

EICHMAN AT THE BUS STOP



By Michael J. Carroll

I saw Adolph Eichman at a bus stop in Berlin. I did not really see him, of course, because the Nazi head of the Judenreferat – the Department of Jewish Affairs – the man who planned and executed the murder of millions of European Jews was hanged more than 50 years ago for war crimes and crimes against humanity. What I did see were several large photos of him plastered to the windows of the bus stop.

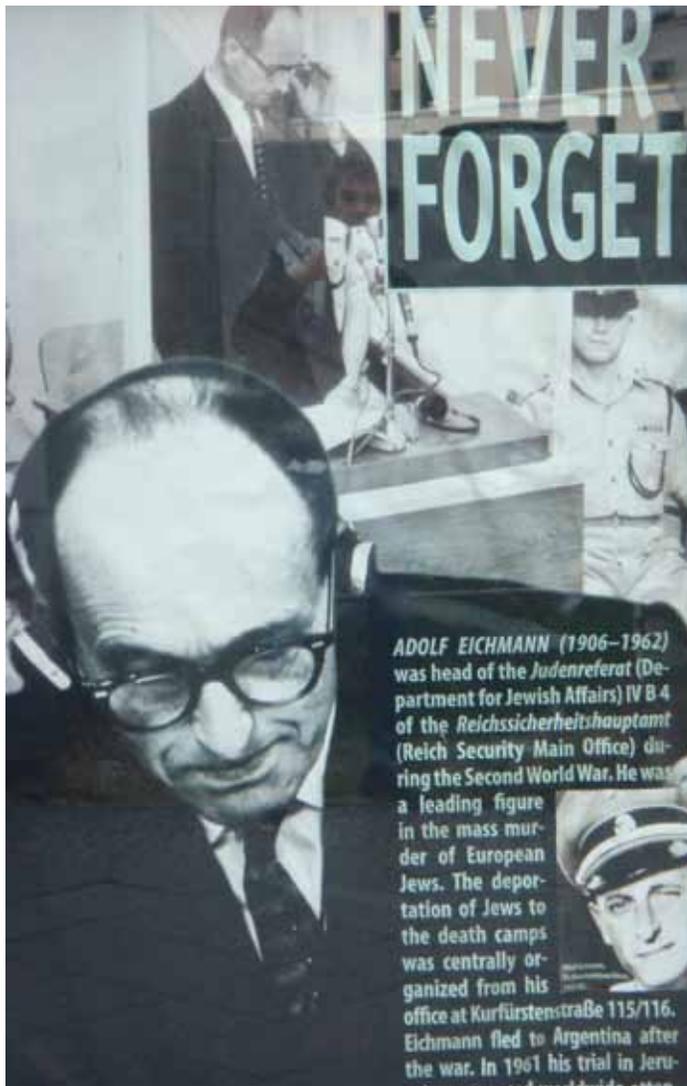
Eichman is back in the news because there is a new book about him, “Eichman Before Jerusalem,” by Bettina Stangneth. Her book is seen as a response of sorts to a big book of a previous generation, Hannah Arendt’s portrait of him at his 1961 trial, “Eichmann in Jerusalem.” Arendt coined the famous phrase, “banality of evil” to describe and to try to understand Eichman. Over the years it supported a view that he was a bland bureaucrat following orders – terrible orders – from on high. Stangneth apparently sees it differently. She recognizes that there were indeed non-ideological functionaries, but Eichman was not one of them. She sees

in him a passionate, unrepentant Nazi leader who was a planner and executor of the Holocaust, proud of his murderous accomplishments until the end, or at least to the end of his post-war freedom and the beginning of his trial at which he tried to portray himself as the faceless functionary who was “only following orders.”

One bus stop photo shows him in a drab suit that he wore during his 1961 trial in Jerusalem. He looked anything but banal in the other photo in which he was

dressed in his snazzy Nazi uniform. I am not sure whether it was designed by Hugo Boss who did the uniforms for Hitler’s bodyguards and other SS members. Maybe it was done by a designer less known than Boss – a faceless functionary designer.

The paragraphs next to the bus stop photos note that Eichman had his headquarters on that site where a luxury hotel, the Hotel Sylter Hof, now sits. Before the hotel and before Eichman the “former stately house of the Jewish Brotherhood” was there. In large letters on top of words and pictures are the words:



“Never Forget.”

The Eichman bus stop is not the only visible and dramatic Berlin marker of the Holocaust. There are many brass plaques embedded in front of buildings where Berlin Jews once lived before the Gestapo took them away. Each plaque is about the size of a cobblestone and it bears the name of a person deported to a concentration camp, the date taken, and the date and place of death, usually Auschwitz. Very few had death dates after 1945 because few Berlin Jews survived the camps and the war.

The plaques bear witness to murder and to stolen lives, ordinary and extraordinary lives. Berliners walk by them and over them to enter stores and to go upstairs to flats to have dinner with families and kiss children goodnight. Residents, customers and passers-by can choose to know about Jewish Berliners who once lived similar lives in the same places until the police came for them. The metal messages give silent powerful testimony 24 hours a day, seven days a week, on holidays and weekday in good weather and bad.

Some Berliners – I don’t know if it is 1 percent or 99 percent, but some – are working very hard to remember Berlin and Germany’s Nazi past and Nazi crimes. They are trying to ensure that Germans, and maybe the rest of the world as well,

never forget. Such efforts, always important, may be even more important now given the resurgence of anti-Semitism in Europe, Germany included.

Thousands gathered at the Brandenburg Gate recently to demonstrate against harassment and attacks against Jews in Germany. The fighting in Gaza seems to have given an opening not just to those who might criticize and debate in good faith. It has also provided an opportunity for the haters to come out of the shadows.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel spoke at the demonstration. Addressing demonstrations is something she almost never does. She said there was no place in Germany for anti-Semitism, that it disgraces all Germans and it was every German’s duty to fight it.

Faulkner wrote, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

The bus stop, the brass plaques, and the Chancellor carry the same message:

Never Forget. ■

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