

# RESCUE OPERATIONS IN HUNGARY: MYTHS AND REALITIES

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In his autobiography, Gyula Kádár, the former head of the Hungarian Military Intelligence Service, wrote an irreverent comment on resistance in wartime Hungary:

If [Hungary] had had as many “resistance fighters” before March 19, 1944 as it had in May 1945 and later, Hitler would not have risked the occupation of the country, because he would have been afraid of a paralysis in production and deliveries of goods as well as the need to resort to arms.<sup>1</sup>

The intelligence officer was clearly referring to the large number of heroic accounts of resistance that were published during the Communist era. To a large extent, the same can also be said about the postwar accounts of rescue.

An attempt at differentiating between the myths and realities of the rescue operations during the German occupation of Hungary in 1944–45, requires a clarification of the term “rescue” and the approximation of the number of Jews who were actually rescued. Under the term “rescue,” I include only those Jews who were saved from deportation and the subsequent ordeal in concentration camps

1 See his *A Ludovikától Sopronköhidáig* (From the Ludovika to Sopronköhida) (Budapest: Magvető, 1978), p. 665. I am indebted to Professor Richard Breitman, American University, Washington, for his perceptive observations and valuable suggestions for this article.

by Christian friends, neighbors, anonymous good Samaritans, state officials, members of governmental and ecclesiastical organizations, and fellow Jews. In the context of this study, I exclude from the category of “rescued” the Jewish survivors of the concentration camps, most of the surviving labor servicemen, the Jews who fled to neighboring countries on their own, and those who hid and survived without the assistance of others. Having survived the ordeal of the camps, forced labor, or hiding, these Jews were *liberated* by the victorious Allied forces — a liberation that was not an end in itself but a consequence of successful military operations.

One can only approximate the number of Jews who were *rescued* under the definition used in this study. According to the census of 1941, Hungary then had a Jewish population of 725,007, as well as approximately 100,000 converts and Christians who were identified as Jews under the racial laws then in effect. At the time of the German occupation of March 19, 1944, Hungary had 762,000 racially defined Jews, of whom 231,450 lived in Budapest. The difference between the 1941 and 1944 figures consists mainly of the large number of men called up for labor service and subsequently deployed in the Ukraine and Serbia.

The wartime losses of Hungarian Jewry are generally established at 565,000 lives. Of these losses, over 60,000 were incurred *before* the German occupation. The post-occupation losses were 501,500, with the great majority of the Jews murdered in Auschwitz following massive deportations in May-July 1944. Of these, 100,803 were from Budapest. Of the 260,500 Hungarian Jews who survived the Holocaust, 130,650 were from Budapest, and 129,850 were from the provinces.

It is almost impossible to determine the number of Hungarian Jews who survived with the help of others, whether that assistance was offered purely on humanitarian grounds or for remuneration. There are no data, for example, on the number of Hungarian Jews who joined the Slovak and Polish refugees who had decided to return to their respective homelands at a time when conditions there were more tranquil than in Hungarian-ruled areas. It is also difficult

to identify the number of Jewish men who were rescued from various ghettos by benevolent labor-service commanders who recruited them into their units, saving them from deportation. For many of these labor servicemen, however, the rescue proved only temporary, because they, too, ended up in Nazi concentration camps following the Arrow Cross (Nyilas) coup of October 15, 1944.

It is also almost impossible to determine the number of Jews who were rescued by Christians, either for payment or for humanitarian reasons, despite the risk. In the course of the years, Yad Vashem has recognized many, though certainly not all, of the humanitarian rescuers as Righteous Among the Nations. Of the more than 600 Hungarians who were so identified, by 2003, a few were recognized for the “humane policies” they had pursued during their terms in office. However, they had never risked their or their families’ lives for indirectly saving or helping the lot of Jews.

Most of the Jews who were rescued by Righteous Gentiles had lived in Budapest, where the conditions for survival and rescue were much more favorable than in the countryside. In the capital, the rescue of Jews acquired momentum only after the Nyilas acquired power on October 15. Then the Soviet forces, having already occupied almost all of Northern Transylvania, were poised to cross into Trianon Hungary.

The rescue of Jews was more perilous in the provincial towns and villages than in the capital, because of their small geographic size and relative isolation, the prevailing antisemitic climate, and especially the speed with which the ghettoization and deportation process was carried out. This was especially true in Carpatho-Ruthenia and Northern Transylvania, the centers of Jewish orthodoxy, where the mass deportations began. It was partially because of these reasons that the number of Righteous Among the Nations from these areas was relatively small. Of the close to 600 Christians recognized so far, only 14 percent were from the provinces. Their relatively small number notwithstanding, the heroic acts of the Righteous Among the Nations represent the

shiniest pages in the otherwise dark history of Hungary during World War II.

A considerable number of Jews owed their survival to rescue operations that were initiated during the German occupation by either Hungarian state leaders or Jewish communal and Zionist officials. Of these, six became the subject of heated controversies both during and after the war — controversies that continue to agitate historians and lay persons alike. The myths and realities surrounding these rescue operations have been the subject of numerous scholarly and polemical works.

These operations involved (1) rescuing the Jews of Budapest; (2) the rescue of 1,684 Jews in the “Kasztner-transport”; (3) the transfer of 18,000 Jews to Strasshof; (4) the rescue of eighty prominent Jewish communal and ecclesiastical leaders by Philip Freudiger; (5) the rescue of the Weiss-Chorin families; and (6) the “rescue of many thousands” of Hungarian Jews across the Hungarian-Romanian border. Hungarian and other officials were involved in only one, albeit the largest, of these operations — the rescue of the Jews of Budapest. Noticeably absent from the Jewish communal and Zionist leaders initiating and carrying out these rescue missions were the national leaders of Hungarian Jewry who subsequently emerged as the dominant figures in the German-imposed Central Jewish Council. The one exception was Freudiger: he exploited his personal “friendship” with Dieter Wisliceny, one of the leading members of the Eichmann-Sonderkommando, to save himself, his family, and some of his closest friends.

The failure of the Jewish national leaders to be involved in rescue operations before and during the Holocaust, or even to adopt rescue-related contingency plans can be traced to the perceptions and attitudes developed during the “Golden Era” of Hungarian Jewry. These leaders were convinced that the bonds they had forged with the governing conservative-aristocratic leadership of Hungary would safeguard Jews from the harm that had befallen their co-religionists in many other countries of Europe. As a consequence of the mutually beneficial symbiotic relationship that

evolved between the two leadership groups, all Jews felt ever-more secure and became ever-more patriotic and assimilated.<sup>2</sup>

In the forefront of the Magyars' struggle for national independence in 1848–49, the Jews of Hungary had played an important role in the modernization of the country, in the flourishing of its culture, and, more importantly, in providing the slim political majority the basically feudal aristocratic-gentry class needed to rule in the multinational kingdom. Identifying themselves as “Magyars of the Jewish faith,” the Jews even assumed a leading role in the government's drive for the Magyarization of the ethnic-national minorities.<sup>3</sup> Grateful and ever-more patriotic, the Jews in general and their leaders in particular were ready to overlook the fact that the conservative-aristocratic leaders of Hungary, enlightened as they appeared, were fundamentally undemocratic and reactionary, imbued with neither the principles of toleration nor the conceptions of pluralism.

The “social contract” between the ruling and the Jewish elites was basically tenuous, one-sided, and short-lived. While the conservative-aristocratic elite formally adhered to it as long as its political and economic interests required it, the Jewish leaders looked upon it as “binding,” a guarantee of safety for the Jews. These leaders convinced themselves that the Magyars, civilized and chivalrous, would never forget the political, economic, and cultural services the Jews had rendered to the Hungarian nation since 1848.

The fact that the contract was one-sided and ephemeral was

- 2 Paul Igotus, the noted writer, remarked that, during the so-called Golden Era, “the Jews became... more fervently Magyar than the Magyars themselves”; see his *Hungary* (London: Benn, 1972), p. 93. This assessment was also shared by Robert Seton-Watson, the renowned British historian. In commenting about the nationalism that prevailed in Hungary in 1908, he emphasized that “the Catholic Church and the Jews form today the two chief bulwarks of Magyar chauvinism”; quoted by Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe Between the World Wars* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), p. 91.
- 3 Oszkár Jászi, the world-renowned sociologist, wrote frequently about the “intolerant [Magyar] nationalism of the Jews” which, in his view, had done a great deal to poison relations between the Hungarians and the other nationalities of the pre-war era; Mendelsohn, *ibid.*

revealed almost immediately after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918.<sup>4</sup> While the postwar Hungarian ruling elite unequivocally nullified it, the Jewish leaders continued to cling to it as still in effect, firmly adhering to their pre-war patriotic posture. They looked upon the newly adopted *Numerus Clausus* law (the first anti-Jewish legislation in post-World War I Europe), the antisemitic outbursts that followed the short-lived Communist dictatorship, and the anti-Jewish rampages of the Horthy-led counterrevolutionaries as mere temporary aberrations. Clinging to their patriotic stance, they vehemently rejected the drive by some international Jewish organizations to have Hungary penalized for violating the peace treaties as a gross intervention in their country's internal affairs.

