Carpathian Mountains supplied timely information about the appalling circumstances that the deportees were thrust into. Despite strict military censorship, information also poured back about the string of murders committed by Ukrainian irregulars and German murder squads. This knowledge was detailed, time-sensitive, and highly accurate. For example, a report about the Kamenets-Podolsk massacre was dated on August 30, 1941, a day after the conclusion of this infamous mass murder. It also well gauged the number of Hungarian victims. This up-to-date intelligence, straight from the murder sites, was transferred to the branch office of the JDC in Budapest, via MIPI, which collected and summarized it. It’s reasonable to assume that MIPI was walking a delicate line not to being accused of any anti-Hungarian activities.
In turn, the JDC representatives in Budapest, Joseph Blum, C. W. J. Newcomb, and later S. Bertrand Jacobson, can be credited with transferring this information to the attention of Pell. Simultaneously, telegrams were sent to Washington, DC, to the US State Department (Division of European Affairs) with the request to forward them to the attention of the JDC leadership in New York. In turn, Paul T. Culbertson, the assistant chief of the Division of European Affairs at the State Department, forwarded a “paraphrased” version of all telegrams to the JDC’s headquarters in New York. This last request, however, was somewhat redundant, because New York was well informed about the chain of events in Budapest and Galicia, and made all efforts to respond accordingly. Ultimately, these reports were also brought to the attention of the American Secretary of State Cordell Hull.

Interestingly, JDC representatives did not communicate directly with their European leadership in Lisbon and its head, Morris C. Troper. He was updated on the situation from New York. The reports to Washington about the situation in Hungary and the occupied territories are grim in describing the abuses in the deportation process and the desperate situation of the deportees in Galicia. They urge the JDC to establish “food kitchens, housing, and medical facilities.” One repeating motif is “to intercede with all possible authorities including Hungarian representatives in the United States and enlist public opinion.” A follow-up communication from August 1, 1941, points out that “it is supremely important that you publicize the situation and bring pressure to bear on the Hungarian Government with a view of stopping further deportation.” A week later, the communication advised the JDC to “enlist Hungarian personalities in the United States” who could influence Hungarian authorities.102

A second informational channel was with the American Embassy in Budapest and the Ambassador Pell. During Pell’s tenure in the Hungarian capital, the American legation became the focal point of anti-German sentiments, especially for the strongly anglophile aristocracy, after the departure of the British envoy from Budapest.103 The American Embassy staff in Budapest was well informed about the events taking place across Hungary, and especially the collection and cross-border transportation of Jews to Galicia. The atrocities committed there by Ukrainian paramilitary gangs and the systematic annihilation of the Hungarian Jews by SS attachments did not escape their attention either. The ambassador was privy to this intelligence.

During his short tenure from February 11, 1941, until January 16, 1942, the ambassador distinguished himself among American diplomats with a broad intellectual horizon and a deep knowledge of Hungarian history, including the peculiarity of the Hungarian situation in Central Europe, and the inherent inconsistencies in Hungarian–German relations. Yet he was a man of his time, with all its biases, prejudices, and subtle anti-Semitism. His anti-Semitism was not rooted in racial ideas, but more of an upper-class exclusivity, as he came from the wealthy and conservative class.
Yet he was also an internationalist and progressive within the confines of his social class. He recognized early the danger of Nazism and was the leading American proponent of fostering an awareness of the plight of European Jews in the 1930s and 1940s. During his short stint in Budapest, he gained firsthand knowledge of the anti-Semitic policies and the consequent wave of deportations in 1941.  

Pell’s sources included the confidential reports from the JDC; however, he was well informed about the deportation from other reliable sources earlier—already at the commencement of the deportation. One of the leaders of the Hungarian-Polish Refugee Committee, who accompanied Slachta to Kőrösimetző, Countess Erzsébet Szapáry informed him on July 17 that the Hungarian government had been deporting Polish Jews to the territory occupied from the Soviet Union for almost a week. In addition, the American military attaché, who maintained close contacts with Hungarian military officers, was able to tap into corresponding confidential information about the ongoing disaster in Galicia.

