

# The Klarsfeld Saga

*From Their Meeting in the Metro  
To the Jailing of Klaus Barbie*

By Charles Greenfield

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PARIS — Next to the stacks of files and correspondence piled high on the Louis XV desk in Serge and Beate Klarsfeld's office near the Elysee Palace, hangs an unusual photograph — a concentration camp survivor in his Auschwitz striped "pajamas," his chest covered in medals, being arrested by a West German policeman.

"He was a very close friend who died a few years back," Serge Klarsfeld says. "The French government decorated him and he was closely associated with our campaigns against Nazi criminals in Germany in the 1970s."

For the Klarsfelds, who along with the Austrian Simon Wiesenthal are considered by many the world's most effective Nazi hunters, the photo sums up both a longstanding moral commitment and intense personal feelings. In 1943, the then 8-year-old Serge and his mother and sister hid behind a false wall in their Nice apartment as the Gestapo took away his father, Arno, to an internment camp and later Auschwitz, where he perished.

Forty years later, Klaus Barbie, part of the same Gestapo organization in France, is behind bars in a Lyons prison. Due in great part to the dogged efforts of the Klarsfelds since 1971, the Barbie case was reopened in February 1982, after new evidence of "crimes against humanity," on which there is no statute of limitation, had been submitted by the couple.

Now in their mid-40s they have the air of a successful French middle-class couple. "We are both very bourgeois in our tastes," says Serge, laughing at a picture of himself in a worker's cap from the early 1970s, when the German rightist press referred to them as "the Klarsfeld gang." A slightly plump man, he has the unruffled, manner of an accountant (he has a law degree) when spelling out the evidence from the Barbie file. Beate, just returned from a meeting in London and dressed in a chic, gray wool outfit, describes herself as "the realist and pessimist" in the family. "I think he is more opti-



Beate and Serge Klarsfeld.

mistic than me. Certainly more imaginative," she adds.

Their family backgrounds are disparate. A German-born Protestant (she carries both French and West German passports), Beate met Serge in the Paris Metro in 1960 on her way to class at the Alliance Francaise. "He was on his way to classes at Sciences-Politiques," she recalled. "I had come to France to study the language and get away from the usual German middle-class fate for young women — marry a German, settle down, have kids, etc. When Serge told me he was Jewish and had lost his father at Auschwitz, I really felt strange. Of all the people I would meet in Paris it would be a French-Jew. And a Preach Jew whose father had been exterminated by my own people."

As they started dating, cultural differences quickly came to the surface. "At the beginning I know Serge's mother wasn't crazy about her son going out with a German girl. But when she met me she reacted differently; she's the type of woman who only judges people for what they are. As for my own mother in West Germany, despite the fact that my father was dead, she still was somewhat influenced by what the neighbors would say. Later on when Serge and I became well known, my mother was impressed by favorable worldwide reaction to our activities. But in fact, she has never really learned

anything or understood what I have been fighting for."

Like many young Germans in the 1950s, Beate had remained almost ignorant of the history of the Third Reich. "Serge immediately taught me my own country's history from 1933 to '45," she said. "There had been no revelations in my postwar generation. My parents were part of that silent majority of Germans who didn't want to take a position on the war. At school my history teacher would dodge questions that proved embarrassing. Serge played an essential role in helping me to come to grips with my own past. I always wanted my children to be proud of their half-German background, to never blush about their country. Anyway, one day they would have asked what my attitude was toward Nazi criminals after the war. My children's grandfathers had two pasts: One died in Auschwitz, the other fought for the Wehrmacht. It's from this rather exceptional situation that my motivation sprang."

Their first joint action came from a seemingly normal event. In 1967 Kurt-Georg Kiesinger became chancellor of West Germany and Beate was a secretary in Paris for the French-West German Youth Service. In a series of articles for the leftist French newspaper *Combat* she revealed Kiesinger's role in the radio department of the German Foreign Ministry during World War II. In

one article she wrote: "If Eichmann represented the banality of evil, Kiesinger represents the respectability of evil." Later that year Beate was dismissed from her job.

"Beate was fired for the articles. That was obvious," said Serge. "What was strange for most people at the time was that Beate decided to fight not to get her job back, but to get Kiesinger out of office. After various trips to West Germany in 1968 to campaign against the chancellor, she posed as a secretary at a Christian Democrat rally, crossed the podium to Kiesinger and slapped him on the face while shouting, 'Nazi! Nazi!'"

