

Against all hope -

Escaping Auschwitz, escaping memory

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The truth about Auschwitz was the most guarded secret of the architects of the Final Solution. It was kept as a military secret by six thousand SS personnel, two hundred vicious dogs, two lines of electrified fences, and a terrorized, fearful Polish population living around the camp. It was further preserved by limiting and restricting the prisoners' movements inside the camp, particularly those of Jews. Throughout the five years of the camp's existence there were hundreds of attempts at escape. Seventy-six of the escapees were Jews, but most were caught. Only five succeeded in escaping, to reveal the secrets of Auschwitz and to survive the war to tell their stories (Braham, 2000; Conway, 1984a,b; Gilbert, 1981, Hilberg, 1992, 1996; Kulka, 1975).

Historians have no doubt that "by far, the most important escape was that of Walter Rosenberg (Rudolf Vrba) and Alfred Wetzler (Josef Lanik) on April 7th 1944" (Braham, 1981, p. 709). Both escapees had been deported from Slovakia in the spring of 1942.

A major aspect of Vrba's duties during 1942 and 1943 was to be present at the

arrival of most transports of deportees and to sort the belongings of the gassed victims. From this vantage point he was able to assess how little the deportees knew about Auschwitz when they entered the camp. Their luggage contained clothing for all seasons and basic utensils, a clear sign of their naive preparation for a new life in the area of "resettlement" in the east.

In the summer of 1943, Vrba improved his position for collecting information when he was appointed registrar in the quarantine camp for men. At the beginning of 1944, he noticed that preparations were under way for an additional railway line, for an expected transports of Jews who, in the SS camp language were called "Hungarian salami". Transports from different countries, Vrba would later explain, were characterised by certain long lasting provisions packed in the prisoners' luggage for the final journey into the unknown.

For almost two years he had thought of escape, at first selfishly, because he had merely wanted his freedom, but now, "I had an imperative reason. It was no longer a question of reporting a crime but of preventing one." He began his first scientific study: to assess every unsuccessful escape attempt, to analyze its flaws and to correct them.

On Friday, April 7 1944, (the eve of Passover), Vrba and Wetzler sneaked into a previously used hideout sprinkled with gasoline-soaked tobacco to prevent

the dogs from sniffing them out. They stayed there for three nights, until the camp authorities assumed that the two men had already got beyond the outer perimeter. When the cordon of SS guards that had surrounded that perimeter was withdrawn, Vrba and Wetzler were ready to sneak out.

On April 10, 1944, the escapees sneaked out of Auschwitz-Birkenau. After a perilous 11 days' march they reached their native country, Slovakia, and almost at once managed to establish contact with the leaders of the remainder of the Jewish community (about 25,000 out of 88,000 souls). For three days the escapees conveyed in detail to the members of the Jewish Council the geographical plan of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the German's method of mass murder (tattooing, gassing, and cremation) and the course of events they had witnessed there from the spring of 1942. Vrba and Wetzler gave an estimate of the number of Jews killed in Auschwitz in the period between June 1942 and April 1944 (about 1.75 million). They warned that preparations were being made for the murder of nearly 800,000 Jews from Hungary and the 3,000 Czech Jews who were placed in a "family camp" and were designated for "special treatment" on June 20, 1944, six months to the day after their arrival (.Conway,1997, Swiebocki, 1997).

The Vrba-Wetzler report was unprecedented in its accuracy and detail . It was carefully examined by the official Jewish leadership of Slovakia (Neumann, 1956). The escapees were assured that the information it contained would be

disseminated without delay to the western world and, of course, to the potential victims who, at that time, were still freely walking the streets of Hungary. Vrba's and Wetzler's predictions were soon confirmed by two other Auschwitz escapees, Czeslaw Mordowicz and Arnost Rosin, who succeeded in escaping from Auschwitz on May 27, 1944 and reached Slovakia on June 6, 1944. They reported that during the month of May, 1944 Hungarian Jews were being murdered in Auschwitz at an unprecedented rate and that the expanded facilities were now fully in use. Human fat was used to accelerate the burning of the corpses (.Braham & Miller, 1998).

