

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Santa Barbara

*The Vrba-Wetzler Report: The Horrifying Truths of Auschwitz*

This thesis will examine how the *Vrba-Wetzler* was reported in the secular and Jewish media as well as how it was used as evidence in various trials following the end of World War II.

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL SATISFACTION OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
THE DEGREE BACHELOR OF ARTS IN HISTORY

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March 2025

## ABSTRACT

### *The Vrba-Wetzler Report: The Horrifying Truths of Auschwitz*

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The *Vrba-Wetzler Report*, written by two Slovakian Jews who escaped Auschwitz concentration camp on April 7, 1944, is a 33-page document detailing what was occurring inside Auschwitz and Birkenau concentration camps. This report included a description of the Nazis' use of gas chambers to commit mass genocide against European Jews, which was unknown at the time. This thesis analyzed the media's reaction, including secular and Jewish newspapers, to the publication of the *Vrba-Wetzler Report*, as well as how it was used as evidence in various trials following the end of World War II. To answer the overall question of how the report was received during and after World War II.

To accomplish this I analyzed 37 articles from small, local newspapers across the United States. I also examined 12 articles from 6 Jewish newspapers across the United States and noted the same details that I When looking at the articles, I noted what page the article was published on, if the word "Jew" was in the headline, and if they used the correct death toll estimation. When looking at four trials following the end of the war, the Nuremberg Trials, the Eichmann Trial, the Auschwitz-Frankfurt Trial, and the Ernest Zundel Trial, I noted

if the *Vrba-Wetzler Report* was used as evidence, or if Vrba and Wetzler were called upon to testify.

I found that in regards to the *Vrba-Wetzler Report*, small, local newspapers were not hiding the Holocaust as historians have argued in the past. These articles were being published on the front page, they used the word Jew, and they used the correct death toll estimation. Regarding Jewish newspapers, I found that these newspapers were more likely to bury the news of the *Vrba-Wetzler Report*, putting it further in the paper. In the trials, I found that their report was used as evidence in one trial, Vrba testified in two trials, and Wetzler only testified in one. Leading to the overall argument that while their report made a splash in the media at the time of its publication, Vrba, Wetzler, and their report began to fade into obscurity. Leaving them to unfortunately not receive much recognition for their report and escape.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Professor Harold Marcuse for his guidance and help throughout this process. I would not have been able to accomplish this thesis without his support and knowledge along the way. I would also like to thank Professor Jarett Henderson for his mentorship in our senior thesis class, and the constant encouragement and advice along the way. I would also like to thank my research pod mates and my other classmates going through this senior thesis with me for their moral support, laughs, and a shoulder to lean on.



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**Introduction:**

From 1939 to 1945, the entire world held its breath in terror as war raged across Europe. These terrifying years are best known as World War II, in which Hitler and the Axis Powers, which included Germany, Italy, Japan, and more, engaged in war against those fighting to maintain their sovereignty. While Hitler and his Nazi army attacked those on the front lines, he was crafting and engaging in a war against the European Jewish population. Hitler devised a plan to murder all Jews in Europe, which he called the "Final Solution to the Jewish Question," or as it is referred to today, the Holocaust. Hitler crafted a plan to deport all Jews to extermination camps in Eastern Europe where they would be brutally murdered through starvation, disease, shootings, and gassings. These camps functioned throughout the war and would be responsible for the deaths of about 3 million of the 6 million Jews murdered during the Holocaust. The most notorious of these concentration camps was Auschwitz, located in Poland near the border to Slovakia, which would later have additions called Birkenau and Monowitz, which were responsible for 1.1 million Jewish deaths. In this thesis, I will focus on two escapees from Auschwitz, Rudolf Vrba, and Alfred Wetzler, who risked their lives in 1944 to write a report, now usually referred to as the *Vrba-Wetzler Report*, that would expose the horrifying truths of this camp as well as warn all living Jews in Europe of their fate.

The *Vrba-Wetzler Report*, also known as the *Auschwitz Report* or the *Auschwitz Protocols*, is a 33-page document written by Vrba and Wetzler, outlining the horrors that were taking place inside the Auschwitz concentration camp. The English version of this report is currently located at the FDR Library in New York. The English copy of the report is accompanied by the War Refugee Board's memo regarding the report and a report drawn up

by a Polish major who escaped the camp. This report differed from contemporary documents, as it explained how the Germans were able to commit mass genocide using gas chambers and crematoriums, which they invited for the Holocaust. This comprehensive report includes both diagrams of the camp and detailed descriptions of the prisoners at Auschwitz, including which prisoners survived and which did not. The *Vrba-Wetzler Report* was one of the most significant pieces of information to come to light during the war and remains one of the most important documents produced during the time as it completely changed the way we viewed the Holocaust. It detailed the inner workings of the camp, including the gas chambers.

The report spans from April 13, 1942, to the authors' April 7, 1944 escape. The report is divided into three parts. Wetzler wrote the first part, both prisoners wrote the second part together, and Vrba wrote the third and final part.<sup>1</sup> The first and third parts are more of a personal account of what happened directly to Vrba and Wetzler, whereas the second part is more of an overview of what occurred in the camp over the two years. The first and third parts have accounts of what each man did for work in the camp, whom they knew, and stories of their personal experiences. The middle section describes who was arriving at the camp and what occurred to those people once they arrived. It is also important to note that while Vrba and Wetzler are the report's authors, they received help and information from many other prisoners in the camp, including the Sonderkommando, who were the prisoners who worked the gas chambers at Auschwitz and Birkenau.<sup>2</sup> One surviving Sonderkommando worker, Filip Müller, claims that he helped Vrba and Wetzler by giving them a large amount of information regarding the gas chambers and how they functioned. Müller details their

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<sup>1</sup> "Vrba-Wetzler Report," Wikipedia, October 21, 2024, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vrba%E2%80%93Wetzler\\_report](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vrba%E2%80%93Wetzler_report).

<sup>2</sup> Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum, *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994), 554

interactions in his memoir, *Eyewitness Auschwitz: Three Years in the Gas Chambers*.

However, Jewish Slovak Council member Oscar Krasnansky-Karmiel, who translated the report from Slovak into German, claimed all the information in the report came solely from Vrba and Wetzler.<sup>3</sup>

Rudolf Vrba, whose actual name is Walter Rosenberg, used the alias Rudolf Vrba on falsified documents after his escape. He was sent to the Auschwitz concentration camp on June 30th, 1942. Alfred Wetzler was committed to the camp on April 13th, 1942.<sup>4</sup> Both were sent to Auschwitz by the Reich Main Security Office or the RSHA, the agency set up by Heinrich Himmler, the architect of the Holocaust, that helped organize and enforce the emigration policies and deportations of Jews and other prisoners to the ghettos, killing sites, and concentration camps.<sup>5</sup> Vrba and Wetzler were two Slovak Jews who escaped Auschwitz on April 7th, 1944, at the ages of 19 and 26, respectively.<sup>6</sup> Although they were officially pronounced missing on April 7, they were unable to leave their hiding places in the camp until April 10th, 1944. From there, they made their way to Zilina, a city in north-western Slovakia, where they drafted the report closer to the end of April.<sup>7</sup>

The report itself covers a wide range of information regarding the Auschwitz and Birkenau concentration camps. It describes how prisoners were transported to the camps and what would happen once they arrived. For instance, Wetzler described what occurred when he arrived at the camp. He said he was “led into a huge barrack where on the one side we had

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<sup>3</sup> “The Holocaust: The Vrba-Wetzler Report (Auschwitz Protocols),” The Vrba-Wetzler Report (Auschwitz Protocols), accessed October 21, 2024,

<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-vrba-wetzler-report-auschwitz-protocols>.

<sup>4</sup> Gutman and Berenbaum, *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, 549

<sup>5</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, “Reich Security Main Office (RSHA),” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed October 21, 2024,

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/reich-security-main-office-rsha>.

<sup>6</sup> Gutman and Berenbaum, *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, 549

<sup>7</sup> Gutman and Berenbaum, *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, 554

to deposit all our luggage and on the other side completely undress, leaving our clothes and valuables behind.”<sup>8</sup> The report then goes over the categories of prisoners and the different colored badges the prisoners had to wear. The report also describes the construction, installation, and organization of camp management and security for both Auschwitz and Birkenau. The report mostly focuses on the system of prisoner numbers, which were identification numbers that were tattooed on them, and which numbers correlated to which people had entered the camp. The report was laid out like this: “33,100 - 35,900 Jews from Krakow,” where they would list the identification numbers and then describe who went along with those numbers.<sup>9</sup> There are details regarding the everyday life of prisoners, prisoners' accommodations and diets, and how labor was divided among those in the camps. How the headquarters and officers dealt with escapees from Auschwitz and Birkenau is also described. The report then moves on to how the inmates would die, which is the most harrowing and shocking part of this report. Vrba and Wetzler described how some prisoners would die simply due to the conditions of the camp, whereas others would die from shooting and injections. However, what made this report stand out was the description of the gassings that took place. The report describes this process and says, “The gassings take place as follows: the unfortunate victims are brought into a hall where they are told to undress. To complete the fiction that they are going to bathe, each person receives a towel and a small piece of soap . . . Then they are crowded into the gas chambers.”<sup>10</sup> This much detail was not known about the mass killings before the release of the report in 1944. The report also recounts how the Auschwitz staff would make the selections of who would die both on the arrival platform

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<sup>8</sup> Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler, “Vrba-Wetzler Report,” FDR Presidential Library & Museum, accessed October 25, 2024, <https://www.fdrlibrary.org/vrba-wetzler-report>. 1

<sup>9</sup> Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler, “Vrba-Wetzler Report,” 8

<sup>10</sup> Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler, “Vrba-Wetzler Report,” 12-13

and then later in the camp itself. Vrba and Wetzler described the selections made in the camp by saying, “Twice weekly, Mondays and Thursdays, the camp doctor indicated the number of prisoners who were to be gassed and then burned.”<sup>11</sup>

Not only were Vrba and Wetzler very detailed in their written report, but they also created diagrams and drawings. The first one to appear in the report is labeled “Rough Ground Plan of Auschwitz,” which is quite rudimentary, but shows the blocks of housing and workstations and how the security perimeter was set up, with two sets of fences surrounding the camp. The next

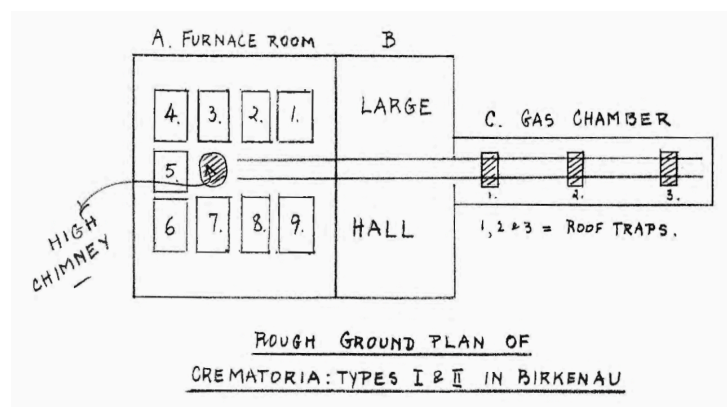


Figure 1.1

drawing in the report is a map that shows where Auschwitz and Birkenau are in relation to

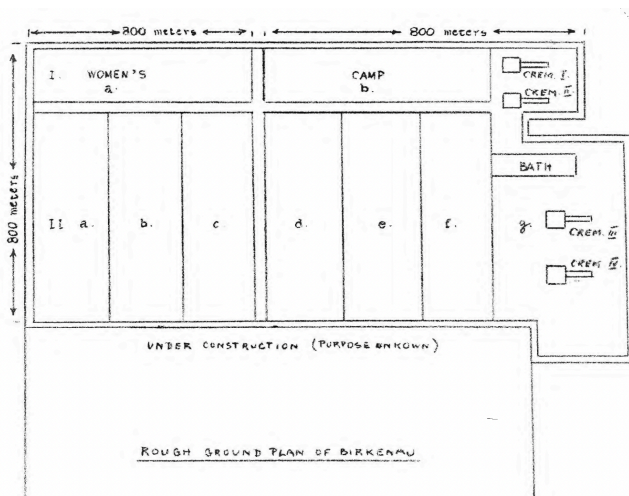


Figure 1.2

surrounding towns. Then, a drawing of how a gas chamber was set up and what it looked like is labeled “Rough Ground Plan of Crematoria: Types I and II in Birkenau.” Also included is a drawing of the “Rough Ground Plan of Birkenau,” which is similar to the drawing of Auschwitz, and finally, a drawing of

where Auschwitz and Birkenau were in relation to each other labeled, “Approximate Situation Sketch of Auschwitz and Birkenau - Camp Districts.”<sup>12</sup> These images are what

<sup>11</sup> Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler, “Vrba-Wetzler Report,” 6

<sup>12</sup> Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler, “Vrba-Wetzler Report,” 3, 12, 18, 33.

make this report stand out from others, as these were the first depictions of how Auschwitz and its gas chambers were laid out.

