

## Chapter Six

### The Last Jew in Vinnitsa, 1942



The Last Jew in Vinnitsa

**W**hat is his name, this last Jew in Vinnitsa? How does he find himself here, kneeling at the edge of a ditch filled with fresh corpses of husbands and wives, old widows and children, some orphaned for a mere 30 seconds before they tumble into the stinking pit to lie upon their parents' lifeless bodies?

That is the original paragraph I wrote on February 18, 2017 as I embarked on this project. This was to be the first chapter. Month by month, I moved it down the list, but I can delay no longer.

This searing image – “The Last Jew in Vinnitsa” – has haunted me since I first saw it a decade ago in 2007. Although the novel took a different direction, this picture inspired me to write *The Hamsa*, a story about human dignity. While I describe *The Hamsa* as a holocaust story, it is a story of human triumph and human failure built around my conviction that God creates us with two special gifts: the freedom of choice and human dignity. Our freedom to choose is forever with us, from our first to final breath, but dignity is different. No one can take our dignity from us, but we can choose to give it away.

Ten years after I penned the opening sentence of *The Hamsa* – “My mother had a dog.” – I gaze again at this picture of the Last Jew and Elie Wiesel’s words echo loudly in my mind, “To forget means to deny the relevance of the past.” Mr. Wiesel’s statement and this Last Jew inspired me to write *Tree Rings*. The image is forever burned into my brain.

You might think it odd that when I look at this picture, I think of the parable of the prodigal son. While I believe the story of the prodigal son is one of the most powerful parables that Jesus uses to teach about unconditional love, the story is unfinished. What happens to the father and the brothers after the party? Do the brothers reconcile? Do they live happily ever after? What about the mother? Is she not a part of the story, too?

Although the days, weeks, months and years that follow the instant this photo was captured on film are well-documented in history, to me, the story behind the photo is unfinished. I have asked myself over and over this question: does the bespectacled man holding the weapon pull the trigger?

The original story I wrote in February is my answer to that question. I choose not to reveal it.

I wrote the original draft eight months ago and was completing final editing this month in preparation for October 1 release, but as I walked my dog Hans in the black and star-filled sky early on the morning of September 18, I decided to forgo fictional speculation on this, the most powerful photograph I know of.

And so, dear reader, I beg your forgiveness as I include this ‘unchapter,’ originally written as Chapter One and now included as Chapter Six. In good conscience, however, it must be a part of this manuscript as testament to Mr. Wiesel’s message to humanity, “To forget means to deny the relevance of the past.”