

July, 1961

p. 98



Eichmann's last victim

BY MEYER LEVIN
Author of "Compulsion"

THERE BEFORE ME in the Jerusalem courtroom, expressionless in his glass cage, sat Adolf Eichmann. Six million Jewish lives stained his hands, yet as I watched him on trial for his life, my thoughts drifted back to the tragic fate of one man—Dr. Rudolf Kastner—Eichmann's last victim.

■ A Hungarian Jewish underground leader who negotiated with the Nazis and saved many of his people from extermination, Dr. Kastner did not perish in the ovens or gas chambers of Auschwitz. Ironically he died 12 years after the war, assassinated by fellow Jews who charged that he had collaborated with Eichmann. In fact, at a controversial trial that shook Israel in 1957, Judge Benjamin Halevy ruled that in bargaining with Eichmann for Jewish lives, Kastner had "sold his soul to the devil." ■ No single Jew confronted Eichmann as often as Dr. Kastner. Day after day he stood up to the Nazi genocide specialist—and now, even in death, he challenges Eichmann's "not guilty"

plea. For Kastner left a book-length report showing that Eichmann was not merely, as he has claimed, a “soldier carrying out orders.” Quite the contrary. According to Kastner, to kill more Jews, Eichmann even schemed to disobey his S.S. superior, Reichsfuehrer Heinrich Himmler. ■ In another stroke of irony, this same Judge Halevy who presided over the Kastner case now sits in judgment on the “devil” himself—Adolf Eichmann. ■ The tangled, passionate story of Rudolf Kastner still casts a long shadow across Israel and the Eichmann trial, since it spotlights an agonizing question that remains to torment us: “Is a man justified in bargaining with the devil to save human life?” ■ Rudolf Kastner and Adolf Eichmann first met in 1944. Eichmann had just arrived in Budapest to administer the fatal “final solution” to Hungary’s Jews. Like all Nazi-era stories of life and death, this one is a delicately complex honeycomb of intrigue, cupidity and cour-



***Rudolf Kastner
bargained
with the devil to
save lives—and
paid with his own.
Now from the
grave, he cries out
for justice***

age. During World War II, Hungary was a dubious ally of the Germans, leading many Hungarian Jews to believe that their government would never turn them over to the Nazis. But Rudolf Kastner had no illusions. A sophisticated journalist—editor of Central Europe's lone Zionist daily newspaper—he was sure that every Jew in Europe faced death. Though he and his wife wanted children, he told her they could not bring a child into the world until Hitler was defeated.

When Kastner's publication was closed down, he went to Budapest, where the weak Zionist movement was still officially allowed to operate. There he met a remarkable couple, Joel and Hansi Brand. Together, these three organized an "underground railroad" to save the stream of Jewish refugees from Poland, who brought with them the first tales of systematic Nazi murders. Kastner took care of political contacts, while Brand handled practical matters, such as falsifying documents and locating hiding places for the fugitives.

For two feverish years, while Eichmann's agents slaughtered Jews in neighboring countries, more than 10,000 were smuggled into Budapest. A dozen children's homes were set up by Hansi Brand, who now runs an orphanage in Tel Aviv.

THEN—in March 1944—came Hungary's turn. Eichmann moved into Budapest's Majestic Hotel and took personal charge of the *blitzkrieg* campaign to exterminate Hungary's Jews before the advanc-

ing Russian armies could save them. His staff included greedy, music-loving Baron Dieter von Wisliceny, said to be Himmler's relative.

It had been through the Baron, Eichmann's subcommander—less than two years earlier—that Kastner and Brand realized the Nazis might sell Jewish lives. At that time, the Baron had accepted 50,000 pounds sterling—\$201,500—from the Kastner-Brand rescue committee in exchange for halting deportations in his area. Thus about 20,000 Jews had gained a year's respite.

Now, in Budapest, the Baron at once again offered his services to the rescue committee—promising to intercede with Himmler for a price.

Hastily gathering two satchels full of pengös—\$200,000—from wealthy Budapest Jews, Kastner and Brand turned this "first deposit" over to the Nazis, who pledged that, for a few million dollars more, the deportations would be halted.

Moving swiftly, Eichmann sent Baron von Wisliceny into the countryside to round up Jews for deportation. Then Eichmann went to Berlin to consult with Himmler.

By this time, Himmler had realized that the Nazi game was up. Seeking to establish "credit" for himself with the Allies, he secretly offered to "sell" 1,000,000 Jews. Eichmann was instructed to forward the bid through the Budapest rescue committee, which had contacts in neutral Turkey. When Eichmann returned, he summoned the astonished Brand to his office.

