# The Search for Politanky

## *A Hidden Holocaust Refuge in Transnistria*

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**Abstract**

As the child of Holocaust survivors, I had thought that after more than seventy-five years little else could be learnt. But I was wrong. After my second journey to Ukraine and Transnistria in order to discover how my family had survived when hundreds of thousands of Jews had perished, I realized just how much so. Bukovina's Jews from Romania, Ukraine and Bessarabia had faced horrific pogroms, forced evacuations and death marches, and had then crossed the Dniester River into Transnistria. These are lesser known topics in Holocaust history. Of the 450,000 Jews sent there, approximately 250,000 died, not by guns, gas or ovens but through thirst, starvation, disease and bullet-free mass murders carried out by the Nazis and their Romanian allies. Transnistria's Holocaust history must be visited and revised. We owe it to the survivors, ourselves, our children and to history itself, before altering what has been written, or not, becomes impossible.

**Keywords:** death march, Holocaust survival, pogrom, Stanestie de Jos, Transnistria

> Every account of the Holocaust, every Jewish family dinner table discussion, every book, tells a unique story about this unfathomable crime. It is the task of the researcher to find commonalities, patterns and differences among the unique parts.
>
> —Shulamit Reinharz, 'Foreword'[1]

## An explanation

I am neither historian nor sleuth, but once I had heard the name 'Politanky' – the tiny village in Transnistria (Ukraine) where my mother and her parents found refuge for nearly three years during the Holocaust, my mother hidden from sight and my grandparents as slave laborers – I knew I would have to try to find it.

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## Another explanation

If this were my mother writing, I know what she might have said several years ago regarding her Holocaust survival after being hidden in Politanky:

> The most obvious difference between what had happened to Anne Frank, as one well-known example among six million, and what had happened to me, is that I survived and she did not. For more than seventy years I had not realized that I had the right to tell my story. I mean, why would it be interesting to read about it? What would make it special seeing as I am still walking around to talk about it?
>
> In other words, not having a blue number tattooed onto my arm always made me feel that I was somewhat of a second-class citizen among Holocaust survivors; no one knew where Transnistria was anyway.
>
> So how would I explain myself to the world, a Holocaust survivor who had sat looking out of a window for almost three years as a child, hidden silently from the rest of the war-torn world by tall fields of corn and sunflowers in the unknown village of Politanky?
>
> What kind of hell is that?

Allow me to try and explain.

## An obsession

For children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, visiting the places in Europe where their families had stayed alive during World War II is not a new or unusual topic, especially if their parents were in a commonly known extermination camp such as Auschwitz. Esther Jilovsky gives a concise explanation as to why she believes this is so:

> We will see that for the second generation who did not experience the Holocaust, visiting sites of memory is highly significant and perhaps at some level substitutes for not having experienced the Holocaust itself … Second generation texts exhibit the desire to assimilate what protagonists know from their survivor parents, and what they may see at the sites of Holocaust memory. They attest to a conflict between what can be known and what remains unknown: what the second generation can discover about the Holocaust and what it is never possible for them to know. Visiting Holocaust sites enables the second generation to claim that 'I was there', whereas testimony from their parents makes it clear that they were not…[2]

Private journeys or organized trips take place on a regular basis from the United States, Europe and Israel, but what of the thousands of undocumented locations and hiding places, many of which are still being discovered (or not) in more remote areas of Transnistria, Ukraine and other locales? How does a person begin a search for a place which at the time had not even appeared on any map or on the World Wide Web?

I suppose the word 'obsession' comes to mind as some form of initial explanation, for this was something I felt I could accomplish. Why was this so important to me? What were my ambitions? Searching for and eventually finding Politanky would be my way of showing respect to my mother and grandparents, who I suppose had never felt their Holocaust survival experience was worth discussing, or was too terrible to reveal, whatever their personal reasons had been.

