

Beate Klarsfeld: The Never-Ending Work of a Nazi Hunter

By Aliza Marcus
(JTA)

With her well-coiffed blond hair and pink wool sweater, Beate Klarsfeld looks more like a chic French housewife than the famed Nazi-hunter.

Her efforts have unearthed and brought to trial people such as Klaus Barbie, serving a life sentence for deporting more than 7,000 Jews to death camps; Kurt Lischke, former chief of the Gestapo in France now finishing a 10-year sentence; and Josef Schwammberger, currently on trial in Germany for allegedly supervising and participating in the deaths of hundreds of Jews at forced labor camps in Poland.

It is the stuff from which movies have been made — and one about her life was — yet she recounts the tales in a soft-spoken voice with a hint of a smile, as if her actions, those of a German-born Christian woman, were not uncommon.

Names and dates and arrests and demonstrations tumble over each other, from protests against Austrian President Kurt Waldheim, linked with deportations in Yugoslavia, to her agitation in Chile against Walter Rauff, the now-dead Nazi who devised the mobile gas vans that killed 97,000 people.

She identified Alois Brunner, Adolf Eichmann's chief aide who has been hiding in Syria for over 30 years; traveled to Beirut to offer herself in place of Lebanese Jews held hostage; and campaigned against anti-Semitism on almost every continent.

She dismisses as unimportant the arrests, the nasty phone calls, the threatening letters, the parcel bomb police safely neutralized and the car bomb they did not.

"We came into this business because it was necessary, because there wasn't anybody else doing it, because it was some kind of obligation," says 51-year-old Klarsfeld, who together with her husband, Serge, has spent decades uncovering the very lives former Nazis and their collaborators have worked to bury in their post-war rise to respectability.

Their tactics start with meticulous research and documentation and, when the facts are known, the survivors located and the identity assured, they move in with public protests, something that often embarrasses the host country into starting extradition or criminal proceedings.

"A lot of people get embarrassed over what we do even though they admire us for our work, but this is our way to act, and as a German, I am showing the type of responsibility my generation should have had," she explains, sitting in a New York office.

What brought her out of Paris this time was a series of lectures and plans to organize demonstrations against Fred Leuchter, a self-proclaimed engineer and expert on executions who had published a book claiming that, based on scientific evidence, the gas chambers of Auschwitz and Majdanek were really disinfection booths.

The State of Massachusetts has arraigned him on charges of practicing engineering without a license, which observers believe was partly a response to pressure from Holocaust groups that had

worked to make his revisionist sentiments known, and in so doing, exposed his lack of engineering qualifications.

Klarsfeld, along with about 50 people trailed by 15 journalists, stood outside the courthouse Oct. 23, placards in hand. Soon after Leuchter entered a plea of innocent, Klarsfeld left to give her lectures before flying back to home, with plans on returning for the pre-trial hearings Dec. 11.

This Nazi-hunter, this woman who shocked the world in 1968 by publicly slapping German Chancellor Kurt-Georg Kiesinger after uncovering his work for Nazi radio propaganda, began her ascent into activism as a 21-year-old au pair in France who caught the eye of a 25-year-old political science student in 1960.

What might have seemed an unlikely pair — she, a German Christian whose father served in the Wehrmacht; he, a French Jew whose father died at Auschwitz — now seems to be the most likely of teams.

The 55-year-old Serge Klarsfeld, a lawyer and currently director of the Jewish Documentation Center in Paris, was her first teacher of the Holocaust, and together they have come to signify a battle between good and evil.

"For over 20 years they have done this because they can't accept that Nazis won't somehow become responsible for their earlier actions," says Shelly Shapiro, director of the Holocaust Survivors and Friends in Pursuit of Justice, an educational and documentation group whose list of honorary directors includes Beate Klarsfeld. "They can't just sit back and allow these former Nazis to go unpunished."

The former director of the Office of Special Investigations, which was formed in 1979 as part of the Justice Department to coordinate efforts to search for Nazi war criminals in the United States, complimented the Klarsfelds' abilities to back up their claims with meticulous documentation and research.