"You know who I am," Eichmann barked. "I brought you here

so that we can talk business. . . . I am prepared to sell you 1,000,000 Jews. . . . Blood for money, money for blood. Which do you want to save? Men who can beget children? Women who can bear them? Old people? Children? Sit down and tell me." Eichmann then elaborated on the plan. Knowing that the Jews could never meet the demands, Eichmann had decided to ask for "goods"—10,000 army trucks—to be supplied by the Western Allies, and to be used, Eichmann said craftily, only against the Russians.

Joel Brand and Kastner debated whether even to transmit the offer to the Allies. Meanwhile, they decided to open negotiations with the Nazis, hoping that while they parleyed, the deportations and executions would be stopped. Brand flew to Istanbul, Turkey, in a German plane while Kastner dickered with Eichmann in Budapest.

Eichmann had promised to "keep the Jews on ice," while Brand traveled to Turkey, but Kastner soon heard that the rate of deportations was being increased. From his hometown, Cluj, he learned that Jews were being rounded up in the open brickyard by the railroad tracks. His brother, his father-in-law, other members of his family, all were there. It was obvious that Eichmann had no intention of easing up on the Jews. Instead, he accelerated his murder machine, shipping off 12,000 Jews to Auschwitz every day. And every day, Rudolf Kastner came to Eichmann's office in the Majestic Hotel, pleading that the death trains be delayed

until Brand could bring a reply.

"No, I'll send more!" Eichmann would shout hoarsely, adding as he looked at Kastner's tense face: "What's the matter, are you losing your nerve? Perhaps I should send you to Auschwitz for a rest cure?"

Firmly, Kastner replied: "I long ago gave up any thought that I might come out of this alive. That's why I can deal with you."

At last a cable came from Brand; the Jewish Agency for Palestine had agreed to negotiate. But Eichmann only laughed. "Anyone can send a cable," he sneered at Kastner. "Why doesn't Brand come back? Where is Brand?"

But Brand couldn't come back. Unknown to Kastner, he had been arrested by the British a few days after sending the wire, and subsequently was detained in Cairo for months of questioning, while the strange German offer was discussed.

Thus it was Kastner against Eichmann. He had received word, Kastner told the Nazi, that there could be no negotiations unless the Germans showed a sign of good faith. His rescue committee had a special allotment of 600 entry permits for Palestine. Would Eichmann let the 600 Jews go? Eichmann referred the request to Himmler in Berlin. Himmler agreed.

Kastner, his wife and a rabbi then sat down in their Budapest apartment to play God. Six hundred Jews out of 1,000,000! Each town had a quota. Zionists came first, then rabbis, community leaders, teachers and artists. But it was a tragic, impossible task. When the remaining

communities were asked to supply their lists, many refused, saying that they could not make a choice. Others feared that this list, too, was a Nazi ruse, and that the chosen individuals would be sent directly to the gas chambers, instead of to safety.

Word came from Cluj that two deportation trains already had departed. And from other towns came tales of ghastly brutality. Even the Nazis' own deportation procedures, packing 70 people into a boxcar, were being exceeded. In one town,

Eichmann forced Kastner to stand for hours while he blew smoke in his face.



100 people had been packed into a single boxcar of the small, European variety. Kastner pleaded with Eichmann to show some pity.

"You Jews spawn lots of children," retorted Eichmann. "Children don't take up much room so we put in a higher number!"

Kastner would emerge from these sessions white and shaking. Often he had to stand before Eichmann for as long as three hours in a position of rigid military attention. A chain-smoker, he did not dare to light a cigarette, while Eichmann blew smoke rings in his face.

One day Hansi Brand insisted, "When Eichmann lights a cigarette, do the same." Kastner risked it. Nothing happened. Later Eichmann commented on Kastner's silver cigarette case. His daring seemed to have some effect, for Eichmann finally gave the order for the first group of Jews to be brought to Budapest for the rescue train. As soon as Kastner left, however, Eichmann canceled the order.

But Kastner had another Nazi contact who could go directly to Himmler. He was Kurt Becher, head of the Third Reich's Economic Section, who realized that Germany was losing the war. Counting on Becher's terror of Allied retribution, Kastner promised to testify for him after the war if Becher would help to save Jewish lives. Becher promptly contacted Himmler, then reported back to Kastner. "It costs \$1,000 a head for a Jew to go to America," Himmler had said, "so we will charge the same price for Jews to get out of German hands."

Fighting for lives, Kastner told Becher: "Let me take a few hundred more of my people. It will be easier to raise the money." Greedily, Becher obliged, and little by little, Kastner increased the list by 1,000 souls. Six coffers of diamonds and gold were amassed, and carried by Hansi Brand to Becher. From all over Hungary where Jews still remained, community leaders, the rabbis, Zionist pioneers—and, sad to relate, some who bought their lives with hard cash—were assembled in a Budapest barracks.

Already 500,000 Hungarian Jews had gone to Auschwitz. In desperation, Kastner sent word to Berlin, informing Himmler that the Allies refused to negotiate unless, as a token of Nazi good faith, a train load of leading Jews was sent out to neutral Switzerland—immediately. Himmler agreed and ordered Eichmann to release the train.

As the freedom train prepared to depart, panic developed among some of the Jews. They were certain it was all a Nazi trick to collect gold and jewels that otherwise might have escaped them. It was a "death train," they wailed. To calm them, Kastner persuaded his own wife to go along. Dazed, protesting, she begged him to come, too. But who, then, would negotiate to save more lives? Kastner stayed.

Before Eichmann allowed the train to leave Budapest, he played one last sadistic joke. The train's orders read: "Destination: *Auspitz*." To misread *Auspitz* as *Auschwitz* was almost inevitable. Stunned, the Jews bribed a Nazi

guard into letting them telephone Kastner who rushed to an Eichmann subordinate and had the order clarified. The train's destination was *not* Auschwitz, but *Auspitz*, an obscure transfer point in Austria.

THE TASK of saving Hungary's remaining Jews still tormented Kastner. Eichmann's murder squads were by then rounding up Jews in Budapest's suburbs. But Joel Brand's mission to Turkey had not failed entirely. From Istanbul, his message had been relayed to President Roosevelt in Washington. Roosevelt promptly sent a special emissary to Turkey to verify the story, and organized an intensive diplomatic campaign. The Hungarian rulers were warned that they would be held responsible for the lives of their Jewish citizens. The King of Sweden, the Pope, the head of the International Red Cross—all joined in the humanitarian appeals.

On the day set for the deportation to Auschwitz of Budapest's Jews, Baron von Wisliceny called Kastner and said, "You have won." Eichmann and his murder crew had been ordered to leave town.

"I'll be back!" Eichmann promised. And in a few months, he was. But in the interim, Kastner managed to secure the release of the "freedom train" that already had left Budapest; the 1,600 Jews aboard had not gone out to Switzerland, but instead had been detained at the notorious Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, while the Nazis waited for their "blood money."

Kastner and Kurt Becher had

gone to the Swiss border to meet with a man from the American Joint Distribution Committee (the Jewish charity organization). In the middle of a frontier bridge, in a driving rain, they had bargained for Jewish lives. After weeks of such talks, Becher was shown a \$5,000,000 deposit account in a Swiss bank.

Though the Nazis were never to get this money, Himmler relented and allowed the freedom train packed with Jews to chug into Switzerland. Hailed as a savior, Kastner sped to Berlin, where Himmler at last ordered the gas chambers to be shut down.

Among the 1,600 Jews thus rescued from the ovens were 30-odd members of Kastner's family. For this, he was never forgiven by many kinsmen of Hungarian Jews who had not been saved. He was accused not only of favoritism but of something much more sinister. In exchange for this "freedom train," Kastner's foes charged, he had agreed to help Eichmann persuade the remainder of Hungary's Jews to go quietly to their deaths—failing to warn them that they were headed for Auschwitz, and instead letting them believe they were going to a safe labor camp inside Hungary.

I have tried to find out how true this accusation was, poring over hundreds of pages of testimony in the Kastner trial. But I cannot find a single clear fact to corroborate this charge beyond doubt. On the contrary, a member of Kastner's underground committee told me how they had sent young boys around on bicycles, with urgent

notes to every Jewish family, urging them to flee to Rumania, where conditions for Jews were less oppressive. And Kastner's widow recalled how she and her husband had begged their friends and neighbors to flee. But all had waited—blindly hoping for a miracle.

In November 1944, the Nazis gathered for a last-ditch fight. Eichmann again summoned Kastner to the Majestic. "Here I am!" he snarled. On his own, the Nazi Pharaoh ordered the Budapest Jews out on a death march to Vienna. Hundreds committed suicide or died of typhus, and corpses lined the roadsides. Hansi Brand had managed to get a Red Cross emblem which the German soldiers recog-

Wearing
a fake
Red Cross
armband,
and driving
an old taxi,
Hansi Brand
risked
her own
life to save
Jewish
children
from
Eichmann's
death march—
begun
against orders
from
Himmler
himself.

nized. In an ancient taxi she drove after the column of Jews, snatching children out of the sleet and carrying them back to her barricaded orphanages.

Again, Kastner persuaded Becher to fly to Berlin. Himmler countermanded Eichmann's death-march order. But a few weeks later, Eichmann, on his own, brazenly forced thousands back onto the road. He could defy Himmler with impunity now; the "Thousand-Year" Reich was collapsing and discipline had broken down.

