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“The Success is Their Own”: The Long, Arduous History of Reparations for Survivors of Vapniarka, the Camp of Death


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Abstract: A regime of extermination was imposed in the early months of captivity on the Jewish prisoners of the Vapniarka concentration camp in Transnistria, an area occupied by the Romanian authorities with support from their German allies, through the toxic grains distributed as food. More than half of the survivors remained either with paralysis or with some permanent after-effects. This article focuses on the postwar efforts to receive adequate compensation for the hundreds of Vapniarka survivors that were handicapped for the rest of their lives, and thus no longer able to work. These efforts were unique in the history of Holocaust compensations firstly because the victims did not fit within any of the existing restitution frameworks initially defined by the German state, and secondly because they organized themselves into a mutual aid group, an organization, to better lobby for their own interests. Over the years and the course of the various new Wiedergutmachung laws, the Vapniarka survivors encountered challenges to their claims denying them rightful compensations as Germany tried to place the blame at Romania's door and Romania blaming exclusively Germany, not recognizing its own guilt. With the faithful support of a camp's doctor, who kept detailed notes on the inmates' symptoms and illnesses during captivity and after, the survivors, through the organization, started to receive modest compensations only in the late 1950s. Later, a German journalist working for Christian-Jewish reconciliation, set up an aid committee through which she raised private donations, and finally in the late 1960s, the remaining survivors started to receive a more just compensation for their sufferings. This is the first article outlining the trajectory of this story.

Keywords: Transnistria; vapniarka; compensations; mutual aid; solidarity; wiedergutmachung; lathyrus sativus

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1 Short Overview of the History of Compensations After the War

In this paper, the tumultuous road to compensations for the disabled survivors of the Vapniarka concentration camp will be presented in the context of the various compensation schemes developed by the German state starting with the immediate postwar years and continuing until the late 1980s. Falling through the cracks of all the existing compensation frameworks, the Vapniarka survivors from Israel and Romania were tossed around from side to side, country to country, institution to institution, only to be left alone to fend for themselves. They were forced to structure a narration of their suffering that the German and Romanian governments could recognize as a just demand for compensation. Because Vapniarka was located in Transnistria under Romanian occupation, Germany did not recognize its responsibility over the camp. Meanwhile, Romania under the communist regime did not officially recognize its own responsibility for the Holocaust and blamed only Nazi Germany. Despite the extraordinary attempts of those survivors living in Israel who organized into an organization, they did not manage to secure adequate compensation, and only through the chance encounter with a German journalist, Charlotte Petersen, dedicated to Christian-Jewish dialogue and collaboration, did their luck change with a basic monthly pension distributed to the neediest. This represents the only such known instance when an organization lobbies the German state directly for compensation for its members and is written into law as a special case.

For the survivors of Vapniarka, who suffered permanent paralysis in the camp or, due to the delayed effects of the poisonous pea fodder that they were fed, became disabled over time, there were some possibilities for financial and medical support in Romania. As mentioned, Romania's postwar communist regime did not recognize the country's culpability for the Holocaust, instead outsourcing all blame for its crimes to Nazi Germany (Fox 2004). For a few years after its liberation from fascism on August 23, 1944 by a coalition of forces, including the Romanian Communist Party and King Mihai, supported by the entrance of Red Army troops, Romania did recognize racial persecution against Jews as a category of crimes committed by the fascist regime of Antonescu, Germany's ally. However, Jews as such did not have specific state structures to which they could turn for support. There were private Jewish organizations that offered support to the most destitute, but the great need was not matched by official state entities. There was, nevertheless, a state initiative that, among all other ethnic and religious groups, also supported Jews. IOVR (Invalizi, orfani si vaduve de razboi – invalids, orphans, war widows) offered pensions to all those who could prove that they were indeed invalids as a result of the war (there were three

different grades of invalidity, each corresponding to a particular pension level in relation to salary loss, and this also included Romanian soldiers who might have been guilty of crimes against Jews). Although not specifically legislated, it became common knowledge that simply as Jews, applications for benefits would not be readily approved, while as antifascists, chances were much higher. The concept of "antifascist" reflected the communists' narrative that the primary victims of Nazism in Romania were themselves (Fox 2004), not Jews, although no Christian political prisoners were deported to Transnistria, but rather held inside the country, mostly at the Tirgu Jiu political prisoners camp. So the survivors of Vapniarka, whether they were indeed engaged antifascists or not, enrolled in the Asociația Fostilor Detinuti si Internati Politici Antifascisti (Association of former antifascist detainees and internees, founded in 1947) (Fondul Asociația Fostilor Detinuti si Internati Politici Antifascisti 1947–1958) and with this membership were much more likely to be approved for pensions through IOVR. And indeed, many of those who stayed in Romania did benefit from these pensions.

An additional opportunity for Holocaust survivors in Romania came with a June 22, 1960 German government cabinet decision extending benefits for victims of pseudo-medical experiments to countries with which West Germany did not hold diplomatic ties at that time, including Romania. These funds were to be administered and disbursed by the International Red Cross. However, only Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary appealed for compensation through this fund (Unknown Author 1970).