The Vrba-Wetzler report was the first document about the Auschwitz death camp to reach the free world and to be accepted as credible. Its authenticity broke the barrier of skepticism and apathy that had existed up to that point (Lipstadt, 1986). It is doubtful, however, that its content reached more than a small part of the prospective victims, though Vrba's and Wetzler's critical and alarming report was in the hands of Hungarian Jewish leaders as early as April 28, 1944 or early May (Bauer, 1994, 1997b). During May-June 1944, about 437,000 Hungarian Jews boarded in good faith the "resettlement trains" that carried them to the Auschwitz death camps, where most were immediately gassed (Bauer, 2001; Braham & Pok, 1997). A study of numerous memoirs from a handful of surviving Hungarian deportees, even of those who arrived in Auschwitz as late as July 8, 1944, reveals their absolute ignorance of their impending fate at the death camp. Elie Wiesel summarized

it as follows: “We were taken just two weeks before D-Day and we did not know that Auschwitz existed... everyone knew except the victims” (Nicholls, 1993, p.353).

Hope suppressed

Whereas the two escapees were extremely accurate in their prediction about the fate of the Hungarian Jews (Braham, 2000), they could not have predicted that their postwar memoirs and documented report would be kept from the Israeli Hebrew-reading public (Linn, 1998). Fifty-four years after their escape, in June 1998, a poll was taken by the author of this book of 594 students in their third year of BA studies or in their first year of graduate studies at the University of Haifa in Israel (Linn, 1998). They were asked the following two questions: (1) “Did any Jew ever succeed in escaping from Auschwitz?” (2) “Who are the four Holocaust heroes that you are familiar with?” Ninety-eight percent of the respondents stated that no one had ever escaped from Auschwitz. The few who claimed to know that some prisoners had escaped did not know any of their names. The students (half of them prospective teachers) were more knowledgeable about the second question, and named Hanna Szenes, Anne Frank, Yanush Korzak, and Mordechai Anilewicz as their Holocaust heroes. They further named Oskar Schindler, the recent extracurricular addition from Hollywood (Cole, 1999).

Given the practical and symbolic role of Auschwitz in the Final Solution one

would imagine that an escape of Jewish prisoners from this center of evil would be commemorated as one of the highlights of a symbolic Jewish victory over the Third Reich. Yet in 1998, when questioned the average Israeli student about the escape from Auschwitz, it was not clear what was more amazing: the rarity of a successful escape of Jewish inmates from Auschwitz and the authenticity of their report, or the general ignorance of the average Israeli student about this event.

But then, though a native Israeli who had graduated from one of the best private high schools in the country, I myself had never heard about the escape from Auschwitz at the numerous Holocaust ceremonies I attended at school. Nor had I read about it in any of the Holocaust textbooks at school in my own time, or in those given to my children (Keren, 1999). The lesson taught to my generation and to that of my university students often seems to have been coupled with three predominant narratives: most Jewish victims went like "sheep to the slaughter"; a few succeeded in redeeming Jewish honor by resisting in the Warsaw Ghetto or fighting as partisans; and the world was silent. Like some other Israeli citizens, who are not history teachers or belong to the second generation of survivors, I became acquainted with this event during my adult life, through a non-Israeli, a foreign filmmaker, Claude Lanzmann (1987), who considered Vrba's testimony about his escape from Auschwitz central to the understanding of the Holocaust.

From 1987 on, following my encounter with the escape from Auschwitz in Lanzmann's documentary, I wondered how I might learn more about the escape from Auschwitz as an average Hebrew-reading Israeli citizen. I turned to Yad Vashem, the official Holocaust Institute and the national archive of the Holocaust. I failed to find a Hebrew version of the escapees' report about Auschwitz – it was available only in Hungarian or German.

