

# Capture, trial and execution of Adolf Eichmann



**NEXT TO HITLER HIMSELF** and a few other Nazi bigwigs such as Goebbels, Göring and Himmler, Adolf Eichmann, albeit a low-level SS officer and a small wheel in the huge apparatus of the Nazi state, probably range among the most well-known war criminals of World War Two. The reason, of course, is his close association with the Holocaust<sup>1</sup> or ‘die Endlösung’; the ‘*Final Solution to the Jewish Question*’ as the murder of some six million human beings was euphemistically referred to in Nazi parlance, and the circumstances surrounding his postwar capture in Argentina by agents of the ‘Mossad’<sup>2</sup>, followed by a spectacular, globally televised trial in Israel.

## Early life

Otto Adolf Eichmann was born in 1906 in Solingen, Nordrhein-Westfalen as the son of Karl Adolf Eichmann, a relatively well-off businessman and his wife Maria (née Schefferling), and it was not written in the stars that he would end up as one of the most infamous characters of the Third Reich. After his mother’s death in 1914, the family moved to Linz in Austria and during the First World War, Eichmann senior served in the Austrian-Hungarian army. At the end of the war, Eichmann’s father returned to the family business in Linz.

Like Hitler, Adolf Eichmann dropped out of the ‘Realschule’ and subsequently began an apprenticeship as a mechanic at the Federal Institute of Mechanical Engineering in Linz in 1921 in the hope of becoming an engineer. That career did not last long either, but during his school days in Linz, he met and befriended Ernst Kaltenbrunner [who would later become the head of the Security Police and the SD]. Eichmann, however, had his first real encounter with the Nazi ideology as he joined the ‘Wandervogel’ movement,<sup>3</sup> a “*Greek, Aryan brotherhood based on anti-Semitic ideals.*” where some of the older boys were flirting with various right-wing movements.

## Nazi career

In 1932, at the age of 26, Eichmann joined the Austrian Nazi Party, and, on advice by his old buddy Kaltenbrunner, by then a legal advisor to the SS, enlisted as an SS-Anwärter [SS-apprentice].

When the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933, Eichmann signed up for active service in the SS. He was approved, and in November 1933 he was promoted to 'Scharführer' [Squad Leader], working in the administration of the concentration camp Dachau.

**THE PATH FOR A CAREER** in the SS was now in the pipeline and from January to October 1934 Eichmann worked at Dachau while alongside seeking transfer to the dreaded 'Sicherheitspolizei' [Security Police]. Eichmann's request was granted in November 1934, where he was promoted to 'Oberscharführer' and was relocated to the 'Sicherheitsdienst' [SD] headquarters in Berlin. Eichmann quickly showed himself to be a hard-working, exemplary administrator, a quality not unnoticed by his superiors. He was promoted again in 1935 and 1937 and the same year sent on a special assignment to Palestine to investigate the feasibility of a relocation of the entire Jewish population in Germany to what was then just a settlement in the Holy Land.

Upon returning, Eichmann wrote a report *advising against* such an initiative on the grounds of the costs inherent and the – in terms of Nazi Germany's policy – undesirable step to assist establishing a full-blown Jewish state. This report is by some seen as an important step towards the Nazis' elimination of emigration as a solution to the so-called 'Jewish problem'.



**Photo:** Eichmann allegedly somewhere in Vienna, looking over the shoulder of the man in the front right.

Eichmann was then sent to Austria to organize SS security forces in Vienna after 'Anschluss', Austria's absorption into the Reich. Following a promotion to the SS-Obersturmführer in 1938 he was appointed to establish what was called the 'Central Office for Jewish Emigration', which was in fact a front to deploy and expel Jews from Austria. As always, Eichmann

was an efficient administrator, utilizing funds taken from wealthy Jews to deport those less well-off. As a side effect, Eichmann developed an in-depth knowledge of Jewish culture and belief, making him an 'expert' on Jewish questions. As a reward he was appointed to lead 'Reichsicherheitshauptamt' [RSHA] Division IV B4 in Berlin, the department, dealing with Jewish affairs and evacuation.<sup>4</sup>

## Wannsee Conference

Adolf Eichmann organized the Wannsee Conference in January 1942, where Germany's anti-Jewish guidelines were established under the auspices of Reinhard Heydrich as an official genocide policy.<sup>5</sup> In connection with this final solution to the Jewish question, Eichmann was employed as Deportation Administrator, which gave him responsibility for the trains that would transport Jews to the extermination camps in Poland; effectively he had been appointed Chief Executioner. Ever the willing subject, Eichmann performed his duties with a remarkable efficiency and enthusiasm.



