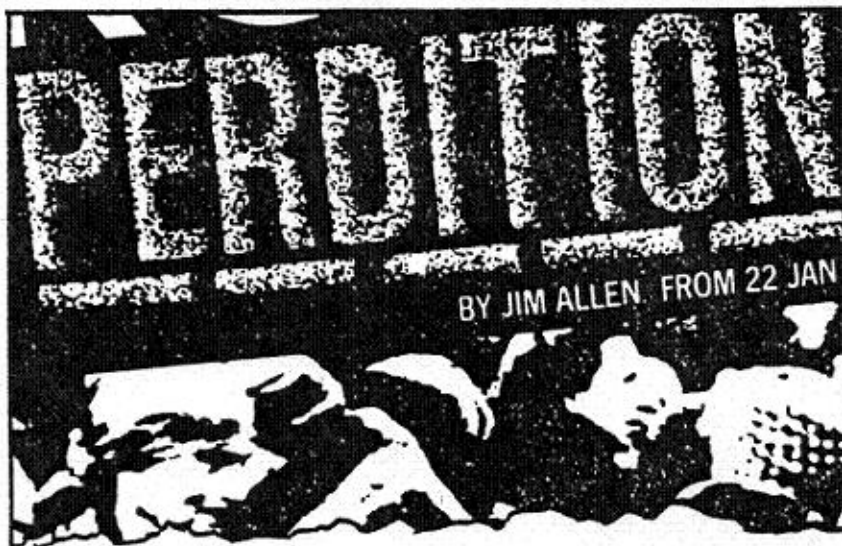


A curtain call for courting perdition

● A new play about Jewish collaboration with the Nazis, was halted last week. CHRISTINE TOOMEY looks at its errors



The play: a 'travesty of the facts' was scrapped

THE controversy surrounding *Perdition*, the latest play by Jim Allen about the collaboration of Hungarian Jewish leaders with the Nazis during the war, came to a head last Wednesday when London's Royal Court Theatre cancelled its preview.

The major problem at the heart of the play is an allegation that Zionist leaders collaborated to kill more than 500,000 Jews to win international support for the establishment of a Jewish state.

The play is based on a libel case in 1954 between Dr Rudolph Kastner, a prominent member of the Budapest rescue committee in 1944, and Malkiel Grunwald, a civil servant, who produced a leaflet accusing Kastner of collaboration.

When Max Stafford-Clark, the Royal Court's artistic director, announced the play was being dropped he strongly denied that *Perdition* was anti-semitic and flawed by historical inaccuracies. However, leading historians disagree.

One, Martin Gilbert, Sir Winston Churchill's official biographer and author of *Holocaust, Auschwitz and Final Journey*, a documentary study of the fate of the Jews in Nazi Europe, calls the play a "travesty of the facts".

He says: "In reality there are inaccuracies on almost every page of the script: not only errors of fact but innuendoes and allegations

against thousands of Jews unable to defend themselves because they were murdered more than 40 years ago by the very people with whom, the script insists, they were in deliberate and sinister collusion."

Gilbert says he has identified 60 errors in the script. Among them:

● The play claims that Kastner, a leading Zionist, told Adolf Eichmann, administrator of the programme to exterminate the Jews, shortly after the Nazi's arrival in Hungary in March 1944: "Spare some Jews of my choice and I shall keep quiet." In fact, it was not Kastner but Eichmann who made the offer to spare

"some Jews" on April 25, 1944 and Eichmann offered to save all 800,000 Hungarian Jews.

It was a cruel deception as Eichmann merely pretended all the Jews would live if the Hungarian Zionists persuaded the Allies to provide trucks, goods, food and cash, which would then be passed to the SS. The Zionist leadership in Jerusalem urged the Allies to test it, not to save a few select Jews (as the script says) but to save every Hungarian Jew.

● Another page of the script states: "Jewish people were dying horribly, and Zionist leaders preferred that it remained so rather than accept settlement elsewhere."

This, says Gilbert, is false. The Zionists frequently put rescue schemes to the Allies.

