

Transcript of the Shoah Interview with Hansi Brand

German Translation by Uta Allers - Volunteer – Visitor Services – Fall 2010

Bob. 244 (HANSI BRAND 1) in Hebrew

C.L.: Hansi Brand, it is my impression that you were never willing to talk about the past. And as a matter of fact, I think that during many years you refused to talk. The first time we met you told me even that you didn't agree to give me this interview. I would like to ask you why today, why did you accept.

H.B. (via interpreter): The memories still oppress me and I know that I can never find relief, so if I begin once again to discuss this I will have to relive the tragedies of our people and of my life. Anyone who hasn't lived through the tension and the type of life that I have had will fully understand.

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H.B.: For many years we didn't discuss the past because we realized that people would not believe us because they would be simply unable to understand what we lived through.

C.L.: I would like to ask Mrs. Brand, does she think it is possible to tell this story, which is not simple at all, today in a rather objective, unpassionate way?

H.B.: The way I tell it, I feel that I am speaking objectively, but my listener will be convinced that somehow I am not being objective.

C.L.: What I would like, as a matter of fact, because Hansi Brand was the wife of Joel Brand and the collaborator of Rudolf Kasztner (?), the two men who were the most important in the negotiations about the fate of the Hungarian Jews, what I wish is that she tells me her own point of view – how she saw the things at the time and how she sees the things today; if she has changed her mind, or if she didn't change it.

H.B.: Certain facts... I can tell about the facts, I can tell how the committee was established and how certain conclusions were reached, and about what was done. If you like I can tell about these facts.

C.L.: First of all, I would like it if she could tell me what kind of personalities were... first Joel Brand, her husband, and Kasztner, if she can define them. But she can talk as long as she wishes.

H.B.: Please permit me to begin at the beginning.

C.L.: OK.

H.B.: None of us, of course, was an expert in rescuing people. Each of us on the rescue committee had had his own private occupation. Otto Arnon (?) had been an engineer, Kasztner had been a journalist, Hoffenbach a salesman, Springmann a diamond dealer, and we ourselves had a knitting factory.

If we ask ourselves how we came to be involved in rescuing people, I can say that for myself I had somehow inherited it from my parents, because our home in Hungary had been open after the First World War to take in the many, many Polish refugees who arrived at that point.

C.L.: Jewish refugees?

H.B.: Jewish refugees. Memories of that period were with me at all times, and I must say that I remember my parents with great pride and am grateful to them for this particular legacy.

I can add that about the same situation had existed in Joel's home as well.

As long as I am talking about our homes I feel it incumbent on me to say something about Kumoy's home as well; his was a center for Jewish students who were hoping to come to Israel.

Springmann's home was a meeting place of Jewish Zionists as well; he was among the founders of Ponlezion(?), workers of Zion, which later became Mapai, and he also helped them with financial support.

Offenbach was also well known in Hungary because of his generosity towards \_\_\_\_\_.

I must also add that the wives of Springmann, Kumoy, and Schweitzer also did a great deal to help the refugees.

C.L.: This rescue committee, this \_\_\_\_\_, was basically a Zionist committee?

H.B.: All these people got together and organized the committee because they came to the conclusion that it was not only the Zionist task, but the Jewish task as well, to help the refugees.

C.L.: Where did these refugees come from?

H.B.: You can imagine how overjoyed we were at first when my sister and brother-in-law had been found after we thought they were dead, but of course our joy was very short-lived,

H.B.: because they brought us the first eye-witness reports of what had been happening in Kamenets Podolskiy, and they told us about Jews who had had to dig their own graves and about people who had been buried alive.

Needless to say, this had a tremendous influence on us, and when I say that we were horrified this would be a mere understatement. We decided that we must begin to act, and therefore when the Zionists began organizing the rescue operations we decided to join them.

C.L.: Was Hansi Brand personally a Zionist?

H.B.: (Yes?)

C.L.: And Joel too?

H.B.: Yes, we had been Zionists, we were awaiting our certificates at that point. Joel had been waiting for his, and we were going to emigrate to Israel.

C.L.: To come to Palestine?

H.B.: Yes.

The first to come were people from Germany who had known Joel, and people gave one another the address of our home, so our home soon became a center for Jewish refugees... Jewish refugees from Germany.

At this time Hungarian Jewry was still living in peace and quiet, and was not fully aware of what was happening in Poland. True, they followed the news of what was going on in Warsaw, but this was all so far away and people in Hungary didn't believe that it would

H.B: ever reach them. They didn't know of the crematoriums, but they had heard about some systematic killings and they heard about the decision to kill off the Jews in Germany and Poland, and they gradually realized that wherever the Germans invaded, they were following the same course and that this would be a decision to annihilate Jewry; but Hungarian Jews just could not believe that this would eventually reach them too.

I must add that at this point in Hungary they began enacting laws against the Jews, but the laws were not so severe as to make the Jews feel a threat of real danger. The threat first began to be felt when forced labor was imposed and then people who returned for a vacation or medical treatment began to tell what was happening.

Those who heard what was happening in the forced labor camps decided to try and organize relief, so a handful, including Kumoy and Kasztner and my husband and others, organized so that when the refugees did come they would have help. Kumoy, who had been a petit bourgeois, was one who agreed to join the committee because he felt that a better-known person should be on the committee, and he actually became Chairman of this committee.

