Secrets of the Dead: Bombing Auschwitz

Premieres Tuesday, January 21 at 9 p.m. on PBS (check local listings), pbs.org/secrets and the PBS Video app to commemorate International Holocaust Remembrance Day and the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz

Synopsis
In April 1944, Jewish prisoners Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler miraculously escaped from Auschwitz concentration camp and fled through Nazi-occupied Poland to find refuge in Žilina, Slovakia, where they connected with the Jewish Underground. Once safe, they recounted what they left behind. Their harrowing testimony revealed the true horror of the Holocaust to the outside world, describing in forensic detail the gas chambers and the full extent of the Nazi extermination program.

While millions of troops fought on both fronts and battled for supremacy in the air during World War II, Nazi forces continued to deport Jews to the concentration camp. As Vrba and Wetzler’s account made its way to Allies, the idea of bombing the camp was discussed at the highest levels of government. Prime Minister Winston Churchill, Allied Air Commanders, the American War Refugee Board and the Jewish Agency were presented with one of the greatest moral questions of the 20th century: Should we bomb Auschwitz and risk killing Jewish prisoners in the camp to stop future atrocities?

Secrets of the Dead: Bombing Auschwitz explores this dilemma through dramatic recreations of arguments that took place on both sides of the Atlantic and first-hand testimony from historians, survivors and expert voices. January 27, 2020, marks the...
75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz and International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

**Short Listing**
Consider the ultimate dilemma. Would an Allied attack on Auschwitz have stopped future atrocities?

**Long Listing**
Join historians, survivors and experts as they consider one of the great moral dilemmas of the 20th century. Should the Allies have risked killing Auschwitz prisoners and bombed the camp to stop future atrocities?

**Running Time:** 60 minutes

**Film Interviewees**
- Michael Berenbaum – co-editor, “The Bombing of Auschwitz”
- Hedy Bohm – Auschwitz survivor
- Judy Cohen – Auschwitz survivor
- Tami Davis Biddle – author, “Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare”
- Max Eisen – Auschwitz survivor
- Rebecca Erbelding – author, “Rescue Board: The Untold Story of America’s Efforts to Save the Jews of Europe”
- Zdenka Fantlova – Auschwitz survivor
- Deborah Lipstadt – author, “Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust”
- Zigi Shipper – Auschwitz survivor
- Gerta Vrbová – first wife of Auschwitz escapee Rudolf Vrba
- Lenka Weksberg – Auschwitz survivor

**Timeline**
- April 1944: The harrowing testimony of Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler, Jewish prisoners who escaped the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, was turned into a detailed report known as The Auschwitz Protocol.
- May 1944: The Auschwitz Protocol reached Rabbi Michael Weissmandl, who secretly worked for the Jewish Underground in Slovakia. Weissmandl sent the protocol to Roswell McClelland at the War Refugee Board in neutral Switzerland with a plea for help and a demand for Allied air forces to bomb Auschwitz. Later, McClelland sent a
cable containing a summary of the protocol and the plea to bomb the camp to the
headquarters of the War Refugee Board in Washington, D.C.

- June 29, 1944: War Refugee Board director John Pehle passed the recommendations
to bomb Auschwitz to John McCloy, Assistant Secretary of War, who was not inclined
to divert resources from the war to stop the mass murder happening at the camp.

- July 6, 1941: Jewish Agency representatives Chaim Weizmann and Moshe Shertok
met with Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden in London, where he was presented with
The Auschwitz Protocol and a memo from U.K. Prime Minister Winston Churchill
urging the bombing of Auschwitz. Eden then summoned Head of Air Ministry Sir
Archibald Sinclair to discuss the feasibility of a raid.

- September 13, 1944: Allied forces accidentally bombed Auschwitz, killing 40
prisoners and 15 SS troops, while attempting to bomb a nearby IG Farben factory.

- Early November 1944: John Pehle received the complete The Auschwitz Protocol and
shared the report with John McCloy who informed him that bombing Auschwitz was
not “feasible from a military standpoint.” Failing to get the War Department
involved, Pehle leaked The Auschwitz Protocol to newspapers.

- November 1944: With the tide of the war turning, the Nazis began dismantling the
gas chambers at Auschwitz in an effort to destroy evidence of their crimes – and
accelerated their efforts with the new media attention.

- December 3, 1944: The Washington Post published an editorial on the atrocities
titled “Genocide,” marking the first time the word appeared in a national newspaper.

- January 27, 1945: Nine months after Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler gave their
testimony to the Jewish Underground, Auschwitz was liberated by the Soviet Army.

Series Overview
Now in its 18th season, Secrets of the Dead continues to captivate PBS viewers on air,
online and beyond, using the latest scientific discoveries to challenge prevailing ideas and
throw fresh light on historical events. Secrets of the Dead is available for streaming
simultaneously on all station-branded PBS platforms, including PBS.org and the PBS Video
app, which is available on iOS, Android, Roku, Apple TV, Amazon Fire TV and Chromecast.
PBS station members can view episodes via Passport (contact your local PBS station for
details).

@secretspbs #SecretsDeadPBS

Production Credits
Secrets of the Dead: Bombing Auschwitz is an Oxford Films production for BBC, in
association with Ventana-Film GmbH and THIRTEEN Productions LLC for WNET.
Produced and directed by Tim Dunn. Written by Mark Hayhurst. Narrated by Jay O.
Sanders. Susan Jones and Nicolas Kent are executive producers for Oxford Films. Stephanie Carter is executive producer for *Secrets of the Dead*.

**Underwriters**
Funding for *Secrets of the Dead* is provided by public television viewers. Additional funding for *Secrets of the Dead: Bombing Auschwitz* is provided by the Sylvia A. and Simon B. Poyta Programming Endowment to Fight Anti-Semitism.

**About WNET**
WNET is America’s flagship PBS station: parent company of New York’s THIRTEEN and WLIW21 and operator of NJTV, the statewide public media network in New Jersey. Through its new ALL ARTS multi-platform initiative, its broadcast channels, three cable services (THIRTEEN PBSKids, Create and World) and online streaming sites, WNET brings quality arts, education and public affairs programming to more than five million viewers each month. WNET produces and presents a wide range of acclaimed PBS series, including *Nature, Great Performances, American Masters, PBS NewsHour Weekend*, and the nightly interview program *Amanpour and Company*. In addition, WNET produces numerous documentaries, children’s programs, and local news and cultural offerings, as well as multi-platform initiatives addressing poverty and climate. Through THIRTEEN Passport and WLIW Passport, station members can stream new and archival THIRTEEN, WLIW and PBS programming anytime, anywhere.

###