A Summer of Mass Murder

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Standing in front of a mass grave leaves little room for moral contemplation—only a degree of incomprehension. One needs all the power of the imagination to conjure a vision of the site as it was after the murder of thousands of people, when the cries of the victims were extinguished and the guns fell silent. Ian Kershaw’s words come to mind: “This was a person with loved ones, not an unfortunate causality of fighting, but someone deliberately killed.”

The Jews of Krivoy Rog were murdered on October 14–15, 1941, near the city. Although no Hungarian expellees were included in this carnage, there was a Hungarian soldier, a Jewish driver, who reported it. Upon witnessing the procession of Jews to the slaughter, Béla Somló, the Hungarian soldier, decided to visit the valley of death for the 7,000 Jews of Krivoy Rog a day after the massacre. Acting against military policy, he also took a picture of the mass grave: “On our way back, we decided to swing by the scene of the shootings of yesterday. Wherever the procession passed, pages with Hebrew letters torn from books, black and white prayer shawls, tefillins [phylacteries], a child’s sock ground into the dirt . . . the gully is filled with earth . . . that is not really filled . . . or filled . . . but not with earth . . . the soil only sprinkled on top . . . hastily . . . sometimes more, sometimes less.”

Such horrifying sights were the norm in the Eastern European Holocaust “theater,” where those who committed atrocities were not concerned that their actions would be observed and recorded. The scene in Nadwórna, eight months after the slaughter of 2,000 Jews in the Bukowinka Forest, many of them Hungarian, was eerily similar. A local survivor, who later escaped across the border to Hungary, was ordered to recover the mass graves several months later. He noted in his diary: “When we arrived at that vale of tears, we faced a horrible and unforgettable sight. There
were enough traces left to see of the awful tragedy that had taken place there about eight months ago. Strewn all over were many torn shirts, underwear, and shredded left-overs of dresses... keys, documents, photos... We were gripped by terror and horror when we saw a chewed-off hand, pointing towards heaven, stick out of the middle of the mass grave.”

This hand haunted the diarist. It symbolized the evil that had taken place: “That hand, reaching towards heaven from the grave, was raised like a signal of accusation against God and men for the gigantic crime committed here by bestial men.” An eyewitness to the exhumation of Hungarians in Kamenets-Podolsk reflected that: “In two of these craters are specifically driven to slaughter the Kamenets-Podolsk foreigners, Jews... Residents of neighboring villages report that after the first filling [covering with soil] of the large elliptical hole, the ground water pushed to the surface and because of the many thousands of corpses it was painted red, and formed a sinister bloody lake.”

These comments and observations underline a frightful statistics, which were quoted in the first chapter. The Soviet investigators from the village of Plebanovka concluded that the rate of success in killing the defenseless victims was “35 percent of the victims were shot dead on the spot, 50 percent of the people were injured, and 15 percent were buried alive.” Even with the knowledge that children were thrown alive into the graves, the natural question arises as to why was only 35 percent of the executed died immediately? Why was the ground heaving, and moaning and crying could be heard from the trenches several days after the carnage? Part of the answer lies in the number of executions that had to be accomplished with limited human resources and under pressures of time. Again, the image of Krüger running along the mass grave and urging his men to speed up the process comes to mind. This image, though, also reflects a deeper reality. He holds in his hand a bottle of schnapps. Thus, it is reasonable to argue that the additional—or perhaps the main—reason for the low success rate in killing was the amount of alcohol consumed before and during mass murder. In Kamenets-Podolsk, shooters were periodically excused to take a break to drink schnapps before returning to the firing line. During the Bloody Sunday Massacre in Stanislawów, the shooters were so drunk that missing their target became a serious concern.

These Nazi executioners were not too meticulous about the process of murder, mostly wounding the intended victims. As for covering the mass graves, it was even less of their concern. We can find in the annals of the Holocaust that burying the murdered was routinely relegated to the local population or Jews from the ghetto who were forced to cover and later recover the scene of the crime. As the night descended on the freshly filled craters, with thousands of new victims, their pleas from mass graves echoed all through the night.
THE NEVER-ENDING QUESTIONS

These musings of a Hungarian soldier in Krivoy Rog, a hand raised to heaven in Nadwórna, the color of a manmade “lake of blood” in Kamenets-Podolsk, and a voice from the grave in Stanislavów—they may provide an appropriate précis for the deportation of more than 20,000 people from Hungary. But is there a fitting metaphor for such a singular and unfathomable event as the Holocaust? The imagination fails to find an answer.