Seven years passed. In 1994, during a stay at the University of British Columbia, it transpired that I did not have to travel far to accomplish my goal. Dr. Rudolf Vrba was my neighbor at the University of British Columbia where he was an Associate Professor of Pharmacology in the Faculty of Medicine. My meeting with him and then reading his book in English led me to modify my original research question. I was no longer concerned with probing the escape from Auschwitz: I was able to learn about this in vivid detail through reading Vrba's memoir originally published in London and a year later in the United States (Vrba & Bestic, 1963; 1964). But a serious new research question now formed in my mind: Why, 50 years after the Holocaust should the unique actions and memoirs of the Auschwitz escapees be sealed away from the average Hebrew reader? Why should Vrba's memoirs be found only in the German or English versions in the libraries of our best universities in Israel? Was there something in them that made it a national imperative to conceal them from the average Hebrew reader (Schlant, 1999)?

Without Vrba's knowledge I made it my mission to break a 35-year silence by having the book published in Hebrew (Vrba, 1998) through the publishing house of my university – albeit not before it had been rejected by Yad Vashem! Following the publication of his book in Hebrew, the University of Haifa awarded Dr. Vrba an honorary doctorate in recognition of his heroic escape from Auschwitz and his contribution to Holocaust education. To my surprise, even at this undeniably historic moment, some Israeli Holocaust historians made a desperate last-minute attempt to belittle the hero and his memoirs, using all possible means from letters of defamation to the press, first signed anonymously by "Four Historians" (*Yediot Acharonot*, June 2, 1998) through anonymous phone calls to the university administration and faculty, to false accusations and threatening phone calls to my home and to the university president's office. No less interesting was the position the Holocaust historians' establishment in Israel took up of "intellectual bystanders": not one of them protested in public against the published letters of the campaign against Vrba. It was precisely here, at "the end of history", that Walzer's (1988) profound question sneaked into my mind: "What is the use, after all, of a silent intellectual" (p.148)?

In the present study I try to delve into the mystery of Vrba's disappearance not only from Auschwitz but also from Israeli textbooks and the Israeli Holocaust narrative. As Bauer's (1998) recent suggestion that "we still lack a great deal of knowledge regarding the 'how' of the Holocaust ... [and] we

should increasingly be concerned with the 'why' " (p.13). Similarly, I think we should try to ascertain not only 'how' the account of the escape from Auschwitz was suppressed in the Israeli educational system, but also 'why'. In light of Bauer's (1998a) argument that German historiography is often dominated by the tendency "to hide things, not to explicate them" (Bauer, 1998a, p.21) studying the phenomenon is crucial. For today's Israeli youth, Auschwitz is not an abstract place - many are given the opportunity to visit the site with school delegations. Their lack of knowledge about the identity of the escapees from Auschwitz and their subsequent activities might suggest that Israelis, quite like Germans, are not immune to flaws of official historiography.

Hope restaged

On September 8, 1963, Hannah Arendt's report on Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem appeared in the *Observer*, conveying to her readers what she saw were the lessons of the trial: "The trial was supposed to show them [the younger generation] ... how the Jews had degenerated until they went to their death like sheep, and how only the establishment of a Jewish State had enabled Jews to hit back". Eichmann was a monster, the Jews were passive victims of the Nazis, and only the armed Zionist revolt in the Warsaw Ghetto prevented their being slaughtered like sheep.