Later in 1971, Romania did solicit compensations from the West German state on the heels of the latter's diplomatic shifts in relation to Eastern European countries, moving away from the *Hallstein Doctrine* of the 1950s and 1960s to an *Ostpolitik* (The resumption of diplomatic relations between the Federal Republic of Germany and the USSR and the Hallstein Doctrine 1955). In its application package, Romania included restitution (compensation) requests for 131,791 individuals, of which 450 were specifically for survivors or descendants of victims of Vapniarka from all three periods of the camp's existence, as we shall see later, not only the last lot which arrived on September 16, 1942 (Selected Record CNSAS). Interestingly, only 17 applications were for victims of medical experiments, and these did not belong to the Vapniarka group but were a separate category. Of the 450 Vapniarka applications, about 80 had died either in the camp or before 1970 from illnesses contracted in the camp, and the forms were filled out by next of kin.¹ In these 450 applications, the listed reason for persecution was mostly attributed to "antifascist" activity, and only to a lesser extent in addition to "antifascism" the term "Jewish" was *also* added. Very few applications list "Jewish" as the *only* reason for persecution. Due to various

¹ This tally is the result of the information I entered into the spreadsheet I created based on the forms received from USHMM, see description under methodology/sources.

mistakes made by the Romanian state in submitting and framing their request for compensation, which was organized by the Securitate (security police), the West German state rejected the claims for this group of 131,791 victims of the Holocaust, and no moneys were received by any of them. Other types of compensations were received after 1990 (Matei 2020).

In parallel, two initiatives for compensation of Vapniarka victims were rolled out in Israel and Germany in the 1950s and 1960s. Until the landmark Luxembourg Agreements of 1953, for the survivors of Vapniarka living outside Romania there were absolutely no legal frameworks available from any state that could support them and their special physical and medical needs that resulted from the poisoning during captivity. From survivor testimony, Israel did provide disabled immigrants very modest pensions based on the level of invalidity, but for several years after the 1948 war of independence, the country was in dire straits economically and barely able to offer adequate food and housing to the large, recently immigrated population (survivors of the Holocaust and refugees from Arab countries).² With the minimum pension received, these Vapniarka survivors could not afford any special medical treatment to improve their health, but just managed to get by day-to-day. A glimmer of hope seemed to appear pursuant the United Nations resolution nr. 301 of July 14, 1950 on victims of pseudo-medical experiments (International Red Cross Archives, B AG 226/ex 009–062 n. d.). “In a Cabinet decision of 26 July 1951, the federal government of Germany established a hardship provision for victims of human experiments who had not been harmed on the grounds of political opposition, race, religion or ideology, *did not fulfil the statutory residence or qualifying date requirements*, or had failed to meet the application deadline. This consisted of a one-off payment in cases of particular hardship” (Wiedergutmachung 2018). It is with this decision that the long parcours of the claims of the survivors of Vapniarka, who also created an organization to support their efforts, begins.

2 Methodology/Sources

Drawing from primary and secondary sources, my novel research into the compensations of survivors of Vapniarka contributes to existing research on the topic of compensations for Jews from Eastern European countries,³ including two studies on

² This is also one of the reasons that led Israel, despite enormous political opposition to not accept “blood money”, to enter negotiations with Germany in 1952 that ultimately led to the Luxembourg Agreements.

³ See ground-breaking research carried out by Paul Weindling, such as *Victims and Survivors of Nazi Human Experiments: Science and Suffering in the Holocaust* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) and *From medical war crimes to compensation: The plight of the victims of human experiments*.

the history of compensations for Romanian Jews by Petre Matei (Matei 2020) and Stefan Ionescu (Ionescu 2022), but also introduces a unique case study of how self-help and mutual aid led to an unprecedented form of pressure on the German government. In the course of this research, I discovered novel sources and documents, which are cited in this paper for the first time. The few existing scholarly studies on various aspects of the Vapniarka camp are cited in my previous works dealing with the topic.⁴ Primary sources include the personal archive of Dr Arthur Kessler, who had been a detainee in Vapniarka and along with his medical colleagues in the camp, diagnosed the source of the paralysis suffered by the more than 600 inmates (more than half of the camp population) by October 1943, and attributed it to the toxic pea fodder, *lathyrus sativus*. Dr Kessler kept meticulous records on the condition of the sick prisoners while treating them in captivity, as well as copies of letters and petitions submitted to the camp commanders informing them of the lethal effects of the pea fodder distributed as the only food. These petitions were met by the latter with the statement, “how do you know we want to keep you alive?”⁵ (P.A. Kessler n.d.). Kessler’s journal is being published in an English translation soon. His archive also includes post-war correspondence with various Jewish organizations on behalf of the survivors that he was treating in Israel, and medical reports he submitted to German authorities. Additional primary sources include: correspondence between representatives of the Joint, the survivors of Vapniarka, and German authorities; and personal testimonies of the survivors published in book form or as articles in *Wapniarka*,⁶ the bulletin of the Organization of Vapniarka survivors. These were checked to confirm details that appear in the claims. Secondary sources include several articles published in German-speaking Israeli press regarding the Charlotte Petersen fund, the book *Die Grosste Bettlerin des Jahrhunderts*, a biography about Charlotte Petersen written by Gerhard Zimmerman, correspondence from the World Jewish Congress (WJC) and Joint’s archives pertaining to their participation in the Vapniarka case, which is incomplete, and which I had to complete with documents from the Arthur Kessler archive, in English and German. Lastly, I was able to consult the archive of the 450 applications of Vapniarka survivors made in 1971 through the Romanian authorities, mentioned above. From this archive, received

4 These studies include articles by Paul Shapiro, Marianne Shapiro, Ana Barbulescu, Laura Degeratu, and my own two published articles and upcoming doctoral thesis.

5 Personal archive of Dr Arthur Kessler, German Vapniarka compensation 1954–1958, courtesy of David Kessler.

6 The name of the camp is written in numerous forms: Romanians called it Vapniarca, while Germans wrote Wapniarka, in English it is generally written Vapniarka, and Russians wrote it Vapnjarka. There are other forms as well. In some documents it is incorrectly referred to as Wapnerka or also written as Vapnearca. This multitude in spelling has complicated research.

from USHMM, of thousands of scanned forms, several scans per person, I created an excel spreadsheet for easier access. Numerous individuals that appear in this archive in 1971 later emigrated to Israel and joined the Organization of Vapniarka survivors.

