

VRBA, Rudolph
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Abstract

Rudolph Vrba was born in Trnava, Slovakia and grew up in Bratislava. He considered himself a Slovak, but as a Jew, he was allowed to attend only eight grades of school, and was excluded from the gymnasium. When he was sent to a transit camp, the conditions in some train cars were so bad that a third of those passengers died.

At his first camp, Majdanek, he saw children killed, women clubbed, and bones broken. After 14 days, in June 1942, he volunteered with 400 other men to go to Auschwitz. They were to help burn the corpses of 100,000 Russian prisoners to destroy evidence of the murders.

He arrived in Auschwitz in January 1943. He was on the selections team and also, for ten months, cleaned the cattle cars. Three to 16 trains arrived daily for two years. If prisoners protested, or spoke to the new arrivals, the prisoners could be beaten, shot or clubbed to death. A worker in Auschwitz crematorium #1 intimidated Rudolph that SS men had put a relative of former French president Leon Blum into the oven – alive.

Rudolph was transferred to Bruno, where he and others were forced to run while carrying heavy sacks of cement and being beaten. Daily, they were given only a pot of tea to be shared among five men, a bit of soup, and a piece of bread. Anyone could be shot for stealing bread.

He compares the various camps and sub-camps he was in. “Auschwitz was clean and neat, it looked better than Majdanek,” which he termed “a minor, crude extermination camp.” He adds, “Birkenau was tougher than Auschwitz.”

One *Sonderkommando* consisted of many men from his hometown, including three or four brothers of his friend Shanji Weiss. They plotted an uprising but were informed on and all were killed. Rudolph mentions Philip Miller, who survived 12 *Sonderkommandos*.

In January 1944, Rudolph heard rumors that the largest extermination so far was coming, so he made escape plans. He found out also about a large impending deportation of Hungarian Jews.

Rudolph escaped to Slovakia and told the Slovak Jewish Council about the expected transport of Hungarian Jews. He says the council did not help much, so he turned to the Communists in Trnava for help. “I felt that my having escaped did not help save Jews from being taken away.”

Tape 1, Side A

Q: When were you discriminated against the first time? What was your--?

A: Answer by Rudolph Vrba: First of all, it depends on what one calls discrimination. Anything on a social level, within the framework of existing law, cannot be considered discrimination. Everyone discriminates against someone at times. Everyone has a right to their likes and dislikes. But if someone is not accepted at a school or is thrown out of school because of race or religion and not because of achievement, that is discrimination.

My first experience of discrimination was based on Nuremberg Law. I was excluded from the gymnasium because I was Jewish. The Nuremberg Law defines someone as Jewish or not Jewish based on that law, not based on what one professes to be. It's based on what ones parents are. Jews were not allowed to go to school past the eighth grade. I stopped attending school, received a piece of paper and was finished with my education at the age of 14 in 1939. This was in Bratislava, Slovakia, that was independent of Czechoslovakia at the time. I considered myself a Slovak by nationality. A large percentage of my friends considered themselves Jews. In my class of 50 students, we had a choice of requesting tuition in Catholic, Jewish, Evangelic, or no religion. Three years later, deportation began.

Meanwhile, different edicts came down. First, Jews could not visit schools. Jews could not travel without permits. Permits were issued, but Jews could travel only in certain cars, to avoid contaminating the public. These laws applied to different groups differently. Jews were not to travel, period, because mixing with the non-Jewish public at large offends non-Jews. So Jews were not to travel unless absolutely necessary. They could request a permit. Then, there were people (Jews) who must travel: doctors, lawyers, or those involved with production. They received permanent permits. So automatically, Jews were divided into two groups. This process of division changed constantly. Jews were not allowed to enter Catholic offices. Jews were not allowed to live on main streets. Jews could not be trusted as honest business people, so an Aryan _____ (advisor?) was put in place. He would help himself to the till, but was not really doing any advising.

Small businesses were closed, but large businesses did very well. Non-Jews were not inclined to talk to Jews, for fear of being suspected of plotting against the government. Jews had to wear a Jewish star. This was to be six inches in diameter, sewed on exactly, with very few stitches. Some Jews had to wear a Star of David just one inch in diameter. This was another division. Those were very important because they were needed by the government. Those people were not touched by gangs.

A Jewish council was in charge of dealing with government agencies. They wore very small stars, had papers permitting them to travel anywhere, and were protected from any

discrimination. Jews had to register with the Jewish council. The council had to have a list of properties owned by Jews. Jews between the ages of 16-30 could actually work, although they don't like to work. Thus, they can prove themselves worthy of this civilization with manual work instead of their kind of tricks.