The national leaders of Hungarian Jewry continued to retain this posture even after Hungary, in emulation of Nazi Germany, began to carry out an increasingly severe anti-Jewish program in 1938. They tended to interpret the avalanche of ever-more restrictive anti-Jewish laws as “reflections of the spirit of the time.” They rationalized that the adoption of some, if not all, of them were both “understandable” in light of the international situation at the time and “necessary” in order to appease the Nazis abroad and the Nyilas and their allies at home. While they agonized over the many excesses that were committed in the name of the “New Order” — the Hungarians caused the death of around 60,000 Jews between 1941 and March 1944 — the Jewish leaders continued to believe that what happened in Poland and elsewhere in Nazi-dominated Europe could not possibly happen in chivalrous Hungary.

The leaders' sense of optimism was shared by most, if not all, the Jews of Hungary, including the Zionists. They felt basically

4 Theodor Herzl, the Budapest-born founder of modern Zionism, had a foreboding. In a letter addressed, in 1903, to Ernő Mezei, a Jewish member of the Hungarian parliament, he presciently foretold: “The hand of fate shall also seize Hungarian Jewry. And the later this occurs, and the stronger this Jewry becomes, the more cruel and hard shall be the blow, which shall be delivered with greater savagery. There is no escape.”; *ibid.*, p. 94.

secure. The government of Miklós Kállay (March 9, 1942 — March 19, 1944) consistently rejected the Germans' insistent demands that Hungary adopt the program leading to the "final solution of the Jewish question." By the fall of 1943, the Jews — the leaders and masses alike — became even more convinced that they would survive the war, albeit in economic ruin. Their optimism was reinforced by the destruction, in January-February 1943, of the Hungarian and German armies at Voronezh and Stalingrad, respectively, and by the surrender of Italy a few months later. It was further bolstered by their conviction that independent Hungary's alliance with Nazi Germany provided an additional plus for their safety.

The communal and Zionist leaders became so convinced of the chances of the Jews' survival that they apparently decided to keep the masses uninformed about Auschwitz and the "final solution," secrets about which they were by then fully aware.<sup>5</sup> Confident to the end, they failed to take sufficient notice of the ever-darker clouds that were gathering over their heads, neglecting to take any

5 Using some questionable psychological arguments, Yehuda Bauer claims that the Jews of Hungary were informed about the realities of the Final Solution but had not "internalized" the information, failing to turn it into "knowledge." To confirm that the Jews had been informed, he cites selectively the recollections of survivors, including some young Zionist couriers and local community leaders who were allegedly involved in "rescue and warning activities." In this context Bauer also refers to the accounts by Moshe Weinberger (later Carmilly-Weinberger), the former rabbi of the small Neolog Jewish community of Kolozsvár (Cluj in Romanian). In his 1998 paperback edition, Bauer identified the rabbi's account as "apocryphal." For some details on the rabbi's "rescue activities," see below.

As almost all of the memoirs by survivors from Kolozsvár attest, the Jews were not only left in the dark about the secrets of Auschwitz, but in fact were *misinformed*: while most of the leaders escaped on the eve of the ghettoization and/or mass deportations, the masses were reassured that they were only being "relocated to Kanyérmező." It is a pity that Bauer fails to refer to this, let alone cite the views of many survivors, including Elie Wiesel, who testified that they had no advance warnings about Auschwitz. For Bauer's position on this subject, see *Jews for Sale? Negotiations Between Jews and Nazis, 1933–1945*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 158–160, 199–200.

precautionary contingency measures. They did not and could not envision a scenario under which Nazi Germany would occupy an ally like Hungary and subsequently liquidate the conservative-aristocratic leadership on which the Jews were depending for their survival.

Stunned and bewildered after the occupation, the Jewish leaders grasped at the last straw of hope. They were relieved when they heard that Miklós Horthy, the head of state, had decided to remain at the helm, convinced that, as commander in chief, he would continue to enjoy the allegiance and support of the military and state administration and thereby save the lives, if not the property, of the loyal “Magyars of the Jewish faith.” Little did they know that the man on which they had pinned their hopes had in fact consented, at his Schloss Klesheim meeting with Hitler on March 18, 1944, to deliver a few hundred thousand Jewish “workers” for “employment” in the Third Reich — an agreement the German and Hungarian Nazis successfully exploited for the speedy implementation of the “final solution.” At that time Horthy and the top governmental and political leaders of Hungary, as well as the national leaders of the Jewish communities, were well informed about the realities of Auschwitz.<sup>6</sup>

The Sztójay government that Horthy constitutionally appointed on March 22, 1944, enabled the German and Hungarian Nazis to liquidate the Jews of Hungary at a speed and level of barbarity unmatched anywhere else in Nazi-dominated Europe. Under the guidance of fewer than 100 SS men, the Hungarian police, gendarmerie, and civil service carried out the various steps leading to the deportation and the subsequent mass murder of the Jews with a routine and cruelty that impressed even the German Nazis.

Horthy decided to halt the deportations early in July, in response to great domestic and foreign pressure. Some of the world’s leaders, including Pope Pius XII, President Roosevelt, and the King

6 Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide. The Holocaust in Hungary*. 2nd. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), chapter 23.

of Sweden, eventually decided to intervene on behalf of the Jews after the Swiss and Swedish press publicized the realities of the Hungarian chapter of the “final solution.” The determining factor in inducing Horthy to act was the realization that, after the Western Allies’ successful landing in Normandy and the inexorable advance of the Red Army in the East, the Axis would inevitably soon lose the war. Horthy’s military assessment was probably also influenced by the American bombing of Budapest on July 2. But by the time Horthy halted the deportations, all of Hungary, with the notable exception of Budapest, was already *Judenrein*.

Although many thousands of Jews were murdered in Budapest during the Nyilas era (October 15, 1944 – February 13, 1945), well over 130,000 Jews survived. After the war a veritable historical battle ensued over who was to be credited with their “rescue.” The accounts of the direct or indirect involvement of the many *dramatis personae* in this rescue operation are shrouded in myths. Nationalists eager to sanitize the history of the Horthy era place the blame for the Holocaust exclusively on the Germans. They maintain that the Hungarian head of state was completely unaware of the realities of the “final solution” and that, as soon as he read the so-called “Auschwitz protocols” early in July, he stopped the deportations, thereby saving the Jews of Budapest.<sup>7</sup>

While Horthy’s decision was clearly important for saving most of the Jews of Budapest, the observations made by Edmund Veesenmayer, Hitler’s former plenipotentiary in Hungary, were not totally off the mark. Testifying for the prosecution in the 1945–46 trial of László Endre, László Baky, and Andor Jaross, the main Hungarian architects of the “final solution,” he observed that, by demonstrating his power to halt the deportations, Horthy, had he

7 For details on the Auschwitz reports, see Braham, *Politics*, pp. 824–832. On the arguments used by the sundry Hungarian history cleansers, see idem, “The Assault on Historical Memory: Hungarian Nationalists and the Holocaust,” *East European Quarterly*, 33:4 (January 2000), pp. 411–425. For a more updated Hungarian version, see, “Magyarország és a holokauszt. Erőfeszítések a múlt megszépítésére,” *Beszélő*, Budapest, X:100 (April 2002), pp. 68–82.

really so desired, could have prevented their launching in the first place. Thus, one can only give Horthy “credit” for saving most Budapest Jews if one assigns him a significant share of the blame for the deportations.

Horthy had in fact committed himself to the delivery of hundreds of thousands of “Jewish workers” to Nazi Germany. Is it feasible that he, the arch-conservative head of state, also accepted the rationalizations of the leading members of his pro-Reich government that the families of these workers, including the sick and the elderly, the insane and the newborns, were added to the transports for “humanitarian” reasons? These racially motivated antisemites tried to convince the nation and the world at large that the family members were shipped along to reassure the “workers” and thereby make them more productive. The evidence is overwhelming that Horthy, like the other top leaders of Hungary, was fully informed about the barbaric treatment of the Jews, including their isolation, marking, expropriation, ghettoization, concentration, and deportation.<sup>8</sup>

The halting of the deportations by Horthy coincided with thwarting an attempt by the Nyilas to oust him from power. The coup was plotted by a group of extremists headed by László Baky bent on putting an end to the conservative-aristocratic regime of Hungary. Simultaneously with the establishment of a radical Nazi regime, the plotters also planned the round up and subsequent deportation of the Jews of Budapest. Toward this end, on July 2, 1944, they ordered several thousand gendarmes to the capital, ostensibly to participate in a ceremony honoring the gendarmerie unit of Galánta. According to the plan, the deportation of the Jews was to start on July 10, under the command of Colonel Tibor Paksy-Kiss and Colonel Jenő Péterffy, the gendarmerie officers who were in charge of the anti-Jewish drive in Northern Transylvania.