A counter-narrative suggesting that in some cases at least the Jewish leaders

might have contributed to this "sheep" state of mind, as voiced by Arendt (1963), would soon be marginalized. Like all master narratives, the "sheep to the slaughter" thesis "represents the political elite's construction of the past, which serves its special interests and promotes its political agenda" (Zrubavel, 1995, p. 11). She refused to see Eichmann as the only agent that deceived the Jews in their march toward their own destruction. She would claim, as was later further documented, that keeping the Jews in the dark regarding the real intention of the deportation was not only a widespread policy of the Germans but in some cases the hidden agenda of the terrorized Jewish Councils. They were known by the pejorative term Judenrat. Once in position, Arendt reminds us, the Judenrat (though unwillingly) controlled the individuals' sphere of hope having they authority to compile the lists for deportation; protection of their families and close friends from deportation or the knowledge of events in the outside world and the destination of the deportation. Under this impossible conditions, the Judenrat activities were not without instances of protectionism, favoritism, misuse of positions of public trust for personal advantage - all of which naturally resulted in bitter accusations leveled against them by the community. Not without reason, Arendt came to see the role of the Judenrat as "undoubtedly the darkest chapter of the whole dark story." If the Warsaw uprising was discussed at the trial as a matter of Jewish pride in order to illustrate the ability of the Jews to resist, then, she argued, it was imperative to study the connection between the functioning of the Jewish Council and the lack of Jewish opposition as

well. It certainly should have interested the prosecutor, who without mercy repeatedly asked the witnesses: Why did you not resist? (Pearlman, 1963)

A week later, on September 15, 1963, Professor Jacob Talmon, a Hebrew University history professor who was a visiting fellow at Oxford at the time, wrote to the press in response to Arendt's non-Zionist position:

.... Miss Arendt's dissertation on Jewish "co-operation" is a display of atrocious bad taste. If that "collaboration" was such a very significant fact, all one can do is to hang one's head in silent shame and grief, while the courts do their job, and not gloat over it. But the whole argument is a piece of inflated nonsense. Anyone with the slightest knowledge of Jewish history knows that whenever and wherever a few Jews found themselves together their first reflex was to get organized, especially in an hour of trial.

Miss Arendt does not accuse even the most ambitious of the Jewish "collaborationists" of deliberate treason. She condemns them for letting themselves be duped out of a lack of that insight into the nature of totalitarianism which has been vouched to her - and only to her - *in her Manhattan apartment Post Factum...*

I was told of inmates of Auschwitz who while observing

everyday the smoke from the gas chambers would still not believe the truth. Gradually and systematically the Nazis took away from the Jews not only the power to resist but even the will to live, and when the Judenrat grasped what the real aim of the Nazis was they were no more than *helpless and benumbed hostages*.

In the end, they all went down to a man to death with their brethren, Judenrat or no Judenrat; it would not have made the slightest difference in face of the unshakable resolve to track down and to send to the gas chambers the last Jewish baby of men like Eichmann – a “banal” type on whom Miss Arendt expends all those *philosophical acrobatics and psychological profundities*. ... (*Observer*, September 15, 1963; emphasis added).

The letter is signed J.L. Talmon, Professor of Modern History, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, and Visiting Fellow St. Catherine’s College, Oxford. Talmon referred to Arendt as Miss instead of Dr. He further failed to acknowledge Arendt’s wisdom as a woman, a philosopher, and above all a non-Israeli – what kind of an insight about the Judenrat might one have if one lives in a *Manhattan apartment*? He further belittled her ability to understand the Holocaust events as she had not been there. He had no answer to her accusation that it was not only the Nazis who “took away from the Jews the

power to resist.”

Vrba responded to Talmon’s letter. On September 22, 1963, he wrote to the *Observer*:

As a Jewish inmate of Auschwitz from June 1942 until April 1944, it was not without amazement that I read last Sunday's letter from J.L. Talmon, Professor of modern history, Hebrew University, Jerusalem. Professor Talmon asserts that “*the Nazis took away from the Jews the power to resist*”. Saying [this] he is besmirching the memory of those dead Jews, who not only in Warsaw but even in Auschwitz formed an underground movement together with other, non-Jewish, prisoners and tried to fight from Auschwitz the Nazi-death machinery, although it was not on equal terms they had to fight once they had been tricked into Auschwitz. Most Jews believed the Nazis when they said they were deporting the Jews to labor camps. And they thought that labor camps would be better than pogroms against their children in their homes all over Europe. Therefore they went voluntarily to the new “reservations” in the “east” but when they arrived they were suddenly in the watertight extermination factories, and they could do nothing but die, whether they realized what was to happen to them or not.

