

# Introduction

*Escape from Hell*, Alfred Wetzler's personal story, straddles the line between memoir and literature, in many ways like Eli Wiesel's much heralded *Night*. Like *Night* it evokes reality powerfully and poignantly, even if at times it adheres less strictly to the form of a conventional historical narrative. Yet the heart of the story is based on historical fact, not fiction.

Unlike most memoirs, which are written in the first person, this book is written in the third person. The two main protagonists of the escape Alfred Wetzler and Rudolf Vrba (Walter Rosenberg) are referred to as Karol and Val, respectively. They are written about like characters in a reportage or novel albeit not with distance, but with intimacy.

Throughout the book Wetzler includes a great deal of dialogue, which is considered problematic in a memoir, since rarely can a witness remember the exact words that were said at the time. Moreover, Wetzler includes scenes and dialogue from situations that he did not directly witness. For example, he reconstructs events among the staff members at the heart of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp, while he and Vrba were hiding and waiting to begin making their way to Slovakia. Wetzler obviously did not hear what was said or observe the frenzied reactions of the camp staff in their offices. At best he could have learned of these things after the war from survivors, or he may have used his knowledge of the men involved to fill in the gaps. The descriptions of several scenes in the book differ from those previously presented in the scholarly literature, in particular, Wetzler's account of the compilation of the report about Auschwitz and the people present when he and Vrba recounted their information.

Still, many people Wetzler mentions and scenes he relates correspond very closely to the known historical record. Wetzler writes about people like the notorious physicians Mengele, Clauberg, Thilo, Wirths and Schumann. He mentions Karl Prufer, chief engineer of Topf and Sons (the makers of the gas chambers and crematoria at Auschwitz Birkenau), as well as the brutal SS Hauptscharführer Otto Moll, chief of the crematoria at Birkenau. Frequently he refers to the cruel Johann Schwarzhuber, who he calls Hans, the commander of Birkenau. At the other end of the spectrum he writes about Mala Zimetbaum, a member of the Auschwitz resistance who was hanged. Many aspects of the

description of his and Vrba's escape not only ring true, they reverberate. The first stage of the escape itself, the secreting of the pair under a woodpile on the outer perimeter of the camp, the spreading of Russian tobacco previously soaked in gasoline to deter the guard-dogs from discovering the two men, and the three day wait until the Nazis called off their manhunt, all match other accounts. By describing the cramped space in which they hid and the tension they felt until they were able to begin their journey to Slovakia, Wetzler draws the reader close to what the men must have experienced, thought and felt.

Wetzler is a master at evoking the universe of Auschwitz, especially his and Vrba's harrowing flight to Slovakia. The day-by-day account of the tremendous difficulties the pair faced after the Nazis had called off their search of the camp and its surroundings is both riveting and heart wrenching. Wetzler makes it clear that alone, neither man would have made it to Slovakia, but together, each leaning on the other, they were able to attain their goal. The timely help they received from Poles and Slovaks, who endangered themselves to help, cannot cancel out the barbarism the pair faced in Auschwitz-Birkenau or the desperate risk of their escape, but Wetzler's descriptions of aid remind readers that even in the worst of times and situations, a handful of righteous people emerged.

Wetzler and Vrba's report, later appended by the information provided by two additional escapees, Czeslaw Mordowicz and Arnost Rosin, has come to be known as the Auschwitz Protocols. Wetzler and Vrba, as well as the members of the Auschwitz-Birkenau underground who helped arrange their escape and who provided them with many of the details about the camp, hoped that once the report about the mass systematic murder and inhuman regime at Auschwitz-Birkenau was made public, the Allies would intervene to destroy the machinery of death. Those like the intrepid Rabbi Michael Dov Weissmandel of the semi-underground rescue organization, the Working Group, who received the report in Slovakia and forwarded the information it contained to the 'free world', also believed the protocols would lead to immediate action to destroy the murder apparatus. But this did not happen.