**Photo:** The Wannsee conference on January 20, 1942. To the best of my knowledge no photos were taken, so this is borrowed from the chilling motion picture 'Conspiracy', starring Kenneth Branagh as Heydrich and Stanley Tucci as Eichmann.

Eichmann thus primarily acted in an operational capacity, responsible for collecting information on the Jews in area after area, organizing the theft of their property, and scheduling eastbound transports to camps in Poland. He traveled extensively to visit concentration camps and ghettos, while his wife, who had little liking for Berlin, lived in Prague with the children. In March 1944, Eichmann shifted his attention to Hungary and soon daily transports of Jews here from to Auschwitz commenced, peaking at some 3000 persons daily.

## The death camps

Eichmann thus organized the identification, assembly, and transportation of Jews from all over occupied Europe to their final destinations at Auschwitz and other extermination camps in German-occupied Poland. People were

arriving along a newly built track that ended only a short distance from the gas chambers. At a selection process some 10 to 25 percent, mainly younger men and women, were singled out to do forced labor, while the rest, old people and small children, were killed within hours of arrival.



**Photo:** Auschwitz. What looks like a grandmother and the little children being walked-off to the gas chamber, while the adults probably have been singled out for slave labor. Source: Bundesarchiv.

*"In 1944, Hungarian leader Admiral Horthy wished to leave the Axis to make a separate peace with the Allies. Hitler came to convince him to stay in. Horthy acquiesced, but one of his conditions was that 8,700 Hungarian Jewish families be allowed to emigrate to a neutral country. Hitler conceded because he could thereby deport the legions of other Hungarian Jews. The prosecution found a telegram from the Nazi appointee in Budapest to German Foreign Minister Ribbentrop, reporting that Eichmann, then in Hungary, was very upset about these families, saying they were important 'biological material,' who could proceed from the neutral country to Palestine, where they could help reconstitute the Jewish race. According to the Nazi telegram, Eichmann tried to speed up deportations so those Jews would be taken before their visas came. Eichmann thereby acted in defiance of Hitler himself, belying his claim of just following orders."*

[Tablet Magazine]

On Christmas Eve 1944, Eichmann managed to escape from Budapest just before the Red Army arrived. He briefly returned to Berlin, organizing the destruction of his departments incriminating records while at the same time sending captured Jews off to the east.

As the Second World War closed to an end and Germany's defeat was imminent, Eichmann doubled his efforts to avoid front duty under the guise of being very busy. Taking priority even over much needed supplies to the front, trainloads of Jews were running eastwards into early 1945, primarily from the suburb train station of Grünewald west of Berlin.

## On the run

Unlike most of his peers, Eichmann had not worked out an escape plan, neither accumulated the necessary funds to finance an escape. Having assumed the identity of one 'Otto Eckmann' and masquerading as a plain Luftwaffe soldier, Eichmann was eventually captured by the US Army, but his identity was not revealed. In early 1946 he managed to escape from American custody and subsequently hid in different locations in the chaos of postwar Germany. Finally, in the early 1950s Eichmann went to Italy, where he posed as a refugee, calling himself Ricardo Klement. Through intervention of the Catholic Church, Eichmann obtained a humanitarian passport from the International Red Cross Committee and a visa for Argentina, where he would successfully conceal himself for the next ten years<sup>6</sup> working in various professions in and around Buenos Aires. In Argentina, back then a safe-haven for many Nazis on the run, he even managed to retrieve his family from Germany.