Therefore the leaders of the underground in Auschwitz decided to send a warning to the Zionist leaders. Our underground leaders in Auschwitz cannot be blamed for the fact that most of the attempts to escape from Auschwitz and deliver the message failed. One of these leaders, Ernst Burger, from Vienna (who, incidentally, was not a Jew) ended with others on the gallows of Auschwitz for attempting to escape and to inform the world.

With my friend Fred Wetzler from Slovakia I managed to escape from Auschwitz on April 7, 1944, and we headed straight for the Zionist leaders. In April 1944, we handed to a high representative of the Zionist movement, Dr. Oscar Neumann, a 60-page detailed report on the fact that extermination of 1,760,000 Jews had taken place in Auschwitz, and that preparations were complete for the annihilation of one million Jewish Hungarians during the very next weeks. Did the Judenrat (or the Judenverrat) in Hungary tell their Jews what was awaiting them? No, they remained silent and for this silence some of their leaders – for instance Dr. R. Kasztner – bartered their own lives and the lives of 1684 other “prominent” Jews directly from Eichmann. They were not “helpers and benumbed hostages” but clever diplomats who knew what their silence was worth. The 1684 Jews whom they bought from

Eichmann included not only various prominent Zionists, not only relatives of Kasztner, etc., but also such Jews who were able to pay with millions, like the family of Manfred Weiss. At the same time they silently watched as more than 400,000 Hungarian Jews, unaware of their fate, were tricked into Auschwitz, where thousands of their children were not even gassed but merely thrown into the pyre alive.

Professor Talmon says that “they all went down to a man to death with their brethren, Judenrat or no Judenrat”. Is he not aware that, for instance, Dr. Kasztner and his family were honored members of an official Zionistic group in Israel until somebody on a dark night in 1957 shot Kasztner in the streets of Tel Aviv? Is he not aware that they were saved with the help of Eichmann and his deputy (Wisliceny)? Professor Talmon considers that “Miss Arendt's dissertation on Jewish co-operation is a display of atrocious bad taste” and that “if that ‘collaboration’ was such a very significant fact, all one can do is to hang one’s head in silent shame and grief”. Now Professor Talmon is an historian, and he should understand that if we ponder and speak about the past it is because we think about the future. This historical phenomenon has to be faced if we are to understand mankind.

Vrba did not testify at the Eichmann trial although 56 out of the 121 prosecution witnesses whose testimony dominated the trial were not concerned with Eichmann, who was the accused. In an interview with a prominent Israeli Holocaust historian it was hypothesized that: "Vrba was probably not invited since the state of Israel had no money to sponsor the flight from Vancouver, Canada at the time" (Linn, 1998). As it happens, Vrba was living in London, England, at the time and his whereabouts were known to the Slovak community in Israel; and larger sums were spent bringing witnesses from more distant places. Vrba ended up giving a deposition against Eichmann at the Israeli embassy in London. All appeared content with data "that reveal what was known" and not necessarily with those voices that reveal "what could be known" (Friedlander, 1997 p. 2).

Hope revised

In 1944, the Slovak leadership did not call itself the Jewish Council but the "Working Group" which was headed by Dr. Oscar Neumann, a lawyer with a long record of Zionist activity. The group was founded during the 1942 deportations by another member of the center, Gizi Fleischmann, a Zionist activist who was the head of the immigration to Palestine section in the Jewish Center (Bauer, 1998b). The members of the group hoped to rescue the surviving remnants of the Jewish population in Slovakia (and possibly in other nazi-occupied countries) with the use of bribe. Its spiritual guide in this

project was Fleischmann's ultraorthodox relative, rabbi Michael Beer Dov Weissmandel.

