

# A traitor in Budapest

Rudolf Kasztner was not a hero but an unscrupulous Nazi collaborator, insists British historian Paul Bogdanor in his new book **By Tibor Krausz**

**REZSŐ KASZTNER** was a much-maligned hero of the Holocaust. Or he was a villainous Nazi collaborator. It depends who you ask and how you look at it. Over 70 years after the end of World War II and almost 60 years after his death, the Jewish-Hungarian Zionist leader remains a highly controversial figure.

To his defenders, like Israeli historian Shoshana Ishoni-Barri and Hungarian-born Canadian writer Anna Porter, the author of “Kasztner’s Train” (2007), Kasztner (who later changed his name to Rudolf Kastner) was a plucky and resourceful mensch who single-handedly saved a trainload of Jews, including his own relatives, during one of the Holocaust’s darkest days – the mass deportation of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz in the spring and summer of 1944. To his detractors, like the late Jewish-American writer Ben Hecht, who condemned the Hungarian Jew in “Perfidy,” his 1961 book of reportage, Kasztner was a *moser*, a traitor, who betrayed his 800,000 fellow Hungarian Jews just so he could save his own skin.

The facts of Kasztner’s actions in the months following the Nazis’ occupation of Hungary in March 1944 are scarcely in much doubt: they have long been documented and dissected, explored and evaluated. It’s his reasons for what he did that still divide opinion.

Was Kasztner, the de facto head of the Zionist Aid and Rescue Committee in Budapest, eagerly liaising with Adolf Eichmann and his henchmen so as to save any Hungarian Jews he could from deportation and certain death in Auschwitz-Birkenau? Or was he doing so out of sheer self-interest in order to make himself indispensable to the Nazis by helping send hundreds of thousands of other Jews blindly to their fate through willful deception?

In his book “Kasztner’s Crime,” British author and researcher Paul Bogdanor seeks to settle the debate once and for all. Kasztner, the author argues, was guilty as charged. And that fact, he asserts, needs to be reiterated in the face of renewed attempts to rehabilitate the Jewish-Hungarian lawyer from Transylvania, in today’s Romania, who became a leader of Hungarian Jewry in Budapest in 1944-45.

“Over the past decade, several books and a major film ‘Killing Kasztner’ have painted Kasztner as a hero,” Bogdanor tells *The Jerusalem Report*. “This year [Israeli playwright] Motti Lerner’s play championing him will be revived. Most of the Holocaust survivors who spoke out against Kasztner are no longer here to challenge his apologists. We all have a moral obligation to preserve the testimony of these Holocaust survivors.”

Challenge those apologists he duly does.

Bogdanor’s book is a meticulously researched, cogently argued and at times riveting indictment of Kasztner, which is bound to reopen debate on the wartime Zionist leader’s role in the destruction of Hungary’s Jewish community.

**IN APRIL** and May 1944, the author demonstrates at length, Kasztner knew full well that the Nazis were busy deporting Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz, where the gas chambers awaited them. Yet he covered for Eichmann in the latter’s cynical ploy whereby the German architect of Hungary’s genocide sought to buy himself time for the mass murder of Hungary’s Jews by promising to spare them in exchange for \$2 million in cash and 10,000 trucks from the Allies. By so doing, Kasztner knowingly aided the Nazis with their subterfuge and helped lull local Jews into a false sense of security.

This proved vital because Eichmann’s small team of SS stalwarts who were tasked with the mass deportation of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz-Birkenau feared that, even with the help of 20,000 Hungarian gendarmes, they would be outnumbered if Hungarian Jews, knowing their impending fate, fled or resisted, just as the residents of the Warsaw Ghetto had done the year before. Hungary’s Jews didn’t flee or rise up, Bogdanor posits, thanks in no small part to



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Rudolf Kasztner in a broadcasting booth at Kol Yisrael radio station, where he hosted a program in Hungarian

Kasztner's lies and deception.

Shortly after the Nazis occupied Hungary in March 1944 – in response to secret plans by the country's head of state Admiral Miklós Horthy, Hitler's now dithering ally who had sought to sue for peace with the Allies in the face of looming German defeat – hundreds of thousands of Jews were rounded up and cloistered in crowded makeshift ghettos, from where they were

then promptly deported en masse. "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," Bogdanor notes. Within a mere two months, some 400,000 Jews would be dead.