When writing about the Holocaust, it is tempting to apply a “whiggish” interpretation of history. In other words, in explaining the 1941 deportation and the consequent genocide we analyze it within the background of modern politics. The axiom, coined by the French historian Henry Rousso, stating “the past that will not pass,” indicates the attitudes in Central and Eastern Europe toward the events of 1941. Politics notoriously erases stories that do not fit the preferred narrative, reframing past sins to suit the issues and expediencies of today’s reality. This is especially true in Hungary, where historical memory has a complicated history of its own. A colleague mused about taking responsibility for the Galician genocide to ask the penetrating question: “How do you wake up from the nightmare of history when you are the nightmare?”

This question begets, of course, a new question. Can we—or rather should we—protect the past from itself? In the popular imagination, the Holocaust is associated with

Fig 9.1  The site of the mass murder: Memorial Park in Kamenets-Podolsk. Courtesy of George Eisen.
rapid industrial killings in the death camps. In 1941, however, an entire system, security and civil, became complicit in robbery and murder. Across the region, it became a vertically integrated criminal enterprise. As Father Patrick Desbois noted, “there is no such thing as genocidal purity.” While the killing might have been framed as ideological at the start, it rapidly descended into a frenzy of pillaging and plundering. The Nazi murder squads looked at the killings as purification of the race initially, but didn’t disdain from sending back to their families looted Jewish valuables. The Ukrainian militiamen were not motivated by ideology; they were there for the discarded garments, extra food, and unending supply of schnapps. The members of the Hungarian field-gendarmerie did not entertain discernable ideological convictions either. They started stripping deportees from their valuables at their homes, following in the camp at Körösmező, and finishing somewhere at the end points in Galicia.

After Auschwitz, Galicia is the second largest Hungarian Jewish Holocaust cemetery in the world. But unlike Auschwitz, in Galicia we are forced to see the men, women, and children through the sights of rifles and submachine guns at very close range and within the confines of the host communities. We can observe the process of murder through the micro-lens of well-designed community involvement: digging the graves, collecting the Jews, guarding them at the execution site, covering the mass graves, and even squabbling over the meager possessions of the murdered. In a deposition during his trial, a Ukrainian policeman openly complained to the Soviet investigative commission that the Ukrainians always received the most inferior pieces, not deemed worthy by the Nazi officers.9 Echoing such sentiment, a Hungarian military report noted with an undisguised envy that “during mass murder of Jews, for example in Kamenets-Podolsk, approx. 27,000, the Germans prevented the Hungarians from getting even the most trivial things, but permitted the Ukrainian population to sell cheaply the loot distributed to them.”10

In the introduction to this book, I posed questions raised by researching and writing a narrative about the 1941 Hungarian deportation. In the first place, was there a causality between the deportation and the launching of the Holocaust? The obvious answer is no. The Holocaust was already in progress by the time Jeckeln made a commitment to “liquidate” Hungarian Jews in Kamenets-Podolsk. Snyder’s assessment of the Kamenets-Podolsk example is close to the truth in that larger massacres only “confirmed the precedent of Kamenets-Podolsk for the destruction of the Jews.”11 In other words, Kamenets-Podolsk taught us that mass murder by simple means is doable.

Was the Hungarian deportation expedited or influenced by the evolution of the Holocaust in general and the Final Solution in particular? The answer is yes, for in one sense there is an underlying interconnectedness. Again, Snyder’s words well defined this question by stating that “the Holocaust is integrally and organically connected to the Vernichtungskrieg, to the war in 1941, and is organically and integrally
connected to the attempt to conquer Ukraine." Using the pretext of eliminating the Hungarian Jews, Jeckeln exterminated around 2,000 Jews from Bukovina and more than 6,000 local Jews also, who might not have otherwise been targeted at that time. On the other hand, during the notorious Bloody Sunday Massacre of 12,000 people, the first 2,000 victims to be exterminated by the Germans were the Hungarians imprisoned in the Rudolfmühle in Stanislawów. The Galician expulsion also had a direct impact on a string of follow-up murders by German forces. Can we draw, then, a connecting line between the precedent setting mass murder in Kamenets-Podolsk and the follow-up massacres across Ukraine? Was there a causality between Kamenets-Podolsk and Babi Yar? Even a more pertinent question; were the Hungarian actions precipitated a chain of events that led to the unleashing of the Final Solution in Europe? The deportation expedited the extermination process, starting in late August and early September, and culminating in several bloodbaths that became ominous milestones in Holocaust history. They signified a transition from the experimental and selective phase of genocide to the systemic approach to murder and, ultimately, to the Final Solution.

