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## Remembering Rudolf Vrba's 5 per cent

By Tom Teicholz

On April 7, 1944, Rudolf Vrba escaped from Auschwitz, one of very few to do so; he died recently at age 81, a professor of pharmacology at the University of Vancouver, British Columbia. Vrba once said that he spent 95 percent of his life on science and 5 percent on the Holocaust. It is worth considering the importance of that 5 percent and the controversy it engendered, which resonates to this day.

Vrba was born Walter Rosenberg in 1924 and grew up in Czechoslovakia. At 15, he was barred from attending school because he was Jewish. He became a laborer until he was arrested in 1942 and sent first to Majdanek and then to Auschwitz. He worked for many months in the arrivals area, watching the overfilled human cargo trains pull in and sorting the goods of the soon-to-be-dead. At a later date, he was transferred to Birkenau, where he worked in the quarantine area, registering those whose illnesses prevented them from immediately being murdered. There he could glimpse the gas chambers and came into contact with the sonderkommando, Jewish inmates whose job was to drag the bodies from the gas chambers to the crematoria.

In the quarantine section, Vrba met fellow inmate Alfred Wetzler (also spelled Weczler) who had worked in various areas of Auschwitz-Birkenau, and between them, they had a comprehensive understanding of the camps and their operation. They decided — against all reason, all information and even against the advice of some Jewish leaders in the camp — to escape. They were driven not only to save their own lives but to tell the world what they had seen. Vrba, in particular, was concerned because he had witnessed a new railroad spur being built and had overheard that this was meant for the Jews of Hungary who would soon be coming to Auschwitz to meet their fate.

Vrba and Wetzler escaped by hiding at the perimeter of the camp, where materials were kept for constructing an extension of the grounds. They hid for three days under planks in a woodpile and spread near them tobacco and some gasoline to hide their scent from the guard dogs. After three days, the Germans stopped searching for them. Only then did they emerge and actually make their escape.

Eventually, they crossed from Poland to Slovakia and made contact with leaders of the Jewish resistance, whom they told what they had witnessed. It was shocking — no one had escaped Auschwitz before — and no one had ever described the camp and its operation in such exacting detail.

The Jewish leaders knew that their friends and family members had been transported to the camps in the east — but even they could not grasp a systematic factory of death where plunder

and murder were done in an assembly line process. They questioned Vrba and Wetzler each separately to make sure their stories matched and redacted their accounts in Hungarian and German into a 32 page account that became known as the Vrba-Wetzler report and as “The Auschwitz Protocols.”

Copies were prepared: One was given to Rabbi Michael Dov-Ber Weissmandel to send to Jewish representatives in Switzerland, who in turn sent it to the United States, where it was brought to President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s attention. Another was given to the representative of the pope in Slovakia, who forwarded it to the Vatican. Finally, Vrba insisted that a copy be sent to the Hungarian Jewish leadership to warn them of what the Nazis had planned for them.

The Nazis had invaded Hungary and occupied Budapest on March 19, 1944. Up until then, Budapest’s Jews lived in relative safety. However, with Adolf Eichmann now in command, the Nazis immediately began imposing restrictive laws and regulations.

The Hungarian Jewish Rescue and Relief Committee (also called the Waada) was headed by two men, Joel Brand and Rudolf (Rezo) Kastner. Kastner arrived in Bratislava on April 28, 1944, and was given a copy of the Wetzler-Vrba report. And herein the controversy begins.

Once the world knew of Auschwitz, what did it do? What did Roosevelt do? What actions did the pope take? And what of the Hungarian Jews themselves?

The gas chambers at Auschwitz continued to operate until late October 1944 — of 800,000 Hungarian Jews, only about 80,000 survived the war — Vrba felt that the world powers did not do enough, and that because the Hungarian Jewish leadership did not inform the entire Hungarian Jewish population of the Nazis’ plans, hundreds of thousands of Jewish lives were lost that might have been saved. Vrba titled his memoir, “I Cannot Forgive.”

Why didn’t Kastner distribute the Wetzler-Vrba report among the Jewish populace?

Many accounts suggest that the Waada didn’t want to “alarm” the population. But there is also another reason given: On April 25, 1944, Eichmann, architect of the Final Solution, summoned Brand to his new offices in the Majestic Hotel in Budapest. After explaining that he was the one responsible for the “aktionen” against Jews in Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia, Eichmann made a shocking declaration: “I am prepared to sell you 1 million Jews.”