Bob. 246 (HANSI BRAND 3)

H.B.: On March 19<sup>th</sup> 1944 the Germans entered Hungary, and this changed our lives utterly and

H.B.: completely. Our prime purpose became to find ways of communicating with the various towns and to help the refugees; we tried to establish contact with Germans through whom we could help rescue some of these refugees. As had been done in the negotiations by Fleischmann and Weissmandel in Slovakia, we wanted also to negotiate and, perhaps with the use of large sums of money, to try and rescue people there. We knew that the Germans were losing the war and it was only a matter of time before they would lose completely.

#### HANSI BRAND 4

H.B.: One day Joel received an invitation to come the Gestapo to see Eichmann. Joel had already met Krummer and Hunscher but he had not met Eichmann. Eichmann was not ashamed, he outspokenly said “I am the person who was responsible for what happened in Poland and in Czechoslovakia, and now I will also see to it in Hungary. But I have an idea; we can make a deal, (and I must say this in German) – ‘Blut für Waren und Waren für Blut’ ...”

Joel was at first so shocked by the words that he couldn't find the answer and asked for time to think. He told Eichmann that he was not the sole person who made decisions on the committee, and that he must consult the others.

The offer that Eichmann made was that for every truck we gave him, he would set 10,000 Jews free. In our circumstances we had no idea of what tomorrow and the next day held in

H.B.: store, and this proposition seemed extremely macabre to us, but since there was no choice we began to discuss the prospects.

## Face A

Suite Bob. 246 (HB 5) in German

La: Yes, it's hard to imagine that, because it was a fantastical suggestion, and I'd like to know what impression Joel got about Eichmann. What did he say?

HB: Joel was very, very surprised when he heard of the details of the whole scheme. All were surprised, for it was an implausible proposition. But since the Gestapo came up with such an offer, something had to be behind it. So, they (*talked about*) it the whole night through...

La: ...talked about it.

HB: ...talked about what and how this could be managed. It was no easy matter to ask for 10,000 trucks. But this is how we looked at it at the time: this is about the remaining Jews, that the free world would do something by whatever offer to save this remaining... That was already after 5 million Jews had been killed. So, since we no longer had an alternative, we had to have faith that something could be done with this. And we had to do something. In addition to that, there was another offer,

which .... was ready to send Joel ....abroad. Then we really had faith in this. It was clear to us that the Germans themselves knew that they'd already lost the war. And yet they wanted – some of the Germans – let's say, like Eichmann, wanted to profit from that for Germany itself. But there were many who wanted to save their own lives through this offer. For they knew, that after the war, there would come a day of reckoning and they would be held accountable for what they did. So when they... when we got the offer, at that very moment, we weren't so clued in. But at least it was an anchor. Now is the time. Maybe in this way we can do something after all. And so it was decided that Joel would travel to Istanbul.

La: Joel wanted to go to Istanbul.

HB: It wasn't as simple as that – wanting to. I have to add something to that, which... For years, people here lived with the illusion, of which I could not relieve them, that Bandi Grosz was Joel's protector; that Joel was not to do (*should not risk doing*) anything wrong there. But he... had a special assignment, a grand strategy, that is, he should negotiate with Steinhart in Ankara.

La: And ?? he was the American...

HB: The Ambassador. And the assignment, the reason I believed in this business is that I knew that this was the work

HB: and the assignment of the Germans.

La: Yes.

HB: And it wasn't an issue of self-determination in that Joel himself decided that he would go, for there were various offers. But the Germans, like Bandi Grosz, they saw to it that Joel was considered. So it happened that Joel traveled with Grosz. But that isn't really important, whether Grosz went or ...

Bob. 247 (HB 6)

La: You know that many people are saying, it was said, that Joel Brand was not the right man to be in charge of such negotiations in Istanbul. And Kasztner himself writes in his report, that the question, whether another man would have been better being in charge – this question will never be resolved. I want your personal, I want your personal opinion. Was there rivalry between Kasztner and ...?

HB: Later, when the negotiations with Eichmann about the trip began in earnest; in the beginning it wasn't taken seriously, we simply didn't believe it, didn't believe it at all. That Joel actually went (*on the trip*) that's because he kept his faith in this matter. Joel was one of the few people, who really got involved without any political considerations or had any other (*motives?*). No, it was just a human impulse to help. And because of that, people trusted him. He was one of the few,

HB: who had the trust of the Hungarian side, who .... Jewish business property...and and. That is, none of us talked about wanting to save our possessions. We just didn't think about our personal property. And people knew that. Joel didn't start this work (*of building trust*) back then.... Joel had already proven himself to be a trustworthy, a trustworthy...

La: Yes, who ...

HB: So, the minute things began in earnest, the trip to Istanbul, everyone realized that this is a historic moment. That hadn't happened in history. To that I have to add, that everyone (*several people*) wanted to fulfill this mission. But...

La: Yes. Meaning, who is he?

HB: Let's say Kasztner or the father-in-law of Kasztner and...

La: Kasztner wanted to go?

HB: Kasztner wanted to go.

La: Dr. Fischer too?

HB: Interestingly enough, Dr. Fischer writes in his book: "Personally, I wanted Kasztner to go, for I didn't want my two children to be kept here as hostages." That's no...

La: But what is your personal opinion now? And do you think that...

HB: My personal opinion is that no one would have succeeded

HB: for this was no regular negotiation as if you're dealing with... textiles or leather. It was a matter of the outsiders having to take a neutral position without benefit of negotiations.

That's how you have to see it. That's how I personally saw it too, that the remainder of the Jews will be taken, no matter what we do.

La: Indeed.

HB: They (*were willing*) to try anything, try something, to get some benefit out of this business. So, as far as I could see, even back then, it wasn't an issue of who goes. What was important, in and of itself, was the offer.

La: Yes, well yes, I think you're completely right.

HB: And I still stand by that today.

