

## 6 Theatrical interpretation of the Shoah: image and counter-image

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The general context of this chapter is the change in attitude toward the Holocaust which has taken place in Israeli society in recent decades, as reflected in public discourse as well as performance. Our test case will be the treatment on stage and screen of two historical figures – Hannah (Anna) Szenes and Israel (Rezso) Kasztner. Both Szenes and Kasztner are Hungarian Jews, each of them related in his own particular way to the tragic events which took place in Hungary during the last phase of World War Two, following the unexpected occupation of that country by the Nazis in March 1944.<sup>1</sup>

Hannah Szenes, born in Budapest in 1921, was a highly talented writer and poet. Daughter of the famous Jewish Hungarian writer Bella Szenes, she came from a well-assimilated family, immigrated to Palestine in 1939, and two years later became a member of Kibbutz Sedot Yam, near Caesarea. Together with other youngsters from Palestine – thirty-seven in all – she volunteered to parachute into Nazi-occupied Europe in order to aid her Jewish brethren. In March 1944 she was dropped with her fellow parachutists in Yugoslavia, where she spent three months with Tito's partisans. Early in June she entered Hungary, hoping to take part in saving Jews in the country in which she was born. But soon after crossing the border she was caught by the Hungarian authorities, put in prison, tortured, tried for treason and finally shot

<sup>1</sup> The spelling of the names of both Hannah Szenes and Israel Kasztner follows *The Encyclopaedia of the Holocaust*, ed. Israel Gutman (New York and London: Macmillan, 1990), except for titles or quotations in which these names are spelled in a different way.

by a firing squad. In 1950 her remains were brought to Israel, where she was buried in the national military cemetery on Mount Herzl.<sup>2</sup>

Since her execution in November 1944 at the age of twenty-three, Hannah Szenes, as Abba Eban put it, 'has become a consecrated image in her people's memory'.<sup>3</sup> The book of her diaries and poems has reached its fifteenth edition; a ship, a forest and two farming settlements have been named after her; thirty-two streets in Israel bear her name. Since the late forties, many plays have been written about her, and the story of her life and sacrifice was put on stage several times. Some of these plays were widely circulated in amateur theatres, schools and youth movements. In the late fifties the emerging Israeli film industry considered producing a film about her life, and in 1964 Menachem Golan, the producer of the American movie *Hannah's War* (1987), was commissioned to write a script on Hannah Szenes. A traditional ceremony in memory of Hannah Szenes takes place every year in Kibbutz Sedot Yam, as part of the Holocaust Remembrance Day's ritual, where readings of her diaries and poems and singing of her songs are intermingled with a military parade of Israel Defense Forces (IDF) paratroopers. Kibbutz Sedot Yam is also the location of *Beit Hannah* ('Hannah's House'), a memorial site where visitors can watch a seven-minute audiovisual presentation dedicated to her life.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly enough, the first treatment of this theme in Israeli drama was in a play written by Yitzhak Sadeh, the first commander of the Palmah, the permanently mobilized strike force of the Haganah (Israel's pre-state army). As early as 1947, Sadeh had published the third act of a 'memorial play' entitled *Darkah shel Hannah* (*Hannah's Road*), later to be included in *Lohamim* (*Warriors*), a posthumous volume of dramatic works which deal with modern Jewish heroism. In this context, Sadeh fosters the heroic image of the Holocaust, presenting

<sup>2</sup> See A. Masters, *The Summer that Bled: The Biography of Hanna Senesh* (London: Mitchell and Valentine, 1972).

<sup>3</sup> Hannah Senesh: *Her Life and Diary*, introduced by Abba Eban (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), p. vii.