3 About Vapniarka

Vapniarka was a concentration camp in the region of Transnistria, which was occupied from 1941 to 1944 by Romania under the fascist military dictatorship of Marshal Antonescu. Although research on Transnistria pales in comparison to the amount conducted on the extermination of Jews at Auschwitz, there have been nevertheless pioneering works from Jean Ancel and Radu Ioanid, who established the field of the study of the Romanian Holocaust. In Transnistria along with Bukovina and Bessarabia, all areas occupied by Romania beginning with the launch of Operation Barbarossa,⁷ more than 400,000 local and Romanian Jews were killed by shootings, imposed hunger, epidemics, and cold (INSHR-EW 2004). This represents the second largest mass killing of Jews independently undertaken after Nazi Germany itself. Vapniarka was one of only two official concentration camps in this region, the rest being ghettos and unofficial spaces of concentration (Benditer 1995).

Starting in October 1941, Jews were deported to Vapniarka by Romanian authorities in three stages: first, the survivors of the Odessa massacre,⁸ then a few months later, after the first lot died, Jews from the Romanian occupied regions of Bessarabia and Bukovina, and after this previous lot was exterminated, the last lot arrived on September 16, 1942 (Benditer 1995). The deportees from the first two stages, in total over 3,000, all died from typhus, cold, a mysterious disease that was identified only later by doctors deported in the last lot, and mass shootings carried out by the Romanian guards, as can also be gathered from the claims submitted by the Romanian government in 1971. Categorized by the Antonescu regime as a political prisoners' camp in the fall of 1942, 1,200 Jews from Bukovina, Bessarabia and Old Kingdom Romania were brought here, only 150 of them with clear political sentences. There these inmates, like the previous lot, were exclusively fed a pea called *lathyrus*

7 Operation Barbarossa was the invasion of the Soviet Union launched by Romania and Germany as allies on June 22, 1941.

8 The Romanian army, on the orders of the Antonescu regime, carried out a large-scale massacre of Jews in Odessa in October 1941 in retaliation for an attack by partisans on a police station. The Romanian army killed more than 20,000 Jews and deported the rest to various places of concentration in Transnistria. The ones suspected to have held communist sympathies, despite lacking proof, were deported to Vapniarka.

sativus, that in quantities of over 300 g per day, caused paralysis and other debilitating illnesses within weeks of ingestion and years later.

4 The Deliberations with the German Government

A letter dated January 3, 1954 sent to Dr Arthur Kessler, the doctor caring for the Vapniarka survivors in Israel, by a representative of MILTAN⁹ informs him that a doctor will be sent by the Bonn government to Israel to conduct physical examinations of those claiming to be victims of pseudo-medical experiments. The letter continues to explain that due to the new BErG laws of September 1953 (*Bundesergänzungsgesetz zur Entschädigung für Opfer der nationalsozialistischen Verfolgung*), MILTAN will try to argue that the Vapniarka group had been under German authority. Pursuant a meeting with the mentioned doctor from Bonn, Dr Schaeffer, in which she suggested that the 100 or so survivors of Vapniarka then residing in Israel should organize themselves into an association to better influence the German government in their own favor, Avram Haimovici sent a letter to those survivors requesting identifying details and announcing the formation of the organization. He became its first leader. The group came to be called the *Organization of Invalid Victims, Extermination Camp Vapniarka*. In an official medical report dated January 10, 1954, Dr Kessler wrote to the German authorities:

The prisoners were fed a poisonous grain for 145 days. The toxic nature of the poison was clear to all those involved, camp inmates, doctors and guards, and the responsible administrators, commanders and medical staff¹⁰ All had received clear information about the catastrophic consequences of administering this poison, both verbally and in writing, as well as through local inspection. (P. A. Kessler n.d.).

To stress the *equal* responsibility of the Romanian and German authorities for the poisoning of the inmates, Dr Kessler titled his medical report: *The situation in the Vapniarka camp under the Romanian-German occupation of Ukraine*.

Despite the report's title, Nehemiah Robinson from the World Jewish Congress, who confirmed its receipt in November of the same year, stated:

Unfortunately, the report does not contain any indication of who conducted the experiments: German or Romanian, nor does it say who was in charge of the camps and who liquidated the other half of the deportees. (P. A. Kessler n.d.).

⁹ Written in various letters and communiques as MILTAN or MILTAM. In Hebrew it is an acronym for the Israeli office for calculation of compensation claims from Germany.

¹⁰ He is referring to the Romanian medical staff responsible for the care of the Romanian camp guards and authorities.

His request for specification highlights the way that the survivors of Vapniarka were tossed around, and how both countries, Romania and Germany, desired to wash their hands of the responsibility for these permanently disabled survivors. Those who emigrated to Israel from anywhere in the world after 1953 could not apply for compensations from Germany. This is because they had been legally limited by the Luxembourg Agreements, which provided Israel compensation not in cash but in goods only, and thwarted any future agreements between Israel and Germany. However, the Hardship Fund for Nazi medical experiments was still available. Therefore, Mr. Robinson's questions also pointed to a need for the survivors to formulate a narrative of their experience that would more neatly fit within the restrictions and structures created by both the Romanian and German states.