This report was different from those that came before it as it outlined and detailed how the Germans were committing mass murder. This report showed the true horrors of the Holocaust and gave a closer estimate of the number of Jews who had been murdered thus far at Auschwitz, which was 1,750,000. However their estimate was a bit too high, and at the time the report was made, the number was actually between 960,000 to 1,353,000 Jews murdered.<sup>13</sup> It is important to note that the United States and the world knew the Holocaust was taking place long before the *Vrba-Wetzler Report* was produced. For instance, The Riegner Telegram, which was sent to the British and American governments in August of 1942, outlined the Nazi regime's plan to implement the “Final Solution to the Jewish question.”<sup>14</sup>

This report had monumental impacts on society. It was used as a piece of evidence by Jewish organizations and the War Refugee Board to urge the United States government to bomb Auschwitz; however, the bombings never actually occurred. Segments of the *Vrba-Wetzler Report* were in hundreds of newspapers across the United States, both in secular and Jewish papers. The BBC broadcasted the part of the report detailing the gas chambers and the estimated number of Jews murdered, which was 1,750,000, and that is what appeared in newspapers. Some newspapers that reported on this were *The New York Times*, the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, the *Jewish Sentinel*, and many local papers across the country. This is when the tide turned for how the world viewed the Holocaust and opened the

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<sup>13</sup> Gutman and Berenbaum, *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, 555.

<sup>14</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, “The Riegner Telegram,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed October 21, 2024, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-riegner-telegram>.



eyes of many to the atrocities the Nazi regime had committed, as the *Vrba-Wetzler Report* made the front page of many of these newspapers.

The “Final Solution” to the Jewish question, which was the “deliberate and systematic mass murder of European Jews,” was first created by Hitler and his Nazi regime in the summer of 1941.<sup>15</sup> The first extermination camp then started on December 8, 1941; this camp would be known as Chelmno, located in Chelmno, Poland. The United States was first notified in May of 1942 when the Allied governments received a report from the Jewish Socialist Bund of Poland called the “Bund Report.” This report emphasized that the killings of Jews in Europe were not random attacks but rather part of a bigger plan to eradicate all European Jews. This report also described the gassings taking place at Chelmno in mobile “death van-trucks.”<sup>16</sup> This information was further corroborated when Gerhart Riegner, the World Jewish Congress’s representative in Switzerland, sent a warning telegram to the Allied governments. What would be known as The Riegner Telegram also outlined the Nazi regime's plan to implement what was euphemistically called the Final Solution to the Jewish question.<sup>17</sup> Both of these reports were further corroborated when prisoners from Chelmno escaped in January of 1942. One of these prisoners “who was forced to work as a gravedigger at Chelmno before escaping, informed the Allies of the mechanisms of mass-killing at that camp and that 700,000 Polish Jews had already been murdered.”<sup>18</sup> Similar to the Sonderkommando, these grave diggers saw firsthand the mass killings taking

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<sup>15</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, “‘Final Solution’: Overview,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, December 8, 2020, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/final-solution-overview>.

<sup>16</sup> David S. Wyman, “Bund Report,” Encyclopedia of America’s Response to the Holocaust, April 13, 2015, <https://enc.wymaninstitute.org/?p=113>.

<sup>17</sup> “The Riegner Telegram.”

<sup>18</sup> Fleming, “The Reassertion of the Elusiveness Narrative: Auschwitz and Holocaust Knowledge.”

place at the various concentration camps. Their testimonies were essential in letting the world know of the true horrors of the Holocaust.

It is a massive misconception that the world, including both the Allied governments and the public, did not know that the Holocaust was taking place until the liberation of the camps in 1945. As shown above, this is completely untrue. The Allied governments knew about Hitler's plan to destroy all of the European Jews soon after the plan for the Final Solution went into effect. It is important to understand and acknowledge that the Allied governments knew that Hitler and his Nazi regime were systematically murdering millions of Jews and other civilians throughout the war. The United States and other governments chose not to intervene for various reasons. The United States government argued that they believed their citizens would not believe that Hitler was committing such horrific crimes. They argued that the Holocaust was so extremely brutal that it was literally unbelievable. The United States government thought that Americans would think the Holocaust was propaganda, as many lies had been spread during World War I through exaggerated and false information. Many historians also argue that there was simply a lack of news coverage during World War II, so even if citizens were willing to accept and believe that the Holocaust was indeed taking place, news organizations were simply not reporting on the issue.

Against this background, my thesis will look at the broad question of how the *Vrba-Wetzler Report* changed what the world knew about the Holocaust and how governments and citizens reacted across the globe. Further, I will analyze the public reactions to the report, and to Vrba and Wetzler themselves when the report came out and after the war. By doing this, I want to answer the following questions: How did various newspapers, including secular and Jewish papers, report on Vrba and Wetzler's testimonies being

published? Were there differences between secular and Jewish papers, and if so, what led to differences in reporting? Then, I investigate how the report was used after the war. In what contexts was it used in various trials, and were Vrba and Wetzler called on as witnesses? Finally, have Holocaust deniers used the report or Vrba and Wetzler in their propaganda, and if so, how were they used?

This thesis recognizes the contributions and changes that Vrba and Wetzler were able to create due to their escape and the creation of their report. It also addresses the gaps in the existing literature by putting the report in a wider context. Many historians have studied the *Vrba-Wetzler Report* in the context of the report's first publications. Many have then studied how the report added to the existing knowledge of the Holocaust and how it changed or did not change Allied policy regarding the continuation of the Holocaust in Europe. However, historians have not done in-depth research on the effect of the *Vrba-Wetzler Report* in the United States media. Nor has an in-depth analysis of how the report was used after the war, both in trials and in Holocaust denial literature, been conducted. This thesis goes beyond the report's first publication to see its long-lasting effects. My research draws on primary sources, including the *Vrba-Wetzler Report* itself, government memos and letters, newspapers, and testimonies from trials after the war. When researching newspapers published by secular and Jewish newspaper companies, I examine how they reported on the event and the differences between them. Testimonies in trials after the war, such as the Nuremberg, Auschwitz, and Hoess trials, are examined to see if the report was brought up and if Vrba and Wetzler were called on as witnesses.

I found that many newspapers across the United States made reports after the release of the *Vrba Wetzler Report*, though some of these reports were relatively short. Still, many

were on the first or second pages of the papers. Historians have often argued that mainstream newspapers tried to downplay or hide the Holocaust and the systematic murder of Jews across Europe. I also found that Jewish newspapers buried the report deep within their papers, often reporting on the *Vrba-Wetzler* on page seven or after in their papers. This is again the opposite of what some historians have argued. I want to do more research and find out why Jewish papers would hide such monumental evidence of the Holocaust and why they would wait to report on it days after secular newspapers published their reports. I analyze these contradictions and try to fill in the gaps between the existing literature and my findings.

Vrba and Wetzler both testified in the Auschwitz Trial that took place in Frankfurt in 1964. They did not testify in either the Nuremberg trials or the 1961 Eichmann trial in Israel. The Nuremberg trials were a set of trials that took place from 1945 to 1949 to prosecute Nazi war

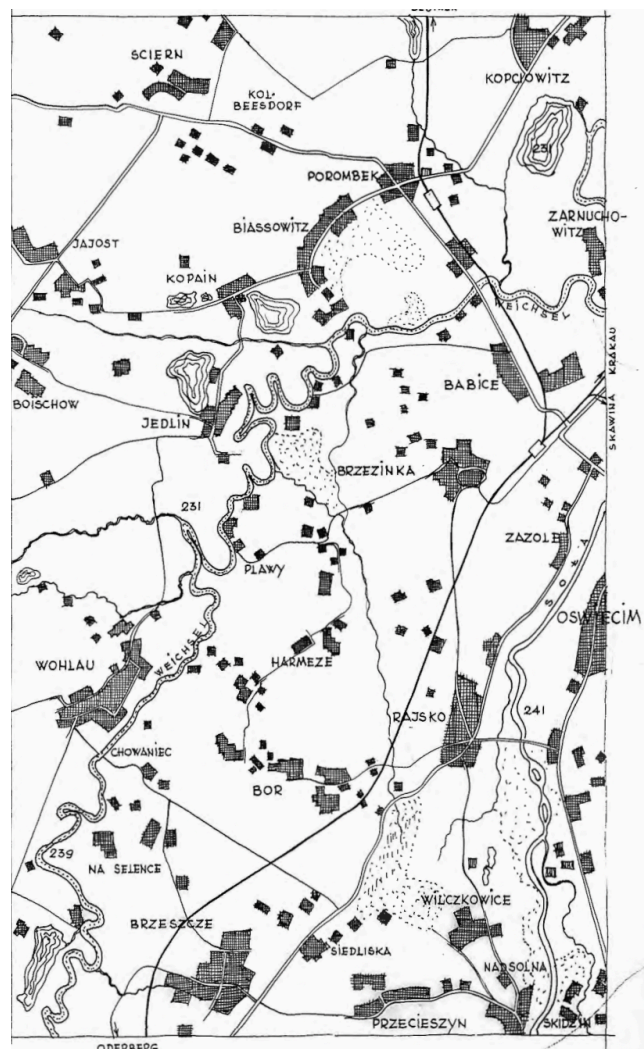


Figure 1.3

criminals. Various sources say that their report was used as evidence in the Nuremberg trials, but I found only one brief, tangential mention when the number of victims at Auschwitz was presented. The Adolf Eichmann trial was successful in convicting Eichmann of “managing

and facilitating the mass deportation of Jews to ghettos and killing centers in the German-occupied East, he was among the major organizers of the Holocaust.”<sup>19</sup> Vrba sent in a deposition for the Eichmann trial; however, because he was not able to be present and his deposition only focused on Auschwitz, it was not used as evidence against Eichmann.<sup>20</sup> I highlight the importance of their testimonies in the Auschwitz trial and why their report was not used as evidence in the other two trials. I will also analyze Vrba’s testimony at a Holocaust denier’s trial, Ernest Zundel after he was charged in Canada under a law stating he “‘knowingly published false news that caused or was likely to cause harm to the public’s interest.”<sup>21</sup> I will look into the impacts that this trial had in relation to Holocaust denial as a whole and Vrba’s role.

This thesis also expands on the importance of their report after the war and its continued impact. Accompanied by my analysis of their testimonies, I further look into their lives after the war as well as how their report was used in later understandings of the Holocaust as a whole. One aspect of the post-war years that my thesis examines is how Holocaust deniers used the *Vrba-Wetzler Report* as evidence as to why the Holocaust supposedly did not occur and was a “hoax.” I will look into these harmful and damaging accusations and see how Vrba and Wetzler play a role in Holocaust-denier literature. My thesis also covers life after Auschwitz for both Vrba and Wetzler and analyzes the long-lasting impact that their report had on society and their impact as individuals. To do

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<sup>19</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, “Eichmann Trial,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, July 16, 2021, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/eichmann-trial>.

<sup>20</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, “Eichmann Trial -- Session 109 -- Rulings on Evidence; the Completion of Evidence,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, February 21, 2024, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn1001890>.

<sup>21</sup> Leonidas E. Hill, “The Trial of Ernst Zundel: Revisionism and the Law in Canada,” Museum of Tolerance, April 6, 1988, <https://www.museumoftolerance.com/education/archives-and-reference-library/online-resources/simon-wiesenthal-center-annual-volume-6/annual-6-chapter-7.html>.

this, I look at both of their memoirs, Vrba's titled *I Cannot Forgive* and Wetzler's *Escape from Hell : The True Story of the Auschwitz Protocol*. I will also look into documentaries they participated in after the war.

When looking into the *Vrba-Wetzler Report*, I want to hold the utmost respect and grace for the survivors of the Holocaust and those who did not survive. Although this is a historical analysis, millions of Jews were murdered during the Holocaust, and those who did survive had to live through the horrors and brutality of the Final Solution and Hitler's antisemitic rule. I want to keep their stories, struggles, and experiences in mind and at the forefront of my research.