<sup>4</sup> See Judith Tydor Baumel, 'The Heroism of Hannah Senesh: An Exercise in Creating Collective National Memory in the State of Israel', in *Journal of Contemporary History*, 31.3 (1966), pp. 521–46.

the Jews not 'like sheep going to slaughter', but rather as courageous warriors who rebelled against the Nazis. The theme of Hannah Szenes – whom Sadeh happened to meet in person before her departure to Yugoslavia – was more than appropriate for this purpose: 'Watching the way in which she faced the firing squad raised respect in the heart of every soldier', says the investigator to Hannah's mother following the execution. 'Shit, it cannot raise but respect. If she were not Jewish, I would be proud that someone like her was a native of Hungary.'<sup>5</sup> Sadeh was not a professional playwright, yet his long-forgotten play, staged only once by an amateur group,<sup>6</sup> was a significant expression of the need to locate Hannah Szenes, the symbol of Jewish and Zionist struggle against the Nazis, at the foreground of Israeli consciousness.

For this same reason, the idea of using Hannah Szenes as a dramatic figure became extremely attractive to many writers and playwrights throughout the 1950s. Sadeh was followed by Aharon Megged, a writer and playwright of fame and an ex-member of Kibbutz Sedot Yam, who produced his own 'memorial play' based on his personal acquaintance with Hannah Szenes, as well as on written and oral evidence. *Ha-Sneh ha-Bo'er* (*The Burning Bush*), a small sketch on Hannah Szenes' last days, was published in the spring of 1955 in a literary periodical, and was later issued as a booklet for amateur groups, particularly in schools.<sup>7</sup> In January 1957 Eliezer Barot, also a member of Sedot Yam, published in a Kibbutz periodical the first act of a play dedicated to Hannah Szenes' Hungarian mission.<sup>8</sup> Later that year, the National Theatre Habima announced a competition for a play on Hannah Szenes, to be performed in 1958 as part of the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the State of Israel. Behind this contest was the idea that the proper way to treat the Holocaust in the context of celebrating

<sup>5</sup> Yitzhak Sadeh, in *Lohamim* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1953), p. 58. First published in *Leahdut ha'Avodah*, 165, 13 November 1947.

<sup>6</sup> This information was provided to me by Zevi Dror, the biographer of Yitzhak Sadeh (*Mazbi-le-Lo Serara* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1966)).

<sup>7</sup> *Orot*, 4.23 (1955), pp. 31–43. The mimeographed booklet was issued by the Department of Culture and Education of the *Histadrut* (General Union of Workers).

<sup>8</sup> Eliezer Barot, 'Hannah', *Mibifnim*, 19.2–3 (January 1957), pp. 258–9.

Israel's statehood was through the character of Hannah Szenes, who represented the heroic image of the Holocaust, and was directly associated with the limited involvement of the Yishuv (the Jewish community in Palestine) in the military struggle against the Nazis. Six plays were submitted, and as none of them was found worthy of theatrical production, all sank into oblivion, except for one written by the Hungarian-born writer Avigdor Hameiri, an old friend of the Szenes family, who produced a long epic play in which he intermingled the realistic presentation of Hannah's biography with references to Jewish legends and myth associated with martyrology. Hameiri called his play *Ashrei ha-Gafrur* (*Blessed Be the Match*), following Szenes' highly popular poem, with the match turning into a mystical emblem identified with the light of the Messiah, the long-expected redeemer of the Jewish people.<sup>9</sup>

The work finally staged was a two-act play commissioned by the National Theatre from Aharon Megged, who was known not only as an experienced writer and playwright but also as a man deeply committed to Hannah Szenes' memory. The new play was an extension of Megged's earlier piece, *Ha-Sneh ha-Bo'er* – with both plays cultivating the widely accepted image of Hannah Szenes as a national heroine: 'The generation of catastrophe, the generation which lost millions of our people', wrote Megged in an essay which he contributed to a Hannah Szenes volume in 1946, 'this generation has chosen as its hero the emissary and the pioneer, who had sacrificed her life by leaving her country and by going to a foreign land to save her brethren from the trap of death.'<sup>10</sup> Megged located his play in the Budapest jail in the summer of 1944, with episodes from Szenes' previous life both in Hungary and Palestine introduced through flashbacks. The artistic intention was to describe the mission of Hannah Szenes as a saintly mission. Shaw's *Saint Joan*, first performed in Israel in 1952, inspired Megged's writing, as this defiant speech testifies:

I have been accused here of a number of crimes which I do not deny. I did cross the border from the partisans in Yugoslavia

<sup>9</sup> Avigdor Hameiri, *Ashrei ha-Gafrur* (Tel Aviv, 1958).

