



# The Great Escape: Nine Jews Who Fled Hitler and Changed the World

*Kati Marton*

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**The Great Escape: Nine Jews Who Fled Hitler and Changed the World** Kati Marton

'The Great Escape' is the story of the breathtaking journey of nine extraordinary men from war-torn Budapest to freedom, what they experienced along their dangerous route, and how they changed the world.

## The Great Escape: Nine Jews Who Fled Hitler and Changed the World Details

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# From Reader Review The Great Escape: Nine Jews Who Fled Hitler and Changed the World for online ebook

## Nick says

This was an interesting account of nine Hungarians who left Hungary just as Hitler came into power. The book primarily focuses on their contributions to the world after leaving their homeland. While the book was interesting, the description of the men's lives seemed inadequate since the author was trying to give a full biography for nine different men. For example, on several occasions she describes in detail pictures taken by one man who revolutionized the photojournalist industry, but none of the pictures she describes were included in the photo section of the book. Another man's life is described in detail up to his mid-twenties and then he disappears from the book until his death fifty years later. The author would have done better to divide the men among two or three books.

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## Paul says

At end of summer in my last trip to Alaska, one of the parishioners in Petersburg lent me "The Great Escape." This was not the World War ii escape from a German prison camp but the escape from Hitler. The subtitle was: The Great Escape, Nine Jews who Fled Hitler and Changed the World.

It was written by an expatriate Hungarian. The 9 Hungarians mentioned are an incredible group: Robert Capa, Andre Kertesz, John von Neumann, Leo Szilard, Edward Teller, Eugene Wigner (Wigner, Szilard to Einstein to start the Manhattan project), Michael Curtiz (Casablanca), Alexander Korda (propaganda, That Hamilton Woman) and Arthur Koestler.

Some great quotes:

Hungarians are the only people in Europe without racial or linguistic relatives in Europe, therefore they are the loneliest on this continent. This ... perhaps explains the peculiar intensity of their existence.... Hopeless solitude feeds their creativity, their desire for achieving.... To be Hungarian is a collective neurosis. Arthur Koestler

pp. 210-211

"But success could never fill his well of pessimism. "A dispassionate observer from a more advanced planet," he wrote, "who could take in human history from Cro-Magnon to Auschwitz ... would come to the conclusion that our race is ... a very sick biological product ... there is the striking disparity between the growth curves of science and technology on the one hand, and of ethical conduct on the other.... Since the day when the first atomic bomb outshone the sun over Hiroshima," he concluded, "mankind as a whole has had to live with the prospect of its extinction as a species."

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## Amy says

Fascinating read. The only complaint I have is that while listening to it (in the car -- which means I sometimes had to pull my attention away from the book to concentrate solely on something happening on the road), I began to get confused about who was doing what. Especially since so many of the nine have names that begin with the same sound. Took until the middle of the book to get that part down. Other complaint has to do with the audiobook format. I wish the reader would have paused for a moment whenever switching to a different person. It would have helped a lot with the before mentioned confusion.

But in terms of the book -- it has inspired me to read her other books, and to learn more about WWI. I loved that part in the book which said that in trying to eradicate the jews for a superior society, Hitler actually lost many of the brilliant minds that could have led him there. Or something like that. Simply a great read!

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### **Wendy says**

I give this book zero stars.

Since my father was one of the nine who escaped, I was interested in this book. As I read I found the material superficial, with cute stories cherry picked, but nothing especially new or insightful. There are so many better books written about these people and these times. Among them are: Budapest 1900 by John Lukacs, Weimar Culture by Peter Gray, His Version of the Facts by Leo Szilard, Genius in the Shadows by William Lanouette, The Recollections of Eugene P. Wigner, and - forgive me, this is self serving -- my father's book, Memoirs: A Twentieth Century Journey in Science and Politics. Compared to these books, The Great Escape is thin soup.

But when I got to the middle of the book, Ms. Marton started attributing intent to people's actions which she could not possibly know. Then I hit upon incidents in which I was involved. These were misrepresented. I tried to look in her notes to discover whether Ms. Marton had rewritten history or whether she depended on someone who had committed that sin. Her notes were long. She did many interviews and she read many books. But there was no way to discover how Ms. Marton got the "facts" she was reporting.