This situation is again reflected in the December 1, 1954 letter sent to Mr. Robinson in New York by Esther Ory, the secretary of the World Jewish Congress in Tel Aviv. She stated that after discussing with Dr Kessler, the latter specified that:

Their immediate contacts were Romanian, with the Germans holding dual control of the administration but only Romanians came into direct contact with the inmates. The Germans were there all the time but hitherto have refused to accept any responsibility for this camp, claiming that this was run entirely by Romanians, in spite of this being erroneous, for they had control, in conjunction with the Romanians. This camp was later liquidated by the Romanians. (P. A. Kessler n.d.).

In the same letter we get a confirmation of the process undertaken by the Romanian government vis-à-vis war invalids that we explained above. The majority of survivors of Vapniarka were granted pensions for 100 % invalidity, or 80 %, i.e. grade 2, through their membership to the Association of former antifascist detainees and internees and IOVR.

One of their spokesmen, Abraham Haimovici, was granted a 100 % invalidity by the Romanian government, being classed a war invalid. He, of course, forfeited this when he immigrated to Israel. (P. A. Kessler n.d.).

For more than a year, throughout 1955, letters were exchanged between Esther Ory and her boss, L. Bernstein; Dr Nehemiah Robinson, Legal Adviser of the World Jewish Congress in New York; Dr Nahum Goldmann, Founder of the World Jewish Congress; Mr. Passman of the Joint; and Dr. Harry Knopf of MILTAN and United Restitution Organization, about the Vapniarka case, revealing that applications had either not been received or had been misplaced by the German government, and promises were made that the survivors would be officially registered with the Ministry of Finance of Germany. Indeed, they were eventually registered, and an official response from Dr Georg Blessin, the chief of the Ministry's restitution division within

the Bundesministerium der Finanzen, came on March 5, 1956. In keeping with Germany’s attempts to limit their financial responsibility to victims and eliminate as many claims as possible, Dr Blessin stated that the reason for the rejection was that there was no valid proof that at Vapniarka there was a Nazi medical experiment, since:

- There was no medical supervision analyzing the results,
- It was already known that *lathyrus sativus* would have a debilitating and lethal effect on human consumers, and an experiment was not necessary,
- It was not clear that the camp was under German control (Collection 1955–1960)

He closed with an invitation that once additional proof becomes available, the Ministry would reconsider.

The new BEG (*Bundesgesetz zur Entschädigung für Opfer der nationalsozialistischen Verfolgung*) – Federal Compensation Act – of 1956 did not do much to permit the Organization of Invalid Victims, Extermination Camp Vapniarka to advance their claims, instead it continued its principle of territoriality, and now also excluded communists from the accepted categories of victims (Heinelt 2008).

But the survivors of Vapniarka were not deterred. In a letter from mid-1956 from the *Organization of Invalid Victims*, signed by Avram Haimovici, and addressed to the Joint, he requests financial support for a 3-person delegation, including Avram Solomovici, one of the first to suffer from paralysis in the camp, to be sent by the organization to Germany to meet with German government officials and lobby for some funds on the grounds that this group was the only “case of experimentation with toxic pea fodder ordered by the Germans and executed by Romanian authorities”.

On February 17, 1957, Esther Ory requested that Dr Robinson write to Dr Pressman of the Joint assuring him that the World Jewish Congress supports this approach and would subsidize the group’s stay in Germany during the negotiations. During this period of discussion among the different Jewish organizations, it became clear that even Dr Robinson himself seemed to lose hope that there would be any positive resolution to the rightful claims of the group, but nevertheless encouraged them to change their claim from the category of pseudo-medical experiment to either article 165 or 239 of the new BEG laws (Collection 1955–1960).¹¹

11 Article 165 (1) If the compensation granted to the persecuted person in connection with his property and other income is not sufficient to support himself, he shall be granted an appropriate hardship compensation. (2) Paragraph one shall also apply if the persecuted person belongs to a group of persons for whom special purpose funds are provided elsewhere. Article 239 The Federal Government shall be authorized to make global arrangements for the granting of benefits by way of hardship compensation for groups of persons whose injury is attributable to the grounds for

Finally, the three-person delegation, composed of Avram Solomovici, Streissfeld, and Avram Haimovici, arrived in Germany on May 31 and stayed until September, 1957. Sometime in June, a letter tells how the group of Vapniarka representatives were successful in securing 150 DM per survivor per month for “deprivation of liberty” (in total 3 years, 5400 DM, which fit under article 165 of BEG), while their fight for compensation for pseudo-medical experiments continued. In a report of activity that the delegation submitted upon their return to Tel Aviv to their organization, it is recounted that on June 15–17 they met an unnamed Vapniarka survivor residing in Munich who, due to his citizenship of a country other than Israel, had access to many more benefits and funds. He had been able to secure these through an acquaintance, whose contact information he offered to the delegation. They agreed to keep the contact as a last resort, but to continue to pursue their path through legal means (P. A. Kessler n. d.).

In the same report, the delegation also stated that Oberregierungsrat Dr Schulte, who was extremely supportive of the group, confirmed that he as a lawyer in that office had to solve tens and tens of similar cases. Therefore, he could presume that even if the pea fodder was not given necessarily for “experimental” purposes at the beginning, it became so when the first cases of lathyrus appeared. He suggested that the doctors there, as well as the Romanian and German ones that came after, encountering interesting cases in the first two lots that modern medicine had not yet met, requested that the diet be continued, thus starting the research on the last lot of deportees. He also drew their attention to the need to detail the medical visits, how they were examined, exactly what tests they were subjected to (specifically mentioning Lombard tests), and what medicines they received.¹² (P. A. Kessler n. d.).

