
THE IMPOSSIBLE ESCAPE: A LITTLE-KNOWN STORY THAT EXPOSED THE TRUTH ABOUT AUSCHWITZ

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Abstract

The author reviews the young adult historical nonfiction work, *The Impossible Escape: A True Story of Survival and Heroism in Nazi Europe* (2023) by Steve Sheinkin.

Keywords: Auschwitz, Gerti Sidonova, historical nonfiction, Holocaust, Hungary, Nazi Europe, Poland, Rudi Vrba, Vrba-Wexler Report

Steve Sheinkin has done it again, delivering a suspenseful, mesmerizing, edge-of-your seat story in his latest historical nonfiction work, *Impossible Escape* (2023). In 1942, the lives of Jewish teenagers Rudi Vrba and Gerti Sidonova are tragically disrupted as Nazi control strengthens across Slovakia and the persecution of Jews escalates. Determined to escape, Rudi attempts to flee but is captured and sent to a labor camp in Novaky. From there, he is sent by train to Auschwitz in Poland where he is imprisoned under inhumane conditions. Meanwhile, Gerti's family flees to Hungary, where they live under false identities, constantly hiding the fact that they are Jewish.

From Rudi's perspective, we witness the atrocities of Auschwitz firsthand. In contrast, through Gerti's story we experience how life in hiding, though not as harrowing as Rudi's experience in Auschwitz, is still one of fear, uncertainty, and loss. Though Gerti is not confined like Rudi, her discovery could result in imprisonment or death at any moment.

Rudi's miraculous escape from Auschwitz becomes a suspenseful race against time. Readers experience his intense physical and psychological suffering, never knowing his fate until the very end. Rudi is able to persevere because he comes to understand that his escape is no longer about his own personal survival—it is about exposing the truth to the world, to deliver his eyewitness detailed account of unimaginable genocide happening at the Auschwitz death camp.

By pairing Rudi and Gerti's stories, Sheinkin shows that Jewish survival of the Holocaust took many forms. Their experiences reveal how luck, timing, urgency, consequence, perseverance, and extraordinary courage enabled some individuals to survive and tell their stories of truth to the world. Most importantly, Rudi's detailed account of Auschwitz became what is known as the Vrba-Wexler report. The Vrba-Wexler report was published in June of 1944 and is credited for saving many Jewish lives.

The work will appeal to middle school and high school readers because Sheinkin's use of narrative storytelling allows adolescent readers to experience history vicariously through Rudi and Gerti's stories. While *Impossible Escape* conveys important historical facts about the Holocaust, it does

so alongside the human story behind those facts. For young readers to learn effectively from history, they must feel the emotional impact of events that is difficult to achieve through a purely informational way.

Though the work is grounded in extensive research, some readers may challenge its authenticity because Sheinken employs narrative techniques that may feel like embellishment. However, at the end of the work, Sheinken provides comprehensive sources notes and a robust bibliography that includes firsthand accounts as well as reliable secondary sources. Readers who wish to verify the accuracy of events or explore the historical content further may consult those materials.

On October 7, 2026, Washburn University will host the Heartland Literature Festival where Steve Sheinken will be the featured author. Sheinken and volunteers will give presentations and lead discussions of the *Impossible Escape*. Registration for students and teachers will open August 2026 at the thewritingconference.com.

Reference

Sheinkin, S. (2023). *Impossible Escape: A True Story of Survival and Heroism in Nazi Europe*. Roaring Book Press.

Author Biography

Dr. Danny Wade is the Associate Provost of Faculty Development and Professor of English Education at Washburn University, where he has taught for 18 years. He earned his Ph.D. in English Education from the University of Oklahoma and brings a combined 28 years of experience in education. Before joining Washburn, Dr. Wade taught middle and high school English for ten years in Colorado and Oklahoma. At Washburn, he teaches courses such as Teaching Young Adult Literature, Teaching Composition, and Secondary English Methods, and he supervises student teachers. His research interests include adolescent literacy, the teaching of poetry, and young adult literature, reflecting his deep commitment to preparing future educators to connect meaningfully with young readers and writers. He can be reached at danny.wade@washburn.edu.