



October 22, 2009

Once Reviled as Nazi Collaborator, Now Hailed as a Savior

By [RALPH BLUMENTHAL](#)

“Were you on the train?”

Hedy Mayer, Devora Spira, Peska Friedman and Berta Rubinsztein felt no need to ask: which train? Only one train was on everyone’s lips on Tuesday night at a Manhattan gathering of Hungarian Jews who had escaped the Holocaust. There had been many trains to Auschwitz. There had been only one train to life, and the four women, now all in their 80s, had been on it, along with about 1,680 others.

It was a train from Budapest that stopped for several months at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp and finally made its way to Switzerland and salvation. The trip was arranged in 1944 during the darkest days of the Nazi genocide by Rezsó Kasztner, also known as Rudolf or Israel Kastner, a Jew who was to rescue more Jews than Oskar Schindler.

He had done this by negotiating face to face with [Adolf Eichmann](#), the administrator of [Hitler’s](#) Final Solution, and paying \$1,000 a head while concealing, enemies later said, the full measure of the peril that was to claim an estimated 550,000 of Hungary’s 825,000 Jews, and vouching at the Nuremberg trials for an SS colonel, Kurt Becher. For this, Mr. Kasztner was shot to death in 1957 at age 51 in Tel Aviv.

For years his name was anathema. Reviled as a Nazi collaborator whom an Israeli judge said had “sold his soul to the devil,” Mr. Kasztner, a journalist and official in Israel’s ruling leftist workers party, Mapai, was denounced in court, demonized in print and spat upon on the street. Rage against him brought down the Israeli government in 1955 and all but ignited a civil war. His three right-wing killers were pardoned seven years into their life sentences. Israel’s [Supreme Court](#) later cleared him of all charges, but the stigma stuck. His name graced no memorial walls, even at Yad Vashem, Israel’s shrine to victims of the Shoah, although in 2007 it accepted some of his papers.

But on Tuesday, growing research by historians and a long campaign by his aggrieved family and the many he saved culminated in a joyous tribute at the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research at 15 West 16th Street, where a respectful new documentary about him was screened before its American movie house opening on Friday.

The two-hour film, [“Killing Kasztner: The Jew Who Dealt With Nazis,”](#) took its director, Gaylen Ross, more than eight years to make. The movie presents new information, including allegations by the confessed gunman, Ze’ev Eckstein, that others were in on the plot but never prosecuted, and it has already been acclaimed in Israel, Canada, England and Hungary. It also suggests that Mr. Kasztner had acted with the knowledge of Jewish Agency officials he later

protected.

“There were some things I didn’t know; there was a lot of politics involved,” said Gabriela Shalev, Israel’s ambassador to the [United Nations](#), who listened to a discussion afterward with Ms. Ross, members of the Kasztner family and historians.

“We heard he was killed and we were shocked,” said Ms. Friedman, who had been on the train and now lives in Brooklyn. “He did not deserve it.”

Ms. Mayer, also of Brooklyn, said that she was several months pregnant when she boarded Mr. Kasztner’s train. Her child, Egon, was born in Switzerland and lived to become a professor of sociology at the [City University of New York](#).

Ms. Spira, another Brooklyn resident, said it was not just the people on the train who were saved. “I have two children, 13 grandchildren and 27 great-grandchildren,” she said. “He saved them, too.”

Mr. Kasztner’s daughter, Zsuzsi, 63, a nurse in Israel, and two of her three daughters — Merav Michaeli, 42, a television journalist, and Michal, 38, a marketing consultant — were smothered in embraces. “I want to thank you for your grandfather,” said Irene Grossman, 67, of Riverdale, in the Bronx, who was 3 years old when she joined her family on the train.

Manny Mandel, 73, a psychotherapist in Silver Spring, Md., who was also aboard the train, said he had heard all the stories about Mr. Kasztner’s outsize ego and abrasiveness. “I’m not sure I would have liked that man personally,” he said. “But if not for all that arrogance, imagine how he could have negotiated with Eichmann — he could have had him shot on the spot.”

Ladislav Löb, 76, who was 11 when he was on the train, came to the screening from England, where he is emeritus professor of German at the University of Sussex; he published a book last year on his experiences and what he called Mr. Kasztner’s “daring rescue of Hungarian Jews.”

“He was a hero of circumstances,” Dr. Löb said. “Somebody had to do something. It’s better to save lives than not save lives.”

Ms. Rubinsztein, also from Riverdale, claimed the last word before the Yivo Institute audience of 300. “Who has something to say about Kasztner should come to me,” she said. She was there, alive.

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