The Jewish council also had to make a list of places Jews can be sent to. They can take 25 pounds of goods with them. Their gold had to be handed over to the government. In turn, their people at home would be protected. I did not trust the Slovaks or the Jewish council to do as they promised.

Tape 1, Side B

There was a small minority of Jewish fanatics (Zionists.) They stated that all Jews should go to Palestine and establish their own state, to preserve the Jewish cultural heritage. Then came the Nuremberg Law. Issued by a nominally civilized state, it stated that Jews do not belong to Europe, but to Palestine. The Zionists realized that the Jews have been saying the same thing that the Nuremberg Law says. The Jewish council consisted of Zionists who were chosen from the upper crust of Jewish society. They and their children were totally protected.

I considered the Jewish council as Fascists just as the Gentiles. In my opinion, the aim of the Jewish council was the same as the authorities: to get me on a train with my 25-pound bag and leave my mother behind.

The crucial point was boarding the train. This was a special procedure. The train: the potential resistors were gotten rid of by being sent away to work. Thus, only the older ones stayed. I was upset that the Jewish council (Zionists) permitted this to happen.

Because I have been a bad boy by resisting and trying to escape, I was placed in a special car on the train and I was sent to a transit camp, where I would be taught discipline. After three months, I was put on a train with women, children, and older people. My original group had left a long time ago to some other place. Not too many soldiers were attached to this train, because these people would not give them too much trouble. I was warned not to misbehave or I'll be shot. So I did.

Lots of people were put on this train. Children, parents, packages, etc. More people were picked up at other stations. Sanitary conditions were not good. Old ladies were hoisted up on the train. Passing the Slovak borders to Poland, the Slovak _____ in Block (black?) uniforms left and SS guards took over.

Svardan was a border between Poland and Slovakia. Letters were circulated about Nazi promises that they would be joining their family at the destination. When they arrived, they were asphyxiated in the same gas chamber where their family had been gassed a year earlier.

Everyone was concerned about where we were going, and how to hide items like gold or cigarettes. For 24 hours, we did not get water. We had one (elimination) bucket for the whole trainload of 60 to 70 people. Children cried. We could eat because we had been allowed to take food with us. The bucket was not allowed to be emptied.

It was dehumanizing. This was done in a manner of _____ by the SS. They could not help that the train stopped far from a station where water might have been gotten. Nor that there was only one bucket to be used for elimination. But if one stuck a hand out through a grating on the window, the hand was shot. I have heard of, or seen, a train being in transit for 11 days. Sometimes one-third of the group was dead in the train cars.

My first stop was the concentration camp in Majdanek. We were greeted with machine guns pointing at us. Men aged 16 to 45 got out of there very quickly. Women who wanted to join their husbands were clubbed. Heads and hands were broken. Children were killed. Supposedly, the women and children were to go to a ghetto while the men were working.

Tape 2, Side A

Q: After people were beaten, what happened?

A: Later on in Auschwitz, I was part of the selection committee greeting the incoming trains, and we had to clean up the mess. After each transport arrived, I realized this process was preplanned, not _____ as the Germans would have us think. Transports of three or four to 16 a day would arrive. This went on for about two years. People inside the trains were degraded totally. They defecated in front of each other, women menstruated, children and others were throwing up. This caused fighting with each other. They didn't understand what was really going on. They were under unbelievable stress, thinking that all this would stop once the train stops. But that was not the case. This was all planned out well by the Nazis -- very civilized, clean, white-gloved people. We, the prisoners in striped clothing, would not have been believed if we were to tell them ahead of time that they are going to be gassed. So, as they got out of the wagons quickly, they were met with SS encircling them and if a word was said, without warning they were shot.

There was a _____ commando, which I was part of for about 10 months. This was the cleaning up team. When a transport arrived, the SS unlocked the locks. The _____ commando opened the doors. They were not to talk to the people in the wagons (train cars), not give any signs, punishable by instant death. Two SS men standing at the wagon ordered people to get out quickly. Anyone not moving fast was hit with a walking stick. Sometimes they used a different technique. They told the people to please step out, not take their luggage with them because these criminals standing around would take their trunks, but make sure their names are on the luggage, so it can reach them. Women with their children were sent off to the gas chambers together because women would have caused problems if their children would have been snatched away from them. The healthy men and women were selected out fast. They were sent away

separately, eventually to be going to work. The people selected for the gas chambers were hauled off in a truck to the nearest chambers, the truck was raised, the door opened, the people got out, got undressed to go to the showers. They were told they will get water and food after the shower, which of course never happened.