How can we fully absorb the complicated lessons of this deportation? It is a narrow slice of the Holocaust universe, taking place in an obscure corner of Eastern Europe, and initiated by rather unfamiliar Hungarian policymakers, at least for the Western public. Yet it carries all the contours of the unfolding genocide. The influx of Hungarian expellees to Galicia was the primary factor, a fuse in the first mass murder in Kamenets-Podolsk. The Hungarian Jews, then, were part of the follow-up destruction of the Jews of Galicia, becoming an integral part of the Final Solution.

It is a quandary as to how and why these Jews from Hungary proper, from Budapest, and the reannexed territories—a semicircle extending from the southern part of former Upper Hungary in the north (Felvidék), Carpathian Ruthenia on the east, and Transylvania in the southeast—ended up in Galicia in the first place? Another weighty question that needs to be addressed is why were the foreign nationals from various internment camps included in the expulsion? As a savvy former diplomat, Bárdossy, the prime minister, should have known that this was contrary to international conventions. Finally, how could a country with a highly developed legal system, a functional parliamentary structure, and a proudly stated and emphasized “value system” that was proclaimed to be “solidly anchored in Christian values,” perpetrate such an action? There are no easy answers.

The most immediate answer for the first question might be in the realm of psychology. As we quoted earlier from Peter Hayes, the transition from ideas and perception about a minority to hostile action depend on circumstances that could promote “murderous intentions.” The outbreak of World War II and the Hungarian occupation of Galicia provided these circumstances. As for the international refugees, it was a
corollary effect in which both KEOKH and the Chief of Staff General Werth teamed up to resolve this issue—rather unilaterally.

And then, there is the additional question of the demographic composition of the expulsion. Thousands of Jews from Budapest and foreign nationals from the internment camps were collected and deported to Galicia. But why the Jews on the periphery, and especially in Carpathian Ruthenia and northern Transylvania, were singled out in overwhelming numbers for removal? While their geographic proximity to Galicia—just over the Carpathian Mountains—may be one reason, a full answer might demand more nuance. With their large masses of Jews who were more traditional than those in the interior of the country, these regions offered something of a Rorschach test for Hungarian society as a whole. It reflected and magnified the vitriol and hate that gripped the Hungarian political landscape. The socioethnic mélange of this region, allied with a distinctly retarded social development where Hungarians were a minority, was conducive to racial animosity. Surrounded by Ruthenian and Romanian peasants, the Hungarians, competing with a devoutly religious, yet staunchly pro-Hungarian Jewish middle class, saw economic ascendancy in despoiling the Jews. The observation of Eleanor Perényi again is authoritative and instructive: “Jews were looked down on, but only because they engaged in all things which in other countries are the province of the middle class. . . . And as everyone seemed to be either a noble or peasant, business and the professions were gratefully turned over to the Jews. So, of course, were the arts.”

There was no single, linear chain of causality for the expulsion, nor was there a clear, ideological rationale. While the political elite was fully aware of the atrocities taking place in the newly conquered territories, it made every effort to placate the Nazi-inspired right in the Parliament by removing the “Easterners.” On the local implementation level, however, there were little ideological or political considerations. Their actions were rooted in an ingrained hatred that was deeper than ideology. This hatred formed the basis for attempts to create the “Other,” and place the blame on this creature for economic, social, and cultural ills—real or imaginary.

The euphemistic “economic realignment” of Hungary in the late 1930s, cemented by the Jewish Laws, brings the expulsion into even clearer focus. This despoliation can be viewed on the macro level, as the economic transfer from “Jewish to Christian” hands as the Second Jewish Law decreed. By 1941, however, and following the waves of deportation, the economic transfer took a different form. It was not as orderly as the law would have mandated, rapidly deteriorating into unmitigated plunder. A report by a chief magistrate in Carpathian Ruthenia boasted that he “distributed stocks of goods from numerous Jewish warehouses, whose absentee owners cannot be found, to Christian merchants.” He knew very well, of course, as to where these merchants disappeared. But, then, one cannot ignore the micro level either, when the looting started
at the moment of deportation by the detective who collected the family for immediate removal. Elie Wiesel’s words that “what hurts the victim most is not the cruelty of the oppressor, but the silence of the bystander” can so aptly describe the moment when the gentile neighbors lined up to gawk or, rather, to take away various items from the home of the family that is removed. One of them turned to the mother, just being led out of their home and preparing for deportation, to ask, “can we have the bedroom furniture of the little girl for our daughter?”

