

# THE NAZI HUNTERS

HOW A TEAM OF SPIES AND SURVIVORS CAPTURED THE WORLD'S MOST NOTORIOUS NAZI

NEAL BASCOMB

סודי  
איש

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*אשרת*  
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To Justice Served

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— N.B.

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# LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

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Adolf Eichmann, Nazi commander in charge of transportation for the Final Solution

Vera Eichmann, his wife

Nikolas (Klaus, Nick), Horst, Dieter, and Ricardo Eichmann, his sons

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Zeev Sapir

## **NAZI HUNTERS**

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Shaul Shaul, navigator

Zvi Tohar, captain

Shmuel Wedeles, copilot

**OTHER ISRAELIS**

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Haim Cohen, Attorney General of Israel

Gideon Hausner, Second Attorney General of Israel





“Justice should not only be done, but should manifestly and undoubtedly be seen to be done.”

---

— *Lord Chief Justice Gordon Hewart, 1924*

“I sat at my desk and did my work. It was my job to catch our Jewish enemies like fish in a net and transport them to their final destination.”

— *Adolf Eichmann*

“We will bring Adolf Eichmann to Jerusalem, and perhaps the world will be reminded of its responsibilities.”

— *Isser Harel*

# PROLOGUE

Buenos Aires, Argentina, May 1960



*A remote stretch of unlit road on a windy night. Two cars appear out of the darkness. One of them, a Chevrolet, slows to a halt, and its headlights blink off. The Buick drives some distance farther, then turns onto Garibaldi Street, where it too stops and its lights turn off. Two men climb out of the back of the Buick and walk to the front of the car, where one lifts the hood. Their breath steams in the cold air. One leans his burly frame over the engine. Another man gets out of the front passenger seat and climbs into the back, shutting the door after him. His forehead presses against the cold glass; his eyes fix on the highway and the bus stop.*

*In five minutes, the bus will arrive. There is no reason for any of the men to speak. They have only to wait and to watch.*

*A train roars across the bridge that spans the highway.*

*A young man wearing a bright red jacket, about fifteen years old, pedals down Garibaldi Street on his bicycle. He notices the Buick and stops to ask if they need any help. It's a remote neighborhood with few houses, after all. The driver steps halfway out of the car and, smiling at the youth, says in Spanish, "Thank you! No need! You can carry on your way."*

*The men standing outside the car smile and wave at the youth too but stay silent. He takes off, his unzipped jacket flapping around him in the wind. There is a storm on the way.*

*Suddenly, headlights split the darkness. The green and yellow municipal bus emerges, but instead of stopping at exactly 7:44 P.M., as it has done every other night the men have kept watch, it keeps going. It rattles past the Chevrolet, underneath the railway bridge, and then it is gone.*

*The man in the back of the Buick limousine speaks briefly. "We stay," he insists. Nobody argues.*

*At 8:05, they see a faint halo of light in the distance. Another bus's headlights shine brightly down the highway. This one slows and stops. Brakes screech, the door clatters open, and two passengers step out. As the bus pulls away, one of them, a woman, turns to the left, while the other, a man, heads for Garibaldi Street. He bends forward into the wind, his hands stuffed in his coat pocket.*

*He has no idea what is waiting for him.*

# CHAPTER 1



*Adolf Eichmann in uniform during World War II.*

Lieutenant Colonel Adolf Eichmann stood at the head of the convoy of 140 military vehicles. It was noon on Sunday, March 19, 1944, his thirty-eighth birthday. He held his trim frame stiff, leaning slightly forward as he watched his men prepare to move out.

The engines rumbled to life, and black exhaust spewed across the road. Eichmann climbed into his Mercedes staff car and signaled for the motorcycle troops to lead the way.

More than five hundred members of the Schutzstaffel, the Nazi security service — better known as the SS — were in the convoy, leaving Mauthausen, a concentration camp in Austria, for Budapest, Hungary. Their mission was to comb Hungary from east to west and find all of the country's 750,000

Jews. Anyone who was physically fit was to be delivered to the labor camps for “destruction through work”; anyone who was not was to be immediately killed.