Yet this is where they had been, living, hiding, working, surviving for nearly three years, and I wanted to see it for myself. Was this wrong or strange? Perhaps a little, because in the language of the period after the Holocaust had ended, it was better to forget it all and just be thankful to be alive in America, Great Britain, Australia or Israel.

## A mystery

I had first heard the name Politanky when I was in my fifties. My mother had survived the Holocaust some seventy years earlier. I believe this was due in part to the writing of my own book, which had started out as a collection of photographs and stories from my family's life in Bukovina, Romania before World War II, but then began to develop into a great deal more.

I had always felt the weight of the Holocaust, an invisible anchor attached to me since the day I was born. It now wanted to release its hold and reveal itself, gradually at first, like the peeling of an onion, to use the common analogy. Yet, if you will forgive me, I felt it was something more like a young lover's tenuous attempts at first seduction. That's how mysterious it all was.

When my mother uttered the name 'Politanky' – the tiny village where she, her parents, her aunt and infant cousin had been hidden, the adults going out to work as slave labourers at the on-site melon farm – it almost seemed to surprise her. She had never mentioned it to me, and neither had my grandparents, who had barely uttered a word about their Holocaust survival while they were still alive. Had my own book affected her so much that the name of the place where she had been hidden was suddenly jolted back into her memory? I, too, felt something had been

awakened within me; an unconscious urge had been touched and I had been changed forever. I knew immediately that I would get to Politanky, somehow. At the time, it seemed more like trying to discover another planet, not just travelling to a place at the end of a long plane ride. It seemed so remote, more than just flying to Romania or Ukraine to find it, because my family's survival had always been somewhat foggy, not solidly connected to this earth. Now that there was a name attached to this ghost, it had in one instant become a reality, and a real place could be reached. But first of all, I would have to gather clues as to how to begin the search…

## A journey: 1941

I had always known that my family members had survived a horrific pogrom in their small hometown village of Unter-Stanestie (or Stanestie de Jos, now Nyzhni Stanivitzi, Ukraine), which as a child I understood was in Romania. There had also been an even tinier village, called Vivos (now Vivis), almost completely unheard of, which is where they had actually lived.

**Figure 1.** My mother's childhood home. This small house, located next to the lumber mill, was recently sold by the state for the first time, having remained empty since World War II. It is now (2018) under renovation, more than seventy-seven years after the pogrom took place on a large field behind the home in early July 1941. Photograph by the author.

This pogrom was documented originally in German in 1962 by Josef Schapira, who provides great detail on the events, even down to the capture of my grandfather and his eventual escape.

> On 27 June 1941, following Germany's declaration of war on Russia (22 June 1941), the armed Ukrainian population gathered in the church to discuss the annihilation of the town's Jews. On this day, almost all the Jewish men and those women who didn't want to be separated from their husbands and sons were locked in the courthouse. At the same time, the murderers held a 'trial' in the community building in which the Jews were condemned to death. On 28 July 1941, sixty-five Jews were divided into groups and murdered. One group was taken to the hill overlooking the Fischer estate and a second group was taken to the saw mill on the Vivos. There, they were murdered in a bestial way with axes and other household tools. The first victim was Nathan Wagner and among the others were Rabbi Friedlaender and his two sons. It was a miracle that Abraham S. rescued himself by running bound and half naked into a nearby forest. He lives today in America. The killing went on for three days. At the same time, the surviving old people, widows and orphans were rounded up by the Romanian police and taken to Waschkoutz and from there, on 1 August, to Jedinetz (Bessarabia). The majority of these unfortunates died from stress and starvation. Those who stayed behind were shot, and many were buried alive. The survivors went by foot to Bershad, Moghilev, Murafa, Vapniarka, Tulchin and other towns in Transnistria. Many of these people were taken over the Bug River to German slave labour camps from which no one returned alive. In three years, 172 Stanestie residents died in Transnistria.[3]

In a recent article, 'He Spoke Yiddish Like a Jew', Simon Geissbuhler concisely summarizes the facts of the pogrom in Stanestie and surrounding villages and offers insights into some of the political factors that may have contributed to the participation of local residents in carrying out the atrocities:

