

Chapter 2

Negotiations and Rescue Efforts

*God's most beautiful gift to us is the hatred of our enemies, whom we in turn hate with all our hearts.*³¹ – Joseph Goebbels

*Who is talking today about the extermination of the Armenians?*³² – Adolf Hitler

To better understand how the Holocaust in Hungary occurred, it is important to explore not only the perspective of the perpetrators but also the efforts of those involved in negotiations and rescue initiatives aimed at saving the Jews during this period. These negotiations will further illuminate the extent of the Nazis' genocidal and deceitful tactics in Hungary. After the German invasion of Hungary in March 1944, the pro-Nazi Arrow Cross Party established the Budapest Jewish Council on March 21, 1944. The council was a Jewish self-governing body made up of prominent members of the Budapest Jewish community and was responsible for implementing Nazi policies against the Jews, including the creation of ghettos and the deportation of Jews to concentration and extermination camps. Samu Stern headed it along with eight members of the community that he had appointed. They called for strict adherence to German orders, and their compliance was driven by fear of the Germans and hope for survival.³³ Despite the council's efforts to mitigate the impact of these policies, most Hungarian Jews were ultimately murdered during the Holocaust. There was also a small Zionist Jewish group in Budapest, "The Aid and Rescue Committee" (*Va'adat Ha-Ezrah ve-ha-Hatzalah*), and Dr. Rudolf Kasztner was one of their leaders. Until the occupation of Hungary, this Zionist organization had supplied support for the thousands of Jews who streamed into the country from the neighboring Nazi-occupied states. In 1944 it was no longer a matter of extending aid to refugees, but a desperate – almost hopeless – attempt to save the lives of their own people. Kasztner decided that the best path would be to try negotiating with the SS.³⁴ He then negotiated with Eichmann on behalf of the Budapest Aid and Rescue Committee to allow a number of Jews to escape certain death.³⁵

³¹ Kortchin, *Ha-Hipus Ahar Ha-Emet*, p. 15. The quote is from Goebbels' diary, dated June 16, 1926.

³² See the quote and accompanying discussion in Chapter 4 page 48. In that quote, Hitler referred to the 1915 Armenian Genocide by the Turks, during which the major powers failed to intervene.

³³ Lichtenstein, *Witness to History*, p. 297.

³⁴ Hanna Yablonska, *The state of Israel vs. Adolf Eichmann*, New York: Schocken, 2004, pp. 27–28.

³⁵ Eichmann had an experience with the case of the Slovakian Jews and others, so he preferred to deal with the head of a Zionist Organization, or the Jewish agency. He chose to work with them out of the various Hungarian groups, and Kasztner emerged to be the one for that task. See Porter, *Kasztner's Train*, p. 99.

Between May and July 1944, Rudolf Kasztner repeatedly negotiated with Adolf Eichmann, the architect of the deportation of over half of Hungary's Jewish population to Auschwitz in occupied Poland. They reached an agreement to spare 1,684 Jews in exchange for a ransom, estimated at approximately \$1,000 USD per person.³⁶ The train departed Budapest on June 30, 1944. However, in complete violation of the agreement, Eichmann diverted the passengers to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, where they arrived on July 8. Despite this betrayal, further negotiations with the Germans and additional payments ensured the eventual rescue of the passengers. They were transported to neutral Switzerland in two groups, the first in August and the second in December 1944.³⁷

Kasztner remains a controversial figure. Some look upon him as a hero, a valiant savior of thousands of Hungarian Jews, while others consider him a traitor and a Nazi collaborator. Allegations spread after the war that Kasztner had done nothing to warn the wider community.³⁸ Rudolf Vrba escaped from Auschwitz after learning that construction and preparations were being made for the mass arrival of Hungarian Jews. The Jews were jokingly called "Hungarian Salami" by the camp guards.³⁹ He escaped with Alfred Wetzler, and together they authored the

