

The epitome of evil

Bettina Stangneth's research has corrected Hannah Arendt's erroneous and harmful assessments of the nature of Nazi criminality

By Efraim Zuroff

SOMETIME IN April 1957, a group of escaped former SS members, Nazi sympathizers and assorted others began meeting regularly in Buenos Aires on Sunday afternoons at the home of Dutch SS veteran and journalist Willem Van Sassen to discuss issues related to World War II, as well as contemporary West German politics.

The group consisted of fanatic Nazis with delusions of establishing a Fourth Reich and, naturally, the subject of the Jews and their fate during the Nazi era was a major topic of discussion and debate.

The featured speaker called upon to enlighten them on this subject was the most important operative in the implementation of the Final Solution still alive, and the person who had the most comprehensive knowledge of the scope of the annihilation program – none other than Adolf Eich-

mann, or as he was known in Argentina, Ricardo Klement.

The content of these encounters during which Van Sassen interviewed Eichmann, and which continued for at least several months, are the heart of Bettina Stangneth's fascinating book, *Eichmann Before Jerusalem: The Unexamined Life Of A Mass Murderer*, which utilizes the transcripts of the interviews and additional writings by Eichmann in Buenos Aires to decipher his somewhat enigmatic personality and determine to what extent the persona he presented at his trial in Jerusalem was indeed authentic.

This is no simple question, yet one that remains to this day of critical importance given the enormous impact of Hannah Arendt's "Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil," in which Eich-

mann was described by the influential political philosopher as a dull, almost boring bureaucrat, motivated primarily by his absolute subservience to orders by superiors rather than by any adherence to any political or philosophical ideology.

One might have expected such an astute observer as Arendt not to be taken in by what we, today, can certainly affirm to have been, based on Stangneth's research, a carefully crafted performance designed to arouse the sympathy of the Israeli judges, but that was not the case.

Arendt, to a significant extent, accepted Eichmann's portrayal of himself as an unimportant head of a department, one of many in fact, who was really a small-minded "pencil-pusher" who did not overstep his responsibilities – a bureaucrat rather than an SS man. In that respect, Eichmann



Adolf Eichmann on trial inside a bulletproof booth in a Jerusalem court in 1961. He was executed for crimes against humanity in 1962, the only sentence of capital punishment ever carried out in Israel

tried very hard to hide the zeal and charisma he had exhibited while serving in an extremely important position in the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA) and to present himself as a reformed Nazi who had opposed the horrors from the very beginning.

In fact, without Hitler and his orders, he would finally be able to go back to being the completely harmless and apolitical person he had always been and enjoy the real life he had always longed for, and which only truly began in 1945 when he became a harmless rabbit breeder. It was the regime that had been evil, and his career in the Third Reich had not been a product of any special ambition, but rather a bizarre twist of fate.

If only Arendt had had access to the materials Stangneth was able to study, the world would almost certainly have been spared one of the most harmful and errone-

ous assessments of the nature of Nazi criminality; but this material only became available to researchers relatively recently. It consists of more than 1,300 pages in which Eichmann, before his kidnapping, presents the story of his life and his thoughts on his career and the Nazi regime he served. The bulk of the material is the more than 1,000 pages of transcribed interviews he gave to Van Sassen, including about 100 pages of notes Eichmann wrote after reviewing the texts.

Of particular interest is a 107-page manuscript entitled, "They Spoke Now I Want to Speak," which includes a 10-page segment on "My Findings on the Matter of 'Jewish Questions' and Measures by the National Socialist German Government to Solve This Complex During the Years 1933 to 1945," and a concluding 26-page segment of his thoughts on the issue of guilt, in

which Eichmann presents himself as a victim of malicious defamation and misrepresentation, and demands the opportunity to expose the lies about him.