Hard put to believe the horror, Dr. Neumann instructed his aid, Oskar Krasniansky to settle Vrba and Wetzler in two separate rooms, where for three days each dictated their accounts without need of any technical aids "due to their wonderful memory" (Krasniansky, 1961, p. 20). By comparing the dates providing by the escapees with the lists of Jews that they were forced to draw up and had kept ever since, the Jewish leaders could verify the monstrous description related by the escapees and give it credence. The two separate accounts in the Slovak language were conflated as a single report , which was forthwith translated into German by Krasniansky who also wrote a one page introduction to the report which included biographical notes on the anonymous escapees and vouched for its accuracy and authenticity.

On April 28, 1944, the Vrba-Wetzler report was completed. According to the German practice of that time, the escapees' arrival in Slovakia, could have profound consequences: If it became known that the Jews had learned the secrets of Auschwitz the leaders and their families would most likely be liquidated. The Jewish leaders supplied Vrba and Wetzler with excellent false documents and money. They arranged a hideout for them far away in the mountains. They were further assured that all possible measures would be taken to disseminate the report and inform the potential victims. Vrba did

soon thereafter joined the partisans (in September 1944), eventually to be awarded the highest medal for valor. Wetzler joined the partisans later (in February 1945)

Left with the report in his hand, Dr. Neumann decided to count on Weissmandel's spiritual and imaginative guidance and connections, and consequently sent him the Vrba-Wetzler report. Weissmandel immediately recognized the significance of this information and sent a copy to his relative, Pinchas Von Freudiger, who was the leader of the Budapest orthodox Jewish community and with whom Weissmandel maintained frequent contact (Freudiger, 1986). Freudiger's reading of the report resulted in his clear-cut decision for himself to arrange to flee from Hungary to Romania with 80 members of his family. This flight (August 1944) was approved by Wisliceny (Eichmann's aid) only after the deportation from Hungary were stopped by Horthy (July, 1944) and Freudiger's forced contribution to this SS officer in the preparation of the deportation lists was not relevant any more. Upon his arrival in Bucharest he would engage in documenting the chain of events that led him flee. He did omit in his memoirs any mention of the Vrba-Wetzler report. In his post-war testimonies, he did provide two different dates and versions of how the report came to his knowledge (Braham, 2000).

The second channel of communication was Dr. Reszo Kasztner, a young Zionist leader, previously a lawyer in Cluj, who had moved to Budapest only

four years before, and who habitually visited with the "Working Group" in Bratislava (Braham, 1981). Aware of Kasztner's forthcoming visit, Dr. Neumann's aid (Krasniansky) quickly translated the German version of the report into Hungarian, and according to one of the (three) versions of his post-war testimony, he personally handed the report to Kasztner upon his arrival in Bratislava in late April (Braham, 1981, 2000). Like Freudiger, following the reading of the Vrba-Wetzler report, Kasztner was convinced that the entire community was doomed to liquidation and the bribe model exercised by the Slovakian group two years earlier (in 1942) was the only hope. Following intense negotiations with the S.S., Kasztner succeeded to save 1685 prominent Jews who, under Eichmann's aegis left Budapest on June 30 to Bergen-Belsen and eventually to Switzerland. During that time, the Vrba-Wetzler report was kept as a top secret in order not to "create panic" (Braham, 1981).

Vrba's and Wetzler's unexpected return from Auschwitz to Slovakia in April 1944 and their precise account was not an event one could forget easily (Neumann, 1956). They were not only resourceful informants but also living memories of the Jewish Council's own approved list of the 1942 deportees. Though the shaven-headed escapees and their accurate account would stick long in Dr. Oscar Neumann's mind, the head of the Jewish Council and a member of the "working group" did not recall their names: "News about the horror of Auschwitz had reached Slovakia before, but it was vague... Who is

it who can reach death and come back? But one day this miracle happened. On that day, *two young Jewish chaps*" (Neumann, 1956, p. 166). This nameless account was also adopted by his aid, Mr. Oscar Krasniansky. Though he spent three intensive days in interrogating the escapees, he, too failed to recall the escapees' names in his depositions for the Eichmann trial in 1961, which is replete with other precise names and details. While serving as an Israeli representative in the consulate at Kohn, Germany, he would testify that the report was written "by myself" in the spring of 1944, from the words of "*two young people* who succeeded in escaping from the death camps of Auschwitz (Birkenau) in April, 1944" (Krasniansky, 1961). .