In order to fit within the frame that Oberregierungsrat Dr Schulte outlined, the delegation confirmed in writing that some of the prisoners had indeed been taken out of the camp infirmary to be checked by Romanian and German doctors, and had been subjected to Lombard tests and other involuntary examinations. Dr Kessler, in a transcription of the medical notes he kept in German in the camp, dated October 16, 1943, wrote:

persecution under § 1, but who have no spatial relationship to the scope of this Act and are also not entitled to claims under §§ 149–166 b. The Eighth and Ninth Sections of this Act shall not apply.

12 Throughout this article I try to show that the narrative of *Nazi experimentation* through pea fodder was shaped by the necessity of the survivors to fit within very limited existing compensation schemes and it is not known if indeed it was or not a real Nazi experiment. It is also not proven with certainty that the patients received Lombard tests and were investigated and checked by German doctors.

On June 1 and 2, 1943, Professors Bailiff, Nitulescu, Tatarianu checked all the remaining sick in the camp, described, acknowledged pea fodder, and made remarks. Some days later, they were all photographed by a Major.

At that time there was no mention of specifically German doctors, but rather only Romanian ones.

While in Germany, during the last part of their stay, two of the three members of the delegation were hospitalized and investigated by official government doctors and it was promised to them that the matter would most likely be resolved in two to three months.

In 1957, the World Jewish Congress recognized the efforts of the delegation as unprecedented.

NR (Nehemiah Robinson) states, "the success is their own". They went to Germany and they went from office to office, and they actually achieved something that others did not – they did get recognition of a claim that they were deprived of their liberty. This was recognized although they are Romanian Jews, and the Germans have not agreed to compensation in the cases of nationals of other countries which Hitler occupied.¹³ (Collection 1955–1960).

The same three-man delegation returned to Germany on November 2, 1957 and continued to send Dr Robinson requests for support while on his trips to Bonn. Dr Kessler submitted yet another report to the Bonn government on November 19, 1957 during the delegation's stay there, specifically addressed to the Obermedizinalrat Dr Goetz, explaining in detail why the poisoning of the inmates through the pea fodder must be recognized as a medical experiment. He held that:

- When the approximately 1,200 Jews arrived in the camp on September 16, 1942, they found goodbye notes written on the walls from the previous inmates.
- The lot was fed exclusively the pea fodder that turned out to be *lathyrus sativus*, known for its debilitating and lethal effects on humans and animals. Despite this *previous* knowledge, the commanders did not offer any other food, which they could have easily done as later shown.
- Once the paralysis and associated symptoms broke out and hundreds of prisoners became bedridden, appeals to humanity and human rights were sent to the commanders, requesting a change in the food. The camp commanders returned them all, ignoring them entirely.
- The effect of the *lathyrus sativus* on humans and animals had been known for decades, but had *not been accurately tested on humans*, and because it was abundant in the areas abandoned by the Red Army, and Jews were available as

¹³ It is important to stress that Hitler had NOT occupied Romania and in fact Romania was an ally of Nazi Germany during the war until August 23, 1944 when it turned its arms and became an Ally.

test subjects, it was at that time a good opportunity to conduct such human experiments.

It was not until March 1958, that the *Organization of Vapniarka Invalids* wrote Dr Blessin, the Ministerialamt, on the occasion of his visit to Israel, letter thanking the German government for the “deprivation of liberty” funds that had been received, and asking for a face-to-face visit to explain their continued justifications for also requesting compensations under the pseudo-medical experiment scheme. The 160 survivors who were at that time in Israel were almost entirely disabled and could not work. Many had already died shortly after the war from diseases caught in the camp as a result of the pea fodder, which is also reflected in the compensation file submitted by Romania to Germany in 1971. To prove their thesis that Vapniarka was under German authority, the authors of the letter claimed that they had handled German money, had been seen by German doctors, and had worked on loading and unloading coal and weapons at the Vapniarka train station. In a document I recently found from the Romanian war criminals trials of 1946, it is confirmed that the train station at Vapniarka was indeed under German authority for a brief time in 1942, and it was German soldiers who were supervising the inmates working there. This document, however, was not known by, or accessible to, the survivors in Israel and could not be used as evidence in their claim (SRI ds. 40011 19 fila 8a1, Murgescu testimony n. d.).

On March 17, 1958, a memorandum in German written by the *Organization of Vapniarka Invalids* about their encounter with Dr Blessin, Dr Brenner, and Director Mack of Bundesministerium der Finanzen of a few days before, once again outlines the narrative that had until then been established, but confronts with more vigor the lingering question of “medical purpose” of the experiment that had stalled the Germans’ recognition of their case. Building on Dr. Kessler’s report, the group claims that the medical purpose of the experiment was to find out in what quantities the grain of *lathyrus sativus* could be safely given out to the German soldiers. As mentioned earlier, the grain was in abundance in the area, left over by withdrawing Red Army soldiers, and could be used as food during a time of shortages if the correct amount were established. The prisoners at Vapniarka became the perfect testing group, as they were of varied ages, social classes, and backgrounds. The memorandum authors claim that they were purposefully left without medicine so the German doctors could supervise the development of the symptoms within the group. The memorandum continues:

The disabled can’t provide the documentary evidence that the then Romanian and Nazi governments made available for the purpose of “human experiments” just like we can’t prove to which purpose the nutrition specialist Dr Ruge stayed in Bucharest at that time, since all the NS persecution measures and especially the human experiments were under Top Secret and Secret Reich Matters.