We, the prisoners, couldn't protest because if we did, a few things could happen. Either one would be clubbed, beaten, or men would smile and write down our number and once whatever we were doing would be finished, we would be slowly clubbed to death.

Tape 2, Side B

We couldn't warn people at their arrival even if we were not clubbed to death immediately. We were watched. When we were attending to the crippled and wounded, when we had to get them onto the trucks which could carry them to the gas chambers, we couldn't even put them on a blanket. We either had to drag them or, if they could run, make them run until they dropped, then drag them onto the truck. No resistance was possible. The possibility might have existed many months before they were to enter the train cars. Perhaps they could have saved themselves somehow.

I came to Auschwitz from Majdanek. In Majdanek, which was a minor, crude extermination camp, I was there for 14 days when 400 people were needed to work elsewhere, in fields. This was June 1942. I volunteered. After a thorough check of the volunteers, one Czech prisoner told me not to go, because Auschwitz was the next stop and that is not a good place. The job there was getting rid of some 100,000 Russian prisoners bodies by burning them, so there would be no trace left of them. This was already accomplished by the first 1,000-men transport. Now they needed 400 more. We were in civilian clothing. The transport was again without water. But Auschwitz was clean and neat, it looked better than Majdanek, even after I saw the sign "*Arbeit Macht Frei*" and rows of fences. I was not afraid of being shot or hurt when I saw all the SS with guns.

Five weeks later, August 1942, I was transferred to the Buna command. The counting of people took one to two hours. The Buna command did not stand to be counted. We were counted on the way in and out. We left the camp at 3:00 A.M. before the other prisoners were awakened.

Tape 3, Side A

It took a long time to get to the next destination. The trains were very slow. We were still on German territory, with Polish names of villages. We passed civilians, who just went into their houses as if nothing was happening. Then we saw a huge area with huge construction sites. Cranes, cement machines were all over. We were marveling with the capos shouting orders. Then we were in front of a depo full of cement sacks. We had to pick up a sack and run. We were being beaten in the process. We handed over the bag to another prisoner who ran farther while being beaten. If someone fell, the person was ignored or got kicked back up onto his feet to make sure that he was not faking to avoid working. I watched and noticed things. Between shouts by the capos to hurry up,

civilians were walking around writing, measuring, doing things quietly. These people did not seem to notice all the noise and hitting of the prisoners. The officers were all SS, not Wehrmacht.

Some of the prisoners were either dead or dying, but when we came back to the camp, we had to be counted and the count had to be the same as the one in the morning when we left. So we left with 100 let's say, and came back with 100; but some of the 100 were dead or dying. Those bodies were carried back for counting purposes. It took us only a few hours to realize the difference in the way the capos were dealing with us. By 11:00 A.M., it was beastly hot. We were thirsty, but could not ask for any water, although water was around. We hoped for relief by noon. The sirens started at noon. We stopped working, were told to sit, but we all ran to a spot where there might be water. The capos with clubs were there. They told us not to drink this water because we would get dysentery. But we didn't care. Again they told us not to, or hit us on our head. Then we saw barrels being carried by prisoners. They were filled with soup and tea. The prisoners who drank the water died within a few days; the water was polluted with this germ. We were given our food, then one pot of tea to be shared by five people. Most people counted the gulps and shared properly. We got one piece of bread at night. We tried to save half the bread for the morning because no food was served in the morning. If someone stole another's bread, killing the thief was permitted. No one objected to the killing.

Tape 3, Side B

Birkenau was tougher than Auschwitz. Germany needed working power. They were going to get the most out of everyone. After people were stripped of everything—family, possessions, glasses, shirts—fat was the only thing left for the Germans to use from them. Calories were the only thing left to use from the workers. Auschwitz was the end of the line for people. It was a place to liquidate Jews. At the time (1942), there were no planes that could reach Auschwitz from either England or Russia with a return trip, so it could not be bombed. The people of Slovakia, France, Greece, Germany, and Poland were brought to the area; their homes were given to the local population, to assume that they will support the war effort of the Nazis. Thus, they had a work force in Auschwitz in their factories that were safe from being destroyed and also had the support of the people who inherited those very workers' homes and land. So, although people were sent to Auschwitz to be exterminated, they were first used for work. When they went to Buna to work, only the ones in fairly good condition were allowed to go. The ones who looked like skeletons were sent to the gas chamber directly. If there was any fat left on their bodies after they were gassed, in the process of their bodies being burned, the fat was used to burn the fire better.

Why did people go on working, when all knew that the end result will be death? They were all interested in living.