The *Vrba-Wetzler Report* changed what the world had known about the Holocaust in a significant way. The bravery of these two men and others in the camp who supplied them with information deserve recognition for what they could accomplish. Through their detailed description and accurate diagrams, they were able to bring to light the horrors of the gas chambers and crematoria that were built inside Auschwitz and Birkenau. Vrba and Wetzler's main motivation to escape the camp was to warn the Hungarian Jews of the fate they would meet at the concentration camps. However, they did not receive the warning in time, due to the fact that both Allied and Neutral governments did not heed their warnings or put in more effort to stop the deportations. By making the report, they honored and acknowledged many of the victims who died in the camp and ensured their names would be remembered. The *Vrba-Wetzler Report*, if heeded, might have been able to cut the murder machinery at Auschwitz short by nearly six months. Both the neutral and Allied governments did not heed this warning, and thousands of Jews continued to be murdered at Auschwitz through the rest

of 1944. The *Vrba-Wetzler Report* can constantly serve as a reminder to not let our governments or media ignore human atrocities taking place around the world.

My thesis will analyze the cost of the government and media not listening to survivors, like Vrba and Wetzler.. It will shed light on and give a voice to those who have been ignored or not trusted. Vrba and Wetzler demonstrated bravery that most people did not have by attempting to warn the Hungarian Jews of what awaited them at Auschwitz. However, the neutral and Allied governments did not act swiftly enough. Many innocent people died at the hands of Adolf Hitler and his cruel SS officers, and the United States and other Allied and neutral governments chose to watch and ignore what was happening. Media outlets across the United States could have reported more in-depth and more frequently about the Holocaust but chose not to. My thesis will also demonstrate that even after the war, survivors were still not always believed when clear evidence was presented. Holocaust deniers are still active in their arguments in 2024 that the Holocaust did not take place. Antisemitism is still very present in today's society, and hateful and cruel acts of violence are still being committed against Jews all over the world. The effects of the Holocaust and World War II can still be seen today, and the survivors still hold those horrific memories. Through my thesis, I want to honor Vrba and Wetzler and show how two brave and extraordinary people attempted to inform Hungarian Jews and Allied governments about the mass murders that were taking place.

### ***The Vrba-Wetzler Report in Newspapers***

During World War II and the Holocaust, newspapers were essential in informing the public of what was happening. At a glance, it may seem as if newspapers across the United States were trying to hide the systematic murder of Jews during the Holocaust. Many historians have argued this point and claimed that the Holocaust was buried deep within the American secular media and that the Jewish papers were more likely to shed light on the horrors of the Holocaust. Contrary to established historiography, smaller secular newspapers prominently reported on the Vrba-Wetzler Report, while Jewish newspapers downplayed its significance, reflecting differing editorial priorities and community dynamics.

### ***Secular Newspapers:***

Throughout the war and the Holocaust, many historians have claimed that the American media tried to bury the horrors occurring in the ghettos and concentration camps that Hitler and his Nazis had set up all over Europe. Walter Laquer, David S. Wyman, and Deborah L. Lipstadt are three historians who have specifically focused on the media coverage of the Holocaust.

Each of these authors has argued that American newspapers would put stories about the Holocaust deep within their papers so readers would have to look to find these news stories. They also have said that various secular newspapers would not mention “Jews” in the titles of these articles. Still, they would rather call them “Poles,” “Czechs,” “Hungarians,” etc., or simply “political prisoners.” The argument is that the United States government and the press did not want to identify that Jews were being killed and targeted like no other group of individuals in Europe. They instead wanted to group the Jews into the masses. Laquer,



Wyman, and Lipstadt have also argued that newspapers would severely underestimate the number of Jews being killed and that they never wanted to mention the actual number.

Overall, the American media wanted to downplay what was happening and not admit that a genocide was taking place.

There are various arguments as to why the United States government and the media would want to hide the horrific truths of the Holocaust. Lipstadt, in her book *Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust, 1933-1945*, largely focuses on the years preceding the war and the beginning stages of the Holocaust. She argues that at the beginning of World War II, the government and many American citizens did not want to get involved and wanted to remain neutral.

The tendency to dismiss the reports of horrors was strengthened by America's desire to remain neutral. An isolationist American public, particularly one inclined to believe that Britain would stop at little to get us to join the Allied side, felt justified in dismissing these reports as British creations. The press was "distrustful" of both sides and unanimous, at least at the outset, in endorsing neutrality.<sup>22</sup>

The government and newspaper companies thought that news like the Holocaust would spur people into action and cause them to want to fight. This also goes along with the idea that once the United States had joined the war, the United States government did not wish to believe we were fighting a war for the Jews.<sup>23</sup> Antisemitism was at an all-time high, and if the war was being fought for the Jews, people would be less likely to support the war effort. If information like the mass killings of millions of Jews was widely known, American citizens may have assumed that fighting the war was to save Jewish lives. Still, the government did not want this narrative to form as antisemitism was at an all-time high.

During this time, many American citizens did not believe that the Allies were going to win

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<sup>22</sup> Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust 1933-1945* (New York, New York: The Free Press, 1986), 137.

<sup>23</sup> Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief*, 137.

the war, so many newspapers also did not want to continue publishing the gruesome details of the Holocaust if there was no hope of rescuing the millions of Jews being persecuted.<sup>24</sup>

In Wyman's 1984 book, *Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust 1941-1945*, he argues that there was also a lot of mistrust from American citizens that the media was correctly portraying what was happening. During the early years of the war, a lot of the information the United States was receiving was coming from the Soviet Union, which was not entirely trusted.<sup>25</sup> The government could not confirm if the mass killings that Russia was supposedly witnessing were happening. There was also a lot of mistrust in the media from the propaganda from the First World War, which also added to the wide mistrust of the media and made Americans second-guess the truthfulness of the Holocaust.<sup>26</sup> This was further cemented when the United States received a telegram from Switzerland in 1942 stating that the corpses of the dead Jews were being turned into bars of soap and fertilizer.<sup>27</sup> The use of Jewish bodies as soap and fertilizer did not actually occur and further added to the wariness of the media. Many reports did not know if the news of the Holocaust would be believed simply because of the horrifying truths of what was actually occurring. Many believed that the Holocaust was simply too horrifying and that men were not capable of committing such atrocious crimes. If people did believe the genocide was taking place, many newspapers were worried that they would eventually become emotionally exhausted and not be able to handle news story after news story.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief*, 138.

<sup>25</sup> Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief*, 139.

<sup>26</sup> David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941-1945* (New York, New York: The New Press, 1984), 27

<sup>27</sup> Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews, 1941-1945*, 45

<sup>28</sup> Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews, 1941-1945*, 29

In Laqueur's book, *the Terrible Secret: Suppression of the Truth about Hitler's "Final Solution,"* he argues that another driving factor, and arguably the most significant, as to why American newspapers were hiding the Holocaust deep within their papers was that the Allied governments were not willing to take in Jewish refugees. Where the Jewish refugees were going to go if they were rescued was an ongoing debate throughout the entirety of the war. Neither the United States nor England was willing to take them in, and England was pushing back on the idea of the refugees being allowed into Palestine, as Palestine was under the British League of Nations mandate control at the time.<sup>29</sup> Both governments worried that if the Holocaust were widely publicized, there would be a dramatic push to allow the Jewish refugees haven. Neither government was willing to let that happen.

When it comes to the publication of the *Vrba-Wetzler Report*, these historians argue that the U.S. media treated it the same as all other major Holocaust events. At the time of its release, it is important to note that it was being called the *Auschwitz Report* and not the *Vrba-Wetzler Report* because Vrba and Wetzler remained anonymous at this time. Historians argue that it was hidden deep within the papers and that they did not want to mention how Jews were dying. Due to this, newspapers did not report on the key component of the report, which was the description of the gas chambers as the main weapon in Hitler's and the Nazis' mass genocide. Up until this point, the use of gas chambers as the main weapon against Jews was unknown. Lipstadt describes the publication of the report and says, "The *Los Angeles Times* placed the report on page 5 . . . the headline cited the smaller figure of 1.5 million [Jews murdered]. It made no mention of the gas chamber."<sup>30</sup> Going beyond the media,

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<sup>29</sup> Walter Laqueur, *The Terrible Secret: Suppression of the Truth about Hitler's "Final Solution"* (New York, New York : Penguin Books, 1982), 91.

<sup>30</sup> Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief*, 235.

Laqueur and Wyman argue that the United States government wanted to conceal the report and not release it to the press.

One flaw that historians have when it comes to the analysis of the media coverage in the United States during World War II surrounding news of the Holocaust is that they mainly analyze the main, popular newspapers. For instance, Lipstadt explains that she examines the following newspapers:

*New York Times, New York Herald Tribune, New York Journal American, New York Sun, PM, New York World-Telegram, Los Angeles Times, Los Angeles Examiner, Baltimore Sun, Philadelphia Inquirer, Christian Science Monitor, St. Louis Post Dispatch, Chicago Tribune, Atlanta Constitution, Miami Herald, San Francisco Chronicle, San Francisco Examiner, Washington Star, and Washington Post.*<sup>31</sup>

All of these newspapers are set in major cities around the country and have a large audience that subscribes to these various newspapers. These papers are where most go to read worldwide news, and during a war like World War II during the 1940s, these newspapers would frequently be putting out publications. Lipstadt's book was written in 1986 and Laqueur's in 1980, so they may have only had these large publications readily available, as newspapers were not digitized yet. However, it is important to look at how smaller, more local newspapers were reporting on the Holocaust and, for this thesis's purpose, the publication of the *Vrba-Wetzler Report*.

When it came to looking at how the media reported on the *Vrba-Wetzler Report*, I wanted to get a wide scope of newspapers published nationwide in both bigger and smaller cities. To do this, I went to the website History Unfolded, which is a crowd-sourced newspaper project put on by the United States Holocaust Museum. This website hosts thousands of newspaper articles covering 46 different Holocaust events starting on February 27, 1933, with the burning of the German parliament building the Reichstag, and ending on

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<sup>31</sup> Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief*, 5.

July 4, 1946, when 40 Polish Jews were murdered in Kielce, Poland. The newspaper articles that reported on the *Vrba-Wetzler Report* on their website are labeled as “First Public Reports on ‘Extermination Camp’ at Auschwitz” with a date of November 26, 1944. They have 637 articles in 327 newspapers surrounding the *Vrba-Wetzler Report*, however, I found only 35 to be useful for my thesis, as only I was able to find 37 from July 3rd that were able to be freely accessed. These 35 newspapers are from 34 cities in 27 states.

What I have found from analyzing these articles is that they didn’t try to hide the truth of the *Vrba-Wetzler Report* and were broadcasting quite clearly that millions of Jews were being murdered in Europe. All the articles that I have found were published on July 3, 1944, and contained the same message by the Associated Press:

A Geneva dispatch to the New York Times today said 1,715,000 Jews had been put to death by the Germans in Upper Silesian “extermination camps” at Auschwitz and Birkenau in two years. The report was attributed to information reaching the International Church Movement Ecumenical Refugee Commission of Geneva and the Fluchtlingshilfe of Zurich. Victims were said to have come from these countries: Poland 900,000; the Netherlands 100,000; Greece 45,000; France 150,000; Belgium 50,000; Germany 60,000; Yugoslavia, Italy and Norway 50,000 Bohemia, Moravia and Austria 30,000; Slovakia 30,000; and foreign Jews from Polish concentration camps 300,000”. Yet another 120,000 Jews from Hungary were said to have been killed or died en route to Upper Silesia . . . Prisoners were led into cells and ordered to strip for bathing . . . and then cyanide gas was said to have been released causing death in three to five minutes. The bodies are burned in crematories . . . Birkenau there are about 50 such furnaces.<sup>32</sup>

There are some variations of this quote from the AP in the newspapers, some of the newspapers go on to add more to their article, and some just leave this quote as it is. The contents of this specific report from the AP go against what many historians have claimed regarding the media coverage of the Holocaust in the United States. This quote directly states that 1,715,000 million Jews had been killed, as of April 7th, 1944 when Vrba and Wetzler

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<sup>32</sup> Associated Press, “Nazis Killed 1,715,00 Jews in 2 Years, Geneva Reports,” *Alton Evening Telegraph*, July 3, 1944.

wrote their report, at Auschwitz alone. This is by no means an underestimation of the genocide taking place. The quote also directly states that Jews specifically were being killed, which historians have claimed was rarely done in the media. This quote also describes in detail the killings done in the gas chambers and even goes as far as to explain that they would burn the bodies afterward, which historians claim was rarely reported.

