

Auschwitz Museum Obituary notice

Rudolf Vrba Dies at 82. He was one of the few who managed to escape from the camp.

21-04-2006

Vrba was born Walter Rosenberg in Topolcany, Slovakia, in 1924. Jozef Tiso's pro-fascist government introduced anti-Jewish legislation, modeled on that of Nazi Germany, in Slovakia in 1940. As a result, Vrba was first expelled from a Bratislava secondary school, then arrested, and finally deported at the age of 18 to Auschwitz, where he was assigned prisoner number 44070.

He was forced to labor for a year in the "Kanada" work detail, employed sorting the vast amounts of shoes, clothing, and other personal effects belonging to the Jews who were murdered in the gas chambers. He was also a witness to the scenes that transpired when transports arrived. He saw how the SS men treated the Jews and put them through selection for the gas chambers.

Decades later, in 2004, Vrba helped the Museum in its work on commemorating the place where he had worked for a time, the so-called *Judenrampe*. This was the railroad right-of-way between Auschwitz and Birkenau, where the Germans directed arriving trains full of people deported to Auschwitz during the war.

On April 7, 1944, after almost two years in Auschwitz, Vrba and his fellow prisoner Alfred Wetzler went into a hiding place in "Meksyk" (Mexico), as one part of Auschwitz II-Birkenau was called. They made their way out of the camp after spending three days hiding there.

Their escape route led to Slovakia. Polish and Slovakian civilians aided them along the way. More than ten days later, Vrba and Wetzler met secretly with members of the Jewish community council in Zylyna, and submitted their account about what they had seen in Auschwitz.

The account was the basis for a report containing a description of events in Auschwitz from April 1942 to April 1944, which also covered the earlier period.

The Vrba-Wexler report was then sent to the west through various channels, reaching the World Jewish Congress, the International Red Cross, allied governments, and the Vatican, and receiving press coverage.

Both the escapees stayed in Slovakia and joined the partisans; they greeted liberation as armed combatants. Vrba emigrated to Canada in 1967. He was a professor of pharmacology.

The Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum published the Vrba-Wetzler report in Polish, English, and German in *Reports by Escapees from Auschwitz Concentration Camp*, featuring an introduction by Henrk Świebocki of the Museum's historical research department titled "Auschwitz—Did the World Know the Truth about the Camp during the War?" – Auschwitz Museum Obituary Notice

[The Auschwitz Museum simultaneously provided the stupendously false statistic that only one million people were "deported" to Auschwitz.]

News

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Thanks to Polish civilians and escapees from the camp, the world learned the truth about the Nazi German Auschwitz Concentration Camp while the war was still on

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Collecting evidence of Nazi crimes

The resistance movement in the camp made continual efforts to inform the world about Auschwitz. Prisoners risked their lives to collect information and statistics about SS crimes.

Concealing evidence in the camp

Some of this material was concealed within the Auschwitz grounds in the hope that it would one day be discovered. This included the information about the tragedy and destruction of the Jews in notes made by members of the Sonderkommando—the prisoners whom the Germans forced to burn the corpses of the victims. Also concealed were the record books of the Gypsy camp, containing thousands of names, and prints of SS photographs documenting construction work, including the building of the gas chambers. This material was published after the war.

Smuggling evidence out of Auschwitz

A significant part of the information about the murder of Jews in the gas chambers and the annihilation of Poles, Gypsies, Soviet POWs, and prisoners from other ethnic groups was sent out of Auschwitz while it was still in operation and received by the Polish resistance movement. Polish prisoners who clandestinely maintained contact with other Poles outside the camp played a crucial role in this work. Otherwise, the flow of information would not have been possible.

The Polish resistance movement received the information coming out of Auschwitz, and used it in its own domestic underground publications as well as sending it to the west and the headquarters of the Polish government-in-exile in London.

The Polish government used the material it obtained to inform the free world, including the UK and the USA, through diplomatic channels and in the form of reports, about the crimes the Nazis were committing in Auschwitz. Thanks to this work, the truth about the camp was already known during the war.

Escapes from Auschwitz

Escapes from the camp were an additional way of informing the world about the crimes the Germans were committing in Auschwitz. The attitudes of local civilians had great significance in the success of escapes.

Escapes: facts and figures

Over the history of Auschwitz, where over a million people were deported, several hundred attempted to escape. The most numerous among the escapers were Poles, Soviets, and Jews. Fewer than 150 escape

attempts succeeded. The Germans shot other escapers during their attempts, or captured them and murdered them later.

The attitude of the local Polish population

Thanks to the attitude of local Polish civilians, Auschwitz escapees were not left depending solely on their own resources. Escapes were frequently organized in close cooperation with local resistance organizations. They hid Auschwitz fugitives before later escorting them to safer regions far from the camp, where they could count on shelter or a chance to join partisan units.

