



THE HIDDEN STORY OF RESCUE

An interview with Dr. Ayala Nedi

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The newly published book **Between Krausz and Kastner: The Struggle to Rescue the Jews of Hungary** reveals an unknown chapter in the history of the rescue of Hungarian Jews during the Holocaust. The author, Dr. Ayala Nedi, in a special interview with Inyan, shares the sequence of events that led to her researching one of the most amazing rescue initiatives and the little-known figure who led it, her astonishing exposures and the circumstances that caused this chapter to vanish from the pages of history until now.

SCUE WORK IN HUNGARY

BY ESTY SHDEOUR

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“**T**he collective historical memory is based on personal and political agendas, and the issue of the rescue of Hungarian Jews during the Holocaust shows how true this is. This is the bottom line of my book, as well as of the doctoral thesis on which it was based, that was titled *The Palestine Office in Budapest: Its Actions in Saving Jews From 1943-1945 and Their Formulation in the Collective Memory*.”

This decisive statement by the author, Dr. Ayala Nedi, runs like a thread throughout the interview, not only when she recounts the historical facts, but also when she explains how she chose the research topic.

“I am a second-generation Holocaust survivor [i.e., a child of survivors] from Hungary,” Dr. Nedi says, “and their story is the story of Jews from the provinces who found themselves within a short time in Auschwitz. I reached the point where I was ready to return to their story in an intellectual way and research the subject

of the Hungarian Jews’ Holocaust, although at the time I wasn’t sure where to focus my research.

“During this period, I happened to watch the play *Kasztner Trial*, by playwright Motti Lerner, which was first performed in 1985. I was very impressed with the figure of Israel (Rudolf) Kasztner, the head of the Rescue Committee in Budapest, whose rescue operation and its aftermath had aroused great controversy, culminating in the Kasztner trial in the 1950s. The play portrayed him as a positive but tragic figure who did whatever he could to save Jews. Following the show, I decided to read all the protocols of the Kasztner trial.

“I was surprised to discover a very different picture in the protocols than what had been presented in the play. While reading them, I learned for the first time about another character, completely unknown, who had headed an awesome alternative

rescue project that relied on the help of Swiss diplomats and on the assistance of anti-Nazi Hungarian officials.

“And so I decided to explore the fascinating and unknown story of Moshe Krausz and his rescue operation. In the background, the question shouted to Heaven: Why did Krausz receive virtually none of the recognition he deserved, especially since his rescue activities saved a far larger number than

the number which Kasztner saved, and without the difficult moral dilemmas that characterized Kasztner’s attempts?”

Who Was Moshe Krausz?

Moshe Krausz was the director of the Palestine Office in Budapest from 1935 to 1945. He was born in 1908 in the village Mezolde near Miskolc, in northern Hungary. In his youth he studied in Miskolc in the yeshivah of Harav Shmuel HaLevi Austerlitz, *zt”l*. Krausz was active in the Mizrahi movement. In 1934 he moved to Budapest and began working as the secretary of that city’s Palestine Office, which served as a center for the distribution of *aliyah* certificates from the Jewish Agency.

A year later Krausz became the actual manager of the office. His first official act was to foster relations with the Hungarian authorities in charge of security and immigration, and with foreign diplomats, including the British Embassy in Budapest. After Hungary’s diplomatic relations with Britain were cut off, he continued to maintain contact with the Swiss vice consul, Carl Lutz, who represented Great Britain’s interests in Hungary. Carl Lutz, as Dr. Nedi will later relate, had a pivotal role in Krausz’s



rescue operations.

Before the war, the Zionist movement in Hungary was very small. It became powerful with the growth of anti-Semitism in Hungary and with the increasing flow of Jewish refugees from Poland. At that time, the Zionist *yishuv* leadership assigned great importance to Hungary because, until its Nazi occupation in March 1944, life there was relatively normal and it was almost the sole option for legally leaving occupied Europe. The Palestine Office officially continued functioning throughout the war, with the approval of the Hungarian government.

Mass Jewish emigration was impossible, due to lack of passes from Turkey, which functioned, at the time, as a “transit” port.

Krausz constantly strove to receive passes from Turkey, in order to make use of the many immigration certificates that were in the Palestine Office.

At the beginning of 1943 a Rescue Committee of the Jewish Agency, headed by Kasztner, was established in Budapest, in order to help smuggled Jewish refugees from Nazi-occupied countries and to prepare for the eventuality of Nazi occupation of Hungary.