An example: The *Sonderkommando*. If they understood that after doing that awful work they were going to be killed, why did they go on working?

They were never told that they would be killed. The first *Sonderkommando* consisted of many men from my hometown. My friend Shanji Weiss from Trnava, a child of a family of ten children, had three or four brothers in that *Sonderkommando*. Together they plotted an uprising. When this was discovered, the whole commando was killed. The *Sonderkommando* were well-fed. They also had gold, which gave them the chance to buy bread from the SS. The uprising was all set. One man named Issac went to the SS and in exchange for the promise to keep him alive, he told of the plan and the time. This commando was not taken to work that night. They realized that they had been reported, discovered who it was, set up a court and split open Issaac's head. All of them were killed the next day. It was said that they were killed because of the rebellion. The next *Sonderkommando* was killed for a different reason. The SS always had a spy among the group. Philip Miller was one person who survived all 12 *Sonderkommandos*. He was totally trusted by everyone and he knew how to maneuver well.

Everyone ended up working, in hopes of surviving another day, if not forever. Human nature dictates that. Those of us who were not gassed immediately learned to try to survive. Those who were gassed right away didn't know that they were going to die.

Those of us who did not get gassed right away went on working, hoping that we would survive. So there was no point in committing suicide, in other words, not do the work we were assigned and thus be killed. Each day was a fight for the possibility to live another day.

To understand how and why all this could happen, one has to understand that we are all brought up in the Judeo-Christian tradition. We follow the Ten Commandments. We may sleep with our neighbor's wife, but we don't kill her. So it is impossible for us to think that we can be executed without accusations, lawyers, papers, etc. So, when people go into a shower, they don't think that they are going to be gassed. They think that they are going into a shower. This is how a normal person would think. The Nazi thinking was very different.

Moshe Sonnenshein, a Rabbi's son, a very educated man in religious matters, believed that things happen according to God's will. At the selections of 19,000 people as to who is going to live and who is going to die, his comment was this is the will of God. When he saw all the atrocities and heard the death screams of young women as they were taken to the gas chambers and became aware of that fact, he prayed to God, "Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad," hoping that God will hear him. When he realized that his prayers were to no avail, he said, "There is no God." He did change his mind later and did not want to be reminded of what he had said.

Tape 4, Side A

Q: What was the attitude of the commando to the work they had to perform?

A: Very hard to answer that question. I was in Auschwitz main camp and the *Sonderkommando* was in Birkenau. As I said before, the first *Sonderkommando* consisted largely of boys from my hometown, they were my friends. They were executed in December 1942, so my friends were no longer alive when I got there in January 1943. The next *Sonderkommando* was strictly isolated from the general prisoners. There was a punishment section, which was block 1 and block 2. The *Sonderkommando* were not allowed to mix.

We did have contact in the way of business. They had money that they had found on the dead bodies. They kept some money and did not hand over all of it to the SS. Somehow, we got some of it and I could, by some methods, get to read a newspaper, which the SS accidentally left open after I gave him money. As I said, the money had been taken from a dead body.

I met Israel in Auschwitz crematorium #1. He was opening the ovens, and we talked about the weather. He said that there was not much work that week. He mentioned that political prisoners were treated somewhat differently. The name Blum came up, some relative of Leon Blum. Israel intimated that this man was put in the oven alive. But the *Sonderkommando* was not used for this job. The SS did this themselves. He was upset about that. These guys were docile and considered themselves almost dead while they were working.

Inmates had an attitude of contempt toward victims who went to the gas chambers without a fight. The only thing I could think of to do was to explain the goings on to the future victims. This was next to impossible to do. So I thought of escaping and explaining it to the outside world.

The machinery of getting rid of the bodies had to be destroyed. The trick of killing people had to be stopped. The whole process was inconceivable to civilized people; theirs was a different civilization. In January 1944, I got information that the biggest extermination action was being planned. I started making plans to escape.

Q: How did you know that the next group was going to be the Hungarian Jews?

A: I was stationed near the main gate of the camp. I noticed several chaps with tripods. There was a lot of work being done in three shifts. The SS who came to collect money from us dropped words about Hungarian salami was coming, along with other good things. A lot of work was being done in preparation of the arrival of one million people. I did not believe that Hungary would permit this kind of deportation until an SS man left a newspaper for me to read, in exchange for \$100 I supposedly found and gave to him. The paper said that the Hungarian government was toppled on March 19, 1944. (Miklos) Horthy was out and (Ferenc) Szalazi and another radical fascist replaced him. I realized I had to get out of there and tell the world.