³⁶ Anna Porter, *Kasztner's Train*, New York: Walker Publishing, 2007, p. 213. Porter notes that Adolf Eichmann initially demanded \$200 per person, while Kurt Becher proposed \$2,000. Ultimately, Heinrich Himmler set the price at \$1,000 per individual. Kasztner later remarked that the total ransom paid exceeded the agreed-upon rate, amounting to 1,684,000 USD for the 1,684 passengers. It appears that the negotiations involved a collective ransom, with the per-person amount adjusted based on contributions of money, gold, and valuables from Hungary's Jewish community. Among the passengers, around 150 wealthy individuals reportedly paid \$1,500 each, covering not only their own ransom but also helping to subsidize the cost for others on the train. See more at: https://www.jewishgen.org/databases/Holocaust/0172_Kasznter_Jews.html

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 203–204, 212–214. The study further discusses this in Chapter 7 and note 287, along with possible reasons for diverting the passengers to Bergen-Belsen. Anna Porter discussed the negotiation and the situation in which Kasztner negotiated with Becher. The study will later delve into why, for a specific period, Becher was in charge and the differences between him and Eichmann. The exchange from Bergen-Belsen to Switzerland, which ultimately led to their freedom, was facilitated by a ransom paid by the Swiss Orthodox Jew, Isaac Sternbuch. The train, comprising 35 cattle cars, carried passengers including notable figures such as the Satmar leader Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum, writer Béla Zsolt, psychiatrist Leopold Szondi, opera singer Dezső Ernster, and artist István Israel, along with other distinguished intellectuals, scientists, religious leaders, and political activists. Yet, among them were also individuals who were neither wealthy nor famous, including a group of Polish orphans.

³⁸ Ben Hecht, *Perfidy*, Milah Press, New York, 1997, pp. 101–117. Additional information can be found in Court Case 124/53 at the District Court of Jerusalem. Available at www.archives.gov.il/ArchiveGov/ArchiveNavigation.aspx?ID=30.0.50

³⁹ See Vrba, *I Escaped from Auschwitz*, p. 54, and Yoel Palgi, *Into the Inferno*, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2003, pp. 267–279.

report, which was delivered to the Jewish Agency to warn Hungarian Jews. Vrba later claimed that his report on Auschwitz's gas chambers was deliberately withheld by Rudolf Kasztner and the Jewish-Hungarian Aid and Rescue Committee in Budapest to avoid jeopardizing the complex – and ultimately futile – negotiations with Adolf Eichmann. These negotiations included Eichmann's proposed "Blood for Goods" deal, offering to exchange up to one million Jews for money and trucks from the United States or the United Kingdom.⁴⁰ Verba wrote that the Nazis were aware that Jewish communities in Slovakia and Hungary had placed their trust either in secular Zionist leaders such as Kasztner, or in Orthodox Jewish leaders, which is why they lured precisely those members of the community into various negotiations, supposedly designed to lead to the release of Jews, but actually intended to placate the Jewish leadership to avoid the spread of panic, because panic would have slowed down the transports.⁴¹ On the other hand, others claim that as a result of his negotiations, an additional 15,000 Hungarian Jews were transferred to labor camps at Strasshof rather than being killed at Auschwitz.⁴² Anna Porter further asserts that "Kasztner is a hero who acted with courage and resourcefulness, and that the tangible results of his negotiations can be summed up as saving over 200,000 Hungarian Jews". This includes the avoidance of the deportation of upwards of 200,000 Jews remaining in Budapest after July 1944.⁴³ However, Ruth Lichtenstein, head of Project Witness, writes that Kasztner, spurred by the hope of ransoming surviving European Jews, was largely unsuccessful as he persisted in his

⁴⁰ Further details on the Wetzler-Verba report and its handling in Hungary can be found in Appendix F. By the beginning of May 1944, Kasztner and many other Jewish leaders had received the Vrba-Wetzler Report and other evidence that Hungary's Jews would be sent to their deaths. The report was released to the leaders of Jewish organizations in the hope that Hungarian Jews would be warned that they were being deported to a death camp and were not being resettled, as they had been led to believe. However, the report was not made public by the Jewish Council in Hungary or by Kasztner (Gilbert, Martin, *Auschwitz and the Allies*, pp. 201–205). According to David Kranzler it was Kasztner's Jewish Agency rival Krausz who eventually sent the report to Switzerland for publication. The resulting international outcry persuaded the Hungarian government to stop the deportations. But by then 437,000 Hungarian Jews had been deported to Auschwitz, where the overwhelming majority were murdered on arrival. See David Kranzler, *The Man who Stopped the Trains to Auschwitz*, pp. 103–104, and *Thy Brother's Blood*, pp. 103–108.