The Zionist leadership had a very clear hierarchy of priorities in distributing certificates, with the refugees who were members of the Zionist movements given preference. The arrival in Istanbul of Harav Baruch Rabinowitz (the son-in-law of the Minchas Elazar of Munkatch), *zt”l*, and other *chareidim* who received certificates thanks to the intervention of Reb Jacob Griffel, *z”l*, a well-known activist and Agudas Yisrael’s representative in Istanbul, caused a furor. In response — some would say retaliation — Zionist officials rescinded the authority of Budapest’s Palestine Office to decide on the list of certificate recipients.

On March 19, 1944, German troops occupied Hungary without resistance. At this point, who headed the Hungarian Jewish leadership?

After the occupation, the central leadership was the Jewish Council of Budapest, which was considered the General *Judenrat*

of Hungarian Jewry. It was headed by Samuel (Shamu) Stern, the president of the Neolog community.

The main negotiations with the Germans were led by Kasztner and his assistant, Joel Brand. Philippe Freudiger, *z”l*, (one of



Carl Lutz in his office.



Joel Brand

the most important Orthodox figures of Budapest’s *Judenrat*) wanted to enter into negotiations to save Hungarian Jews, but Kasztner insisted on leading talks with the Germans, contending that only one or two people should be involved, and that he and his assistant, Joel Brand, had been invited by the Germans to do so.

In my opinion, the Germans preferred to negotiate particularly with Kasztner and not with Freudiger, because they believed that the Zionists had international connections.

In any event, Freudiger cooperated with Kasztner in his rescue operations, and even gave him Orthodox community funds because he believed that collective Jewish responsibility superseded party interests — the main goal was to save as many Jews as possible. Kasztner, however, both deceived Freudiger and withheld certain truths from him. Later, in Israel during the Kasztner trial and the Eichmann trial, Freudiger admitted that he had erred in trusting Kasztner.

In your book you say that Krausz opposed Kasztner's ideas of how to save Jews. What was the bone of contention between them?

Krausz opposed cooperating with the Nazis. He held that the plans that Kasztner tried to implement were a typical, well-known German ruse aimed at sidetracking the Jewish leadership from the [Nazi] intention to exterminate the Jews in the provinces.

It was about two main rescue plans: One — an immediate one — was the travel of 600 Jews (this figure later grew to 750, 1,200, and finally to about 1,700 Jews), known as the “Kasztner Train.” The other was rescuing 1,000,000 Jews in exchange for 10,000 trucks loaded with goods necessary to the Germans, which is known as “Trucks for Blood.”

According to Dr. Nadivi, the Germans allowed the Kasztner Train to leave, but only in the guise of a sealed boxcar train going to the concentration camp.

Krausz strongly opposed disguising Jewish emigration. There was no need to disguise emigration because the Hungarian government that was established after the occupation approved Jews' emigrating as long as the Germans approved it. In his opinion, letting Jews emigrate without the Hungarians' knowledge in sealed trains made a clear statement to the Hungarian government that these Jewish negotiators acquiesced to Jews being deported.

When Krausz's firm opposition to this dangerous travesty was ignored, he ended his relationship with Kasztner and began his own rescue route.

What, then, was the alternative rescue plan that Krausz proposed?

Krausz took the road he knew — the diplomatic route, which primarily involved contacts with the neutral consulates and with Hungarian anti-Nazi officials, in the hope of carrying out the immigration to Israel that was already approved by the Hungarian government, or at least to ensure that Jewish foreign-certificate carriers would be protected as foreign subjects to whom various decrees and laws would not apply.

Krausz began working feverishly to provide passes to the people who possessed certificates to Palestine. This had already begun earlier with Burgenland Jews who had fled Austria in 1938 following the Anschluss, who actually reached [the relative safety of] Hungary.

How do you view Harav Weissmandl, zt"l. in light of your study, and given all the materials and documents that you read?

Rav Weissmandl was a rare personality, a giant of a Jew. He expended enormous energy to alert the free world to the peril threatening Jews. He wrote his letters with his blood. He begged the free world to wake up. For someone living in Slovakia and not in the free world, he was informed about the situation in Hungary at a level that is difficult to believe, and he continuously sent that information to the free world.



