

## Kasztner, Rezsó

(also known as Rudolf or Israel; 1906-1957), Hungarian Zionist leader. Kasztner was a Labor Zionist activist in his native Transylvania and then in Budapest after Transylvania was annexed by Hungary in 1940. In late 1944 he helped found the relief and rescue committee of Budapest. Until spring 1944, the committee successfully smuggled into Hungary refugees from Poland and Slovakia.

Germany invaded Hungary in March 1944. Kasztner believed that the best way to save Hungarian Jewry---the last Jewish community in Europe---was to negotiate with the German authorities. Thus, the rescue committee contacted the SS officers in charge of implementing the "Final Solution" in Hungary. Soon thereafter, Adolf Eichmann made his offer to exchange "Blood for Goods," whereby a certain number of Jews would be spared in exchange for large amounts of goods, including trucks. An emissary, Joel Brand, was sent to Turkey to bring this offer to the attention of the Allies and Jewish leaders. When he did not return to Hungary, Kasztner took over direct negotiations with Eichmann and later with Kurt Becher. In late June 1944 Kasztner convinced Eichmann to release some 1,700 Jews. Kasztner and other Jewish leaders drew up a list of Jews to be released, including leading wealthy Jews, Zionists, rabbis, Jews from different religious communities, and Kasztner's own family and friends. After being detained in Bergen-Belsen, the members of the "Kasztner train" eventually reached safety in Switzerland. Kasztner and Becher continued negotiating for an end to the murder and later for the surrender of various Nazi camps to the Allies. These negotiations may have led to the order to stop the murder in Auschwitz and to stop the deportations from Budapest in fall 1944.

After the war, Kasztner moved to Palestine. In 1954 he sued a journalist named Malkiel Grunwald, who had accused Kasztner of collaborating with the Nazis. However, Grunwald's lawyer turned the trial into an indictment of Kasztner, and in fact, the judge summed up the trial by saying that Kasztner had "sold his soul to the devil"---by negotiating with the Nazis, by favoring his friends and relatives, and by not doing enough to warn Hungarian Jews about

their fate. Kasztner appealed this verdict and the Israeli Supreme Court cleared Kasztner of all wrongdoing. However, before the new decision could be announced, Kasztner was assassinated by extreme right-wing nationalists