

**Perdition, a new play which accuses Zionist Jews in Hungary of collaborating with the Nazi extermination machine, opens at the Royal Court, London, later this month. David Rose examines the background to a work which will arouse a storm of controversy**

A NEW play about the Jewish Holocaust which opens in London later this month claims that Jews, and specifically Zionist Jews, collaborated with the Nazis. They did so, the play argues, because they regarded the massacre of their co-religionists as a political necessity, which would strengthen their hand at negotiations after the war to achieve the realisation of the state of Israel.

Perdition, which is being put on at the Royal Court, is the first stage play by Jim Allen, a former miner whose previous television work—Days of Hope, The Lump—has made him no stranger to controversy. It argues that the Jewish Zionist leaders in Hungary "allowed themselves to become Eichmann's Trojan horse, the Zionist knife in the Nazi fist." According to one of the play's leading characters, the Jews of Hungary—of whom more than half a million died in Auschwitz—"were murdered not just by the force of German arms, but by calculated treachery of their own Jewish leaders."

The play, directed by Ken Loach, was first presented to the Royal Court two years ago, and its production has been delayed several times. Max Stafford-Clark, the theatre's artistic director, said yesterday that he realised that many people might find it offensive, and some of the Royal Court's governing council have expressed strong reservations—the present opening date of January 27 is almost a year later than originally planned.

Since the Court first mooted the production, Perdition's text has been read critically by at least three historians of the period. They include Martin Gilbert, Churchill's biographer and the author of Holocaust, which was published last month: "When I read it, it bore no relation to historical fact whatsoever," Gilbert says, "and I left the Royal Court in no doubt of my view that it was a vicious travesty of the facts."

According to Max Stafford-Clark, both playwright and theatre have been determined to correct inaccuracies in the light of the various critiques, and remaining areas of controversy now concern interpretation, not fact, while in any case the play "is a work of fiction."

But it now seems certain that the Royal Court is about to be engulfed in the deepest and most bitter controversy in its history. The Institute of Jewish Affairs, an international academic organisation based in London, is demanding that a statement criticising the play be included with the programme—a demand which has so far been resisted.

The Institute's director, Dr Stephen Roth, was present at the events in Budapest described in the play, was tortured by the Gestapo and sent to Auschwitz as a member of the underground Zionist resistance—an organisation whose very existence Jim Allen, in an interview with the Guardian, denied.

Roth says: "In suggesting that the Zionist movement had to cooperate with the Nazis and in other statements about Jewish religious law [in an earlier draft, Allen compared aspects of biblical Judaism to the 1933 Nuremberg laws], the play is clearly anti-semitic. Perdition is a libel against all those who lived through, fought and mostly perished in the Holocaust."

It is understood that other Jewish organisations are considering mounting a picket of the theatre for the duration of its five week run.

Perdition takes the form of a libel trial, set in England in 1967 in the immediate aftermath of the Six-Day War.



Jews on their way to the concentration camps. Did the Zionists really believe that scenes like this would lead them to their homeland?

## Rewriting the Holocaust

Roth, an academic, is being sued by Yaron, a survivor of the Hungarian Holocaust, after publishing a pamphlet alleging that he collaborated with the Nazis in order to save a Zionist few.

Perdition's fictional trial is loosely derived from a real libel case in Israel in 1955. Malkiel Grunwald, an extreme right-wing supporter of the Irgun terrorist group,



**Martin Gilbert: 'It was a vicious travesty of the facts.'**

had published a statement alleging that Rudolf Kasztner, a leading Hungarian Zionist who had become a close associate of the Israeli Labour government—then in power—and one of its parliamentary candidates, collaborated with Adolf Eichmann, the architect of the Holocaust.

Grunwald claimed that in March 1944, when the Germans, along with Eichmann and his SS sonderkommando, occupied the previously independent Hungarian satellite state, Kasztner failed to warn the Hungarian community of its impending fate, despite detailed knowledge of the massacre of five million European Jews which had already taken place—thus

facilitating the organisation of transports to Auschwitz.

Kasztner, he wrote, had close contacts with Eichmann, and in return the Germans allowed a special train to take nearly 1,700 Zionist and other 'prominents' out of Hungary to safety in Switzerland.

The Israeli government prosecuted Grunwald for criminal libel, and the case dominated Israeli politics for months—eventually leading to the collapse of the cabinet of Moshe Sharret. But Grunwald engaged the services of a brilliant lawyer, who was also a supporter of the Irgun and the political alternative represented by Menachem Begin, and after days of cross-examination Kasztner came to pieces in the witness box. The judge found most of Grunwald's allegations to be justified, awarding token damages of one Israeli pound.