Harav Michael Ber Weissmandl

We know that the famous letter he wrote dated May 16, 1944, sent a day after the massive deportation of Jews from the provinces to Auschwitz began, together with a detailed description of Auschwitz as an extermination camp and a call to bomb all railroads leading to it, reached Nathan Schwab, the *yishuv's* representative in Geneva, the next day. I discovered that a few days later this letter was in the hands of the *yishuv's* Rescue Committee in Istanbul, and at the same time that Joel Brand came to Istanbul. This means that the *yishuv* representatives knew, from Brand and from Harav Weissmandl, everything about the transport of the Hungarian Jews to the Auschwitz extermination camp.

The *yishuv* representatives passed the information received in Rav Weissmandl's letter on to the Joint's representative and to the U.S. Ambassador in Turkey, Laurence Steinhardt, and Steinhardt sent these letters to the War Refugee Board in New York and to the Joint (American Joint Distribution Committee). Today we know with certainty that all of these people knew what awaited Hungarian Jewry and that they did not respond to Rabbi Weissmandl's pleas for rescue or reveal the truth to the world.

The historical irony is that what revealed the truth were Krausz's two reports that were sent to Switzerland. The person who publicized those reports was George Mantello, originally from Bistricia, Transylvania, and at the time serving as the first secretary of the El Salvador Consulate in Switzerland — and not those Jews who knew the truth long before. Mantello's publication of these reports was by far the most important event that caused a major change in the actions taken on behalf of European Jews in general and Hungarian Jews in particular by governments, politicians, international institutions and Jewish leaders outside of Hungary and in Palestine.

AUSCHWITZ PROTOCOLS

This was the detailed report of two Slovakian Jews who escaped from Auschwitz — Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wezler — in which they tell firsthand of the slaughter of Jews in the extermination camp there, along with the exact numbers of victims who died from 1942 to April 1944 and with a detailed description of the mass killing of Jews in gas chambers. It was written by members of the Working Group in Slovakia, who interrogated the two escapees on April 25, 1944.

According to Dr. Nedivi, the report was handed to

Kasztner, probably on April 28, about two weeks prior to the beginning of the mass transports from Hungary to Auschwitz. However, its content reached the hands of very few people, but hadn't been publicized to Hungarian Jewry, because they didn't want to risk the two rescue plans at stake at that time: the journey of Brand to Istanbul for the "Trucks for Blood" plan; and the Kasztner Train.

Contents of the report reached Moshe Krausz only about a month later, in late May or early June 1944, when he received it from Joseph Reisner, a Jew who worked for the Turkish consulate in Budapest.

At that time, Krausz had turned to the British ambassador and they both appealed to the Hungarian interior minister, who approved the entry of these refugees to Hungary. The British ambassador supplied each of the refugees with documents noting that its carrier intended to leave for Palestine and was therefore subject to British protection. This meant that anyone who had a certificate to immigrate to Palestine was a kind of British-Palestinian subject, under the protection of the British ambassador, and could not be touched. After Britain broke off relations with Hungary, its interests were represented by the Swiss; in effect, by the Swiss consul, Carl Lutz.

Krausz worked with Carl Lutz and with anti-Nazi officials in the Hungarian Foreign Ministry. On April 26, at the height of the ghettoization process, two weeks prior to the start of the massive deportations to Auschwitz — and two days before Kasztner received the Auschwitz Protocols [see sidebar] — the Hungarian Foreign Ministry recognized that the Palestine Office had 7,800 family certificates — resulting in certificates for 40,000 people (a family certificate was for 4-6 individuals). With this information, Carl Lutz turned to the British government and asked it to send 40,000 citizenship certificates to the holders of these certificates. He was simply not authorized to issue 40,000 such documents.

The answer was long in coming, and only arrived after the deportations were stopped on July 7, 1944. The deportations, it should be emphasized, were stopped after Horthy couldn't resist the international pressures exerted on him following the revelation to the free world of the atrocities being perpetrated, after most of the provinces' Jews were transported.



Laurence
Steinhardt

Along with the break in deportations, Horthy approved the 7,800 family certificates for emigration to Palestine.



George
Mantello

Krausz "rented," in the name of the Swiss legation, the large "Glass House" from Arthur Weiss, a big glass wholesaler in Budapest. This house received an ex-territorial status. The Palestine Office's Immigration Department (which since the occupation was located at the Swiss legation building) moved into the building, and they began working to bring 40,000 Jews to Palestine. The immigrants were registered in a "collective passport," which was a book including an average of some 1,000 names with photos and personal data. Whoever was registered in the "collective passport" was considered to be "protected" by the Swiss. According to Krausz, there were 10 such "collective passports." During those three months between April and July much international effort was invested in order to have these Jews emigrate to Palestine.