Horthy, informed about the arrival of the gendarmes on July 1,

8 For some details, see Braham, *Politics*, pp. 394–401, 832–834.

and about the impending coup, had some of the top gendarmerie officers arrested, and appointed Major General Károly Lázár, the commander of the Palace Guard, as supreme commander in the capital. On Lázár's orders an armored regiment under the command of Colonel Ferenc Koszorus was brought in from Esztergom, thwarting the coup, and averting the danger then threatening the Jews.<sup>9</sup>

A number of well-meaning Hungarians, including the surviving members of Koszorus's family, have in recent years launched a campaign to have the former officer recognized by Yad Vashem as a Righteous Among the Nations, arguing that it was *he* who had saved the Jews of Budapest by forcing the departure of the gendarmes.<sup>10</sup>

Undeterred by the failure of the coup, the Hungarian and German Nazis continued their covert efforts to bring about the deportation of the Jews of Budapest. They actually managed to outsmart the authorities by deporting close to 3,000 Jews after the deportations had been halted: Jews from the Kistarcsa and Sárospatak internment camps were "illegally" deported on July 19 and July 24, respectively.<sup>11</sup>

It was Romania's *volte face* of August 23, 1944, that induced the Hungarians to take a stronger stand on the Jewish question. The following day they informed both Eichmann and Veessenmayer that the deportation of the Jews would no longer be allowed, inducing Heinrich Himmler to yield immediately. Within hours after Romania's change of sides, the *Reichsführer-SS*, eager to safeguard the position of the German troops in the Balkans and assure their supply lines and avenue of escape via Hungary, ordered

9 Ibid., pp. 878–880.

10 Bálint Török, "Legenda vagy tény? Mi az igazság a Koszorus akcióról," *Magyar Szemle* ("Hungarian Review"), 5:6 (2000), pp. 102–119; see also László Karsai, "Ők és mi. Holocaust Magyarországon," *Élet és Irodalom*, March 6, 1998, pp. 8–9.

11 Braham, *Politics*, pp. 890–893. Bauer mistakenly claims that only one train was involved; Bauer, *Jews for Sale?*, p. 182.

the recall of Eichmann and the end of the deportations.<sup>12</sup> As the events following the Szálasi coup of October 15 revealed, Himmler's orders were largely tactical and strategic. Nevertheless, this did not prevent *SS-Sturmbannführer* Wilhelm Höttl, the former head of Intelligence Service of the Security Police in Vienna (which covered Hungary), to claim after the war that it was Himmler rather than Horthy who saved the Jews of Budapest.<sup>13</sup>

The myths surrounding Himmler's involvement in the rescue of the Jews of Budapest are also indirectly present in two other accounts of rescue operations. One is related to *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Kurt A. Becher, Himmler's personal economic representative in Hungary, and the other to Saly Mayer, the Swiss representative of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC).

Becher was a member of a Waffen-SS unit that reportedly committed many atrocities in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union in 1942–43.<sup>14</sup> Presumably realizing that the defeat of the Axis was inevitable, he apparently decided during his assignment in Hungary, in 1944, to pursue two basic goals: personal enrichment and the acquisition of foolproof alibis. He achieved both objectives through his dealings with the magnates of Hungarian industry and the representatives of the Zionist-dominated Budapest Relief and Rescue Committee (the Vaada).

A shrewdly calculating realist, Becher took full advantage of his

12 Bauer claims that much of the credit for halting the deportations must be given to Becher and Kasztner. However, Bauer confuses Becher's role in connection with Himmler's order of August 25, with Becher's claim that he had contacted Himmler about the Jews of Budapest "shortly after the meeting on the Swiss border" with Saly Mayer and Kasztner. This meeting, the first of several such encounters, took place on November 4, 1944; Bauer, *Jews for Sale?*, p. 221.

13 See his interview in Péter Bokor's *Végjáték a Duna mentén* (Budapest: RTV-Minerva-Kossuth, 1982), p. 192.

14 For some details on Becher's activities in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, see Bauer, *Jews for Sale?*, pp. 206–209.

close personal relations with Himmler, which provided him virtual immunity. These relations were reinforced after Becher acquired German control over the Weiss-Manfréd Works, Hungary's largest industrial complex on May 17, 1944 (see below). While Becher's personal share from the deal is unknown, the wealth acquired through his contacts with Rezső (Rudolf) Kasztner, the de facto head of the *Vaada*, is fully documented. On June 20, Becher replaced Eichmann as the chief negotiator with the Zionist group.

The Becher-Kasztner negotiations began with the grandiose "trucks for blood" offer that was first initiated by Eichmann as a sequel to the grandiose "Europa Plan."<sup>15</sup> They soon focused on the release from the Bergen-Belsen *Bevorzugtenlager* ("Camp for Privileged"; "Camp for the Preferred") of the 1,684 Jews in the so-called Kasztner transport (see below). In the months that followed, Becher developed a close working relationship with Kasztner, which enabled him after the war to acquire the alibi he needed to be freed of all charges at Nuremberg.<sup>16</sup>

Understandably grateful for Becher's involvement in the transfer of the 1,684 Jews to Switzerland, Kasztner, with no means of verification at the time, appears to have accepted all of Becher's boasts of rescue at face value. In his *Report*<sup>17</sup> and many postwar statements, Kasztner perpetuated several of Becher's basically alibi-seeking claims of rescue. He unwittingly lent credence to Becher's claim of responsibility for persuading Himmler to prohibit the deportation of the Jews of Budapest in August 1944, and to halt the mass extermination of the Jews in general two months later. Kasztner also gave Becher basically unearned credit for his alleged role in halting the death marches from the Óbuda brickyards, for

15 See below. See also Braham, *Politics*, pp. 1074–1076.

16 On Kasztner's negotiations with Becher, see *ibid.*, pp. 1093–1103.

17 *Der Bericht des jüdischen Rettungskomitees aus Budapest 1942–1945* (Basel: Vaadath Ezra Vehazalah beBudapest, [1946]), XIII, p. 191.

saving the Jews in the ghetto of Budapest, and for preventing the destruction of the Jews still in Nazi concentration camps.<sup>18</sup>

While presumably gratified by his assessment as a rescuer, Becher himself could not, during his interrogation in Nuremberg, recall his involvement in the rescue of the Jews in the Budapest ghetto and virtually denied his appointment by Himmler as Special Reich Commissioner for all Concentration Camps. Clearly, he was fearful that he might be held responsible for the many crimes that were committed by the Nazis during his alleged tenure as commissioner.

Becher undoubtedly owed his release from prison to Kasztner's interventions.<sup>19</sup> To his later regret, Kasztner even boasted about his role in having Becher freed in a letter addressed to Eliezer Kaplan, then Israel's first Minister of Finance, on July 26, 1948. At the end, Kasztner paid dearly for his loyalty to his former negotiating partner. In the emotionally and politically charged atmosphere in which his pro-Becher activities were revealed during a libel suit in the mid-1950s, the anti-Kasztner passion in Israel grew in intensity. Kasztner was shot in front of his home in Tel Aviv by nationalist rightist extremists on March 4, 1957, and died eleven days later. Becher, after having been cleared of all charges at Nuremberg,

18 Becher was "reminded" of these rescue activities during an interview/interrogation by Kasztner on July 7, 1947, while Becher was still in prison in Nuremberg. In the course of the interrogation, Kasztner appears to coach Becher in corroborating many of the rescue activities they were involved in as earlier detailed in Kasztner's *Report*. For the text of the interrogation, see *The Holocaust. Selected Documents in Eighteen Volumes*, edited by John Mendelsohn and Donald S. Detwiler (New York: Garland Publishing, 1982), vol. 15, pp. 60–82. During his debriefing by the FBI on May 17, 1945, Kasztner claimed that, through his dealings with Becher, he "saved the lives of hundreds of thousands of Jews"; see U. S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Intelligence Report. National Archives, Washington, RG 65, Folder 47826–249 (cited hereafter as FBI Intelligence Report).

19 As Bauer demonstrates, Kasztner intervened not only on behalf of Becher but also several other top Nazis and/or war criminals, including SS-*Obergruppenführer* Hans Jüttner; Herbert Kettlitz, Becher's associate; and Hermann A. Krumei and Dieter Wisliceny, leading members of the Eichmann-*Sonderkommando*; Bauer, *Jews for Sale?*, pp. 234–235, 250.

returned to Hamburg, where he lived as a very prosperous entrepreneur until his death in 1995.

