

**In wartime Budapest a handful of Jews risked everything to stop the Holocaust, while those around them connived with or simply ignored the occupying Nazis. Adam LeBor tells one woman's story, and asks what might have happened if Britain had faced the same dilemmas**

Sitting on Budapest's number two tram as it trundles along the banks of the Danube, I sometimes forego gazing at the river in favour of people-watching, especially the elderly. Behind every lined face is a story to be told, of someone who has lived through a monarchy, dictatorships of the left and right, orders issued by Soviet commissars and SS officers. Surviving such a parade of rival empires, with their various flags to be saluted and anthems to be lustily sung, demands considerable gymnastics of allegiance.

Living in the city for almost a decade, I have become aware of the sliding scale of compromises, sometimes merging into corruption and collaboration, that life under occupation and dictatorship can be midwife to. For there were always choices. Nuanced shades of grey rather than black and white, but options for moral and civic courage nonetheless. What did my fellow tram passengers do when the Nazis invaded in 1944? Did they denounce their Jewish neighbours, or help to hide them? Or in the abortive revolution of 1956? Did they fight the Soviet tanks as they rumbled down the boulevards, or did they stay at home until Communist order was re-established? Across Eastern Europe, many chose what they called "inner exile", a kind of disengagement from society wherever possible, in favour of a concentration on friends, family and personal pastimes.

Of course the countries behind the old Iron Curtain are free now, but their present reality, and that of their citizens, is still shaped by their turbulent, often bloody history. Physical as well as psychic scars remain. Not far from my flat is a riverside McDonald's, with a pleasant terrace overlooking the Danube. It shares a building that during the winter of 1944 was controlled by the Arrow Cross, the Hungarian Nazi party. Jews and others were taken into its basements, tortured and shot. It was known as the "House of Vengeance". Now, on the other side of the building's main entrance, is a Rothschild supermarket, selling Israeli Carmel wine and hummus. History, too, can have a dark sense of irony.

Considerable scholarly energy has been expended on comparing Nazism and Communism. The similarities have been noted: the one-party state, secret police, concentration camps and gulags, terror. Yet one key difference has been less

examined: the opportunities for personal profit and gain under Nazism. In Stalin's Russia merely to survive the endless purges and the night-time knock on the door was an achievement. In Hitler's Germany there were riches to be had. A large part of the appeal of Nazism was that it removed many of the constraints, both legal and moral, that govern behaviour across every sector of society. For many individuals this often had little to do with furthering the triumph of Nazi ideology itself. Businessmen could build giant economic empires based on plunder and exploitation, with a workforce that could be starved and enslaved, until the SS sent replacements. Art collectors could buy up Old Masters on the cheap from fleeing Jews. Doctors had humans on whom they could, and did, carry out macabre experiments. Such was the dark world of the many who sought to profit from Nazism.

Dictatorships bring out the best in people, and the worst. They act like a pressure cooker: those who are weak and selfish become more so, while those who are blessed with bravery find it tempered in adversity. Just as compromising with evil begins with the first accommodation, so does the journey away from it. But where does courage come from? Especially the courage to say "No", sometimes the most powerful word of all.

Those individuals with enough courage to spot the cracks and fissures in the edifice of dictatorship, could make a difference. For the quick and the brave, such as Hansi Brand, there was space for initiative, to try and save lives, even at great personal risk. I met Hansi Brand in Tel Aviv in 1998. Even in her mid-eighties, slowed by age, she still showed the inner courage and fire that allowed her, a Hungarian Jewess, to sit across a table from Adolf Eichmann in wartime Budapest as she and her colleagues tried to thrash out a deal with the very architect of the Holocaust to save at least a few hundred Jews from its fires.

We talked in her modest flat of events that had unfolded over five decades before, but which still resounded among the lives of those who survived them. She had lived not far from my office in downtown Budapest, in the city's sixth district. The streets on which she and her colleagues - and the Nazis with whom they negotiated - lived were the same as those on which I strolled to work every day. As we spoke she mentioned places and squares which I knew well. It was a strange feeling to imagine SS officers striding down the same streets. Great and awful events leave intangible marks, an atmospheric resonance, as well as physical ones.

Hansi Brand and her husband Joel were founders of the wartime Vaada, the Budapest-based Zionist rescue committee. Vaada operatives, particularly her husband Joel, a German-born Jew, ran a perilous network smuggling Jewish refugees into Budapest from Poland, via Slovakia. The Vaada also ran a network of couriers bringing news and information from Nazi-occupied countries. The reports were then passed to Jewish officials working in Istanbul, via a Polish watchmaker called Samu Springmann. This is the very stuff of spy novels, but really happened. It was difficult and extremely dangerous work. Hansi Brand and her husband were not part of the Jewish establishment, the assimilated grandees, who believed their personal contacts and titles would save themselves and their fellow Jews from the Nazis' plans, arguing that the rules and regulations must still be followed. The Brands ran a glove and stocking factory. They were outsiders. Joel was a habitue of cafes. He knew smugglers, black marketeers.

In contrast, Samu Stern, official president of the Pest Jewish Community, held a position at the Royal Hungarian Court, was assimilated and patriotic, and considered himself a true Hungarian, although many of his compatriots thought differently. He favoured legal methods, sticking to the regulations. His leadership was a disaster. In 1943 he had refused an appeal from a Slovak Jewish resistance group to send funds, claiming such a transfer could only be arranged through a bank, which was of course impossible. The following year, at the height of the deportations to Auschwitz, he even forbade the distribution of a clandestine appeal to Hungarian Christians to aid Jews fleeing the round-ups. He and many of his colleagues on the Jewish Council - the Nazi-appointed communal leadership - diligently implemented the Nazis' instructions, advising fellow Jews to keep calm and follow the Germans' orders. When a Nazi officer demanded that the Jewish Council present him with a piano, he was offered so many from which to choose that he replied he only wanted one - to play, not to open a shop. At the same time the Council was given 250 immunity certificates, signed by both German security and the Hungarian police. These allowed the holders to move freely about and were priceless, but many Jews saw them as a simple bribe for co-operation and condemned the Council's lack of courage.