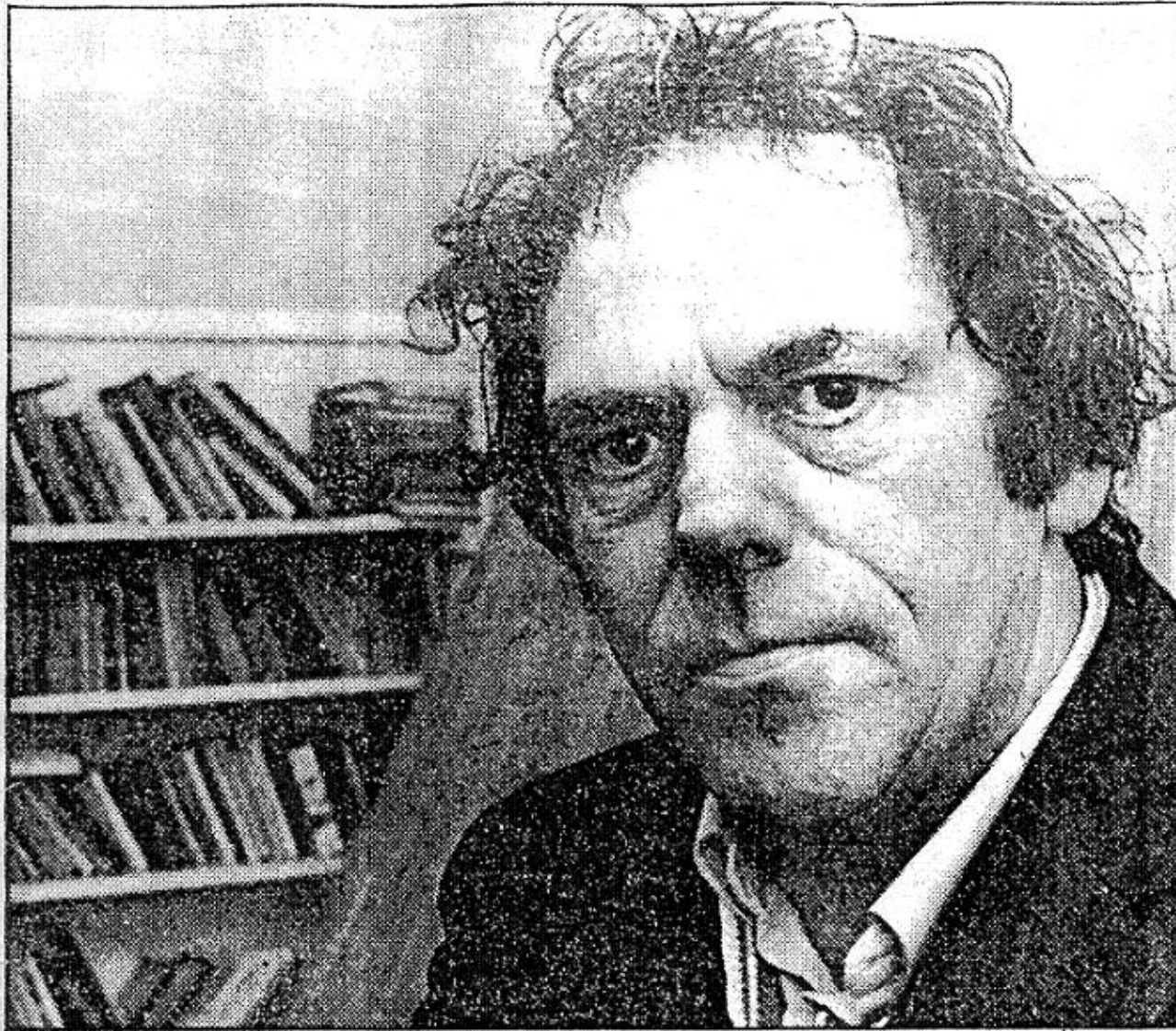
● For six weeks after the start of Jewish deportation from Hungary on May 15, 1944 "the entire Jewish leadership" in Jerusalem (specifically named in the script as Dr Chaim Weizmann, David Ben Gurion and Dr Yitzhak Gruenbaum) "knew what was happening" but "did not publish or even utter one single word of protest".