Saly Mayer played a crucial role in the negotiations with Becher and other members of the SS for freeing the Kasztner-transport and the Jews still in Nazi concentration camps.<sup>20</sup> Mayer's freedom of action was severely curtailed under the restrictions imposed upon him by the JDC, the War Refugee Board, and the Swiss authorities. His basic task was to drag out the negotiations and to make no firm commitment on any payment or delivery of goods to the SS. His dilatory tactics clearly pleased his superiors but annoyed the Jewish leaders in Nazi captivity, which were under the impression, wrongly in retrospect, that the Nazis would have stopped the anti-Jewish drive had he been more forthcoming. After the war, Mayer, reviled by many of the surviving leaders of the Slovak and Hungarian Jewish communities, was hailed as a hero and "rescuer" by the JDC. In a myth-creating press release issued on October 4, 1945, by the organization's headquarters in New York, Mayer was credited not only with securing the entry of the 1,684 Jews in the Kasztner group to Switzerland but also with having persuaded Becher to cancel the order for the deportation of the 200,000 Jews of Budapest to Auschwitz.<sup>21</sup> Without detracting anything from the achievements of Mayer, Yehuda Bauer believes that credit for saving the Jews of Budapest must also be shared by the Sternbuch brothers in Switzerland, and, above all, Kasztner.<sup>22</sup> He claims that by persuading Becher to intervene with Himmler — an incident

20 For details on Saly Mayer's activities, see Bauer, *Jews for Sale?*, especially chapters 11 and 12; see also Braham, *Politics*, especially chapter 29. For further information on the trial, see Yehiam Weitz, *The Man Who Was Murdered Twice: The Life, Trial and Death of Dr. Israel Kasztner* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Keter, 1995).

21 Braham, *Politics*, pp. 1103–1104.

22 Bauer, *Jews for Sale?*, chapter 12. On the rescue activities of Elias and Yitzhak Sternbuch, leaders of the Orthodox community, see David Kranzler, *Thy Brother's Keeper: The Orthodox Jewish Response to the Holocaust* (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1987).

Becher had difficulty remembering — Kasztner had played a pivotal role in rescuing the Jews of Budapest.<sup>23</sup>

Still another myth in connection with the survival of most of the Jews of Budapest evolved around the rescue activities of Raoul Wallenberg. An authentic hero of the Holocaust era, Wallenberg arrived in Budapest on his rescue mission on July 9, 1944, the very day Hungary, with the notable exception of the capital, became *Judenrein*. Wallenberg's rescue activities began in earnest only after the Nyilas had acquired power with German help on October 15, and reached heroic proportions during the Soviet siege of the capital in December 1944 and January 1945. The evidence currently available indicates that, using his diplomatic skills and with great personal courage, Wallenberg saved between 7,000 and 9,000 Jews.<sup>24</sup> His heroism was transformed into a legend during the height of the Cold War, when his arrest and murder by the Soviet secret police was effectively exploited in the Western propaganda campaign against the Soviet Union: to highlight the magnitude of the Soviet crime, Wallenberg's rescue operations were vastly exaggerated. In countless official and unofficial statements issued in many parts of the free world, Wallenberg came to be identified as the man who single-handedly saved either all of the capital's Jews or at least 100,000. These figures were soon adopted in numerous books, articles, and documentaries, perpetuating the Wallenberg

23 According to Bauer, "... it would appear that these talks, initiated and promoted by Kasztner, were the *direct cause* [emphasis added] of the rescue of the Jews of Budapest"; Bauer, *Jews for Sale?*, p. 221. Yet on p. 240, Bauer admits that "Becher could not remember a thing about the last days in Budapest. Kasztner more or less forced him to 'remember' that he had intervened with Himmler in favor of the Jews..." (The reference is to the interrogation cited in note 18.) In another book, Bauer states that "for nothing more than Mayer's promise to see whether the Germans' demands would be met, Himmler was ready to desist from the deportation of Budapest Jewry"; see his *American Jewry and the Holocaust: A History of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1939-1945* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1981), p. 415.

24 Bauer concludes that Wallenberg saved 4,500 Jews; Bauer, *Jews for Sale?*, p. 237.

myth that overshadowed, if not eclipsed, the rescue operations of many others.<sup>25</sup>

Exaggerated numbers of rescued Jews were also advanced in connection with the rescue activities of the Vatican, the International Red Cross, and the representatives of several neutral powers in Budapest, including Angel San-Briz and Georgio (Jorge) Perlasca of Spain, as well as Carl Lutz of Switzerland. A mythmaker identified his hero, George Mandel-Mantello, the Transylvanian-born Jew who served as the first-secretary of the Consulate General of El Salvador in Geneva, as “the man who stopped the trains to Auschwitz.”<sup>26</sup> Many of these accounts fail to note that the rescue activities of the representatives of the neutral powers were largely restricted to Budapest during the Nyilas era and that all of the neutral powers had close lucrative economic ties with Nazi Germany throughout the war.

Credit for saving “large numbers” of Jews in Budapest and in the provinces is also claimed by former leaders of the various Zionist factions constituting the wartime Halutz resistance movement. Like the claims of many other rescuers, the postwar accounts by their leaders are also sometimes self-serving and shrouded in myths. Since many among these leaders were escapees from Nazi-occupied Poland and Slovakia, they had to be aware of the realities of the “final solution.” Their primary objective both before and after the German occupation was to work in tandem with the Vaada for their own survival, to help the thousands of Jewish

25 See, for example, *The Hungarian Jewish Catastrophe: A Selected and Annotated Bibliography*, compiled and edited by Randolph L. Braham (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), Ref. No. 1471–1501, and *The Holocaust in Hungary: A Selected and Annotated Bibliography*, compiled and edited by Randolph L. Braham (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), Ref. No. 1026–1071.

26 David Kranzler, *The Man Who Stopped the Trains to Auschwitz. Mantello, El Salvador, and Switzerland's Finest Hour* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000). For some details on the rescue activities of the representatives of the International Red Cross, the Vatican, and the neutral states, see Braham, *Politics*, pp. 1205–1246.

refugees in Hungary, and to rescue Jews from Polish, Slovak, and other camps.

The tactics of these leaders varied over time. During the year before the occupation, their relief and rescue operations were relatively easy because the Hungarian governmental authorities, convinced after Stalingrad that the Germans would lose the war, not only eased their anti-Jewish policies but also searched for an honorable way out of the Axis alliance. After the German occupation, however, the tactics and strategies of the Halutz leaders changed drastically. Presumably convinced that there was no hope for the Jewish masses, they concentrated their attention first on rescuing individuals, mostly their comrades, Zionist sympathizers, and their families. They expanded their frame of operations in Budapest following the deportations' halt early in July and especially after the Szálasi coup of October 15. For this purpose they produced and distributed a large number of false Aryan identification papers, a variety of protective passes issued by the neutral states, and even Gestapo, SS, and Nyilas membership cards.

Although the anti-Jewish drive in the provinces was being carried out at lightning speed, the *Halutzim* managed to smuggle several hundred Jews into Romania and Slovakia, where at the time the anti-Jewish drive was at a standstill.<sup>27</sup> As part of their rescue drive they also sent several of their young followers to the provincial ghettos to alert the Jewish leaders there about the impending disaster. This mission usually ended in failure, because the provincial leaders were more inclined to accept the soothing reassurances by the traditional leaders in Budapest, who at the time constituted the Central Jewish Council, than the apocalyptic warnings by well-meaning but totally unknown youngsters.

While their illegal activities were clearly laden with many potential dangers, the Halutz leaders in charge of the rescue and

27 Among these were Rabbi Moshe Weinberger and his wife, as well as several other leaders of the Jewish community of Kolozsvár who abandoned their flock to save themselves.

resistance operations were relatively well off. During the first phase of the occupation, they operated from the headquarters of the Central Jewish Council, enjoying a degree of immunity and many personal privileges, including exemption from wearing the “yellow star.” By virtue of their contacts with the Vaada, they managed to include some of their immediate family members and followers in the Kasztner-transport. In late July, they shifted their headquarters to the Swiss-protected Glass House, which, since it had territorial immunity, offered them protection and even greater immunity to conduct their “illegal” operations. This often aroused the anger of the traditional Hungarian Zionist leaders who felt that such illegal activities endangered their own “official” Swiss-sponsored mission of rescue.

It was during the Nyilas era that the Zionist resistance groups provided some of the shiniest pages in the history of rescue in Nazi-dominated Hungary. They played a pivotal role in rescuing Jews from imminent danger and in protecting and feeding thousands of children. One cannot possibly determine the exact number of Jews who were actually rescued by the *Halutzim*. Their rescue and relief operations, however relatively modest, were real. The myths lie in the leaders’ basically self-aggrandizing postwar accounts that exaggerate both the scope and accomplishments of these operations.<sup>28</sup>

Credit for the survival of the Jews of Budapest is even claimed or attributed to two Nyilas leaders. One of the claimants is none other than Ferenc Szálasi, the head of the Arrow Cross Party, who became the Leader of the Nation after the coup of October 15, 1944. His diary notes of February 11, 1946, written while being tried for war crimes, include the following text: “The Jews will soon realize that those who returned alive from the past Jewish

28 See, for example, Ref. No. 1342–1377 in *The Catastrophe of Hungarian Jewry*. Relying on self-serving testimonies, Bauer states that Joszef (Joshko) Meir, a member of Ha-Shomer ha-Za’ir, was also involved “in sabotage and the derailling of trains”; Bauer, *Jews for Sale?*, p. 235. No corroboration for this claim has been found to date.

tragedy or remained alive owe their survival to me.”<sup>29</sup> The other Nyilas official credited with saving Jews was Pál Szalai, the extremist party’s liaison to the police, who had been won over by the Jewish leadership toward the end of the war. Szalai was credited with saving close to 70,000 Jews concentrated in the ghetto of Budapest by thwarting the efforts of the German and Hungarian Nazis to kill them before the arrival of the Red Army — a rescue operation also attributed to Wallenberg.<sup>30</sup>

At the same time, given the political exigencies of the Cold War and the anti-Communist and antisemitic climate that emerged following the collapse of the Soviet system in 1989, relatively little attention has been paid to the determining role the Red Army played in the survival of the Jews of Budapest. In the post-Communist era of Hungary, it is politically and existentially more prudent to dwell on the Soviet conquest and subsequent subjugation of the country rather than the Soviet liberation of the Jews.

