

KASZTNER'S CRIME

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Introduction

This book is about one of the most intense controversies of the Holocaust. It explains how an attempt to save the innocent became an instrument of their murder. It shows how the illusion of rescue was used to camouflage the reality of genocide and then turned into an alibi for war criminals—and how the protests of the survivors have been consigned to oblivion.

By 1944 the majority of Jews in the Nazi sphere of influence were dead. Yet Hungary's Jewish community, though far from unscathed, was largely intact. Moreover, many Hungarian Jews were still oblivious to the fate that had befallen millions of their coreligionists under Hitler's rule. On March 19, 1944, their innocence was suddenly and cruelly shattered when the Nazis occupied Hungary. Accompanying the German armed forces were Adolf Eichmann and his SS staff. Their mission was to organize the deportation of all the Jews in Hungary—over three-quarters of a million men, women, and children¹—to Auschwitz.

Eichmann had only 150–200 SS personnel at his disposal. He also had very little time: the Nazis were losing the war, and it would not be long before the Germans were beaten back by the Red Army. It was no simple matter to murder so many people in such a brief interval. Nevertheless, Eichmann performed his grisly task with extraordinary speed and efficiency: for eight weeks, beginning in mid-May 1944, he was able to load Jews onto the death trains at the rate of up to twelve thousand souls per day.

As they were making the arrangements for this tremendous slaughter, officers of the SS conducted “rescue negotiations” with representatives of Hungary's Jewish population. One of the aims of these negotiations, from the Nazi standpoint, was to lull the Jewish side into a false sense of security and to abort any effective steps to save Jewish lives. The key Jewish figure in the talks with the SS was Rezső Kasztner, acting head of a small Zionist rescue committee in Budapest. Kasztner had already compiled a record of courageous activism in saving Jews from

extermination in Poland and Slovakia. Recognizing his importance, the SS officers granted him special exemptions from their antisemitic measures and treated him as the major spokesman for Hungary's Jews.

In the fateful weeks of the mass deportations to Auschwitz, Kasztner and Eichmann were locked in heated discussions about the possibility of sparing Jewish lives. Ultimately Eichmann agreed to gather a special group of 1,684 Jews, who were first taken hostage and later sent to Switzerland by train. By that point, Eichmann and his local henchmen had rounded up well over four hundred thousand other Jews and sent them to a terrible destination. At the end of the war, the Jewish death toll from the Nazi occupation of Hungary stood at half a million.

During the negotiations, Eichmann presented a "rescue plan" that was as far-reaching as it was far-fetched. He announced to Kasztner's colleague Joel Brand that he was prepared to free a million Jews from Nazi-occupied Europe in exchange for ten thousand trucks and other goods from the West. Brand traveled to Turkey to explain the offer—the so-called Goods for Blood deal—to the Zionist movement. The latter duly informed the British and lobbied for their support. But Eichmann, who had promised to postpone the destruction of Hungary's Jews until the end of Brand's mission, was already delivering hundreds of thousands to the gas chambers.²

Given the obstacles facing Eichmann's tiny SS unit at the time of the Nazi occupation in the penultimate year of the war, it is remarkable that the Hungarian Jews were sent to their deaths so quickly. Only outside pressure forced the Hungarians to call a halt to the deportations in July 1944, at the eleventh hour. Otherwise, Eichmann would have achieved the total destruction of the country's Jewish population during the few short months of his "rescue negotiations" with Kasztner and his "rescue offer" to Brand.

Kasztner survived the war under Nazi protection. After the Holocaust he was hailed as a savior by many of the passengers of his special train—which came to be known as the Kasztner Train—but condemned as a collaborator by many of the death camp survivors from Hungary. It was alleged that, as a condition of his deal with the killers, he had knowingly misled the victims about their fate. In his home city of Kolozsvár (now Cluj-Napoca) in North Transylvania, there was a campaign to try him *in absentia*: the suspicion was that he had encouraged the local Jewish leaders to save their own lives by deceiving many thousands of ordinary Jews into boarding the trains to Auschwitz.