As Stangneth clearly shows, these writings reveal the real Eichmann – a fanatic anti-Semite and zealous National Socialist fully committed to the ideological objectives of the regime and especially the total annihilation of the Jewish people, a goal he totally identified with, and he took special pride in his achievements in that mission.

THE REAL EICHMANN WAS A FANATIC ANTI-SEMITE AND ZEALOUS NATIONAL SOCIALIST FULLY COMMITTED TO THE TOTAL ANNIHILATION OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE

Eichmann justifies the destruction of the Jews by claiming that world Jewry, and specifically Dr. Chaim Weizmann, had declared war on the Reich and, un-

Books

der those circumstances, it was only natural for Germany to respond as it did, as any country would in the midst of war. This was, in his opinion, a total war, in which the need for Germany's self-preservation naturally took precedence over moral considerations. Under the circumstances of World War II, the only possible solution for the Jewish problem was total annihilation, since the struggle for the survival of one's people was the only thing that mattered.

Despite his deep identification with Nazi ideology, Eichmann nonetheless tries to absolve himself of any personal responsibility for his crimes. He blames everything on the German government, on Hitler and his ministers and, of course, the issues of oaths and obedience. In his words, I am "neither a murderer nor a mass murderer." The only thing that he could be accused of was "abetting the killing during the war," while acting under orders. "I passed on the evacuation and deportation orders I received, and oversaw the compliance with and following of those orders that I received and passed on."

THE STORY OF EICHMANN BEFORE JERUSALEM IS A SERIES OF MISSED OPPORTUNITIES TO HOLD THE TRIAL IN GERMANY AND CREATE A NEW BEGINNING

He also claimed ignorance of which of the people deported were subsequently murdered, and stressed his preference for the Madagascar Plan to resettle European Jewry on that African island. He also claimed that the Nazis' original plan was peaceful emigration, which only failed, he said, due to the lack of cooperation from other countries.

As absurd as these claims are in fact, Eichmann's writings in Argentina, as Stangneth explains, were undertaken as part of his plan to return to West Germany and were designed to repudiate the allegations that had surfaced after the war and attributed major guilt to him for the implementation of the Final Solution. As crazy as that might sound today, in the mid-50s, with very little zeal



Bettina Stangneth reveals the real Eichmann

ALFRED A. KNOPF

in West Germany to prosecute Holocaust perpetrators, no death penalty on the books and lenient sentences in the few cases brought to justice, there was some basis for Eichmann's dream to return "home" with his family.

Eichmann's protestations of innocence aside, his fanatic dedication to the annihilation of the Jews is clearly evident in his writings in Buenos Aires. Thus, for example, he was particularly proud of his success in the deportations of the Jews of Hungary, which he called "an

achievement that was never matched before or since" and expressly pained by his partial failure in Belgium, where the trains were not always full, not to mention his "deadly disgrace" in Denmark, where he had to recall his transports.

Yet, at the same time, he purposely manipulates dates and figures regarding the Final Solution, as well as inflating the number of emigrants and survivors, and adds the patently false assertion that a large number of the Jews murdered must have been killed in Allied bombing raids – all in order to falsely reduce the number of Jewish victims. Also of note is the absence of any word of sympathy for his victims since, in Eichmann's twisted mind, it was ultimately he and Germany who are the real victims of World War II.

Stangneth's presentation and analysis of the Argentine Papers, as she refers to them, would be sufficient to make this book incredibly valuable, but there are several additional elements that are also of great importance. The first is her detailed description of Eichmann's immediate postwar years in hiding in Germany. The second, which is of far greater significance, is her findings concerning the information regarding Eichmann's whereabouts, which the German authorities, in particular the BND (German secret service) and its predecessor the Gehlen Organization, possessed before his abduction by the Mossad.

Her conclusion in this regard is particularly sobering and sends an important message about the importance of bringing Nazi war criminals to justice in the Federal Republic: "The story of Eichmann before Jerusalem is a series of missed opportunities to hold the trial in Germany and create a new beginning." ■

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