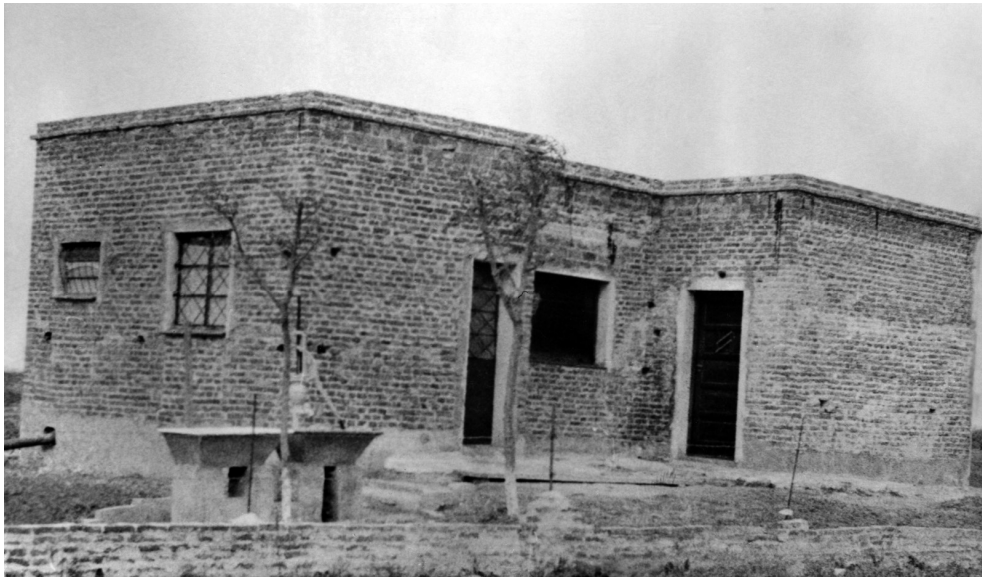


Photo: The house in Garibaldi Street where Eichmann lived with his family.

## Picking up the scent

However, Mossad was on his trail and in 1960, the Israelis gained reliable information of his whereabouts. It was, as so often in history, a romantic connection (and a loose tongue) that sealed his fate. For some reason, Eichmann's wife and sons did not change their surname after arriving to Argentina. Klaus, his oldest son, was dating a young German woman, Sylvia, unaware of her Jewish ancestry and her father, blind as a result of Nazi violence and silently listening to the young mans anti-Semitic rambling and boasting of *his* fathers war-time 'merits', concluded that it had to be the real Eichmann. He passed his suspicion on to the German authorities and to his luck, the information was received by Dr. Fritz Bauer, Attorney-General in Frankfurt and himself a victim of Nazi atrocities,<sup>7</sup> who concluded that the German legal system, at that point in time still riddled

with former Nazis, would most likely let the information disappear in some file. By his intervention, the tip eventually reached Tel Aviv.

**SKEPTIC AT FIRST** the head of the Israeli intelligence 'Mossad', Isser Harel, proceeded to make inquiries and investigations, including an on-site inspection by an Israeli agent, but initially nothing came of it. Stubbornly, however, Sylvia's blind father, assisted by his daughter, followed the trail while the Israelis silently shelved the matter in 1958.

It would take a personal visit to Tel Aviv by Fritz Bauer to resurrect the investigation. He brought fresh information from a reliable, yet never disclosed source, including the name Ricardo Klement; the alias Eichmann had assumed. The matter was brought before David Ben-Gurion, the Israeli PM, who immediately realized the futility in asking the Argentinean government to hand over the escapee to justice. Kidnapping was the only option.

## The end of the line

Having staked out Eichmann's house at Calle Garibaldi 14 in San Fernando, a suburb to Buenos Aires (his residence allegedly unbeknownst to the Argentinean government and police) for several weeks; recording his routines and taking clandestine photos to verify his identity, the Mossad finally clamped down on Eichmann one night when he returned from work; hurled him into a car; drugged him, interrogated him in a safe house where he stayed with his captors for more than a week, double-checking his identity and finally kidnapped him by plane<sup>8</sup> to Israel. The plane arrived in Israel on May 22, and Ben-Gurion announced his capture to the Knesset the following afternoon.



**Photo:** Eichmann at the trial. The courtroom had been furnished with a bullet-proof box for his protection. Credit: WW2Database



Eichmann was taken to a fortified police station at Yagur in Israel, where he spent the first nine months, then moved to an isolated and equally heavily guarded cell in the Ramla Prison.<sup>9</sup>

**“The world now understands the concept  
of a 'desk murderer'.**

**We know that one doesn't need to be fanatical, sadistic, or  
mentally ill to murder millions; that it is enough to be a  
loyal follower eager to do one's duty.”**

[Simon Wiesenthal]

The trial, which at its time commanded worldwide attention, commenced on April 11, 1961.<sup>10</sup> Eichmann was charged with of fifteen major counts, including crimes against humanity. His defense was centered on the assertion that he was merely a bureaucrat following orders, claiming that he; *‘...never did anything, great or small, without obtaining in advance express instructions from Adolf Hitler or any of my superiors’*. During the trial, testimonies from 90 Holocaust survivors were presented and were not challenged by Eichmann’s defense team, who - again - stressed that Eichmann was merely a ‘small wheel’ following orders without question, as the ‘Führerprinzip’ in the Nazi system demanded.

