

Kastner: Holocaust Hero Or Nazi Collaborator? – An Interview with Author Paul Bogdanor

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Paul Bogdanor

In 1952, an elderly Hungarian Jew, Malchiel Gruenwald, published a pamphlet accusing Rudolph Kastner – a spokesman for Israel’s Ministry of Trade and Industry – of collaborating with the Nazis during the Holocaust. The Israeli government sued Gruenwald for libel, expecting the trial to last a couple of days.

It didn’t. It lasted a year. And at its conclusion, instead of exonerating Kastner, Judge Benjamin Halevi found that Kastner had “sold his soul to the devil.” The trial led to the government’s collapse and the assassination of Kastner in 1957.

Although six decades have since passed, the Kastner Affair remains highly controversial. Some continue to see Kastner as a collaborator while others – like Israel’s Supreme Court, which overturned Halevi’s ruling by a vote of 3-2 in 1958 – argue that Kastner’s dealings with the Nazis enabled him to save over 1,500 Jews. The latest to weigh in on the debate is Paul Bogdanor, an

independent researcher in England and author of the recently released "*Kasztner's Crime*" (Transaction Publishers).

The Jewish Press: Many Jews know about Rudolph Kastner from the riveting book *Perfidy*, by Ben Hecht. Are your book's findings in consonance, or in conflict, with those of *Perfidy*?

Bogdanor: What *Perfidy* says about Kastner is accurate. Its accusations against the Zionist movement as a whole, however, are not so accurate.

For example, *Perfidy* accuses Ben-Gurion and his colleagues of deliberately sabotaging a mission by Kastner's colleague Joel Brand to convey Eichmann's "goods for blood" offer to the West. This was an offer by the Nazis to release a million Jews in exchange for 10,000 trucks and other goods from the West. Hecht says the Zionist leadership willingly sabotaged this mission, and thus doomed the Jews to extermination.

But the opposite is true. Ben-Gurion and his colleagues went all out to further the "goods for blood" offer. In doing so, though, they fell into a Nazi trap since these trucks were going to be used on the Eastern front against the Soviets in an effort to split the Allied coalition at a crucial point of the war.

Furthermore, Eichmann told Brand that he would not murder Hungary's Jews until he had a definite answer on the "goods for blood" offer when, in fact, he had already started deporting thousands of Hungarian Jews a day to Auschwitz even before Brand left Budapest to convey Eichmann's offer to the Zionist leadership. In other words, the Nazis used this offer as a way of keeping the Jewish leadership busy while it went about murdering Jews.

You write that Brand might have been naïve but you offer no such excuses for Kastner. You regard him as an outright Nazi collaborator. Why?

Because he deliberately misled scores of thousands of Jews into boarding the trains to Auschwitz. And because throughout the mass deportation from Hungary to Auschwitz he sent Nazi disinformation to his Jewish contacts in the free world with the aim of aborting any successful rescue effort.

How so?

For example, at the height of the deportations – when 12,000 Hungarian Jews every day were being driven onto death trains and sent to Auschwitz – he wrote that the deported Jews were alive in "Waldsee," which was a Nazi camouflage for Auschwitz. At one point he even claimed to have received 750,000 postcards from these Jews saying they were alive and well. So Kastner's Jewish contacts abroad read these letters and were misled about what was going on.

Is it clear that Kastner knew the Nazis intended to exterminate these Jews?

Absolutely. There's no doubt about that because he admitted it. After the war he said Eichmann repeatedly told him that Hungarian Jews were being exterminated in Auschwitz. He also knew that escapees from Auschwitz had warned that the camp was being prepared to receive – and murder – massive numbers of Hungarian Jews.

If Kastner knew the Nazis planned on exterminating Hungarian Jewry, why didn't he sound the alarm? He negotiated with the Nazis to save 1,684 select Jews on board what later became known as the "Kastner Train," but why didn't he warn all of Hungarian Jewry to go underground or resist boarding the deportation trains to Auschwitz?

When the Nazis occupied Hungary in 1944, Kastner tried to negotiate the rescue of all of Hungary's Jews. At the very first meeting with Adolf Eichmann's officer, Dieter Wisliceny, on April 5, 1944, Kastner and Brand made four demands: no executions, no concentration in ghettos, no deportations, and permission for Jews to emigrate.

Wisliceny, though, told Kastner that the Jews could only emigrate if the emigration was disguised as a deportation. Kastner agreed, and from that moment on he *had* to collaborate with the Nazis because he had to make sure Jews boarded the deportation trains. But of course, once the Jews were on these trains, the Nazis could do whatever they wanted with them, and they sent them to Auschwitz.