⁴¹ Vrba, *I Escaped from Auschwitz*, pp. 419–420.

⁴² Yablonka, *The State of Israel Vs. Adolf Eichmann*, p. 27. However, Yablonka notes that approximately 450,000 Hungarian Jews were murdered in record time.

⁴³ Porter, *Kasztner's train*, pp. 339–340. Based also on Roswell McClelland Report on the activities of the War Refugee Board from March 1944 to July 1945. On August 25, 1944, Eichmann's organization had 66 trains ready and Porter argues that Kasztner succeeded to avoid it through his negotiations.

negotiations with the Germans until the war's end.⁴⁴ Ben Hecht further dismissed the thought that Kasztner saved the remaining 200,000 Hungarian Jews through his negotiations. He claimed that a different member of the Jewish Agency, Moshe Krausz, was busy rescuing thousands upon thousands of those Jews.⁴⁵

The Israeli historian, Yehuda Bauer, offers more in support of Kasztner's defense, as he argues that the Hungarian-Jewish community already knew that Jews were being killed in Poland, and there was nothing further Kasztner could have done to warn them.⁴⁶ Bauer analyzes the situation and shows that the Hungarian Jews did not have any chance to succeed by resisting or escaping to Romania (as was written in *Perfidy* by Ben Hecht), and that they were told the truth by various people who escaped a previous Nazi persecution, but refused to accept that reality.⁴⁷ Bauer further rejects Vrba's claim that he provided information about the

44 Ruth Lichtenstein wrote that beyond rescuing the Jews on the train, he successfully facilitated the safe transfer of a group of Jews, including Rabbi Weissmandl, who were hiding in Slovakia, to Switzerland. See Lichtenstein, *Witness to History*, p. 314.

45 Hecht, *Perfidy*, p. 151. Hecht claims that These actions were done on his own initiative and not as instructed by the Agency. In his book, Hecht criticized the Jewish agency, and he writes that Krausz was violating the Jewish Agency Party line. He based this on Krausz's testimony given in the District Court of Jerusalem (C.C. 124/53 in the D. C. Jerusalem). Krausz had also filed a court case against the Jewish Agency in Palestine for not paying his salary and for throwing him out of his job without even compensation.

46 Yehuda Bauer, *Jews for Sale? Nazi-Jewish Negotiations 1933–1945*, Yale University Press, 1994, p. 150–155, 159–160, 197–200. Bauer argued that it would have been contrary to human nature for Kasztner to exclude his family. Ferenc Laczo further discussed the difficulties of survival after a successful escape. His study of approximately 349 Hungarian survivors reveals that, while some witnesses viewed their escape from the Jewish camp as crucial to their survival, many frequently used ethnic labels to identify the perpetrators of violence, often referring to Eastern European collaborators. See Laczo, Ferenc, p. 156.

47 Bauer, *Jews for Sale? Nazi-Jewish Negotiations 1933–1945*, pp. 159–161. Bauer praised Kasztner for bargaining with the Nazis and saving at least some 1,600 Jews. Bauer argues that Cluj was indeed a place from which to flee, but when Rabbi Moshe Weinberger (Gefen) tried to organize a group of individuals in Cluj to explain to the local leaders that they were facing death and that they should escape, he was overwhelmingly rejected. Bauer emphasized the reluctance of Hungarian Jews to enter an illegal escape, and he further rejects the accusation that Kasztner's own community in Cluj would have fled to Romania if they had given a warning. Bauer claims that the Hungarian and Germans could have stopped a mass flight with ease. He also spoke about the difficulties of arranging an uprising, and the low chance of success. Arranging an escape to Palestine by sailing on a ship was also difficult, as was entering Palestine against all the British restrictions. Kasztner's critics replied that he received SS permission to visit Kolozsvar/Cluj on May 3, 1944, but failed to warn the Jews there even though Cluj was only 3–5 miles from the Romanian border. They further emphasized that the 20,000 Jews were guarded by just 20 Hungarian gendarmes and a single SS officer, making an escape potentially feasible. They also argued that Kasztner could have contacted other Jewish communities by telephone but failed to do so. They claimed that a timely warning might have saved