The first escape

The first escape was made as early as July 6, 1940, during the first month that the camp was in operation. The escapee was a Pole, Tadeusz Wiejowski, who walked out through the gate under the sign reading Arbeit macht frei disguised as a laborer, accompanied by members of the Polish resistance movement who were employed in the camp as "civilian workers." Only one of these resistance fighters survived the war. Wiejowski himself was later arrested and shot.

The most spectacular escape from Auschwitz

On June 20, 1942, four Poles, Kazimierz Piechowski, Stanisław Gustaw Jaster, Józef Lempart, and Eugeniusz Bendera, made a daring escape. They broke into an SS storage area and stole uniforms and weapons. Then, dressed as SS men, they drove a stolen vehicle out of the heavily guarded, closed area around the camp. One of them was carrying a report on Auschwitz, written up for the supreme command of the Polish Home Army (AK).

Polish-Jewish escapes

The escape by the Pole Edward Galiński and the Jew Mala Zimetbaum ended unsuccessfully. They made their exit from Auschwitz on June 24, 1944, when he, disguised as an SS man, escorted her out of the closed area around the camp. However, they were captured less than three weeks later, brought back to Auschwitz, and executed after brutal interrogation.

The Pole Jerzy Bielecki and the Jew Cyla Cybulska repeated the same escape ploy a month later, and succeeded. He was dressed as an SS man and pretended to be escorting her. Bielecki joined a partisan unit and Cybulska went into hiding with a Polish family until the end of the war.

Escapes combined with reports on the Nazi atrocities at Auschwitz

Of special significance were the escapes whose protagonists, once they reached freedom, wrote up reports on the crimes that the Nazis were committing in Auschwitz. The publication German Extermination Camps - Auschwitz and Birkenau, which came out in Washington in November 1944, was based on reports of this kind which were passed clandestinely to the west. The authors were Auschwitz escapees—the Pole Jerzy Tabeau and the Jews Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler (mentioned above), and Arnošt Rosin and Czesław Mordowicz.

Aid to Auschwitz prisoners

The camp was founded in June 1940. As early as the following month, its commandant wrote to the supreme SS and police commander in Wrocław, regarding the local civilians, that "[they] are fanatically Polish and ready for any kind of action against the hated camp SS garrison. Each prisoner who manages to escape can count on help of any kind as soon as he reaches the first Polish farmstead."

Spontaneous aid

Spontaneous help was offered to prisoners by Poles from the local area who had not yet been expelled from their homes, sent off to slave labor in Germany, arrested, or deported to the camps—the fates that lay in store for all of them sooner or later.

Despite their own severe difficulties in material terms, resulting from plunder of their property, confiscation, delivery of agricultural production quotas under duress, and strict food rationing, these people helped the inmates of Auschwitz.

Organized help

Local underground organizations, mainly the Home Army, Polish Socialist Party, and Peasant Battalions, worked for the sake of the prisoners in an organized way.

Varieties of aid

Poles organized secret feeding points for prisoners laboring outside the camp, passed on their secret correspondence with relatives, delivered medicine and warm clothing, and helped with organizing escapes and sheltering fugitives.

The treatment of newly arrived Jews and their murder in the gas chambers; living conditions in the camp

During a [my first] night shift I was able to witness for the first time how incoming convoys were handled. The transport I saw contained Polish Jews. They had received no water for days and when the doors of the freight cars were open we were ordered to chase them out with loud shouts [while they were also hurried by the beatings of the SS-men].

They were utterly exhausted and about a hundred of them had died during the journey. The living were lined up in rows of five. Our job was to remove the dead, dying, and the luggage from the cars. The dead, and this included anyone unable to stand on his feet, were piled in a heap.

Luggage and parcels were collected and stacked up. Then the railroad cars had to be thoroughly cleaned so that no trace of their frightful load was left behind. A commission from the political department proceeded with the "selection." of approximately 10 percent of the men and 5 percent of the women and had them transferred to the camps. The remainder were loaded on trucks, sent to Birkenau, and gassed while the dead and dying were taken directly to the furnaces. It often happened that small children were thrown alive into the trucks along with the dead. Parcels and luggage were taken to the warehouses and sorted out in the previously described manner.

Between July and September, 1942 a typhus epidemic had raged in Auschwitz, especially in the women's camp of Birkenau. None of the sick received medical attention and in the first stages of the epidemic a great many were killed by phenol injections, and later on others were gassed wholesale. Some 15,000 to 20,000, mostly Jews, died during two months. The girls' camp suffered the most, as it was not fitted with sanitary installations, and the poor wretches were covered with lice. Every week large "selections" took place and the girls had to present themselves naked to the "selection committee," regardless of weather conditions. They waited in deadly fear whether they would be chosen or given another week's grace. Suicides were frequent and were mostly committed by throwing one's self against the high tension wires of the inner fence.