In turn, the ambassador wasted no time in informing Secretary of State Cordell Hull about the “transfer [of a] large number of Polish Jews now in Hungary to an area in Galicia now occupied by Hungarian troops.” The US State Department thus had immediate knowledge of the mass relocation. By late July, the ambassador was able to fine-tune this information by noting that the group of expellees included Hungarian citizens and refugees from Western Europe.

Concurrently with his communication with Washington, Pell personally delivered a diplomatic missive on July 24, 1941, to László Bárdossy, the prime minister. The
lengthy, five-page memorandum shared the American envoy’s concerns with the prime minister about the atrocities taking place in Carpathian Ruthenia and adjacent areas, the situation in Galicia, and policies that contravened international conventions, like deporting international refugees holding Nansen passports. The memorandum was significant because it introduced an international dimension in this human and political drama, and created a direct line of communication between the two relating to the deportation. Bárdossy replied on August 2, reassuring Pell that the “expulsion-decree . . . is exclusively applied to Jews of Galician origin . . . all measures have been taken for supplying them during their transport.” He added that those who were ill or over seventy years of age were “excluded from expulsion.” His reply concludes with a reassurance that “a strict order has been given to all competent authorities to strictly respect the expulsion-decree and carefully avoid anything that would be in contradiction with its principles.”

In retrospect, it seems that the prime minister was either misinformed or just an incompetent liar, because by that time similar reports from MIPI and other sources had reached the desk of Keresztes-Fischer. Even Pell was skeptical about the prime minister’s reply. In his communication with the State Department on August 7, he opined that the reply “puts the case for the Hungarian government in an unduly favorable light.”

The American ambassador’s protest, though, might have had an unexpected effect on Keresztes-Fischer’s decree, which limited the scope of the deportation to Polish and Russian Jews. It was issued by KEOKH on July 30. The ambassador’s reports, sent directly to the attention of the secretary of state made those in Washington rethink Hungarian policies. In a highly confidential missive, dated on August 13, 1941, the Royal Hungarian Embassy informed the prime minister about a rather frosty meeting with high-level State Department officials, who were, in the words of the Hungarian diplomats, “unfavorably informed by the American ambassador.” During the discussions, one of the American representatives didn’t mince words in bringing to the attention of the embassy that the Hungarian actions relating to the deportation were not well received by the America public. He added that this might have an impact on the two countries’ relations: “the expulsion of the Jews produced a negative impression in America . . . any Hungarian political decisions will be judged and the Hungarian American relations assessed, whether these actions were taken independently by the Hungarian government or forced by circumstances beyond its control.”

The sole objecting “diplomatic” voice was Pell’s, and it provided an international dimension to the conduct of the deportation and its eventual suspension. His role in pressuring the Hungarians for the cessation of the deportation cannot be underestimated. Interestingly enough, his German counterpart in Budapest, Dietrich von Jagow, followed the activities in the American legation with open suspicions—even resorting to spying. The American diplomat, though, didn’t hold back his forceful protestation in
his dialogue with the prime minister, which caught the attention of Bárdossy, forcing him to issue a revised directive as to who should be included in the expulsion.

The US State Department recommendation that “we are firmly convinced that Hungarian authorities would be influenced by American public opinion” was a wakeup call for the JDC in enlisting the media. The calls in every dispatch for increasing the American public awareness about the tragedy taking place in the Hungarian provinces and the mass murders in Galicia, and, consequently, exerting pressure on the government in Budapest, finally resulted in a host of revealing articles overseas. The Hungarian newspapers limited their coverage to reporting small episodes during the ongoing collection of the Jews. For example, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency noted on July 22, 1941, that “Budapest Radio today announced that 500 Jews ‘mostly of Eastern origin’ were arrested during a large scale police roundup.” What happened after the arrest and expulsion remained unreported. Indeed, the daily news bulletin by the JTA became the main source of accurate news stories from Nazi Europe and especially regarding the murders in Galicia. In utilizing the testimonies by Hungarian officers directly from the trenches, they provided an accurate picture of the mass extermination of both Hungarian and Galician Jews taking place there.\footnote{120}