Eichmann had planned it all carefully. He had been in charge of Jewish affairs for the Nazis for eight years and was now chief of Department IVB4, responsible for executing Hitler’s policy to wipe out the Jews. He ran his office like it was a business, setting clear, ambitious targets, recruiting efficient staff members and delegating to them, and traveling frequently to monitor their progress. He measured his success not in battles won but in schedules met, quotas filled, and units moved. In Austria, Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Slovakia, Romania, and Poland, Eichmann had perfected his methods. Now it was Hungary’s turn.

Stage one was to isolate the Jews. They would be ordered to wear Yellow Star emblems on their clothes, forbidden to travel or to use phones and radios, and banned from scores of professions. He would remove them from Hungarian society.

Stage two would secure Jewish wealth for the Third Reich. Factories and businesses would be taken over, bank accounts would be frozen, and the assets of every single individual would be seized, down to their ration cards.

Stage three: the ghettos. Jews would be uprooted from their homes and sent to live in concentrated, miserable neighborhoods until the fourth and final stage could be effected: the camps. As soon as the Jews arrived at those, another SS department would be responsible for their fate. They would no longer be Adolf Eichmann’s concern. That was how he saw it.

To prevent escapes or uprisings, Eichmann planned to deceive the Jewish community leaders. He would meet them face to face and promise them that the restrictions were only temporary, the necessities of Germany’s war with the Allies, which had been going on for four and a half years. As long as the leaders cooperated, he would reassure them, no harm would come to them or to their community. He might take a few bribes as well. Not only would the money add even more Jewish wealth to the German haul, he would also fool more Jews into thinking they might save themselves if they could pay up. Even when they were forced onto the trains to the camps, the Jews would be told either that they were being moved for their own safety or that they were going to supply labor for Germany.

Eichmann knew that these deceptions would buy time and acquiescence. Brute force would do the rest. He thought it best to initiate stages three and four in the more remote districts of Hungary first, and to leave the capital, Budapest, for last.



At dawn on April 15, the last day of Passover, gendarmes came to Zeev Sapir’s door in the village of Dobradovo. They were from the Hungarian police, which was cooperating with the occupying German troops. Zeev was twenty years old and lived with his parents and five younger siblings. The gendarmes woke up the family and ordered them to pack. They could bring food, clothes, and bedding — no more than fifty kilograms per person. The few valuable family heirlooms they owned were confiscated.

The gendarmes bullied and whipped everyone in the community — 103 people — to the nearby town of Munkács. The very young and the very old were brought in horse-drawn hay carts. They

reached Munkács in the evening, exhausted from carrying their baggage. Over the next several days, 14,000 Jews from the city and surrounding regions crammed into the old Munkács brick factory and its grounds. They were told that they had been removed from the “military operational zone” to protect them from the advancing Russians.



*Hungarian gendarmes guard the entrance to the Munkács ghetto.*

This news was no comfort to Zeev. His family now lived on the factory grounds, in a shelter with a roof but no walls, and with little food apart from spoonfuls of potato soup. There was hardly any water — only two faucets for the whole ghetto. The Hungarian gendarmes played cruel games with them, forcing work gangs to transfer piles of bricks from one end of the brickyard to the other for no reason other than to exercise their power. As the days and nights passed, the crying of hungry and thirsty children became almost too much for Zeev to bear.

Then came the rains. There was no escaping the downpour that turned the brickyards into a mud pit and brought on epidemics of typhoid and pneumonia. Somehow, Zeev, his parents, his four younger brothers (ages fifteen, eleven, six, and three), and his sister (age eight) avoided getting sick.

After three weeks in the ghetto, Zeev heard that there would be a visit from a high-ranking SS officer. Perhaps this “Eichmann” would be able to tell them what was going to happen to them.

When Adolf Eichmann arrived, the entire population of the ghetto was forcibly assembled in the main yard. Flanked by thirty Hungarian and SS officers, Eichmann strode into the camp in his polished black boots. He announced to the prisoners, “Jews: You have nothing to worry about. We want only the best for you. You’ll leave here shortly and be sent to very fine places indeed. You will work there, your wives will stay at home, and your children will go to school. You will have wonderful lives.”