Three months passed, and in October the Arrow Cross coup occurred, and Krausz was helpless to prevent the Holocaust of Budapest Jews.

At this point, whoever fled to the Glass House was protected due to its Swiss extraterritorial status. Shortly after the coup, the new Arrow Cross ruler met with two consuls — Lutz and the Swedish consul Carl Ivan Danielson — and asked that the Swiss and Swedish governments recognize his government. They answered: Our government will recognize your government only if you respect the decision of Horthy (who in the meantime had been deposed) to allow Jews immigrate to Palestine and

Sweden. At the same meeting it was also decided that all Jews registered for *aliyah* would get a *schutzpass* — a personal safe pass from the Swiss Legation indicating that the subject was under its protection. It was also decided that all Jews who had a *schutzpass* would move to safe homes under the protection of Switzerland and Sweden.

Krausz would later recall that he asked the Spaniards, the Vatican representative and the Portuguese to ask the new ruler for the same arrangement, to provide some safe houses. The Swiss Consulate had seventy-six safe houses that received a protected status, and the Swedes about thirty. (Only the Swiss houses continued operating until liberation.) Thus, *schutzpass* holders were transferred to safe houses, while Jews without safe passes were moved to the large ghetto around the Dohnanyi Street Synagogue (also known as the Great Synagogue). At the same time, death marches to the Austrian border had begun.

So it turned out that the Glass House and the seventy-six Swiss-protected buildings saved tens of thousands who were holding original and forged *schutzpasses*. Even those who were not in the safe houses — because they did not want to or because there was no room — were still somewhat protected because of the *schutzpasses* they held, although they were at the mercy of the Arrow Cross mobs in the street.

This, in general, was Krausz's rescue operation. I emphasize that the principle of rescue that he espoused was the same all along, but under different circumstances it would take different forms: It started in 1938, when the Jews of Burgenland escaped over the border to Hungary, and it continued until liberation. Whoever owned a certificate to Palestine was a protected Jew, and absurdly, the authorities respected this because it suited their own interests.

Were all the people in the safe houses, as well as the people with *schutzpasses*, saved in the end?

Those who were in the Glass House — certainly! In the building adjacent to the Glass House, about 1,000 Jews were living in terribly crowded conditions, but they survived. Inhabitants of the other Swiss safe houses were saved too, but at lower rates, since they — even the ones who held authentic

schutzpasses — suffered from attacks and harrassments. One has to understand that toward the end of the war, when hunger was severe, there were conflicting forces within the Arrow Cross. Krausz arranged for the assistance of some Arrow Cross officers in protecting the safe buildings in exchange for money, food and housing. Yet Arrow Cross mobs continued a terrible

killing frenzy.

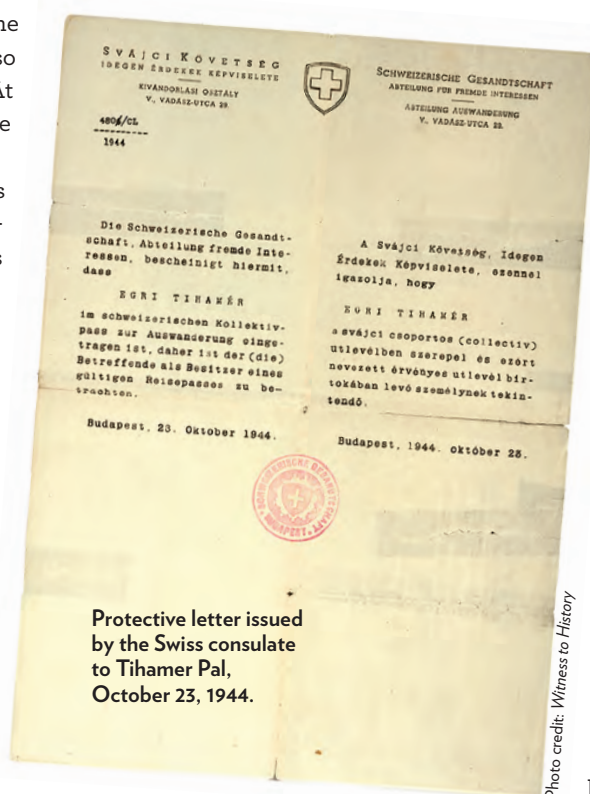
It should be remembered that in those days, after the Hungarian government left Budapest and moved to the area of Sopron on the Austrian border, the mob in Budapest went wild. The safe houses had to be protected from the rabble, and many times the ones who were defending them were none other than members of the Arrow Cross whom the Jews had hired.