The Jewish press in America, on the other hand, became a channel through which the whole scope of the unfolding Holocaust became common knowledge in Jewish circles. By late October, reports from the killing fields, disseminated by the JTA, became front-page news in the Jewish press in New York and London. Through headlines in the Yiddish, English, and even Hungarian news outlets in New York, from late October, such as “Jews Dragged from Hospitals in Hungary for Deportation to Nazi-Held Galicia,” “Thousands of Corpses in River Dniester,” “Slaying of Jews in Galicia Depicted,” the extermination of Hungarian Jews became widely known. While in Budapest the Kamenets-Podolsk massacre was discussed in hushed tones, often not believed, in New York, exact numbers of the victims and details of their murder were openly quoted.\footnote{121}

How much of this public information campaign changed the chain of events in Budapest or Galicia? It is at best an enigma. By the time these articles hit the streets of New York, the mass expulsions had stopped, and the murders in Kamenets-Podolsk, Stanisławów, Nadwórna, and elsewhere in Galicia had become a painful reminder of a failed Hungarian policy. For the halting of the deportation, Pell’s role, from an American perspective, was more crucial. After the declaration of war by Hungary against the United States, the JDC played a limited role. Bertrand S. Jacobson returned to the United States with the rest of the American diplomats after Pearl Harbor and the declaration of war by Hungary. In New York, he was finally able to speak freely. In a press conference in New York City on March 13, 1942, he described in graphic details the mass murders taking place in Russia. On March 15, 1941, the JTA published an
excerpt from this press conference by Jacobson. Blum, not being an American citizen, was able to continue as the director of the JDC in Budapest until the summer of 1944, when he was incarcerated in Bergen-Belsen.112

THREE UNCONVENTIONAL Saviors

Individual efforts inside Hungary to alter the chain of events during and after the deportation were equally important. Among the leading personalities, which included parliamentarians from the opposition parties, concerned church leaders, and leading politicians, the human tragedies of the deportation brought together an unlikely alliance of three exceptional women—Margit Slachta, Baroness Edith Weiss, and Countess Erzsébet Szapáry. They were willing to challenge the political, social, and moral status quo in a conservative society to stop the deportation, extend humanitarian assistance to the expellees, and help their family members who remained destitute inside Hungary.

Although they came from a diverse social, economic, and religious universe, they were well equipped to step into an arena where many of their contemporaries were afraid to go. They also represented three different organizations and constituencies, yet their role and mission intertwined. All three had direct access to the highest levels of Hungarian governmental circles and members of influential organizations such as the Hungarian Red Cross, the Hungarian-Polish Refugee Committee, and MIPI.

Fig 7.4 Head of the Order of the Sisters of Social Service Margit Slachta, parliamentarian, politician, and rescuer. Named as Righteous Among the Nations by the State of Israel.
Slachta was one of the most fearless church leaders in Hungary between the two wars. Elected as the only female member of the Hungarian Parliament in 1920, she was labeled as the only “real man” in the constitutional assembly. She didn’t hesitate to challenge the power structure both on moral and legal grounds. As the head of the Order of the Sisters of Social Service, she naturally gravitated toward serving society’s oppressed and underrepresented. She was one of the rare Christian voices that openly opposed the Jewish Laws. In the public consciousness, she is mainly remembered for her heroic efforts to save the lives of thousands of Jews in Budapest during 1944, yet her exploits went far back into the 1930s. She stood side by side with the dispossessed Jews who were thrust across the border from Slovakia in the late 1930s—a pawn on an ongoing tit-for-tat over which country could expel more Jews. A year before the 1941 deportation, she was instrumental in alerting Hungarian society, and the government itself, on the expulsion of Jews from the small northern Transylvanian town of Csikszereda. By all accounts, it might have been a dry rehearsal for the much more encompassing Galician expulsion.

Slachta’s intrepidity, coupled with a razor-sharp intellect, could confront Ilona Horthy, the regent’s wife as to “what will happen if Germany will not win the war?” She posed this question just a month after Hungary entered the war on the side of Hitler’s Germany when both the Hungarian and German armies were deep in Soviet Russia. This was the time when Hitler already celebrated with raised glasses the demise of the Soviet Union. Slachta didn’t hesitate to remind the reigning couple that there would be inescapable consequences for these crimes against “law, justice, and Christianity.”

