

Alex Kershaw. *The Envoy: The Epic Rescue of the Last Jews of Europe in the Desperate Closing Months of World War II.* Cambridge: Da Capo Press, Incorporated, 2010. x + 294 pp. \$26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-306-81557-7.



Reviewed by Shlomo Aronson (Hebrew University of Jerusalem)

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A Questionable History of the Holocaust

This book focuses on the Holocaust in Hungary by comparing the roles, the behavior, and the motivation of Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi henchman responsible for deporting Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz, to that of Raoul Wallenberg, the savior of Hungarian Jews, while telling the stories of the victims and some survivors. It begins with the Wannsee Conference of January 1942, where Reinhard Heydrich, chief of the Nazi terror and murder organizations and Eichmann's supreme boss next to SS chief Himmler, discussed the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question" in Europe with the representatives of the German civil bureaucracy. The second chapter tells the story of a Jewish family in Slovakia, where the "Final Solution" had begun, and where "Jewish women were kidnapped by the SS to be used as sex slaves on the Eastern Front." (p. 9). They fled Slovakia and found refuge in Hungary, where Jews were protected until the German occupation in March 1944.

Chapter 3 recounts SS chief Heinrich Himmler's preparations for occupying Hungary and his appointment of Eichmann to destroy the last Jewish commu-

nity in Europe, and Eichmann's march into that country "hot on the heels of no less than eleven Wehrmacht divisions" (p. 17). Information concerning Eichmann's aides Theodor Danneker and Dieter Wisliceny is also provided, especially the former's crimes against the Jews of France, including using Jewesses as "high-class whores." Chapter 4 discusses Hungarian fascists who welcomed the invading Germans, and who created for them the necessary apparatus for deporting the Jews from the Hungarian province, while the Germans occupied Budapest city and created a "Jewish Council" therein.

These four chapters are unfortunately based on outdated secondary literature and hearsay. They also include a number of factual mistakes. Heydrich was not an Austrian "like Eichmann" (p. 4) but was born in Halle/Salle, Prussian Saxony, while Eichmann was born in Solingen, Rhineland, Germany. His family moved later to Linz, Austria. Such mistakes suggest careless research, which becomes serious when the author repeats hearsay about Jewish women kidnapped by the SS in Slovakia to be used as sex slaves on the eastern front. Sexual rela-

tions between Jews and “Arians” were forbidden by the Nuremberg race laws of 1935. Slovakia was not occupied by the Germans. About two-thirds of its Jewish population was deported to Auschwitz by the Slovak government, which stopped the deportations on its own—a story that Zionist rescue workers in Hungary misinterpreted, believing that the Germans were ready to stop the Final Solution altogether. Although not discussed in this book, the records of Slovak negotiations with Eichmann’s aide Wisliceny are required to understand the behavior of the Jewish Council and of the Zionist Rescue Committee in Budapest when Eichmann’s team arrived in Hungary, Wisliceny included. Moreover, Hungary was occupied by a relatively small number of German troops, Budapest City excluded, in order to perpetuate the image of an invitation made by Admiral Horthy, the Hungarian chief of state, to the Germans to lend support to Hungary against the Soviet threat. However, Horthy appointed an anti-Semitic government, which collaborated with the Germans to cleanse the Hungarian province of the Jews. Behind them was the Wehrmacht waiting for the Red Army.

Eichmann’s role, as described in the latter part of the book, as the main, decisive, almighty master of the fate of the Hungarian Jews, is based on outdated impressions of Jewish leaders who had direct contact with him. In fact the deportations of the Jews from the Hungarian province were dictated by the Wehrmacht, which perceived in them, on top of their own racist policies, a security risk upon the arrival of the Red Army at the Hungarian border. Eichmann’s role was an important part of the Final Solution in Hungary, yet he was the third cog in the SS machinery in Hungary. First was Otto Winkelmann, SS *Obergruppenfuhrer* (full general) and Higher SS and Police Officer in Hungary, who cabled Himmler after the successful operation against the Jews in the Hungarian province that “we have broken the Jewish power in Hungary, not without some difficulties.”[1] Second in command was Dr. Hans-Ulrich Geschke, SS colonel and later general, Commander of the Security Police (Gestapo and Criminal Police) and SD (Nazi Intelligence) in Hungary. He toppled Horthy in favor of the fascist Hungarian Arrow Cross following Horthy’s decision to spare the Jews of Budapest City. Both of them escaped postwar justice, but not Eichmann, who was personally known to his Jewish interlocutors.

The second part of the book treats the so-called Auschwitz Protocols, the famous Vraba Wetzler reports by Auschwitz escapees, who tried to tell the world the truth about the fate awaiting the deportees to Auschwitz. According to the author’s version Eichmann denied the

reports in a meeting with Rudolf Kasztner, the Zionist rescue operative, who was still hoping to negotiate a rescue deal with Eichmann—having no idea about the latter’s very limited competence in regard to the “Jewish Question” in Hungary or elsewhere.

Chapter 6 provides a distorted version of the so-called Brand’s Mission or the “Blood for Goods” deal, which was allegedly offered to Kasztner and other Zionist operatives by Eichmann. He is described as if he offered the Zionists—a very active minority among Hungarian Jews eager to help rescue Jews wherever this proved possible using funds diverted from Palestine to Hungary—to exchange one million Hungarian Jews for Western Allied strategic goods such as trucks and other commodities. Again, unfortunately, the author relies on too limited source material: one primary but obsolete Zionist source in English, and Ben Hecht’s *Perfidy* (1961) to describe this complex issue. He has not examined the German records now available, any German or Hebrew sources, or any of the recent scholarship on this “deal” by either the present reviewer (*Hitler, the Allies, and the Jews*, 2006) or others. “Perfidy” was one of the cases of politicizing the Holocaust following the so-called Kasztner Trial in Israel, in which Kasztner, the representative of the Labor Party Mapai in Hungary, found himself accused of collaboration with Eichmann. In exchange for the rescue of a small group consisting of his family and a few dignitaries, he was accused of hiding the terrible fate awaiting the vast majority of Hungarian Jewry. He was assassinated by right-wing extremists as a result. Similarly, Mapai’s leaders in Palestine, David Ben-Gurion most significantly, were accused of collaboration with the British authorities in regard to Brand’s Mission. Joel Brand was arrested by the British while pursuing his mission, and when interrogated by Lord Moyne, the British Minister Resident in the Middle East, he was asked by Moyne—“and what shall I do with a million Jews?” (p. 48). This sentence became a model case for the “world’s” behavior during the Holocaust, and justified *ex post facto* the assassination of Lord Moyne at the hands of the Stern Gang in November 1944. Brand himself joined the Stern Gang after the war and gave them the justification for Moyne’s assassination, which became a part of the legacy of the Israeli Right.

However, the whole story pertaining to Brand’s Mission as described by Ben Hecht, by Brand himself, by Mapai’s political enemies during Kasztner’s trial, and by our author has nothing to do with the realities of the Holocaust. To begin with, Eichmann had no competence to strike the rescue deal attributed to him, nor were the Ger-

mans interested in a deal to save the Jews of Hungary, but in using them to split the Allies (the trucks were intended to fight the Red Army alone), and in the political and propaganda effect on Allied masses and troops getting ready for the Normandy invasion: Jews were dealt with without their knowledge in order to supply the Nazis with vital strategic goods. Allied governments did their best to avoid the impression that WWII was a "Jew's War" on the eve of the bloody Normandy invasion. Brand was not interrogated by Lord Moyne but by a German-speaking British artillery lieutenant. Hence Moyne never offered the above-quoted expression. A British Foreign Office official said something to the effect that a million Hungarian Jews could not be brought out of Nazi-occupied Hungary under wartime conditions, in a conversation with Moshe Shertok, the Zionist foreign minister, who tried to use Brand's Mission to gain time, if possible, during which the Final Solution in Hungary would be suspended. Brand was accompanied by Bundy Grosz, a converted Hungarian Jew who offered the British and the Americans a "real deal," i.e., negotiations on separate peace agreements between the SD and the West against the Soviet Union. Thus, Grosz's role and British intelligence decryptions and German records now available tell us that the Nazis never intended to release Jews in large numbers, and that the "truck deal" was a brain child of Fritz Laufer, a half-Jewish traitor and enemy agent, endorsed by Brand and suggested by him to Eichmann, who readily accepted it. Nevertheless, Kasztner continued the negotiations with Eichmann as if Brand's Mission was still on and managed to release 1,684 prominent Jews (including his wife and in-laws; the rest of his large family was deported to Auschwitz) as a sign of good will by the other side, and later the rescue of no less than 20,000 Jews—whole families included—who survived the war. Finally, he was able to split the SS murder machine itself. In his last effort to save Jews, mostly Hungarians, who were marched by foot from Auschwitz and other places for work in Germany and interned upon arrival in concentration camps, Kasztner succeeded, preventing their execution ordered by the isolated Hitler in his Berlin bunker.

The story of the Budapest Ghetto and Raoul Wallenberg's efforts to save it during the Soviet siege of the city as told by our author also differs from the historical reconstruction that should be possible based on German archival materials now available. When Admiral Horthy ordered the termination of the Final Solution in Budapest in summer of 1944, many Jews who fled the province to Budapest and others were given Swedish immunity pa-

pers by Wallenberg in his capacity as a Swedish diplomat and by Carl Lutz, the Swiss consul general. However, in the autumn of 1944 Horthy was toppled by the SS and the Hungarian fascists took over and interned the Budapest Jews in ghettos. Eichmann returned, and began marching them to the Austrian border, but the Red Army arrived and put the city under siege. The fighting which commenced in November 1944 did not end before February 1945, during which time the Hungarians intended to destroy the remaining Jews. Wallenberg supposedly saved them by making the German city commander described by our author as Wehrmacht general August Schmidhuber [his real name was Gerhard Schmidhuber] personally responsible for their survival. However, Waffen-SS *Obergruppenfuehrer* Karl Pfeffer-Wildenbruch was the real commander of the city. He testified after the war, having returned to Germany from a Soviet POW camp, that "he-Pfeffer-never met Mr. Wallenberg nor heard from him." [2] He said so in response to a query by former consul Lutz about Wallenberg's role in saving the ghetto. Lutz used the opportunity to lament Soviet mistreatment of Budapest's people and foreign diplomats and the "stupidity of the Western Allies who did not join the Germans against the Russians." [3] He was reprimanded by the ex-SS general for this. Pfeffer continued that "when the decision was made to defend Budapest, I asked the commander of the Gestapo Group in the city [Eichmann had left by that stage], to report to me about the Jewish question therein, whereupon I [gave] him a strict order to defend the Jewish Ghetto [from the Hungarian killers, who were ready to march in and destroy it] with additional help of my troops." [4] Pfeffer remained silent about his motives, leaving us historians wondering about the sources preserved in his estate at the German Military Archive in Freiburg. One or two OSS records (Wallenberg's rescue mission in Budapest was coordinated by the WWII CIA) that we have at our disposal in the U.S. National Archives in College Park, MD, decrypted in real time by the Germans, confirmed that "Swedish diplomat Wallenberg was now under the protection of the Waffen-SS in Budapest." [5]

Telling the story of survivors in between the problematic discussion of the realities of the Holocaust is by itself an important contribution to the memorializing of the Hungarian catastrophe. Yet even the discussion of Wallenberg's fate after the war by our author is a repetition of old speculations. Did Soviet intelligence decrypt Wallenberg's OSS exchange like the Germans? Was he arrested by the Soviets upon the occupation of Budapest as an alleged American agent, interrogated by them in

the usual way, and did he perish as a result?

[3]. Ibid.

Notes

[4]. Ibid.

[1]. See Winkelmann's SS-Personal File, BDC, Bundesarchiv Berlin.

[5.] U.S. National Archives, RG 226, Entry 123, box 2, Bern-SI-INT-14-26.

[2]. See Pfeffer's estate in the German Federal Archive/Military Archive, Freiburg/B, file N 370/10.

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