In December 1947, Kasztner moved from Switzerland to Palestine. Although there was ongoing controversy surrounding his dealings with the Nazis, he succeeded in becoming an Israeli government official. But his wartime record finally caught up with him in 1954, when the government prosecuted an elderly Jew, Malkiel Grünwald, for branding him a Nazi collaborator. The case, now known as the Kasztner Trial, became a *cause célèbre*. In his verdict, the trial judge agreed with Grünwald that Kasztner had collaborated with the SS, remarking that in doing so he had “sold his soul to the Devil.” This finding provoked public uproar and led to the collapse of the government. The verdict was appealed to the Supreme Court, but it was too late for Kasztner: in March 1957, he was assassinated by right-wing extremists in Tel Aviv.

Delivering their decision, the majority of the Supreme Court judges voted to overturn the trial verdict. But they were very far from exonerating Kasztner: all of the judges agreed that he had wrongfully saved SS officer Kurt Becher from punishment at the Nuremberg Trials. Subsequently, it was discovered that Kasztner had intervened on behalf of several other SS war criminals at Nuremberg.

That was not the only evidence unknown to the Supreme Court judges. They did not have access to most of Kasztner’s communications with his foreign contacts during the destruction of the Hungarian Jews. The analysis of those messages in the following pages will help us to understand, for the first time, how the Nazis were able to mislead world opinion for several crucial weeks as they did their inhuman work.

This book also exposes, for the first time, the conveyor belt of deception from Budapest that enabled the Nazis to manipulate Jewish leaders in ghettos throughout Hungary. Readers will learn why hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews boarded the death trains either in total ignorance of where the trains were taking them or in the belief that they were being resettled for labor. Understanding the Kasztner affair allows us to unlock one of the central mysteries of the Holocaust in Hungary: the secret of how Eichmann was able to prevent panic among the Jewish population of the ghettos and secure their obedience to the SS machinery of mass murder.

Despite decades of anguished debate among Jewish communities, Holocaust survivors, and historians in Israel and abroad, there is still no consensus on whether Kasztner was a savior or a collaborator—a Jewish version of Oskar Schindler or a Jewish equivalent of Vidkun Quisling. This investigation aims to resolve the controversy once and

for all. It reproduces extensive testimony from the Kasztner Trial, most of it never before seen in English. It uncovers in Kasztner's statements shocking new information that previous research has missed. It is also the first book to give an accurate account of his messages to the outside world during the deportations to Auschwitz. And it contains new evidence from his private papers.³ It asks the following questions:

- Were Hungary's Jews aware that the Nazis intended to murder them?
- What preparations did the Zionists make before the Nazi occupation? Did they succeed in building a viable underground rescue network?
- Was there any connection between Eichmann's success in deporting the Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz and his negotiations with Kasztner?
- What did Kasztner tell the outside world as the mass murder of Hungary's Jews was taking place?
- Did Kasztner really help to rescue tens or even hundreds of thousands of Jews, as he asserted after the war?
- Why did Kasztner intervene on behalf of several of his wartime Nazi contacts at Nuremberg?

The answers to these questions will bring us to the most disturbing issue of all: was the head of the Jewish rescue operation in Budapest working as an accomplice of the Nazis during the genocide of his country's Jews?

Notes

1. At the time of the occupation, there were 762,000 Jews in Hungary: Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary*, Vol. 2 (Boulder, CO: Social Science Monographs in association with Columbia University Press, 1994), 1298, Table 32.1.
2. On May 15, 1944, Eichmann gave Brand two weeks to return from his mission. Within that space of time, Eichmann deported the first two hundred thousand Hungarian Jews: Braham, *The Politics of Genocide*, Vol. 1, 673.
3. Kasztner's personal papers were made available to my fellow researcher Eli Reichenthal by the Kasztner family and have since been donated by them to Yad Vashem.