

The Auschwitz Report

The Impact of Its Revelations in Switzerland and Hungary

Frank Baron

Abstract: The escape of Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler from Auschwitz on April 7, 1944, was extraordinary in its daring, courageous execution, and impact. The challenging task of the two escapees was to inform the world of previously unimaginable crimes, and to do so in a way that made the unbelievable believable. Because the deportations to Auschwitz were still in progress, it was essential to inform the threatened Jewish populations that they were slated by the Germans to be part of the "final solution." When and how the transmission of the resulting Auschwitz Report took place, made all the difference, and that is this paper's focus. Decisive transmissions involved secret networks in Switzerland and Hungary, taking place independently. Despite the presence of the Gestapo and the German army, finally, in early July, 1944, two independent, increasingly powerful efforts engendered by the report converged in Budapest. Only then could one of the most remarkable rescues of World War II take place. fbaron@ku.edu

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I

The Escape and the Report

On April 7, 1944, Rudolf Vrba (1924–2006) and Alfred Wetzler (1918–1988) escaped from Auschwitz by hiding inside a pile of lumber in a working area outside the inner ring of barbed wire. They remained there for three days and nights, and when the camp guards finally gave up looking, the two men slipped past the watch towers during the night. After about seventeen days of walking, they finally reached Zilina (Hungarian: Zsolna) in Slovakia. Here, Jewish contacts were alerted and a member of the Jewish Agency Rescue Committee, the engineer Oskar Krasnansky (Slovak: Krasňanský; later name: Oskar Isiaiah Karmiel) came from Bratislava and began interviews. Although members of the Jewish Rescue Committee in Slovakia, such as Gizi Fleischmann and Michael Dov Weissmandel, were instrumental in the distribution of the report,



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the key person to lead the transcription and translation of the interviews was Krasnansky. He was impressed by the escapees' extraordinary memory, and for two days he shared a crucial role in articulating the reality of Auschwitz.

Vrba recalled telling their story to some Slovak Jewish leaders who, at this time, had themselves been spared deportation: "Doctor Oscar Neumann, Oscar Krasnansky, Erwin Steiner, and a man called Hexner." Vrba referred to Krasnansky as a stenographer, but it is clear from other sources that he, more than anyone else besides the two escapees, played a key role in the report that came to life. Vrba added: "They then worked on it together, rewriting it six times. As they were working on it, Neumann's aide, Oscar Krasnansky ,... translated it from Slovak into German with the help of Gisela Steiner, producing a thirty-two-page report, which was completed by Thursday, April 27, 1944" (Vrba 1997: 248, 386., *JewAge*, 2022. Cf. Karny 1998: 564).

Krasnansky also took a leading role in the preparation of the report of two men who escaped from Auschwitz about a month after Vrba and Wetzler; the important Mordovicz-Rosin Report (Bleakley 2022: 97).

After Vrba and Wetzler were treated to their first meal in many days, they began to tell their story. Germans had told Slovak Jews that their removal would be simply a matter of resettlement (Vrba 1997: 22; Freedland 2022: 18). Now Krasnansky and the others heard what was actually taking place: extermination. Vrba remembered: "I had a horrible feeling that they did not believe a word we were saying" (Vrba 1997: 248). Wetzler published *Escape from Hell*, a fictionalized version of what he remembered of the first reaction of those who listened to what the two arrivals had been through: profound shock and disbelief (Wetzler 2007: 193–203).

The two escapees had survived in Auschwitz for about two years. Both had held relatively responsible positions among the prisoners. Vrba, for example, worked for about ten months in "Kanada," so named because the country of Canada had a reputation of great wealth; it was the job of this prisoner unit to sort through the luggage of the deportees for useful items to send to Germany. From his working position Vrba could observe the arrival of deportation trains. Later, he had a registrar position in Birkenau, and again was able to see arrivals selected for the gas chambers. Vrba also observed the construction of a rail line directly into the camps, allowing the deportees to take a short walk straight to the gas chambers. He developed especially close contacts with the arrivals from the ghetto of Theresienstadt (Czech: Theresin), north of Prague. These arrivals stayed together as families and were spared from the usual work details, but after six months they became victims of the gas chambers. Wetzler, also a registrar, was able to collect valuable information about these arrivals.¹ Wetzler had contacts with men actively

¹ A policy of deception was clearly at play in this arrangement by the Nazi authorities. Independent reports confirm that postcards, written by inmates from the "quarantine" camp, gave an idyllic return address: *Waldsee* (suggesting: forest by the lake) (Kastner 1961: 83).

engaged in the killing process at the gas chambers and crematoria. The final report provided drawings of the gas chambers and the crematoria. Both men observed preparations for receiving masses of new arrivals. The last page of the report gave the estimated number of those killed in about two years at Auschwitz as 1,765,000.²

The authors of the report, Vrba, Wetzler, and Krasnansky, struggled to make the unbelievable believable. But at the time, no such conditions could have been imagined by most intended readers. As early as 1942, Jan Karski, a Polish military officer, had experienced extremely crude and cruel forms of German experimentations with mass killing, but his efforts to communicate what he had seen was met with disbelief. Chief Justice Felix Frankfurter, himself Jewish, listened to Karski, but after hearing about what Karski had reported in 1942, he asserted that he was unable to believe him (Wood & Jankowski, 1994: 188). The expectation of such disbelief forced Krasnansky to conduct interviews to produce only verifiable facts. The reported conditions and events had to stand up to strict scrutiny.