Nevertheless the Auschwitz Protocols, which reached the 'free world' through various paths, did make a considerable impression. Arriving in Žilina on 25 April, 1944, some 18 days after the start of their escape, Wetzler and Vrba met with Ervin Steiner a representative of the Slovak Jewish leadership. Immediately thereafter Steiner contacted Oscar Krasnansky of the Bratislava based Jewish Center, the Slovak Jewish Council. Krasnansky managed to reach Žilina and at Steiner's house Wetzler and Vrba told the Jewish leaders about

Auschwitz, moving them profoundly. Separately, Wetzler and Vrba then wrote up their accounts, which were combined in a 60 page document a few days later. It was copied several times over, translated from Slovak to German and Hungarian, and distributed to members of the Slovak Jewish Council, the Papal Nuncio in Slovakia, Monsignor Giuseppe Burzio (who then sent it to the Vatican), and to the Budapest Relief and Rescue Committee. The last was particularly important because the report contained information about preparations in Auschwitz-Birkenau for the imminent arrival and slaughter of Hungarian Jewry. The Relief and Rescue Committee, which had just begun negotiations with the SS about rescuing Hungarian Jews, apparently did not widely disseminate the information contained in the protocols. Even today, their actions concerning the report remain a matter of controversy among scholars, survivors and lay people.

Rabbi Weissmandel sent out an abbreviated version of the report to his contacts in Switzerland, early in May, but the information did not arrive. On 16 May, just after the deportations from Hungary began, he tried again, adding a plea to bomb the rail lines leading to Auschwitz-Birkenau. This time, Recha and Isaac Sternbuch of the Swiss-based Vaad Hahatzalah received it and began its dissemination. The full text of the protocols, delivered by a courier dispatched by Weissmandel's Working Group, reached Switzerland only on 13 June, 1944. It was delivered into the hands of the representative of the Czechoslovak Government in Exile, Dr Jaromir Kopecky. Gerhard Riegner of the World Jewish Congress then sent it to allied representatives in Bern: Elizabeth Wiskemann of the British legation, Allen Dulles head of U.S. intelligence in Switzerland and Roswell McClelland of the American legation. On 18 June, the BBC broadcast segments of the report. In Switzerland itself, a press campaign ensued, urging that aid be given to Jews endangered by the Nazi occupation.

The results of all of this activity are not easy to pin down. Rescue initiatives were already underway in Hungary when the protocols reached the 'free world', yet it is quite likely that the report gave additional impetus to those efforts. The report probably had much to do with the appeal of 30 June, 1944, to the Hungarian Regent, Admiral Miklós Horthy, by the King of Sweden, Gustav, to save the remaining Jews of Hungary. This appeal was likely to have played an important role in Horthy's decision to stop the deportations from Hungary and offer to allow several thousand Jews to leave Hungary. The Horthy Offer, as it is known, in turn played a central role in subsequent rescue activities in Hungary. The information contained in the protocols almost certainly spurred on the International Committee of the Red Cross, which, on 4 July, 1944, made a written protest about Hungari-

an crimes against Hungarian Jewry and offered to supervise the distribution of food and medicine to the deportees. Horthy responded to their letter by making the International Red Cross responsible for the welfare of the remaining Jews of Budapest, which in turn became a linchpin in further rescue efforts.

The request first made by Rabbi Weissmandel to bomb Auschwitz-Birkenau and the rail lines leading to it, did not fall on deaf ears. Both Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt ordered that the matter be explored, but for purposes of rescue neither the camp nor the rail line was ever bombed. Although the issue is sensitive and tortuous, it is important to understand that the bombing was being considered around the time of the Normandy landings, when all of the effort of the Western Allies was focused intensely on the largest and most complicated military operation ever carried out up to that time. The bombing of the camp's murder facilities was deemed very problematic, and given the Allies' stated policy that nothing should detract from the war effort and that the best way to help the Jews was to win the war, the mere existence of difficulties in what was considered to be a non-military issue most likely precluded efforts to try to solve them. What remains clear, however, is that the Allies' desire to rescue Jews was never commensurate to the Nazis' desire to murder them. It is equally clear that the Auschwitz Protocols made an indelible impression on those who read them and contributed to the rescue of many thousands of Jews, especially in Budapest.

Wetzler's memoir, evoking the suffering, death and life in the shadow of the camp, allows readers to approach the unprecedented horror that was Auschwitz-Birkenau. His writing casts light on the desperate courage of the members of the underground, making it plain for all to see. Shining vibrantly through the pages of the memoir is the tenacity and valor of two young men, who sought to inform the world about the greatest outrage ever committed by humans against their fellow humans. The mixed consequences of their bloodcurdling message demonstrate the complex realities of a world in the throes of a cataclysmic war and the Holocaust, and the fundamental powerlessness of the Jews to stop the carnage.

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