In this light, the economic motivation for the deportation becomes more rational and understandable. Compared with the interior of the country, civil society, and a viable middle class in the outlying provinces, which were rural and impoverished, especially in Carpathian Ruthenia and northern Transylvania, was weak. In the interior there was a well-entrenched Christian middle class, Hungarian and Swabian German. But in the provinces, Jews constituted both the virtual middle class and a nascent civil society. In these newly reannexed territories, they were also a substantial political demographic counterweight to the Ukrainian, Romanian, or Slovakian majorities. They had a marked Hungarian cultural and political orientation, stubbornly clinging to the memories of the peaceful years of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. These Jews remembered, with nostalgia, the monarchy as a bulwark that had once held anti-Jewish hatred at bay. During his meanderings in northern Transylvania under Romanian rule in the mid-1930s, the British traveler Patrick Leigh Fermor described his accidental meeting with Hasidic Jews who were in the logging business in the Carpathian Mountains. These devoutly religious Jews insisted on speaking among themselves in “Hungarian rather than Yiddish” and dreamed of the return of a Hungary that practiced a benign Austro-Hungarian tolerance.

During the Romanian years in Transylvania and the days of Czech-Slovak control of Upper Hungary and Carpathian Ruthenia, Jews consistently identified themselves as Hungarians. The Hungarian writer Márai’s diary reflected this: “The Jews during the last twenty years have faithfully supported Hungarian interests, in the elections as well as cultural life.” In turn, the Hungarian minority was temporarily tolerant of its Jewish counterpart. But after the reannexation there was no need for a counter-balanced minority vis-à-vis the non-Hungarian majority. The prevailing internal deterioration of the political climate would have been a strong impetus for the deportation. But enmity toward the Jews in these reannexed territories were much more toxic and vengeful than in Hungary proper. There, they didn’t need the Jews anymore.

One must confront, then, the question of how many and who were this people forced into “exile” to a “bloodland” called Galicia? At first, we can name them as deportees and expellees. However, they rapidly became a multitude of rootless refugees with no rights and no anchor in an alien land. Joyce Carol Oates said that “A refugee’ is, by definition, desperate: he has been displaced from his home, has been rendered
stateless, has few or no resources.” More importantly, when one is exiled from home and country, this comes with the ultimate price: “there is a loss of identity in the category term refugees.”¹⁷ A survivor, six years old at the time, vividly remembered the moment when they were rendered to such a state. The gendarme gave the mother five minutes to be ready, with two children, upon the threat of a gun to her head: “Our life stopped at this moment . . . my mother wanted to put the housekeys in her purse. Small detail but I remember clearly as the gendarme took away the keys. If someone ever experiences this, giving the keys to your own home that you lived all your life . . . and within five minutes, it’s over.”¹⁸ The use of the term “refugee” for the displaced persons from Hungary fits well precisely because of the punitive violence it betrays.

Writing in his diary in the town of Tluste in Galicia, the previously quoted doctor grasped this well. He was surprisingly well-informed about who these refugees, 2,000 of them, were:

It was also about Jews from the Transcarpathian [Carpathian Ruthenia] regions, recently incorporated to the Hungarian state. Later, this ordinance encompassed those with Nansen passports, refugees from Austria, Germany, and Poland, even some Jews formerly from the Polish army. An immense chaos occurred there, families were separated and the hearth of homes were destroyed, as there were many mixed marriages between Jews and Aryans or [Hungarian] citizens. . . . These condemned [people] were torn from their homes with absoluteness and guile and driven to Ukraine on trucks in the path of Hungarian armies following the eastern front. Some were taken from their jobs in the daytime, others were woken from their sleep during the night and immediately loaded into cars. Some were allowed to take the most important [items], and others were not. Some were told that they are being taken to be registered, a second group that they are being temporarily interned in lagers, a third group that they are being resettled to other areas of Hungary, and a fourth group that housing and farmlands are prepared for them, as entire cities and villages are deserted and emptied as a result of the Soviets taking away populations.¹⁹

While this description does not provide numbers, it is a well-rounded summation from an outsider of the identities of the thousands of people uprooted from their homes in 1941. “The bald statistics of population displacement,” Ian Kershaw informs us, “like all macro-economic data, are wholly impersonal. They say nothing of the death, destruction, suffering and misery involved.”²⁰ But the statistics provide us with a tangible picture of the magnitude of an atrocity. Since a limited number of records survived the war, we can only estimate. As mentioned in the opening chapter, the official approximation of the deported was 17,656. This number corresponded with the files maintained by KEOKH. An appeal to the International Red Cross for aid for these people
in early December 1941, apparently borrowed from the same sources, speaks of similar estimates. Pásztóy openly boasted in a memorandum, sent to László Bárdossy on September 16, 1941, that “until now I have expelled 18,000 Jews.” A month later a perhaps more reliable source, a police report from the border region, quoted 19,426 people. The arrests and forced collections in the provinces, however, were more sweeping than the central authorities in Budapest decreed or were informed about. The resulting reports from these outlying areas, demanded by Budapest, if they were sent at all, were at best fragmentary and incomplete.