In at least one case Vrba disagreed with Krasnansky about what should be considered a fact. For Vrba it seemed crucial to take seriously that the guards were looking forward to "Hungarian salami." This was the most obvious signal for Vrba that deportations from Hungary were about to begin. Although this information was deemed by Krasnansky as second-hand, they were, for Vrba and Wetzler, clear indications that Auschwitz was preparing for a large influx of deportations. For Vrba it was essential to get the report to Hungary immediately. He believed that the Jews would not board the deportation trains if they understood the true nature of Auschwitz. From Wetzler's recollections it is clear that for Vrba, the Jewish leaders, and especially Krasnansky, were not taking the impending doom of the Hungarian Jews seriously. The intensity of Vrba's views becomes most evident in Wetzler's book. Although the author resorted to a fictional presentation in order to cope with the communist censors, it becomes clear that Val, the name given for Vrba, reflects Wetzler's recollection about the intensity of Vrba's feeling. When he observed what he considered unnecessary delays, he shouted:

² Jerzy Tabeau (in early reports referred to as a Polish major) escaped from Auschwitz on November 19, 1943, and prepared a report before Vrba and Wetzler had escaped. On the way to England, he arrived in Budapest on March 19, 1944, just as the German army entered Hungary. Tabeau, a retired cardiologist in Kraków, asserted to me in a 1996 interview that, despite the fact that he was in Budapest on the way to London, he had no chance to communicate with Hungarians about his report. Because of the dangerous circumstances of the German occupation, he was forced to return to Poland. Tabeau's important report was lost for some time, but came to light in Switzerland, together with the Vrba-Wetzler and Mordowicz-Rosin reports, around the middle of June 1944. These reports served, in general, to confirm the accuracy of the information about Auschwitz. Tabeau estimated the number of Jews killed at the time of his escape to be 1,500,000. Given the fact that he escaped about four months before Vrba and Wetzler, who provided the figure 1,750,000, these general estimates tend to support each other (Baron 2000: 171–208, here 207). To be sure, a recent study about the accuracy of such estimates asserts that *both* numbers represent exaggerations (Piper 1993: 81–82).

In three days! But back there they are flinging people into the fire at this moment and in three days they'll kill thousands,,... Do something immediately! Do you hear? Good Lord, they're all standing there like pillars of salt! You, you, [he points his finger at the journalist and the lawyer, then at all the others] you'll all finish up in the gas unless something is done! Do you hear? (Wetzler 2007: 205; Cf. Freedland 2022: 208)

Krasnansky did in fact pay attention to the need to inform the Hungarian Jewish leadership of the great dangers they faced. He was in close contact with one of the leaders, Rezső Kasztner (also known as Rudolf Kastner), so that, after having translated the report into Hungarian, he could personally give it to Kasztner, who was visiting Bratislava at the end of April. To be sure, Kasztner did not actively use the report to inform those who were in greatest danger. He was one of those whom the historian Randolph Braham accused of participating in a "conspiracy of silence."³

II

A "Conspiracy of Silence" at the Jewish Council in Budapest

There has been much controversy about the fate of the Vrba-Wetzler Report after it arrived in Budapest, especially regarding the question of whether the Jewish leaders made efforts to inform the endangered Jews in the provinces. For the rest of his life, Rudolf Vrba repeatedly accused those he believed to have negotiated with the Nazis and to have failed to warn the Hungarians Jews about what was threatening them. The foremost of those he thought guilty was Rudolf Kasztner. Vrba felt that Kasztner, the first Hungarian to have received the report, was guilty of silence, especially for negotiating with Rudolf Eichmann to save family and friends in his native Kolozsvár (today Cluj-Napoca, in Romania).

Were Vrba and Braham justified in making these accusations? Even if Vrba never relented, he met a most formidable debate opponent in the person of George Klein. Both Vrba and Klein later became active scientists who had become acquainted through their mutual attendance at conferences treating medical issues of common interest: Vrba attended as a neuropharmacologist from the University of British Columbia in Canada, and Klein as a cell biologist who had acquired, while in Sweden, an international reputation for his work in that field. During the late 1980s Vrba and Klein had numerous heated discussions. As far as Klein was concerned, the Jewish people were simply unprepared "to see the terrible truth" (Klein 1992: 131). Klein rejected Vrba's assumption that the revelations of the Auschwitz Report could have led to a general uprising, as Vrba had claimed. He refused to accept Vrba's view that the Jewish Council

³ Braham. 1994, II, 806–849; Krasnansky 1961. Krasnansky translated the report into Hungarian for Kasztner. Presumably this same text was given to Kasztner close to the time of the writing of the Auschwitz Report. This report, according to Krasnansky, was then given to Regent Horthy and Cardinal Serédi. There is, however, no evidence that Kasztner's particular text ever reached the latter two men. Krasnansky's personal translation into Hungarian has not been located.

could have communicated the contents of that report to the Hungarian public or to the provinces, where Jews were about to be deported. Moreover, Klein did not believe that Kasztner was guilty because of his negotiations with Eichmann. He saw in them only Kasztner's genuine rescue efforts.

Klein's argument was strong because it was based on direct knowledge of the Auschwitz Report and of Kasztner's actions. At the age of nineteen, Klein had worked as an errand boy and later as secretary at the Budapest Jewish Council, and there he received from his supervisor, Council Member Zoltán Kohn, the Auschwitz Report to read. It had just arrived from Slovakia and was shown secretly to members of the council during the first days of May. Klein was able to observe Kasztner closely and believed his actions as the best possible in the worst of circumstances (Klein 1992: 129–130; Cf. Sanders 2016: 4–33).⁴ After his supervisor allowed him to secretly pass on the essence of what he had just learned from the Auschwitz Report, Klein was disappointed by the reactions of those whom he informed about the report's contents: "Of the dozen or so people I warned, not one believed me." Despite their disagreement, Klein and Vrba remained friends. Vrba held on to his belief that the report, if given publicity, would have changed minds and saved lives. It should be noted, however, that in the context of the Gestapo's clear presence, as it was in Hungary at the time, it was especially dangerous for Jews to distribute the report widely or to communicate its content effectively.