La: Okay, so Joel is in Istanbul. It was May 17<sup>th</sup>...

HB: It was in May.

La: And you stay in Budapest and you're working with Kasztner in the...

HB: So, I stayed in Budapest, and then I was the representative, who had to stay in contact with the Germans. To that I want to add, that some people on our committee protested against that, saying that a woman can't represent Jewish concerns by herself. And one time, I won't mention the name, because that's unpleasant for me, I took two of these committee members with me to Schwarmberg and introduced them. Actually, our...

La: What was Schwarmberg?

HB: Schwarmberg was Eichmann's headquarters.

La: Of the...Jewish commando?

HB: Of the Jewish commando.

La: Yes.

HB: And I have to add here, what people don't know, nor can understand, that apart from our courage and pride, we had nothing.

La: Yes, that's right.

HB: What that meant is that we went to the Germans to bargain, and we had to be careful to act in a normal, sociable, let's say ordinary manner, so that no one would know that we were afraid of them (*the Germans*).

La: You were afraid?

HB: No. No. For if I had been afraid, I would have already proven that I wasn't afraid when I was arrested (?). Had I trembled with fear there, then I would have already been (*denigrated as*) a "Mist-Jüdin", a dirty Jew.

La: What is a "Mist-Jüdin"?

HB: A "Mist-Jüdin"...well, that is, that is the way they humiliated the Jews, so that they (*the Jews*) wouldn't dare act in a human way. And...I said that (*the expression "Mist-Jüdin"*) too and it's deeply embarrassing for me, and I think they (*the two committee members?*) realized that, that they were in no better position in dealing with the Germans. And if it's obvious that a person is trembling and

HB: is afraid of the other, then they (*the opposition*) don't see you as a partner.

La: Yes, I understand.

HB: If they are at the point of inviting us, of hosting us, then I have to play their game. I have to behave in the role of a negotiating partner.

La: Yes, exactly, with a negotiating partner.

HB: With a negotiating partner. And so I... I won't say that I wasn't afraid, I was afraid, but I knew that whether I was afraid or not, in the end, it could all be the same. So we had to act like serious people, negotiating partners. They had invited us. They wanted to do business with us. So we had to behave like a business partner.

La: Yes, but could you please (*describe*) the situation, because that's so hard to imagine...

HB: Well, that's hard to recapitulate too. It wasn't the way we are now, sitting across from one another and having a nice conversation on a sofa, and you ask and I answer.

La: Yes, yes, yes.

HB: So first I went up to Eichmann with Joel, where Joel introduced me...

La: With Joel?

HB: With Joel I went to Eichmann. Before he went (*on his trip*). And Joel (*introduced me*) to Eichmann...

La: Kasztner doesn't say that in his report.

HB: ...that's because... We'll get back to that. So, I went up with Joel. I didn't know why I was actually...

La: After the suggestion (*of the trip*)?

HB: Before the suggestion. Before the trip.

La: Yes, yes.

HB: Before the trip. But I didn't know why, why me particularly, but later I (*realized*), when I had been introduced to Eichmann: (*in Joel's mind*) that's my wife and she will represent me in my absence. And then from Eichmann's talk, I understood that actually I and the children had to stay as hostages.

La: Hostages. Can you describe this first meeting with Eichmann precisely?

HB: Well, the encounter went like this: Joel went up with me. Someone showed us into Eichmann's room right away. Interestingly enough, it was the same apartment in which we had lived up to a few months before.

La: Oh yes, in Schwarmberg?

HB: In Schwarmberg, in the same apartment. That was the Hotel Majestic. And then he said to me: "So, Frau Brand, you know what this is about; someone is going to Istanbul..."

La: You were standing or he was sitting...

HB: At the beginning, we were standing. If I recall correctly, he got up, so we were all standing. And...did I know why my husband was going to Istanbul and if I know among other things, that I have to report every day and if something, a report or a telegram or a tele-

HB: phone call (*comes in*), then I have to...

La: Every day?

HB: Every day.

La: With whom? With Joel?

HB: No. With Eichmann, with Eichmann. And if something...

Bob. No. 248 (HB 7)

HB: So, I was to call him every day to say if there is something from Joel, then I was to report it to them.

La: The answer.

HB: Yes. It was agreed that Joel would telegraph or phone or write, whatever was available to him. After his departure, one could never know what could happen to a person in Budapest, if one...

La: ?? In Istanbul?

HB: No, in Budapest. I'm talking about Budapest. I wasn't in Istanbul.

La: Yes, yes, I understand.

HB: So, then I decided that I would take Kasztner to Eichmann too...

La: You decided that.

HB: Yes, I decided. And I asked Kasztner to go up to Eichmann with me, that I want to introduce him, for we just don't know how things will go and what will happen. I was pretty pessimistic at the time, being a hostage. That's why I introduced Reszo (*Kasztner*) right away, because Eichmann...for you just didn't know, how things would develop. And

HB: that's how it started, the bargaining about bringing up the group from the "Provinz" (*the countryside or outlying areas*), in case the deal went through.

La: From Cluj?

HB: Not only from Cluj, not only from Cluj, but from the whole country. That one should...from everywhere...because we already knew that the countryside will be emptied out, and we wanted, if Jews were brought from the countryside to Budapest, that they...

La: You, you, you yourself knew at this time, you knew that Auschwitz existed or not?

HB: Of course we knew.

La: You knew.

HB: Of course we knew.

La: Knew exactly that Auschwitz was an extermination camp.

HB: We knew that, we knew that long before. We even sent reports to Switzerland and Istanbul.

La: Yes.