<sup>10</sup> Aharon Megged, *Hannah* (Sedot Yam, 1946), p. 71.

– I admit it. I was sent here by the Allies. I admit it . . . I came to save Jews from death – I’m proud of it. But the charge that I betrayed the country of my birth, and planned its destruction, I categorically deny.<sup>11</sup>

Megged also explicitly compares Hannah to other martyrs from the European Christian tradition, such as John Huss, John Wyclif and Galileo, as well as with Jewish martyrs like Hannah and her seven sons.<sup>12</sup>

The 1958 performance of Megged’s *Hannah Szenes* was one of the most prestigious and successful productions of the Habima. A careful examination of this particular production is extremely enlightening as to the centrality of Szenes in the Israeli imagination at that time. The cast was the best Habima could assemble: the role of Hannah Szenes was played by Miriam Zohar, a Holocaust survivor herself, and the most promising talent among the young generation of the national theatre. Next to Zohar were Hannah Rovina, Aharon Meskin and Yehoshu’a Bertonov, who were among the founding fathers of the Habima in Moscow, and definitely three of the most celebrated actors on the Israeli stage. Long previews were written about the production, which included a detailed report about the sentimental journey taken by the actors to Kibbutz Sedot Yam, as well as their meeting with the ‘real’ people behind the play – one of them was Katherina Szenes, Hannah’s mother. An exhibition on the life of Hannah Szenes and her mission was prepared specially for the occasion and shown in the theatre’s lobby. The opening night, which was attended by state dignitaries as well as by Hannah’s fellow paratroopers, turned to be a highly emotional event which received full press coverage. Daily newspapers, weeklies and children’s magazines were full of cover stories and articles related to the production, and of extensive writing about the so-called ‘legend’ of Hannah Szenes. Shortly after the première the play was published, and the first edition was soon sold out.

<sup>11</sup> Aharon Megged, ‘Hannah Szenes’, translated by Michael Taub, in *Modern International Drama*, 27.1 (1993), p. 129.

<sup>12</sup> Ilan Avisar, ‘The Evolution of the Israeli Attitude Toward the Holocaust as Reflected in Modern Hebrew Drama’, in *Hebrew Annual Review*, 9 (1985), p. 35.



10. Aharon Megged, *Hannah Szenes* (Habima Theatre, 1958). Hannah Szenes (Miriam Zohar) with her mother Katherina Szenes (Hannah Rovina).

Megged's *Hannah Szenes* became a major success at the Habima. Though most reviewers were rather critical of the text itself, all of them thought that the performance of the play was of great significance: 'In a show like this one', wrote the critic Leah Porat, 'how unpleasant is the role of the critic, who is obliged to mention all the possible flaws. Indeed, for quite a long time we haven't seen a theatrical show which is so important to be seen, which is so good to identify with, which enables you to say: go and see it in droves, because it is part of yourself, a flesh of your flesh, a pure golden ring in the chain of your own history.'<sup>13</sup> During the 1958/9 season it was performed 116 times, while productions of other plays never went beyond 50 performances. It was revived in 1964, with only minor changes, which is an unusual phenomenon in Israeli theatrical life. Matinées were offered for young audiences, and special performances were organized for IDF paratroopers. On the eve of Holocaust Remembrance Day, when all theatres in Israel are closed by law, Habima remained open for a special performance of *Hannah Szenes*. No less than five different adaptations of the play were written for the young; these were largely circulated among dramatic troupes in schools and youth movements. All this could happen because Megged's *Hannah Szenes* was the right play at the right time, interpreting the Holocaust in a way which would perfectly fit into the Israeli ethos. As such, it was also considered worthy of cultural export: an English version of the play was staged in 1964 at the Princess Theatre in Los Angeles (under the title *The Legend of Hannah Senesh*) and, in 1969, Habima performed it at the Burgtheater in Vienna.<sup>14</sup>