Zeev had no choice but to believe him.

Soon after Eichmann’s visit, the trains arrived. Brandishing whips, blackjacks, and tommy guns, guards forced everyone into the rail yard. Every last man, woman, and child was stripped, their clothes and few belongings searched for any remaining valuables. Those reluctant to follow orders were

beaten. Terror and confusion reigned.

A guard tore Zeev's personal documents into shreds and then gave him back his clothes. Then a 103 Dobradovo Jews, including Zeev and his family, were crammed into a train car meant for eight cows. There was a bucket of water to drink and an empty bucket for a toilet. The guards slammed the door shut, casting them into darkness, and then padlocked the door.

The train rattled to a start. Nobody knew where they were going. Someone tried to read the platform signs of the small railway stations they passed to get an idea of their direction, but it was too difficult to see through the carriage's small window, which was strung with barbed wire to prevent escape.



*Jews are crowded into a cattle car and brought through France.*

By the end of the first day, the heat, stench, hunger, and thirst had become unbearable. The Sapi children wept for water and something to eat; Zeev's mother soothed them with whispers of "Go to sleep, my child." Zeev stood most of the time. There was little room to sit, and that was reserved for the weakest. Villagers of all ages fainted from exhaustion; several died from suffocation. At one point the train halted at a station. The door opened, and a guard asked if they wanted water. Zeev scrambled out to fill the bucket. Just as he arrived back, the guard knocked the brimming bucket from his hands and the water seeped away into the ground.

Four days after leaving Munkács, the train came to a screeching stop. It was late at night, and when the door crashed open, searchlights burned the passengers' eyes. SS guards shouted, "Out! Get out! Quick!" Dogs barked as the Jews poured from the train, even more emaciated than they had been before. A shop owner from Dobradovo turned back: He had left his prayer shawl in the train. A prisoner in a striped uniform, who was carrying away their baggage, asked, "What do you need your prayer shawl for? Soon you'll be going there." He pointed toward a chimney belching smoke.

They had arrived at Auschwitz.



*Hungarian Jews from the Tet ghetto arrive at Auschwitz, May 27, 1944.*

An officer divided the new arrivals into two lines with a flick of his hand or a sharp “left” or “right.” Zeev was directed to the left, his parents and siblings to the right. He struggled to stay with them but was beaten back by the guards.

He never saw his family again.



Adolf Eichmann had not reckoned that the war with the Allies would interfere with his plans to exterminate the Jews, but on July 2, 1944, six weeks after his arrival in Budapest, air-raid sirens wailed throughout the city. At 8:30 A.M., the first of 750 Allied heavy bombers, led by the U.S. Fifteenth Air Force, released its explosives. Antiaircraft guns and German fighter planes attempted to defend Budapest against the surprise attack, but they were overwhelmed by wave after wave of bombs.

When the bombardment was over, Eichmann emerged from his hilltop villa — a fine two-story building formerly owned by a Jewish industrialist — to find Allied propaganda leaflets drifting down from the sky onto his lawn. They said that the Soviets were pushing east through Romania, and that the Allies had landed in France and Italy and were driving toward Germany. The Third Reich was facing defeat, the leaflets declared, and all resistance should cease. President Franklin Roosevelt insisted that the persecution of Hungarian Jews and other minorities must stop. Those responsible would be hunted down and punished.

Eichmann was unmoved. He had traveled a long road to become who he was, the man who sent millions of Jews to their deaths. Born in an industrial town in Germany, he had been raised in Linz, Austria, by a father who was a middle-class manager, a strict Protestant, and an ardent nationalist. Eichmann joined the Nazi Party in 1932, when he was twenty-five. He was a handsome young man,



with fine, dark-blond hair, narrow lips, a long nose, and grayish-blue eyes. He went to Germany, received some military training, and enlisted in the Sicherheitsdienst (SD), the Nazi intelligence service. Diligent, attentive to detail, and respectful of authority, he caught the eye of the man in charge of creating a Jewish affairs office. Given the degree of revulsion Hitler felt toward the Jewish people, Eichmann knew that being part of that office would serve his career well. Beginning in 1935, he spent three years studying the German Jews and formulating plans to move them to Palestine — the preferred Nazi answer to “the Jewish question” at the time.