HB: That was no longer a secret. People weren't just (*talking about*) death by shooting and being buried alive, rather they knew that...first they heard about gas mobiles and then later they heard about crematoria too.

La: Gas chambers.

HB: Gas chambers. And then... we sent more exact details via someone to Istanbul and Switzerland. And it can't be said, that...

La: Which ones exactly, which descriptions?

HB: The descriptions of death in Auschwitz. A very exact...

La: Yes, from Weissmandel...

HB: from, yes, yes, yes

La: Yes, from Rudolf Vrba...

HB: Schleichmann??...and then they spread the word. So, when I...

La: You...

HB: If I recall correctly, two boys escaped from Auschwitz.

La: Yes...Rudolf Vrba.

HB: ...I don't remember.

La: Two Slovaks.

HB: Two Slovaks escaped from Auschwitz. They presented an exact plan of Auschwitz. And this plan was sent around. And we got copies of that and we sent it on as well. So, it's not just from the Slovaks, we used every method to inform the "neutrals" abroad about what was happening. So that was no longer a secret.

La: That means that you knew that the Hungarian Jews from the countryside...

HB: Yes, of course, we, we, we, that was a big thing, I have to add here, since I'm already on the topic, that Eichmann told Joel he should hurry, "you should hurry because every day 12,000 Jews were being taken to Auschwitz." So, that was no secret any more.

La: Yes, yes. You are convinced, you are sure that Eichmann said as much to Brand, to Joel.

HB: Those are sentences that you can't forget. You can't forget things like that sentence.

La: One can't forget that.

HB: No.

La: But Kasztner...

HB: Well, he wasn't there.

La: Yes, yes.

HB: He wasn't present then. So then...I introduced Kasztner to Eichmann, and we were so sure that Joel would accomplish something, that we asked (*could also be "demanded of"*) Eichmann that Jewish people should now be protected and should be preparing for the emigration. So...

La: Who had, who had the idea, the idea of the Cluj Koloshvar transport being a privileged transport?

HB: Well, that wasn't anything special. People weren't brought to Budapest only from Koloshvar. There were a number of cities. What happened with Koloshovar, as we said, that was the beginning, for when it came to that, a half million Jews had already been deported; so we said amongst ourselves that if it continues like that – there had been no positive news from Joel, and he (*Eichmann*) was actually, he was actually glad the Joel wasn't reporting anything, so he had free rein, Eichmann. And we decided,

HB: that was not Kasztner, we would go for what we could get, that of the thousands, *(to bring)* these 500 or so people to Budapest...

La: 388.

HB: Oh, 388. Well, we heard that Koloshvar already was “Judenrein”; it had no more Jews. Then we decided that if they *(the Germans)* couldn’t give us confirmation of anything, then there’s no point in continuing to bargain with them. We would hide out *(with false papers and a new identity)*. If we don’t achieve anything, just pushing and pushing without success...it’s better...then it’s better that we quit. There was really a pretty contentious discussion with ...

La: Eichmann.

HB: Eichmann.

La: Could you *(describe)* this discussion. How many times did you *(meet)* Eichmann with Kasztner...

HB: Very often.

La: Very often.

HB: I don’t really know anymore. I don’t know anymore. But often. Well...

La: Could you *(describe)* these discussions...

HB: Well, it’s hard to recreate the spirit of the present *(as it was)*. In such a situation, I can’t vouch for the exact words. But one thing is for certain, that I... my hands were trembling, and Kasztner’s hands were trembling, and we talked about, decided we would say goodbye to Eichmann and go.

La: You said “adieu and we’re going”?

HB: No, we said that between ourselves with Reszo.

La: Oh yes.

HB: He was talking at the back with his secretary and then... I don’t know what he said to his secretary; at any rate, we talked among ourselves that we could just leave the room and go. And... then he said, “So, okay, give me a list and I will have these people brought (*here*), so they can be report to Istanbul, that...

La: Yes, because in the beginning he said, “Yes, you can do such a transport”, and later he said, “No, I don’t want any more” etc.?

HB: Well, there was always a lot of back and forth, depending on his mood. So, I have to say, maybe he was in a good mood if he was able to deport 10,000. And when he was prevented from doing that, then he was furious. Actually he was a loyal Nazi and SS, (*carrying out*) the orders that the Jews had to be destroyed and exterminated because they were socially dangerous elements... So, this had to be taken seriously. But still, it was...

La: That means it was a very hard discussion.

HB: It, it, it was always a hard discussion, for it was always hard to keep a credible demeanor, as he sometimes screamed.

La: Screamed?

HB: Screamed..., for example, “What are you thinking? That I should be concerned about the Jews?”

La: Yes, and?

HB: And such exclamation...

Bob. No. 249 (HB 8)

La: I have a question: Kasztner is accused, for example, of not having warned the Jews of Cluj of their terrible fate in Auschwitz, or what do you think of these, these ...

HB: That is the most heinous lie.

La: That's, that's a lie?

HB: The most heinous lie.

La: Yes.

HB: Back then, when the Germans came to Hungary, people already knew, even Klausenburg, for they (*the residents*) were also in the Labor Service, and they'd already seen and heard what was going on there.

La: Yes.

HB: Apart from that, that before that, the president of the Zionist organization of Klausenburg was in Budapest...

La: Dr. Fischer?

HB: Dr. Fischer. And he knew exactly what was going on. Besides that, money was being sent to Hiller Danzig.

La: Hiller Danzig was a member of the Jewish Council in Cluj?

HB: Cluj? I don't know whether he was a member of the Jewish Council. What I know is that he was also in the Labor Service, and I know that money was sent to him for, for fleeing; he was to distribute the money, and he didn't want to take the money.