In subsequent years the theme of Hannah Szenes was still on the agenda of the Israeli theatre, yet it was treated in a totally different way. In 1973 a group of young actors and singers under the direction of Shimon Levi and Nissim Givati produced a theatrical pot-pourri based on the diaries, poems and songs of Hannah Szenes, as well as on selected parts of Megged's play. This production, which had more than 300 performances (mainly in schools, small towns and agricultural

<sup>13</sup> *Lamerhav*, 6 June 1958.

<sup>14</sup> For the American production, see Margaret Harford's review, 'Hannah Senesh – Drama of Wartime Hero', in the *Los Angeles Times*, 8 May 1964.

settlements), was defined by its producers as an attempt 'to take the figure of the Israeli paratrooper down from the national pedestal and to represent her as a sensitive, cautious woman'.<sup>15</sup> It was followed in 1979 by the short-lived Haifa Municipal Theatre performance of *Kenafayim (Doves)*, a theatre-dance evening produced by the American choreographer Anna Sokolow in co-operation with the Israeli poet and playwright Israel Eliraz, who made it clear that he and Sokolow were not interested in treating 'a national symbol, charged with pathos, who lacks a face of her own', but rather a girl who had a lust for life, who searched for love, who had experienced solitude, and who was ready to make a personal commitment and pay the full price for it.<sup>16</sup> Another production, though marginal, was offered at the Israel Festival for 'Alternative Theatre' in Acco in 1987, where the playwright Dudu Palme's intention was to analyse the formation of the myth of Hannah Szenes rather than reproduce that myth once again. The glorious days in which Hannah Szenes was staged at the national theatre as a local version of Joan of Arc, with the performance of the play turning into a major cultural event as well as a commercial success, were over.<sup>17</sup>

Ironically, the man who was taking Hannah Szenes' place on the Israeli stage as a symbol of the Holocaust was none other than Israel Kasztner, the Hungarian Jewish leader who was accused of collaboration with the Nazis, and whose victimization took place just as Hannah Szenes had her heyday on the Israeli stage and in public discourse at large. The emergence of Kasztner as a significant presence in the Israeli theatre and media has definitely been a by-product of a new interpretation of the Shoah. 'This particularly glaring ideological representation started crumbling with the Eichmann trial, and subsequently faded out

<sup>15</sup> *Yeditot Aharonot*, 26 February 1973. The play is titled after a poem by Hannah Szenes – 'Kol Kara, Ve-Halakhty' ('I Heard a Voice. I Went').

<sup>16</sup> Quoted from Israel Eliraz's presentation in the programme of the Haifa Municipal Theatre production (1979). Anna Sokolow's production was later performed with a local company at the Harold Clurman Theater in New York in 1953. See Elenore Lester's review, 'The Story of a Wartime Heroine Comes to the Stage', *New York Times*, 23 January 1983.

<sup>17</sup> Dudu Palme, *Rak ha-Kokhavin Hayu Kerovim Kol Kakh (Only the Stars Were So Close)*, unpublished play, Hannah Szenes Archive, Sedot Yam.



of the main public discourse', says the historian Saul Friedlander.<sup>18</sup> Beside the trial itself, Friedlander points to a number of social and political factors which have led to a new and more complex attitude of Israelis toward this national trauma, reflected in historiography, public discourse, novels, plays, museology, ceremonies, and so on. In this new phase, Israelis became less interested in heroes and martyrs, trying instead to get to know more about the victims themselves. This led, among other things, to a new understanding of the dilemmas of those individual Jews who were in a position of leadership in Nazi-occupied Europe, mainly the *Judenrat* (the Jewish councils who operated under the Nazis), traditionally regarded as reflecting the moral failure of Jews during the war, and as a symptom of the rather despised *galut* (Diaspora) mentality. The publication by Yad Vashem (The Holocaust Authority) of a Hebrew version of Isaiah Trunk's seminal book *Judenrat* (1979), followed by Ruth Bondy's biography of Jacob Edelstein, the head of the Jewish council in Theresienstadt (1981), are early expressions of this new understanding.<sup>19</sup> It was in these circumstances that the shift from Szenes to Kasztner was made possible, even necessary.

