TIME FOR THANKS

Acknowledgments

One might ask the “unaskable” question: do we really need one more book on the Holocaust? Hopefully, I framed this book in order to respond to this question. This text explores a rather narrow and unexplored slice of the Holocaust. Yet, its consequences transcend Hungary—the cross-border removal of the thousands of Jews precipitated a chain of events that shaped the Holocaust process. But it also presaged the full Jewish Hungarian tragedy, which followed three years later in 1944.

My journey through archives, institutions, and countless scholarly discussions with colleagues—from Israel to Ukraine, from France to Germany, and from the United States to Hungary—for the past eight years have yielded material that is both enlightening and puzzling. There is a long list of individuals who helped along the way or provided helpful hints and suggestions. The first exploratory trip that we made to Kamenets-Podolsk with my three colleagues, and a follow-up visit in which we were joined by Éva Veres, was only an informal introduction. I owe a special debt to them—Nataliya Kubiniy, Vasyl Miklovda, and Mykhaylo Pityulych—for without them this book might have not been written. Of course, our unforeseen meeting with Valentina might also be construed as a form of divine intervention. In the excitement of the moment, we never learned her family name. She will always remain Valentina. Many thanks to her and her tears.

The most crucial information was buried in archives and museums. The list of such institutions is a long one. My access to the video collection of testimonies by Holocaust survivors located in the Steven Spielberg Film and Video Archive (USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education) at the University of Southern California was crucial. It stands out as the most important place, for these interviews painted a rich tapestry of human experiences under often inhuman circumstances. Through this archive I was able to tap into an invaluable reservoir of authentic recollections of the 1941 expulsion. Initially, Lydia Wasylenko from the Syracuse University Libraries was able to help me to view these testimonies. Later, Douglas W. Ballman from USC made accessible all the requested and re-requested videos, thanks to advanced information transfer,
directly via the Internet. I appreciate his prompt responses to my frantic emails. His assistance was crucial, for through these testimonies the story of the summer and fall of 1941, a time of unbridled murder, reemerges in vivid colors.

Thanks to these survivors, we encounter the central architects of the murder mechanism. It’s worth of repeating that we all are familiar with the immoral monsters—Hitler, Himmler, Goebbels, Göring—in Germany. Thanks to in-depth interviews during the Nuremberg trials, we are also acquainted with their personalities and their psychological profiles. For the general public, or even historians, the “second tier” low-level SS men, like Leideritz and Krüger, who can be credited collectively with hundreds of thousand murders, are, at best, unfamiliar. As for the international audience, figures such as László Bárddossy, Henrik Werth, Ámon Pásztóy, and Miklós Kozma are almost wholly unknown, enigmas outside of Hungary. Yet, these Hungarians were as much, or perhaps more, responsible for the early phases of the Hungarian Holocaust as the Nazi murder squads. And there are many officers, regional administrators, and government officials who ensured that the vision of these leaders become a bloody reality. This where the recollections of the survivors are invaluable. Through them, we encounter the low-level perpetrators as well as vocal and sometimes unwitting saviors amid the destruction, who are slowly fading into the mist of history, yet come to life, for a fleeting moment, through the voices of these survivors in the videos.

General documents and trial records of the executioners from Hungarian, German, Israeli, Polish, and Ukrainian archives tell a detailed story of the intricate process of murder. A collective thanks is due to the United States Holocaust Museum for the support its dedicated staff extended for the completion of this book. Thanks to the digitalization of Ukrainian archives in Galicia, accessible via the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, we were able to read long-forgotten testimonies of eyewitnesses, confessions of perpetrators, and trial proceedings. In this, I am indebted to Vadim Altskan, historian at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. He went above and beyond in accommodating my often challenging requests. Similarly, important assistance was given by the staff of the photo archives and reference desk of the museum: Megan Lewis, Judith Cohen, and Nancy Hartman.

This book would not be complete without the assistance of a group of creative young Hungarian historians who brought to my attention new sources and research. Gyula Kosztyó, who provided primary documents directly from the archives of the Kárpátaljai Területi Állami Levéltár, (KTAL) Beregovo (Beregszász) in Transcarpathia [Carpathian Ruthenia], Ukraine, is one of them. His groundbreaking work on the economic devastation of the region as the consequence of the Jewish Laws also helped to explain the economic rationale for the deportation. Ákos Fóris, a young and creative historian in Budapest, yielded important primary sources, without which some theories would remain in the realm of mere speculation. In addition, his dissertation yielded important background material about the functioning of the Hungarian military on the Eastern Front.
Then there is a list of individuals who assisted me selflessly, due to friendship, professional courtesy, or a genuine belief that this story should be told. Among them a special thank-you is due to Tamás Stark, who provided invaluable material from a host of Hungarian archives and limitless discussions about various aspects of the 1941 deportation. He has been a valuable help in this project from the beginning. Indeed, his access to Hungarian archives was crucial to this book.