The next three rescue operations covered in this study were based on the Jewish leaders’ negotiations with the SS. Clearly, the bargaining position of the parties was highly skewed. The SS held all the trump cards of power; trapped after the occupation, the Jews were basically helpless and defenseless. They were helpless largely because the top communal and Zionist leaders, though aware of the realities of the “final solution” in Nazi-dominated Europe,<sup>31</sup> failed to take any meaningful contingency measures for rescue and possible resistance while they still could.<sup>32</sup> They were defenseless

29 *A Szálasi per* (“The Szálasi Trial”), edited by Elek and László Karsai (Budapest: Reform, 1988), p. 255.

30 For some details on Szalai’s activities, see Braham, *Politics*, pp. 1005–1007.

31 *Ibid.*, chapter 23.

32 During his libel suit in Jerusalem, Kasztner admitted that he was aware of the warnings by Moshe Sharett and Izhak Ben-Zvi, who later became prime minister and president of Israel, respectively, urging the Jews to engage in rescue and resistance, a message he failed to communicate to his co-religionists in Koložsvár; see Section 52 in the Judgment by Justice Benjamin Halevi. The Zionist leaders also failed to heed the warnings by Menahem Bader, a leading figure in the Jewish Agency office in Istanbul, issued months before the German occupation; see Braham, *Politics*, p. 815.

because a basic element of all their assumptions about the safety of the Jews in Hungary evaporated with the arrest of the conservative-aristocratic governmental leaders and their subsequent betrayal by the Hungarians on whom they depended. Horthy secretly consented to the delivery of Jewish “workers” to Nazi Germany; the Jews, loyal citizens of the Hungarian state, were told that “the demands of the Germans must be obeyed”; the Horthy-appointed Sztójay government embraced the “final solution”; and the Christian population, intoxicated by years of antisemitic agitation, was at best largely passive.

In their desperate effort to save the community, the Jewish leaders felt they had no alternative but to negotiate with the SS representatives in Hungary. This decision was made easier for them by the advice of the Slovak Jewish leaders — mistaken and counterproductive as it later turned out to have been. The leaders of the Jewish community of Slovakia were under the impression, although it turned out to be totally false, that it was their bribing of Dieter Wisliceny that had halted the deportations in 1942.<sup>33</sup> They

33 The Jews of Slovakia, many of them Hungarian-speakers, were the first to be deported to Auschwitz. Between March 26 and June 1942, close to 60,000, or two-thirds of Slovakian Jewry, was deported to the Lublin District and to Auschwitz. The deportations were halted for many reasons, including the Slovak national leaders’ request to visit the new “Jewish settlements in the East,” which, if granted, would have exposed the realities of the “final solution”; the successful bribing of local Hlinka leaders; the special legitimization that the remaining Jews had been able to obtain via “protective letters” certifying that they were essential to the nation’s economy; and pressure from the Catholic Church and the Vatican. Rabbi Michael Dov Weissmandel, one of the leading figures of the “Working Group” of Slovak Jewry, only contacted Wisliceny around June-July 1942; that is, when the first phase of the deportations had already been completed. Even this contact was indirect: he had approached and dealt with Wisliceny only through Karel Hochberg, a Jewish traitor who worked for the SS. Wisliceny played along and took two payments of \$25,000 for his “services.” For some details on this and other aspects of the tragedy that befell the Jews of Slovakia, see Bauer, *Jews for Sale?*, chapters 5 and 6, and Brahm, *Politics*, pp. 1048–1053.

even proposed a grandiose plan — the so-called Europa Plan<sup>34</sup> — to use bribery as a way to rescue an even larger number of Jews in Nazi-dominated Europe.

Like their Slovakian Jewish counterparts, the Hungarian Jewish leaders operated on the mistaken assumption that bribing the top officers of the Sonderkommando would prevent, or at least delay, the Nazis' anti-Jewish drive. They did not — and could not — realize that these SS officers operated under the command of the RSHA (Reichssicherheitshauptamt; Reich Security Main Office), which was committed to the “final solution,” and that their independent decision-making power with regard to excluding Jews from the “final solution” was in fact limited.<sup>35</sup>

The basic bargaining objectives of the SS were as clear as they were ruthless. By negotiating with the Hungarian Jewish leaders and freeing a limited number of Jews, they would lull the Jewish masses into submission, distract their attention from the possibility of resistance, and implement the “final solution” without any serious difficulty. This was the primary, if not the determining, objective of the SS in dealing with the Jewish leaders of Slovakia

34 Emboldened by their presumed success in halting the deportations from Slovakia, the leaders of Slovak Jewry again contacted Wisliceny via Hochberg in October 1942, offering the “Europa Plan.” This called for the suspension of the deportations of Jews to Poland from all over Europe in exchange for the payment of two million dollars. With the consent of his colleagues and superiors, Wisliceny again played along, advancing the interests of the SS by laying his hands on Jewish wealth while he and his associates, together with local accomplices, were still proceeding with the “final solution.” For some details on the “Europa Plan,” see Braham, *ibid.*, pp. 1074–1076.

35 The SS, including members of the Eichmann-Sonderkommando, appear to have bartered individual or small groups of Jews in accord with a directive given by Hitler to Himmler. A memo by Himmler, dated December 10, 1942, reads as follows: “I have asked the *Führer* with regard to letting Jews go in return for ransom. He gave me full powers to approve cases like that, if they really bring in foreign currency in appreciable quantities from abroad.”; Bauer, *Jews for Sale?*, p. 103. Clearly, Himmler decided, as shown in the case of Slovakia, to act on his own along these lines even earlier. His own instructions were: “Take whatever you can from the Jews. Promise them whatever you want. What we will keep is another matter.”; *ibid.*, p. 167.

and Hungary regarding the various rescue schemes, including the Europa Plan. The SS representatives in Hungary were also interested in appropriating as much Jewish wealth as possible and in promoting a variety of bogus rescue schemes calculated to advance the political and military interests of the Third Reich.

Although aware of the “final solution” and of the tactics and strategies the SS had employed elsewhere for its implementation, the Jewish negotiators had a basic strategy of their own: they tried to safeguard the interests of the Jewish community by winning a desperate race with time. With an eye on the military victories of the Allies, and especially the rapid advance of the Red Army, they hoped that they could win this race by bribery and by dragging out the negotiations with the SS as long as possible.

The Nazis were not fooled. Even though they presumably realized that the Axis would lose the war, they were committed, together with their Hungarian accomplices, at least to winning the war against the Jews. Their strategy was simple and effective. Aware of the basic differences characteristic of Jewish-Christian relations in Poland and in Hungary,<sup>36</sup> the Nazis resolved to implement their genocidal program in Hungary without evoking a possible Zionist-led uprising in Budapest like the one they had faced in Warsaw a year earlier.<sup>37</sup> Apparently they were not really worried about the traditional Neolog and Orthodox leaders who had pinned their hopes on the Hungarians. The Nazis’ tactics, therefore, called first and foremost for the entrapment of the Zionist leaders. The Nazis also worked on the assumption that the Zionist leaders had many international connections that could be exploited not only for the acquisition of foreign currency and war-related

36 In contrast to Poland, where Jewish-Polish relations were generally antagonistic, in Hungary they were basically more symbiotic, especially among the Jewish and Christian elites.

37 In retrospect it appears that the Nazis had nothing to fear, because the Halutz youth movements decided in January 1944 — two months before the German invasion — *not* to organize any Warsaw-like uprising, believing it would fail and prove catastrophic; Bauer, *Jews for Sale?*, p. 235.

materials, but also for the advancement of the Reich's political interests abroad, including a possible rupture in the Grand Alliance.