"This puts them in a very different class from people interested in just publicity," said Allan Ryan Jr., who now works

as a lawyer for Harvard University.

Still, the Klarsfelds are not without their detractors, and their public methods have earned them criticism from Simon Wiesenthal, the legendary tracker of Nazis, who prefers a more low-key approach to exposing such crimes.

Beate Klarsfeld is quick to acknowledge Wiesenthal's important role, and explains their differences are ones of means and not ends because, in the end, all three believe former Nazis should be called to account for their crimes against humanity.

Klarsfeld and others who have devoted their lives to tracking down Nazi war criminals speak of that time — maybe in 10 years, maybe in five — when few of the perpetrators will still be alive, or those alive will be judged too elderly and ill to stand trial.

With this end in mind, an important part of Klarsfeld's work is documenting, with Nazi-prepared reports, lists of Jews deported to concentration camps and gassed, as testimony against those who would deny that the Holocaust, the mass extermination of six million Jews during World War II, actually occurred.

Klarsfeld, whose work has always been focused on searching for German and French Nazis, accepts the upcoming deaths of long-sought Nazi war criminals — and an end to her searching — with equanimity: "Even if they die peacefully, it's better than having them alive, because the victims are always offended that they (Nazis) are living free."

"I've spoken to a lot of Nazi war criminals and faced them, and I think the most awful thing is that they have no regrets, that they make you feel like a criminal for troubling their quiet life," says Klarsfeld. "They are always so secure, believing that nothing will happen to them."

She smiles for a moment: "But we have always hoped, and sometimes it has been true, that one day something would happen and when it does, when they have to go to jail, I hope they remember that moment of protesting their innocence."

Israel Bond Campaign to Help Meet Cost of Soviet Immigrant Absorption

Charlotte Israel Bond Chairman, Mark Goldsmith, announced that the Jewish leadership of North America has resolved to implement an accelerated Israel Bond campaign to help Israel meet what is anticipated to be massive costs in absorbing hundreds of thousands of Soviet immigrants.

The plan was adopted at the annual Israel Bond Fall Leadership Conference held Oct. 25-28 at the Chicago Hyatt Regency and attended by 300 North American Jewish leaders.

Conference delegates heard a number of prominent speakers, including Israel Ambassador to the United States Zalman Shoval and Israel Bond President and Chief Executive Officer Ambassador Meir Rosenne, report that the unprecedented Soviet emigration could cost Israel as much as \$30 billion over the next five years. Immigration is expected to run as high as 200,000 per year, with Israel ultimately taking in as many as one million Soviet Jews.

Ambassador Shoval, in his first address since assuming Israel's most important diplomatic post, said that 250,000

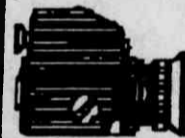
housing units would be needed to successfully absorb the Soviet immigrants. In noting that the Soviet resettlement effort came at the same time as increased military expenditures due to the Persian Gulf crisis, Ambassador Shoval said "it will not be easy, but we cannot afford to fail. It would be the most disastrous Jewish failure since World War II."

The keynote address of the conference was given by Ambassador Rosenne, who told Bond delegates that "we are here to ensure that no Jew will ever be prevented from going to Israel because of a lack of funds, housing and jobs."

Declaring that "we are survivors of the hate, indifference and cruelty of mankind," Ambassador Rosenne urged the Bond leaders to "renew your commitment. We are unique because we have been taught never to give in and never to give up."

Israel Bonds are viewed by Israel's government as an important means of providing housing and job opportunities for Soviet immigrants, and several of its top leaders cabled the conference to convey their support.

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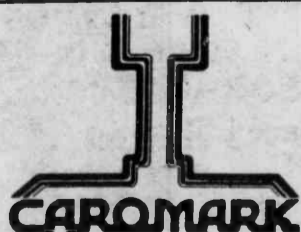


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