What is the estimated number of survivors in the buildings Krausz protected?

Opinions are divided. Those who worked extensively on forging and distributing *schutzpasses* and bringing Jews to safe houses were youth movement members. Members of the youth movement claimed that they saved 100,000 Jews. I believe the number is exaggerated. My assumption, is that at least 50,000 Jews were saved.

Either way, it's tens of thousands of Jews. During the Holocaust there was no rescue project of this scope elsewhere. Moreover, Krausz spawned the extensive rescue operation without receiving even a cent, as he says, from the "Jewish people," namely the Joint.

MY ASSUMPTION... IS THAT AT LEAST 50,000 JEWS WERE SAVED. EITHER WAY, IT'S TENS OF THOUSANDS OF JEWS. DURING THE HOLOCAUST THERE WAS NO RESCUE PROJECT OF THIS SCOPE ELSEWHERE. KRAUSZ SPAWNED THE EXTENSIVE RESCUE OPERATION WITHOUT RECEIVING EVEN A CENT FROM THE "JEWISH PEOPLE," NAMELY THE JOINT.



Protective letter issued by the Swiss consulate to Tihamer Pal, October 23, 1944.

Photo credit: Witness to History

THE RESCUE OF THE BELZER REBBE, ZY" A

Moshe Krausz's role in the rescue of the Belzer Rebbe is an unknown story. Moshe Krausz played a significant part in the rescue of the Belzer Rebbe and his brother, the Rav of Bilgoray, zy" a.

Kraus had a good relationship with Leon Mach, who was for many years an official in the Polish Consulate in Hungary. In late 1942 Mach met a Polish officer who escaped to Hungary and continued to travel almost every week to Poland on clandestine missions. The officer told Mach that for a considerable sum he would smuggle Jews out of the Polish ghetto and bring them to Budapest.

Gusta Stall, a Jewish refugee from Poland who worked as a secretary in the Hungarian-Polish Commerce Bureau (and later became Krausz's wife), knew that the Rebbe of Belz was in Bochnia, and that his many followers among the refugees would do everything in their power to save him.

After they agreed upon the sum required to smuggle the Rebbe and his brother, they were taken out of the ghetto and brought secretly to Budapest. With Krausz's intervention, the Rebbe was hospitalized in the Jewish Hospital



in Budapest under a pseudonym as an ill refugee, so he wouldn't be at risk during his stay in Hungary.

One day the Rebbe received a notice to present himself to the Aliens Registration office, which demanded launching an immediate investigation to punish those involved in smuggling him, and wanted to hand the Rebbe over to the German authorities for further interrogation.

Krausz contacted the head of the Aliens Registration office, Alexander Shimenfelby, admitted that the refugee was indeed the Rebbe of Belz, but denied the involvement of Hungarian officials in the smuggling. Krausz assured him that the Rebbe was expected to immigrate to Palestine within a few weeks, and that the mere fact that the Rebbe, who had a reputation as a miracle-worker, was a guest in Hungary would confer on Hungary great honor and merit. Shimenfelby acquiesced to Krausz's request, but demanded that the Rebbe appear personally before the Aliens Registration police.

Krausz traveled with the Rebbe to the Aliens Registration office. After registering with them, the Rebbe was concealed in the apartment of one of his followers, out of sight of his followers and German detectives. Meanwhile, Krausz managed to get approved certificates for the Rebbe and his brother, the Bilgoray Rav. On January 18, 1944, two months prior to the occupation of Hungary and seven months after the Rebbe was smuggled out of the ghetto, he and his brother left Hungary for Eretz Israel.

You describe this rescue initiative as being extraordinary in scope and without the moral dilemmas that characterized Kasztner's rescue operation. How, then, can you explain the fact that this initiative has never received the recognition it deserved?

Without a doubt, Krausz was intentionally erased from the collective memory. I think this brutal expunging started after the Kasztner trial. [In Israel, before then people did not discuss the Holocaust, and afterwards Krausz's testimony was too negative.]