After the war, Ernő Munkácsi, a member of the Jewish Council, assessed the significance of the Auschwitz Report:

History provides evidence of momentous events that lead in an unpredictable, new direction. This phenomenon is replicated in the structure of drama, the poetic form of history, in which developments necessitate a totally new path. In the tragedy of Hungarian Jewry, such a dramatic turn came about with the disclosure of the Auschwitz Report, which, on the one hand, dispelled the culpable optimism that had dulled the minds of the vast majority of Jews, and, on the other hand, stirred up the conscience of certain Christian leaders and revealed the final destination of their policies (Munkácsi 2018: 130; Baron 2021: 67–68).

Facts and their potential influence matter in every discipline; in literature, as well as in politics. In a literary work, lines of development converge in a dramatic turning point. Only after that do events lead to a final resolution. This outline is recognizable in Budapest in the context of the events at issue in this paper both with Munkácsi's exit from the Jewish Council, and in general with the crisis of early July, when the planned deportation of Budapest Jews was foiled.

⁴ In a film interview Klein moderated this generalization by stating that his young friends did believe him, but that all persons of the older generation and those who had family responsibilities could not accept the realities of Auschwitz. Michael Muschner conducted the film interview with Klein. Available at https://www.fbw-filmbewertung.com/film/leben_in_budapest_1944_1_der_auschwitz_report Accessed 2022.07.21.

For Munkácsi this dramatic turn of events came after the intense council meeting of June 10. At that meeting Dr. Imre Varga accused the council of cowardice:

How can we stand for this any longer? How can we content ourselves with mere petitions and servile supplication instead of revealing all of it [the contents of the Auschwitz Report] to Christian society? We must shout out to the whole world that they are murdering us! We must resist instead of slavishly obeying their orders! (Munkácsi 2018: 139–140; Braham 1994: 700–701, 710)

Varga's suicide on the next day evidently made a great impact on Munkácsi in particular. He abandoned the council and joined an underground faction that sought to warn some government officials and other prominent individuals. Individuals such as Munkácsi could accomplish little in face of the German and Gestapo presence, along with the Hungarian collaborators.

III

The Report in Christian Hungary

The exclusive focus on the failure of the Jewish leadership to rouse resistance overlooks the fact that Christian religious leaders, government officials, and ordinary citizens were able to act with greater freedom. Many ignored the fate of the Jews or, as journalist-author Sándor Szenes has shown, were afraid to act. There were, however, notable exceptions.

Dr. Géza Soos (Hungarian: Soós; 1912–1953), an official of the foreign ministry, leader of the Calvinist youth movement *Soli Deo Gloria*, and a founding member of the secret Hungarian Independence Movement called *Magyar Függetlenségi Mozgalom*, (MFM), was responsible for the Jewish questions in that organization. He received a smuggled German copy of the Vrba-Wetzler Report in Budapest within a few days of its completion. Soos immediately recognized its significance. József Éliás, a close friend, in charge of the Good Shepherd Mission, a service organization, primarily associated with the Calvinist Church, recalled what happened immediately after the report's arrival:

In 1944, on one of the last days of April or on one of the first days of May, Géza Soos [and I] met in the café of the National Museum [in Budapest]. Géza, who was a person of great energy but otherwise calm and collected, seemed on this occasion to vibrate with excitement. I sensed that he had something extraordinary to communicate. He said that a secret organization of prisoners in a concentration camp of the Germans in Poland was successful in bringing about the escape of two young Jews. The escape bordered on the miraculous,,,. A representative of our opposition movement on the border of Slovakia received one of the German copies of the report; the messenger had arrived with it in Budapest on the morning of our meeting. The leaders of the movement (i.e., MFM) decided that I should be responsible for the tasks that the report required (Szenes and Baron 1994: 58).⁵

⁵ Baron's German text of the book and the English translation of the Szenes interviews are available at KU Scholarworks: <http://hdl.handle.net/1808/6817>. My involvement in this research project originated when Mária Székely, the translator of the Auschwitz Report into Hungarian and English, introduced me to Sándor Szenes. I realized immediately that the exclusive focus on Hungarian sources in this project was a serious mistake. In my

Soos then outlined to Éliás what had to be done:

We needed, first of all, an accurate, clear, and speedy translation from German into Hungarian; second, six typed copies of the Hungarian text; third, five copies to persons designated by Géza transmitted in such a way that the persons involved should not even suspect from where and through whom they received the report. Fourth, we had to return the sixth copy and the original German copy we had to return to Géza. The opposition movement (i.e., MFM) wants to orient the church leaders, above all, so that the government will not mislead them and so that these influential individuals can exert pressure on the government to prevent the tragedy awaiting the Jews. Géza said that the movement would find a way to get the report into the hands of Hungarians and others living in Switzerland. Finally, he stressed that those whom I involved in this undertaking as translator and messenger must be loyal, capable, and reliable people. We discussed who might be the right persons for delivering the report. As far as the translation was concerned, we agreed on choosing Mária Székely (later Küllői-Rhorer), my most loyal, well-educated, and tested colleague (Szenes & Baron 1994: 58).

After the completion of the translation, the report was transmitted to church leaders and to Regent Horthy. As the Szenes interviews indicate, Horthy probably also received a copy from one of the church leaders and from his daughter-in-law. Soos had direct contact with Horthy's son Miklós Jr., which made another line of transmission possible. Thus, the report probably reached a number of important individuals secretly in the second half of May, at the time when the deportations were already in progress from the countryside.

The belief held by Soos and others that the report's transmission to Christian religious leaders and to Horthy could immediately halt the deportation was unrealistic. As we will see, it took strong political pressure from the Allies to bring about significant change. The landing of the Allies in Normandy contributed. By the time that pressure materialized in late June, deportations of over 400,000 to Auschwitz from most parts of Hungary, outside the capital, had been completed.