Israel Kasztner, who was born in Cluz (Transylvania) in 1914, was a lawyer, a journalist and a Zionist leader, who served as the vice-chairman of the Jewish Relief and Rescue Committee in Hungary during the war. After the German conquest of Hungary in March 1944, Kasztner negotiated with the Nazis, particularly with Eichmann, on the possibility of exchanging 'merchandise for blood' ('*ware für blud*'). Kasztner finally managed to rescue 1,684 Jews, who left Budapest by a special train in June 1944. The historian Yehuda Bauer credits Kasztner for being involved in saving the life of several thousands of Jews in Hungary and elsewhere. In 1954, already in Israel, Kasztner brought a lawsuit against Malkiel Grünwald, who blamed him for collaborating with the Nazis. The Grünwald trial was soon turned by attorney

<sup>18</sup> See Saul Friedlander, 'The Shoah Between Memory and History', *Jerusalem Quarterly*, 53 (Winter 1990), p. 118.

<sup>19</sup> Isaiah Trunk, *Judenrat: the Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe Under Nazi Occupation* (New York and London: Collier-Macmillan, 1972); see also Ruth Bondy, *Elder of the Jews: Jacob Edelstein of Theresienstadt*, translated by Evelyn Adel (New York: Macmillan, 1989).

Shmuel Tamir into a Kasztner trial, which ended by a verdict in which Justice Benjamin Halevi, the president of the Jerusalem district court, went as far as to describe the vice-chairman of the Jewish Relief and Rescue Committee in Budapest as someone 'who sold his soul to the devil'. Kasztner was found guilty of collaboration with the Nazis, and following a highly emotional testimony by Katherina Szenes, he was also blamed for the desertion of her daughter Hannah while she was imprisoned in Budapest. About a year after the verdict was handed down, Kasztner was murdered by national extremists, who took Justice Halevi's words literally; only after his death did the supreme court exonerate him from all accusations (except the charge that he helped Nazis escape justice).

A dramatic shift in the public attitude towards Kasztner took place in 1982, when a two-part documentary by Yehuda Kaveh, commissioned by Israeli television, adopted an extremely favourable position toward him and his role during the Holocaust, and, therefore, criticized the judicial procedures which led to his indictment by the Jerusalem district court. Kaveh's treatment of this controversial material was warmly welcomed by most columnists and reviewers.<sup>20</sup> Two years later, in 1984, David Levine, then Habima's director, wrote (in collaboration with Miri Shomron) a trial drama named *Reszo* which challenged the previously accepted notion about Kasztner and called for his rehabilitation. This line of thought was followed in 1985 by a highly successful production by the Tel Aviv Chamber Theatre of Motti Lerner's *Kasztner*, as well as by this playwright's three-part television drama, *Mishpat Kasztner* (*The Kasztner Trial*), produced by Israeli television in 1994.<sup>21</sup> That same year the Israeli composer Arie Shapira presented a new opera with the same title (*Mishpat Kasztner*), whose libretto was based on selected quotations drawn from the transcripts of the trial of 1954. Originally Shapira planned to write an opera for the stage, but as he turned to electronic music, his piece was

<sup>20</sup> Yehuda Kaveh (producer), *Kofer Nefesh* (*Ransom*), and *Pesak Din* (*Verdict*), Israeli Television Archive, Jerusalem.

