One million Jews for sale

By Emanuel Litvinoff

He did not return to Budapest. Instead of meeting high Jewish Agency officials in Istanbul, as expected, he was ordered by British Intelligence agents and later transferred to Cairo. Requests for his visit to Israel by the Jewish Agency authorities were politely rejected and nothing was done about the German offer. Understandably, 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 the Jews of 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 calculated.

The broad outlines of the Brand mission have been familiar for some time. Its failure has left a trail of decimation and violence. The Stern Organisation criminals, for example, in the East and the Middle East, is believed to have been one of the consequences. Another was the murder last year in Athens of British military attaché, Mr. Myers, in Athens. There is no superior in Budapest, Mr. Israel Kastner, who received nominal damages in a libel suit against a man who accused him of collaborating with the Nazis. Kastner, who was unimpeachably vindicated, has a version of the events, submitted in a confidential report to the Jewish Agency in 1945, differing materially in certain details.

Kastner'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 him in touch with the Germans. The main deportations from Hungary had begun three days before he left on his mission and were increased by day. Eichmann seemed in greater hurry than Kastner to kill the Jews. One half—350,000—of the total left in Hungary were herded off to the death camps in three weeks. This information was smuggled out to the British from a Central in Geneva by Milos Kraus, head of the Budapest Palestine Office, and was communicated to the Allies and the Jewish authorities. So that even as Brand was arguing the value of Eichmann's offer with at least a pretense of seriousness, Allied intelligence already knew that it was worthless and were anxious to discover the real German position in sending him to Istanbul.

The answer seems to lie with his companion on the trip, Bundi Grosz, who Brand seemed to regard as an indispensable 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 significance 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 inept, 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 parsonal policy of restricting the entry of Jews to Palestine to fifty certificates a month, even after the infamous episode of the "Struma" in 1942, in which 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 Brand's fate was reported. "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.