In retrospect it appears that the entrapment of the Zionist leaders took place in two distinct phases. During the first phase, when the Nazis and their Hungarian accomplices were laying the ground for the mass deportation of the Jews, the SS leaders misled the Zionists about their readiness to continue their negotiations in the spirit of the "Europa Plan" first discussed in Slovakia. As in Slovakia, the leading role in the negotiations between the SS and the Hungarian Jewish leaders was, at the beginning at least, played by Wisliceny. A few days after the occupation of Hungary, he handed Fülöp Freudiger a letter of recommendation from Rabbi Michael Dov Weissmandel, one of the self-proclaimed architects of the Europa Plan, who identified him as a venal SS officer with whom the Jewish leaders could do business and a "reliable" negotiating partner.<sup>38</sup> While Freudiger continued to maintain contact with Wisliceny until his own escape in August 1944, the negotiations with the SS were soon taken over by Kasztner and other leaders of the Vaada.<sup>39</sup>

The first meeting between the Zionists and the SS took place on April 5, the day the Jews were first required to wear the Star of David. Relying on the fatal advice of the Slovak Jewish leaders, the Zionist leaders began the negotiations by raising the question of the possible rescue of Hungarian Jewry on the basis of the Europa Plan.<sup>40</sup> The SS agreed to the negotiations without hesitation, inducing the Zionists to deliver large amounts of cash and valuables

38 Wisliceny demonstrated his "power to deliver" to Freudiger by freeing the latter's brother; he had been among the first influential Jews in Budapest to be arrested immediately after the occupation.

39 During his May 17, 1945, debriefing by the FBI, Kasztner provided a succinct description of the "SS organization in Hungary responsible for Jewish persecution." He claimed that "with the exception of von Wisliceny who accepted bribes... all these SS men were completely incorruptible"; FBI Intelligence Report.

40 Bauer mistakenly claims that the first meeting took place on March 24; see *Jews for Sale?*, p. 162.

in return for the promise to help.<sup>41</sup> Their “promises” to the Zionists notwithstanding, the SS and their Hungarian accomplices proceeded with the implementation of the first phase of the “final solution”: the isolation,<sup>42</sup> marking, expropriation, and ghettoization of the Jews.

The second phase of the entrapment started in late April or early May 1944, when the Zionist leaders realized that the SS had failed to live up to their promises. To soothe the anger of the disappointed Zionists, the SS offered them two distinct but interrelated consolation prizes: a conditional plan to save over a million European Jews; and a more concrete plan for the rescue of a limited number of Hungarian Jews. The first came to be known as the “blood for trucks” offer; the second as the SS-Kasztner deal.

The “blood for trucks” offer was made by Eichmann during his discussion with Joel Brand, a leading member of the Vaada, on April 25. Eichmann indicated that the Nazis were ready to sell one million Jews in exchange for certain goods to be obtained outside of Hungary.<sup>43</sup> The “goods” included, among other things, 10,000 trucks that, according to the SS, would be used exclusively on the

41 Following up on the Europa Plan offer made by the Slovak Jewish leaders, Wisliceny demanded a total of US\$2,000,000, insisting that \$200,000 be paid immediately in Hungarian Pengő as “proof of the Zionists’ goodwill and financial liquidity.” The first installment of three million Pengő was delivered shortly thereafter to Hermann Krumej and Otto Hunsche, two leading figures of the Eichmann-Sonderkommando. The second installment of 2.5 million Pengő was delivered to the same officers on April 21, while the ghettoization in Carpatho-Ruthenia and northeastern Hungary was already in full swing; Braham, *Politics*, pp. 1076–1077.

42 The Jews were deprived of their right to travel and to own any means of transportation and communication, including bicycles, cars, radios, and telephones, in order to assure their smooth deportation and detract them from their ability to escape or engage in resistance.

43 Relying largely on the misinformation provided by Becher during his interrogation by Kasztner on July 7, 1947 (see note 18), some scholars of the Holocaust concluded that it was the Zionists who made the “blood for trucks” offer to the SS; see, for example, Bauer, *Jews for Sale?*, pp. 163–164, and Richard Breitman and Shlomo Aronson, “The End of the ‘Final Solution?’: Nazi Plans to Ransom Jews in 1944,” *Central European History*, 25: 2 (1992),

eastern front.<sup>44</sup> After the mission was approved by the top officials of the RSHA, including Walter Schellenberg, head of *Amt VI* (Counterintelligence Section),<sup>45</sup> Brand was supplied with a passport forged by the SS and allowed to fly to Istanbul on May 19. He was accompanied by Andreas (Andor, Bandi) Gross, a shady character and multiple intelligence agent, who reportedly had a separate mission of his own.<sup>46</sup>

Brand was unable to convince either the Jewish leaders or the lower-rank representatives of the Western Allies he met in Istanbul

pp. 177–203. The evidence that it was Eichmann who made the offer to Brand is overwhelming. It was convincingly demonstrated, for example, in Brand’s testimony and Judge Halevi’s judgment in the Kasztner–Grünwald libel suit in Jerusalem.

- 44 Using Brand’s testimony, which he calls “unreliable,” as a reference, Bauer writes that, during Brand’s third meeting with Eichmann, “most likely on May 8,” the head of the Sonderkommando handed Brand “\$32,750 and a bundle of letters from Switzerland.” On May 14, Brand allegedly also received “\$50,000 and SFR270,000 together with letters” from Klages. Bauer admits that “these amounts raise some questions, because the total sum transferred by Mayer to Hungary in April and May did not exceed \$86,000.” However, he fails to explain how these sums ended up in the hands of the SS and why the SS— who were also in desperate need of foreign currency—were ready to transfer those amounts back to the Jews; Bauer, *Jews for Sale?*, p. 164.
- 45 Schellenberg’s approval of the mission as a means “to split the Allies” was revealed by Karl Marcus, the assistant to Kurt Jahnke, the former head of Hitler’s personal intelligence office under Rudolf Hess and later political adviser to Schellenberg; see “Memorandum for the Secretary of State” dated December 28, 1944, in National Archives, Washington, DC, Record Group
- 46 Relying largely on the testimony given by Gross during his Cairo interrogation by the British, Yehuda Bauer has become convinced that the *real* purpose of the mission was the one entrusted to Gross. Accordingly, Gross was expected, with Himmler’s and other top Nazis’ consent, to establish contacts with representatives of the Western Allies in Istanbul in order to bring about a separate peace and perhaps establish a common “capitalist” front against Soviet Bolshevism; Bauer, *Jews for Sale?*, chapter 10. Shortly before his death in 1964, Brand confessed that he made a terrible mistake in passing the Eichmann offer to the British, emphasizing that “Himmler sought to sow suspicion among the Allies as a preparation for his much desired Nazi–Western coalition against Moscow.” *The New York Times*, May 21, 1964, as quoted by Braham, *Politics*, p. 1154. Bauer failed to note Brand’s postwar conclusions. For some details on the Brand mission, see Braham, *Politics*, pp. 1078–1088.

and elsewhere about the feasibility or merits of the “blood for trucks” offer.<sup>47</sup> Gross was equally unsuccessful with his own mission. Both of them were eventually arrested by the British and interrogated at length in Cairo.

The Nazis’ main objectives behind the offer were clear. Already involved in the mass deportation of the Jews (the deportations began on May 15, two days *before* Brand’s departure), they aimed, among other things, to distract the attention of the Hungarian Jewish leaders and masses from the disaster that confronted them and, if possible, to bring about a split in the Grand Alliance at a time when the Third Reich was facing imminent defeat. The Brand mission was doomed to failure from the outset; clearly, the Allies would not fall for the blackmail. The Slovak and Hungarian Jewish leaders, on the other hand, condemned the Allies and the Jewish leaders of the free world both during and after the war for having “missed a great opportunity for rescue.”

The second offer was more concrete and more attractive to the Zionist leaders. During their meeting with Krumei and Hunsche on April 21, Krumei informed the Zionists, who had just delivered the second installment of the ransom demanded by Wisliceny, that Berlin had agreed to issue exit visas for the 600 applicants holding Palestine immigration certificates.<sup>48</sup> It was the chance of saving

47 During his debriefing by the FBI on May 17, 1945, Kasztner is quoted to have said: “On hearing of the Allied attitude, Eichmann issued orders for Auschwitz ‘to start work’”; FBI Intelligence Report. Needless to say, the mass deportations began on May 15, and the Allies’ response was not revealed until July 19, 1944.

48 Bauer claims that the offer was conveyed by a certain Josef Schmidt (or Schmied), a member of the Budapest *Abwehr* team; Bauer, *Jews for Sale?*, p. 163. Robert Rozett, whose doctoral dissertation was written under the guidance of Bauer, in turn claims that the offer was delivered by Wisliceny; see *The Relationship Between Rescue and Revolt: Jewish Rescue and Revolt in Slovakia and Hungary During the Holocaust*, doctoral dissertation, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, June 1987, p. 181. The certificates were sent by the Istanbul office of the Jewish Agency early in 1944, to Moshe (Miklós) Krausz, head of the Budapest branch of the Palestine Office. The SS became aware of them after Carl Lutz, the head of the Swiss Legation in Budapest, had approached the Germans for exit visas.

these and possibly a few more Jews that appears to have entrapped the Zionist leaders, who by then seem to have been convinced that the “final solution” could no longer be delayed, let alone stopped.<sup>49</sup> The first two transports were taken to Auschwitz at the end of April.

The negotiations relating to the rescue of the 600 Jews — a number that eventually grew to 1,684 — were conducted under the leadership of Rezső (Rudolf) Kasztner. Eichmann identified the rescue of these “prominent” Jews as a top “Reich secret.” He was apparently convinced that this would not only compel Kasztner to remain silent in order not to jeopardize the rescue of his group, but also enable the SS and their Hungarian accomplices to implement the “final solution” program without fear of mass escape or resistance.

The so-called Kasztner-transport was allowed to leave Hungary at the end of June 1944, but instead of ending up in a neutral country, as originally promised by Eichmann, it was directed to Bergen-Belsen, where the Jews were placed in a special section of the notorious concentration camp. The switch in venue was in accord with Eichmann’s diabolical plan to use these Jews as hostages, thus keeping Kasztner in his grips: a “violation of the Reich secret” would lead to the physical elimination of the group still under his control.<sup>50</sup>

The postwar debates over Kasztner’s negotiations with the SS overshadowed the many controversies that raged over the conflicting accounts of rescue in Budapest. The debates acquired a particularly egregious tone in the mid-1950s over Kasztner’s role in the rescue of the 1,684 Jews, including 388 from his hometown Kolozsvár. Many of these people were among his friends and relatives. While there is general agreement that, in the absence of

49 It was the acceptance of this offer that induced Justice Halevi to conclude that Kasztner had “sold his soul to the devil”; see Section 39 of his judgment.

50 Bauer implies that the train ended up in Bergen-Belsen due to military factors. “At the time, the Allied beachhead in Normandy was expanding, and travel toward the Spanish border became more and more problematic.”; see *Jews for Sale?*, p. 199.

this operation, many of the 1,684 Jews would have perished during the anti-Jewish drive in 1944, the controversy that continues to linger even until today revolves around the “price” that was allegedly paid for the rescue. The barricades are still manned by people firmly committed to their particular myth-laden version of the truth. The original combatants were survivors: the family members and friends of those who were rescued and of those who were murdered, respectively. In the course of time, the personal arguments were replaced by historical battles spearheaded by a variety of political interest groups in Israel and elsewhere. They employed myth-laden ideological, moral-philosophical, and theological arguments in support of their particular individual and collective interests.

The anti-Kasztner forces relied — and continue to depend — on the conclusions reached by Judge Benjamin Halevi, who presided in a Jerusalem District Court over a lengthy libel case that was initiated by Kasztner against Malkiel Grünwald. An Orthodox Jew who was distraught over the loss of many of his family members, Grünwald had used his makeshift mimeographed newsletter to accuse Kasztner, among other things, of “collaboration with the Nazis.” In a lengthy and devastating opinion read on June 22, 1955, Judge Halevi concluded, among other things, that Kasztner had “sold his soul to the devil.” He concurred with one of the main contentions of the defense; namely, that Kasztner had helped send hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews to their death by remaining silent about the Nazis’ design in exchange for the opportunity to save a few thousand “prominent” Jews, including his family and friends. Judge Halevi’s conclusions were skillfully exploited by the anti-Mapai forces within Israel and by many antisemitic and anti-Israel elements of the right and the left the world over.

The pro-Kasztner forces continue to rely for their support on the conclusions reached by Israel’s Supreme Court in mid-January 1958. Reversing Judge Halevi’s decision, a majority of the court concluded that Kasztner actually had tried to save as many Jews as

possible and had risked his own life in so doing.<sup>51</sup> Kasztner's vindication came a year after his death.

The debate continues to linger over the conclusions reached by Justice Moshe Silber of the Israeli Supreme Court. In his dissenting opinion, Justice Silber concluded that the Nazis' ability to carry out the "final solution" program in Hungary as easily and peacefully as they did was "the direct result of the concealment of the horrifying truth from the victims." He made a special reference to the case in Kolozsvár: "Either Kasztner did not disclose to the local leaders the secret of Auschwitz or the leaders did not inform the masses of the secret known to them from Kasztner. There is no third possibility."<sup>52</sup>

The evidence is not totally clear whether Kasztner, during his visit to Kolozsvár early in May 1944, had in fact informed József Fischer, his father-in-law and also the president of the Jewish community and then head of the local Jewish Council, and, indirectly, the other members of the Council. These leaders were by then fully aware of the realities of the "final solution." The fact that the lay and spiritual leaders of the Council were privy to the secrets of Auschwitz led to their escape before the mass deportations began, leaving the masses to fend for themselves. After the war most of these leaders insisted that they had been unaware of the realities of the death camps. Like the masses, they contended, they were sure that the Jews would only be taken to Kenyérmező (a fictitious area in western Hungary) for agricultural labor for the duration of the war. Perhaps they were convinced that this transfer plan was genuine. But then, why did they not remain with the

51 In a perceptive piece, Michal Shaked argues that the judgment of Justice Halevi was judicially and morally more appropriate than that of the Supreme Court; see "History in the Courtroom and the Courtroom in History: Court Decisions and Narratives of Memory," *Alpayim* (Hebrew) (2000), no. 20. See also an equally perceptive review article on this subject by Shulamit Aloni, the former Israeli minister of Education and Culture, entitled "Roads Not Taken in the Province of Memory," *Ha'aretz*, February 16, 2001.

52 For a summary of the Kasztner case in Israel, see Braham, *Politics*, pp. 1104–1112.

masses to provide ongoing leadership and support in Kenyérmező instead of escaping and abandoning their flock? None of them provided a satisfactory answer to this question after the war.<sup>53</sup>

The SS used another of their trump cards against the hapless Vaada leaders in connection with the transfer of 18,000 Jews to Strasshof, Austria. On June 14, 1944, Eichmann informed Kasztner that, in addition to the “prominent” Jews, which included his friends and family members, he was ready to allow 30,000 Jews to be “laid on ice” in Austria as a demonstration of his good will in connection with the grandiose “blood for trucks” offer.

Eichmann’s “generous” goodwill offer was in fact a monstrous extortion scheme. He exploited the opportunity presented by an urgent request from Ernst Kaltenbrunner, the head of the Reich Security Main Office, to transfer thousands of Hungarian Jews to Austria to ease the labor shortages suffered by local agricultural and industrial enterprises, many of which were involved in the production of war-related products. Kaltenbrunner acted in response to the many desperate pleas he had received from Austrian entrepreneurs and high-ranking officials, including *SS-Brigadeführer* Karl Blaschke, the mayor of Vienna.<sup>54</sup>

Kasztner, who could not possibly have been aware of what prompted Eichmann’s offer, jumped at the opportunity to save more Jews. With the endorsement of the Jewish Council leaders, he first offered Eichmann five million Swiss francs in jewelry, *Pengös*, and foreign exchange. Eichmann had a counteroffer but, finally, agreed to a per capita payment of \$100. Kasztner had hoped to stop the deportations then going on in northern Hungary by suggesting that the transfers to Austria depart from there. However, since the machinery of destruction was already in high gear in this part of the country, the transports were transferred mostly from the

53 For reasons of his own, Bauer is also silent on this issue.

54 *The Destruction of Hungarian Jewry. A Documentary Account*, compiled and edited by Randolph L. Braham (New York: World Federation of Hungarian Jews, 1963), Doc. 184; see also Section 71 in Judge Benjamin Halevi’s judgment.

southeastern parts of Trianon Hungary. The background of the entire extortion-based “rescue” notwithstanding, the survival of most of the Strasshof deportees continues to be recorded as a successful rescue operation by the Kasztner-Becher group.<sup>55</sup>

The third rescue-related contact between a Jewish leader and a representative of the SS was personal and discreet. It involved Fülöp Freudiger, a leading figure of the Central Jewish Council representing the Orthodox Jewish community, and Dieter Wisliceny, the deportation expert in the Eichmann-Sonderkommando. For his first formal meeting with Freudiger, Wisliceny came armed with a letter of recommendation from Rabbi Weissmandel, who, as noted earlier, was under the mistaken impression that he had played a crucial role in halting the deportation of Slovak Jews in June-July 1942 by bribing the SS officer.<sup>56</sup>

The contacts between the Jewish leader and the SS representative became mutually rewarding. As in Slovakia and Greece, Wisliceny played an active role in the round up and deportation of the Jews of Hungary. Nevertheless, this did not prevent Freudiger from continuing to supply him with large amounts of jewelry and cash every time they met in Budapest, gestures that were rewarded at the personal level. As a *quid pro quo* Wisliceny picked out some eighty Orthodox Jewish community leaders from various ghettos, including Debrecen, Nagyvárad, Pápa, Sopron, and Székesfehérvár, most of whom were subsequently included in the Kasztner transport.

Wisliceny was also instrumental in helping Freudiger, his family, and some of his friends escape to Romania on August 9, 1944. The escape caused considerable panic among the Jews of Budapest, who continued to live under the constant threat of deportation. As a result of his close contact with Jewish leaders abroad and with

55 Braham, *ibid.*, pp. 733–737. It is all but impossible to determine the number of survivors, for even from the Strasshof area an undetermined number of Jews were transferred to Auschwitz as “punishment for breaches of discipline.”

56 On Wisliceny’s role in Slovakia, see *ibid.*, pp. 1048–1050, 1074–1075.

Wisliceny, Freudiger was widely believed to be one of the best-informed members of the Central Jewish Council. His sudden departure, therefore, was widely construed as a harbinger of imminent deportation, a fear that was reinforced by the arrest of the top leaders of the Council by the Gestapo.

While Freudiger was clearly responsible for saving close to 100 Jews, the circumstances behind the rescue elicited considerable controversy both during and after the war. In Israel, where he also served as a prominent prosecution witness in the Eichmann trial (1960–1962), Freudiger’s role in the Jewish Council, his dealings with Wisliceny, and his escape were subjected to constant scrutiny. His opponents argued, among other things, that he fraudulently used passports that the Romanian government had placed at the disposal of Romanian-Jewish nationals stranded in Hungary, an accusation Freudiger denied to the end of his life.<sup>57</sup>

In contrast to Eichmann, who insisted that the goods identified in his “blood for trucks” offer be obtained outside of Hungary, Becher was set to acquire the Weiss-Manfréd Works, Hungary’s largest industrial complex, for the SS. With the wholehearted support of Himmler, who wanted, among other things, a steady source of military equipment for his Waffen-SS units, Becher negotiated with Ferenc Chorin, who, as head of one of the four families owning the industrial complex, represented the so-called “family group.” Using the skills acquired elsewhere during his long service in the SS, Becher managed to overcome the political and legal hurdles posed by the transaction. He paid lip service to Hungary’s nominal independence and sovereignty by including several Hungarian Christian nationals in the new board and circumvented the governmental regulations relating to the expropriation of Jewish property.

Under the terms of the agreement signed on May 17, 1944, the SS acquired the controlling 51 percent of the shares owned by the

57 Fülöp Freudiger, “Five Months,” in Randolph L. Braham, ed., *The Tragedy of Hungarian Jewry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 237–294.

Aryan members of the families. The agreement also stipulated that the SS would administer the enterprise “as a trusteeship for a period of 25 years” in compensation for which it (and Becher) would get 5 percent of the gross income for their services as trustees. As part of the agreement, forty-five to forty-eight members of the family group were allowed to leave Hungary for the free world. Under an “embarrassing” part of the agreement that was not made public, these family members were also to receive cash payments of \$600,000 plus 250,000 German Marks — much of which the Germans failed to pay.

The family members, who, with a few notable exceptions, had little if anything to do with the Jewish community, were flown to Vienna the day the agreement was signed. Ironically, it was the very day Brand and Gross were flown there on their separate missions. After a few weeks’ stay in the Austrian capital, thirty-two members of the family group were eventually taken to Lisbon, while a smaller group went to Switzerland. Nine of the most influential members of the families were retained in Vienna as hostages to ensure the “good behavior” of the others in the free world.<sup>58</sup>

In contrast to the accounts of earlier rescue operations, which were imbued with various degrees of reality, those advanced in connection with the mass rescue of Jews across the Hungarian-Romanian border are purely mythical. These myth-laden accounts were concocted by two elderly individuals and effectively propagated by Romanian nationalists and governmental officials, both before and after the collapse of the Communist regime in 1989, for the advancement of their particular domestic and international agenda. The authors of the mythical accounts of rescue were Rabbi Moshe Carmilly-Weinberger, the former head of the Neolog Jewish Community of Kolozsvár, and Raoul Șorban, a painter and professor of art history at the University of Bucharest. The rabbi was one of the leaders of the Jewish Council of

58 For some details on the SS acquisition of the Weiss-Manfréd Works and its many political, economic, and diplomatic ramifications, see Braham, *Politics*, pp. 556–566.

Kolozsvár who escaped just before the beginning of the mass deportations, leaving his congregants to their tragic fate. After the war he launched a veritable disinformation campaign to exonerate himself by “demonstrating” that his alleged escape was in fact a mission of rescue undertaken at the behest of the Jewish leadership of Kolozsvár. Şorban, a vehemently anti-Hungarian, self-righteous, and opportunistic Romanian nationalist intellectual, seems to have been passionately eager to acquire recognition for his oft-asserted but unproven wartime rescue activities on behalf of the persecuted Jews of Hungary.

The commonality of interests that bound the two led to the invention of rescue accounts that soon found their way into the press and mass media. Laden with half-truths and outright lies, the accounts have, in the course of time, been upgraded, with increasingly exaggerated revelations of rescue.<sup>59</sup> While, in 1945, Şorban boasted only about his collaboration in rescuing a few Jews, including Rabbi Carmilly-Weinberger and his wife (a claim that even the rabbi failed ever to corroborate), in April 1986, shortly after establishing contact with the rabbi, Şorban recalled his involvement in the rescue of “hundreds of Jews.” Once they fully established their *Interessengemeinschaft*, Şorban and the rabbi began emphasizing that they collectively saved many *thousands* of Jews. By 1992, Şorban became cocky enough to emphasize his personal involvement in the rescue of “tens of thousands.” His boasts were “authenticated” by Dr. Alexander Şafran, the former chief rabbi of Romania. Speaking before a plenary session of the Romanian Senate on March 28, 1995, Rabbi Şafran, then chief rabbi of Geneva, referred to Şorban as the man who saved “the Jews of Northern Transylvania who managed to escape deportation to Auschwitz.”

59 Rozett also credits Ernő Marton, the former editor-in-chief of the *Új Kelet* (“New East”) of Kolozsvár, with the rescue of Jews across the Hungarian-Romanian border; see his *The Relationship Between Rescue and Revolt*, p. 139. Like Rabbi Weinberger, Marton, a leading figure in the Jewish community of Kolozsvár, also escaped before the ghettoization.

There is no solid evidence that Șorban saved even a single Jew — a conclusion that was reached even by Rabbi Carmilly-Weinberger early in 1973; that is, before his collaboration with Șorban began. In a letter of response addressed to Avraham Ronen, then a professor of Archeology at the Tel Aviv University, who lobbied for Șorban’s recognition as a Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem (a support based almost exclusively on what he had heard from Șorban during one of his visits to Bucharest), Rabbi Carmilly-Weinberger wrote: “*I don’t know if Prof. Raoul Șorban really saved the life of one Jew in reality. I can only testify that he was the only non-Jew who was ready to help in those days*” [emphasis added].

Notwithstanding the absence of any evidence that Șorban “saved the life of one Jew in reality,” the rabbi, once his own personal interests required it, in the mid-1980s, became one of Șorban’s most ardent supporters, virtually compelling Yad Vashem to grant him the recognition. Șorban was awarded the coveted title of Righteous Among the Nations on November 6, 1986, a decision that appears to have gone counter to the standard procedures usually followed in other cases. Șorban expressed his gratitude by promptly exploiting his recognition for monetary and political advantages. During the post-Communist era, he switched his allegiance to the nationalists, using his prestigious title to advance their common agenda: denial of the Holocaust in Romania, rehabilitation of Marshal Ion Antonescu, and contrasting Romania’s wartime “humanitarianism” with Hungary’s anti-Jewish and anti-Romanian “barbarism.”<sup>60</sup> On November 21, 2003, Șorban was unmasked as having been for over twenty years an informer for the Securitate, the dreaded secret police of Communist Romania.<sup>61</sup>

60 Randolph L. Braham, *Romanian Nationalists and the Holocaust: The Political Exploitation of Unfounded Rescue Accounts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

61 The revelation was made by the National Council for Studying the Archives of the Securitate (*Consiliul Național pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securității. Evenimentul Zilei* (“The Event of the Day”), Bucharest, November 21, 2003.

In contrast to the Carmilly-Weinberger — Şorban mythical accounts of rescue, many of the personal narratives of rescue across the Hungarian-Romanian border are real. A number of Jews managed to cross this border in 1944, thereby escaping deportation. According to a December 28, 1944, report by S. Bertrand Jacobson, the Bucharest representative of the HIAS-HICEM, the two American-based Jewish rescue organizations, approximately 1,500 Hungarian Jews clandestinely crossed the Hungarian-Romanian border that year. Some were smuggled across the border by *Halutzim*. Most managed to save themselves without the aid of any rescue groups.

I would like to conclude by paraphrasing, however sardonically, the irreverent comment by the Hungarian intelligence officer cited at the beginning of this study. Had Hungary had as many mass rescuers during the German occupation period as were identified or self-proclaimed after the war, most of the Jews of Hungary would have survived the Holocaust. And had the number of surviving Jews attributed to the rescue operations of these individuals been the *real* number rather than the one inflated by the mythmakers, the Jewish population of Hungary after the war would have been larger than on the day the Germans occupied the country. There is a potential danger that the myths of rescue, if left unchallenged, may acquire a life of their own, threatening the integrity of the historical record of the Holocaust.