EPILOGUE
Looking for a Closure

During my first trip to Kamenets-Podolsk in 2008, I found a proverbial bottle with a message of mass murder, cast out for an accidental discovery. It was the impromptu testimony of Valentina. This bottle was full of scattered memory nuggets—the repressed mental notes of an eight-year-old girl from a period of history that is hard to comprehend and even harder to explain. But after perusing thousands of pages of wartime documents, scholarly sources, interviews, and video testimonies by survivors, including Valentina’s memories, I was able to piece together a more comprehensive tableau about what happened in 1941, which placed the content of her words in context.

Still, something was missing from the overall picture of the 1941 deportation. I had a nagging sense of unfinished business, for there were three additional castaway bottles that needed to be found and opened. Was it the need to find a personal angle and perspective? For one, I wanted to discover more about the fate of the two brothers, my uncles, who disappeared in the mass graves of Kamenets-Podolsk. This book’s genesis could be attributed to my quest to find some traces of them.

Also, Valentina’s short testimony, fragmented as it was, left me with more questions than answers. How could she see so vividly the process of murder? Could I find out more by revisiting Kamenets-Podolsk?

And, finally, there was a third, rather intriguing quest: the not fully explored story of an almost unknown murder site that my research was able to uncover. It was a hitherto unfamiliar story of the mass murder of the Hungarian expellees in the small Podolian town of Orinin.

The most challenging task was the first one. In looking for some clues about the two brothers, I ran into a wall. I suspected that no new details about them would be easily found. I knew that in the provinces, record keeping was only a perfunctory exercise, but how is it possible that no traces could be found of all the thousands of people deported from Budapest? Why did the personnel in KEOKH not keep a list, a tally, detailed records? Yet, and unfortunately, there were no records or lists of deportees that could be found, if kept at all, in various Hungarian archives. Time was of the essence...
here, also because the number of family members who could have information about my uncles was rapidly dwindling. Age takes its toll. Far back, I had tried to reach out to Tildi, the wife of the younger brother, Samu. She was living by herself at the time, having never remarried. But she refused to talk about the war years. She reflected a pattern of behavior that was characteristic to many victims of Holocaust trauma—evading the painful past with silence. It did not happen if we do not talk about it. Not long after that, she passed away. Beyond that, I was not able to discover any new information. After all, these were two poor brothers with little education, and without an anchor in society where they could leave a trace or historical memory. One of my greatest regrets, in looking back, as a young boy, was not meeting the porter who wanted to save Samu. But, at that time, I did not know how to ask any questions.

Thus, the most immediate priority in finding new information was contacting the surviving daughters of Samu. In the fashionable Café Europe, in Budapest, I sat with Éva, Zsuzsa, and Gita, the three sisters and their children. This was the first and only time that an opportunity presented itself for meeting all three of them at the same time. I hoped for a soul-searching conversation about their father. What could they remember prior to the deportation? Could they recall any details from the days before his arrest and transfer to the transit camp? Were they aware of his final hours? As we sipped strong espresso, I formulated a whole set of questions, which rapidly evaporated as I sensed a feeling of mutual grief that they had never faced or experienced before. As I learned, their mother had wrapped the whole affair in silence. They did not even know that they were Jewish until later in life. Was it a coping mechanism for the loss? Or the mother’s deep sense of guilt for not making an effort to save him? As my own mother once bitterly blurted out in an unguarded moment, “She could have saved him.” Did she mean the lack of action on the part of Samu’s wife? But it might be also likely, as her granddaughter confided in me later, that she was terrified for her daughters’ fate for being partly Jewish.

What surprised me the most was the complete lack of information or knowledge about the final fate of their father. As they slowly opened up, decades of denial gave way to memory fragments. The older one, Éva, remembered that their mother shared the moment when Samu was taken away for a promised short examination of his papers, after which he would “surely return.” We now know that he was taken from the precinct directly to the central synagogue of Budapest. Zsuzsa, the middle daughter, also remembered vaguely visiting her father in the makeshift internment camp in the synagogue. Nothing more. Yet, it was an opening for rediscovering and sharing with each other a painful past. There was no anger, only long silences as I explained to them the chain of events in Kamenets-Podolsk that led to the final moments of their father and his brother in facing the executioner’s gun. The sisters, who had never faced or contemplated this raw truth, now mourned these gaps in our history that could never be fully
recovered. In many ways, and hopefully, our quiet discussion, interspersed with somber reflections, provided long-overdue closure for them.