I suggest, if you are interested in this time and these people, you try another book.

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### **Suesantaylor says**

Just finished "Enemies of the People" not dreaming that this could be as good, if not better. But it is. Marton is a terrific writer.

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### **Sandy says**

Fabulous read. Inspiring and telling. The story reveals the personal side of some great, historic accomplishments from the dismal and horrific time of Hitler. These 9 Jews changed the world as we know it; they pioneered advancements in science, photography, and literature.

Sometimes it was hard to keep track of the facts as most of the men changed their given names to escape Hitler and assimilate into Europe or America. The scientists associated with Einstein; pioneered the nuclear

age and then, when realizing the hazard that would become, they put their time and energy into pulling it back as best they could. They were at odds with each other at times - yet remained steadfast friends. One of the group spearheaded what we know call photojournalism; one went on to become one of the great movie directors (Casablanca), and another a world famous photographer - best known for his work as a war photographer.

A great read for anyone interested in recent history or history of the early 20th century.

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### **Katie says**

Marton's book, *The Great Escape*, follows the lives of nine exceptional Hungarians who lived during Hitler's reign of terror. All nine escaped their homeland, and throughout the book, Marton follows the various paths their lives took. She writes about Michael Curtiz, the man who brought the world the film *Casablanca*, and another director, Alexander Korda, known for his lavish sets and stunning films. She also follows two photographers, Andre Kertesz who pioneered photojournalism, and Robert Capa, the great war photographer. Also on the list are four scientists, Leo Szilard, Eugene Wigner, Edward Teller and John von Neumann. She recounts the men's contributions to the Los Alamos project under J. Robert Oppenheimer. And finally, Marton shares the story of the writer, Arthur Koestler, known primarily for his book, *Darkness at Noon*. I really enjoyed the book, and I especially enjoyed learning about these Hungarian men whom I had not, for the most part, ever heard of. Marton seemed to spend the most time following Robert Capa who seems to have been a jaded playboy of his time, having lost his first and only true love while she photographed a war. I felt most interested in the writer, the directors, and the photographers. I had more difficulty remaining interested in the scientists whom she often grouped together. However, this was a fantastic book. It was certainly worth the read.

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### **Jeanne says**

What fascinated me most about this book was how many famous Americans are really Hungarians! I didn't know anything about Hungary before reading this, but I am driven to learn more about the recent past because of this book.

The movie *Casablanca* was directed by a Hungarian, and the story of its creation is entrancing. The idea of a US atom bomb was launched and created by three Hungarians. Who knew that Hungarians have been so influential in 20th century Western life?

"Hungarians are the only people in Europe without racial or linguistic relatives in Europe, therefore they are the loneliest on this continent. This...perhaps explains the peculiar intensity of their existence..." Arthur Koestler

If you enjoy 20th century history, especially WWI & WWII, you will enjoy this book.

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### **Carl R. says**

Kati Marton's *The Great Escape* is an eye-opener. How many of us know that turn-of-the century Budapest

was a world-unique hotbed of intellectual and artistic activity where Jews participated on an equal basis with gentiles?

Not me. Nor did I know that when it all fell apart during and after WWI, when Hungary lost its seaport in the Versailles/Trianon carveup, when poverty and despotism took over so much of Eastern Europe, these same prosperous Jews became worse and worse off as the century progressed. Most of all, I did not know that a good number of them migrated to Berlin and/or Paris, thence to America and/or Britain and helped profoundly change our history and culture.

Here are the names of the nine men whose history Marton traces in *The Great Escape*. Eugene Wigner, Leo Szilard, Edward Teller, John von Neumann, Arthur Koestler, Michael Curtiz, Robert Capa, Andre Kertesz,

and Alexander Korda. I recognized Teller's name, of course, and Koestler's, but was chagrined at my ignorance about the others. Wigner won the nobel prize in physics. von Neumann virtually invented the computer. Curtiz directed *Casablanca* and dozens more famous films. Korda based himself in London and directed equally renowned if less famous films. *The Third Man* with Orson Welles is perhaps his most highly regarded. Kertesz was a pioneer in photography with a reputation among artists right up there with Henri Carier-Bresson's. Capa's achievements as a photo-journalist are unsurpassed, especially when it comes to war photography. Four of these guys (Wigner, Szilard, Teller, and von Neumann) worked on the Manhattan project and subsequently became involved in bomb politics--on opposite sides. Isn't that enough? Not quite. Marton also alludes to people whose stories she doesn't detail.