Now, of course, with hindsight, and no guns at our necks, it is perhaps too easy to judge. But not everyone followed orders. After the Nazis invaded Hungary in March 1944 the Vaada members continued with their work, independent of the Jewish Council. "In the beginning the Jewish Council did not want to hear about the Vaada, they were not interested," Hansi Brand recalled. "When things started to turn ugly, they started to be interested. It took them a while." Eichmann too

began to be interested. In late spring of 1944, as the Third Reich began to fracture and the Allies advanced on both fronts, he summoned Joel Brand, Hansi's husband, to his headquarters on Schwab Hill, at the Hotel Majestic. He offered Brand a bizarre deal, part of Himmler's attempt to split the wartime Allies, and isolate the Soviet Union. Eichmann would exchange a million Jewish lives for 10,000 trucks, and large amounts of consumer staples such as cocoa, coffee and soap. These would be supplied by the Western Allies and used only on the Eastern front against the Soviet Union, Eichmann pledged. In exchange the Jews would be transported through Nazi-occupied Europe to neutral Spain and Portugal. "Goods for blood" was Eichmann's macabre term to describe the deal.

Once Joel had left on his mission to the Allies, Hansi was to be held as a hostage, she told me. "Eichmann told Joel to bring his wife, and so Joel took me up to Schwab Hill and introduced me to him. Eichmann asked me if I knew what it was all about, that I had to stay in Budapest with the children as hostages. And that Joel's mission was the Reich's secret, which I must not reveal to anyone. So that's how I met Eichmann." The Nazi leader was polite, but jittery, she remembered. "He wasn't too loud, he sometimes said something to me, I said something to him and I received an answer for that. But he was very nervous, his weapon was always there on his desk, and his helmet. I had to report to him all the time. If there was any news, I had to report it."

Brand left for Istanbul on 19 May 1944, flown from Vienna on a German plane. His plan was to travel to Jerusalem, in British-mandate Palestine, with Eichmann's bizarre offer, and try to stop the Holocaust. He was accompanied by the shady figure of Andor Grosz. Grosz was also a Hungarian Jew, a shady character known as the "smuggler king of Budapest", a black-marketeer also in contact with the Hungarian secret service, German military intelligence and several other secret-service agencies as well. The mission never stood a chance. Brand was arrested by the British authorities as soon as they left neutral Turkey and arrived in Syria. As a Hungarian enemy national, Brand was suspect, and he was repeatedly interrogated by British military intelligence, and sent to Cairo, before being moved to Jerusalem, where he was finally released. He took revenge of sorts on the man who had sent him to Istanbul when he testified at Eichmann's trial in Israel in 1961.

The failure of Joel Brand's mission did not deter Eichmann from negotiating, and other Zionist officials also saw a possible window of opportunity. Hansi Brand became a kind of go-between. She took a pair of Zionist leaders to the Hotel Majestic to meet Eichmann. Not surprisingly, the two men were terrified, and

showed it. She was not impressed, she told me. "I felt ashamed. We had nothing but our dignity, and to show that we had a sense of security, that we were not poor trembling Jews, but were partners in these negotiations, with whom the Nazis wanted to make business." Eichmann then opened a second set of negotiations with another Vaada official, Rezso Kasztner, a lawyer from Kolozsvár, then in Hungary, now in Romania. Kasztner was the political brains of the Vaada. Hansi accompanied him to the Hotel Majestic. He too was scared, she said. "When I took Rezso up there and introduced him to Eichmann he acted the same way, so I felt really bad. When we came out I told him that we had nothing left but to show that we're not afraid of them. He said yes, took out a cigarette and lit up. I stood there watching him and I asked him, 'You didn't expect the SS to offer you a cigarette, did you?'"

These negotiations were partially successful. Kasztner failed to save the bulk of Hungarian Jewry, but on the night of 30 June 1944, Eichmann allowed 1,685 specially selected Jews to leave Budapest on a train to Switzerland. After being held for many weeks at a special "VIP" annex to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, where they were not forced to work, and were fed, they eventually reached Switzerland. Each passenger paid \$1,000 or the equivalent in gold and valuables for a place on the train. Some rich Jews, desperate to leave, subsidised places for those who could not afford such an amount. The monies were paid to Eichmann's colleague, an SS officer called Kurt Becher. Hansi Brand herself took two suitcases-worth up to the Hotel Majestic.

Was Hansi Brand a hero? The train deal was condemned by many Jews as a deal with the devil, saving a few at the expense of the many. She was certainly heroic, although she was no saint. Among historians and survivors of the time, it is fairly common knowledge that during the war she and Kasztner were lovers, even though both of them were married to others. Perhaps unconventional attitudes to fidelity are a necessary part of the same emotional make-up, of bravery strong enough to negotiate with Adolf Eichmann, who could have despatched either Hansi Brand or Rezso Kasztner to Auschwitz at a moment's notice. When we met, Hansi Brand was the last survivor of the major protagonists in the strange and murky story of the wartime negotiations between Budapest's Zionists and the Nazis. Eichmann was hanged in Israel in 1962 as a war criminal. Kasztner was shot and killed in Tel Aviv in 1957, by an Israeli gunman after a libel trial in which Kasztner was accused of collaborating with the Nazis. Joel Brand died in 1964. So Hansi had spent 24 years alone in widowhood, bereft of both the men in her life. She died in April 2000.