On the other hand, the transit camp in Körösmező, a “filter” station, was chaotic and often overwhelmed by the incoming Jews, which made an accurate accounting impossible. Originally three collection camps were planned, but only that one was established. Thus, the expellees were often transported directly from the train station to Galicia, bypassing any registration protocol. Finally, we are not informed about an important demographic segment, that of the nearly 3,000 foreign nationals in the internment camps—Czech, Slovak, French, Austrian, German, and even Dutch Jews—who found temporary shelter in Hungary. These camps were under military administration. Military trucks emptied these camps by directly transporting their human cargo across the border. This was obviously, as the American ambassador pointed out, in contradiction to international laws, which might be the reason that the transit camp in Körösmező was intentionally circumvented. On the final account, though, none of these foreign nationals survived.

An estimate by the Joint Distribution Committee, dated on July 16, 1943, placed the overall number of deported as “close to 23,000.” Considering the official statistics in Hungary, German military dispatches from the occupied territories, testimonies, and Yizkor books from villages and towns on both sides of the border, 23,000 to 25,000 seems most plausible. These numbers include their extermination along the long treks by Ukrainian irregular forces, and in ghettos by Ukrainian and German killing squads. Just in the four main killing centers of Orinin, Kamenets-Podolsk, Stanislawów, and Kolomea, the number of the victims exiled from Hungary reached 2,000–3,000, 14,000–16,000, 3,000, and 2,000–3,000, respectively. If we add to that the various killing sites in smaller communities, the magnitude of destruction becomes more palpable. And, then, the shadow of Belzec, where the final remnants of Hungarian Jews ended up, looms largely over the killing fields.

TWICE BETRAYED

Reading the testimonies of Hungarian Jews, one realizes that the true writers of Holocaust history are the victims themselves. They depict a Hungarian as much as a
Jewish tragedy. It might not be hyperbole to claim that the deportation to Galicia served as a “dress rehearsal” for a much more ambitious, concluding chapter of the Hungarian Holocaust in 1944. In this case, the past informs the future as 1941 became a prologue and harbinger for a much deeper black hole of horrors, that of the 1944 mass murder of more than 500,000 Hungarian Jews.

This book would not be complete without finding a connecting cord between the introductory and final chapters of the Hungarian Holocaust, 1941 and 1944. The fate of the estimated 2,000 or so survivors from the Galician deportation, and some of the Galician Jews who found temporary shelter in Hungary, might be this cord. After escaping from their harrowing Galician experience, often the sole returnees from their traditionally large Jewish families, they were forced into hiding inside Hungary. While some made a painful effort to rebuild a semblance of normal life, others dispersed all across the country for fear of being forced to return to Galicia. But these same survivors, and Galician escapees, were invariably collected and dispatched under inhumane conditions with their families three years later, in the spring of 1944, mostly to Auschwitz. The large majority of them never returned from the death camps.

In addressing a political controversy, the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum issued a communiqué that might serve as a connection between 1941 and

![Figure 9.2](https://example.com/figure9_2.png) Portrait of a religious Jewish farmer from Carpathian Ruthenia, his wife, and six of his children. The family was expelled to Galicia, returned, and then, in 1944, killed in Auschwitz. The farmer, Chaim Simcha Mechlowitz, became immortalized as the farmer in Roman Vishniac’s collection *A Vanished World*. United States Holocaust Museum, Courtesy of Lisa Wahler.
1944 — between Galicia and Auschwitz. It indirectly brings into focus the evolution of the Galicianer and the consequent fate of the Hungarian deportees in 1941 and the second phase in 1944: “When we look at Auschwitz, we see the end of the process. It’s important to remember that the Holocaust actually did not start from gas chambers. This hatred gradually developed from words, stereotypes and prejudice through legal exclusion, dehumanization & escalating violence.” This could imply that Auschwitz might have not come into existence without the foundation of mass murder in the Soviet Union.