Over a dozen Nobel Prize winners emerged from roughly the same generation of Hungarians. (there is some dispute as to their numbers, twelve to eighteen, depending on whether one counts areas of the county of country the Treaty of Trianon stripped away in 1920.) Among them were George de Hevesy, John Polanyi, and George Olah, awarded nobel Prizes in chemistry, Albert Szent-Gyorgyi and Georg von Bekesy, awarded Nobel Prizes in medicine; Dennis Gabor and Plilipp Lenard, who joined Eugene Wigner in winning the physics Nobel; and in economics, John Harasanyi, who won a Nobel for his work in Game Theory, the field pioneered by von Neumann, whose early death probably denied him his own Nobel. There were others--not all of them Nobel laureates. Marcel Breuer designed his famous chair and other Bauhaus masterpieces, as well as the Whitney Museum in New York. Bela Bartok's disturbing harmonies started in Budapest and reached the world. For decades, Bartok's students, as well as other products of Budapest's Franz Liszt Academy, among them Fritz Reiner, Geroge Szell, Eugene Ormandy, Georg Solti, and Anatal Dorati, created the sound of the world's' great orchestras.

For some reason Marton did not include the Gabor sisters on her list. Maybe they were edited out for space reasons. At any rate, she chose the subjects of her history well, for all of these men led exciting, disturbing, and historically significant lives which should be better known than they are. Her writing is lively, and the book is structured to keep the narrative moving without losing track of any of the individual stories. Oh, and don't let me forget the dozens of terrific photos. They range in subject and style from a snapshot of Koestler and Langston Hughes picking cotton in Turkmenistan to some of Kertesz and Capa's best work. I wonder that this book and its content haven't received more play in the press. There's no more significant story in the twentieth century and it deserves to be broadcast as widely as possible.

[Footnote: In July, I did a review on this website of Arthur Phillips' *Prague*, which inexplicably takes place mostly in Budapest. Like all such travel and reading, the geography and color I picked up from that novel enhanced my enjoyment of *The Great Escape*. An intimate knowledge of Budapest is not an absolute prerequisite, but you will get more out of it if you google a bit of history and geography beyond the map Marton provides in the opening of the book.]

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## **Carol says**

This is a must read book for anyone with any interest in 20thC European history. The author (widow of Peter Jennings) came to the US from Hungary with her family in the mid 50's at the time of the Hungarian Revolution against the USSR. She writes of the linguistic and cultural uniqueness of Hungarians in Europe--making the point that the transition of Hungarians to the US was huge, given that they never really fit in well in their home continent. The impact of WWI and the rapid and extreme political changes that came with the fall of the Austro-Hungarian empire cannot be under-estimated. The nine individuals the author describes were artists, scientists, directors, and mathematicians. You will learn details of film production, the Manhattan Project, the Spanish Civil War, the McCarthy era, and even Ingrid Bergman (not Hungarian!) in this instructive and entertaining book that makes profound points about politics, genius, and art.

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## **Marcia Fine says**

I loved the history in this book. It brought together the movie industry, the Manhattan Project and photography. There were so many famous names that influenced America. A most impressive work! Read this book as well as The Invisible Bridge

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## **Shauna Tharp says**

Marton's recounting of the experiences and influential lives of these nine men was excellent. She painted a picture of each man's contributions individually and as a remarkable group. This can't help but lead to thoughts of the unbelievable atrocities of Nazi Europe and the other unbelievable thinkers and artists that were lost.