Tamás Majsa assessed Slachta’s stance by noting that “in July 1941 she was one among the rare few within the church who knew what their mission should be.”

She utilized well her connections both in Hungary and internationally. Her close cooperation and friendship with Countess Erzsébet Szapáry, from one of the leading aristocratic families in Hungary, and Baroness Edith Weiss, from a noted family of Jewish industrialists, bought together an effective front against governmental policies, military intransigence, and the pervasive anti-Semitism of Hungarian officialdom. On February 18, 1969, Yad Vashem recognized Slachta as Righteous Among the Nations.

Szapáry represented the nobility with a strong anglophile orientation. She was a leading member of the Hungarian-Polish Refugee Committee, established at the outbreak of World War II. She was also one of leaders of the Hungarian Red Cross. Her lineage, enhanced by her mother’s title as a Polish countess, opened doors in diplomatic circles in the Hungarian capital. The organization saved thousands of Jews from among the Polish refugees—estimated at around 5,000. It provided Jewish refugees from Poland with shelter, money, clothing, and medical help, as well as forged Christian documents. Politically active, she was member of a literary circle, which encompassed
the entire leadership of the Hungarian-Polish Refugee Committee, including Baroness Edith Weiss. This was established with a strong anti-Nazi orientation in the early 1940s. The group frequently invited the British ambassador to their weekly get-together. After the departure of the ambassador, Szapáry gained direct access to Pell. She provided vital information to the embassy about issues revolving around the deportation, which, in turn, was forwarded to Washington.

Utilizing her aristocratic pedigree, she was equally undaunted in confronting authority in Körösmező. As a member of the delegation to the transit camp, led by Slachta, she did not hesitate to demand that the head of the gendarmerie on site, a colonel, join them and release those who had documents attesting their Hungarian citizenship. Thus, she was able to save scores of people.119 Her humanitarian work continued, as more Jewish refugees arrived in 1942 and 1943 when the Polish ghettos were liquidated and Hungary was relatively safe.

After the German invasion of Hungary, Szapáry was arrested by the Gestapo for her activities. She survived and immigrated to Switzerland after the war. On April 19, 1998, Yad Vashem recognized Szapáry as Righteous Among the Nations.

The third member of the trio, Baroness Edith Weiss is, in many ways, an enigma. In spite of her prominent role in the Jewish leadership in Budapest during the 1930s and 1940s, and as a leading member of the Hungarian-Polish Refugee Committee, we know painfully little about her. Very few documents, or even a photograph, have survived
from the war years that could attest to the wide-ranging rescue activities she had conducted. She came from one of the wealthiest families in Hungary that had decided to convert to Christianity, yet she remained Jewish and assumed communal responsibility for the fate of the Jews in Hungary.\textsuperscript{120}

As one of the leaders of MIPI, she confronted the main perpetrators of the deportation, including Ámon Pásztóy, Sándor Siménfalvy, and other officials. Her effectiveness is hard to gauge. She had contacts, like Slachta and Szapáry, in the Hungarian Red Cross.\textsuperscript{121} Their appeals to this organization to aid the destitute family members left behind without sustenance and to reach out to those who were deported to Galicia resulted in the involvement of international entities such as the US State Department and the International Red Cross in Geneva.

Edith Weiss’ sphere of influence encompassed the entire Hungarian political spectrum, from ministers to church leaders, and from a personal meeting with Pásztóy to an appeal to the Hungarian Red Cross. Her letters and personal meetings with the head of the Hungarian Reformed Church Bishop László Ravasz provide an indication for her comprehensive grasp of the rescue work. In spite of rejecting conversion, she was at ease with the bishop, who was not always pro-Jewish in his political views. Her words in a letter to the bishop paint a horrific picture of the attempted border crossings, with bona fide German permits (\textit{Passierschein}), and the border guards’ unwavering policy of rejecting and returning the unfortunates to Galicia: “The starving, depressed,
and down-at-heel deportees—perhaps many hundreds or even thousands—are waiting across the border in the no-man’s land.” Appealing for Christian compassion, she turned to the bishop for his intervention in the repatriation of the few survivors from Galicia. How much this was useful cannot be ascertained, because no reply from the church leader has survived. As for other luminaries from the Catholic or Evangelical churches in Hungary, there were no raised voices or protest of the deportation.

