

## Criminals with Doctorates

An SS Officer in the Killing Fields of Russia, as Told by the N

passing a test for courtroom interpreters I was assigned to the so-called Einsatzgruppen Case. Einsatzgruppen is a jargon word denoting special task forces that were sent to Russia to kill Jews, Gypsies, so-called Asiatics, Communist officials and some mental patients. In this case twenty-two ranking SS officers commanding these units were on trial for killing many thousands of innocent civilians for racial reasons. There were four

C], Werner Braune [Commander of Einsatzko

as the book's title indicates, the Greek connection constitutes a central feature of the plot. avenging Greek deities who punished crimes, especially in families; they were sometimes ironic, for they kill with impunity while the mitigators, like the narrator, fail to mitigate. But the title could also refer to the Furies that pursue Maximilian Aue, since he is presented as an Orestes figure. (Orestes was pursued by the Furies for killing his mother and her lover with the help of his sister Electra, because they had killed their father Agamemnon.) The book was written in French by an American, perhaps because he has greater facility in that language and because it may read better in French; and because Europeans may be closer to World War II than Americans, emotionally as well as geographically. The greater anomaly is that a Jewish author has placed a German SS officer at the center of a Holocaust novel. The book was clearly written to inform the reader of the enormity of Nazi crimes in Russia, which are less well known than what happened in stationary places such as concentration camps.

The book begins with a flashback after the war, when Aue lives in France as a prosperous family man and manufacturer who writes down his wartime experiences and reflects on them. He lives to tell the tale. Since this is a 975- myself to what seemed particularly striking to me.

The campaign begins in June 1941 at the border between Poland and the Ukraine. The author concentrates on the Southern sector of the campaign, from the Ukraine to the Caucasus, probably because that was the farthest German advance, which enabled the Einsatzgruppen to operate in a vast stretch of territory. And there were several extreme



the author is putting him to the test. Despite orders from the commanding SS general that

prepare a documentation of Babi Yar with photographs which he has bound in black

Blobel praises it highly and promises to send it to Himmler and perhaps even to Hitler.

This is Aue's contribution to Babi Yar: a handsome scrapbook to show what Germans have done in Kiev. He is documenting the event for posterity.

The account of the Babi Yar massacre is a key passage in the book. Babi Yar is a Jewish tragedy compressed into two days. It is well documented by survivors who were still living fairly recently. When the author was in Kiev he located an elderly Jewish man who had survived this massacre at the age of 13. He remembered it in detail and provided the author with precise information. The description of this massacre in the novel is one of the memorable set pieces in this book. Babi Yar may stand for all time as an example of racial madness carried to an extreme defies all attempts at explanation.

The factual fidelity in this book is remarkable even about the reassignment of Otto Rasch, commander of Einsatzgruppe C which included Commando 4a. It is a fact that Rasch (Dr. Dr. Rasch) was replaced shortly after the massacre in Kiev. The author

Einsatzgruppen, the historians Helmut Krausnick and Hans-Heinrich Wilhelm report that Rasch was probably relieved for holding exactly these views, despite Heydrich's esteem for this officer. (Krausnick and Wilhelm, 628f.) In one of his last reports Rasch tells of patients in a mental hospital in Kiev. (Krausnick and Wilhelm, 629) Even Rasch's successor, Dr. Max Thomas, punitively transferred from the West, claimed that

Aue explains how the victims were counted at Babi Yar to Richard Korherr,

- he avoids using the word 'Jews' - were subdivided into groups of twenty or thirty. As they passed a table, a non-commissioned officer counted them and wrote down  
thousa -463.

According to information received from the author, he did not make this up but does not remember the source.) During their discussion about the numerical accuracy of the Einsatzgruppen reports, Korherr tells Aue that the numbers were occasionally over reported sometimes because the officers were hoping for a promotion. I recall exactly such testimony.

Aue expresses doubts about killing Jews. Then why does he continue? His background offers some clues. Most important is the manner in which he joined the Einsatzgruppen. Essentially he was blackmailed: having been arrested during a



Nazi asset Hauser recruits him for the SD, assuring Aue that the charges against him would be dismissed. Serving under this cloud Aue may feel constrained to stay the course, though aware from the beginning what the Einsatzgruppen were doing. Thomas had informed him, and he attended the meeting in Pretzsch where the task force commanders received their orders. This meeting actually took place shortly before the invasion of Russia (22 June 1941).