Recently, I read Brand’s account of this meeting and what ensued in “Desperate Mission, Joel Brand’s Story,” by Alex Weissberg (Criterion, 1958). It is chilling and mind numbing to imagine being in the room with Eichmann and hearing such a proposal. It is even more heartbreaking to read what followed: Brand was dispatched to get the approval and funds from the Jewish Agency leadership in Constantinople (Istanbul). Although he was expected to return in two weeks, instead Brand was led on a wild goose chase that had him travel to Aleppo in Syria and to Cairo, where he was interrogated by British authorities. Along the way, he met with Jewish leaders Moshe Shertok, David Ben-Gurion and Teddy Kollek.

Months passed. No one helped. No one acted. Instead, the Jewish leaders parachuted “fighters” into Eastern Europe, who were immediately arrested, including Hannah Senesh who was put to death by the Nazis in a Budapest jail cell.

Back in Budapest, Kastner kept the negotiations alive with Eichmann and his surrogates, most notably an SS man named Kurt Becker. Eventually, they succeeded in having a train of some 1,600 Jews sent to Switzerland. Kastner believed, as Brand had, that the war was going to end imminently. They thought they just had to stall a little longer to save Jewish lives.

On July 19, 1944, Hungarian Prime Minister Miklos Horthy stopped the deportations to the camps. However, the Hungarian fascists, the Arrow Cross Party, toppled Horthy and resumed a policy of murdering Jews, which continued unabated until the Russians liberated Budapest in January, 1945.

After the war, Kastner immigrated to Israel, where he worked in a government ministry. When a fellow Hungarian immigrant, Malchiel Greenwalt, attacked Kastner as a Nazi collaborator, Kastner sued for libel. The Kastner trial, as it came to be called, became a trial of Kastner’s behavior during the war — whether he deliberately did not inform Hungarian Jewry of the Nazis’ plan and let hundreds of thousands die in order to save the 1,600 members of the Kastner train, which included some of his friends and relatives.

He was faulted for having provided an affidavit for Becker at his war crimes trial, saying they had worked together to save Jews. The judge concluded that Kastner had “sold his soul to Satan” in dealing with Eichmann and Becker. Soon after, the Ben-Gurion government fell. American writer and Irgun supporter Ben Hecht wrote a play called “Perfidy,” critical of Kastner and those who would negotiate rather than resist.

However, on appeal, the Supreme Court of Israel reversed the verdict, saying Kastner had only done what any person in his situation would have done. But it was too late: Kastner had been assassinated on a Tel Aviv street a few months earlier. His murderer was never found.

Eichmann, for his part, fled to Argentina, where in 1961 he was apprehended by Israeli agents and brought to trial in Jerusalem. Brand and his wife, Hansi, testified against him. In his testimony, Eichmann implied that he used Kastner to keep order among the Jews during the deportations. Holocaust revisionists have used Eichmann’s comments and Vrba’s arguments as fodder for the contention that the Jews were complicit in their own murders.

So what are we to think? No one really knows what Eichmann intended. Were his negotiations with the Jewish community a way to distract the Jewish leaders and lull them into submission as he pursued his Final Solution? Would he really have saved 1 million lives if he had received the payment he demanded? Was all this a plan or a ploy by Eichmann — or even Himmler — to create an opening to the Allies after the U.S. invasion at Normandy and the approaching Soviet forces? Was this a way to say, as Becker did at his war crimes trial: “We wanted to save Jews”?

Did Brand and Kastner make tragic judgment calls? Or was Kastner guided purely by self-interest? How can we second guess him? If the Auschwitz protocols had been circulated among

the Hungarian Jewish populace, would more have survived? Would people have even believed them as true?

Remember, that since 1939, more than 25,000 Jewish refugees had flooded Hungary, and many had reported on the fate of Polish Jewry, the ghettos and camps there and had established a resistance organization (which reported to Brand and Kastner). If Auschwitz's purpose was not known, certainly the Nazi and Arrow Cross plans for Jewish annihilation were.

What we do know for sure is as follows: Vrba and Wetzler's report did confirm the worst fears of the Jewish leadership. Roosevelt and the pope shortly thereafter did condemn the deportations and Horthy did act to halt the deportations. Kastner did save more than 1,600 Jewish lives. Some sources (and I'm not sure how they calculated this) estimate that as a result of the Vrba-Wetzler report, 100,000 lives were saved.

After the war, Vrba did doctoral and post-doctoral work in Prague. He became a medical researcher in Israel, Britain, the United States and Canada. Wetzler became a journalist and author, writing under the name Jozef Lanik. He died in 1988 in Slovakia.

The questions remain: How do we ponder the imponderable? How do we act? Given what we know of Bosnia, Rwanda, Darfur (and these are just the places whose names have become totems to us), what can we do? What should we do?

Vrba knew he had to tell the world what he had witnessed. The world, for its part, found it hard to listen, but in the end, it could not ignore the facts. Vrba's 5 percent still haunts us to this day.

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