**“It was unthinkable that I would not follow orders!”**

In the middle of August 1961, the trial was concluded and the three judges presiding over the trial, Moshe Landau, Benjamin Halevi, and Yitzhak Raveh deliberated for a further three months. On December 11, 1961, they found him guilty on all fifteen counts, and four days later, on December 15, sentenced him to death by hanging. An appeal was filed and rejected by the Israeli Court of Criminal Appeal. A number of requests for clemency, some from prominent people, were also rejected.

**“Repentance is for little children”**

In the evening of May 31, Eichmann was served his last meal and, per request, a bottle of red wine. Thus, by the time the Chaplin arrived, the prisoner was a little tipsy. On the clergyman’s question whether he repented his sins, now that he was about to meet his maker, Eichmann answered in the negative, he just handed the priest a few letters for his family. He was hanged on June 1, 1962.<sup>11</sup>

Post Mortem Eichmann was cremated and within an hour his ashes were scattered over the Mediterranean Sea in international waters by an Israeli patrol boat to avoid creating a site of pilgrimage for Nazis.

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**EICHMANN’S RATIONALIZATION**; that he had acted ‘under orders’, was an excuse already declared null and void under the Nuremberg Trials in 1946. Thus, eventually, it was now time for him to assume responsibility for his acts and answer for what he did.

Did he do nothing else good in his life, his trial did serve as an eye-opener in postwar Europe, embedding the term ‘Holocaust’ in public awareness.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Although the term ‘Holocaust’ is primarily associated with the targeted Nazi efforts to wipe out the Jewish people from the surface of the Earth, it should not be forgotten that many other groups, in Nazi jargon ‘undesirables’, such as Roma, Sinti, homosexuals, mentally feeble and political opponents also suffered persecution, imprisonment and even extermination during the time of the Third Reich.

<sup>2</sup> Mossad is the Israeli Secret Service, formed in December 1949, eighteen months after the declaration of the State of Israel and responsible for intelligence gathering, covert operations and counter-terrorism.

<sup>3</sup> Albeit predating the Nazi ideology by a quarter of a century, the Wandervogel movements (there were several independent) contained elements that appealed to and was invoked in the Hitler Youth. The “Vogels” were – as other youth movements such as the boy scouts – soon to be absorbed by the Hitler Youth and the BDM.

<sup>4</sup> A euphemism for transport to a KZ camp.

<sup>5</sup> Notwithstanding the ultimate goal was well-understood by all participants, the word ‘genocide’ or similar phraseology was never officially used. Instead documents spoke of ‘transfer’ or ‘relocation’ or other vague terms.

<sup>6</sup> German and American intelligence had allegedly traced Eichmann to Argentina as early as the late 1950ties, but no action was taken. The Cold War dominated the international scene and West Germany wished to focus on the future. In addition, some high level German officials had links to the Nazi Party during the war.

<sup>7</sup> Bauer, himself a Jew, had been arrested by the Gestapo in 1933 for his socialist activities. He fled to Copenhagen and at the occupation of Denmark further on to Sweden where he, in cooperation with Willy Brandt, published the newspaper ‘Socialistische Tribune’.

<sup>8</sup> There were at that time no regular El Al flights to Buenos Aires, but offering full cooperation the Israeli airline suggested a ‘test-flight’ under the pretext of opening a new route. As it went, the planned ruse was made redundant by a visit of Israeli dignitaries to participate in the celebrations of Argentina’s 150 anniversary from the liberation of Spanish rule. Eichmann was drugged and clad in an El Al uniform and passed to the Argentinean guards at the airport as a crew member who had had a bit too much to drink.

<sup>9</sup> Today Aylon Prison, Ramla. Several other notorious inmates have spent time there, including John Demjanjuk, a Ukrainian guard at Nazi death camps during the Holocaust; extradited from the United States to Israel and imprisoned at Ayalon until 1993. Mr. Demjanjuk was initially condemned to death by hanging, but eventually acquitted on grounds of trial misconduct. He was released as a new case against him would infringe the principle of double jeopardy. He died in 2012 at the age of 91.

<sup>10</sup> Hannah Arendt [1906-1975], renowned, German-born political philosopher, attended the trial which inspired her to the 1963 thesis of the ‘Banality of Evil’; “...*that unsuspecting and ordinary humans have the capacity for vile, depraved actions in the name of ignorance, misplaced duty and blind loyalty.*” Eichmann was her proof of concept: a seemingly average man who showed little remorse for the millions he helped to slaughter.

<sup>11</sup> Two days before his execution, on May 29, Eichmann wrote a letter to the Israeli PM, Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, asking for clemency. Once again he pleaded that he was only a ‘small wheel’, taking orders from his superiors, the real culprits, and therefore should be spared. The letter had no effect on the verdict.