Regent Horthy, after the war, dated his acquaintance with the Auschwitz Report later than he should have. In fact, he provided numerous, inconsistent dates. Not even what he remembered after the war at the Nuremberg trials (end of June 1944) can be considered reliable (Fenyo 1972:

view it was important to understand how the report got to the West and could then influence events in Hungary. This insight was the basis of a collaboration between Szenes and me, resulting in a publication in the German language. Our book caught the attention of Rudolf Vrba, resulting in a ten-year acquaintance, which inspired me to continue my further research about the Auschwitz Report and its impact. According to the Szenes interviews, Soos asked Székely to translate the German text also into English, indicating that he had a chance to have it taken to Switzerland. It is not clear what happened to the translation that Székely gave to Soos. Baron 2020:194. After Soos escaped to Italy in December of 1944, he was interrogated by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS,) in Caserta, and in that interview Soos revealed that a year earlier he had been in Switzerland and made contact with Allen Dulles, Visser 't Hooft, and Elizabeth Wiskemann (see below). Presumably Soos intended to send the English translation to one of these individuals. There is no evidence that the translation ever reached any one of them. If it had, the revelations could have had an impact already by the middle of May. Cf. the text of the OSS interrogation in Baron 2020: 115–122.

194). Lieutenant-General Gábor Faragho, administrative leader of the provincial *csendőrség* (gendarmerie), former military attaché to Moscow (later, in October, to be entrusted with secret armistice negotiations with the Soviet Union), remembers that, about the middle of June, he had talked to Horthy concerning the report. But Horthy had probably known about the German annihilation of the Jews even earlier, soon after the Auschwitz Report's distribution by Soos. At any rate, by the middle of June he must have realized that there was no way to deny what awaited the deported Jews.⁶

Before June, Horthy had been unwilling to admit that the deportation destination was a death camp. This attitude originated with his disastrous meeting with Hitler at Kleßheim on March 18, 1944. Although no record of the fateful bargaining between Hitler and Horthy survived, it is evident, as British historian C. A. Macartney explained, that Horthy was willing "to make thousands of Jewish workers available for work in the German munitions factories,....., Then he acted like Pontius Pilate: he washed his hands" (Macartney 1957: II, 236–237). Horthy's conversation of April 28 with Calvinist Bishop Ravasz confirms that the regent held on to this fiction "about the German demand for a large number of hands for labour service" until its credibility was destroyed by the increasing pressure of the Auschwitz Report (Munkácsi 2018: 168).

The June 22 interaction between Horthy and Faragho is noteworthy also because their discussion touched on a notorious film the German Propaganda Ministry had produced. The discussion indicates that their view of the deportations was evolving. What is known originated with László Rakolczay, the Hungarian military attaché in Bern, who was keenly aware of the need to enlighten the Hungarian authorities about German intentions to deflect international criticism from themselves to the Hungarians. Rakolczay had been invited, together with the chief secretary of the Hungarian legation, Imre Tahy, to a small gathering to view a film. This film, shown for the first and last time around June 20, had far-reaching consequences. The shocking news about it probably reached Budapest a day or two later (Bajtay 1994: 43; Kahn 1996: 452). The controversial "documentary" had two parts. The first part showed the Hungarian provincial police in Nagyvárad (today Oradea, in Romania), beating women with rifle butts, chasing children with whips, and tearing wedding rings off the helpless victims. Members of the Hungarian *csendőrség*, with their rooster-feather hats, pressed the Jews into the freight cars. No Germans were present in this segment of the film. But in the second part they appeared to show how the Germans took over the transports in Slovakia from the cruel Hungarians. At this point there was the shock of the German Red Cross nurses as they opened the sealed cars. Horrified,

⁶ A meeting between Faragho and Horthy took place on June 22, 1944, not in the middle of June, as Faragho remembered (Sebők 2004: 177. Horthy 1956: 219). At the Nuremberg Trials, Horthy asserted that he learned about Auschwitz about the end of June ("gegen Ende Juni 1944, als ich ausführliche Berichte von Vernichtungslager Auschwitz bekam.") Quoted by Fenyo from NA Record Group 238, World War II War Crimes Records. National Archives. (Fenyo 1972: 194–195).

they removed corpses, and distributed fresh water and food to those emaciated victims who were still alive. While the first part of the film probably registered reality, the second part was clearly staged. At the conclusion of the film there was applause. The diplomats were convinced. Only a few in the audience knew that the first part of the film was genuine and reflected a sad reality, but the other part was a staged film prepared by Eberhard Taubert, the film's producer, for Propaganda Minister Goebbels. The purpose of this trick was to undermine the vehement press campaign in Switzerland (Lévai 1998: 224).

The film failed to improve the German image. On the other hand, it provoked the Hungarians, shocked to see themselves as guilty. Historian Randolph Braham believed that Horthy, after learning of this film, became more determined to stop the deportations. At the meeting of June 22, Faragho discussed the film and the Auschwitz Report with Horthy. Up to this point in time, both men had tolerated, and even defended, the deportations. But it presumably did not escape their attention that the victorious Allies could put them on trial as criminals. The true nature of the deportations had become evident. For both Faragho and Horthy, their discussions of June 22 appear to have been a crucial, but still secret, turning point.⁷

Bishop Ravasz, who had earlier been supporting efforts to restrict the rights of Jews, met Horthy on different occasions. As Ravasz recalled, Horthy held fast to the fiction that the Jews would be treated humanely until he realized at last that his previous efforts to explain the deportations were untenable. Now the question became: What could be done about it? As a result of the uproar about Auschwitz in the middle of June in the Swiss press, political pressure on the Allied governments intensified. These in turn put pressure on Hungary. Warnings and pleas hailed down on the Hungarian government from different directions: from President Roosevelt, the Pope, and the king of Sweden.⁸ At a June 26 meeting of Hungarian government ministers, Horthy declared that the deportations must stop:

I shall not tolerate this any further! I shall not permit the deportations to bring further shame on the Hungarians! Let the government take the measures ... The deportation of the Jews of Budapest must cease! The government must take the necessary steps! (Munkácsi 2018: 204; Braham 1994: 873)

⁷ Miklós Mester, Hungarian state secretary in the ministry of Religion and Education and a central figure of the growing secret resistance, remembered that when the film is reported to have been discussed, Faragho talked about a "big turn" in Horthy's thinking as a result of the Auschwitz Report. Mester learned about this crucial meeting and the film from Gyula Ambrózy, Horthy's trusted advisor (Mester 2012: 76–77). Sebök believes, and Mester confirms, that the news of the film arrived in Budapest on June 22 (Sebök 2004: 177–178). Cf. Braham 1994: 679–680. Béla Sárossy remembered mistakenly that this film was shown in Bern at the beginning of July (Lévai 1968: 222–224).

⁸ Roosevelt's warning of June 26, relayed by Secretary of State Hull, presented the text the president had formulated on March 24. Tsvi (Zwi) Erez asserted that this warning also came down on Budapest in the form of flyers. But he presented no evidence of such a flyer being dropped or found at this particular time. His source only refers to Roosevelt's earlier warning (Erez 1988: 38). Oláh shows, on the other hand, that the particular flyers that Erez referred to were dropped, but considerably later (Oláh 2018: 69–87).

It turned out, however, that words were not enough to produce results; the momentum of the deportations, which Horthy himself had allowed to proceed, was not easily halted. It seems, in retrospect, that Horthy often felt that he had to satisfy different powerful audiences: on the one hand, the Allies, who appeared to be winning the war; and, on the other hand, the occupying Germans, represented by Ambassador Veesenmayer, who meticulously reported his words and actions to Berlin. Even if he had wanted to act, Horthy lacked the political and military basis for being taken seriously. Intimidated by the German presence in Hungary, Horthy remained silent. His state of paralysis only increased with serious challenges to his authority, especially at the beginning of July, with the arrival of the provincial *csendőrség* units.

A comprehensive, objective view of subsequent events requires the reconstruction of the Auschwitz Report's reception in two vastly different circumstances of two countries: one being Hungary, which existed under the occupation of Hitler's Germany; and the other, Switzerland, where a system of censorship secured the appearance of neutrality. The MFM, the Hungarian network, was forced to operate in secrecy. The Swiss network, on the other hand—with the prominent involvement of Elizabeth Wiskemann, assistant press attaché in Bern; Gerhart Riegner, representative of the World Jewish Congress; and numerous others—achieved its remarkable successes by breaking through that censorship and the silence about Auschwitz. These diverse initiatives eventually converged in Budapest in early July. Acting on the compelling content of the Auschwitz Report, these networks influenced the course of events in order to rescue most of the city's Jewish population. This was the combination of events that, as Munkácsi observed, necessitated "a totally new path."

A remarkable breakthrough with the publication of news about Auschwitz, defying censorship policies of neutral Switzerland, provided the necessary precondition for serious pressure on Horthy. The regent received telegrams from the United States, the Vatican, and the King of Sweden. Horthy's helplessness finally ended only when, amid a deepening political crisis, the MFM network opened for him an opportunity to stop the deportations. We will consider each of these developments in turn.

IV

The Breakthrough in Switzerland

After Vrba and Wetzler had reported on the atrocities of Auschwitz, Gizi Fleischmann and Dov Weissmandel, both representing the Jewish Council of Slovakia, sent desperate telegrams to Swiss contacts about Auschwitz in early May 1944. Delays in the world's reaction are difficult to explain. Censorship restrictions in Switzerland and the policy of the Allies discouraged news reports about Jewish persecution. Neither the Swiss government nor the Allies wanted to prioritize the plight of the Jews. A German copy of the report reached Nathan Schwalb, the Geneva delegate of Hechalutz, a Zionist youth organization, on May 17. Schwalb passed it on to Roswell McClelland of the recently established United States War Refugee Board. Without further notice or a translation into English, this document survives today in the Roosevelt Library as evidence of a first unnecessary delay that stood in the way of making the realities of

Auschwitz known. It is filed in the form of the original German copy, without a translation. Significant recognition of the report's importance became known only about a month later when Dr. Jaromir Kopecky, the Geneva representative of Czechoslovak government-in-exile in Geneva, finally obtained the report on June 13 (Gilbert 1981: 232).

Kopecky also obtained the reports not only of Vrba and Wetzler, but also of two other men, Czeslaw Mordowicz and Arnošt Rosin, who had escaped from Auschwitz on May 27 and reported on the arrival of deportations trains from Hungary. Kopecky quickly shared these reports with Gerhart Riegner, representative of the World Jewish Congress. Riegner, in possession of the new follow-up report on Auschwitz, grasped the need to act quickly to save the lives of arrivals from Theresienstadt (Theresin) in Auschwitz. The knowledge of a mass killing of a particular group of people was about to take place prompted him to act. Riegner later recalled saying to Kopecky:

I had never heard of this before. Then they had been killed, and then there had been another quaranteen [sic] camp. Six months, I thought to myself, what does that mean? In only seven days time the second quaranteen [sic] expires..... Have you seen this paragraph? These people are going to be killed in seven days. We must act. We must telegraph London at once. The BBC can alert the world.⁹

On the same day, Riegner and Kopecky contacted Elizabeth Wiskemann at the British legation in Bern. Wiskemann, educated at Newnham College, Cambridge, served in Bern as assistant press attaché, working on intelligence, with a focus on Czechoslovakia. According to historian Michael Fleming, Wiskemann had been sending regular intelligence reports from Bern to the Foreign Office in London.¹⁰ She immediately prepared a summary of the facts and sent the requested telegram.