Meanwhile, Kasztner acquiesced in the charade that his negotiations with the Na-

zis on behalf of Hungary's Jews were proceeding well. "Kasztner's negotiations succeeded only in enhancing his own status," Bogdanor argues. "So rapid was Kasztner's ascent that his committee managed to usurp the political contacts with the Nazis from the official Judenrat [Jewish council], which increasingly deferred to his wishes. Eichmann's officers had not, of course, bestowed this extraordinary promotion on the

head of the rescue committee for free. The price for the rise of Kasztner would be paid by the Jewish population of Hungary.”

**KASZTNER REVELED** in his newfound status and the perks that came with it: he could travel around unimpeded and did not have to wear the yellow star that marked all other Jews. To keep those perks, Kasztner was willing to sell out his coreligionists. This he did by concealing from them the contents of a secret eyewitness report, the so-called Auschwitz Protocols, which he received in April 1944 from two Jewish escapees from Auschwitz about the extent of mass murder going on there and the plans being put in place for the extermination of Hungarian Jews. Rather than alert the Jewish deportees, he let them persist in the belief that they were being taken to a labor camp in Hungary, not to an extermination camp in Poland.

After the war, Kasztner claimed that he had tried to warn local Jewish communities but in vain. There might have been some truth to that assertion insofar as several other Jewish leaders, too, assisted the Nazis in their deceit, either out of fear or ignorance.

Bogdanor will have none of that excuse, however. The author, who scoured archives for unpublished materials and drew on the transcripts of both Kasztner’s and Eichmann’s trials in Jerusalem for his conclusions, insists that contemporary eyewitness accounts belie those claims. “Kasztner suppressed the report of the two Auschwitz escapees, Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler, as part of his policy of pursuing only Nazi-approved ‘rescue’ deals while deceiving the Hungarian-Jewish masses about Auschwitz,” Bogdanor tells *The Report*.

In the same vein, Kasztner misled Jews in his own hometown of Kolozsvár (today Cluj-Napoca in Romania) about their prospects by reassuring them that they would be deported to a new agricultural settlement for Jews in Hungary. His reason: to make sure they would not outnumber their guards

and flee, which could have exposed him to Eichmann’s wrath.

Worse: Kasztner continued lying to his foreign Zionist contacts, including David Ben-Gurion, about his negotiations with the Nazis on behalf of Hungarian Jews by portraying what he knew was a charade as a promising avenue for rescue operations. He did so on orders from Eichmann and unwittingly admitted as much in an aside in one of his postwar testimonies. “As the ghettos in Hungary were being emptied at maximum speed and with utmost cruelty, the Zionist leaders in Palestine became the naive victims of a calculated deception by the killers,” Bogdanor writes. “In this deception, the head of the Jewish rescue committee in Budapest played a key part.”

### The price for the rise of Kasztner would be paid by the Jewish population of Hungary

Worse still: Kasztner also misled his own colleagues on the Zionist rescue committee in Budapest. He told them that Eichmann was keeping his word about staying mass executions in Auschwitz, even though he knew the opposite was true. He also leaned on them to stop underground rescue missions in order not to antagonize the Nazis – and thereby risk losing his protected status, which he had earned by aiding them.

To top it all off, he helped the Nazis distribute fraudulent postcards that allegedly content Jewish inmates at Waldsee, a fictitious site of resettlement, sent back to their relatives in stifling ghettos, imploring the latter to follow them. It was a Nazi ploy to get Hungary’s Jews to board the trains to Auschwitz willingly.

Lies, falsehoods, deceptions. The ques-

tion is: Why?

Kasztner didn’t act not out of spite or vicarious bloodlust; he did so out of calculated self-interest. By collaborating with the Nazis wholeheartedly, he wanted to avoid jeopardizing, at any cost, the special privileges he received from them. In the process, however, he ended up playing a pivotal role in the death of half a million Hungarian Jews by helping to buy enough time for the Germans and their Hungarian allies to murder thousands of people daily... all the while pretending that the Nazis were willing to let those very same Jews go free for a ransom. Kasztner chose to “sacrifice his conscience to his ambition” is how Bogdanor sees it.

It’s of course doubtful whether Kasztner would have been able to make any difference, even had he raised the alarm in time. But his active collusion with the Nazis helped prevent any genuine rescue efforts from being even considered by local Jewish leaders or their foreign contacts. “Eichmann wanted to gain time to murder the Jewish population of Hungary: as he saw it, the offer of rescue negotiations would undermine any genuine possibility of rescue,” Bogdanor insists. To that end, Kasztner “converted the rescue committee from an underground network into a client institution under the official protection of the murderers.”