<sup>21</sup> Motti Lerner, *The Kasztner Trial* (Tel Aviv, Or-Am, 1994). An English translation by Emre Goldstein's is included in the same issue of *Modern International Drama* (27.1 (1993)) which provides the translation of Megged's play, pp. 33-94.

broadcast only on Israeli radio, and later recorded on CD by the Israeli Association of Composers. In 1994, Shapira won the prestigious Israel Prize for composition.<sup>22</sup> Kasztner's role during the war also received much credit in a book written by Dov Dinur in 1987, and most recently in a new, most favourable biography written by the historian Yehiam Weitz.<sup>23</sup> Both Dinur and Weitz were involved in the various Kasztner productions: the manuscript of Dinur's book was used by Lerner for the writing of his 1985 play, whereas Weitz operated as a historical advisor to Lerner and Barabash in their work on the 1994 television drama. No wonder, then, that the cover of Dinur's *Kasztner* included a picture showing Oded Teomi and Ilan Dar, the two actors who played the roles of Kasztner and Eichmann in the Chamber Theatre production which took place prior to the publication of his book.

The production of *Kasztner* by the Chamber Theatre in 1985 can be seen as the antithesis to Aharon Megged's *Hannah Szenes* performed by Habima almost thirty years earlier. Whereas Megged and Habima had chosen to celebrate Hannah Szenes, the anti-Nazi woman fighter, Lerner wrote a play about the Holocaust by focusing on someone who had been perceived for years – particularly as a result of the 1954 trial – as being diametrically opposed to the mythical Szenes. And it was this kind of 'anti-hero', also associated with the Hungarian chapter of the Holocaust, which Lerner was committed to put on stage: 'There is great heroism in one's ability to stand in front of Eichmann, to negotiate with him', he declared. 'We are not used [to appreciate] this thing. We think still of heroism in terms of using a pistol and a hand-grenade. This was heroism of a different kind.'<sup>24</sup> Like Megged before him, Lerner had also produced a semi-documentary drama, in which he reconstructed the

<sup>22</sup> Arie Shapira, *The Kasztner Trial: Electronic Opera in 13 Scenes* (1991–4). Compact disc published by the Society of Authors, Composers and Music Publishers in Israel (ACUM), cat. no. AS-001. The libretto is rendered in English translation.

<sup>23</sup> Dov Dinur, *Kasztner: Giluyim Hadashim al ha-Ish u-Fo'olo* (*Kasztner: New Revelations on the Man and his Deeds*) (Haifa: Gestlit, 1987); Yehiam Weitz, *Ha-Ish She-Nirzah Pa'amayim* (*The Man Who Was Murdered Twice*) (Jerusalem: Keter, 1995).

<sup>24</sup> Quoted from a television debate (1 October 1985). Israeli TV Archive, Jerusalem.



11. Motti Lerner, *Kasztner* (Tel Aviv Chamber Theatre, 1985). Kasztner (Oded Teomi) meets Eichmann (Ilan Dar).

devastating situation in Budapest after the Nazi occupation in March 1944, exposing with great empathy the dilemmas, the motives, the code of behaviour of the man who stood at the centre of his play: Kasztner facing Adolf Eichmann, Kasztner facing the Jewish community, Kasztner facing his own self. The chain of events is broken only in the final episode, which dramatizes the assassination of Kasztner in Tel Aviv in March 1957; by doing so, Lerner, just as Megged before him, is using the moment of execution as a vehicle through which he manages to present his innocent hero as a victim of evil forces, thus reaching for his ultimate sanctification.

Lerner's *Kasztner* was one of the best, most successful and highly debated productions of the Israeli theatre. It had a tremendous press coverage, including a special television feature produced by Yehuda Kaveh, who had been in charge of the television documentary of 1982 which marked the turning point in the treatment of the Hungarian Jewish leader by the Israeli media. Naturally, this production became the focus of renewed public debate on Kasztner, and though the old accusations were reiterated – mostly by attorney Shmuel Tamir, who had been instrumental in leading Halevi to his verdict in 1954 – new voices, absolutely pro-Kasztner, were heard in the Israeli arena. An eminent spokesman who expressed a pro-Kasztner position following the theatrical production was Yehudah Bauer, who presented Kasztner once again as a person who 'struggled with the devil' for the purpose of saving Jews, finally managing to save at least some of them; the critical reference to the district court verdict of 1954 was more than obvious.<sup>25</sup> The polemics of the 1980s over the idea of associating *shoah* ('Holocaust') with *gevurah* ('Heroism'), cemented in the 1950s, was getting here its full expression. This was also the reason why most reviewers, who may have been sceptical as to Lerner's dramatic genius, responded favourably to what he had done.<sup>26</sup> As *Hannah Szenes* in 1958, this was also the right play at the right time. In the daily *Ma'ariv* – a rather right-wing paper – Gabriel Strasmann wrote