The more territory the Nazis occupied, the more Jews came under their control, which meant more responsibilities and opportunities for Eichmann. When Germany seized Poland in September 1939, Heinrich Müller, the new chief of the German secret police, the Gestapo, gave Eichmann the job of running the Central Office for Jewish Emigration. Their new goal was to deport Jews to the edges of German-occupied territory to make room for ethnic Germans. Eichmann even came up with a plan to resettle millions of Jews in Madagascar, off the southeast coast of Africa, although this never came to pass.



*Obersturmbannführer Adolf Eichmann of the SS, with top Nazi brass.*

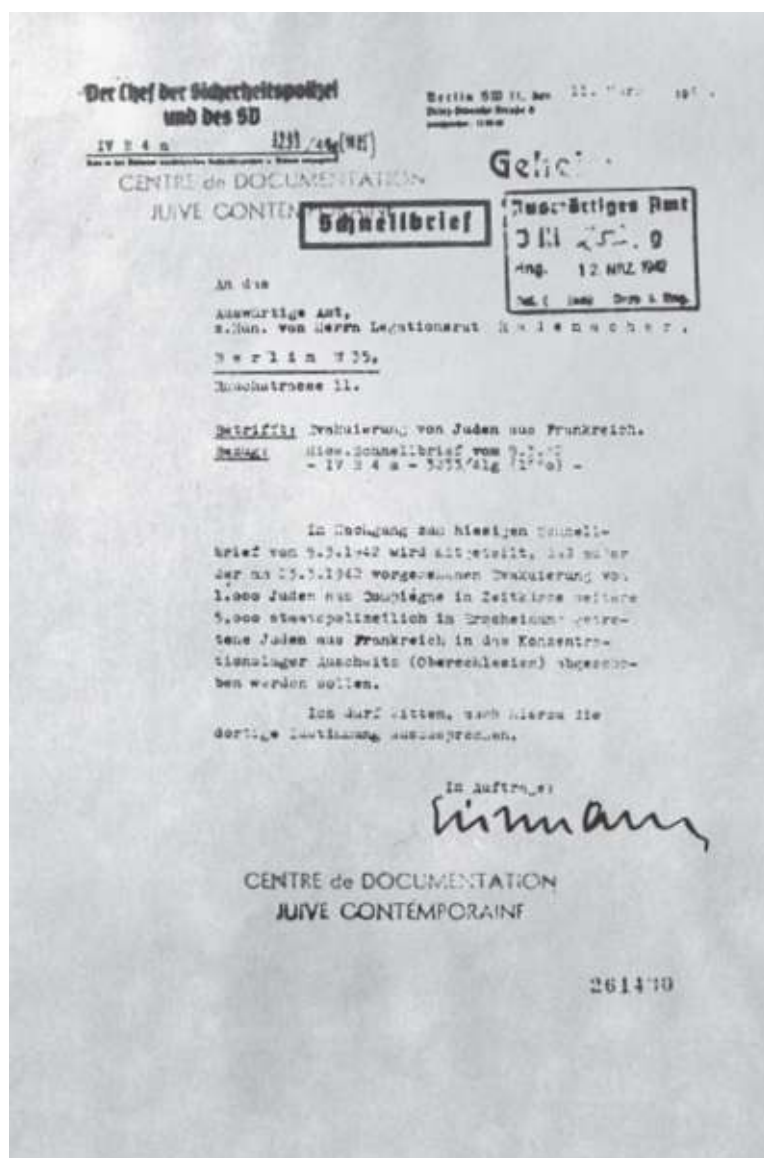
In late summer 1941, Reinhard Heydrich, the head of the Nazi spy service, summoned Eichmann to Berlin and told him, “The Führer has ordered physical extermination.” Eichmann was sent to report on killing operations already under way in Poland. He saw death squads organized by Heydrich follow the German army into Eastern Europe and Russia and set to work murdering Jews, Gypsies, Communists, and any other “enemies” of the Reich. Near Lodz, Poland, men, women, and children were rounded up and loaded into vans that were pumped full of exhaust fumes, poisoning everyone inside. In the Ukraine, people were forced into pits, ordered to strip, and then shot in the hundreds.