gas chambers and that Jewish leaders failed to act on it, resulting in the deaths of thousands of Hungarian Jews. Bauer argues that a large number of Hungarian Jews were already aware of the mass murders in Poland and that even if they had known about the gas chambers, the assumption that they would have refused to board the trains was unrealistic.⁴⁸ In addition, Kasztner's supporters argue that the agreement over the train was part of a much larger rescue effort involving negotiations to save all Hungarian Jews.

On the other hand, Randolph Braham holds the Jewish Council responsible for failing to share the substantial information they had about the Nazi genocide with Hungary's Jewish population. Braham suggests that, had this information been released, it might have incited Jewish Hungarians to resist, potentially disrupting the smooth operation of the deportations.⁴⁹ Ferenc Laczó further quotes Hungarian journalist Jenő Lévai, who researched the Holocaust of Hungarian Jewry, criticizing the shocking naiveté of the Jewish leadership in Hungary, which led to their servile behavior.⁵⁰ Hannah Arendt, a political philosopher and Holocaust scholar, is also known for her critique of the *Judenräte* (Jewish Councils). According to Arendt, the use of the *Judenräte* made it easy for the Nazis to carry out their plan. Arendt mentioned that Eichmann described how smoothly the process went and how it became routine. In her quote, she cites Eichmann's statement that he encountered no resistance and that the Jews provided him with cooperation. According to him, without their assistance in administrative and police tasks, he would not have been able to execute the plan.⁵¹

Rudolf Kasztner entered negotiations that dealt with the exchange of those who would be spared, vis-a-vis the majority of the Jews who would be sent to a death camp. During that time, another incident unfolded when Joel Brand, a member of

thousands, or even tens of thousands, of lives through local uprisings, resistance, escapes, hiding children with Gentiles, forging documents, or paying ransoms and bribes. However, Bauer rejected these assertions.

⁴⁸ Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002, pp. 235–236. Vrba's argument is discussed in the introduction and in footnotes 1–2.

⁴⁹ Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary*, pp. 84–85. See also: Paul Hanebrink, "Review of *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary* by Randolph Braham," *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, Jan. – Apr., 2003, Vol. 93, No. 4, pp. 616–618.

⁵⁰ Ferenc Laczo, *Hungarian Jews in the Age of Genocide*, Boston: Brill, 2016, pp. 181–182. Laczo concluded that "our fathers" had proven "too weak in the storm".

⁵¹ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Penguin Publishing Book, 2006, pp. 115–117. Chapter 10 expands on this, emphasizing Arendt's firm rejection of sacrificing even a few to save many. She likened it to ancient human sacrifice and stressed its contradiction to Jewish principles, citing the Talmud (Trumot 8:12): "If they ask you to sacrifice one man for the security of the community, don't surrender him; if they ask you to give one woman to be ravished, don't let her be ravished."