Perhaps Kastner thought he had no choice. Perhaps he believed the Nazis would most likely kill everyone and that only by negotiating and cooperating did he stand a chance of rescuing at least some Hungarian Jews.

First of all, if the Jews were going to be killed, they didn't have to be killed with Kastner's help. And secondly, there was an opportunity to save many thousands of Hungarian Jews in north Transylvania. There was an escape route across the border to Romania, but on May 3, 1944, Wisliceny told Kastner to tell the Jewish leaders in Kolozsvar – Kastner's hometown – that the escape routes had been blocked.

Kastner gave this false information to the leaders in Kolozsvar who immediately ended all the escapes. Kastner directly obeyed a Nazi instruction to sabotage the escape routes from his hometown.

Didn't Kastner realize at some point that he was being used? After all, the Nazis exempted him from wearing a yellow star and allowed him use of a phone and car. At one point, they even convinced him to hand over two rescue activists – Yoel Palgi and Peretz Goldstein – who had been smuggled into Hungary by the Zionist leadership. Didn't this close relationship with the Nazis make Kastner suspicious?

Exactly. Kastner must have understood he was serving the interests of the Nazis and that his rescue negotiations were gaining time, not for the Jewish victims but for the Nazis to exterminate them. And I argue that he understood this very early on in the rescue negotiations.

So what are we to conclude – that Kastner was an evil man?

My conclusion is that he was motivated partly by his pessimism about the possibility of saving any Hungarian Jews and partly by his megalomania. You have to remember that before the Nazi occupation of Hungary, Kastner was an underground rescue activist. He wasn't a major figure among Hungarian Jews; he was a minor figure operating illegally. As soon as the Nazis occupied the country, though, he suddenly became the most important figure in Hungarian Jewry because he was the only person (after Brand's departure) allowed to negotiate officially with Eichmann on the fate of the Jews of Hungary.

Even Kastner's enemies usually give him credit for saving 1,684 Jews aboard the "Kastner Train." You don't. You argue, provocatively, that this rescue train was actually a Nazi hostage operation. How so?

The Nazis needed to take some Jews hostage in order to guarantee the obedience of the Jewish leadership in Hungary during the deportations to Auschwitz. And this is clear from Kastner's own postwar report where he describes the terms of the deal he made with Eichmann. The original terms were that 1,684 Jews would be taken out of Hungary and kept for a few weeks in a Nazi camp in Strasshof, Vienna and only then sent to the free world. And those weeks would coincide with the planned Nazi deportation of Budapest's Jews to Auschwitz.

You write that Kastner traveled to Vienna toward the end of the war as a guest of the Nazis and later visited several concentration camps along with Nazi official Kurt Becher. This behavior seems rather bizarre.

Yes, the interesting thing is after the Kastner Train's arrival in Switzerland, Kastner went to Switzerland and never returned to Hungary even though tens of thousands of Jews in Budapest were being massacred by fascists and a rescue operation was desperately needed.

But he didn't go back to Hungary. Instead he left the free world and went to Nazi-controlled Vienna to meet Kurt Becher, who had been Himmler's representative in Hungary. And once in Vienna, he didn't stay with what remained of the Jewish community, but rather in the Grand Hotel, which was the headquarters of the SS. His room there was arranged by Dr. Karl Ebner, the deputy head of the Gestapo in Vienna. So at that point Kastner was actively moving among the inner circle of Nazi war criminals.

With regard to the Nazi concentration camps, the order came from Himmler. Kastner and Becher were to visit the concentration camps and make a show of handing them over peacefully to the Allies in order to create an alibi for Himmler.

Why did Kastner play along with this farce?

Because he understood at that point that he was in severe danger of being condemned as a collaborator after the war. So he had an incentive to help the Nazis if it created a joint alibi for all of them – Himmler, Becher, and Kastner.

At the Nuremberg Trials, Kastner actually submitted an affidavit on behalf of Kurt Becher, correct?

Yes. He gave an affidavit for Becher most famously. But he also provided one for Eichmann's right hand man, Hermann Krumei, and the commander of the Waffen-SS, Hans Juttner. He also intervened in an attempt to stop Wisliceny's execution. But he was too late for that.

Your previous writings have concerned Israel and anti-Semitism. How did you come to write a book on Rudolph Kastner?

When I first became interested in Kastner, I assumed he was innocent. Recognizing him as a traitor came as a real shock. I then became increasingly appalled at the way Kastner's supporters ignored or dismissed the Holocaust survivors who had spoken out against him. I wrote this book because as a Jew I felt a strong obligation to these Holocaust survivors to make sure their testimony was not forgotten.