I studied the guarding system thoroughly. I found the weak point and used it. At night, the prisoners were in barracks surrounded by electrical wires, machine guns, and lights

close by. During the day, they were let out and were not surrounded by wire, only by watch towers, equipped with machine guns. In the evening, the prisoners were again going into the barracks with electric wire, _____ in both chains. After they counted prisoners and all were accounted for, the signal was sent that the electricity can be cut.

Tape 4, Side B

My plan was to stay between the inner chain and the outer chain. 200 days (?) and lots of guards were sort of spread out on about 1½ mile area. The area was closed down for three days when someone was missing. They felt that they had to find the missing person. If they didn't find the prisoner within those three days, they drew down the outer chain and police started to search outside the camp. So, I had to get out of the reach of the camp guard and hopefully get out of the reach of the outside police as well. A lot of building was going on in preparation for the incoming prisoners; of about 30,000.000. There was a lot of wood and the wood was set up in a way that had an empty space in the middle. We, I and my friend Vecla (Margovich?) The trick was to hide there for three days. Then we would be safe. So we got out. We knew where we were and tried to find our way out and get across the border to Slovakia. The nearest town was Czatsa.

Dr. Pollack was the medical practitioner in the fascist organization, due to the fact that there was a shortage of doctors. I recognized him from the time I went to Majdanek and he was to go with me. I told him I am coming from Auschwitz and I need to contact someone immediately at the Jewish Council. As he was taking care of my foot, I explained to him that all the people he knew were dead. I have to leave his office and he would contact Oscar Neuman in Bratislava.

The next evening, the (Slovak) Jewish Council arrived with info about me and verified my identity. I was the first Jew who had ever come back. They questioned the truthfulness of our report. My friend Vecla was upset that they did not really believe us. We were questioned separately for about six hours. Finally, they appeared to believe us. I was not yet 21 years old and there was a law that I could not sign a paper without parental permission. They wasted some days. They should have contacted the Hungarian Jewish Council.

We got papers with proof of my Aryan origins for three generations. But they didn't give me shoes. The Germans issued a warrant for us. Meanwhile, the first Hungarian transport left for Auschwitz. I felt that I was tricked by the Slovak Jewish Council. I knew I had to find other contacts. We were supposed to talk at a synagogue on a Friday night. Not realizing it was Shabbat, I lit a cigarette as I was hiding near a wall before my talk. A member of the synagogue saw us and ordered us away because we were desecrating the Shabbat. He didn't care what we had to say, he just wanted us away from there. Four months later, he was killed in Auschwitz. I turned to the Communists for help in Trnava. They thought my story was very sad.

Tape 5, Side A

The local communist group was helpful. They offered, money, documents, a hiding place. They were not helping us as Jews -- they did not mention the concentration camps in Russia -- but as people who are against the Nazis. The communists were not enamored with the Jews because the Jews were all capitalist and they don't support communism. But the communist group was willing to help us with anything we needed. They would help me get to some unit where, if I wanted to, I can even get to shoot some Germans.

Well, I went to my hometown, met an old friend _____ Weiss. In the evening, I knocked at his door. He told me that my mother was not mad at me, even though I had not gone to see her in two years. I must be in a good position, that I was seen around Slovakia recently.

He understood my position right away. He had a job with the Anti-_____ Disease Center, which was rampant, due to the German soldiers' behavior. He thought we could use his office to mobilize what we can. We would have to get to the Hungarian masses to let them know what was happening and what was coming. The reports were smuggled into Hungary from Bratislava. We got reports from another escapee from Auschwitz six weeks later that said the four crematories were not enough to take care of the large number of Jews coming in from Hungary. They were digging ditches where the Hungarians would be shot and burned. I felt that my having escaped did not help save Jews from being taken away. The Jewish Council helped a little; they wanted me to be talking to groups, telling of the terrors going on.

The Pope _____ was in reality a Spanish priest. We talked for about six hours, my friend, the other escapee, (Vecla) Margovich, and the Jewish Council. After six hours, the priest started to cry. He asked how many priests were involved in Auschwitz. The priests were against the Nazis, even though the Pope directed them otherwise.

The first inclination of change in Hungary came when I was living with the partisans for about two months. Around October 10 or 20, I found a German newspaper that said the Jewish plutocrats in England and the Jewish Bolsheviks in Moscow are spreading rumors about Jews being murdered in a place called Birkenau. Such a place does not exist on the maps and it is all lies. I understood that something I had said came through and perhaps I made a difference.

When listening to the Auschwitz trials, I realized that the Nazis from Auschwitz had not gotten their punishment, but in fact got elevated in life.