We can only offer a few certainties. In no other Transnistrian camp was a persecuted group brought at one point¹⁴ and through just one transport besides at Vapniarka. In no other camp were the detainees given *lathyrus sativus* even though everywhere there was a lack of food and great hunger, in no other camp was such a regime implemented like in Vapniarka, where food was not let in, where they took away the water, or where upon arrival the commander said to the prisoners, “you will not get out of this camp, or if yes, only on crutches. (P. A. Kessler n.d.).”

At the end of that same year, in yet another letter sent by the Organization to Dr Blessin, the Ministerialrat, the author refers to the German Interministerial Committee’s 41st meeting of December 19, 1957 in which the case of the Vapniarka group was discussed and yet another rejection of their claims was concluded. The author reminded Dr. Blessin of the promise made a year and a half before that the case would be resolved in two to three months and still no recognition of their rightful claims had passed. In the meantime, two survivors of the camp in their mid-40s had died due to the illnesses contracted from the pea fodder, numerous were in the hospital, and the rest led a daily struggle to subsist. The author concluded with an appeal to the humanity and morality of the Ministerialrat to help the almost 200 survivors who by that time were residing in Israel, a considerable increase in numbers from the slightly over 100 who were in Israel in January 1954 when the organization was founded.

On this same topic, E. Katzenstein from the World Restitution Organization wrote to his colleagues on December 18, 1958 to recount the exact events from the Interministerial Committee’s 41st meeting. He quoted Dr Blessin, who was strongly against any additional funds being made available to this group: “In a subsequent debate, the Committee’s physicians once again emphasized their view – which they also expressed in the 41st meeting on 19.12.1957 – that the illnesses in the Vapniarka camp and their consequences were caused by inadequate nutrition. There was no evidence that these were experiments, at any rate, but in any case not experiments under medical supervision or control. From a medical point of view nothing has changed since the 41st session.” However, Katzenstein continues to say that to his surprise, Blessin and Metz told him that they would add the Vapniarka cases to the January 1959 agenda of the Wiedergutmachungsausschuss, which dealt with amendments to the BEG, even though this group constituted Israeli citizens who were not eligible for support. Metz informed Katzenstein that it was the intent of Alfred Frenzel, Chairman of the Bundestags Indemnification Committee, to create a category for victims of medical experiments irrespective of domicile (Alfred 2023).

Five days later, on December 23, 1958, a letter from Dr Nehemiah Robinson to a colleague at the Joint reminded that the group of Vapniarka survivors did manage in

14 He means that the entire third lot was brought at the same time, on September 16, 1942.

1957 to receive some funds for their members from the German state for “deprivation of liberty”.

Further correspondence between various members of Jewish organizations on the topic of the compensations of Vapniarka victims shows the uncertainty and doubt which some had toward the ability of the group to succeed in getting additional funds. This is strikingly clear in Katzenstein’s communiques, including one in April 1959, when he recommended that the Joint not pay yet another trip of the Vapniarka group to Germany.

However, by August of the same year, Mr. Bernstein of the World Jewish Congress Tel Aviv office wrote to Dr Robinson of the New York office the following:

There was no one this group could apply to: the Germans blamed the Romanians and vice versa. No one in our offices believed that their claims would be recognized but the members of this group, conscious of their rights, took the matter personally to the German authorities and the German Federal Cabinet passed a resolution recognizing their rights to compensation. (Collection 1955–1960).

Mr. Bernstein also effusively acknowledged the efforts of his secretary, Esther Ory, on the group’s behalf.

Indeed, the resolution in question had been passed by the German Federal Cabinet on August 1, 1959. A memo written at the end of November in 1960 by Esther Ory to the NY office of the World Jewish Congress related the history of the Vapniarka group’s connection to the WJC offices thusly: 2 survivors of the camp had approached them in the Tel Aviv office in late October 1954, months after their organization had been founded in January, and since that time Dr Robinson from the NY offices had been a guide and essential support to the group in their quest to get recognition for the medical experiments they had been subjected to in the camp that left them permanently paralyzed and unable to work. This recognition only came years later in a German law passed on August 1, 1959, after enormous struggle and dedication on behalf of the survivors and their Organization, in the form of a special payment above and beyond the concentration camp restitution claim, “deprivation of liberty”, which they had received in 1957. The group received a total of 800,000 DM and the promise that future survivors emigrating later to Israel would also benefit from this fund with a one-time payment of 5,000 DM (Collection 1955–1960). An essential part of the group’s success, according to Ms. Ory, was also the report written by Dr Kessler, and his 1947 publication of a scientific article in Switzerland about the impact of *lathyrus sativus* consumption on the inmates of Vapniarka (A. Kessler 1947).

Despite these limited, early successes of one-time payments with no pensions, the needs of the survivors were growing and could not be met by these funds. The survivors were becoming more numerous as they were emigrating from Romania to Israel, and those already in Israel were getting sicker and sicker as the effects from

lathyrus lativus were developing later for some than for others. The costs for their care were mounting while the Israeli government, according to its laws, only offered a mere “140 Israeli pounds” or the equivalent of \$196 in the Israeli currency of that time before the shekels were introduced, to 100 % invalids, and proportionately less to those deemed to have lesser grade invalidity. With this pension it was impossible to care for their families and parents, if they too had emigrated to Israel (P. A. Kessler n. d.).