> In Stanestii de Jos, a village east of Czernovitz … the locals organized a Ukrainian national committee to take control of the village 'arresting' the Jews and holding them in the mayor's office or the saw mill. The Ukrainian nationalists soon began to murder their prisoners, and when the Russian army reached Stanestii de Jos, the pogrom was intensified. Upon his arrival, the Romanian gendarmerie's commander put a stop to the blood bath, but by that time between eighty and one hundred and thirty Jews had already been killed … The Jews barricaded themselves in their homes, and the Ukrainians 'patrolled' usually armed with agricultural tools, for firearms were not widely available. The Ukrainians then decided to 'fetch' the Jews from their homes and concentrate them in

> one place. A list was compiled from which the names of the Jewish men were read out one by one, after which these were led away … Most of the Jewish men were beaten to death – only a few were shot … Chana W. … related how Ukrainian neighbors rampaged through the village armed with hammers and sickles. According to W., more than eighty Jews were killed in the pogrom. Close to the village, local perpetrators killed a pregnant woman and beheaded her … The massacres of Jews by the local population sometimes seem especially puzzling because the perpetrators are civilians and the victims are their neighbors … Later when it became clear that it was possible to murder with impunity, people murdered so that no one would be there to remember the stolen property.[4]

In the text by Schapira mentioned above, Abraham S. is my grandfather. He escaped capture, survived the pogrom and Transnistria and died aged ninety-four in New York City. In the quote from Geissbuhler, Chana W. is my mother's first cousin, today aged eighty-four, the daughter of

**Figure 2.** Mass grave for one hundred Jews killed in the Stanestie pogrom on 3 July 1941. Although the pogrom took place behind my mother's home, and the original mass grave site that had been prepared hours before the murders took place was behind the lumber mill, during the 1960s flooding brought the bones of the Jewish victims out of the ground. A new grave site built using donations by Jews from overseas lies within the grounds of the Christian cemetery, where it remains to this day. Photograph by the author.

my grandmother's sister, who had hidden her father in the town hall with two of her sisters and her mother. She also survived the pogrom and Transnistria. The pregnant woman mentioned as being beheaded was Chaika, one of my grandmother's sisters and therefore Chana's and my mother's aunt. Chaika was caught in the forest with her young husband trying to escape the slaughter. No further explanation has ever been given or found for her beheading.

While in Stanestie in June 2017, I gained access to some of the key areas of the pogrom mentioned, including the former town hall where the men had been ordered to report for 'registration' and all women and children had been collected before being deported from the village on foot. The men were taken out into separate side rooms for 'interrogation', only to be led away and slaughtered in the field behind my mother's home next to the lumber mill where my grandfather had been the manager. There, a large pit had been prepared for the approximately one hundred victims who were beaten and stabbed to death, most likely with tools from the mill.

Being there for the second time (having been previously in 2007), this trip was completely different. I now knew the facts by heart and could put each one of them in order in a logical chain of events. The hall where the women and children were ordered to congregate by the Romanian militia aided by Ukrainian locals now looks like any other old-fashioned theatre, unchanged from the time it was built, most likely after World War I, except for fresh coats of paint, floor polish and perhaps a change of stage curtains. In this room, where my mother's cousins had saved their father, they had been spotted by an apparently sympathetic local who was guarding the women. When he noticed what they were trying to do, he told the other guards to ignore them because he was just a harmless, crazy man. My mother's uncle survived.

Another of my mother's uncles was not so fortunate. His wife had implored him not to go to the town hall for 'registration', but he went. He was subjected to 'interrogation' and was then taken by cart to the lumber mill in Vivos where he was eventually murdered along with the others. My mother's aunt and five-year-old cousin survived by leaving their home with all of its contents to the chief of police, who in fact did as he said he would: he took them by wagon to her sister's home in Chernovitz. The sister's husband, a scientist and 'necessary Jew' according to the Romanian government, was given extra food stamps for his family and never had to leave his home in the Chernovitz ghetto until the end of the war when they emigrated to Israel.