Krausz, who testified at the trial, recounted in detail the story of his rescue operation. Thus it turned out that, in fact, there was an alternative way to Kasztner's. It turned out that Krausz's

rescue route saved a huge number of Jews, without even receiving a penny of help from Jewish people living outside of Hungary — while Kasztner had access to funds. Much of these funds fell into German hands, and at the end Kasztner's rescue plan, which was fraught with moral dilemmas concerning his relationship with the Germans, saved only a far smaller number of Jews.

Krausz's testimony, therefore, raised awareness of the possibility that if this money had gone to those espousing an alternative method of rescue, many more Jews could have been saved. This complicated picture was completed by additional documents that I used for my research; the protocols of the Eichmann trial and the Nuremberg trials, Krausz's correspondence and the ninety pages, his "memories," that he

wrote in German, already presented at Kasztner's trial. They included valuable information that explains many of the gaps appearing in the research until then.

Krausz had been "erased" because he and the alternative rescue route that he formulated was proof that it was possible to save many Jews. Without a doubt, Kasztner wanted to save many Jews. He was certain that the Germans would save the Jews for a high ransom, but he was wrong.

Krausz testified that at the end of April and throughout the month of May, he realized that the Germans' method of operation was mainly to distract the Jewish leadership from the deportation of the Jews in the provinces. But the more Kasztner realized that the Germans were fooling him, the more he fooled and lied to the members of the *Judenrat* and the people who collaborated with him in his rescue operations. They were completely deluded about the power wielded by the charismatic Kasztner.

The Kasztner trial was, therefore, the last time that Krausz's views and actions were presented, and ever since they have been deliberately erased, first by the Israeli state's leadership,

which was previously the Palestine *yishuv*'s leadership, and then afterwards by members of Israel's academia and media.

To the credit of Carl Lutz, the 22nd Zionist Congress held in Basel in November 1946 granted him an award in an impressive ceremony. Lutz said: "I want to make it clear that without the help of Mr. Krausz, my efforts would have been only of little benefit."

And so, while Kasztner was recognized and rewarded by the institutions of the Zionists, and afterwards by the State of Israel, Krausz fought the establishment to be recognized for his rescue activities. Evidence of that exists in the extensive correspondence he had with various parties in the Israeli Establishment.

Their non-recognition of him and his achievements caused him great anguish, but he did not attempt to bring it to the attention of the public. He realized that the creators of the collective memory wanted him to be forgotten because he was a "nuisance," but he had no one with whom to share his frustration. He suffered in silence and on September 1, 1986, he died in Jerusalem all alone (he and his wife, Gusta, whom he married in 1944, had no children).



Budapest, 1944:
A crowd of Jews
waits outside the
"Glass House"
hoping for
protective papers.

Photo credit: Yad Vashem



Glass House sign: *Schweizerische Gesandtschaft* (Swiss company).

Photo credit: Hidden Treasure Tours



Photo credit: Hidden Treasure Tours

The cellar of the Glass House today.

Have you, as one who seeks to raise awareness of Krausz's life and work, come across the academic establishment's drive to hush up things?

Yes. We know that the Israeli government leadership supports the academic world, the media and the arts, and as a result, members of these groups spout the official way of thinking. Israel's leading historians consider Kasztner a positive albeit a tragic figure, who acted to the best of his ability to save Hungary's Jews. This view has been maintained by a handful of researchers, and they are the ones who control the journals and the academic forums.

For many years, my articles that were written in the wake of my Ph.D. thesis were repeatedly rejected by academic journals.

My position receives its notice only in more narrow circles, as none of the academic centers in Israel — excluding Michlala Yerushalayim — has so far given me a stage for presenting my viewpoint. The will to silence my position is so strong that the opposition to my views occurs only behind the scenes: literally,

no one from the recognized academic establishment in Israel has come out in public to prove that my viewpoint is wrong, not on the recognized academic stage such as in periodicals or at conferences.

The height of absurdity can be seen in the central display at Yad Vashem. A picture of Kasztner is juxtaposed with two huge pictures showing crowds huddled in front of the Glass House. The innocent viewer immediately puts two and two together: Who was the man who saved these people? — Kasztner! [But] Kasztner had absolutely nothing to do with the rescue sponsored by Krausz.

Dr. Nedivi concludes:

"I hope that my book will bring to the wider public the description of Krausz's tremendous achievements and will help in completing their knowledge of rescue work in Hungary and the impact of the *yishuv* leadership's involvement in it. In particular, I hope that this book will get readers to think critically about history." ■