In the most famous Hebrew textbook entitled: "The Holocaust- Some Historical Aspects" (Bauer, 1987, Tel Aviv: Hapoalim Publishers) the young Israeli reader is informed about the escape from Auschwitz in one sentence as the following: "detailed reports about the death camp in Auschwitz and the gas chambers there, were received in Slovakia from *two Slovak Jews who escaped from Auschwitz* on April 7. Two additional testimonies were received by two other fugitive that escaped on May 27" (p. 175, my translation). Keren's (1999) most recent high school Holocaust text book, which was published after Vrba's visit in Israel does not mention the escape at all. The Hebrew inscription outlining the Auschwitz escape that appears on a wall of the (old) Yad Vashem Museum in Jerusalem attests that it was accomplished by "*two young Slovak Jews*". After the publication of my book "Escaping

Auschwitz - a culture of forgetting" (Linn, 2004) Vrba's name and picture re-staged at the new Museum. Vrba's book appears on the book list at the book store of Yad Vashem, but is never in stock. My book, is not known there, in spite of a dramatic article published at the leading Israeli newspaper Haaretz (28 February, 2005). How ought we understand this phenomenon of "Historical Autism" , asks the German historian, Bedürftig (1999)? Why is it that the narrative of hope is placed in a "history without people" ? (Brunner, 1997).

Acknowledging that the principle for knowing or interpreting the past is embedded in the present we are required to question again "what aspects of the past should be remembered and how should they be remembered? Are there phenomena whose traumatic nature blocks understanding and disrupts memory while producing belated effects that have an impact on attempts to represent or otherwise address the past? ...Can - or should historiography define itself in a purely scholarly and professional way that distances it from public memory and its ethical implications?" (La Capra, 1988, p.I). Should Horthy be remembered as a leader who contributed (though unwillingly) to the smoothness and speed of the deportation of the 437,000 Hungarian Jews from the countryside or as a leader who took military measures to oppose the deportation of 200,000 remaining Budapest Jews (Sakymyster, 1999)? Should the Slovak or the Hungarian Judenrat members be remembered as Nazi approved compliant leaders who took part (though unwillingly) in the

preparation of the deportation lists or as leaders who tried to save the remaining Jews? Should the escapees from Auschwitz be remembered as individuals who added glory to the Jewish narrative of resistance by their consistent opposition to the plans of the Nazis, or for their refusal to comply with the Israeli hegemonic narrative where those who criticize the war-time leadership should play the anonymous role?

The failure to save the (non informed) Hungarian Jews is presented as a matter of the victims' psychological failure to act and the inability to inspire hope in them: "Knowing" as explained early by Bauer (1978, p.18), is stage-related: the information had to be a) Disseminated b) be believed c) be internalized d) be translated into action (if at all). This thesis repeats itself, uncritically, in various modes till the 90th (Bauer, 1994 p. 72; Bauer 1997, p.197; Bauer, 2001, Cohen, 1996, p.381, Yahil, 1991). How ought the young Israeli reader understand this psychological analysis made by a historian in face of some hard evidence as the following, for example:

1. The "Auschwitz Protocols" did reach the Jewish Council and Zionist activists, including the illegal Halutz Zionist Underground. *Yet they did not transmit this information to the Jewish public when the deportation began* (Cohen, 1996, p. 381);
2. *The report remained unknown to the Jewish population inside Hungary itself*ⁿ (Cohen, 1997, p. 131).

3. "The point is that this information was rejected, people did not want [emphasis in the original] to know" (Bauer, 1978, p. 106).

As Diner (1995) observed, "particular histories [were] ... implicitly denied via a kind of mere retelling according to the given national patterns. Particular narratives are reauthored, submerged and thereby hegemonized" (p. 152). Within this context, we might want to question the "strategic remembering" of the political elite and the attempts "to brush aside questions of the war's morality" (Brigham, 1999, p. 166, Kramer, 1996).