In this former town hall building, where my mother recollects buying candy in a small sweets shop that had been situated there before World

War II, are now located a pharmacy and a second-hand shop selling all sorts of used clothing and household items. Except for one woman aged approximately forty to fifty who had known a bit about the village's sorrowful past, the young saleswomen behind the counters in the two shops had no inkling of what had transpired in the very building in which they were working.

I knew that my relatives, along with thousands of other deportees from Bukovina, had walked from Stanestie to Transnistria over a period of several months, from July to October 1941, but I had not comprehended what that really meant. What is it like to walk for hundreds of kilometres in the broiling heat of the Ukrainian summer guarded by Romanian soldiers on horseback with whips? What is it like to sleep outside on the road and beg for scraps of food from local peasants or search the ground for leftover vegetables still growing from the earth or rotting in the summer sun? Once reaching the Dniester River, how did they manage to get across to reach the transfer station of Moghilev, only to be dispersed once again to other camps or ghettos like birds fleeing from one season to the next?

When I was younger, I had always imagined that Transnistria was one huge concentration camp, nothing remotely similar to Auschwitz or any of the other large extermination camps created by the Nazis. How little I knew (we knew?), and how wrong I was. Somehow the rare discussions, which I do not consciously remember ever hearing, contained mention of surviving the pogrom in Stanestie and then somehow jumped to 'after the war', arriving in the United States with the assistance of an uncle who had 'sponsored' them, giving my grandfather his first job, a place to live and a new start until he could get on his feet once again. Now with a new baby as well, born exactly one week after the end of World War II, Transnistria, never mind Politanky, were somehow overlooked/deliberately skipped over. I certainly didn't realize it then, but perhaps I understand why a bit more today.

Transnistria, even today, raises the image in my mind of a huge, vacant territory, not the reality of hundreds of small camps and ghettos, each a world unto itself, some as small death camps, some as functioning farms. It has taken me sixty years to fill this empty void with facts and truths that were there all along: disguised, distorted or untold. And by 'me', I mean that I have taken it upon myself to attempt to amend the historical truth, for there can be only one. For if not me, then who? Not every second- or third-generation child or grandchild finds interest or need in seeking out the past as I do. This is no one's fault and there is no shame to be had. It was just the hand of cards that I had been dealt, and I would see it out to the end, or at least until I had no more chips to put into the pot.

## A history?

Since there is so little mention of Politanky on the World Wide Web, we may look to the closest village, Shargorod (which plays a role in our saga), to get some background information as to what the Jewish community in the area may have looked like:

> Founded in the late 16th century, this town 190 miles southwest of Kiev is [was] one of the few remaining 'shtetls' – the settlements where Jews were forced to live in imperial Russia. These townships saw anti-Semitic massacres in the 17th and 18th centuries; the birth of Hassidism, one of the most powerful spiritual movements in modern Jewish history; and the hardships of the 19th century, when Jews were confined to the region called the 'Pale of Settlement'. Shargorod's synagogue, built in 1589, is a testimony to past glory with its white, fortified walls. The Soviets turned it into a liquor factory. A labyrinth of metal vats now conceals the carved stone columns inside.
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> The war: Shargorod was occupied by Romanian troops allied with Nazi Germany. That was a break for the town. The Romanians brought in some of their own Jews, but limited themselves to harassment and beatings … 'There used to be a ghetto here during the war. The Romanians put barbed wire around these streets and made us stay inside. Many people died of hunger. But they were not killing us, like the Germans did' … German troops who occupied nearby areas slaughtered hundreds of thousands of Jews.
>
> Before the Soviet collapse, Shargorod was designated as a historic site, but Ukraine has no money to preserve the town … 'It's impossible to save Shargorod', says Leonid Finberg, head of Kiev's Jewish Institute. 'At one point, I considered it to be terribly important, but I no longer think so. One must realize that the value of human life, or of educating a child, is much more precious. So, let it be as it would. It's a slowly disappearing world … It's a drying branch of the Jewish tree', Finberg says. 'But it's important to let this branch dry out quietly by itself. Maybe 50, 100 years will pass, but nobody should cut it off by force'.[5]