I did not ask about Karcsi, the second brother. There was no reason. He was the tall, slim, silent figure with deep-set, blue eyes, who will remain forever a mystery, slowly fading into the shadows of the millions who were killed in Eastern Europe.

As for my decision to visit Kamenets-Podolsk again, I was not sure what I would find during this new trip and what I would do once I got there. There was no logical reason to visit the murder site—the memorial park had no historical value for the book that would justify a second trip. Yet, something urged me to return. I replayed in my mind Valentina’s spontaneous and emotional words next to the little market. I had only sketchy mental notes from this first meeting, and a few hastily scribbled notes for the records. Was this the reason that I wanted to see her and hear her story again? Or maybe I hoped to discover hitherto unfamiliar new details?

Again, I persuaded my university colleagues and one of their assistants, Éva Veres, who spoke Ukrainian and Hungarian, to join me in this new adventure in the hope that we might find some new or “rediscovered memory.” We decided to start this visit by stopping first at Kamenets-Podolsk where a noticeable change had taken place. A special organization was formed, called Chesed Besht, which was dedicated to the welfare of the small, truncated, and elderly Jewish community in the region. Not surprisingly, it hardly concerned itself with historical memory.

This limited us to visiting and talking with Valentina again. The consequent interview or a rather nebulous reconnect was, at best, introspective. We were the only ones who asked about her experiences during the fateful three-day massacre. Though I did not have explicit questions in mind, by then I was well-acquainted with the details about the intricacies of mass murder and, specifically, that of Kamenets-Podolsk. It was rather a belated opportunity, perhaps, to say thanks for providing the impetus for writing this book.

We had no address or information as to where to locate her. Fortunately, everyone knew the old flower seller at the little market. So, Éva and I set out to find Valentina. My companion, though, was understandably nervous and emotional. While she had no connection to the Holocaust, she proved that it could touch people who had never encountered, on the personal level, this tragedy.

The short stroll from the market to her house opened a gap in time and space—from the center of town with the mass grave, surrounded by aging, communist-style multi-level buildings, to a dilapidated neighborhood of small houses. This short walk finally helped me to see and understand how an eight-year-old child was able to run to the site and observe the minutia of mass murder. Her little Ukrainian village was adjacent to the craters where 23,600 victims were slaughtered within three days—not more than a five-minute walk. The staccato of gunfire must still ring in her ears.
Valentina’s little rickety shack, groaning with age and overgrown with weeds, was perhaps her ancestral home. The roof precariously perched on walls flaking and crumbling. In the accompaniment of her two goats, peacefully grazing, she appeared at the iron gate when she saw us coming. Someone had already alerted her that foreign visitors were looking for her. Her smile, though, was the same. She remained the only living memory of the massacre.

There was not too much that she could add, though. There were no new insights. But it helped me to close the circle, reconfirming the painful memories of a child. On my part, my visit was also a belated thank-you for launching me to write this book. As we stood at the gate recounting her experiences, one of the neighbors sauntered over, listening somewhat bemusedly to Valentina’s story. She had never heard about the mass murder in her own neighborhood. Five minutes away. Then, she turned to Éva in a whisper with the impromptu suggestion of giving Valentina a few Hryvnia, the Ukrainian currency. She lived in dire poverty. Éva silently opened her purse and pulled out a handful of banknotes.

