

PAT JOHNSON ARTICLE ON RUTH LINN

Israeli narrative omits Vrba

By Pat Johnson

When Rudolf Vrba passed away in Vancouver last month, a hero of the Holocaust and a profound and difficult epic in history passed with him. But the story of Vrba's astounding escape from Auschwitz – he was one of just five Jews to make it out before the end of the war – remains an open book.

Ruth Linn, the dean of education at the University of Haifa, in Israel, flew to Vancouver immediately after her own mother's shivah, to be with Vrba's widow and family. In an interview with the *Independent*, Linn, who is the author of an explosive book on Vrba, his escape and his place in Holocaust historiography, disinters the painful and difficult questions Vrba's life and story raised. While the events of Vrba's escape are long past, the events of early 1944 remain key to understanding the moral complexities and failures of that time. They also raise difficult, and still not fully answered, questions about the narrative of the Holocaust as told by primarily Israeli historians.

Alfred Wetzler and Rudolf Vrba held positions of some authority within Auschwitz-Birkenau, which allowed them to learn details of incoming transports. Having imagined an escape for many months, the news that the camp was preparing for the arrival and liquidation of the 800,000 Jews of Hungary made Vrba and Wetzler's plan immediately urgent. Miraculously escaping the notoriously high-security facility, the two made their way to their Slovak homeland and conveyed to Jewish leaders details of the true fate awaiting the Jews of Europe, most of whom still believed they were headed for "resettlement" in an eastern location of comparative freedom.

The Vrba-Wetzler Report was a precise description of the geography of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the mass murders occurring there and a detailed outline of developments in that vacuum of humanity since 1942. Vrba and Wetzler's recollections constituted the first eyewitness details about Auschwitz to reach the Allies. But, while Vrba and Wetzler risked their lives to bring this news to the world – and details were reported by the BBC and the *New York Times* – the information never flowed down to ordinary Hungarian Jews, whose imminent liquidation Vrba had forewarned. Despite the report, 437,000 Jews were transported to Auschwitz in the weeks *after* the information about the death camps was made available.

Vrba's escape, though it did not have the impact he wanted, which was to incite mass resistance among Hungarian Jews, nevertheless may have contributed to saving the lives of between 100,000 and 200,000 Jews. Linn contrasts Vrba's story with many celebrated martyrs whose efforts against the Third Reich had no practical successes and wonders why Vrba was not more heralded.

Linn's 2004 book, *Escaping Auschwitz: A Culture of Forgetting*, explores the moral issues raised

by the failure of Jewish and other leaders to adequately disseminate the contents of the Vrba-Wetzler Report, speculating that some form of resistance could have been mounted by Hungarian Jews had they known. But the Jewish councils, or Judenrate, who were charged with the impossible task of negotiating the fate of their people with the Nazi overlords, apparently viewed the reality of Auschwitz as too upsetting to share with their citizenry. Deeming the Third Reich too powerful to confront, the councils seem to have concluded, Linn posits, that it was best for the Jews of Hungary to march to their deaths unaware of what awaited them.

However, the more sinister issues raised by Linn's book centre not on the manner in which the news was used (or not used) in 1944, but the manner in which the Israeli Holocaust narrative has almost entirely expunged any reference to Vrba. The issues she raises are difficult: the role of Jewish councils in the Holocaust, the choices these elites made under inhuman conditions and the postwar creation of a heroic – and Zionist – mythology around individual incidents in the Shoah.

Linn has been on this story, off and on, since first hearing of Vrba in Claude Lanzmann's monumental 1987 documentary *Shoah*. The themes of the film were well known to Linn, with the exception of one remarkable story.

"This was Rudolf Vrba," she said, noting that she had learned nothing of the daring escape either in her Israeli education or as an academic. "This was very strange to me, because I read a lot about the Holocaust. I never, ever read about Vrba in Israeli textbooks."

This made Linn curious.

"Ever since I saw the Lanzmann documentary, this question stayed in my mind: Am I the only crazy Israeli who fell asleep in class when we studied this in the Holocaust?" she asked. "Or maybe we never studied it."

Further research in Israel revealed little about Vrba. The historical footnote remained in Linn's mind, but she continued with her other work, until an academic exchange brought her to the University of British Columbia. Here, in 1994, she was astounded to discover she was practically a neighbor of a pharmacology professor – Vrba – who was teaching at UBC.

Vrba, who apparently harbored some suspicions about researchers, gave Linn his 1963 book *I Cannot Forgive* and sent her away. It would be years before Linn and Vrba would develop their profound, familial friendship, but Linn was moved by Vrba's book.

"In terms of literature, it is in the class of Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, first-class novelists of the Holocaust," said Linn. "But then I turned the book back and forth and I see on the cover, 'First published 1963.' And the year is 1994. I said to myself, 'Where has this book been for 31 years? I never read about it in Israel.' "

Why had the Vrba story been almost erased from Israeli Holocaust narrative? Linn took it as a challenge to find out.

"Now I had an Agatha Christie mission to try and trace what happened to this book," she said over coffee in Kerrisdale during Pesach. "It was published in London in 1963 ... but it wasn't translated into Hebrew. What, there was no money? So many books have been translated and this is not a [story about a] tiny shtetl in Siberia. This is Auschwitz, centre of the Holocaust narrative. So this became, accidentally, my mission: to do justice to history, to bring this guy to Israel and give him an honorary doctorate. We didn't know about him and I wanted to put him back into our history."

With Linn shepherding the manuscript, which had already been translated by another Israeli researcher, Yehoshua Ben Ami, the book was finally published in Hebrew in 1998. Vrba then went to Israel and participated in a conference and signed copies of his book.

While the lessons of Vrba's life remain to be learned, the Holocaust narrative prevalent in Israel is now forced to include the heroic story of Vrba's escape and the troubling implications of its aftermath. This story does not have a tidy ending. But Linn notes that she has added a chapter to the mystery.

"My book starts from 1963," she said. "What happened to this book in the Israeli narrative? My book is the story of the story. The lost story."

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Pat Johnson is editor of *MVOX Multicultural Digest*, www.mvox.ca.

Ruth Linn is central to the creation of the Vrba Laboratory for the Study of Morality and Leadership at the University of Haifa. Tax-deductible donations can be made to the Canadian Friends of Haifa University, 400 Walnut Rd, #729, Toronto, Ont., N5P 2X7. Cheques should be made out to Canadian Friends of Haifa University, c/o Account #4872.