As a key figure in the leadership of MIPI, Weiss was privy to the reports from across the border. The organization rapidly abandoned its original mandate of extending legal assistance to Jews who needed to prove their citizenship, and refocused its efforts, from late summer of 1941 and on, on saving lives and supporting individuals whose family members were deported. In this mission a partnership developed, rather naturally, with the representatives of the JDC. This partnership, in turn, brought on board Ambassador Pell. Equally important was the channeling of these reports not only to Ambassador Pell, but also through the embassy to the American Jewish press.

Weiss’s friendship with Slachta became stronger after the war. With the ascendancy of Communism in Hungary, Slachta fled the country at the end of 1948. Both of them settled in the United States, in New York City and Buffalo, respectively. They remained close friends. By that time, though, the tables had turned. Weiss became part of a network that smuggled out Christians, the members of the Order of the Sisters of Social Service who were persecuted by communist authorities in Hungary.

SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS

As one of the preeminent chroniclers of the Hungarian Holocaust phrased it, the 1941 deportation was a Jewish as well as a national trauma. It became a watershed event in the two communities’ coexistence. It might have also contributed to the dismissal of Bárdossy as the prime minister half a year later for seriously entertaining the hopes of a continuation of the deportation that might have included the entire Jewish community.

The rescue and protection of Jews during 1941 and 1942 was a heroic effort by those ranging from simple but caring individuals to moral leaders and organizations. Yet it met with limited success. The Galician deportation, which started in July 1941, ended more than a year later. During this year, intermittent transfer of new groups or escaped and consequently arrested Jews to Galicia was conducted by KEOKH or independently by border authorities.

On October 28, 1942, Keresztes-Fischer ordered all authorities to stop the redeportation of Polish-born Jews and other stateless aliens; however, the intermittent transfer to Galicia continued until 1943. By some estimates, only 10 percent of the deported
were able to return and resume “normal” lives. Most of the stories of those who rescued Jews or the ones who were able to escape on their own can be gleaned from individual memoirs. Perhaps the most convincing explanation for the paucity of early and more extensive “rescue” literature may be attributable to the taboo on discussing the Holocaust during the Communist period in general. On the other hand, some of the main actors in the rescue efforts in 1941 belonged to religious circles, the aristocracy, and the upper bourgeoisie—an anathema in Eastern Europe after the war, and those heroic stories had to be squashed. It’s perhaps telling that the first real mention of Margit Slachta’s name and her activities in 1941 was dated 1986, at the twilight of Communism in Hungary.114

While newspapers in London and New York openly reported on the massacres taking place in Galicia, international responses to the deportation and its aftermath were limited to the American diplomatic outpost in Budapest and, ineffectually, to the International Red Cross in Geneva. The protestations by Pell introduced an international element in this human and political drama. There was continuous and direct communication between him and Bárdossy relating to the deportation. We know that Keresztes-Fischer’s decree, which limited the scope of the deportation to Polish and Russian Jews, was issued on July 30. The memorandum by the American envoy, informing the prime minister of the atrocities as well as the policies contravening international conventions, was dated July 24. The causality is clearly there.

Evaluating the role that Jewish organizations, specifically MIPI, OMZSA, and the JDC, played is a more complicated one. While the JDC had the backing of an American-based international organization, close connection with the embassy in Budapest, and the Department of State in Washington, MIPI was more circumscribed in navigating Hungarian political realities on the ground. The organization had to steer carefully around a fractious Jewish establishment within Hungary itself. One can see a process of radicalization in MIPI’s responses as the deportation proceeded. With its limited ability to maneuver, MIPI made valiant efforts to first rectify malfeasance, especially by public officials. Then it aimed to stop the deportation and, finally, to extend support both at home and across the border.

In several initiatives, however, it failed, at least until late 1942. There was never any government-sanctioned return of Jews with Hungarian citizenship from Galicia put into effect. Nor was permission ever given to repatriate Jews who were languishing across the Galician border after being captured by military and police authorities. By some estimates, over 2,000 unfortunates were redeported to Galicia to their certain murder. As an already quoted survivor phrased it, they “disappeared without a trace.”