HB: The girl who brought the money to Klausenburg is still alive.

La: But my question is as follows: Did Dr. Fischer, for example – Dr. Fischer was Kasztner's father-in-law...

HB: Yes.

La: And he was the president of the so-called Jewish Council in Cluj. Did Dr. Fischer tell the 15,000 Jews living in the Cluj-Ghetto ...

HB: Whether Fischer said that, I can't say, because I wasn't in Klausenburg. I can only say that Dr. Fischer was in Budapest and he was well informed about what was happening in Poland and in Slovakia.

La: Yes.

HB: And...it's unbelievable that they insist that they knew nothing at all.

La: But I mean the, the, the ordinary Jews, the ...

HB: Ordinary Jews ...

La: ... if they knew or ...

HB: What do you mean by ordinary Jews? Well, if there was such a secret, for example, that Mortun Erdu, the editor of Ukelet, he died. But his wife was also in this Klausenburg group. But he fled to Romania. He left his wife and child in Klausenburg. And they went into the ghetto and were saved through this ...

La: but ...

HB: So, that, that means that people knew ...

La: Yes, but you know.. why do I have such a question? There are some people from Cluj, who were sent to Auschwitz and they, they later came back. And these people say, they say, that they didn't know, that "we weren't warned."

HB: Well, I want to get to that in my Foreword, when I still spoke Hebrew (*on a previous tape in the interview*), how people wouldn't acknowledge this total Jewish extermination.

La: That's very important; go ahead.

HB: They don't want to acknowledge it. They just couldn't accept it, because as long as they kept it away, they could just keep on eating, drinking, smoking, living a normal life like everyone else in Hungary, and even when the men were taken to Russia with the Labor Service. So they wrote too, they sent Hungarian soldier letters and they asked for packages. And one that went on for two, three years. So, one can't say that in Hungary no one knew ...

La: Yes, but... it didn't last three years; it happened very quickly.

HB: Yes...but the Hungarians knew what it meant when the Germans arrived. It meant the end of the Jewish population.

La: Yes ... Hungarian Jews, yes.

HB: They knew that. They knew that. Besides that, there were refugees everywhere. All of Hungary was full of Polish and Slovakian

HB: refugees. So, for God's sake, how can anyone maintain that in 1944, that no one knew what was going on in the German areas? So, it's those who want to separate themselves morally from this matter. And I wanted to get to this too, actually, that these two famous witnesses of (*against*) Kasztner's, on whom Halevi based his verdict, that he didn't tell his two best friends, what was going on. He didn't need to say it. They knew.

La: Which two friends?

HB: Dr. Hermann and Hiller Danzig. They knew all that.

La: Yes. And they didn't ...

HB: And they were, and and and they weren't even invited. They volunteered themselves and wanted to be witnesses. And then they testified that Kasztner didn't tell them anything that day.

La: Yes, yes. I read that.

HB: So that means, that the judge, Halevi, who was in a free and neutral country where one could listen to the radio, to the BBC, read the newspapers, and there were reports about the Warsaw ghetto, and there were reports of the exterminations. There were always reports that the Jews were being exterminated in Europe. And the judge, that Halevi, who lived here (*in Israel*), took the two witnesses seriously, that in 1944, we didn't know what was going on.

La: Yes, yes, yes.

HB: Well, then I have to add, how sad that is. I said it back then, but now it's been confirmed, that he paved the way for his political career back then.

La: Who?

HB: That Dr. Halevi. Kasztner's judge... he (*Kasztner*) would have said that, that he (*Halevi*) sold his soul to Satan. So, there you can see that he's sitting in the Knesset, because ...

La: Well yes, I think you are quite right. No, but you know...

HB: But one can... I'm not a jurist...

La: Neither am I.

HB: I'm not a jurist, but one can't (*believe*) two people, who volunteer themselves. You can't prove something negative. I can prove to him what he didn't know if he's not ashamed to say what he didn't know. I can prove with something positive, and with the positive that in Hungary everyone knew that. People didn't know how far it would go and how it would happen, but they knew that Jews would be systematically exterminated.

La: Yes.

HB: And since, since, since they knew that... it was very hard, since everything in Hungary went by ration cards: food and clothing and shoes, and it was very hard to get clothing and such for the refugees; you couldn't risk that, for if someone were caught helping refugees, then he himself would be driven out. It was better not to know.

La: Yes, yes. You believe that?

HB: I believe... I mean, I believe. I'm convinced that they knew.

La: Yes.

HB: A few days before the German occupation, Fischer, Josef (*was*) in Budapest. And they talked about a contingency, for they already had information. Only, they didn't know on which day the Germans would occupy Hungary.

La: But what could have happened, for example? If Dr. Fischer, for example, this head of the Jewish Council in Cluj, had said to these people...

HB: That's a whole, a whole other question.

La: Yes, what would...

HB: And I'll tell you why. And I'll tell you why. We were already advising people in '43 and '42, they should get themselves an Aryan apartment and they should get themselves false papers, for you never know what will happen. And those who heard that, they said, that's not possible, that won't happen in Hungary. And you can't convince people that...

La: Yes, yes, I understand. But it was the head of the Jewish Federation...

HB: Yes, yes.

La: ... and if the head of it says, please don't go, for, if you go, that will be your death, don't you think that this this this matter would have taken a different turn?

HB: But I have to, have to respond to you on that, for when it was Hungary's turn, that is, Hungary was surrounded; there was nowhere to flee from Hungary.