Therefore, it was a strike of extraordinary luck that starting in the early 1960s, a new and quite unlikely ally of the Vapniarka organization came on the scene. It was not a Jewish organization as had been the case until then, but rather the Protestant Church of Dillenburg, and its representative, the journalist Charlotte Petersen. As a devout Christian, Charlotte was dedicated to charitable causes, and during the war she had been involved with some actions of anti-Nazi resistance. After the Holocaust, she made the cultivation of friendship between Christians and Jews, and the atonement for the sins of the German people against Jews, her life’s calling. To foster this friendship, she took a trip to Israel with Hilda Heinemann, the wife of the Bundespräsident Gustav Heinemann, in 1959, and there met a Norwegian priest, Magne Solheim, a Jew who had converted to Christianity, emigrant from Romania to Israel in 1949, who was looking after the Israel-based Vapniarka group. He was the one who introduced the two women to a few survivors of Vapniarka. The story of these survivors moved Petersen so profoundly that she took it upon herself to contribute to their ongoing sustenance. This was the start of the Hilfswerk Wapniarka, the association she founded and through which she raised funds from private donors for monthly pensions for the sick and paralyzed (Zimmerman 2014).

As a journalist, she wrote for her church’s newspaper, *Unser Weg*, and one of the first articles about the topic dates to early 1960. After describing the situation of the survivors who, as mentioned before, were all 80–100 % invalids and unable to hold jobs, she added a call for donations. It was the first private action on behalf of the survivors and in total she managed to collect from private sources 71,000 DM that she then sent to Magne Solheim in Israel for distribution among the Vapniarka survivors. In parallel to her fundraising on behalf of the Vapniarka group, Petersen continued her work in collaboration with other church-affiliated activists to convince the German state to offer pensions to these survivors, arguing, as had the Organization for years before, that the camp was under Nazi control. This time, though, a more specific link to the Nazis was mentioned, which had until now not appeared in the narrative of the Organization – one of the Romanian commanders had worked for the SS (Zimmerman 2014). But the German state continued to reject the claim, as it had done in all previous official statements, insisting that Vapniarka had been a Romanian concentration camp.

Starting in 1962, the Protestant Church of Hessen and Nassau, after pressure from Petersen, agreed to contribute 100,000 DM every two years for the monthly pensions of the Vapniarka group. In addition, Petersen continued to collect private donations from individuals, and thusly was able to send 40,000 DM monthly for the pensions, covering more than 160 survivors with between 200 and 300 DM/month each (Zimmerman 2014).

Out of all these funds collected, two publications were also printed in the late 1960s: a brochure in 1966 by Beno Baruch including his memories of captivity in Vapniarka, and an entirely bilingual brochure (GER-ROM) in April 1968 as a tribute to Charlotte Petersen. The foreword of Baruch's testimony from 1966 was written by a lawyer who wanted to remain anonymous due to his work, and in it he condemned what he called "the formalistic and dry wording of legal texts (which) puts numerous obstacles in the path of finding financial means of support even if, sometimes, people with a humanitarian spirit – are very sympathetic to the plight of former Vapniarka prisoners". He concluded that "nothing is unattainable, when we want to save these people whose presence is a terrible indictment against the past and a powerful, mobilizing call to factual dialogue between nations through a humane attitude, towards the formation of a common path." (P. A. Kessler n. d.).

In the 28-page issue dedicated to Charlotte Petersen with numerous articles from survivors, praising and honouring Petersen, Baruch wrote:

Every disabled person who receives aid is known to Mrs Peterson. It is not a gift sent to a sufferer but to a friend. Mrs Charlotte Peterson is visiting Israel today. The invalids of Vapniarka camp received her with the feelings with which you greet a friend who brings you the greatest gift: the warmth of his heart, his permanent care, the desire for transformation of soul balance and, most important of all, the tear of regret united with that of hope for tomorrow.

Filip Cohn wrote,

So it came to pass that one day the people of Vapniarka finally had the opportunity to meet Mrs. Peterson, the initiator of this charitable work. Accompanied by our comrade Itzhac Rones, the president of the Irgun (the current president of the Organization of Vapniarka), she knocked on the door of each invalid, talked to him, listened to his needs with a patience that only a human with a noble soul can have. Her presence brought into the homes visited the divine light of faith in humanity and the warmth of hope.

And Adolf Horovitz informs that, "at the end of 1967 the aid amounted to over 200,000 DM. Almost 100 of the most needy victims benefit from this aid."

On November 14, 1968, in the Sitzungen des Deutschen Bundestages, yet another discussion was held regarding the compensations for Vapniarka victims. During this discussion between Dr Bechert (representative of the SPD, Social-Democratic Party)

and Leicht, Parliamentary State Secretary to the Federal Minister of Finance, Leicht stated that:

The Federal Government in its Cabinet decision of August 1, 1959, granted on general humanitarian grounds and without recognition of a legal claim to compensate the injured persons living in Israel, who have suffered severe paralysis as a result of being fed the poisonous peas, a one-time aid of up to 5,000 DM in special emergencies. At that time a figure of 150 was assumed. Up to now 418.¹⁵ such cases have been compensated.¹⁶

Dr Bechert argued that, “even the Evangelical Church and also the Society for Christian-Jewish Cooperation in Germany are calling for donations and sponsorships for these victims,” but Leicht was not moved. Once again, the issue of authority over the camp of Vapniarka was raised and a long debate undertaken. The conclusion was that responsibility was shared as Romanian authorities were according to Leicht “at least – and I express myself very cautiously here as well – partly responsible, and probably were even in the first place (responsible).” Leicht insisted that no pensions could be awarded because, “In principle for a variety of reasons – because other groups would also be affected – we cannot increase such benefits”, while Mr. Bechert “pointed out that, on the basis of the final regulations, there is the possibility probably to give at least further compensation.” No pensions were approved in 1968 either.¹⁷