Aue's mentality is right-wing from the start, and he has a tolerance for violence

*I crossed over to the dark shores*

(24), though he claims to be a human being like any other – a self-serving rationalization, since not everyone is a potential killer. During his studies in Paris he moved in right-wing circles, which accounts for his assignment to report on potential pro-German influence on the French Government in 1939. (This part suggests a Nazi effort to undermine the French Government.) One of Aue's acquaintances in Paris was the historical figure Robert Brasillach (1909-45), a writer who was tried and executed after the war for collaborating with Germany.

Aue's right-wing stance stems from his father. The father had served in World War I, had lived with his French wife in Alsace, where Aue was born in 1913. (At that time Alsace was German. The loss of Alsace-Lorraine after the German defeat in 1918 was painful for father and son.) After the war the father served in a right-wing militia in Germany (Freikorps) and took part in a plot against the Weimar Republic (Kapp-Putsch). He left his wife and son. We learn that he had worked for a prominent Nazi businessman who had arranged for Aue to join the SS. Following in his father's footsteps Aue traveled to Germany in 1930, at age 17, where he heard Hitler speak about Germany's renewal.



concentration camp. Elsewhere the author speaks of Aue's coldness.

Ohlendorf's successor, Walter Bierkamp, transferred Aue to Stalingrad because he disapproved of his benign view of the Caucasian mountain Jews and found his friendship with a visiting scholar suspect.

Aue is badly injured at Stalingrad and is evacuated with his friend Thomas' help. After recovering from his wounds Aue is appointed assistant to Himmler, charged with enabling concentration camp inmates to be productive workers for the German war effort. Before assuming this assignment he becomes the chief actor in a family tragedy of Greek dimensions. He kills his mother and stepfather, but in a trance, so that he later had to be confronted with the evidence; and he has an incestuous relationship with his sister, the

and to God. Nothing of this order applies to the Nazi murders of the Jews. Moreover, Maximilian Aue's murder of his mother and stepfather is not sufficiently motivated to make him a modern-day Orestes; it introduces a personal crime into a world-historical event. For these reasons the introduction of Greek tragedy into the novel seems to me of dubious validity. A more fitting analogy that comes to mind is the killing orgy in the *Nibelungenlied*, which shares with the Holocaust a lack of any moral restraint.

Aue blames his mother for driving his father away, marrying a Frenchman and choosing a government career for him for which he is not suited. But these are hardly sufficient reasons for committing murder. There are some literary clues: *Electra* by Sophocles is his favorite play; in a school production he played the part of Electra with



is confirmed by a moving scene in the Caucasus (278-284). A very old mountain Jew pleads to be shot by Aue rather than by a Nazi death squad. Aue complies. After the old Jew picks out his own gravesite he is shot by Aue's non-commissioned officer and laid to

perversion of Kant's categorical imperative - a high point of the book for one German critic (Lüderssen 9. I owe this refere such a way that the Führer, if he

19) Or: Act in such a way that your action can

Himmler's blatant revelation which shocked his listeners is explained as follows: in case Germany loses the war, which loomed as a real possibility in October 1943, none of the assembled Nazi leaders would be able to plead ignorance of the murder of the Jews. They understood that Himmler was making them complicit, that they were deeply involved and would have to stand or fall together. Aue was aware that he too was being addressed. He

from ever turning back...It's the *Endsieg*

broadcasting precise information about the killing program and naming names.

The segment dealing with Himmler's speech is told in dramatically breathless style—run-on sentences, a pile-up of facts, a heightened narration—to highlight its importance. The presence of Albert Speer, the armament minister credited with giving Germany two extra years of war, moves Aue to comment that Speer knew what was going on, which made his post-

To what lengths the SS officers went to kill Jews is shown by Ohlendorf's action in the Crimea. Though he testified at his trial that he considered the policy of killing Jews a mistake because it damaged Germany's reputation, he carried it out zealously. In the Crimea he found two tribes, the Krimchaks and the Karaites. He sent an inquiry to Berlin asking whether they were Jews. After some kind of study the answer came back: spare the Karaites because they were recent converts to Judaism, but kill the Krimchaks because they had Jewish blood in their veins. (This is mentioned in the novel.) He followed this order to the letter. This action shows that this well-educated man believed in the Nazi racial theory absolutely; it exhibits a bureaucratic mentality at its most extreme: carrying out an order utterly, completely, perfectly, and beyond all reason. This





Q: Was there any disorder?