Ironically, it was his biggest reward for doing so that would later help establish his reputation as a Jewish hero of the Holocaust. On June 30, 1944, a train with 35 cattle cars departed from Budapest. On it were 1,684 Jews, whose places had been booked in return for a large hoard of valuables. The passengers, who included the Satmar Rebbe, Joel Teitelbaum, as well as numerous other Jewish notables, would reach the safety of Switzerland after a tortuous six-month journey, which included a weeks-long detention at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany. The “Kasztner Train” became a celebrated rescue mission, earn-

ing accolades for its eponymous originator, who described it as a Noah's Ark for Hungarian Jewry.

The Nazis' motive for allowing select Jewish passengers to leave Budapest on a special train was to keep them as valuable hostages while scores of other trains continued carrying other Hungarian Jews to their deaths at Auschwitz. "[A]ny obstruction of the final Nazi measures to destroy the Jewish masses could be countered by a threat to liquidate the chosen passengers of the Kasztner Train at a moment's notice," Bogdanor writes.

**KASZTNER UNDERSTOOD** this, but to save a few, he was willing to sacrifice the many. What mattered to him, above all else, Bogdanor posits, was his own safety and reputation. After the war, the author notes, "Kasztner freely admitted that his life had been spared for the sole purpose of establishing postwar alibis for Nazis such as [Kurt] Becher," an SS lieutenant who extorted money and valuables from Hungarian Jews for his boss, Heinrich Himmler. At the Nuremberg war crimes tribunal Kasztner testified in Becher's defense, ensuring that he was not prosecuted. Becher went on to become one of West Germany's wealthiest businessmen, thanks to the riches he had stolen from Hungarian Jews. "[Kasztner's] modus operandi was to serve the murderers under the cover of saving the victims – a policy that could be called pseudo-rescue," Bogdanor insists.

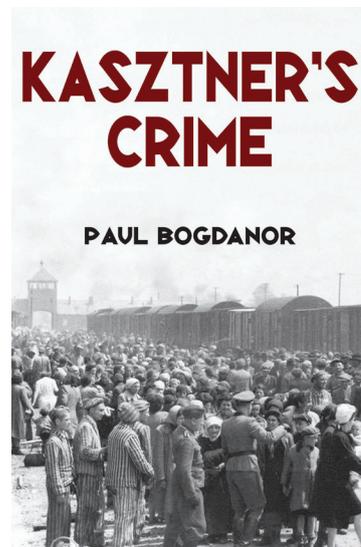
That Kasztner might well have been an unscrupulous collaborator isn't in itself much of a revelation. After the war myriad Holocaust survivors, not least in his hometown of Kolozsvár, accused him of having sold them out to the Nazis. Then in 1954, the Hungarian Jew, who was by then an Israeli government official and an up-and-coming member of Ben-Gurion's Mapai party, ended up facing similar charges at a Jerusalem court during a libel case that Israel's government had brought on his

behalf against another Hungarian-born Israeli, Malkiel Grünwald, an intemperate pamphleteer who was calling for Kasztner's head as a Nazi collaborator and Holocaust profiteer. After weighing up the evidence, the presiding judge, Benjamin Halevi, ruled against Kasztner, insisting that he had "sold his soul to the devil" by helping the Nazis and betraying his fellow Jews. The uproar led to the collapse of the Mapai-led government.

The Supreme Court of Israel overturned that verdict in 1958, but it proved to be a posthumous victory for Kasztner. The year before he had been shot and killed, in retaliation for his wartime role, outside his Tel Aviv home by a far-right Jewish nationalist. His assassination, too, served to turn Kasztner into a hero. He has come to be portrayed as a victim of postwar Israeli gung-ho machismo that couldn't abide a Jew who saved his fellows not by fighting the Nazis but by negotiating with them.

So was Kasztner a hero or a villain? He was certainly a man of marked contrasts: intelligent but unscrupulous, intrepid but venal, competent but arrogant. Already in 1942 he had bribed his way out of being sent in a labor battalion to the Soviet front against the Red Army by using funds he had embezzled from a Hungarian-Jewish community. "I considered him a megalomaniac. He had delusions of grandeur," recalled Moshe Krausz, who was director of the Jewish Agency's local Palestine Office during the war and helped save numerous Jews. "[W]hen it came to his own interests, he was without conscience or consideration."

Kasztner continues to be seen in polarized lights. His champions emphasize his strong points; his detractors highlight his moral failings. But not even his most ardent defenders will now be able to ignore the painstakingly marshalled barrage of damning evidence that Bogdanor has presented. Is the case finally closed on Kasztner? Looks like it. ■



**Kasztner's Crime**  
Paul Bogdanor  
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