There were also unstated differences in these words for the psychological approaches toward mass murder between Galicia and the death camps. The recurring question as to what was the qualitative and quantitative dividing line between the face-to-face murder and the efficiently run death camps? Afterall, both aimed to address the “Jewish Question.” The two events, though, need to be distinguished from each other. In Eastern Europe, the killing fields were open for all to see: locals, Hungarian soldiers, and Jewish members of the labor companies. There was a certain emotional underpinning, soothed over by copious amount of alcohol, as the hands-on killers in the “trenches” of Galicia went on about their business.

Max Solomon, a survivor of the Orinin Massacre, vividly remembered a German SS man, apparently the commander of the unit, who, after killing a little girl, aimed to shoot her sister. Because he was too drunk to properly aim, it took him several shots to finish her. Solomon distinctly heard as the officer jubilantly exclaimed amid the slaughter: “Ich tötete gerade weiteres kleines Mädchen” (“I just killed another little girl”). A teacher from Orinin, who assisted in opening the mass graves, and upon finding large number of empty bottles in the murder site, tartly remarked in a video interview that “a normal human being cannot accomplish such a thing [mass murder] without alcohol.”

In Auschwitz and other death camps, the perpetrators made all efforts to hide the macabre reality both from the incoming Jews and from the world. It was a choreographed process of murder with a corresponding charade of lies and props. No emotional attachment was needed for professionals in mass murder. During his trial in Nuremberg, Rudolf Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz, confided to a psychologist that the attitude to murder in the death camps was total indifference: “Any other sentiment ‘never even occurred to us.’”

Most of the returnees experienced both worlds — sometimes with a macabre twist — Galicia and Auschwitz. We can identify three stages of post-Galician exile, between 1941 and 1944, for these fugitives. The term “fugitives” is not a misnomer in this context, for they were labeled as such — hunted, arrested, and expelled again if they were found. It started with a long period (sometimes a year) of underground existence — at least until the official citizenship papers were arranged. In the second phase, reserved
explicitly for the men, they were invariably drafted into the Hungarian Army as forced laborer and sent back, often enough, to Ukraine. Although, their destination was not Auschwitz, many of them perished on the Eastern Front or were transferred for slave labor in concentration camps in the second half of 1944.  

When we examine the experiences of László Zobel, a twenty-three-year-old, his post-Galician existence might be reflective of the fate of many men returning from Galicia. Upon being smuggled directly into Budapest from Galicia, he was denounced to the police the same day. While he was able to hide initially, his mother was arrested and later deported. Zobel, himself was caught three months later in an identity check on the street, and was sent to an internment camp from which, in turn, he was drafted directly, along with three hundred fellow internees, into the forced labor companies attached to the Hungarian Army. He recalled that two battalions were formed: one for the interned Hungarian Jews, mainly escapees from Galicia, and one for foreign nationals, the majority of them German and Austrian refugees. These foreign nationals, by now stateless Jews, were sent immediately to the Eastern Front, from which no one returned. After decommissioned, Zobel was arrested again and spent the rest of the war in a prison, which might have saved his life. Apparently, the prison guards were more compassionate and protective of their wards than the gendarmerie or the city police. Her mother, on the other hand, was shipped to an extermination camp from which she did not return.

Following his escape across the Carpathian Mountains in 1942, Michael Jackson's life provide another window into many young men's experiences. After having been forced to go underground far away from his family, the long-awaited naturalization papers arrived, which gave him the ability to move unhindered. At least he thought so. During a visit to his parents, the first in almost a year, he was arrested by two detectives in a routine razzia at the train station. Jackson was brutally roughed up, beaten almost beyond recognition in the police station. Following the beating, his citizenship papers, fortunately a copy, were also confiscated. As mentioned in chapter six, less than a year later, he was drafted and dispatched with his battalion to Stanisławów, in Galicia, exactly from where he escaped a year and a half earlier.

The fate of the families of these servicemen was a whole different story. While many of the forced labor men did not reach Auschwitz, their families —women, children, and the elderly who survived Galicia— were not so fortunate. This was the final stage, the deportation of almost the entire Jewish community —starting again in Carpathian Ruthenia—to death camps. The survivors were swept up in this huge “population relocation” from home to ghettos, and from ghettos to Auschwitz —close to 500,000. Among them were the remaining survivors of the Galicia deportation.