A: No.

Q: Did your wife know of this business of the Einsatzgruppen?

A: No.

Q: Have you seen her since 1941-42?

A: I saw her, but never talked to her about those things. I didn't think it was good

(Goldensohn, 389-392. The interview was conducted on 1 March 1946; Goldhagen, 1982)

In the novel Ohlendorf had been Aue's superior and mentor in the Security Service in Berlin. When they met in the Crimea Ohlendorf asked Aue to join his staff. In accordance with the fictional Ohlendorf's request, Aue is transferred from Einsatzgruppe C to Einsatzgruppe D, which Ohlendorf commanded. He may have been drawn to Aue as

intelligent, penetrating man, definitely one of the best minds of National Socialism, and  
racial

policy - *judenrein*, and we 've almost finished with the

shows him to be much less sophisticated than Aue. As depicted in the novel Ohlendorf is hardly a deep thinker, which matches his performance in court.

Ohlendorf was an economist by profession, who rose quickly in the Nazi hierarchy: he was only 34 when he was assigned to lead Einsatzgruppe D as a major

bec

a Nazi cliché.

Perhaps he tried to prove himself to Himmler, who had sent him to Russia. The most

deutsche

Ohlendorf's mind-set. (Krausnick and Wilhelm, 629) According to a biographer of the poet Paul Celan, it is likely that his parents were killed by a unit of Einsatzgruppe D.

(Felstiner, 12-15)

When asked in court whether he considered the Führer order moral, Ohlendorf

there is no question for me whether it was moral or immoral, because a leader who has to deal with such serious questions decides from his own responsibility and this is his

(If Hitler ordered it, it must be ok; Hitler doesn't make mistakes, one defendant testified.)

(The judges commented as follows when a defendant claimed that it was futile to try to get transferred because his successor would have done the same thing: you can't be sure what the next man would do. Besides, this was your decision; if you had left, at least on that day no one would have been shot.)

They were not going to stop until every Jew was killed. The SS High Commissioner (Generalkommissar) for White Ruthenia (Western Ukraine), Wilhelm

eyes of the local population that

such methods one cannot maintain law and order in White Ruthenia. That badly wounded people are buried who have then dug themselves out of their graves is such an outrage that the incident ought t

Kube didn't mind killing Russian Jews but objected to killing German Jews because they

1). (The defendant Gustav Nosske didn't hesitate to kill Russian Jews but refused an order to kill half Jews in Düsseldorf; he was sent to the infantry but didn't lose his rank and was not court-martialed.) Aue finds three categories of killers: Those who kill because they enjoy it; they are criminals. Those who do it as a duty even though they don't like it. And those who kill Jews because for them Jews are animals like a butcher killing a cow. (107)

As the German drive into the Caucasus bogs down, the commanding army general orders the execution units to leave the Caucasian mountain Jews alone, so as not to stir up

up to

directed this program; he was a defendant in the doctors' trial, was found guilty and was executed.) Disapproving strongly Döll was transferred to Sobibor. He tried to justify

children were hungry, it was the only way to be sure I could put food on the table every day....On one hand, it wasn't very pleasant. But on the other, it wasn't the front, and the

shrugged his s

little women

wanted to feed his children, and who obeyed his government even though in his innermost being he didn't entirely agree. If he had been born in France or America, he'd have been called a pillar of society and a patriot; but he was born in Germany and so he is

here are two problems with this view: not every citizen does what Döll did, even in a dictatorship he doesn't say that he was drafted. And it was possible to be reassigned. Aue is also making excuses for himself. Reflecting on the word *Endlösung* and other jargon Aue shows more interest in the language than in the victims (630-632). He argues that there is no moral difference between Nazi Germany and the West (668-669), that both are ruthless colonizers, that all world powers are alike because of the means by which they acquired their power. But the West, mainly England, France and the U.S., offers a haven for refugees and dissidents, which Germany has done only for Russians fleeing the 1917 Revolution, to the best of my knowledge. A man of Aue's

personal make-up gay, of divided background, reflective, artistic might be expected to value tolerance for dissent, but there is no sign of this.

industrialist which formerly had a Jewish

SS officer who refuses to hunt. Walking through the woods with Speer Aue reflects:

about a no correlation between his reflections and his actions. He is cautious, withholding political opinions and trying to navigate among conflicting positions an accommodationist. With one exception: he has lost his belief in the power of world Jewry, because it had been unable to rescue Europe's Jews or even to help them in the late 1930s when no country would accept them.