Historians have claimed that when reports were written about the Holocaust, they were rarely on the front page, and Jews were never mentioned in the title of the articles, as explained by Laquer, Wyman, and Lipstadt. However, I found quite the opposite when looking at the 35 newspaper articles about the *Vrba-Wetzler Report* I collected from History Unfolded. Out of the 35 newspapers, 17 have their reports including the AP quote on the front page, 6 have it on the second page, 1 on page three, 1 on page four, 2 on page five, and the last 8 on page six or beyond. Half of the newspapers I looked at had their article on the first page.

<b>Where the Article was Placed</b>	On the Front Page	On the Second Page	On the Third Page	On-Page Four or After	Total:
<b>Number of Secular Newspapers</b>	17	6	1	11	35

In the scholarly literature to date, the narrative is almost always that news related to the Holocaust was buried deep within where readers would not be as likely to see the article. Out of these 35 newspapers, 33 named “Jews” in their titles as the ones being massively executed. Out of these 35 newspapers, 32 of them say that 1,715,000 or 2 million Jews were murdered in their title. These two statistics once again go against what many historians have argued, which is that Jews were never directly mentioned and that the number of Jews

actually being killed was never stated. Examples of these titles include, *The Alton Evening Telegraph* "Nazis Killed 1,715,000 Jews In 2 Years, Geneva Reports," *The Evening Star-Journal* from Lincoln, Nebraska "Germans Murder 1,715,000 Jews In Two Years by Fiendish Brutality," *The Battle Creek Enquirer and News* "Nearly Two Million Jews Die In Nazi 'Extermination Camps,'" and *Port Huron Times-Herald* "1,715, 000 Jews Cremated By Nazis Since '42."<sup>33</sup>

Why then have almost all of these 37 newspapers gone against what historians have noticed and argued when it comes to the American media reporting on the Holocaust? As mentioned above, historians have mostly looked at bigger media companies such as *The New York Times* or *The Los Angeles Times*. These smaller, more local newspaper companies have



Figure 2.1

fewer reporters covering world news and often reprinted AP bulletins, so if the AP reported about the Holocaust, they would too. Another factor to consider is that the facts presented in the *Vrba-Wetzler Report* were hard to deny or look away from. They were able to recount a detailed

explanation of the layout of the camp, who came into the camp, who was executed in the camp, and how they were murdering a million Jews in gas chambers. Vrba and Wetzler also obtained a label from the Zyklon B canister, which was the lethal cyanide gas they were

<sup>33</sup> See appendix

using in the gas chambers to murder millions of Jews.<sup>34</sup> Not publishing an article on the *Vrba-Weztler Report* would be ignoring a huge moment in the news and a crucial part of the war. This report also confirmed for a lot of people that the “rumors” about the mass killings of Jews in Europe were happening; it was shocking and horrifying news that needed to be published.

***The New York Times:***

Although looking at smaller papers did result in surface discrepancies, one mainstream paper is particularly interesting to analyze in the context of reporting on Holocaust-related news. During the time of World War II and the Holocaust, *The New York Times* was Jewish-owned, which fueled a lot of their decisions to not report on the Holocaust. As Laqueur, Wyman, and Lipstadt claim, if newspapers reported on the Holocaust, it was buried deep within the pages. Arthur Sulzberger was the publisher and representative of the family that owned *The Times* for four decades, and he was the main reason why *The Times* tried to avoid reporting on the Holocaust. Laurel Leff, a journalism professor at Northeastern University, did a deep dive into *The New York Times* and the articles it produced surrounding most of the major events of the Holocaust in her 2005 book, *Buried by the Times*.<sup>35</sup>

Leff explains that although *The New York Times* was not a “Jewish” or religious paper, the owners being Jews severely impacted what they did and did not report on. Sulzberger did not want his Jewish identity defining him or his business, so he left the Holocaust out of the papers. While the *Times* could not ignore that the Holocaust was taking

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<sup>34</sup> Filip Muller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz: Three Years in the Gas Chambers* (Chicago, Illinois: Ivan R. Dee : Datum Distributor, 2000), 135.

<sup>35</sup> Laurel Leff, *Buried by the Times: The Holocaust and America's Most Important Newspaper* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 19.



place, according to Leff, they tried to bury the news of the Holocaust deep within their paper as often as they could.<sup>36</sup> They also tried to downplay the severity of the Holocaust by not mentioning the word Jew and not trying to report on the specific number of Jews killed. Leff explains that Arthur Sulzberger did not view all Jews as brothers and sisters and therefore did not have a duty to help them or report on the tragedies taking place across Europe in various Nazi ghettos and concentration camps.<sup>37</sup>

Leff accredits *the New York Times* as the most influential newspaper and media organization during World War II since it had great influence over what other newspapers reported on. She goes on to argue that if *The Times* was not reporting on the Holocaust or if it was burying the Holocaust deep within its pages, smaller, more local papers would follow suit and, therefore, also not report on Holocaust news.<sup>38</sup> However, as we have seen with the AP report about the *Vrba-Wetzler Report*, this is not the case.

*The New York Times* reported on the *Vrba-Wetzler Report* on July 3rd, 1944, just like the smaller, more local papers across the United States. Their report was on the third page of this edition, so while not on the front page, it was

not hidden within the paper like other articles Leff uses as examples. The title of the article



Figure 2.2

<sup>36</sup> Leff, *Buried by the Times*, 5.

<sup>37</sup> Leff, *Buried by the Times*, 30.

<sup>38</sup> Leff, *Buried by the Times*, 5.

was, “Inquiry Confirms Nazi Death Camps” with a subheading of “1,715,00 Jews Said to Have Been Put to Death by the Germans Up to April 15.” The main does not mention Jews or the number of Jews being murdered, which corroborates Leff’s argument; however, the subheading mentions both.

Daniel T. Brigham, a correspondent at the time reporting from the neutral country of Switzerland, wrote the article.<sup>39</sup> When describing the prisoners of Auschwitz and Birkenau, he says “more than 1,715,00 Jewish refugees were put to death.” Refugees is an interesting way to describe the Jews being held prisoner in these concentration camps as they were taken there against their will. *The New York Times* article does not include the Associated Press quote like the other newspapers I analyzed, but rather, it is an entirely different article. This way, they were able to make it seem as if this was the first the United States had heard about the Holocaust and in some parts of the article gloss over what was happening in the camps.

*The New York Times* was the most influential newspaper during World War II and set the narrative in many instances for how different media companies would report on various events. Combined with its popularity and the fact that the paper was Jewish-owned at the time, it set the pace for how to report on the Holocaust. If a company like *The Times* is not reporting on the Holocaust, why should smaller newspapers report on it when they may have had zero Jewish ties?

### ***Jewish Papers:***

When looking specifically at how Jewish religious newspapers across the United States reported on the *Vrba-Wetzler Report*, it came to me as a surprise that they were the ones trying to bury the story of the detailed report on Auschwitz. The History Unfolded

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<sup>39</sup> Leff, *Buried by the Times*, 278.

website can look up different categories of newspapers, such as secular papers, Jewish papers, college papers, Spanish papers, etc. When looking through the Jewish papers, I found six newspapers reporting on the publication of the *Vrba-Wetzler Report* and the implications that came along with it, with a total of 12 articles. These six papers are *The Jewish Sentinel*, *The Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle*, *The Southern Israelite*, *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, *Detroit Jewish News*, and *The Jewish Transcript*. These papers were published in Illinois, Wisconsin, Georgia, Indiana, Michigan, and Washington.

Out of these six newspapers and 12 articles, *The Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle* was the

## 1,750,000 Jews Killed by Nazis

New York (JPS) — Two European non-Jewish relief committees with headquarters in Switzerland have received confirmed reports of the deaths of 1,750,000 Jews between April 15, 1942 and April 15, 1944, in two extermination camps set up by the Nazis in Auschwitz and Birkenau in Upper Silesia, New York Times correspondent Daniel T. Brigham cables from Geneva. The two committees are the International Church Movement Ecumenical Refugee Commission in Geneva and the Fluchtlingshilfe of Zurich. The Rev. Paul Voght of the Zurich organization reveals the following figures compiled two months ago on the number of Jews massacred in the two Upper Silesia camps, excluding hundreds of thousands slain elsewhere:

From Poland, 900,000; Netherlands, 100,000; Greece, 45,000; France, 150,000; Belgium, 50,000; Germany, 60,000; Yugoslavia, Italy and Norway, 50,000; Bohemia, Moravia and Austria, 30,000; Slovakia, 30,000; Foreign Jews from various camps in Poland, 300,000.

only one to put its stories on the first or second page. *The Jewish Sentinel* put its article

breaking the news of 1,715,000 Jews dead on the 23rd page of the July 6th, 1944 issue.

Compared to the secular newspapers looked at earlier in this chapter, this is the farthest inside a paper in which an article about the

*Vrba-Wetzler Report* appeared. After *The*

*Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle*, the closest any

article is to the front page is on page 4 in *The Southern Israelite*. When looking at the

literature written about the media during the

Holocaust, Jewish papers tend to fit the

narrative that Laquer, Wyman, and Lipstadt

were describing more than the secular papers.

Figure 2.3

The Jewish papers, in hindsight, were the ones actually burying the news story deep within their papers. The Jewish papers also published their articles days after the secular newspapers. The secular papers published their stories on July 3rd, 1944. *The Jewish Sentinel* was the first paper to publish its article on the *Vrba-Wetzler Report* on July 6th, 1944. The rest of the articles were published on July 7th, July 13th, and July 14th, 1944. These newspapers published days and even a week and a half later. This, however, may be due to the fact that all but one of these newspapers were weeklies.

When looking at the titles of these 12 articles, only four of them mention that 1,715,000 Jews had been murdered; the rest of the titles highlight that “two death camps” had been confirmed.. Non-religious affiliated papers were described as not directly saying how many Jews were being killed. Still, in this instance, it is actually the Jewish papers hiding the death toll numbers. Almost all the titles, however, do mention the word “Jew”, which is something that secular papers did not always do. That being said, when comparing the secular papers and the Jewish papers, it seems that the Jewish papers were the ones that were trying to bury the horrors of the Holocaust. They were putting stories related to the death toll of European Jews deep inside their papers, where their readers would have to look to see them. On the front pages of these issues, they discussed the hope that France might be liberated soon, an appeal to stop further deportations of Hungarian Jews, and demands for the borders of Palestine to be opened to Jewish refugees.

When looking at the contents of the Jewish news article related to the *Vrba-Wetzler Report*, they take a quote from the Jewish Publication Society, which based their report on the *New York Times*, not the Associated Press. Each newspaper article only contains the quote

with no further unique content, and all contain the same byline of “New York (JPS).” The quote reads as follows:

Two European non-Jewish relief committees with headquarters in Switzerland have received confirmed reports of the deaths of 1,750,000 Jews between April 15, 1942 and April 15, 1944, in two extermination camps set up by the Nazis in Auschwitz and Birkenau in Upper Silesia, New York Times correspondent Daniel T. Brigham cables from Geneva. The two committees are the International Church Movement Ecumenical Refugee Commission in Geneva and the Fluchtlingshilfe of Zurich. The Rev. Paul Voght of the Zurich organization reveals the following figures compiled two months ago on the number of Jews massacred in the two Upper Silesia camps, excluding hundreds of thousands slain elsewhere . . . These figures, compiled in April do not include the some 400,000 Jews reportedly deported from Hungary to these camps since April 6 of this year . . . The death chambers, like in Treblinka and Oswuenczym, consist of fake bathing establishments into which cyanide gas is released the moment all the victims, stripped, have been shut in . . . The bodies are now burned in crematoriums which were first opened on March 12, 1943.<sup>40</sup>

Suppose the Jewish newspapers did acknowledge the key details of the report, including the gas chambers and death toll numbers. Why did they bury their articles deep within their papers or delay publishing the news? There is not much literature on Jewish Newspapers during the Holocaust. However, Yosef Gorny, a professor at Tel Aviv University, focuses on Jewish media companies during the Holocaust in his 2012 book *The Jewish Press and the Holocaust 1939-1945: Palestine, Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union*. He describes that the Jewish Press wanted to stay hopeful in their papers and not dwell on the horrifying news coming about the Holocaust and the high death tolls of European Jews. In 1942, the papers were questioning whether the number of Jews being murdered was correct or if it was an exaggeration.<sup>41</sup> Later in the war, they did come to terms with the death toll numbers but tried to focus on rescue attempts that could be made to save the millions of Jews still alive in Europe. However, as the war continued and Hitler and his Nazis murdered

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<sup>40</sup> Jewish Publication Society, “1,750,000 Jews Killed by Nazis,” *The Jewish Sentinel*, July 6, 1944.

