

Death of Robert Wolfe a loss for history

Author will dedicate FSU lecture to Holocaust historian

By Edwin Black
Special to the Democrat

Robert Wolfe, the irreplaceable former chief archivist for captured Nazi documents at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., died Dec. 10, 2014, at the age of 93. With his death, a legacy also dies. Many are just now coming to grips with the loss.

Wolfe single-handedly galvanized a generation of Holocaust and Nazi-era historians and authors — including me. He was assigned to the Nuremberg War Crimes prosecutor's office, where he became familiar not only with the infamous testimony now published in many volumes of the Nuremberg Trials, but also the many thousands of linear feet of evidentiary documents still largely unexploited. These are millions of pages of letters, memos, reports, and other documents that construct the enormous case of genocide brought against the Hitler regime.

Later, Wolfe helped microfilm the voluminous cache, and helped create the archives both at the Berlin Documentation Center in Germany and the National Archives in Washington, D.C.

A generation of thirsty historians made pilgrimages to Wolfe's jail cell-like offices at the Archives. Each austere room had a locked cage door with attached sign-in and sign-out sheets.

Often the visiting historian would just enunciate his topic. Then, Wolfe would reach into his user guides and the recesses of personal memory, fetching 10 or 20 linear feet of files. The historian's relentless folder-by-folder search



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would ensue. As nuggets were uncovered, the focus sharpened, and conclusions honed. Wolfe would provide mid-course corrections along the way.

Many award-winning Holocaust historians began their project this way and went on to produce major published works. Many achieved a measure of recognition and success. But Wolfe's name was often relegated to a mere mention in a long "thank you" list in a book's acknowledgments.

In my case, at least two projects were revelations to both of us.

I first came to Wolfe in the early 1980s. Together we explored the undiscovered workings of a complex economic arrangement between the Nazi finance authori-

ties and the Zionist Organization to rescue Jews by transferring them and their assets to Jewish Palestine. This was the Ha'avara Agreement which led to my first book, "The Transfer Agreement." It was Wolfe who taught me lonely courage, tough scruples, and indefatigable diligence in archival and historical endeavor. He helped me every step of the way on that first book, validated my findings, reassured me, and pushed me through toward the loneliness of the historian who answers only to history and allows only the future to judge.

He and I worked together on many other projects through the years, but most salient was my discovery that IBM had consciously co-planned and co-orga-

Author to visit Tallahassee

On Wednesday, Jan. 21, Edwin Black will make three appearances in Tallahassee.

At noon at Temple Israel, he makes an invitation-only presentation on Israel and international law.

At 2 p.m. at Tallahassee Community College, Black chronicles how eugenics began in America and eventually spread to Nazi Germany.

At 7 p.m. at FSU Alumni Center Grand Ballroom on IBM's involvement with the Holocaust.

For more information, visit www.edwinblack.com.

nized Hitler's Holocaust using the company's customized punch cards. Wolfe had just retired from the National Archives when I embarked upon that project. He agreed to help me find the documentary proof. He traveled with me through Germany as we visited archive after archive.

Known everywhere as an eminent archivist and the principal custodian of the Nazi papers, we received special and expedited access to the many private and public repositories scattered across Germany.

One day, we had stealthily arranged to visit an unknown IBM archive devoted to punch cards quietly maintained in a company facility in Sindelfingen, located near Stuttgart, Germany. The files were unique, comprising technical advisories to Nazi agen-

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cies, outlining how to achieve, step-by-step, Hitler's tasks of systematically persecuting and destroying the Jews. Our appointment was set.

But at the last minute, IBM headquarters in New York learned of our mission. When we showed up at the appointed time, we were informed through the surreal medium of a security intercom that the archive had been suddenly "shut down." We could not even come inside.

Chilled rain drizzling down our cheeks, as Wolfe summoned an intense inner anger born of decades of devotion to documenting Nazi history. He bellowed, "In the name of history, open this door!" Each of us said it over and over again. IBM would not.

No matter. Wolfe and I persevered. Ultimately, the information indicting IBM was assembled, verified, cross-checked, vetted, and revealed to the world in meticulous detail. That would not have been possible without the unique expertise and help of Robert Wolfe. Other authors have

their own stories. Eminent historian Shlomo Aronson offered this memory. "Bob was not only a mentor, but our dear colleague ... You could always trust him to guide you and save you from misinterpretation of the records ... We historians will cherish his memory."

This in mind, I dedicate to his memory a lecture titled "How IBM Co-Planned and Co-Organized the Holocaust for the Holocaust Education Resource Council," co-sponsored by the FSU School of Law.

I have lost a friend. The National Archives has lost a resource. History has lost a valiant soldier.

Edwin Black is the author of 11 award-winning editions, including the "Transfer Agreement," "War Against the Weak," "IBM and the Holocaust," and his most recent book "Financing the Flames."

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