<sup>25</sup> Yehuda Bauer, 'Yoter Mal'akh mi-Shed' ('More of an Angel than a Devil'), *Davar*, 1 August 1985.

<sup>26</sup> Boaz Evron, 'Mi la-Hayim, Mi la-Mavet' ('Who is for Life, Who is for Death'), *Yediot Aharonot*, 31 July 1985.

that *Kasztner* by Lerner should be performed everywhere, particularly in schools; it should even become part of the curriculum, because this play raises some of the major issues embedded in the Holocaust. Public interest was so great that long before its publication in book form, the full text of the play was printed in a weekend magazine of the daily *Davar*.<sup>27</sup> In 1987 *Kasztner* was performed by the Chamber Theatre in Wiesbaden, Germany, as it was considered by its producers to be an appropriate product for foreign consumption. Finally, the play won the 'Aharon Meskin Prize' of the Israel Centre of the International Theatre Institute (ITI) in 1986. The award was presented to Lerner by the Minister of Education and Culture, Yitzhak Navon, in a ceremony which took place at Habima, in the same hall where Megged's *Hannah Szenes* was performed three decades earlier.<sup>28</sup>

The success of the Chamber Theatre production and the change of the public climate towards Kasztner paved the way for the television production of *The Kasztner Trial* in 1994, written by Motti Lerner and directed by Uri Barabash. This time Lerner followed David Levine's model, composing a trial drama based on the transcripts of the trial but definitely not identical with them. In his script, Lerner cultivated the line presented in his theatrical production of 1985 by characterizing Kasztner as a genuine and courageous Jewish leader, the true 'hero' of the Holocaust period. Yet this production was still located in Hungary, with Israeli society and its judicial system being criticized only indirectly, whereas the television drama – located in Israel of the 1950s – was a direct and most aggressive attack against the victimization of Kasztner by the Israelis. This attack was carried with the full aid of the Israeli cultural establishment: *The Kasztner Trial* was the most ambitious television drama ever produced in Israel, it was in three parts, it had the best possible cast, it was transmitted on national television during prime time on three consecutive nights, it was highly promoted before and after, a special film was even produced by Israeli television describing the very process of production. All this effort was put into a performance which treated favourably a man who three decades earlier

<sup>27</sup> *Davar ha-Shavu'a*, 27 December 1985.

<sup>28</sup> For the jury decision, see *Modern International Drama*, 27.1 (1993), pp. 37–8.

was considered a war criminal. With the presentation of the three-part television drama on the Kasztner trial, the Israelis found themselves paying tribute not to the 'hero', the war fighter, but rather to the negotiator, the manipulator, the politician, maybe even to a villain, to a man who 'co-operated' (though not 'collaborated') with the Nazis in order to rescue as many Jews as he could, not through useless revolts, but through acts of diplomacy; this kind of human breed, incarnated by Kasztner, turned out to be the legitimate representative of the Holocaust in the texture of Israeli memory. 'Since the trial and death of Israel Kasztner', writes Yehiam Weitz in his introduction to the booklet of *Mishpat Kasztner* published by the Israel Broadcasting Authority, 'a radical change in the image of this man and in the evaluation of his activities has taken place. This change is meaningful, because Kasztner is in many ways a mirror which reflects the change which Israeli society has gone through since the days in which it had passed judgement.'<sup>29</sup>