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## **Karmen says**

Interesting to be reading about Hungary as the Syrian refugee crisis seemed to highlight its current xenophobia. A mindset so far from the Golden Age of 1870-1910, experienced so soon after Hungary's war for independence was cruelly extinguished in 1848. In 1867 Hungary's capital Budapest would become co-capital of the Austro-Hungarian [Habsburg] empire.

A generation later, Hungary would experience a period of great advances in the arts & sciences. Its Golden Age, 1870-1910, presented the world so much by so few including the persons below:

Scientists Leo Szilard, Edward Teller, Eugene Wigner and John von Neuman.

Writer Arthur Koestler

Photographer/director Robert Capa

Photographer Andre Kertesz

Filmmaker Alexander Korda & Michael Curtiz

The gentleman outlined in this book give much credit to Budapest's cafe culture as much as the rigorous learning/schooling available in Austria/Hungary & Germany at the time.

Their journey from Hungary as it journeyed from an open society to a fascist anti-Jewish one mirrored the rise of fascism & Hitler. As a result, they were uniquely positioned to see the danger in Hitler's rise to power.

The book is a great introduction to the lives of these gentleman as they brought so much to the general public. Physics, photojournalism, etc.

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## **Julie says**

(Alexander Korda, Michael Curtiz, Arthur Koestler, Robert Capa, Andre Kertesz, Leo Szilard, Edward Teller, Eugene Wigner and John von Neumann) To be honest I know next to nothing about Hungarian history, but I found this group of men fascinating. Each one was driven and brilliant, but important for this story, and for the events of World War II, they were politically sophisticated and very pessimistic about the fate of Jews in Europe. As a group they were not so much forced out of Europe as they were quick to leave before the communists or fascists took over. Hungary had a very early taste of Soviet communism and police state fascism just after World War I. Years before the Germans experienced hyper inflation, when Hitler was almost unknown, Hungary's governments in 1919 revealed the disturbing possibilities of the two great political systems that would mark the 20th century.

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## **Evelyn says**

After I finished Marton's 'Paris: A Love Story' I wasn't sure I'd want to read anything else by her. I'd liked her book on Wallenberg well enough, but found some parts a bit ponderous. It felt like she had a mission, which she completed more than adequately, but her prose didn't fully resonate.

After those 2 books I wondered, quite frankly, how she'd earned her stellar reputation as a writer, and suspected that perhaps she'd benefited from the company she kept rather than her actual abilities. Since the subject of this book was of interest to me I figured I'd give her one more chance. And I wasn't disappointed.

From the very beginning this book had me hooked. Marton profiles 9 Jewish Hungarian expats, all men who were born either at the end of the 19th or the beginning of the 20th century. Each was raised in Hungary, spent some formative years in an open, liberal, intellectual Budapest, either at its zenith, or as those years were waning, and each left the country when anti-Semitism became the national platform after the fall of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Each went on to earn international acclaim in a variety of fields--4 physicists including one future Nobel winner (Edward Teller, John von Neumann, Eugene Wigner and Leo Szilard), 2 photographers (Robert Capa and Andre Kertesz), one writer (Arthur Koestler), one director (Mike Curtiz of Casablanca fame) and one producer (Alexander Korda)--and each was a star in his own right, though none were acclaimed in Hungary till years later (if at all).

Marton's prose are well crafted and on occasion utterly beautiful (her paragraphs on how much the birth of Israel and being there to see it, meant to Arthur Koestler, Robert Capa and Martha Gellhorn brought tears to my eyes). I thought she managed to bring each of these gentlemen to life fluidly.



One of the reason I believe this book worked so well was that the overall subject was so close to Marton's own life and experience. After an oppressive early childhood in Hungary, during which (for some of the time) her parents were jailed, in 1956 the Marton family escaped to the west where they lived as expats in much the same way Marton's subjects did. Of course, her subjects flourished before, during and after WWII, earlier than Marton's own experiences. But the similarities are strong. And perhaps of equal importance, by the time Marton began working on this book, the secret of her Jewish origins had been revealed to her, and she clearly felt a kinship to each of these men.

One tiny quibble-I do wish there had been at least one woman among her subjects (ceramicist Eva Zeissel perhaps???), but the gender imbalance doesn't really detract from the overall effect of the book.

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