the Budapest Aid and Rescue Committee, was summoned to a meeting with Eichmann on April 25, 1944.⁵² Eichmann asked Brand to help broker a deal between the SS and the United States or Britain, in which the Nazis would release up to one million Jews in exchange for 10,000 trucks for the Eastern front and large quantities of soap, tea and coffee. In negotiations, it's crucial to discern what is truly relevant. Here, Eichmann's seemingly impractical demands make it difficult to believe the British would agree. However, on the other hand, saving lives is paramount, and he offered to send 100,000 Jews without conditions. Ultimately, nothing came of the proposal, described by *The Times* as one of the most loathsome stories of the war.⁵³ Some historians believe the Germans intended it as a cover for high-ranking Nazi officers, including Heinrich Himmler, to negotiate a peace deal with the Western Allies that would exclude the Soviet Union, and possibly Adolf Hitler himself. Whatever its purpose, the proposal was mishandled by the Jewish Agency and a suspicious British government. The British arrested Brand in Syria (which was then under British control) where he had gone to inform them of Eichmann's offer, then leaked the story to the BBC, which broadcast it on July 19, 1944.⁵⁴ It was unrealistic to expect the British to send thousands of trucks for the German army in exchange for Jews. The British wanted to hastily end the war, and not to enter into such negotiations with the enemy or risk their relationship with the Soviets.⁵⁵ Kasztner, who continued negotiating with Eichmann, tried to save time. He was spurred by the hope of ransoming surviving European Jews, and therefore persisted in his negotiations with the Germans until the war's end.⁵⁶

Eventually, the daily transport of about 12,000 Jews to Auschwitz was halted on July 9, 1944. How did this happen? U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt intervened

⁵² Joel Brand (1906–1964) was a sailor and odd-job man, originally from Transylvania but raised in Germany, who became known for his efforts during the Holocaust to save the Hungarian-Jewish community from deportation to the concentration camp at Auschwitz. He is remembered for his negotiations with Adolf Eichmann, to exchange one million Jews for trucks and other goods. The Nazis proposed that deal and called it "blood for goods".

⁵³ Hecht, *Perfidy*, pp. 212–218, Riechenthal, p. 96.

⁵⁴ The actions of the British government and the Jewish Agency, as well as the wider issue of why the Allies were unable to save the 437,000 Hungarian Jews deported to Auschwitz between May and July 1944, have been the subject of bitter debate ever since. Among Hungarian survivors, a feeling emerged that the failure to act on Eichmann's offer was an unforgivable betrayal. In a 1953 Jerusalem court, Brand declared: "Rightly or wrongly, for better or for worse, I have cursed Jewry's official leaders ever since. All these things shall haunt me until my dying day. It is more than a man can bear".

⁵⁵ British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden rejected the proposal, arguing that the allies could not do anything that looked like negotiating with the enemy. See Raul Hilberg, *The destruction of European Jews*, Yale University Press, Connecticut, 2003, p. 1224.

⁵⁶ Lichtenstein, *Witness to History*, pp. 313–314.

by instructing his Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, to send a threatening letter on June 26, 1944, to Hungary's leader, Miklos Horthy.⁵⁷ The letter warned that the transportation of Hungarian Jews to concentration camps must stop immediately, or Hungary would face dire consequences unlike any other civilized nation.⁵⁸ Then, on July 2, 1944, American bombers heavily bombed Budapest. This attack, combined with the letter from US President Franklin Roosevelt, as well as other letters from the King of Sweden and the Pope, convinced Horthy to halt the transportation of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz.⁵⁹ Horthy complied with the demands on July 9, with only a few exceptions. Between July and September 1944, the extermination of Hungarian Jews ceased for several weeks. The deportation of Budapest's Jews to Auschwitz was scheduled for August 25, 1944, but was unexpectedly canceled by Heinrich Himmler at the last moment.⁶⁰ When Horthy was on the verge of announcing that Hungary was withdrawing from the war on the side of Germany, and supporting the side of the Allies, he was deposed by the Nazis on October 15, 1944. After Horthy was removed from power, the anti-Semitic fascist Franz Szálasi, leader of the Arrow Cross party, had effectively become the sole ruler of the Hungarian state.⁶¹

57 Ibid., p. 469, Rosen, *Saving the Jews: Franklin D. Roosevelt*, p. 391. John Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII*, p. 325. It was a personal appeal via the Swiss to Hungarian Regent Horthy to halt the deportations. See https://www.jta.org/archive/roosevelts-efforts-to-save-hungarian-jews-revealed-at-eichmann-trial?utm_source=chatgpt.com

58 See Breitman, *FDR and the Jews*, pp. 273–275, and Morse, *While Six Million Died*, p. 362. This communication was sent through diplomatic channels as well. This warning was part of a broader series of international appeals, including messages from Pope Pius XII and King Gustaf V of Sweden, urging Horthy to stop the atrocities. Awareness was also raised by the press, led by *The New York Times*, which began publishing stories in May that highlighted the perilous situation facing Hungarian Jews.