The tremendous public attention directed to the television drama was very much enhanced by an off-stage drama which took place a few days before the screening of the Lerner-Barabash production. A sensational preview made it known that the original script of *The Kasztner Trial* included a scene in which Kasztner suggested that Hannah Szenes, while imprisoned in Budapest, betrayed her friends. This, one should note, was never said by Kasztner, not during the trial, nor anywhere else. This was never said by anybody, was contrary to all available historical evidence, and even the producers were ready to admit that it was just 'poetic licence'. So, while paving the road for Kasztner to become the legitimate representative of the Shoah, the producers of the television drama made an attempt to go one step further by desecrating Hannah Szenes' memory, the previously highly cherished heroine of the darkest period in the history of the Jewish people. The long-time rivalry between Kasztner and Szenes over the Israeli memory of the Shoah was finally taken into the open.

This move was unanimously rejected by public opinion: the Szenes family took the case to the supreme court, which decided on a majority rule that the omission of the controversial scene would not interfere with the continuity of the programme, but left it to the Israel

<sup>29</sup> *Mishpat Kasztner* (Jerusalem: Israel Broadcasting Authority, 1994), p. 10.

Broadcasting Authority to take the final decision. The suggestion of the court was respected by the Broadcasting Authority, and Kasztner's statement as to the betrayal of Hannah Szenes was removed. The issue was also put on the agenda of the Knesset, the Israeli parliament, and, in a debate which took place on 9 November 1994, Hannah Szenes received the absolute backing by members of all parties. Eli Goldschmidt (Labour) declared: 'Hannah Szenes, as far as I am concerned, and I believe that every Jew and Israeli feels the same, is the ultimate expression of the very essence of Jewish and Israeli existence, which is both heroic and tragic . . . A nation which negates its symbols is negating its own self.' Newspapers were full of articles, interviews and letters to the editor in favour of Hannah Szenes; one of these articles, by Aharon Megged, vehemently condemned the scriptwriter for trying to be 'politically correct' by desecrating 'the myth of Hannah Szenes', whose heroism – to the best of his knowledge – was no myth, but an absolute reality.<sup>30</sup> The general attitude taken by the various agents of public opinion was that Kasztner had got his share, his 'rehabilitation' being by and large accepted, but that it was absolutely unnecessary to grant him a pardon through the unjust desecration of Hannah Szenes.

Yet in spite of the tremendous backing which Hannah Szenes received from the court, the parliament and the press, the public focus still remained on Kasztner, not on her. Incidentally, the television drama on Kasztner came out on the night of 9 November 1994, just two days after the fiftieth anniversary of Hannah Szenes' execution (Budapest, 7 November 1944). While Israeli television produced this prestigious, high-cost production about Kasztner, Hannah Szenes got a small share in the framework of a marginal programme called *Ha-Hodesh* (*This Month*, 22 October 1994) which included interviews, some biographical sketches, and of course excerpts from Aharon Megged's drama, this time performed by second-rate actors.<sup>31</sup> Another place where this event was commemorated is Kibbutz Sedot Yam, where a memorial symposium was specially organized. A large audience,

<sup>30</sup> Aharon Megged, 'Al Rezah Giborim' ('On the Murder of Heroes'), in *Shishi*, 24 February 1995. See also David Pedhazur, 'Mishpat Szenes' ('The Szenes Trial'), *Davar*, 11 November 1994.

<sup>31</sup> Israeli Television Archive.



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including more than 100 women soldiers, gathered in the Kibbutz dining hall, early in January 1995, to attend a round-table discussion on 'The Personality of Hannah Szenes and her Mission'; among the participants were Aharon Megged himself, the arch-builder of the Szenes myth, the veteran Labour leader Yitzhak Ben-Aharon, the general secretary of the United Kibbutz Movement, Muki Tsur, and, last but not least, Gyora Szenes, Hannah's younger brother. Yet this symposium, impressive as it was, was no more than a local event; the national rostrum, at least for the time being, was taken by Kasztner.

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## **Staging the Holocaust**

The Shoah in drama and performance

edited by

Claude Schumacher



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