That telegram of June 14, while reporting on the gas chambers, prioritized the need to prevent the planned massacre of the prisoners from Theresienstadt. As a result, the outside world learned previously unknown details about Auschwitz. BBC radio broadcast the news and a warning, which was also reported by German radio monitors:

⁹ The historian Martin Gilbert's interviewed Riegner in Geneva on October 1, 1980. Cf. Gilbert 1981: 232. A later interview of April 1995 at the Jewish World Congress in Geneva gives essentially the same information about Riegner's experience and actions, indicating that Gilbert obtained his information directly from the Riegner interview. About Mordowicz and Rosin see Nižňanský 2015. The interview of April 1995 at the Jewish World Congress in Geneva, mistakenly transmitted the name of the Auschwitz prisoner as Kulpa. He was, in fact, Erich Kulka. See his article "Five Escapes from Auschwitz," in: Suhl 1967: 196–218.

http://vrbawetzler.eu/img/static/Prilohy/Proceedings_from_Conference_Zilina_2015.pdf
Accessed on July 15, 2020. (Cf. Riegner 2006: 85–86).

¹⁰ After 1958 Wiskemann was a professor of international relations at Edinburgh University, and was subsequently a tutor in modern European history at the University of Sussex. Cf. Fleming 2014: 232 and 369. Cf. Wiskemann 1969: 189. Smith 2005: 221. A new book by Geoffrey Field on Wiskemann (Oxford UP, 2023) claims on page 143 that Wiskemann's role in the transmission cannot be reconstructed, though he thinks it might have fit in with her attitude of frustration over Allied inaction.

Important news! London has been informed: The German authorities in Czechoslovakia have ordered that 3,000 Czechoslovakian Jews are to be murdered in the gas chambers of Birkenau on June 20.[...] All those responsible for the mass murder, from the superior authorities through the intermediaries to the organs carrying out the orders, shall be brought to account (Świebocki 2008: 56; Cf. Gilbert 1981: 233).

Thus, the Geneva-Bern network achieved a significant breakthrough. News about Auschwitz was reaching the wider public.

Further reports about Auschwitz became the basis for press releases distributed by George Mantello (Hungarian: György Mandel), first secretary of the El Salvador consulate in Geneva. On June 24 the following excerpt, at the initiative of Mantello, found its way in the form of a telegram into all corners of Switzerland and beyond: "FOLLOWING DRAMATIC ACCOUNT ONE DARKEST CHAPTERS MODERN HISTORY REVEALING HOW ONE MILLION 715 THOUSAND JEWS PUT [TO] DEATH IN ANNIHILATION CAMP AUSCHWITZ BIRKENAU" (Kranzler, 2000: 97).

With one efficient strike, censorship in Switzerland was defeated. During the following days the information distributed by Mantello succeeded in reaching 384 Swiss papers, leading to headlines throughout the country. The world was forced to take notice.¹¹

Up to this point in time, the Allied governments (not wanting to create the impression that they were fighting the war for the Jews) tended to discourage publicity of German actions against Jews. They were now forced, by a changed public opinion, to deal with the seriousness of the news. The direct result was a series of warnings to Hungary.

Wiskemann also passed on the information about Theresienstadt and Auschwitz to Allen Dulles, the responsible administrator in Bern of the US Office of Strategic Services (OSS), who forwarded it in turn, around June 20, to Roswell McClelland, the US War Refugee Board representative in Switzerland. Wiskemann made a notation that reflected the importance and urgency of the information: "I have just wired this—could you also?" (Waller. 2015: 136).

Frustrated by the fact that British and American governments had not acted decisively in the crisis of the deportations, Wiskemann and Richard Lichtheim, head of the Jewish Agency [for Palestine] in Geneva, sent a series of provocative telegrams on June 26 to the Foreign Office in London. They made specific requests. The most noteworthy are the following: "[...] for the precision bombing of the death camp installations [and] target bombing of all collaborating Hungarian and German agencies in Budapest" (Baron 2020:105; Cf. Gilbert 1981: 251). The telegram gave the names and addresses of seventy Hungarian and German individuals who were stated to be most directly involved in sending Jews from Hungary to Auschwitz.

¹¹ John S. Conway, in the afterword for Rudolf Vrba 1964: 428 (Cf. Kranzler 2000: 86–91).

These were strategic calculations, some of which the Allies, in retrospect, could have taken with dramatic results. In fact, they did not take them. Still unhappy with the lack of response by the Allies, Wiskemann and Lichtheim created fictional cables, urging steps that they knew the Allies were not at all likely to take. This daring calculation included a simple twist. Gilbert explained: "On Wiskemann's inspiration, this telegram was sent without codes to enable Hungarian intelligence to read it." That agency did, in fact, read it, as Wiskemann expected, "and took it at once to the Hungarian Regent, Admiral Horthy, and his Prime Minister, Döme Sztójay" (Gilbert 2005).¹²

Gilbert believed that, on the basis of the serious warnings contained in the uncoded telegrams, Horthy was impelled to stop the deportations. Although several other events also influenced Horthy in this crisis, those telegrams certainly had a documented impact.

By June 1944 Gerhart Riegner, Jaromir Kopecky, Richard Lichtheim, George Mantello, and Elizabeth Wiskemann were part of an extensive network of midlevel officials pleading for the attention of US and British authorities to take the shocking information seriously (Riegner 2006: 39–43, 123). The revelations of the Auschwitz Report, which had reached the Swiss public in the middle of June, were so shocking that the public reaction there exerted the necessary pressure for the warnings to Hungary from the United States, Sweden, and the Vatican.