<sup>41</sup> Yosef Gorni, *Jewish Press and the Holocaust, 1939-1945: Palestine, Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union*, trans. Naftali Greenwood (New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 143.

thousands upon thousands of Jews, Jewish papers started to gradually believe that the only hope of rescue was for the Allies to win the war.<sup>42</sup>

The Jewish newspapers tried to find any hope they could for their readers and European Jewish brothers and sisters. For instance, they continued to reference the statement the United States and the Allies released condemning the Nazis' actions and promising to bring those responsible to justice.<sup>43</sup> They wanted to emphasize to their readers that they needed to work together with non-Jews to create an actual plan to save the European Jews, and they urged the neutral countries to help. These papers did however want to emphasize that their "plight" as Jews was different from others the Nazis were persecuting and that they were being killed like no other group.<sup>44</sup> While they did not want to focus on the death toll and tried to focus on any hope they could have, they did acknowledge the Holocaust. Unlike secular papers, the Jewish papers did not try to label Jews as refugees or political prisoners; from the start, they wanted it to be known that Jews were experiencing mass genocide unlike any other group in Europe.

How the Jewish papers were reporting on the *Vrba-Wetzler Report* aligns with Gorny's description of how the Jewish Press reported on the events of the Holocaust. The 12 articles I found revolving around the contents of the *Vrba-Wetzler Report* did acknowledge and write about the almost two million who had been murdered in Auschwitz and Birkenau. Still, they did not highlight the report or focus on it. For obvious reasons, this article would not bring hope to the Jewish community in the United States, but it was still important to report on. Through the detailed explanation of the gas chambers and crematoriums, the

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<sup>42</sup> Yosef Gorni, *Jewish Press and the Holocaust, 1939-1945*, 144.

<sup>43</sup> Yosef Gorni, *Jewish Press and the Holocaust, 1939-1945*, 147.

<sup>44</sup> Yosef Gorni, *Jewish Press and the Holocaust, 1939-1945*, 159-160.

*Vrba-Wetzler Report* confirmed that the Jews were being persecuted in a different way than other groups, which the Jewish press in the U.S. had tried to emphasize for years.

When comparing the secular media and the Jewish media in the United States, all the claims that were made about the secular papers trying to bury the news of the Holocaust in actuality applied to the Jewish newspapers. The secular papers put the news of the publication of the *Vrba-Wetzler Report* on the front pages, boldly stating that nearly 2 million Jews had been murdered in death camps in Europe. Meanwhile, the Jewish newspapers buried the stories in their papers and did not advertise the tragedies that came with the *Vrba-Wetzler Report*. They wanted to bring hope to their readers, so they would hide the news. The *Vrba-Wetzler Report* established the horrifying news that the way Nazis were able to kill millions of Jews was through gas chambers. This news made it to the front page of secular papers, which defies what historians have seen with major news companies. Vrba and Wetzler were important enough to make the front page.

**The *Vrba-Wetzler Report* in Trials:**

Following the end of World War II and the Holocaust, the true horrors of what was happening inside Hitler's concentration camps were witnessed by the Allied governments. There was hard evidence, such as pictures, film reels, and firsthand accounts, that attested to the systematic murder of six million European Jews. Soldiers from the United States and the Soviet Union came across these camps all across Europe and found tens of thousands of prisoners emaciated and in horrible conditions. It was an atrocity that the world had never seen before. Vrba and Wetzler had tried to warn the world a year before of what the inside of these camps would be like, but they were not listened to. The cruelty and horrible conditions exhibited in these camps went far beyond anyone's imagination; however, when the concentration camps were liberated, it finally sank in that the mass genocide of European Jews had really taken place.

Following the Holocaust, various trials over several decades took place to bring justice to the millions of victims who had perished at the hands of the Nazis. When they published their Report, Vrba and Wetzler brought hard evidence to the Allied governments and media worldwide. This report was the first to show how the Nazis were committing mass genocide with the use of gas chambers, so for this thesis, I wanted to examine how *Vrba-Wetzler Report* was used in trials following the war and if Vrba or Wetzler were used as witnesses themselves. I look at three of these key trials, the Nuremberg Trials, the Eichmann Trial, and the Auschwitz Trial, as well as the trial of a Holocaust denier, Ernest Zundel. When analyzing these trials, it became clear that the *Vrba-Wetzler Report* was not used as a significant piece of evidence, and the authors were rarely used as witnesses. Vrba and Wetzler did not get the recognition they deserved for their accomplishments or their bravery.



Their report and its findings were considered an afterthought in most legal proceedings following the war.

### ***The Nuremberg Trials:***

On August 8th, 1945, a month after the German forces surrendered, the Allied governments consisting of the United States, France, Britain, and the Soviet Union came together to establish an International Military Tribunal (IMT) to put Nazi officials on trial. These four nations curated the London Agreement, which would set the trial proceedings and allow each country to appoint a judge and a prosecution team. This trial would be the first of its kind as it had judges from four countries. The trial took place in Nuremberg, Germany, from November 20th, 1945 to October 1st, 1946.<sup>45</sup>

An indictment was filed against 24 Nazi government officials and organizations, and the jurisdiction of the Tribunal included crimes against peace and humanity as well as war crimes. The IMT for Nuremberg defined crimes against humanity as “murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation . . . or persecutions on political, racial, or religious grounds.”<sup>46</sup> On November 20, 1945, the indictment was read aloud with 21 defendants appearing in court. It is important to note that due to the suicide of Adolf Hitler, Joseph Goebbels (Hitler’s chief propaganda officer) and Heinrich Himmler (the leader of the SS organization) were unable to appear in court and be prosecuted.<sup>47</sup> The SS was responsible for the internal security of

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<sup>45</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Nuremberg Trials,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, January 5, 2018, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-nuremberg-trials#:~:text=In%20all%2C%20199%20defendants%20were,guilty%20and%20executed%20in%201962>.

<sup>46</sup> The National WWII Museum, “The Nuremberg Trials,” The National WWII Museum | New Orleans, accessed March 15, 2025, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/topics/nuremberg-trials>.

<sup>47</sup> “The Nuremberg Trials”

Germany, and “guardianship of racial purity.”<sup>48</sup> The SS was the main organization responsible for reigning terror over Jews.

At the trials, photographs and videos were shown of the numerous concentration camps established around Europe as evidence of the Nazis’ crimes against humanity. Their plan for the systematic murder of European Jews was described in detail, starting with the creation of the so-called Final Solution in 1941 and following through to the end in 1945 when Allied forces liberated the concentration camps. The world found out in detail truly what was happening during the Holocaust, and all the gruesome details came to light. The Nazis’ crimes included the systematic murder of European Jews, the murders of prisoners of war, atrocities in the concentration camps, and countless cruel acts against the Jews. Many Nazis admitted to committing these crimes but pleaded that they had only followed orders. When the trial concluded, 12 defendants were sentenced to death, three were sentenced to life imprisonment, and four were given prison sentences ranging from 10 to 20 years. On October 16th, 1946, executions were held in the gymnasium of the courthouse, which marked the end of the main trial.<sup>49</sup>

During the period of the first Nuremberg trials, the *Vrba-Wetzler Report* was published and known globally. After the conclusion of World War II, both men were safe and alive and able to testify to what they witnessed in the camps. However, neither man was called upon as a witness, and only a section of their report was used as evidence. In their report, Vrba and Wetzler recounted in graphic detail what was happening in Auschwitz and Birkenau. Vrba and Wetzler described the process of how the Nazis selected who would be murdered, how they tricked Jews into thinking the gas chambers were showers, and how the

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<sup>48</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “The SS,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed March 15, 2025, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/ss>.

<sup>49</sup> “The Nuremberg Trials”

Nazis cremated the bodies of millions of Jews after they were gassed. Their report also includes details regarding the everyday life of prisoners, prisoners' accommodations and diets, and how labor was divided among those in the camp. At the time of its publication, it was the most detailed account of Auschwitz and Birkenau and brought to light that the Nazis were using gas chambers to murder millions of Jews. Even though Vrba and Wetzler crafted this detailed report, they were not recognized for their contributions at the Nuremberg trials, nor was their report a significant piece of evidence.

In the Nuremberg Trials, Major Walsh and an American prosecutor offered only one page of the report as evidence on December 14th, 1945. Page 33 of the report was used as evidence, which tallied up the number of victims from each country at the time of Vrba and Wetzler's escape. When offering page 33 of the report as evidence, Major Walsh said,

I now offer in evidence the document identified by Number L-22, Exhibit USA-294. This is an official United States Government report issued by the Executive Office of the President of the United States, War Refugee Board, on the German camps at Auschwitz and Birkenau, dated 1944. On Page 33 of this report is set forth the number of Jews gassed in Birkenau in the 2-year period between April 1942 and April 1944. I have been assured that the figure printed in this report is not a typographical error. The number shown is 1,765,000.<sup>50</sup>

Even though Vrba and Wetzler provided a detailed explanation of all that was occurring in the Auschwitz and Birkenau concentration camps, the only piece of their report that was used was the number of victims they had calculated towards the end of their report. Neither Vrba nor Wetzler were called as witnesses to the stand during the trials. Two men who escaped from Auschwitz and were able to publish a detailed report to the world were shockingly not called upon to testify in the biggest Holocaust trial following the war.

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<sup>50</sup> "The Trial of German Major War Criminals : Proceedings of the International Military Tribunal Sitting at Nuremberg Germany," Avalon Project - Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy, accessed March 15, 2025, <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/12-14-45.asp>.

The United States  
Holocaust Memorial  
Museum explains that only  
a few Holocaust survivors  
were allowed to testify at  
the Nuremberg Trials.<sup>51</sup>  
Among the few was Avrom  
Sutzkever, who was a  
Yiddish poet and partisan

Poland (transported by truck) .....	approximately	300,000
" " " train .....	"	600,000
Holland .....	"	100,000
Greece .....	"	45,000
France .....	"	150,000
Belgium .....	"	50,000
Germany .....	"	60,000
Yugoslavia, Italy and Norway .....	"	50,000
Lithuania .....	"	50,000
Bohemia, Moravia and Austria .....	"	30,000
Slovakia .....	"	30,000
Various camps for foreign Jews in Poland	"	300,000
		<hr/>
		approximately 1,765,000

Figure 3.1

fighter. He asked to speak his native language, Yiddish, at the trials when testifying, but he was denied that request. Another notable survivor who testified was Marie-Claude Vaillant-Couturier, a French resistance member and a photojournalist who was deported to Auschwitz in 1943.<sup>52</sup> Many eyewitnesses testified, such as soldiers who fought in the war, but very few of those accounts came from Jewish survivors. The antisemitism that was present before the war, still lingered in the post-war world even after all that European Jews had gone through. Furthermore, Eugene Davidson, who was the archivist at the trials, wrote a book that recapped the proceedings after the trial ended. In his book, there is no mention of Vrba, Wetzler, or their report, and Auschwitz itself is only mentioned a handful of times.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>51</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Nuremberg Trial Testimony of Avrom Sutzkever," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed March 15, 2025, <https://perspectives.ushmm.org/item/nuremberg-trial-testimony-of-avrom-sutzkever#:~:text=As%20one%20of%20the%20few,statements%20in%20his%20native%20language.&text=For%20more%20on%20attempts%20o,to%20Sutzkever%20as%20%22Suzkever.%22>.

<sup>52</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Combating Holocaust Denial: Evidence of the Holocaust Presented at Nuremberg," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, September 5, 2020, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/combating-holocaust-denial-evidence-of-the-holocaust-presented-at-nuremberg#:~:text=Irrefutable%20Evidence%20of%20the%20Holocaust&text=During%20the%20trial%2C%20the%20perpetrators,undeniable%20documentation%20of%20the%20Holocaust>.

<sup>53</sup> Eugene Davidson, *The Trial of the Germans : An Account of the Twenty-Two Defendants before the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg*, (New York: Macmillan, 1966).