Despite his feelings toward Jews, Eichmann was unnerved by what he saw. But the fear of losing his job, and the power that went with it, outweighed his misgivings, and he accepted the need to rid

Europe of the Jews through extermination. Though only a lieutenant colonel, Eichmann was appointed head of Department IVB4, the SS division responsible for the Jews, in charge of managing all matters related to “the Final Solution of the Jewish question,” as Adolf Hitler called it.

Eichmann took on his new job with bloodless enthusiasm. He got rid of any guilt and discomfort by telling himself that his bosses had “given their orders.” He had not set the policy of annihilation, but it was his responsibility to make sure it was a success. The more Jews he brought to the extermination camps, the better he looked to his superiors and the better he served the Reich. And in this he excelled, delivering millions to their deaths.

With each challenge, with each victory, he grew a little more obsessive about his work, a little more convinced of its importance, and a little more drawn to the power he held over life and death. Jews were no longer human beings, no longer even units to be moved from one place to another. Jews were a disease. “They were stealing the breath of life from us,” he wrote.



*With this letter, dated March 11, 1942, Eichmann ordered the deportation of six thousand Jews from France to Auschwitz.*

In August 1944, with the war going poorly for Germany, the Nazi leadership came to see the Jews as much-needed bargaining chips. Eichmann thought that this was weakness. When the Russians took Romania, Heinrich Himmler, who was in charge of the entire Final Solution, shelved the plans for

Jewish deportation, and Eichmann was ordered to disband his unit. He refused. Neither an Allied bombing nor a threat by an American president nor even Hitler himself was going to divert him from completing his masterpiece: the destruction of Hungarian Jewry. The Jews needed to be eradicated, and Eichmann was the one who would see it through to the end.

He stayed in Budapest, waiting for his chance to get back to work. He dined at fashionable restaurants and drank himself into a stupor at cabarets. While away from his wife, Vera, and their three sons, he had two steady mistresses: one a rich, thirty-year-old divorcée, the other the consort of a Hungarian count. He went horse-riding and took his jeep out to the countryside. He spent weekends at castles or just stayed in his villa, with its lavish gardens and retinue of servants.

In late October, with the Russians only a hundred miles from the city, Eichmann made one last bid to finish what he had started. “You see, I’m back again,” he declared to the capital’s Jewish leaders. There were no trains to take the Jews the 125 miles to the labor camps in Austria because of the bombing raids, so Eichmann sent twenty-seven thousand people, including children and the sick, off on foot.

With few provisions and no shelter, the weak soon began falling behind. They were either shot or left to die in roadside ditches. It was intentional slaughter, something that Himmler had ordered must now stop. Yet even when Eichmann was given a direct order by a superior officer to call off the march, he ignored it.

At last, in early December, Himmler himself summoned Eichmann to his headquarters in the Black Forest of Germany. “If until now you have killed Jews,” he told Eichmann, in a tone laced with anger, “from now on, I order you, you must be a fosterer of Jews.... If you are not able to do that, you must tell me so!”

“Yes, Reichsführer,” Eichmann answered obediently.



When Zeev Sapir arrived in Auschwitz in May 1944, he was beaten, stripped, deloused, shaved, and tattooed with a number on his left forearm: A3800. The next morning he was forced to work in the gas chambers, where he suspected his family had been killed the previous day. Zeev dragged out the dead and placed them on their backs in the yard, where a barber cut off their hair and a dental mechanic ripped out any gold teeth. Then he carried the corpses to large pits, where they were stacked like logs and burned to ashes. A channel running through the middle of the pit drained the fat from the bodies — fat that was then used to fuel the crematorium fires. The smoke was thick, the flames dark red.

As the months passed, Zeev lost track of time. He never knew what day of the week it was, or even what hour of the day. The Germans regularly killed workers like him so as to keep their activities secret. Somehow he escaped execution. Eventually, he was sent to Jaworzno, a satellite camp of Auschwitz, where he went to work in the Dachsgrube coal mines. He had to fill forty-five wagons of coal every twelve-hour shift or receive twenty-five lashes. He often fell short.



*Jewish laborers are forced to work in a mine near Lodz, Poland.*

Then it was winter. Curled into a ball on his bunk one morning, Zeev could not stop shivering. The December wind whistled through the gaps in the hut's walls. He had swapped his spare shirt for a loaf of bread, and his clothes hung loosely in rags on his skeletal body. At 4:30 A.M., a siren sounded, and Zeev leapt down from his bunk. He hurried outside with the hundred other prisoners from his hut, completely exposed now to the bitter wind, and they marched off to the mines.

When Zeev returned to the camp that evening, bone weary and coated with coal dust, he and the other three thousand prisoners were ordered back out on a march. The Red Army was advancing into Poland, the SS guards told them. Zeev did not much care. He was told to walk, so he would walk. That attitude — and a lot of luck — had kept him alive for eight months.

They trudged through deep snow for two days, not knowing where they were going. Anyone who slowed down or stopped for a rest was shot dead. As night fell on the second day, they reached Bethune, a town in eastern Poland, and were told to sit by the side of the road. The commanding officer strode down the line, saying, "Whoever is unable to continue may remain here, and he will be transferred by truck." Zeev had learned not to believe such promises, but he was too tired, too cold, and too indifferent to care. He and two hundred other prisoners stayed put while the rest marched away.

Zeev slept where he had fallen in the snow. In the morning, his group was ordered out to a field with shovels and pickaxes and told to dig. The earth was frozen, but they dug and dug, even though they knew they were digging their own graves.

That evening, they were taken to the dining hall at a nearby mine. All the windows had been blown out by air raids. A number of SS officers followed them inside, led by a deputy officer named Lausmann. "Yes, I know you are so hungry," he said in a sympathetic tone as a large pot was brought into the hall.

The most desperate pushed to the front, hoping for food. Lausmann grabbed one of them, leaned

him over the pot, and shot him in the neck. Then he reached for the next one. He fired and fired. One young prisoner began making a speech to anyone who would listen. “The German people will answer to history for this,” he declared. Then he received a bullet as well.

Lausmann continued to fire until there were only eleven prisoners left, Zeev among them. Before he could be summoned forward, Lausmann was called away by his superior officer. He did not return. The guards took the remaining prisoners by train to the Gleiwitz concentration camp, where they were thrown into a cellar filled with potatoes. Starving, they ate the frozen, raw potatoes.

The next morning, with thousands of others, they were marched out to the forest. Suddenly, machine guns opened fire on them. Zeev ran through the trees until his legs gave out. His fall knocked him unconscious. He woke up alone, with a bloody foot and only one shoe. When the Russian army found him later that day, he weighed sixty-four pounds. His skin was as yellow and dry as parchment. It was January 1945, and he would not regain anything close to physical health until April.

Zeev Sapir never forgot the promise Eichmann made in the Munkács ghetto or the call to justice by his fellow prisoner the moment before his execution. But many, many years would pass before he was brought forward to remember these things.



In the few remaining hours before the Allies’ final attack on Berlin in April 1945, Adolf Eichmann returned to his German office and gathered his dejected unit together. He bid them good-bye, saying that he knew the war was lost and that they should do what they could to stay alive. Then he said, “I will gladly and happily jump into the pit with the knowledge that with me are 5 million enemies of the Reich.” Five million was the number of Jews Eichmann estimated had been killed in his Holocaust.

On May 2, he went to the lakeside village of Altaussee, Austria, in the narrow wooded valley at the foot of the Dachstein and Totengebirge mountains, where he met up with his family. The village was teeming with Nazi Party leaders and members of the Gestapo. A few days later, an orderly arrived with a directive from Himmler: “It is prohibited to fire on Englishmen and Americans.” The war was over.

Eichmann knew that the Allies would brand him a war criminal, and he was determined to avoid capture. He said good-bye to his wife, Vera, and told her that he would contact her again when he had settled somewhere safe. Then he went out to the lake, where his sons — Nikolas (who was known as Klaus and who was nine years old), Horst (five), and Dieter (three) — were playing. Little Dieter slipped and fell into the lake. Eichmann fished his son out of the water, took him over his knee, and slapped him hard several times. Over Dieter’s yells, Eichmann shouted at him not to go near the water. He might never see his boys again, he thought; it was best to leave them with a bit of discipline. Then he embraced them in turn.

“Be brave and look after the children,” he told Vera.

As he hiked away into the mountains, Eichmann was far from prepared to be a man on the run. He had little money, no safe house, and no forged papers. Unlike some of his SS comrades, he had not salted away a fortune in gold and foreign currency. Now he regretted that he had not kept the bribes he took from the Jewish leaders, who would have given him everything they had in exchange for their

lives.

---

## CHAPTER 2



“Have you heard of Adolf Eichmann?” asked a captain of the Jewish Brigade, a British army unit.

“I heard the name from some Hungarian Jews at Mauthausen,” Simon Wiesenthal said. “It means nothing to me.”

“Better look it up,” the captain replied.

It was mid-June 1945. Only four weeks earlier, weighing ninety-seven pounds, Wiesenthal had staggered out of a barracks at the Mauthausen concentration camp to see a gray American tank coming through the entrance. He had collapsed at the sight.

Before the Nazis stormed into Poland, Wiesenthal had been an architect with a rising reputation and a husband with hopes for a family of his own. The Nazis had killed his mother and taken his wife, and he had suffered such terror on his body and mind that he had twice attempted to kill himself.

After his liberation, Wiesenthal was afraid that if he did not go after those responsible for the slaughter, he would have nothing to live for. He sent a letter to the chief investigator of an American army war-crimes unit, chronicling the twelve concentration camps he had survived and listing the names, ranks, and crimes of ninety-one Nazis. The investigator hired him immediately. Wiesenthal captured more than a dozen SS members with the army unit before he was transferred to the American Office of Strategic Services (OSS), based in Linz, Austria.



*Simon Wiesenthal in the 1960s.*

Now Wiesenthal searched through the files at the OSS headquarters. There was limited

information on Eichmann, but he noted the name so that he could make future inquiries. In the month that followed, he heard little more than rumors about Eichmann from former Mauthausen inmates. Then, in late July, he was given a list of war criminals' names by the Jewish Agency for Palestine (a forerunner of the Israeli government). The name Eichmann topped the list, stating that he was a "high official of Gestapo headquarters, Department of Jewish Affairs." Wiesenthal knew that this meant Eichmann had been instrumental in running the extermination camps.

A few evenings later, at his apartment on Landstrasse 40, just two doors down from the OSS office in Linz, Wiesenthal sat at his desk, looking at his own list of names. *Eichmann* was now underscored for emphasis.

His landlady entered to clean his room and peered over his shoulder. "Eichmann!" she exclaimed. "That must be the SS general Eichmann who was in command of the Jews. Did you know his parents live here in this street? Just a few houses along, at number 32."

On July 28, two OSS agents were at the elder Eichmanns' door. They questioned Eichmann's father, who reluctantly admitted that his son Adolf had been a member of the SS, but that was all he knew of his wartime activities. Adolf had visited near the end of the war, but his father had heard nothing from him since. A search of the house failed to deliver a single photograph. "Is there a picture?" one of them asked, suspicious that the man was hiding something.

"He never liked to be photographed," answered Eichmann's father.

•••

The Nazi hunters were on Eichmann's trail, and finding a photograph for identification purposes was high on their list. In 1947, Jewish agent Manus Diamant was given the task. Handsome as a movie star, and with all the charm of one, Diamant could play any undercover role with ease. Using the story that he was a former Dutch SS officer by the name of Henry van Diamant, he earned the confidence of Eichmann's wife, Vera, who was still living in Altaussee, and he wooed several of Eichmann's mistresses in his efforts to gather information.



*Undercover agent Manus Diamant.*



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