The small town of Politanky may have developed out of the need for the local population to increase production of corn and sunflower fields. The placement of two major churches within the tiny village attests to the fact that more than likely no Jews had ever lived there. Jews who may have been nearby throughout the five hundred-year history of the area, since the establishment of the city of Vinnitsa, would probably have used the synagogues and/or the Jewish cemeteries located in Shargorod. However, there is no way of knowing for certain if Jews had ever lived in Politanky or not.

## A clue: 2015

Fate would have it (or was it in the cards?) that in June 2015 I made a quick decision to get to Politanky, assisted by a cousin with diplomatic papers and licence plates. This was just about the time of the beginning of advances in 'Google Earth' and 'Waze', but these had not yet arrived in Eastern Europe, and Politanky could not yet be found on the World Wide Web. Through my cousin's connections, a well-versed Moldavian museum director produced an 'Encyclopedia of the Holocaust' in Russian, which looked more like a huge sorcerer's manual from a *Harry Potter* film, and found it. Now at least we had a destination on Earth, which would help, but not much. The next challenge would be to implement the physical evidence and combine it with the infant stages of the invisible modern technology and cellular phones and see if Politanky would be found. Now that I had a location, the means and companions with proper permission and travel documents, we were off!

When we reached the ferry to cross the Dniester River into Transnistria, I felt as if we were truly travelling back in time. The updated car took centre stage in the middle of the heavy wooden-planked ferry, operated as it had always been with metal chains used as pulleys, and ferry handlers on either side of the river who pulled us in the direction of the bank towards Transnistria. We landed after the 45-minute trip and had now entered a portion of the world where time had stood still. Once we had left the main road, there was no road to speak of at all. The 4x4 began to dance around the potholes, travelling from side to side to avoid either a herd of cows or a huge pit that could have swallowed up the front end of the vehicle.

While we were still relatively close to civilization, there was a fair amount of cell phone reception, but after one and a half or two hours, as we grew closer to the area we believed Politanky might be in, cell phone connection became quite weak. We were at an additional loss because no one in the car spoke Russian, the language of the villagers there. The roller-coaster ride was beginning to tire us, mentally and physically, when suddenly a sign in Russian appeared on the side of the road. We all knew what was written on it, even me, though I had never spoken or read a word of Russian: 'Welcome to Politanky'. A sudden chill went through me.

We turned and were now on a wide, dusty path lined on either side with huge fields of sunflowers and corn, half-grown in the early summer season. We continued slowly down the road until we realized that we had already exited the tiny village. We turned back around and

on the way back saw a large church with a smaller, much older one next to it. We walked towards the church, hoping to speak to the priest, but he was in the middle of Sunday services. Across from the church was a house with an incessantly barking dog whose owner finally came out to see what the fuss was all about. A woman of about fifty headed out of her gate slowly, one step at a time towards us, as we moved towards her. My cousin spoke only a few words of Russian, and his wife only Romanian. What saved the day was his very bright young daughter, who had learnt Russian in school. After some moments, in a creative language mix of Russian, Romanian and sign language, the woman began to speak.

She explained to us that her grandmother had told her that during World War II, eleven kilometres from where we were (perhaps Shargorod), there had been very bad fascists. Here, she said, there had also been Romanians, but they had not been so bad. Between the six of us, somehow the woman began to comprehend that I was American and that my mother had been in the area as a child. But she was still confused, as were we. What was I doing there? What was I looking for in Politanky? We tried desperately to find the words in Russian for 'melon' or even 'fruit' farm, but to no avail.