While the *Vrba-Wetzler Report* was only used once, it is significant that the evidence pulled from the report was their calculation of how many people had been killed at Auschwitz. When the Soviet Union liberated Auschwitz and Birkenau, they estimated, based on the size of the gas chambers and the crematoriums, that four million people had been killed at there. This was a significant overestimation, but four million is the number that had stuck for years following the end of the Holocaust. At the trial, Rudolf Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz, claimed that two and a half million people had been gassed at Auschwitz and another 500,000 had died of starvation, which again was an overestimation.<sup>54</sup> In the *Vrba-Wetzler Report*, they calculated that at the time of their escape, which was April 7th, 1945, 1,715,000 people had died at Auschwitz, which is a closer estimation of how many Jews had actually been murdered. Years after the war and the Holocaust had ended, Holocaust deniers claimed that four million people had not died at Auschwitz, but the actual number was much smaller. This began a conversation among historians. Franciszek Piper, a Polish historian, in 1991 used timetables of train arrivals combined with deportation records to calculate the number of victims. He found that 1.3 million people were sent to Auschwitz and Birkenau, and of those 1.3 million people, 1.1 million people had died.<sup>55</sup> Holocaust deniers chose to focus on the fact that 4 million Jews dying in Auschwitz was an overestimation, and this fueled many of them to continue to make harmful claims denying various aspects of the Holocaust.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Leonidas E. Hill, "The Trial of Ernst Zundel: Revisionism and the Law in Canada," Museum of Tolerance, April 6, 1988, <https://www.museumoftolerance.com/education/archives-and-reference-library/online-resources/simon-wiesenthal-center-annual-volume-6/annual-6-chapter-7.html>.

<sup>55</sup> Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial Museum, "How Many People Died in Auschwitz?," Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial Museum, May 11, 2003, <https://www.auschwitz.org/en/museum/news/how-many-people-died-in-auschwitz.316.html>.

<sup>56</sup> Franciszek Piper, *Auschwitz: How Many Perished Jews, Poles, Gypsies* (Oświęcim: Poligrafia ITS, 1996).

When looking at the Nuremberg Trials, it becomes apparent that survivors of the Holocaust were not the Allied government's main priority. Very few Jewish survivors were asked to testify about the crimes committed against themselves and their community. These two brave men escaped the most notorious concentration camp. They were able to write an extensive, comprehensive report about Auschwitz and Birkenau, and yet they were not recognized at the trials. The Nuremberg Trials, which were established to bring the Nazis to justice for their horrific crimes against humankind, including European Jews, served the judicial purpose of holding Germany accountable for the Allies. However, the Allied governments and the trial failed to recognize the Holocaust survivors who experienced the Nazis' wrath.

### ***The Eichmann Trial:***

Adolf Eichmann was a high-ranking Nazi official and was one of the men who helped Hitler create and organize the Final Solution. He attended the Wannsee Conference, where the inner workings of the Final Solution were planned out and coordinated. He helped to organize and facilitate the mass deportations of Jews all across Europe to ghettos and concentration and extermination camps. At the end of World War II in 1945, he was captured by the Allied forces and was sent to a detention camp for SS officers. When he was on a work detail at the camp, he escaped and moved around Germany for months under the false name of Otto Heninger. Meanwhile, at the Nuremberg Trials, Rudolf Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz, was providing extensive evidence against Eichmann and his part in the Final Solution. Eventually, using a pseudonym, Eichmann bought a plot of land and lived in Altensalzkoth, Germany, until 1950. In 1950, he moved to Argentina under the false name of

Ricardo Klement, with the help of Nazi sympathizer Bishop Alois Hudal. He was eventually captured by Israeli agents on May 11th, 1960, and was taken to Israel where he stood trial for his crimes.<sup>57</sup>



Figure 3.2

The Eichmann Trial began on April 11th, 1961, and was held in front of a special tribunal of the Jerusalem District Court. Eichmann was charged based on the 1950 Nazi and Nazi Collaborators Punishment Law, which allowed Israeli courts to punish Nazis and Nazi collaborators for their crimes against the Jewish people.<sup>58</sup> The Israeli attorney general, Gideon Hausner, signed the indictment against Eichmann on 15 different counts, including crimes against the Jewish people and crimes against humanity. Eichmann testified behind a glass booth to protect him against

assassination attempts. He claimed that he had had no part in creating Nazi policy but that he was simply carrying out orders. He said that he was “merely a little cog in the machinery” that murdered 6 million Jews.<sup>59</sup> On December 11th and 12th of 1961, his verdict was read out, and he was found guilty of “crimes against the Jewish people, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and membership in a criminal organization.” He was sentenced to death on December 15th, 1961 and executed on June 1st, 1962 by hanging.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>57</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Eichmann Trial,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, July 16, 2021, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/eichmann-trial>.

<sup>58</sup> “Eichmann Trial”

<sup>59</sup> “Eichmann Trial”

<sup>60</sup> “Eichmann Trial”

Unlike the Nuremberg Trials, Eichmann's trial heavily leaned on the testimony of Holocaust survivors. About 100 Holocaust survivors testified at the Eichmann Trial. In an interview regarding the trial and the integration of Holocaust survivors as witnesses Deborah Lipstadt, a Holocaust historian said, "It was a chance for them to tell their stories, one by one by one, to be present and to put a face on the suffering in a way that hadn't been the case at Nuremberg."<sup>61</sup> The trial gave these survivors an opportunity and a space to tell their stories and prompted a new openness in Israel for survivors to start speaking about what they had endured. Up until this point, it was rare for the Jewish survivors of the Holocaust to speak about what had happened to them in the ghettos and concentration camps, and many did not want to confront what had happened, understandably so. This trial, however, was a turning point for many survivors, in that it allowed them to help bring justice to their community by condemning Eichmann, one of the highest officials in the Third Reich.

While many Holocaust survivors were able to testify, Vrba and Wetzler were not able to do so. While he could not appear in court himself, Vrba sent an affidavit to be read at the trial, condemning Eichmann for his actions at the Auschwitz and Birkenau concentration camps as well as his hand in the mass deportations of European Jews. His affidavit, however, was rejected as evidence because he could not appear in court himself, and his statistics of how many people died at Auschwitz and Birkenau would not definitively answer the questions of the court.<sup>62</sup> The defense went on to argue that if the prosecution wanted to use Vrba's affidavit as evidence, then they should have made an effort to have him testify in court and that if he testified, the affidavit might have shed light on how many people were actually

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<sup>61</sup> Elaine Justice, "Deborah Lipstadt Talks about the Eichmann Trial," Emory News Center, March 21, 2011, [https://news.emory.edu/stories/2011/03/deborah\\_lipstadt\\_talks/index.html](https://news.emory.edu/stories/2011/03/deborah_lipstadt_talks/index.html).

<sup>62</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, "Eichmann Trial -- Session 109 -- Rulings on Evidence; the Completion of Evidence," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, February 21, 2024, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn1001890>.



killed in Auschwitz and Birkenau. However, because Vrba was not there to testify directly, his calculations were not analyzed to arrive at a definitive answer.<sup>63</sup> While Vrba's affidavit in full is not available to read; in his memoir, *I Cannot Forgive*, he explains that in his affidavit he wrote that he believed 2.5 million people had been murdered at Auschwitz by the time it was liberated, plus or minus ten percent.<sup>64</sup> While it is known now that this is an overestimation, at the time this number would have been considered plausible. Wetzler was not involved in the Eichmann trial.

Going beyond the rejection of Vrba's affidavit in the Eichmann trial, Vrba and Wetzler were also not given credit for writing the *Vrba-Wetzler Report* during the trial. In an article written by Ruth Linn, a professor at The University of Haifa in Israel, she explains that Oscar Krasniansky, who helped Vrba and Wetzler translate their report from Slovak into German, as well as arrange false papers for them, testified at the Eichmann Trial, and claimed that he himself wrote the *Vrba-Wetzler Report*.<sup>65</sup> In her article, Linn explains that in his testimony, Krasniansky claimed, "testified under oath 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."<sup>66</sup> This is yet another instance where Vrba and Wetzler were denied recognition for their remarkable report. When they are denied credit, their experience and the trauma that they went through at Auschwitz, and the efforts that they took to escape the camp are not validated.

In the Eichmann Trial, Vrba and Wetzler were not asked to testify, and it is not made clear as to why they were not there to testify. On Vrba's website, it is only stated that he was

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<sup>63</sup> "Eichmann Trial -- Session 109 -- Rulings on Evidence; the Completion of Evidence."

<sup>64</sup> Rudolf Vrba, and Alan Bestic, *I Cannot Forgive*, (New York: Grove Press, 1964).

<sup>65</sup> Ruth Linn, "Managing Our Past, Managing Our Future: Is There a 'Right' Way of Remembrance?," *Journalism and Mass Communication* 5, no. 3 (March 2015): 143–50, <https://doi.org/10.17265/2160-6579/2015.03.005>.

<sup>66</sup> Ruth Linn, "Managing Our Past, Managing Our Future: Is There a 'Right' Way of Remembrance?"

not able to testify as “he wished,” and there is no mention of why Wetzler was not there to testify. Furthermore, the evidence that Vrba did submit was not used, and the credit for bravely escaping the biggest concentration camp to warn their Hungarian Jewish brethren was taken from them. Auschwitz played a crucial role in his trial, as he organized the deportations of Jews to Auschwitz where many Jews were gassed upon arrival.<sup>67</sup> Given that Vrba and Wetzler were two key survivors of Auschwitz, it is striking that they were not at the trial and their report was not used. The Eichmann Trial is a prime example of how Vrba and Wetzler were overshadowed and overlooked for decades.

### ***The Frankfurt-Auschwitz Trial:***

The first Auschwitz Trial took place from November 24th, 1947 to December 22nd, 1947 in Cracow, Poland. This trial tried 41 senior SS officers who had worked at Auschwitz. Rudolf Höss, who was the commandant of Auschwitz, was one of the more notable people on trial. This trial only took place over the course of a month and used witness testimony and a wide variety of German documents. The trial ended with 24 of the 42 defendants sentenced to death, and others were sentenced to life in prison, fifteen years in prison, or acquitted. Rudolf Höss was executed by hanging on April 16th, 1947. The rest of the convicted defendants were executed in the Cracow Prison.<sup>68</sup>

A second Auschwitz Trial took place in Frankfurt, Germany from December 30th, 1963 to August 10th, 1965. This trial tried 22 Auschwitz personnel, including second and third-tier officers. This trial relied heavily on witness testimony, with about 360 people testifying, among them 210 Auschwitz survivors. The trial was also open to the public, which

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<sup>67</sup> Petros A. Papadatos, *The Eichmann Trial*, (London: Stevens & Sons, 1964).

<sup>68</sup> Dr. Naama Shik, “The Auschwitz Trials,” Yad Vashem, World Holocaust Remembrance Center, accessed March 16, 2025, <https://www.yadvashem.org/articles/general/auschwitz-trials.html>.

allowed more information to flow from the courtroom to the outside world, which in turn educated more people about what occurred during the Holocaust. Of the 22 accused, 18 were found guilty, with six receiving life in prison and the others receiving a range of five to fourteen years. However, many of those who were found guilty did not serve their full prison sentences.<sup>69</sup>

The drastic difference between the sentences for the guilty can be explained by what laws the trials were based upon. For instance, the first Auschwitz trial took place based on international law and the definition of crimes against humanity. In contrast, this second Auschwitz Trial was based on German criminal law. This means that the first trial was charging war criminals for crimes committed during the war, which allowed for easier conviction and harsher punishment. Having the second trial based upon West German law meant that convicting some of the accused would be harder, and the punishment could not be as drastic. In most secondary literature about these trials, this is heavily emphasized and makes it so that some viewed the second Auschwitz trial as a failure.<sup>70</sup>

Even though the second trial resulted in less severe punishment for those found guilty of having had a hand in the operations of the Auschwitz concentration camp, this trial did rely heavily on Holocaust survivor testimony, including that of Vrba and Wetzler. This would be the first time that Vrba and Wetzler were able to take the stand, share their experiences, and have a hand in bringing to justice those who put them through crimes beyond anyone's imagination. This would be the first time that they were acknowledged for escaping and providing concrete evidence to prove the Holocaust was occurring when they escaped from

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<sup>69</sup> Dr. Naama Shik, "The Auschwitz Trials."