Bob. No. 250 (HB 9)

La: Hansi, really now, you have to help me. I want to understand and to see (*the situation*) and not just for myself, but for the people who will see this film. What was your situation from a human point of view, and the situation for Kasztner? For there was this unbelievable urgency, every day 12,000 people, Jews, were being sent to Auschwitz, to the Auschwitz gas chambers. And, of course, you knew that and you were in these negotiations with Eichmann in order to save a number of them, a small number. And for you it was... How was it? It was a big emotional burden.

HB: A ...

La: Could you describe it? It's very important.

HB: Well, well, after thirty years, I can... I have to go back... literally, how it was. I'm just surprised at the question; I'll say why. It was become so well known, this whole tragedy, that I don't know if I can find the right words even to express my emotional state. So, it wasn't a setting, it wasn't a setting where anyone was taking down minutes. There was always a constant fear of death, although we hoped and believed that these negotiations would result in something, would lead to something. And this fear of death hovered over us, and when you ask now about the emotional state... well, we

HB: always (*lived*) between fear and despair and hope. And that formed itself into such a heap of stuff, that I can't really describe it – how it was and what it was. Every evening, we went to pieces and during the night, we tried to build ourselves up again, so we could go into the street (*among the public*) again and look like human beings again and continue to live as ... of course, we lived, but then that was not a matter of course at all. And that was like being in a windmill; it turned and moved ...

La: Every evening you went to pieces?

HB: Exactly, exactly. So, when Joel was abroad, that gave us a bit of hope, that maybe we could (*get?*) something in spite of ...

La: ... get...

HB: ... would happen, that would help us. So, with ... we couldn't imagine, not doing anything. In such a situation, there is only one chance. That is, maybe we didn't believe that the neutral powers would contribute trucks, but we hoped that if they offered something else, given that the Germans were in such bad shape, that they would accept other things. It didn't have to be trucks.

La: But, but were you aware of a sense of urgency?

HB: Of course, we were aware of it. We were always getting the reports from the countryside, that

HB: Jews were already deported, and that there were, that is, within three months, about a half a million Hungarian Jews had been deported.

La: And how was it possible to talk with Eichmann, as you said, not coming from a position of a business negotiation. How was that, please, knowing that?

HB: Well, that was... we had no other alternative. And we (*presented ourselves*) as serious people and then we had to get out of there. There was no third alternative. So, there ... what can I say, in the meantime, something had happened. We were arrested.

La: Yes, you were arrested.

HB: Yes.

La: Twice, I believe.

HB: Twice.

La: But who arrested you?

HB: Well, the Hungarian ...

La: Defense?

HB: The Defense arrested me. They used the pretext that we had false papers. That (*man*) Buchtager gave them my name, that much I got. But they were more interested because of Joel's mission. So, really I got the beatings ....

La: What was the mission called; was it a secret?

HB: Joel's mission wasn't just a secret, but a secret of the "Reich", the German empire.

La: A secret of the "Reich", yes.

HB: So, that is still ringing in my ears, that we were a secret of the “Reich”, so, of course, I was scared to tell anything and that’s why I remained silent, since I didn’t want to be responsible if the whole thing went awry.

La: Yes, and you were beaten?

HB: I was beaten on the head and the soles of the feet and in such a way, that I...

La: And you didn’t talk?

HB: And I didn’t talk. And it was pretty awkward for the Germans, our arrest, for they were afraid that the Hungarians would find out that the Germans were .... to put it more clearly, that Hungarian Jews were being sold. So, they (*the Hungarian authorities*) were no less interested in Hungarian property and Hungarian money, and they thought that the Germans had come to exterminate the Jews, but not to sell them as German goods. And they weren’t interested at all that the Germans were exploiting (*could also be “ransacking”*) the Hungarian Jews as they did. So, they wanted to know what was behind this mission, for it was strange to them that the Germans had sent two Hungarian Jews to a neutral country.

La: Yes.

HB: So, the Germans were at risk, and they pulled strings to get us out of there. As I learned later,

HB: I was freed on a direct order from Himmler. So, after I had been beaten up so badly, then I ...

La: In your opinion, was it all the same to the Germans whether they exterminated the Jews or sold the Jews?

HB: Well, Eichmann was skeptical about the business of selling. But there, where I was taken, when I was brought by the Hungarian police, then I was given to the German security service, and there I got to meet Lieutenant Colonel Klages.

La: Klages, yes.

HB: So, he presented himself as being outraged, well, that was something new for him, that a woman could be beaten up so badly.

La: That a woman...

HB: ... to be beaten up so. And he expressed that in full force. And it was just lunchtime, and lunch was brought to him, and he asked me to share his lunch, for surely I hadn't eaten in a long time from what he'd heard... and...

La: And you ate with Klages?

HB: And then I had lunch with Klages. For a few days, I couldn't stand on my feet.

La: Because your feet had been beaten.

HB: Even today, you can see the ... It's all from that time.

La: With what?

HB: With a rubber club.

La: A rubber club.

HB: So, after a few days, I went to Eichmann again. In the meantime, a telegram had come from Istanbul. And then we were very happy and relieved, and we went to Eichmann with the telegram. Eichmann said, "Frau Brand, you have saved your own life". I was amazed, quite surprised that the big Nazi said that so readily: "You've saved your own life."

Bob. 251 (HB 10)

La: Yes, but I want to come back to the emotional burden. All these dealings with Eichmann were for you and Kasztner, I think, very difficult, very dangerous, also very unpleasant. And in the so-called Kasztner report, I chose two pieces; and I'd like to read them and get your opinion. I'll read: "It was ... these negotiations..."

HB: I, I...