Where might the melon farm have been, on which my mother's family had worked while she and her little cousin were forced to stay indoors for three years, with no toys, no books, no other children to play with? We could no longer try to bring unknown words to our lips, or keep our new friend from her Sunday chores, or continue our search on that hot day in Politanky. We headed back out of town the way we had come in. My curiosity about Politanky and the melon farm refuge was not quenched, yet I felt I had made my family (and myself) proud by getting there at all.

## Another clue: 2017

It was not much later that the cards would deal me a full hand as I began translating for an organization dealing with the Holocaust and the exact historical gaps that I was trying to fill in. There is nothing to say except that this was the job of a lifetime and certainly 'fit like a glove'. One day, upon entering the office, I noticed a hand-drawn map of Bukovina on the wall, and to my surprise in letters as large as the other villages was written 'Politanky'. When I raised a question about it to the director, he simply said, 'Never heard of it', as had most scholars whom I had spoken to about the subject. But now, realizing that I had a general physical

location, I could attempt to begin my research once again and try to find the elusive melon farm.

'Google Earth' was becoming more widespread and I began to 'see' Politanky on the map and as it could be seen from the ground. This, however, would not help to corroborate any historical evidence about the melon farm. I soon learnt that the historical organization would be taking their second journey to the areas of Bukovina and Transnistria, which would be a unique opportunity for me to visit my mother and grandparents' hometown once again, and in addition perhaps find someone in Politanky who knew about the melon farm. With the latter in mind, I travelled to Ukraine and Romania in June 2017, believing that this time, better equipped with professional guides who spoke the necessary languages, I might have a better chance of uncovering something new.

## A discovery

One day during the journey, while the rest of our group was touring several camps and ghettos in Transnistria, I travelled with a private car and guide to Politanky. My excellent driver knew his way around the curvy forest-lined roads and we made the approximately 120-kilometre trip quite easily. Entering the village under that same Russian sign, I knew where I was, emotionally and psychologically, and realized that I would have to try to make the most out of this day trip in order to find any additional evidence. We drove all the way through the little village, a weekday this time, turned around and then drove up the path to where the churches were.

As we approached the end of that small road, we were near the church that was locked, and the home of the barking dog and the woman from my previous trip in 2015. My guide and I neared the house hoping to see the blonde-haired woman once again. Her daughter came out, not opening the gate for fear that the dog might either run out or bite us, and said: 'I remember you from last year'. The guide corrected her, saying that it had actually been two years. I asked for her mother, who was unfortunately not at home, and requested that she tell her that I had been back to see her once again. As we got back into the car to head out, we noticed a small grocery shop and decided to try our luck there. It was filled with basic foodstuffs, and the woman behind the counter was more than willing to speak to us. She offered us information about the oldest resident in the town, an 85-year-old woman who lived nearby, and directed us to the next dirt path with two or three small houses on it.

We arrived several moments later, and after knocking at the door, a woman in her fifties or sixties, perhaps her daughter or caretaker, came out. We asked to speak to the woman of the house and were invited inside. Half-lying, half-sitting on a sofa-bed on the nearly airless porch was Maria Chaika, who had lived all of her life in Politanky. She was aged eighty-five, which would have made her, quite similarly to my own mother, aged around nine or ten in 1941. My guide explained to her in Russian who I was and what I was trying to find out in Politanky. Maria Chaika, for all of her frailty and ill-health, spoke clearly without hesitation, as if she were describing something that had just happened to her yesterday. I doubt very much that she had told many people what she was about to tell us.

In 1941 her family had taken in a Jewish family of five who had been wandering around looking for shelter from the Romanian army, then cooperating with the Nazis. She recalled the names of two of the children. The mother, she said, 'we just called "Mama"'. After several weeks, the father felt unsafe hiding in the basement and went back alone to their hometown of Chernovitz to check on the current conditions for Jews there. He returned after some time, took his wife and children and left once again. Maria never knew what had become of them.