V

Crisis and Rescue in Budapest

By June 29, 1944, the number of Jewish Hungarians deported from the provinces reached, according to the report of the German ambassador, 381,661. This figure was to climb to about 437,402 in the first days of the following month. After the Hungarian provinces had lost most their Jewish populations, Adolph Eichmann and his Hungarian collaborators began to take steps to deport Budapest's Jews. The first step in this process was the unexpected appearance in Budapest of two experienced *csendőr* (gendarme) battalions from Galánta, ostensibly to have flags dedicated in their honor (Braham 1993: I, 674 and II, 880).

Valéria Kovács, Horthy's personal friend, whom Horthy had sent to Szeged while deportations were going on there so as to report on how the Jews were treated there, returned on July 2. On the following day she told the regent what she had learned in Szeged: a Hungarian officer had revealed to her that *csendőr* battalions were intending to continue the deportations without regard to the wishes of the regent. This news tended to confirm that the unusual influx of the *csendőr*

¹² It is possible that intelligence officer Kudar was responsible for discovering the provocative telegrams and making them available to the government.

battalions signaled the planned deportation of Budapest Jews and a challenge to Horthy's authority (Karsai and Molnár 1983: 148–159; Munkácsi 2018: 199–201; Kovács 1983: 86–87).¹³

Lajos Kudar, a chief intelligence officer in the ministry of internal affairs and one of the secret founding members of the Hungarian Independence Movement (MFM), was determined to find out the actual intent behind the gathering of the *csendőrség* in the capital. There had been other signs of danger to the head of state. For Kudar, as for other members of the MFM, Horthy's role as head of state was essential for regaining the nation's independence from Germany and retaining it in case of an Allied victory. Kudar had investigated a violent attempt to enter the residence of István Bárczy, north of Budapest. Because Bárczy, a high government official, had access to a secret passage to Horthy's residence, Kudar suspected preparations for a coup d'état. This incident and the appearance of the *csendőőr* battalions was an equally dangerous development, one that required his immediate attention.

Kudar arranged for a drinking party with a high officer of the newly arrived battalions. Having gotten this battalion officer totally drunk, according to Soos, Kudar heard him declare "[I]t was ridiculous for an eighty-six-year-old lunatic king [the king of Sweden] to give advice to a seventy-five-year-old nut [Horthy]; that they were only fooling themselves if they believed they had stopped the deportations, and that, if necessary, his two battalions would take away the Jews together with their regent" (Karsai 1985: 255. English text in Baron 2021: 81–82). Kudar ascertained that they intended to begin deportations in Budapest in the following days and that Horthy was in danger. The revelation was a sign that immediate action was essential. Kudar informed the head of Horthy's bodyguard, Lieutenant General (*altábornagy*) Károly Lázár, of what was being planned.

On July 2, Budapest experienced much destruction—especially the factories on Csepel Island, south of the city—from a bombing attack by the US Air Force (Davis 2003: 214–226). Colonel Ferenc Koszorús, in charge of the tank division at Esztergom, recalled in his memoirs that on this day he met Lázár in Budapest and learned from him about Horthy's serious political crisis.¹⁴

Although Koszorús may have received information from Lázár about the threat to Horthy, it is clear that his recollections left out an earlier part of the story. In fact, actions by Kudar and the MFM preceded his contacts with Lázár and Horthy. Soos supplied a necessary, earlier component to the sequence of events:

¹³ The Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., has recorded an interview in Hungarian with Valéria Kovács in which she also describes the above events. <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn509840> Accessed on July 5, 2020.

¹⁴ Koszorús, Ferenc. *Emlékiratai és tanulmányainak gyűjteménye* (Collection of Memoirs and Essays). New York: Universe Publishing Company, p. 57..Soos, in a report to the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), in Caserta, Italy: *Ráday Gyűjtemény Évkönyve, IV–V (Budapest, 1985)*, text, p. 255. This incident was also reported by Kálmán Saláta: Baron 2020: 81–82. Chapter VI in my recent book (*Az Auschwitz-jegyzőkönyv és Budapest, 1944*) is devoted to the little-known subversive activities of Lajos Kudar. Baron 2022: 73–84.

In the first days of July the Germans were determined to solve the Jewish question by a single strike, a coup d'état. They ordered two *csendőőr* battalions from the provinces (if I recall correctly, those of Galánta and Nagyvárad) to Budapest, with the support of the SS and the Gestapo ,,... Members of the MFM were aware that the honest Hungarian staff officer and leader of the Esztergom armored division [Ferenc Koszorús] was absolutely loyal to the regent and would be prepared to defend Hungarian honor. Two members of the MFM who were also staff officers and majors in rank, Károly Chemnez and István Beleznay, approached Koszorús ,,... [Kudar and the MFM members] learned what was going on and immediately informed General Károly Lázár, and, on the other hand, also Ferenc Koszorús, the tank division commander (General Major, the actual responsible officer, was at the eastern front at this time). Koszorús took the task into his own hands, gathering all available forces (even those that did not exist on paper) and on July 5 directed them in the dead of night to Budapest. In this way the regent was able to assume control. The Budapest Jews were saved. (Baron 2022: 110–111. Based on Soos, "Ellenállás és zsidóság." Ráday gyűjtemény 16. doboz [25K/17])

These recollections about the active role of the MFM in alerting Koszorús offer a more complete narrative of the crisis. A rapid sequence of events involving the initiatives of Kudar, Soos, and other MFM members, offered Horthy a degree of freedom to plan the disarming and driving out of the uninvited *csendőőr* battalions.

On July 4, having acquired the basis for military action, a more confident Horthy requested a meeting with German Ambassador Veesenmeyer. When the two men met, Horthy, intending to create the appearance of normalcy, remained totally silent about his plans. Instead, he provided Veesenmeyer with the kind of anti-Semitic sentiments that he expected the ambassador to appreciate. On the following day, at a meeting of the council of ministers, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Arnothy-Jungert, reported on information from the Auschwitz Report and the publicity about Auschwitz in the West. His report was based, at least in part, on the cables of Wiskemann and Lichtheim. The report provoked concern and controversy, undoubtedly encouraging Horthy to act decisively (Baron 2021: 95, 105; Braham 1994: II, 881,933).