My ongoing brainstorming with Tamás Majsai, a pioneer in the exploration of the 1941 deportation, was also important. I consider his groundbreaking works on this theme as a must-read for any researcher of this subject. I not only benefited from his publications on this topic but also from his astute observations. This book would not be complete without his publication of original documents revolving around the deportation. His unique brand of humor was definitely an added ingredient to our scholarly discussions.

Sometimes an accidental connection on the Internet resulted in unexpected benefits. Such was my virtual meeting with Hans Peter Trautmann, a German history enthusiast. He became an important source for hitherto unknown facts about Peter Leideritz, one of the main executioners of the Hungarian and local Jews in Kolomea, Southern Galicia, and his wife, Anneliese Leideritz. Through our correspondence, important details emerged about Leideritz’s activities, capture, and transfer by American military authorities to Poland. Also, Trautmann brought to my attention important archival material about the Leideritz couple that can be found in the Hessisches Staatsarchiv Wiesbaden in Germany, and in the Institute of National Remembrance (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej) in Warsaw. In turn, I had the opportunity to connect with a dedicated and helpful archivist in this archive, Grzegorz Perzyński.

Sándor Szakály, director of the VERITAS Research Institute for History and Archives in Budapest, provided material pertaining to communications directly with Berlin about the unilateral Hungarian deportation by German border authorities. Szakály’s assistance in locating a key photograph was also an important contribution to this book. Indeed, one of the problematic aspects of the research was finding photographs (or to be more precise, securing permission to use these photographs). I am greatly indebted to Zsuzsa Katona and George Csicsery, both documentary filmmakers; Tamás Ábrahám, a researcher; Daisy Chorin, a survivor and relative of Baroness Edith Weiss; and Angelika Orgona from the Hungarian National Museum.

A book like this could not come to fruition without intellectual discussions in the accompaniment of a good coffee. The topics ranged from the rationale for genocide to the psychological underpinning of the Holocaust, and how “to make sense from the senseless.” I am especially indebted to Professor James Hatley for these enlightening dialogues.

A similar note of appreciation is due to my friend and colleague Mary Van Keuren, who meticulously reviewed and corrected the manuscript. She devoted more time than
I asked for in pouring over the material. Her insightful comments and suggestions not only enriched the book, but it shaped, in some degree, the general tone of it. Her observation that I write as a European might be true.

Finally, I am indebted to Dr. Deb Dooley for the review of the final version of the manuscript. By helping to identify grammatical errors and inconsistencies in the text, she provided insightful comments about these issues. Her sensitivity in reading and commenting on this challenging subject made invaluable contributions to the quality of this book.

Special thanks and gratitude are deserved for the survivors. Many of them are not with us anymore. They volunteered their voices to recount painful memories from a dark epoch that many might want to repress. They were willing to share their stories with future generations in the hope of never forgetting and never letting such an atrocity happen again. These survivors provided the most gripping and unforgettable moments by sharing with me, however inadvertently, their anger, pain, and incomprehension for the sufferings and losses they had to endure. The common thread through their narratives were their never-healing psychological wounds. Yet, each individual dealt with this trauma in their own way, and there a special thank-you is due to László Zobel. He was the only one who provided life interviews and in-depth insights, at age one hundred. My meetings, and friendly discussions with him not only enriched this book, but evolved into a delightful friendship.

After finishing the manuscript, I decided to view selected videos and reread extant letters from Galicia to Budapest again, and suddenly came to the realization that I had missed some important details and nuances. An anguished sentence, a furtive look, a long pause, and a painful expression sometime convey more than a long-winded tale. I was especially taken by the testimony of Cipora Brenner. She is multilingual, so her selection in communicating her tragic story in perfect Hungarian surprised me. For me, her choice of the language of her tormentors still remains an enigma. And there were the deeply moving comments and psychological insights of Elizabeth (Erzsébet) Lubell about her survival and flight from the Kolomea Ghetto. Without their testimony, this book would not be complete. Many thanks Cipora and Elizabeth. Theirs and those of other survivors’ stories are also remarkable, if often devastating, for their haunting testimonies bring history vividly to life. It reminds me of Marie Colvin’s dictum, as a war correspondent, that “war is about what happens to people.”

Finally, I should end with my deepest thanks to my wife, Cynthia, who patiently supported my work. Most importantly, her support expressed itself in giving me unfettered time for travel, research, discussions, and writing. She understood that this book had to be written and, as it turned out, is as much her accomplishment as mine. This patience cannot be better expressed than her words of encouragement: “Stop already the research and finish the damn book.” While you will not be able to see the final publication of this book, Cynthia, I love you for these words.