The third quest was connected with Kamenets-Podolsk as well. I wanted to stop in a little Podolian town, a quintessential shtetl, where close to half of the population was Jewish before the war and was situated a mere ten miles from Kamenets-Podolsk. The name Orinin is not commonly known in Holocaust literature.\(^1\) As many of the
episodes featured in this book, the story of Orinin came to light by coincidence. In writing about it, I struggled with two main questions. Was it just another grisly episode of the Holocaust? Or was it unique in its own right? The town harbored a hitherto unknown story of mass murder—the murder of over two thousand Hungarian Jews in a destroyed Soviet-era fortification. I discovered this information accidentally through the video testimonies of two survivors from Carpathian Ruthenia, who did not know each other, but independently recounted this tale of the prequel to and the murder itself. Additionally, I was not able to divorce myself from the gripping and highly evocative words of Max Solomon, the sole survivor of the immediate mass murder, describing in detail the event. I knew that I needed to visit Orinin to see the site, partly to corroborate his account as well as to pay homage to the victims.

Indeed, human stories are, as I mentioned earlier, what history is made of. The role of the historian is to corroborate such narratives. During a scholarly discussion between colleagues, a question arose about the credibility and validity of witnesses after fifty years since their actual experiences. This question often presents a scholarly quandary: how can we give credit to human memory and imagination after such a long lapse in time—especially when we are talking about repressed memories? Primo Levi’s words of warning resonated in my mind: “Human memory is a marvelous but fallacious instrument. The memories which lie within us are not carved in stone; not only do they tend to become erased as the years go by, but often they change, or even increase by incorporating extraneous features.”

By that time, though, I had in my possession a third testimony, that of a local resident, Alexandr Shulyk, whose grandfather was a witness (and perhaps himself Jewish). Thanks to a video prepared by Ágnes Moldova in 2018, Shulyk’s recollection confirmed the testimony of Max Solomon.

Nevertheless, I had to see the murder site myself—the physical locale. Of course, there was no certainty that the place of murder of the Hungarians would be marked or even known to the local residents. I knew that we might not find a single Jew in this haunted place. Stalin completed the demographic transformation that Hitler did not finish in Ukraine. And, if some Jews survived the Holocaust, perhaps in hiding, or re-located to the town from Russia after the war, they immigrated en masse in the 1970s to Israel or the United States.

Surprisingly, the aforementioned video proved me wrong. As the video produced by Moldova has shown, there were people who remembered the massacre in detail and could pinpoint the site. I wanted to see it myself, in solitude and contemplation. From the reasonably passable road, we could look around, and as far as the eye can see, green fields framed picturesque small groves of trees. This was the murder site. The “Hungarian graves,” as the locals dubbed it.

We approached the grove, a few hundred yards from the road, which was described also in the video. Surrounded by cultivated green fields, the grove remained surprisingly
unmolested as it was left eighty years ago. It was hiding its secret assiduously. I looked around, somewhat distracted by the serenity around me. It was scenic and peaceful. It was here, the graveyard shaded by towering trees, providing background to semi-broken concrete bunkers—the mass grave of the Hungarian Jews. There was no commemorative stone or even a single sign reminding us what happened here eighty years ago. Overgrown by vegetation, the fortifications kept their secret well as I peered through one of the entrances to see only darkness. I guess one could have climbed through the opening, but that would only disturb the sanctity of the place. Standing in deep contemplation, I desperately tried to recall the words of the Kaddish, the Jewish memorial prayer for the dead, that I could recite for the victims of this place. But after the first two lines, my memory failed at this crucial moment.

As I slowly retraced my steps toward the car and my waiting companions, trying not to disturb the crops in the field, I knew that this would not be the last time I would visit this grove. Maybe I would return to properly recite the Kaddish, or, perhaps, to set up a memorial for the victims. But, then, the abandoned bunkers could have served as a form of memorial; a soundless reminder for the atrocity that had taken place here some eight decades ago.

In writing this book, this silent grove became personal. A symbolic place for a collective grief for all the victims of the 1941 deportation. Unlike the memorial in Kamenets-Podolsk, impersonal and somewhat pretentious, a place where I hoped or wanted to reconnect with my two uncles, this place spoke to me with its deep and painful silence. I finally felt a sense of connecting tinged with deep anguish.

As the car slowly pulled away, I turned around to take one last look as the line of trees rapidly disappeared in the distance. It felt like I am left with a story abandoned in mid-sentence. I knew I would have to return.

Fig E.2 Peaceful serenity: The Hungarian graves in Orinin, hidden in the former Soviet military fortification, July 26, 1941. Courtesy of George Eisen.