On the night of July 5, Horthy sent motorcycles with weapons to the Pannonia Hotel near the Jewish synagogue to fetch the leading *csendőőr* officers to the palace. Horthy informed them that all their men had to clear out of Budapest. The next morning, July 6, the individual who had likely been the drunken officer who had commented on the two aging leaders, Colonel István Ládáy, was called for an interview and was likewise told to clear out of the city. Horthy told Ládáy: "You have betrayed my confidence. You have become a political tool, perhaps against your will. Now I order all *csendőőr* units to leave the capital by 4:00 p.m" (Jeszenszky 2017: 215–216. Baron 2021: 98). In the evening of the same day, July 5, Koszorús received the order from Horthy to occupy the city.

This swift sequence of events at the beginning of July allowed Horthy to surprise Ambassador Veesenmeyer and the chief departing officer, Adolf Eichmann, putting them on the defensive. By driving out the *csendőőr* units, Horthy took away from the Germans the manpower they needed to carry out the Budapest deportations.

These events set the stage for a climax in the crisis: the lengthy and crucial telephone conversation between Prime Minister Sztójay and the leading figure of the German occupation, Edmund Veesenmayer. On July 6 Sztójay presented dramatic facts to Veesenmayer, who reported them to Berlin. Sztójay revealed to Veesenmayer Horthy's firm decision to halt the deportations and provided a detailed explanation for this decision. Horthy reportedly argued that in other countries such as Romania and Slovakia, Jews were allowed to remain in their respective countries, that the emigration of rich Jews to Portugal raised serious questions about the justice of the actions against Jews in general, and, that a barrage of telegrams, appeals, and threats had been directed at the regent and the Hungarian government because of the Jewish question.

Finally, stressing the need for the strictest confidence, Sztójay revealed to Veesenmayer the contents of three telegrams that the British and American diplomats in Bern sent to their governments, which had been seen by the Hungarians. Veesenmayer recorded details for Foreign Minister Ribbentrop in Berlin meticulously.

The telegrams Sztójay had in his possession described in detail what was happening to the Jews who were deported from Hungary. The telegrams reported that 1.5 million Jews had already been exterminated, and the same fate awaited the majority of Jews being deported now. The following proposals were made in these telegrams: the bombing and destruction of the destination of the Jewish transports, and, in addition, destruction of the rail lines connecting Hungary with this location. The targets of the bombing, in addition, would be every participating Hungarian and German official building—their exact street addresses in Budapest being made available—and a massive propaganda campaign would let the whole world know exactly what was happening. A further telegram named seventy prominent Hungarians and Germans who bore the primary responsibility.¹⁵

When Elizabeth Wiskemann and Richard Lichtheim, frustrated with the lack of Allied action, composed the essential components of these deceptive telegrams on the basis of the Auschwitz Report, they could not have imagined a more effective result of their efforts. These telegrams had also been discussed in the ministerial meeting of the previous day and obviously supported the need for the actions Horthy was engaged in. The threats of the messages were now in the hands of Sztójay and Veesenmayer, two major facilitators of the deportation to Auschwitz, at a decisive moment. The telegrams appear to have paralyzed them. Being loyal Nazis, they should have paid immediate attention to what was happening to disrupt their deportation plans. They were evidently still not aware that the tanks of Koszorus had entered Budapest, a fact that the ambassador also fails to report to Berlin at this time. These men, dedicated to Hitler's failing cause, had decisions to make. But, disoriented and distracted, they faced and contemplated what

¹⁵ Veesenmayer later complained to Horthy that the latter should have revealed to him what he had in mind. IMT, NG-5523 in: Braham 1963: 427-428. Lévai has published the same report but refers to it as telegram no. 301, NG 5684. Lévai 1968: 204.

they were accustomed to suppress: the consequences of Germany's defeat. They appeared to be frightened by the thoughts of bombing attacks on Budapest and the fact that they themselves were targeted.

Veesenmeyer soon realized that he had been tricked by Horthy. Despite the loss of the collaborating the *csendőr* units, Eichmann still succeeded, with his own men, to secretly slip transports from the camps at Kistarcsa and Sárvár toward Auschwitz. Despite this tragedy, the threat of imminent mass deportations receded. This relative calm changed, however, about three months later, on October 15, 1944, when Horthy was forced to abdicate and was arrested. Although this setback brought on the renewed, devastating persecution of Jews by the Nazi Arrow Cross Party, the deportations to Auschwitz could not be renewed.

When the Budapest deportations were about to be implemented, the influence of the Auschwitz Report became the major factor to prevent them. To understand what occurred, focusing only on events in Hungary appears mistaken. Exclusive attention to the role of the head of state, Horthy, also appears unconvincing. Strict attention to the role of Koszorús at the expense of the NFM initiatives has resulted in an incomplete chronology of events. The Auschwitz Report produced an influential and recognizable set of chain reactions. Expanding the inquiry to the report's most consequential lines of influence, to the Hungarian and Swiss networks, is necessary. Those networks of mid-level government officials had immediately recognized the significance of the fact-based Auschwitz text. Their willingness to act created the necessary preconditions to stop the trains to Auschwitz. That became possible through the convergence of actions by these networks. They were able to overcome the indifference of the Allies to rescue missions. As a result, Regent Horthy was able, with the aid of MFM and the Koszorús tank division, to expel the provincial *csendőr* battalions and thus prevent the deportations. For the Jewish residents in Budapest, often estimated to have been considerably over 150,000, the prospect of survival increased substantially. This sequence of individual and combined efforts resulted from a spectacular Auschwitz escape and the influential report it generated.

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