This insight occurs to him during the catastrophe that befell the Hungarian Jews. Despite his efforts to save Jewish workers, most of the Hungarian Jews perished in Auschwitz. The reasons for the disaster were bureaucratic compartmentalization and

Auschwitz where Himmler had sent Aue to inspect the evacuation he heads for his

segment is to fill in gaps in his background and his vivid fantasy life centering on his sister.

maniac who committed barbaric acts during the Baltic campaign against Communists.

Üxküll, a Baltic aristocrat and a member of an existing family [Baron Jakob Johann von



character. He is a killer.

Back in Berlin, Thomas procures false papers, as do other RSHA (Reichssicherheitshauptamt) members. Aue attends the final Berlin Philharmonic concert on April 12, the day FDR died, while at night he kills his Romanian lover, perhaps in disgust over his sexuality or to erase tell-tale clues. Thomas is prepared to escape, disguised as a forced French laborer, and urges Aue to go to Paris. (Aue speaks fluent French.)

On 27 April, three days before the end, in his bunker, Hitler decides to honor ten RSHA officers for their service, including Aue. (In terms of this novel there has to be an encounter with Hitler.) As Hitler approaches, Aue is struck by his disproportionately large nose. When Hitler faces Aue to honor him, Aue forcefully bites Hitler's nose. He is seized but escapes when the car carrying him is hit by a grenade. After killing a policeman with a paving stone he runs into a subway tunnel where he is confronted by the two detectives who prove to him that he killed his mother and stepfather. One of the detectives is killed in the subway fighting. Aue kills the other detective with one shot. And he kills his friend Thomas with an iron bar. Exchanging his uniform with Thomas' jacket, Aue takes Thomas' pistol, his money, and the papers of a French slave laborer and leaves his own papers in his discarded uniform. But the Furies pursue him for his killings. For now he

-criminal past.

Why Aue? He carries heavy psychological baggage: he is an observer more than an actor, of a divided heritage, an aesthete who prefers philosophy, literature and music. The chapter headings *toccata, allemande, courante, sarabande, menuet, air, gigue* refer



to movements in piano music of Rameau which Aue likes, but their extreme innocence contrasts drastically with the events he describes. And since most of these musical terms denote dance music, they could be considered dances of death – analogous to Celan's *the German art*.

By putting a gay SS officer at the center of his novel, the author may be commenting on the Nazi psyche; there were problems in the Nazi Party with this particular subject. The strict Nazi rules against homosexuality may reflect concern that the military is vulnerable – based on a male-dominated ethos that pervaded German society. There is, further, the problem of authority: absolute obedience to orders, rank consciousness and the exalted respect for authority figures tend to undermine a healthy sexual development.

Being a member of a harassed minority Aue might be expected to question the extermination of the Jews. He is plagued by persistent digestive ailments which are clearly psychosomatic. And being half French he might view Germans with a critical eye. This doesn't happen, as he tries to conform to avoid suspicion. Personally he is critical but officially he goes along, not wishing to expose himself. At the outset he announces that he has no guilt feelings. This compliant mentality in the face of overwhelming atrocities pervaded the ranks of the SS. The subservience to authority was also a hallmark of the defendants in this trial. Compliant and also complicit, Aue proves that he is a killer. Though he won't kill an animal he doesn't hesitate to kill human beings. This qualifies the Third Reich 902): loyalty to their leaders, no matter what. Aue is a good judge of the leading Nazis who are seen through his eyes. His main function in the book is to trace the



took me some seven or eight years after the trial to become fully aware of what I had translated. Perhaps this delay protects the psyche from too great a shock. Since then this case has preoccupied me increasingly, the more so because I was teaching German. The

Institute for Holocaust Research, Yad Vashem; New Haven: Yale UP, 2008.

Krausnick, Helmut, and Hans-Heinrich Wilhelm. *Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges: Die Einsatzgruppen der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD, 1938-1942*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags