

One million Jews for sale

By Emanuel Litvinoff

Advocate for the Dead. The Story of Joel Brand. By Alex Weissberg. Deutsch. Pp 255. 15s.

On April 25, 1944, a Hungarian Jew, Joel Brand, one of the committee of a Jewish underground organisation in Budapest, received a fantastic offer. He was taken to the office of Adolph Eichmann, Himmler's "commissjoner for Jewish affairs" and the official Nazi mass-murderer, who told him: "I am prepared to sell you a million Jews. I'll make you a fair offer. You deliver me one Army lorry for every 100 Jews." Or 10,000 lorries for the million, with Eichmann's word of honour that the vehicles would be used exclusively on the Eastern front.

This proposition was, of course, insane, but it was not the first strange deal suggested to the Jews. Eighteen months earlier, Baron von Wisliceny, chief of the S.S. in Slovakia, had negotiated a profitable agreement with Gizi Fleischmann, a young Jewish woman leader. For £50,000 he delayed the deportations of Slovakian Jews and offered to spare all the Jews of Europe, with the exception of those in Germany and Poland, for an additional \$2 millions. This unlikely proposition was never put to the test because the Jewish authorities abroad could only give Wisliceny a guarantee that the money would be paid to him in the United States after the war, or into a blocked account in Switzerland. These terms he declined.

Brand and his colleagues were living a nightmare existence in which these insanities were things to be taken in deadly seriousness. Germany's hopes of winning the war were fast disappearing and some Germans were interested in bargaining the lives of Jews in return for lenient consideration of their own crimes; others had shown themselves anxious to barter Jews for money, food, or war materials. Rival groups representing the Abwehr and the S.S. intrigued against one another, each promising the tormented Jewish leaders a better deal. Brand describes how he was taken to secret meetings with Germans where negotiations were conducted as between civilised business men over drinks and refreshments. And all the time the same Germans were dispatching trainloads of Jews to the gas-chambers.

For some inexplicable reason Brand remains convinced that Eichmann's offer was genuine. The Allies would not, of course, hand over 10,000 lorries, but he believed that they would agree to prolong negotiations for several months in an attempt to forestall the extermination of the surviving European Jews. The S.S. flew him to Istanbul together with Bandi Grosz, a character who would properly seem to belong to melodramatic fiction and who worked impartially for the intelligence services of the Allies, the Germans, the Hungarians, and, on occasions, the Jews. Brand was warned to return within a fortnight with an acceptance of the German offer. The fate of the Jews, including his own family, was in his hands, he was told.

He did not return to Budapest. Instead of meeting high Jewish Agency officials in Istanbul, as expected, he was ordered to proceed to Aleppo to report to the British. —At the Aleppo railway station he was detained by British Intelligence agents and later transferred to Cairo. Requests for his release by the American and Jewish Agency authorities were politely rejected and nothing was done about the German offer. Understandably embittered, Brand holds the Jewish Agency and the Allies responsible for failing to avert the murder of almost a million people by neglecting to grasp what the book's publisher calls "one of the greatest chances ever offered to save the lives of some of Nazi Germany's victims." Without questioning the honesty and sincerity of the evidence presented here, in relation to the enormity of the charge it can only be regarded as flimsy.

The broad outlines of the Brand mission have been familiar for some time. Its failure has left a trail of recrimination and violence. The Stern Gang's senseless assassination of Lord Moyne, British Deputy Minister of State in the Middle East, is believed to have been one of the consequences. Another was the murder last year in the streets of Tel-Aviv of Brand's superior in Budapest, Dr Israel Kastner, after receiving nominal damages in a libel suit against a man who accused him of collaborating with the Nazis. Kastner has been posthumously vindicated. His own version of the events, submitted in a confidential report to the Jewish Agency in 1946, differs materially in certain details from Brand's.

Brand's story has the remarkable effect of adding obscurity to the episode. It is difficult to understand his curious insistence on the reliability of Eichmann's promise to "keep the Jews on ice" until he returned. The main deportations from Hungary had begun three days before he left on his mission and were increased day by day. Eichmann seemed in a greater hurry than ever to kill off the Jews. One half—335,000—of the total left in Hungary were herded off to the death camps in three weeks. This information was smuggled out to the San Salvador Consul in Geneva by Miklos Kraus, head of the Budapest Palestine Office, and was certainly communicated to the Allies and the Jewish authorities. So that even as Brand was arguing the value of treating Eichmann's offer with at least a pretence of seriousness, Allied intelligence already knew that it was worthless and were anxious to discover the real German purpose in sending him to Istanbul.

The answer seemed to lie with his companion on the trip, Bandi Grosz, whom Brand seemed to regard as an amiable villain. When Grosz told him bluntly that he was merely being used as a cover and that he, Grosz, was bringing the British and Americans an offer from Himmler of a separate peace, Brand was unable to believe it. Now, fourteen years later, he is still unable to assess the full signifi-

cance of this disclosure and the effect that it would have on the Allies' reception of his own mission.

The indictment of the Jewish Agency is more an expression of irrational bitterness than of logic. The worst that can be charged against it is that it was ineffectual, unassertive, and without influence. Jewish leaders had been singularly unsuccessful in impressing their views on the Allies. Their request that bombers should be diverted to destroy the death camps and the railroads that served them was repeatedly rejected on strategic grounds. Only belatedly were they granted permission to establish a special Jewish brigade, and their request that groups of armed Jewish parachutists should be dropped in Hungary and the Balkans to organise the Jews for resistance was refused. They failed to persuade the British to abandon their parsimonious policy of restricting the entry of Jews to Palestine to fifty certificates a month, even after the infamous episode of the "Struma" in 1942, when 769 men, women, and children who had escaped from Occupied Europe were driven by the British from the coast of Palestine, refused landing by the Turks, and died when their ship struck a mine in the Black Sea.

The Jewish Agency could not help Brand. Protests against his detention as a breach of British assurances were brushed aside with the comment: "There's a war on." Moshe Shertok, the Agency's political director and later Israel's Foreign Minister, flew to London where he and Dr Weizmann talked to Eden. They received little but sympathy, and shortly afterwards, on July 11, 1944, the final word on the subject was spoken by Churchill. The persecution of the Jews in Hungary "is probably the greatest and most horrible crime committed in the history of the world," he wrote in a note to Eden. "There should, therefore, in my opinion, be no negotiations of any kind on this subject. . . . Everyone connected with it will be hunted down and put to death."

This is a moral statement. It leaves a lingering uneasiness that will never be dispelled until one knows for certain that negotiations could not have saved some, at least, of Europe's Jews. The publication of Joel Brand's story only provides a small part of the evidence.