The guide returned her to our topic at hand, the infamous melon farm, but she had never known of such a place in Politanky. She continued by saying that most of the Jews and all that was connected to them had taken place near the old sixteenth-century synagogue and the Jewish ghetto in Shargorod. This seemed in retrospect to corroborate what our friend from 2015 had said, since Shargorod is about eleven kilometres from Politanky. Our conversation with Maria did not seem to tire her – at least no more than she already was – but what she had revealed to us was probably a secret that she had carried around with her for much of her life.

How coincidental it is that her family name, 'Chaika', similar to my Hebrew name (Chaya), been given to me in honour of my mother's aunt, Chaika, the beheaded woman and one of the few women killed during the Stanestie pogrom. There is no question that Maria's family name originally derived from Hebrew. About this, I did not ask her.[6]

## A realization: 2017

I asked my mother once again recently if there was anything more that she could remember about the barn or the farmhouse where she, her parents, other family members and additional workers had lived in hiding

for almost three years, from October 1941 until March 1944. She said that on the few occasions she had been allowed outside, she had tried to look around to see if she could see any other people, or even another house, but there was nothing and no one to be seen.[7]

I would like to believe that among the rolling hills the little refuge in which those people survived may exist even today. Their 'owner', caretaker, my grandparents' boss, saviour, employer, rescuer had made the decision to hide them from the rest of the tiny village, the community at large, the world, and he had succeeded. His motivations can neither be commended nor condemned; he himself wanted no recognition for the saving of Jews after the Holocaust had ended, whether in fear for his own life if war was to ever break out again, or fearing repercussions from neighbours or local government officials who may have found out about his actions later on. He himself was neither kind nor cruel towards the Jews whose lives he ended up saving. He had not provided them with any additional food, and perhaps only had sent them deep into the forest when approaching Romanian or Nazi troops entered the area in order to protect his own investment. We can never know the answers to these open-ended questions, and perhaps the best we can say is that he himself may not have known his own inner-most motivations for his actions. Perhaps he had simply taken advantage of a situation that turned out to have positive consequences for both him and his purchased possessions.

I left Politanky this time, knowing in my heart that there would be no other chance to interrogate or interview anyone else who might have been alive during that time. Whatever tiny communal farm or small barn had been used during the period from October 1941 to March 1944 may still be out there among the fields of corn and sunflowers near Politanky, but if it is, I will never find it.

## A conclusion

From this emotional adventure and its inconclusive solution, I felt a small pang of something like regret or sadness as the group and I crossed the modern-day bridge back over the Dniester River from the land of Transnistria into the country of Ukraine, a trip similar to the one that my family took after the Russian army liberated Transnistria from the Romanians and the Nazis in 1944, as they headed back towards their home in Bukovina and Stanestie. They did eventually make it back to Stanestie, for exactly one night, warned off by a concerned neighbour who allowed them to sleep in her home for a few hours until dawn. There were bands of killers in the forests waiting to murder any potential

witnesses who could identify the local villagers who had carried out the pogroms. From there, my family made their way to the village of Sadigura, and eventually to West Germany, from there emigrating to America.

## A rewritten history? A future

Ultimately, it was my mother who began to be able to comprehend why the title of my own book – which deals with, among other things, the emotional effect of the Holocaust on the next generations – was so appropriate.[8] As she was able to explain to others, a person who has gone through so much trauma and lost so many loved ones has great difficulty in trusting life; they cannot allow themselves to love, or at least they cannot allow themselves to express it. As she described it, she had been emotionally dead inside for a time during the Holocaust.[9]

Fortunately, after war's end, signs of life and happiness returned to her face, but internal emotional bruises remained. The ability to learn to trust and love again is almost like recovering from the heartbreak of a first puppy-love. With luck, you may love again; with less, the next generations grow up with an invisible scar over their hearts.

It is up to us to continue the search, physically and emotionally, to remove the last hint of shadowy memories thought to have been lost or buried forever, to accept these realities and move bravely on.

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## Notes

1. Shulamit Reinharz, 'Foreword', in Federica Clementi, *Holocaust Mothers and Daughters: Family History and Trauma* (Kindle edition) (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2013), ii.
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