Three years later, the verdict was overturned on appeal. But before Kasztner could begin to provide answers to some of the questions which remain the subject of intense historical debate, he was assassinated—by another extreme right-winger, who claimed moreover to be a government agent.

The critics of Perdition do not dispute the validity of the issues posed by the Kasztner case, whose continuing importance was shown last year with the performance in Israel of a dramatisation of the real trial by Moti Lerner.

Their concern centres on the use made of it and other material by Jim Allen. They allege that he has wilfully distorted both fact and interpretation, in order to draw conclusions not only about Kasztner but about the entire Zionist movement and the nature of the Israeli state.

Allen himself makes no bones about the overriding purpose of the play: "Israel is a death-trap, a ghetto state," he says, and the conclusions drawn by Perdition provide the full explanation of the present political situa-

tion in the Middle East: "I don't want to sound pompous, but I see the play as a small contribution to rescuing the Jews from Zionism. It's a very pro-Jewish play."

Some who have read the play, including Mike Alfreds, who was asked to direct it before Ken Loach, have attacked its overtly polemical nature, and at the weakness of the case for the other side presented within it: "I don't think Perdition is really a play," Alfreds said in a letter to Max Stafford-Clark. "The writing only catches fire when it is presenting anti-Zionist charges... the result is a lack of dramatic sensibility or honesty. Although the play tries to cover its tracks to avoid the indictment, its effect may well be anti-semitic... it enforces too many stereotypes: cowardly Jews, Jews who buy their way out of trouble, Jewish terrorists..."

Allen rebuts the charge of racism by speaking of fights in pubs with racist "building workers" as a labour organiser, but remains unashamed of his avowedly polemical purpose. Ultimately, he says, "the Zionists were Hitler's favourite Jews. Their interests coincided, on the basis of opportunism: Hitler wanted the Jews out of Europe and the Jews wanted a state in Palestine. It was almost a volkish thing, blood and land. Hitler was fond of the Zionists, they were the good Jews, they were prepared to fight for land."

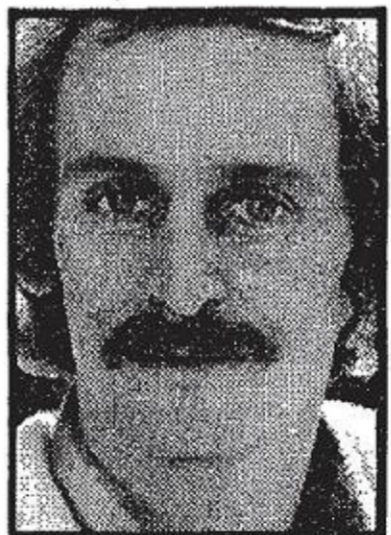
To the play's historical critics, one of its most worrying features is its absolute conflation between the Hungarian Zionists and the Judenrat, the Jewish council established by Eichmann to govern the communities and carry out Nazi orders.

As the play, advancing its argument through speeches by Scott, the defence counsel and various (fictional) witnesses, correctly states, the Judenrat at first urged compliance with Nazi edicts, for example the wearing of the yellow star armband. Allen rightly says that the

Judenrat did nothing either to inform Jews of the impending deportations to Auschwitz, nor to organise any form of resistance along the lines displayed a year earlier by the ghettos of Warsaw and elsewhere.

However, a witness in Perdition goes on to describe Rudolf Kasztner, to whom frequent reference is made throughout the piece, as "the leader" of the Judenrate, and throughout it is stated and implied that this body was controlled by Zionists.

In fact, Kasztner was not a member of the Judenrat, and the Zionists—who formed a small minority of Hungarian Jews—had virtually no



**Max Stafford-Clark: 'Controversy is not something the Court has ever avoided.'**

influence upon it. On the same day that Eichmann arrived in Budapest, representatives of Zionist groups met in secret to discuss a four-point plan for resistance based on a "rescue committee."

They resolved to investigate the possibilities for armed struggle, to manufacture forged documentation to "reclassify" Jews as Ary-

ans, to smuggle Jews across the border into Romania, and—crucially—to send envoys to provincial communities in order to warn them of the danger.

Of this, as Allen says, the Zionists were fully aware, owing to their work over the previous two years of smuggling Jews from Poland and other Holocaust communities into what had been the comparative refuge of Hungary.

Interviewed by the Guardian, Allen said he knew that Kasztner had not been a member of the Judenrat. Pressed on the point, he said: "I will accept the criticism that the roles of the Jewish council and the rescue committee are not clearly enough defined in the play."