In fact the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem, headed by Ben Gurion, warned the Allies on April 6, 1944 (five weeks before the deportations began) of German plans to kill Hungarian Jews; ten days before the deportation started, a Zionist official in Istanbul informed Jerusalem deportations were imminent.

Within hours of this telegram the Jewish Agency's rescue committee head, the same Dr Gruenbaum, who according to the play did nothing for the next six weeks, telegraphed London to urge that "all steps" be taken by the Allies to prevent these deportations. Jerusalem's Zionist leaders also alerted British Zionists urging maximum publicity and on May 12, 1944, three days before the deportations began, the London-based Zionist Review published an editorial headed "800,000 Jews face extermination".

● It is said of the Zionists that "their goal was the creation of the Jewish home-

Mike Aron



The playwright, Jim Allen: 'it seems the play has uncovered a cloud of guilt'

town's leading Jewish citizens, was ordered by the SS to help round-up the Jews but to a man, the council members refused. They were all shot. The SS then selected another group of Jews, declared them to be the council, and ordered them to participate in the round-up. They too refused. All were shot.

The SS then selected a further group at random and ordered them, on threat of the execution of their families, to help find Jews for the round-up. They did so and it was carried out by the SS and the local Ukrainian militia. Then not the Jews but the SS themselves threw a party, forcing the so-called "council" to attend.

● Finally, the play claims that "three young Jewish resistance fighters drop from the skies to help organise resistance in Hungary" and all three were handed over to the Nazis by the Jewish rescue committee in Budapest. In fact, each of the parachutists, dropped into Nazi-occupied Europe in the summer of 1944, was captured by the Germans. Not one was handed over to the Nazis by the Jews. One of the parachutists, Peretz Goldstein, 19, gave himself up to the Gestapo in June rather than jeopardise efforts to send 18,000 Hungarian Jews to Austria. Goldstein died in a concentration camp.

The 62-year-old playwright said last week: "If only we had been allowed to put the play on we could have had some reappraisal of some of the questions that Gilbert raises. But it seems the play has uncovered a cloud of guilt. The play is pro-Jewish but anti-Zionist and anti-Zionist comment, it seems, is not allowed."

Additional reporting by Wendy Robbins

land and to achieve this they were prepared if necessary to sacrifice the Jews of the diaspora". This was not so. At a 1943 meeting in Tel Aviv Gruenbaum declared: "We must continue with our rescue operations and not leave a stone unturned to stop the massacre. We must demand retaliation. We must do all in our power to save lives, to the extent that lives may still be saved."

● A statement in the play that "Eichmann accepted a Zionist invitation to visit Palestine where he was... taken to a kibbutz". Eichmann did in fact try to enter Palestine on June 17, 1937. He came under false papers, describing himself as

a journalist, was stopped at Haifa by the authorities, refused his visa and deported to Egypt. He never returned. He was never invited by a Zionist.

● The play is equally untrue, Gilbert argues, in its claim that the Jewish councils "by and large...collaborated". Many council leaders committed suicide rather than carry out SS orders. Others were murdered for their non-cooperation. Jewish councils organised hundreds of acts of defiance. The Bilgoraj Jewish council was ordered to compile a list of candidates for deportation. Four council members refused to do so. They were shot dead. The council at

Markuszow warned that village's Jews of an impending round-up and advised the community that "every Jew who is able to save himself should do so".

● The play describes how "the Jewish council in the Skalat ghetto who, after driving the Jews out of their hiding places, threw a party for the SS. Over 2,000 men, women and children lay all night in a field next to the railway track listening to the sound of laughter, singing and music as they waited for the train that would take them to Treblinka."

Gilbert says this is a cruel parody. The Skalat Jewish council, made up of the