59 Bauer, *A History of the Holocaust*, p.348. Bauer writes that Horthy erroneously believed the air raid was in retaliation for the deportation of Jews (whereas it was actually part of the Allies' broader war efforts).

60 According to historian Yehuda Bauer, the cancellation was likely the result of unfulfilled promises made by Sally Meyer to Himmler. See Bauer, Yehuda, *A History of the Holocaust*, pp. 352–356.

61 Hanebrink, "Reviewed Work: *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary* by Randolph Braham", p. 616. Randolph Braham discussed the much different fate of the Jews of Budapest who were spared the mass deportation in July 1944 on Horthy's orders, only to be subjected to a brutal and murderous regime led by Szalasi. With Szalasi's rise to power, the authorities' protection of the Jews of Budapest ended. The "Arrow Cross" gangs ran amok on the streets of Budapest. Thousands of Jews were murdered in the street and thrown into the Danube River which was steamed with blood. Adolf Eichmann was unable to get trains for shipment to Auschwitz and sent tens of thousands to death marches and forced labor. About one hundred thousand of the remaining Jews were concentrated in the ghetto in December 1944 under difficult conditions. Although the majority of the Holocaust of Hungarian Jews was carried out by the Germans and their agents in Hungary in

President Franklin D. Roosevelt's pressure on Hungarian Regent Miklos Horthy to halt deportations in July 1944 serves as an example of political efforts to stop the deportation of Jews. However, Roosevelt faced criticism for not doing enough to save Hungarian Jews. He did not pressure Horthy to cease deportations earlier, consider bombing Auschwitz, or open the gates for increased Jewish immigration. In hindsight, it is evident that more could have been done to save the Jewish population during the Holocaust. This highlights the importance of standing up against hate and oppression early on to prevent such atrocities from occurring.⁶²

It is important to note that the rate of murders was slowed down through the heroic actions of diplomats from neutral countries, especially Raul Wallenberg, the Swedish representative, and Carl Lutz, the Swiss representative. Over a period of three months, especially after the Arrow Cross takeover on October 15, 1944, Wallenberg established his protegees in a number of "Swedish Houses" procured for that purpose.⁶³ He issued thousands of passports, tracked prisoner convoys, and confronted the German and Hungarian guards (including Adolf Eichmann), claiming that these Jews were under the supervision of Sweden, he secured their release. He even made sure to hide about fifteen thousand Jews in thirty-one shelters. Wallenberg saved thousands of Jews in Budapest by setting up safe houses under the protection of the Swedish consulate. Wallenberg's heroic efforts eventually led to his arrest by Soviet forces, and his ultimate fate remains unknown. Wallenberg was recognized by Yad Vashem in 1963 as Righteous Among the Nations.

Overall, the Holocaust claimed the lives of approximately 565,000 out of over 800,000 Hungarian Jews.⁶⁴ As mentioned, this event was particularly unique because the victims were murdered in a relatively short period of time, towards the end of the war. This raises many questions and makes feelings that more could have been done to save them. This tragedy serves as a poignant reminder of the devastating consequences of hatred and intolerance. It highlights the importance of promoting understanding and respect among people of different backgrounds and beliefs to prevent such atrocities from occurring in the future.

the period preceding his rule, Szalasi is responsible for the murder of thousands of Jews at the site of their slaughter, with cruelty no less than that of the Nazis.

⁶² See Bauer, *A History of the Holocaust*, pp. 346–348. Bauer writes that Roosevelt's establishment of the War Refugee Board appears to have been motivated by a combination of political and humanitarian considerations.

⁶³ Bauer, *A History of the Holocaust*, p. 355.

⁶⁴ Hayes, *Why?: Explaining the Holocaust*, pp. 231–232. See also Bauer, *A History of the Holocaust*, p. 341.