The title of a book by Peninah Kaufman-Blum, about enduring both of these deportations, Paamayim Shoah [Shoah Twice], is apt in summing up the experiences of
the survivors of Galicia, twice in the inferno. In a short memoir written in Hebrew, she chronicled how she and her mother were the only ones from a large family who returned in 1942 from Galicia. Moving almost immediately to Budapest, she became a member of the Zionist underground, which tried to save lives by distributing false birth certificates and identity cards. Although hiding under authentic Christian papers, her mother was nevertheless arrested in a routine identity check. In spite of her daughter’s frenetic efforts to locate her, her mother embarked again on a final, and equally deadly, journey to Auschwitz.

If we want to find a metaphor for the fateful journeys into “Shoah twice,” we might borrow the story of a family from a small Carpathian Ruthenian village. The odyssey of a woman with a five-year-old son and a husband encapsulates perhaps best the fate of these 2,000 survivors. Upon returning from the death camp in 1945, she described the three stages of their nightmare. It started with their deportation to Galicia in 1941, even though their citizenship application was in its final stage of approval in the offices of KEOKH. It continued with their escape back across the border in 1942, in the back of a one-man car for twenty-six hours: “We were lying motionless in a curled-up position. We had no food or drink . . . and I was worried that my son would start crying and we have finished.” Upon crossing the border safely and feeling relief, “I thought nothing may happen to us, [then] my husband got a nervous breakdown. It was horrible to watch how terror and hiding helplessly destroyed this robust man. . . . He started to cry uncontrollably, shrieking, and crying loudly.” This was the moment when the five-year-old son tried to calm him down and “started to beg him to keep quiet.”

The family continued hiding for fear that “someone in town would notice us.” On the advice of Jewish officials, they reported to the KEOKH, after several months of living in a forest, to clear up their legal status. There, one of the central characters in the deportation and a notoriously anti-Semitic officer, Dr. Árkád Kiss, ordered their immediate expulsion back to Galicia. Upon the intersession of an official in the Ministry of Interior, it was agreed that they could report to the office every two weeks. Not long after that, the family received their Hungarian citizenship papers and “believed we could stay here. But we were fatally wrong.”

In the spring of 1944, the final chapter descended on this family after being deported to Auschwitz. They endured the separation and slow journey of their two children toward the gas chambers. The woman became aware of their final fate through a conversation in the camp. Upon returning from the death camp, she was informed of the death of her husband. She was the only one, a lonely mother, who returned alive. One can see and feel a raw and deep wound that will never heal as her final words in her testimony upon her liberation in 1945 sum up the scope of her personal tragedy: “So, I have no one. Only a brother of mine is alive. You know, if he was not alive, I would throw my life away, which is only suffering and pain for me.”
MAKING SENSE OF THE SENSELESS

Sometimes investigating a historical event leads to a moment that can reduce a well-constructed narrative to one focal point. It might be the tired face of an old man from Bukovina with a flowing white beard or a child carried by a mother randomly selected from thousands of tired and trudging Jews in the dusty Galician flatland. But our eyes can also fix on the erect image of a Hungarian soldier serving in the transit camp for Hungarian expellees incarcerated in inhuman conditions at Körösméző. Military rifle on his shoulder and a menacing club in his hand, as an eyewitness acerbically commented, “obviously not for substituting for a walking stick,” he represents a dramatic contrast between the powerful and the powerless. One can only ponder why he needs a huge club with compliant, thoroughly exhausted old men, women, and children. These pictures are the forceful reminders of the 1941 Hungarian deportation. When we can envision them, we are finally able to see the human dimension of the tragedy.

Long-forgotten files in the regional archive in Beregovo (Beregszász), Carpathian Ruthenia, illuminate well this human dimension, the hidden consequences of the deportation. These files don’t talk about suffering, hunger, or mass murder. Instead, they are local school reports to the superintendent of schools that dryly present, page after page, village after village, the dramatic decline in the number or complete disappearance of Jewish children in the public schools. The report from a small village, on August 9, informs the superintendent that “presently, Jewish families are expelled daily from the village. Therefore, it’s impossible to ascertain how many Jewish children will enroll in the next school year.” The abrupt drop in the number of Jewish students through the entire region in 1941 is a good indicator of the demographic devastation. Academic classes were cancelled, and entire schools eliminated because of students being taken to Galicia with their families. On August 3, a communication from another small settlement notes that “it is my honor to officially report that today the Jews of the village were officially expelled and so school for the Jewish schoolchildren is not required.”

