



“Jewish rescuers during the Holocaust have been recognized very late at Yad Vashem, and they’re not recognized at all in America,” Gaylen Ross told me, when I called her in New York to discuss her new documentary film *Killing Kasztner*. “Many Jewish rescuers had no guns, but they were forging documents, smuggling, doing all sorts of things to save lives.”

Reszo Kasztner was a leading member of a Zionist rescue group in Budapest when the Germans occupied Hungary in March, 1944. This was late in the War, the Germans were clearly losing, and in a sudden about face, Adolf Eichmann offered to negotiate. His goal? Sell Hungarian Jews in exchange for cash and supplies. As a gesture of “good faith,” Eichmann allowed one group to enter Switzerland on what is now known to history as “the Kasztner Train.”

After the war, Kasztner made aliyah, but once in Israel, he was condemned as a collaborator. “In Israel, the first national conversation about the Holocaust was during the Kasztner Trial (1953-1955),” Gaylen said. “The blame, shame, and guilt that followed the Holocaust—much of it ended up at Israel’s doorstep. The bitter divide that happened in Israel politically is all part of this horrendous story.”

Yes, it’s about the Holocaust, but *Killing Kasztner* also addresses urgent issues equally relevant in our own era. Gaylen forces us to confront the paradox of negotiation—how do we know if we’ve crossed the line from “negotiation” to “appeasement;” is this just a debate for historians after the fact? Can a man like Kasztner, acting in the role of negotiator, ever be considered “heroic,” or a role model for others?

Negotiators need cool temperaments, but terrorists run hot. The film is called *Killing Kasztner*, and the man who pulled the trigger was Ze'ev Eckstein. In *Killing Kasztner*, Eckstein, now in his 70s, reflects on his actions as a young man of 24. "The tragedy of Kasztner's murder also encompasses Eckstein, the assassin," Gaylen said. "We never condone the murderer or his act, but, in the film, I try to show what happens when bitterness and ideology and hatred and fanaticism are in the air."

"In the Jewish Quarter of Budapest," Gaylen concluded, "there's a statue of Swiss diplomat Carl Lutz." Like Raoul Wallenberg, Lutz was a non-Jew who saved many Jews, and the statue shows Lutz as a sort of winged angel. "Kasztner is never going to be characterized as a winged angel," Gaylen said. "So where—between the victim and the savior—does Reszo Kasztner exist?"

*Killing Kasztner* opens at the Music Box Theatre on Southport on Friday, Jan 8, and Gaylen will be here in Chicago to conduct Q&A sessions after selected screenings. To read my complete interview, visit: [www.films42.com/chats/GaylenRoss.asp](http://www.films42.com/chats/GaylenRoss.asp).

## Books

Rebecca Goldstein is about to release a new novel called *36 Arguments for the Existence of God*, and she'll be at Spertus Institute on Thurs, Jan 21 to read excerpts and sign copies. *36 Arguments* is set in Boston, and the protagonist, Cass Seltzer, teaches at a college very much like Brandeis (where Rebecca herself once taught). Long used to working in relative isolation, when Cass publishes a new book called *The Varieties of Religious Illusion*, his popularity soars.

In addition to her own significant accomplishments, Rebecca is also Mrs. Steven Pinker, so when she describes what happens to an academic after he's been called up to *The Colbert Report*, she speaks from experience. Funny as references to "the Colbert bump" are, however, this is a serious book with erudite concerns, and there's a clear thread linking it to Rebecca's ongoing philosophical investigations.

In Nov '08, Rebecca was here as a guest of the Chicago Humanities Festival, and when I asked her then about reactions to her book *Betraying Spinoza*, she said: "We're reliving the Age of the Enlightenment. Separating religion and politics? I thought we had actually settled that once and for all, but America has always been a very religious country."

To make reservations for Jan 21, visit: [www.spertus.edu](http://www.spertus.edu). To read more of our chat about *Betraying Spinoza*, visit: <http://www.juf.org/news/arts.aspx?id=38538>.

## Exhibits

The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago will open a new exhibit featuring the work of photographer Anna Shteynshleyger on Sun, Jan 3. Born in Moscow, Anna moved to the USA in '93 at age 16. She trained at Yale University and currently teaches at Columbia College Chicago. According to Hamza Walker, Director of Education, her goal as a photographer is "to look at what's closest to her with critical distance." This includes her many Orthodox friends, her grandmother's apartment in Moscow, and even her ex-husband.

## Tzivi's January '10 Spotlight

Anna will speak about her work at the opening, and four additional tie-in lectures have also been scheduled: Margaret Olin on Jan 21; Jan Schwarz on Jan 24; Leora Auslander on Feb 7; and Charles Bernstein on Feb 14 (closing day).

For complete information, visit: [www.RenaissanceSociety.org](http://www.RenaissanceSociety.org). The Renaissance Society is located on the 4th floor of Cobb Hall (5811 South Ellis).

### Curtain Call

The Goodman Theatre's production of *High Holidays* is now history, and like most local critics, I think it needs some significant rewrites. But the tie-in event on Nov 23, *Tasting Tradition: Tales at the Table in Jewish Culture*, was terrific. Julie Ganey, Mike Przygoda, and Ilana Shabanov from Serendipity Theatre Collective regaled us with holiday stories, and Spertus Institute's "Chef Laura" served a feast—including the best gefilte fish I've ever had!

To learn more about the speakers, visit: <http://www.serendipitytheatre.org>. Laura Frankel can be reached at Spertus: [www.spertus.edu](http://www.spertus.edu).

### Tzivi's DVD Collection

*Anvil: The Story of Anvil* has been called "the greatest movie ever made about Rock and Roll," but for all the cursing, this is really a heart-tugging film about deep and abiding friendship. Steve "Lips" Kudlow is the son of a competitive Toronto businessman. Robb Reiner is the son of a Hungarian Holocaust survivor. Somehow these two Jewish guys balance each other out, and after almost forty years, they're still going on tour and writing new songs. I'm no Heavy Metal fan, but even I was engrossed.

Jan Lisa Huttner (Tzivi) is the managing editor of *Films for Two: The Online Guide for Busy Couples* ([www.films42.com](http://www.films42.com)). Send comments and/or suggestions for future columns to [Tzivi@msn.com](mailto:Tzivi@msn.com). Visit [www.juf.org](http://www.juf.org) for online copies of prior columns.

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