La: One moment... these negotiations about the Jews of Cluj and Eichmann had said "yes" and then he said "no", and "yes and no", and in the end, it was "no". And Kasztner wrote two pieces: "And then Eichmann simply said that he didn't want to keep his word. Not even the little he had promised; if taken that way, we have become accomplices in the destruction of people, who after so much suffering were chosen for rescue. With that, we reached the lowest point."

La: We can't continue that way." That's the first piece. And the second: "It's completely clear to me, what's at stake. It's not only about saving a few hundred Jews from the countryside. If Eichmann can't be brought to his senses now, then the Vaada Rescue Committee, which went along with the game of roulette and put their money on the German side, was as naive as many others of us in occupied Europe. Then the millions that were paid out, pure insanity, for the losers in this game are also called 'traitors'". Those are the two pieces of Kasztner's. And you were in the negotiations with him, did you have the same thoughts?

HB: He wrote that already after the war in Switzerland.

La: Yes.

HB: To that, I have to say...

(HB 11)

HB: So, what he wrote back then, what he wrote two years later already in Switzerland. The fact is that we weren't just betting on the Germans, for back then we had already built bunkers. We sent people to \_\_\_\_\_. We made (*falsified*) Aryan papers, even made German papers. So, you can't just say it like that, that we put all our eggs into the German basket. And our committee had other members as well, not only him and me. Otto Komoly negotiated

HB: with various Hungarian...

La: ....? He doesn't say, that you (*put all your eggs into*) the German basket...

HB: No, no, he writes only that he's afraid that we were counting on the German side (*to deliver*). And then one is...

La: But didn't you have the same experience?

HB: I can't say it just in that way, that I had the same feeling. But we... at any rate, we were afraid too, that this strategy wouldn't succeed. That is clear. We had no guarantee at all; that it would happen and that there was anything solid behind it – it was a hope, a thread that we tied ourselves to, for we had nothing better.

La: Yes, yes, yes. Okay. And do you think that this strategy was a success or not?

HB: Well, as for my take on it, the strategy would only have been successful if we had had the necessary help from the neutral countries. But we were completely alone there. And then you have to understand that in '44, that is, Kasztner is accused of not informing people and that they knew nothing, and that's why they were deported. And there were a lot of people who knew. We knew too and we didn't flee. There was nowhere to flee to.

La: Yes.

HB: And at that time, it wasn't possible to put an announcement in the paper or to give a talk on the radio that Jews should flee

HB: because danger is imminent. Well, it went like this. We put out the news and one person told another. So, that's how it went. So, it wasn't our job, especially not Kasztner's job, to tell everyone: "Pack your bags and get out of here." There was nowhere to go.

La: Yes, yes. It wasn't Kasztner's job?

HB: It wasn't Kasztner's job.

La: What was Kasztner's job?

HB: You see, Kasztner's job was to help everyone who could be helped. Looking out for the refugees and taking care of the refugees, but not to inform the Klausenburg Jews that danger is lurking, since we were convinced that they all knew.

La: Yes. But surely you know, that it is also said, that Kasztner saved his own people in Klausenburg, for example, Dr. Fischer, his father-in-law, and Zionists from Klausenburg and ... what do you think about that?

HB: I ask you, if you were in the same situation, wouldn't you be thinking about your own family?

La: That's a very good answer.

HB: He wouldn't have been a "Mensch" (*decent human being*).

La: Yes. And how did you...the people of the transport to Bergen-Belsen...

HB: I have to say something about that too. We also heard back then that many groups

HB: were organized by the Germans – people took their possessions with them and they were taken to a particular place, and then everything was taken from them and they were killed. So there were those scenarios.

La: Yes.

HB: ...the, the... possibility was here too. And it was a big responsibility in and of itself for us that we took on this whole transport issue to Bergen-Belsen. If that hadn't succeeded, we all would have committed suicide. For we couldn't live with that. Also, it was hard to go on with a normal life, we weren't (*functioning at*) a hundred percent, but somehow we managed. So, after this misfortune, had that happened, not one of us would have stayed alive.

La: Yes, that's true.

HB: It was a very heavy burden. How... how... I imagine that this mission followed Joel too always and everywhere, that he took it upon himself to save the Hungarian Jewry, and he couldn't do it – nothing.

La: Yes. Can you explain to me how the people were chosen for, for ... chosen for the transports?

HB: Well, the...

La: What were the criteria?

HB: The criteria were, were, that is, you have to know ahead of time, those were Hungarian Budapest Jews, rural Jews, there were refugees, there were orphans from Poland, so there

HB: was a big range of people, who were to be on these.

La: Kasztner writes it was a Noah's Ark.

HB: ...??? Well, it was very hard work. How we put the transport together. First came the refugees, who were in the greatest danger. And then (*came*) the Zionists, who had contributed a whole lot. Then Jewish intellectuals were also chosen, then there were the children of the Polish orphanage. Then there was a group that had to pay because we (*the Jews*) had to pay for the transports...

La: Yes.

HB: to pay

La: ... meaning wealthy people.

HB: Wealthy people who paid. And that's how it was put together.

La: That means, the rich people paid for the others.

HB: The wealthy... yes, precisely.

La: Yes.

HB: Precisely.

La: Were there a lot?

HB: There were a few hundred. It was an expensive matter. The Germans (*got*) 1,000 dollars for every trip. Later it became more expensive. Then they saw that it worked. Then they wanted 2,000 dollars for it.

La: There were old people on these transports, weren't there?

HB: Well, we couldn't just ...

Bob. No. 252 (HB 12)

La: Yes, you chose old people for this transport, didn't you? There were old people?