<sup>70</sup> The Wiener Holocaust Library, "Postwar Trials and Denazification," The Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials , accessed March 16, 2025, <https://www.theholocaustexplained.org/survival-and-legacy/postwar-trials-and-denazification/the-frankfurt-auschwitz-trials/>.

Auschwitz in April of 1944 when they wrote their comprehensive 33-page report to warn the Hungarian Jews of what awaited them inside the camps.

Wetzler testified first on November 8, 1964, on the 108th day of the trial, for 2 hours



Figure 3.3

and 43 minutes. Vrba testified on November 30th, the 117th day of the trial, for one hour and 41 minutes. In Wetzler's testimony, the judge was mostly concerned with how the Nazis chose who was to be executed in the gas chambers, as well as how doctors in the camps injected patients with phenol to kill

some of the weakened Jews in the camp. He was also questioned about shootings that took place inside the camps.<sup>71</sup> In one section of his testimony, Wetzler describes shootings in the camp that officers would call "sport" as they viewed it as a game. One particular instance that he could recall in detail took place on October 8th, 1943. He said,

Among the Jews, of course. I remember the number - 800 fairly healthy prisoners were selected from 26 barracks. And in October there were a lot of events. At that time, many, many transports arrived, mainly from the Polish ghettos. It was a commotion there, with all the crematoria burning, except for one, which was not working properly at the time. These were again, as they called them, reprisals for the shot report leader Schillinger [3], who, I believe, was shot in the crematorium at the end of October. So they carried out reprisals again in camp BIId, a "sport", and the guards were allowed to shoot from the tower. And on those days, these prisoners had to bleed for the SS man who had been shot, and so on. [...] I did not see him shoot a prisoner, but he was always present at these "sport" procedures. I think he was very young, it suited him so well to always be there.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Alfred Wetzler, "Witness Alfred Wetzler" (Tape Recording of the Auschwitz Trial, Fritz Bauer Institut, 1964), 70. <https://www.auschwitz-prozess.de/zeugenaussagen/Wetzler-Alfred/>

<sup>72</sup> Wetzler, "Witness Alfred Wetzler"

In this quote, he is describing Stefan Baretzki, who was an Auschwitz guard who helped in the selection of Jews to be killed, all the while beating and murdering prisoners on his own accord.<sup>73</sup> The judges also questioned Wetzler on specific camp personnel, however, he no longer remembered everyone they asked about, as he had escaped 20 years prior.



Figure 3.4

Vrba's testimony focused more on the different jobs he had had inside the camp. He first worked in the SS economic camp, then he was a part of the "cleanup commando," in which he unloaded the transports of Jewish families coming off the trains into Auschwitz. His last job in the camp was being a clerk in the quarantine block in Birkenau, the camp next to Auschwitz. They were most interested in him being a part of the "cleanup commando," as this was directly involved with Jewish prisoners arriving at the camps.<sup>74</sup> In his testimony, Vrba described in detail the entire process of the Jews arriving off the trains until they were checked into the camp and the housing blocks or if they were immediately gassed upon arrival. As Vrba described his duties, he explained,

Between the packages there were foreign currency, gold, gold watches and so on. They were collected under the special supervision of a certain individual called Scharführer Wiegler and brought to his office. The valuables were taken away in a large suitcase. So it was a suitcase full of dollars, British pounds, marks, zlotys, gold watches and things like that. So, in any case, large amounts of value. [After] the work was finished, we marched off to the camp again. We were searched closely by the command when we left. Anyone who was found to have taken something was punished very severely, sometimes with death. And then we marched into the camp, where a group of SS men were waiting for us again, sometimes to search us [+ for] anything that could slip through during the first search. And we were led into the

<sup>73</sup> Wetzler, "Witness Alfred Wetzler"

<sup>74</sup> Rudolf Vrba, "Witness Rudolf Vrba" (Tape Recording of the Auschwitz Trial, Fritz Bauer Institut, 1964), 43. <https://www.auschwitz-prozess.de/zeugenaussagen/Vrba-Rudolf/>

block and slept there until the alarm sounded again that the transport had arrived. I did this work for about ten months.<sup>75</sup>

The judges also asked him about specific people in the camp, but like Wetzler, he could not recall every detail as he had 20 years before.

This trial allowed Vrba and Wetzler to take the stand and share their story. They were finally able to have a part in bringing to justice the men who had put them through unimaginable horrors. They were able to take part in shedding light on what happened in the camps in a very public trial. Vrba and Wetzler finally got the recognition they deserved for what they had gone through and what they were able to accomplish. This trial began a new chapter in their lives where they were able to be more public about their experiences, Wetzler published his memoir following the trial, and Vrba's began to be translated into more languages. This would be the start of their ability to be a voice for all of those who had endured the Holocaust.

### ***The Ernest Zundel Trial:***

Ernest Zundel was a neo-Nazi and a Holocaust denier. Under Canadian law, he was arrested for creating literature that would likely incite against an identifiable group, in this case, Jews, and for being a threat to national security. He was arrested in the United States for overstaying his visa and in Germany for inciting racial hatred. He published a book titled *The Hitler We Love and Why* and helped publish the book titled *Did Six Million Really Die? The Truth at Last*. He started a publishing company called Samisdat Publishers, which by the 1980s was responsible for disturbing Nazi and neo-Nazi memorabilia, posters, and audiotapes as well as Holocaust denial pamphlets and books worldwide.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Rudolf Vrba, "Witness Rudolf Vrba"

<sup>76</sup> Hill, "The Trial of Ernst Zundel: Revisionism and the Law in Canada."

In 1985 Zundel was tried in Ontario, Toronto, Canada, for “publishing falsehoods about the extermination of the Jews by the Nazi regime during World War II—that is, for denying the factuality of the Holocaust.”<sup>77</sup> This fell under a rarely invoked Canadian law that criminalized knowingly publishing false news that caused or was likely to cause harm to the public’s interest, which in this case included Canada’s interest to protect tolerance in their country. Zundel was found guilty, however, his conviction was later overturned. A second trial trying to convict Zundel of the same crimes took place in 1988. He was found guilty once again, however, this conviction was overturned once again by the Supreme Court of Canada due to a citizen being able to have freedom of expression.<sup>78</sup> Critics of the trial argue that more harm than good came out of the trial as it gave deniers like Zundel a platform to spew more misinformation and attack survivors.<sup>79</sup>

Vrba testified in Zundel’s trial in 1985, describing all that he had experienced inside the Auschwitz and Birkenau concentration camps. In an interview, Vrba’s wife, Robin Vrba, recounted the trial and described Vrba’s testimony, saying, “Rudy gets up on the dock and they’re interviewing him. He’s giving all these lectures. He had slides. He had a pointer. He was explaining how the camp worked.”<sup>80</sup> During his testimony, the defense tried to attack the *Vrba-Wetzler Report* and discredit Vrba by explaining that not every detail written in the report was correct. In *The Case for Auschwitz*, written by Robert Jan van Pelt, he describes how Zundel’s lawyers scrutinized every single detail that Vrba or Wetzler had gotten wrong in their report. Vrba fired back, explaining that “one would become suspicious if [the

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<sup>77</sup> Hill, “The Trial of Ernst Zundel: Revisionism and the Law in Canada.”

<sup>78</sup> Hill, “The Trial of Ernst Zundel: Revisionism and the Law in Canada.”

<sup>79</sup> Sewell Chan, “Ernst Zündel, Holocaust Denier Tried for Spreading His Message, Dies at 78,” The New York Times, August 7, 2017,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/07/world/europe/ernst-zundel-canada-germany-holocaust-denial.html>.

<sup>80</sup> Robin Vrba, “Vrba v. Zundel,” Rudolf Vrba, accessed March 16, 2025, <https://rudolfvrba.com/vrba-vs-zundel/>.

*Vrba-Wetzler Report*] did not contain errors.”<sup>81</sup> Vrba explained that he and Wetzler were simply human and that their report was largely based on their memory, meaning they had little to no written documentation of what was occurring inside Auschwitz. Little mistakes were made in their report due to this, but the report as a whole was mostly accurate.<sup>82</sup>

Zundel was not Vrba’s only encounter with Holocaust deniers. Arthur Butz was an associate professor of electrical engineering at Northwestern University. However, he is best known for his book titled *The Hoax of the Twentieth Century*. Written in 1975, Butz claims that millions of Jews were never murdered in gas chambers and that the Holocaust was one big propaganda scheme. He mentions Vrba in his book as well, claiming Vrba was never in Auschwitz to begin with because the name Rudolf Vrba cannot be found in any records of the camp.<sup>83</sup> Vrba wrote Butz explaining that “Rudolf Vrba” was the name he put on his falsified documents after he escaped the camp and that his given name was Walter Rosenberg, which can be found in the camp records. However, Butz would not listen to anything Vrba had to say and stuck with his claim that Vrba had never been in the camp.<sup>84</sup>

Even after Vrba and Wetzler were finally recognized for their achievements in the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial, they were still fighting for the respect they deserved. Vrba should not have had to testify in court against a Holocaust denier to prove what he had been through or that the report that he wrote with Wetzler was factual. Vrba should never have read that Butz was claiming that he had never been in the camp, trying to take Vrba’s truth away from him. Holocaust survivors are still battling to this day to have recognition for what they have

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<sup>81</sup> Robert Jan van Pelt, and Mazal Holocaust Collection. *The Case for Auschwitz : Evidence from the Irving Trial*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 150.

<sup>82</sup> Pelt, *The Case for Auschwitz*, 151.

<sup>83</sup> Arthur R. Butz, *The Hoax of the Twentieth Century*, (Torrance, CA: Institute for Historical Review, 1976).

<sup>84</sup> Kenneth S. Stern, *Holocaust Denial*, (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1993).



gone through. Vrba is a prime example of this, in having to defend himself against uninformed and uneducated people who claim that his horrible truth never happened.

Overall, it took Vrba and Wetzler many years to be acknowledged as notable Holocaust survivors who were able to escape and provide evidence of the Holocaust. The *Vrba-Wetzler Report* informed the world that gas chambers were being used in the camps to murder millions of Jews across Europe, and yet it was not used as a strong piece of evidence until the 1960s, 20 years after their escape and the end of the Holocaust. Even once they were given recognition, they still had to fight Holocaust deniers. Vrba, on multiple occasions, had to prove that he endured the horrors of the Holocaust. It is a pity that the world did not take what Vrba and Wetzler so bravely did much sooner and shed light on how admirable these two men were.

**Conclusion:**

*The Vrba-Wetzler Report* was the most concrete piece of evidence as to what was happening inside the walls of the Auschwitz and Birkenau concentration camps at the time of its full publication in late 1944. Their 33-page report revealed the inner workings of the camp, including various jobs prisoners would hold, conditions inside the camps, the Nazis' selection process for who would die, and most importantly how mass genocide could be conducted through the use of gas chambers and crematoriums. These descriptions also had accurate drawings and diagrams paired with them, including a map of Auschwitz and Birkenau in relation to the surrounding towns, as well as diagrams of the gas chambers. Their report revealed their estimation of how many Jews had been murdered at the time of their escape in April 1944, which was an overestimation, but at the time of publication was the closest number to the actual death toll that the Allied governments had received. Vrba and Wetzler were also able to deliver a label from a Zyklon B canister, which contained the cyanide gas the Nazis used to murder millions of Jews in gas chambers.

Before Vrba and Wetzler's escape, the most evidence as to what was occurring inside the concentration camps across Europe were reports that mentioned the mass killings of Jews under Hitler's Nazi regime. Two of the most important of these reports include the May 1942 Bund Report and the August 1942 Riegner Telegram, which outline that the Holocaust was in full effect, but neither report has the detail that the *Vrba-Wetzler Report* contained. There was also testimony from soldiers at the front line who had heard rumors as to what was happening behind German lines to the European Jews, but they did not have concrete evidence. Vrba and Wetzler had been in the camps for two years before they made their escape. That two escapees of Auschwitz had survived in the camp for two years was unheard of at the time,

but their reports and their efforts to warn the world about what was happening inside these death camps were largely ignored.

Vrba and Wetzler's main motivation for escaping, besides saving their own lives, was to warn the Hungarian Jews what awaited them if they were deported to concentration camps, however, they were not believed and were ignored. During WWII and the Holocaust, historians have argued that many people did not believe that millions of Jews were being murdered because it was impossible to imagine. It was a horror beyond anyone's imagination, and people either simply did not believe such an atrocity could be taking place, or they simply did not want to believe that millions of Jews were being murdered. When the Bund Report and the Riegner telegram were made, people did not want to consider those reports as true either. It was not until photographs and videos were made at the liberation of the camps that people believed that the stories of the Holocaust were real. They had to see it to believe it.