Politicizing the narrative of Hope

Vrba's critical position regarding the Jewish leadership, combined with his decision not to pursue his career in Israel but to live elsewhere seems to detach him from the Israeli "narrative strategy" of identity (Bhabha, 1999, p. 292) and its "imagined community" (Anderson, 1995). Vrba is aware of the fact that even if the prospective victims believed in the data of the Vrba-Wetzler report, it is not certain that it would have resulted in an immediate resistance in a country which lacked hills and had no local strong resistance group, and whose younger men aged 20 to 40 were in labor camps. Yet, the fact that most people were not provided with this information or denied (certain) information does not imply that *those who had planned* to resist would do so upon reassessing the morality and the reality of the situation. Bauer's linear (psychological) leading theory of "Knowing" and not "believing"

make a no distinction is made between *general information* about the persecution that befell Jews somewhere in the distant world "in the East" and *specific information* precisely threatening one's own immediate existence. After all, there is a possibility that a specific knowledge about the "Hungarian Salami" might have encouraged *some* Hungarian Jews to reexamine the situation' to regain hope, and believe in their own power to control their destiny. But the hegemonic narrative of 'knowing and not believing' is in fact the narrative of the *informed*, a narrative which leaves no room for the *non informed*, even if they could not have been saved.

Within this context, the academic dialogue between Vrba (1996) and Bauer (1997b) about the thesis of "knowing" and "not believing" is most interesting and touches the issue of hope. The dialogue between these two fluent German speakers took place in one of the most prestigious historical journals in Germany (Bauer, 1997b; Vrba, 1996).

On the German soil, the voice of the history maker (Vrba) and the history interpreter (Bauer) was clearly understood: 50 years after the war, the German audience was most sensitive to stories that were not told, or accidentally forgotten (Levy, 1999; Schlant, 1999). The dialogue between Bauer and Vrba is interesting not necessarily because of its being a pursuit of historical truth but one which questions the ways in which seeking the truth has become the subject of inquiry (Hutton, 1993). It is a meeting between two academicians

from two ideological and scientific cultures: Dr. Bauer, the historian, who claims to be objective in his search for facts as an outside observer and Dr. Vrba, the biochemist, who holds a remarkable memory of numbers, and who does not hide his subjectivity as a participant observer in the Holocaust. It is a meeting between an Israeli, a previously Hashomer Hatzair kibbutz member, the son of Czechoslovak Zionist Jewish leaders who were lucky to obtain a last-minute certificate to Palestine in 1938, and a formerly leaderless Holocaust victim whose parents did not want or could not follow the warning of the Zionists to leave the "Diaspora" in time - but who still does not see the Zionist entity as his major concern (who still fears that he would have to be "saved" by those leaders again!). It is a dialogue between the Zionist masculine "self" and the Diaspora feminine "other" upon which we all grew up as Sabras (Zrubavel, 1995). And "the other can only be known and made present in that to which it is opposed and from which it has to remain forever separated" (Pieters, 2000, p. 35).

It is a dialogue between an Israeli scholar who wanted to believe that Zionist underground is an priori just organization, with a Canadian scholar and former Auschwitz prisoner, whose experience taught him that any anti Nazi resistance organization, whether that of Jews, Poles or Communists entails moral limitations, given its preferential care for its own members.

The Bauer-Vrba dialogue, more than fifty years [sic] after Auschwitz, illustrates how the power of discourse operates. It shows how the present day conceptions of the past are constructed by that power – the power to decide what is to be forgotten, dismissed, suppressed, disregarded, discredited, and left nameless; who is the martyr, who the hero, and who the author of memory. It is a dialogue between the "known" and the "could be known" (Friedlander, 1997). It is a dialogue that reflects the power of rational and (supposedly) non-political history over the individual's fight for injustice and his way of remembering it. It is a crossroads, where "Jerusalem" and "Auschwitz" and the individual's hope - meet .

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