HB: Of course, there were old people. You couldn't take the parents from the children. Just sending the children and leaving the parents there? The whole family had to go.

La: Yes.

HB: And... there... were those who had escaped from the Labor Service.

La: Yes. I want to ask you, of course you've read these Kasztner reports. And you've told me that not everything is... exact, isn't correct. I have a hard question: Was Kasztner a vain man?

HB: Well, I can't tell you who was vain there, but everyone of us has a certain degree of vanity. So, that's a completely human quality.

La: Yes.

(HB 13)

La: Yes. My question is: Wasn't Kasztner a vain man?

HB: He was vain just like anyone else. That's a totally human quality. That is, everyone of us has a certain vanity. Well, if I were to tell you that he was very vain, then he was vain like all the others.

La: Like all the others. Do you mean that all Jews are vain?

HB: Well, I can't say that all Jews are vain. But I can say with assurance that almost all Jewish intellectuals are vain.

La: Yes, I think you, you are quite right. That's a fact. But why... I saw this in Germany; I read his book. Why does he have such hatred toward Joel Brand? That's, that's inconceivable.

HB: That, that... in my estimation, that's just a practical matter. We were against Becher, and Biss was for Becher. Because...

La: But Kasztner was for Becher too.

HB: Okay, but that was a completely different relationship; apart from having met him in Nuremberg, he had no connection (*with him*). Joel met Becher, met him and had a conversation with him and asked him some uncomfortable questions, and then he (*Becher*) didn't want to meet Joel anymore. And then this Biss came along and he was the one, I think, that Biss who wrote this book because he was being instructed by Becher.

La: Yes.

HB: So, back then when the book was published, there was a major review in the Frankfurter Allgemeine or the other big Frankfurt newspaper – a major review of this book. Only the last sentence was interesting, where he writes: "Strange about the whole thing is that Biss wrote all that when the

HB: main players, Brand and Kasztner, were no longer around.”

La: Yes. Yes. I think you’re quite right. But I come back to Kasztner. Don’t you think that maybe he, not during the negotiations, but later during the negotiations with Becher, Solly Meyer and so on, that he went a bit too far? That maybe he overstepped the, the, the boundaries?

HB: Well, I am totally convinced that Kasztner wanted only to do right by the Jews. He had no intentions of doing anything for the Germans without gaining something for the Jews.

La: Yes, yes.

HB: For he was, he was a good Jew, a good Zionist. And he had no other thoughts.

La: But he had, for example, and it’s human, he had a lust for strength (*could be “dominance”*), for power.

HB: No.

La: No?

HB: No. For he was in mortal danger with this strength and power. Maybe he was in bigger mortal danger than all the other Jews.

La: Yes. Okay. Now a different question about Joel Brand. In your opinion, why did his rescue mission fail?

HB: Joel’s rescue mission failed because the Jews weren’t able to do anything without the Allies, and the British

HB: weren't interested in the Jews. The British waited for the Germans to do a thorough job, and no single Jew was to be left in Europe, so that they wouldn't have a problem with Palestine.

La: Do you think that Ehud Avriel knew that the British arrested Joel?

HB: I don't want to hypothesize. That's something only Ehud Avriel knows and maybe Joel didn't know. One thing is certain, they weren't interested in saving the Jews. That's very clear today. Very clear!

La: Yes. But do you think that the Jews of Palestine also weren't very interested in this rescue...

HB: The Jews of Palestine, what I can say today, after I've had more life experiences with Eretz Israel, they didn't know either.

La: Yes.

HB: It's happened to me... I don't want to say the name because I don't want harm to come to anyone. They aren't so young anymore either. I was asked by one of the members of the Istanbul Committee in Zurich in 1946: "Tell me, Hansi, is it true that the Germans made soap out of the Jews?"

La: Unbelievable.

HB: It was unbelievable to me too.

La: A man from this, this Rescue Committee?

HB: From this Rescue Committee... in Istanbul. Yes. Yes.

La: Unbelievable!

HB: And then I have to tell you something else, that it is said that Joel didn't want to come back. That happens in such cases, that Joel out of fear, out of personal fear, wouldn't come back. Actually, as a matter of fact, he didn't want to come back, for if he were to come back empty-handed, then not only is he lost, he is one person, but then the whole rescue mission would have failed. And if I add to that, that I don't know if there are a lot of people living in Israel who, let's say, saved 1,600 Jews. For the Germans were capable of destroying all of the Hungarian Jews. They didn't need our help. They had already exterminated five million before they came to Hungary. And they had a lot of experience. They liquidated half a million in three months, so they didn't need the help of the rescue mission at all, nor the help of Brand, nor the help of Kasztner, nor of us.

La: Yes.

HB: So, any Jews surviving at all, that's due to the war slowly, slowly coming to an end. If the war had lasted a bit longer, then not a single Jew would have survived there. And that surely wouldn't have bothered the British; there wouldn't have been a Palestine problem. Then living here would be these nice, cultured 500,000 Jews with their small rural properties, with the

HB: nice little kibbutzes. There would no longer be a problem there.

La: Yes.

HB: But the, the, the Germans didn't fulfill this dream. There were some who remained.

La: You are quite right in what you say about the people. There are people, yes, who say that Joel didn't come back out of personal fear. These farmers, for instance. It's a little crazy.

HB: Well, okay, everyone has to find a reason for his view of things . And that couldn't... that's why I really didn't want to do this interview. For with every interview, you... Then one takes a certain roof tile to the building, whatever the intention to convey may be, and then various historical distortions come about. And unfortunately, ... it's always like that. And that's why I didn't want to do that.

La: Yes, that's true. You're quite right, not to do that.