However, not listening to these reports and survivors, including Vrba and Wetzler, came at a great cost. As mentioned above, Vrba and Wetzler wanted to escape to warn the Hungarian Jews. After Vrba and Wetzler had escaped and written their report, it was sent to Allied and neutral governments in hopes they would step in and stop the deportation of the Hungarian Jews. Despite their warning, Allied and neutral governments in Europe did not accord Vrba and Wetzler's testimony the weight it deserved, and thus did not act upon what their report had to say regarding the mass genocide of European Jews. The Hungarian Jews were still deported, and most were murdered in Auschwitz. Vrba remained angry long after the ending of the Holocaust that his warning had not been heeded and that almost all

Hungarian Jews were gassed upon arrival at Auschwitz.<sup>85</sup> Governments were not willing to change their strategy or act upon this new information, and it cost tens or hundreds of thousands of Jews their lives.

While governments were not willing to listen to Vrba and Wetzler, when the BBC broadcasted a snippet of the *Vrba-Wetzler Report* in early July, hundreds of newspapers across the United States were willing to listen. Despite what previous literature has said regarding the news coverage of the Holocaust, the *Vrba-Wetzler Report* made the front pages of many newspapers. News organizations boldly stated on the front page that 1,715,000 Jews had been murdered in Auschwitz. They wrote about Vrba and Wetzler's depiction of the gas chambers and the number of Jews that had been killed in Europe. Most importantly, these newspapers testified to the fact that Jews in Europe were being killed like no other group; the Holocaust was a mass genocide aimed at European Jews. These newspaper articles would be the most recognition Vrba and Wetzler received for decades, and their names were not even attached to the report at this point.

The next time Vrba and Wetzler were highlighted for their brave escape and their ability to write an in-depth report about what was occurring inside the walls of Auschwitz was the Auschwitz Trial in Frankfurt, Germany in 1964. Before this trial and its proceedings, Vrba and Wetzler were not called upon as notable survivors in other trials, such as the Nuremberg Trials or the Eichmann Trial. Vrba and Wetzler's report faded into the background, with hundreds of other survivors who had experienced things no one could or wished to imagine. They were not highlighted for 20 years for their bravery to escape to try to warn their fellow Jews or for the incredible but true evidence they brought forth in their

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<sup>85</sup> Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, "Rudolf Vrba," Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, November 5, 2019, <https://hmd.org.uk/resource/rudolf-vrba/>.

report. After the Auschwitz Trial, they were once again not widely recognized for their accomplishments.

After that trial, it would be another 20-odd years before their names started to pop up in Holocaust literature, identifying them as the authors of their report as well as acknowledging them for what they were able to accomplish by escaping. However, they would mostly receive mentions in books and articles; no in-depth chapter or book had been written about them at this time. It was not until recent years that their report sparked interest in the media and Holocaust literature.<sup>86</sup> In the late nineties and early two thousands, book chapters or whole books dedicated to them and their report began to appear. Even more recently, in 2021, there was a movie released about them in Poland titled *The Auschwitz Report*, which depicts their escape from Auschwitz to Slovakia, where they wrote their report.<sup>87</sup> This movie is how I discovered Vrba and Wetzler and their report. A memorial walk was also held in their honor in 2024, where participants followed Vrba and Wetzler's footsteps from Auschwitz to Slovakia where they wrote their report.<sup>88</sup> Even though they are now being represented in the mass media, there is still a lack of acknowledgement of them. Through an undergraduate research grant (URCA) I was able to travel to the Museum of Tolerance and the Holocaust Museum of Los Angeles, neither of which mention either Vrba or Wetzler as notable survivors, and there was no mention of their report.

Vrba and Wetzler are prime examples of survivors being disbelieved, ignored, or having their stories buried with hundreds of others. Allied and neutral governments chose not to act upon their warning, and as a result, the murder machinery of Auschwitz continued to function until the fall of 1944. Even after the truth came out, and there was photographic

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<sup>86</sup> Gutman and Berenbaum, *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*.

<sup>87</sup> *The Auschwitz Report*, DVD (Slovakia: D.N.A. Production, 2021).

<sup>88</sup> Helen Karsai, "The Trek," Rudolf Vrba, accessed March 16, 2025, <https://rudolfvrba.com/the-trek/>.

evidence that the Holocaust did occur, these two survivors were not asked to share their stories for 20 more years. They managed to stay alive in Auschwitz, the most formidable concentration camp, for two years, and then to escape and warn the world, yet they were not acknowledged for many, many years. They deserve to be remembered and have their bravery highlighted, as they were able to accomplish and endure more than most can even imagine.

## APPENDIX

## List of Examined Secular Newspaper Articles

Name of Newspaper	Title of Article	Page Number	Comments
<i>Alton Evening Telegraph</i> (Alton, Illinois)	"Nazis Killed 1,715,000 Jews In 2 Years, Geneva Reports"	Front Page	
<i>Council Bluffs Nonpareil</i> (Council Bluffs, Iowa)	"Report 1,715,000 Jews Slain by Germans"	Front Page	
<i>Freeport Journal-Standard</i> (Freeport, Illinois)	"Report 1,715,000 Jews Put To Death In Upper Silesia"	Page 9	
<i>Harrisburg Telegraph</i> (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania)	"Germans Murder 1,715,000 Jews"	Page 9	
<i>Hilo Tribune Herald</i> (Hilo, Hawaii)	"Million Jews Reported Slain"	Page 2	Only added 11 lines of the 40 lines from the AP quote
<i>Kenosha Evening News</i> (Kenosha, Wisconsin)	"1,715,000 Jews Reported Slain in Nazi Camps"	Page 2	
<i>Miami Daily News</i> (Miami, Florida)	"Nazis Kill 1,715,000 Jews in Two Years, Report Says"	Page 10	

<i>Miami Daily News</i> (Miami, Florida)	“Nazis Kill 1,715,000 Jews In Two Years, Reports Says”	Page 10	
<i>Miami Daily News-Record</i> (Miami, Oklahoma)	“Nazis Have Executed about 2,000,00 in Two Years”	Front Page	
<i>Port Huron Times-Herald</i> (Port Huron, Michigan)	“1,715, 000 Jews Cremated By Nazis Since ‘42”	Front Page	
<i>St. Louis Globe-Democrat</i> (St. Louis, Missouri)	“1,715,000 Jews Slain in 2 Camps in 2 Years”	Page 2	Added their own additional comments
<i>The Albuquerque Tribune</i> (Albuquerque, New Mexico)	Report Nazis Slay 1,715,000 Jews”	Front Page	The main headline of this issue
<i>The Battle Creek Enquirer and News</i> (Battle Creek, Michigan)	“Nearly Two Million Jews Die In Nazi 'Extermination Camps”	Front Page	
<i>The Brownsville Harold</i> (Brownsville, Texas)	“1,175,000 Jews Said Killed By Germans”	Page 9	Only added 8 lines of the 40 lines from the AP quote
<i>The Daily Record</i> (Long Beach, New Jersey)	“1,715,000 Jews Declared Killed In German Camps”	Front Page	
<i>The Daily Tribune</i> (Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin)	““Extermination Camps’ Dispatched 1,715,000 Jews”	Front Page	
<i>The Decatur Daily</i> (Decatur, Alabama)	“Jewish Purge Total Grows”	Page 8	Only added 25 lines of the 40 lines from



			the AP quote
<i>The Dothan Eagle</i> (Dothan, Alabama)	“1 715,000 Jews Murdered By Huns”	Front Page	Only added 25 lines of the 40 lines from the AP quote
<i>The Emporia Gazette</i> (Emporia, Gazette)	“Today’s News in Brief”	Page 2	Only added 8 lines of the 40 lines from the AP quote
<i>The Evening Independent</i> (Massillon, Ohio)	“1,175,000 Jews Reported Slain in Nazi Camps”	Page 2	Only added 25 lines of the 40 lines from the AP quote
<i>The Evening Star Journal</i> (Lincoln, Nebraska)	“Germans Murder 1,715,000 Jews In Two Years by Fiendish Brutality”	Page 3	
<i>The Index-Journal</i> (Greenwood, South Carolina)	“1,715,000 Jews Slain By Nazis In Two Years”	Front Page	
<i>The Indianapolis Star</i> (Indianapolis, Indiana)	“Nazis Kill 1,715,000 Jews in 2 Years at Extermination Camps”	Page 5	
<i>The Iola Register</i> (Iola, Kansas)	““Extermination Camps’ Wipe Out Jews in Silesia”	Page 6	Left out the death toll calculations
<i>The News-Palladium</i> (Benton Harbor, Michigan)	“1,715,000 Jews Massacred By Germans In Two Years”	Page 10	
<i>The Palladium-Item and Sun-Telegram</i> (Richmond, Indiana)	“Nearly 2 Million Jews Executed in Two-Year Period”	Front Page	

<i>The Pampa Daily News</i> (Pampa, Texas)	"1,715,000 Jews Reported Slain in the Last Two Years"	Front Page	
<i>The Plain Speaker</i> (Hazleton, Pennsylvania)	"Reports Nearly Two Million Jews Wiped Out By Germans"	Front Page	
<i>The Rapid City Daily Journal</i> (Rapid City, South Dakota)	"Over Million Jews Executed"	Front Page	Left out the death toll calculations
<i>The Sacramento Bee</i> (Sacramento, California)	"Geneva Says 1,715,000 Jews Were Executed in Silesia"	Front Page	
<i>The Salt Lake Telegram</i> (Salt Lake City, Utah)	"Nazis Kill 1,715,000 Jews in Silesia in Two Years"	Front Page	
<i>The Trenton Evening Times</i> (Trenton, New Jersey)	"1,715,000 Jews Killed by Nazis"	Page 4	Only added 25 lines of the 40 lines from the AP quote
<i>The Wilmington Evening Journal</i> (Wilmington, Delaware)	"Nazis Murder 1,715,000 Jews In 2 Years, Geneva Group Told"	Page 5	
<i>The Winona Republican and Herald</i> (Winona, Minnesota)	"1,715,000 Jews Reported Killed"	Page 2	
<i>The Youngstown Indicator</i> (Youngstown, Ohio)	"Put 1,715,000 Jews to Death"	Front Page	

## List of Examined Jewish Papers

Name of Newspaper	Title of Article	Page Number	Comments
<i>The Jewish Sentinel</i> (Chicago, Illinois)	"1,750,000 Jews killed by Nazis"	Page 23	Published July 6, 1944
<i>The Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle</i> (Milwaukee, Wisconsin)	"Reveal Slaughter of Two Million Jews in Silesian Death Camps"	Page 2	Published July 7, 1944
<i>The Southern Israelite</i> (Augusta, Georgia)	"Reports Reveal 1,750,000 Jews Murdered by Nazi up to April 15"	Page 5	Published July 7, 1944
<i>The Jewish Sentinel</i> (Chicago, Illinois)	"The Editor Views the News"	Page 5	The editor comments on the report saying the number "1,715,00" needs to be remembered
<i>The Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle</i> (Milwaukee, Wisconsin)	"Czech Government Confirms 2 Death Camps"	Page 6	Published July 14, 1944
<i>Jewish Telegraphic Agency</i> (Indianapolis, Indiana)	"Swiss Organizations Report Killings of 1,715,000 Jews in Camp"	Page 9	Published July 14, 1944
<i>Detroit Jewish News</i> (Detroit, Michigan)	"Czechs Describe How Nazis Murdered 1,750,000 Jews"	Page 7	Published July 14, 1944
<i>The Jewish Transcript</i> (Seattle, Washington)	"Nazis Warned to Spare Jews"	Page 7	Published October 30, 1944

<i>The Jewish Sentinel</i> (Chicago, Illinois)	"Somewhere on the Route to the Berlin"	Page 7	Published November 30, 1944
<i>The Jewish Sentinel</i> (Chicago, Illinois)	"News of the Week at a Glance"	Page 30	Published November 30, 1944
<i>The Southern Israelite</i> (Augusta, Georgia)	"It Happened Last Week"	Page 4	Published December 1, 1944
<i>The Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle</i> (Milwaukee, Wisconsin)	"Refugee Board Releases Report of Extermination of Jews in Nazi Camps"	Front Page	Published December 1, 1944

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