

## Relief and Rescue Committee of Budapest

(*Va'adat ha-Ezra ve-ha-Hatsala be-Budapest*, known as the *Va'ada*), committee founded to provide aid for Jewish refugees in Hungary. Composed of representatives of various Hungarian Zionist groups, the committee was headed by Otto Komoly and Rezső (Israel) Kasztner. Late in 1941, Komoly, Kasztner and others began helping refugees, and in 1943 they formed a committee aligned with the Jewish Agency in Palestine.

The committee's original goals included rescuing Jews by smuggling them into Hungary (which, until 1944, was a relatively safe place to be); helping refugees within the country; and preparing for the self-defense of Hungarian Jewry. Among its earlier achievements, the committee managed to smuggle some 1,100 Polish Jews out of Poland before the German occupation of Hungary in March 1944. It also helped support Jewish refugees inside Hungary. Additionally, the committee served as an important contact between the Jews in the West and the persecuted Jewish communities in Poland and Slovakia.

When Germany occupied Hungary, the committee's leaders divided up responsibilities in an attempt to save Hungarian Jews. Komoly worked on procuring support for the Jews from Hungarian political and church leaders, while Kasztner and Joel Brand began negotiating with SS officers Adolf Eichmann and Kurt Becher. The rescue deals they discussed were based on the Slovak Working Group's Europa Plan. While Brand traveled to Turkey to convince the Allies of the Germans' proposition, Kasztner immersed himself in one specific part of the negotiations: the Germans' offer to let hundreds of Hungarian Jews leave Hungary by train, as a show of the Nazis' goodwill. Eventually, over 1,600 Jews left on the "Kasztner train," and ultimately reached safety in Switzerland.

Although negotiations with the SS continued until early 1945, a bargain was never reached. Nonetheless, along the way, 21,000 Hungarian Jews were transferred to a safer camp in Strasshof, Austria in mid-1944, where most survived. After the violent Arrow Cross Party took over the Hungarian government in October 1944, the committee was involved in protecting

Hungarian Jews within Budapest. Working with the International Red Cross and Zionist youth movements, Komoly helped provide food, shelter, heat, and protection for the beleaguered Jews. Early in 1945 Kasztner and Becher traveled to several concentration camps where Becher convinced the commanders to hand over the Jews to the Allies without harming them.