Trying to understand the enormity of the crime of killing thousands of Jews and their Christian family members may leave one in the realm of nameless and faceless statistics. In launching and conducting the Final Solution, as Ian Kershaw noted, “the de-personalization of the Jew had been the true success of Nazi politics and propaganda.” Standing in front of the mass graves in Kamenets-Podolsk, one wonders why the Soviet investigative committee did not identify the Hungarian victims upon opening the graves. I asked this question of a silently sobbing elderly Ukrainian woman, Valentina, a witness, who was an eight-year-old peasant girl during the massacre. Had they not, after all, killed many Ukrainian victims who were later identified by grieving relatives? Her answer: the Hungarian victims will remain nameless forever, for no one
came to claim them or recognize them. No family, no relatives, and not even friends left alive to identify them or recite the words of the Kaddish over these nameless victims: “there was nobody to cry,” she said. The true magnitude of the crime hits home only with the recognition of individual names and images.

In 1944, a thirteen-year-old girl started a diary in the Transylvanian city of Nagyvárad (Oradea in Romanian) in which she mentioned the deportation of her best friend three years earlier to Kamenets-Podolsk. Éva’s description of losing Márta Münzer is evocative. After going for a bicycle ride with Éva, Márta was called home, leaving her red bicycle leaning beside the gate. By the next morning, they had joined the thousands of deportees heading toward Galicia. Éva writes, “we didn’t have the heart to send [the bicycle] to Márta’s grandmother . . . we cried a lot when we saw the two red bicycles standing alongside each other.”

She also knew that her friend was murdered in Kamenets-Podolsk: “I thought that bed was the only possible place to die in, but they say that the Münzers also didn’t die in bed in Poland; the Germans shot them. Márta’s grandmother doesn’t know it, because she still keeps cleaning Uncle Münzer’s dress-suit on the balcony, and the neighbors say that while she is cleaning, she has conversation with the suit... All I think about is Márta. She was also just a girl, and still the Germans killed her.” In turn, Éva was deported to Auschwitz, where she died on October 17, 1944.

Her words become ever more haunting when considered next to an obscure and long-forgotten deposition by Katalin Hincsuk, herself a deportee from Nagyvárad. Her testimony was taken on May 26, 1944, after the liberation of Kamenets-Podolsk, by the Soviet Extraordinary State Commission investigating Nazi crimes. Hincsuk remembers scores of people whom she met in the ghetto of Kamenets-Podolsk, among them, the “Münzers, husband, wife, and daughter.” We know that they were murdered. But, finally, the image of the “daughter,” whose name is Márta, as mentioned by Éva, is reilluminated on the yellow archival pages. A child from the many victims comes to life for a fleeting moment. She is not a number or a faceless abstraction anymore.

The opening salvo of the Hungarian Holocaust is a story of many narratives. Or, as a colleague termed it, “a silent history with many unheard voices.” It’s not easy to find positive moments or heroes, for we encounter both the outer boundaries of human evil and debasement intermingled with moments of compassion. Murderers and collaborators outnumber willing rescuers. Heroic and selfless efforts by Margit Slachta, Edith Weiss, Erzsébet Szapáry, Imre Reviczky, and others are well documented. But there were also nameless individuals who were willing to show human decency in lending a hand in the rescue—common soldiers, forced laborers, and many others.

In the mist of passing decades, the dim shadow of such a simple, obscure, nameless Hungarian porter, a “tróger” in Hungarian parlance, who occupied perhaps the lowest rung in society, offered to save one of my uncles, the younger brother, Samu. I have never
met him and I don’t know his name, but suddenly he assumed a mythical aura—extending a hand for the doomed.

For Yaffa Rosenthal, an unexpected moment of redemption came amid their interminable wandering, interspersed with rape and murder, on a dusty road one night in Galicia. They were awakened, fearing that this would be their final moment, when a Ukrainian priest came and brought everyone “hot potato and milk . . . . I still taste that potato . . . even after fifty-five years.”18

Kaufman-Blum’s recollection of a perilous and long trek to the Hungarian border from Czortkov in 1942, and her capture upon crossing it, ends with a moment of illumination. Following their arrest, the Hungarian commander of the border post brusquely ordered the group to be forcibly returned across the border accompanied by a soldier. Yet the voice of this simple soldier, Tamás, who was to lead them back to Galicia upon this stern command shines with humanity. “Go, return to Poland,” the soldier shouted threateningly as he looked back to see if the superior officer could hear them. And then, “he turned to us in a soft voice: ‘if you go right, two kilometers, there is a portion of the border that is not guarded. There you could cross safely . . . .’ then he continued in whisper, ‘Don’t continue together. It’s dangerous. You better separate into smaller groups.’”19