Eichmann eventually fled, one step ahead of the avenging Soviets, while Kastner drove with Becher to several concentration camps to make sure the inmates would be sur-

rendered alive. As the war ended, Becher left Kastner at the Swiss border; then, driving to the Mauthausen concentration camp, he sought out a member of Kastner's committee who had been arrested in the first Budapest days. To the startled, starved Jew, the Nazi handed over the six coffers of Budapest ransom. Later, only a fraction of the treasure was found in them.

After several difficult postwar years, Rudolf Kastner became a radio broadcaster and public relations chief for the Israeli Department of Commerce in Jerusalem. Already, rumors came from Cluj that Hungarian-Jewish Communists were attacking him as a collaborator. He should have ordered re-



sistance, they said, instead of trying to buy lives from the Nazis! And in Israel, this slogan was echoed by the Palestine terrorist group, the Irgun, who now formed a powerful opposition party in the Government. Oddly enough, Kastner's partner, Joel Brand, who had also tried to deal with the Nazis, was not attacked—for Brand had later joined a terrorist group.

Presently, an attack on Kastner appeared in a mimeographed newspaper published by Malkiel Gruenwald, a friend of the Irgun. Kastner had saved his own family while herding others to Auschwitz, the newspaper charged; Gruenwald further disclosed that at Kurt Becher's war crimes trial, Kastner had submitted a deposition favorable to the Nazi, who was subsequently acquitted. Lastly, the newspaper charged that Kastner had shared in the missing loot!

Kastner, a Government official and candidate for the Israel parliament, promptly sued Gruenwald for libel—a suit that soon became a political vendetta. Suddenly Kastner found himself deserted by his friends and thrust into a loneliness “blacker than night, darker than hell”; even people from his “freedom train” hesitated to testify for him!

A brilliant young attorney, Schmu-el Tamir, once a commander in the Irgun, seized on Kastner as a symbol of compromise, and tore him apart in weeks of savage cross-examination. “You began as an ambitious leader,” Tamir shouted at the sobbing Kastner, “and ended up as a Nazi agent!”

It was Kastner's 1947 deposition for Becher that tripped him up. He made the mistake of trying to play it down, failing himself to produce the document from his files. When Tamir got it from Germany, Kastner was caught in half-statements that were made to look like out-and-out lies. Even Joel Brand, supporting Kastner throughout, condemned him for testifying in Kurt Becher's behalf. “A promise to a Nazi didn't have to be kept!” Brand declared.

Judge Halevy upheld Gruenwald, condemning Kastner on all points except the accusation of sharing the loot. The Israeli cabinet fell, and in the subsequent new elections, the country was plastered with posters against “Kastnerism.”

Resigning all his Government posts, Kastner lodged an appeal—certain that Judge Halevy's decision would be reversed. It was—although Kastner never lived to see his vindication. He had been assigned a bodyguard, but after a few months he asked that he be left alone. Then, early on March 4, 1957, Dr. Kastner walked toward the three-room Tel Aviv apartment he shared with his wife and daughter—an apartment presented to him by Jews grateful for his role in rescuing them from Eichmann's death foundries. Suddenly a young man approached him.

“Are you Kastner?” he inquired politely.

“Yes,” replied the bespectacled, 50-year-old editor.

Wordlessly, the unknown man drew a revolver, aimed it at Kastner and pulled the trigger. Miraculous-

ly, the gun failed to go off. Kastner ran for his life. Again his assailant pulled the trigger. This time the gun fired, and Kastner fell, mortally wounded, on the doorstep of his home. The young gunman fled to a waiting jeep. Kastner died 11 days later, as Israeli police rounded up his assassins, three of whom are now serving life sentences in prison. They were youths influenced by a one-time terrorist who wanted to overthrow the Government.

Shortly after his death, the Israel Supreme Court exonerated Rudolf Kastner—except for giving the Becher testimony.

Commented one judge: "Who can see into a man's soul?"

Most people in Israel now feel that Kastner did his best. Elizabeth Kastner believes *she* saw into her husband's soul. He knew he was

risking his life in keeping his promise to a Nazi. But Kastner did not believe, as does Eichmann, that in war a man acts on orders alone. He believed that Kurt Becher kept his word to help save Jews. And so, quite simply, Kastner kept his.

"My husband," says his widow, "was a hero."

But however history evaluates Kastner's actions, his life and Eichmann's are once again intertwined—dramatically and inseparably. At this very moment, as the Eichmann trial drones toward its inevitable conclusion, the Great Destroyer finds himself impaled upon the testimony of a dead man who cries out not for vengeance, but for justice. In life, Rudolf Kastner was denied the vindication that was due him. But in death, he has won his transcendent victory. 👑

Israeli terrorists shot Kastner—believing he had betrayed Jews to Eichmann.