The Zionist underground's activities included the organisation not only of Kasztner's train, but the successful smuggling of about 7,000 Jews into Romania, a shipment of 18,000 as labourers to Austria and the preservation of 100,000 souls in Budapest itself through forged documentation—events which are to be found recorded in Asher Cohen's recent book, the Hehalutz Resistance in Hungary.

Allen says that he is unaware of the existence either of the book or the movement, and would like to know the sources for such statements. "In terms of salvation," the lawyer Scott says in his closing speech, "the only chosen people left in Budapest were these few Zionists."

Allen admits to having made heavy use of a book by the Jewish anti-Zionist historian and journalist Lenni Brenner, Zionism in the Age of the Dictators—a "goldmine source." It is, however, striking, that in places he has gone far beyond Brenner's own conclusions, and in at least one case, appears to have embellished events described in the book.

Brenner discusses a Jewish British agent who was parachuted into Hungary in an attempt to organise partisan resistance: and her appearance in the play, Allen con-

cluded, was derived from Brenner. But where the historian writes that she was merely arrested by the Hungarian secret police on crossing the border, and therefore made no contact with Hungarian Jews, the play describes a meeting between her and Kasztner. In this, Kasztner is said to have persuaded her to give herself up, in order not to jeopardise his negotiations with Eich-



**Michael Hastings: 'I find the state of Israel deeply offensive.'**

mann for the departure of the precious train of "prominents."

Asked about this, Allen said only that he was unsure of what Brenner had written. More strikingly, Brenner again is the source for what Allen states to be the play's central message that Zionists positively desired the slaughter of Jews in order to achieve the state of Israel.

The barrister, Scott, quotes a letter reproduced in Brenner from a Swiss Zionist, Nathan Schwab, to the Jews of Slovakia. The Allies, Schwab said, were shedding much blood, "and if we do not bring sacrifices to the table, with what will we achieve the right to sit at the table when they make the

distribution of nations and territories after the war? Only through blood will the land be ours."

Brenner—himself a militant anti-Zionist whose conclusions have been hotly disputed—writes that such a view was no more than "the morbid thoughts of the worst elements of the Zionist leadership." According to Allen's character, however, they "express the complete Zionist ideology. The shedding of Jewish blood in the diaspora is necessary in order to demand the establishment of the Jewish state." This is Allen's view as well: "The Schwab letter says it all."

Finally, Allen blames Zionists for two "might have been"—a fully-fledged armed uprising, and the bombing of the railway lines to Auschwitz by the Allies. This latter, he says, failed to take place because of Zionist pressure in Allied countries. Brenner, for his part, writes that the reason lay in the reluctance of the RAF.

According to another historian who read the script, the charge of anti-semitism is justified by comments in the play about Jewish religious law. His intervention led to the removal of the equation of biblical law with the Nuremberg decrees, but other false statements—that the children of marriages between Jews and non-Jews are legally bastards in Israel, for example—remain. On Judaism, Allen said that the religion "legitimised" Zionism: "Zionism had to wear the trappings of Judaism, it gave them a warrant."

Michael Hastings, the head of the Royal Court's literary department, was a driving force behind the play within the theatre, yet in letters more than a year ago he was expressing reservations. Asking one historian for an opinion, he said that Allen's main problem was that "he has coloured his dramatisation with the language of international socialism not far short of Trotsky, but for the normal theatre-goer, it may look as though this dialectic point of view is the normal one." There was a strong possibility that Allen had "overestimated the intelligence of his audience, expecting them to define a narrow view between anti-semitism and anti-Zionism."

Yesterday Hastings said that "we had intense reservations," adding that the Court had done its utmost to ensure that the criticisms of historians were incorporated in the text. Asked whether some might find Perdition offensive, he said: "I find the State of Israel deeply offensive."

Matthew Evans, chairman of the Faber publishing house, and chairman of the Court's council, said that the play "may be flawed." But, he went on, while it would upset many people "putting forward the question of artistic freedom is very important in this case. As chairman I'm very much in favour of putting it on."

But while the Court's administrators, with the partial exception of Max Stafford-Clark—"I don't think controversy is something the Court has ever avoided"—emphatically denied that they had deliberately sought to generate controversy, Jim Allen may, it seems, have welcomed it.

In a covering letter accompanying a rebuttal of one of the historian's critiques, he told the theatre that the criticism was "pathetic, a reflection of how guilty and incapable the Zionists are in defending his dark chapter in Jewish history. 'Allegations of anti-semitism would surely be made, he said: 'Unable to contest any of the points raised in the script, this will be their main line of attack, and defense (sic) when the play goes out. I can't wait.'"