Starting in the early 1970s, the Organization, now renamed *Organizatia Fostilor Deportati si Internati Politici Luptatori Evrei Antifascisti in Lagarul Vapniarka* (The Organization of Former Deportees and Political Prisoners, Jewish Antifascist Fighters in the Vapniarka Camp), also began publishing a regular bulletin, *Wapniarka*, in which members of the organization recounted their memories of the camp and news about the survivors were announced. The stated purpose of the bulletin was elaborated in an introductory article in its first issue dated January-February 1972:

And even today it is still believed that the survival of the Holocaust of a large part of the Jewish community in Romania is due to favorable political factors to which the Jews in Romania contributed nothing, while entire communities in Europe were destroyed and actually participated in the anti-fascist struggle in partisan formations or even mass resistance. This misconception is precisely due to the lack of sustained and well-presented publications. And this task fell to the *irgun* Vapniarka whose members were at the head of the anti-fascist resistance group of the Jews of Romania regardless of political color. On the front of the anti-fascist struggle of the Jews of Romania, stood side by side Zionists, communists, socialists, or simply progressive

¹⁵ I have not found corroborating evidence pointing to the number of 418 “such cases” having been paid.

¹⁶ Bundesfinanzministeriums. Wiedergutmachung – Provisions Relating to Compensation. 15 8 2018. <https://dserv.bundestag.de/btp/05/05195.pdf>. (accessed September 1, 2022).

¹⁷ See the document cited in the previous footnote.

Jews who were not registered, but who stood together without fear on the barricade that was called Vapniarka. Respecting our commitment made at the beginning of this article to demonstrate this truth with facts, we are starting work with the present issue of this Bulletin which we hope will soon turn into a cultural-political external Bulletin with bilateral content: historiography and contemporaneity. (P. A. Kessler n.d.).

An interesting detail mentioned in the published report of the Organization's membership meeting from December 21, 1971 is that a delegation had been sent to Romania to gather documents pertaining to their captivity in Vapniarka and their "antifascist struggle", and those documents, 180 in total, would be exhibited at the Ghetto Fighters House, (a museum founded by the survivors of the Warsaw Ghetto rebellion and antifascist fighters), on the occasion of the opening of a small exhibition dedicated to the camp. The new name of the Organization, now under the leadership of Beno Baruch, as well as the stated mission of the bulletin, can be argued to point to a merging of the narratives and historiographic slant of the Romanian government with that of the members of the Organization residing in Israel, and the mission of the Ghetto Fighters House's exhibition, all focusing specifically on anti-fascist resistance. By the time the bulletin was published, according to the report submitted by the Organization leadership, 116 survivors had benefitted from the Charlotte Petersen fund in comparison with the 77 in 1969.

Additionally, with Petersen's financial support, several memoirs by survivors were also published in the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁸ Until her death in 1994, through her personal efforts, Hilfswerk Wapniarka was able to send the Organization 900,000 DM yearly to cover the monthly pensions of an ever-growing number of survivors, new emigrants from Romania to Israel. At her memorial, a telegram sent by one of the last presidents of the Vapniarka Organization, Ihel Benditer, was read:

We will always remember Charlotte Petersen with profound gratitude. May she rest in peace (Zimmerman 2014).

Benditer's 1995 monograph, *Vapniarka*, was also published with financial support from the Hilfswerk Wapniarka.

In 1998, four years after Petersen's death, the Hilfswerk Wapniarka, which continued its charitable activities on behalf of survivors and their families, sent 755,000 DM collected from private donations to survivors, of which 138,800 DM to those still in Romania, whom it had been helping since 1990. Until its dissolution in 2001, the Wapniarka Hilfswerk had fundraised over 18,230,277 DM for the survivors' monthly pensions and allowed them a more decent life after the horrors they had experienced.

¹⁸ Besides Vapniarka by Benditer, there are Matei Gall's *Eclipse*, Mara Pelz's *Children of Vapniarka* (out of print), Filip Cohn's *Baricada* to name but a few.

5 Conclusions

The Vapniarka compensation case is unique because the group of survivors organized themselves into a mutual aid organization, which was the only one to successfully convince the German authorities early on of the need for compensation of the victims who otherwise did not fit into any existing framework of that time due to their Israeli residence and citizenship, and Romanian origin. But through extraordinary perseverance, the representatives of the Organization “wore down the German officials”, as Dr Robinson wrote in 1957, describing the feat (Collection 1955–1960). They managed to secure one-time payments for “deprivation of liberty” in 1957, and additional one-time payments of 5,000 DM per survivor in their group, which was written into law as a separate category in 1959, promising the same to any additional survivor who would later emigrate from Romania to Israel, despite the German government not recognizing legal responsibility. However, even with this fund, the survivors’ needs were still not met since most were unemployed and had high medical costs for which they necessitated a monthly pension. A chance meeting in 1959 with Protestant journalist Charlotte Petersen led to decades-long financial support from private sources in Germany through the Hilfswerk Wapniarka that she founded in Dillenburg. This support came in the form of the much needed monthly pensions, something that until then no one had been able to secure from the German government.

The questions raised in this paper deal with the exact nature of the feeding of the prisoners with the toxic pea fodder at the Vapniarka camp. Was it really a medical experiment ordered by the Nazis and carried out by Romanian commanders, as the narrative established by survivors claimed in their quest for just compensation, and continued by Charlotte Petersen in her work to secure funds on their behalf? Or was it an initiative of the Romanian commanders and Romanian government because they wanted the prisoners to die? While documentary evidence to definitively answer this question has still not surfaced, it is clear that Romania is guilty at the very least in equal measure to Germany for the fate suffered by the inmates of Vapniarka, as Leicht also stated in 1968. Therefore, Romania should have also paid reparations to the Vapniarka and other Holocaust survivors long ago.

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