"It was a tremendous symbolic act," Serge said. "I think of Beate's slap as the daughter striking the father, the younger generation resisting the older one. As a result of the uproar and a new awareness on the part of Germans of their past Willy Brandt became chancellor in 1969. Brandt was a major change in Germany — a new face, so to speak."

In the 1970s the Klarsfelds pursued their anti-Nazi activities on several fronts. A legal loophole in a treaty signed by France and West Germany in 1954 permitted Nazi criminals who had worked in France to escape prosecution in their native Germany. The French were afraid these criminals would be tried by former Nazi judges," said Serge. "And the Germans refused to extradite German nationals to France. It was an absurd situation that Willy Brandt tried to change but the Christian Democrats and the Free Democrats wouldn't ratify the bill on the treaty."

To set a precedent and demonstrate the judicial dilemma, in 1971 they made an attempt to kidnap a former high Nazi police official in France, Kurt Lischka, on a street in Cologne. "We rented a car and with some friends tried to push Lischka inside as he was waiting for a streetcar," Serge said. "He was well over six feet tall and very heavy. A policeman saw us and we were scared off." Since the German authorities were reluctant to press charges — the Klarsfelds had to

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# The Klarsfekls and Klaus Barbie

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goad government officials into action. They were eventually tried and given suspended sentences.

They eventually had the satisfaction of seeing the Bundestag ratify the treaty in 1975 and Lischka, along with two other former Nazi police officials in France, sentenced to prison in 1980.

Barbie, however, was perhaps the Klarsfeld's most frustrating mission. Beate spoke of the difficulty of organizing support in the early 70s both in France and Bolivia. "Today it's very simple," she said. "Barbie is in prison and everyone is relieved. But back in 1971 when we first had proof that Klaus Altmann, alias Barbie, was living in Bolivia, there was inertia at every stop. People love to read about the 'myth' of the Nazi hiding somewhere in South America. Still when push came to shove, the only people who accompanied me to Bolivia were two old French Jewish women whose families had been wiped out. Even the companions of Jean Moulin, whom Barbie tortured and may have killed, balked. Imagine the sight of a few women in La Paz trying to explain what Nazis were and that over 6 million Jews had been killed in the Second World War!"

The Klarsfelds agree that Barbie's trial will raise many unpleasant truths. "Barbie undeniably belongs in France because he is linked: to Jean Moulin, France's greatest resistance hero," Serge

added. "The French press is much more concerned about the Barbie-Moulin connection than the fact that Barbie sent 52 Jewish children from Izieu, east of Lyons, to the death camps. Or that over 90 percent of the 80,000 French Jews killed were arrested by the French police in the Vichy government. That's not written in French history books! The real test of the Barbie case will be how the French deal with the top French collaborators from the Vichy government."

In 1978 the Klarsfelds started the Beate Klarsfeld Foundation to raise money for their research, documentation and dissemination of materials, on the Holocaust. The same year Serge published "Le Memorial de la Deportation des Juifs de France," a directory of the names, ages and convoys of French Jews killed in the camps. He is also the president of the FFDJF (Les Fils et Filles des Deportees Juifs de France), responsible for an enormous memorial wall in Israel for the French dead. A more recent publication from their foundation, "The Holocaust and the Neo-Nazi Mythomania," stresses their biggest concern today, the rise of Neo-Nazism.

"In these uncertain economic times, many people, including youth, are looking for a strong man or an image of strength," Beate says. "We are trying to educate people as to what really happened, to combat this nostalgia for Nazism with its myths that include the denial of the gas ovens, genocide

and Hitler's knowledge of the Final Solution. Our latest book consists of statistics drawn up by the Nazis themselves on the effectiveness of their solution to the Jewish problem. The numbers and the facts are incontestable."

As for active Nazi hunting, besides the cases of Mengele in Paraguay and Walter Rauff in Chile, Serge is pushing for the extradition from Syria of Alois Brunner, Eichmann's top deputy. It was Brunner who ordered the arrest of Serge's father.

"Serge went to Damascus last summer to draw attention to Brunner's presence in Syria," Beate said. "People say we have courage to go to hostile countries to put pressure on governments. But I think it is more a question of what the Germans call 'civil courage,' which is really individual involvement that avoids a political party or ideology. I think this is what was insisted on by the group if Israelis who nominated me in 1977 for the Nobel Peace Prize."

Despite the danger that is a constant in their lives — a booby-trapped parcel in 1972, a time bomb that destroyed their car in 1979, anti-Semitic phone calls, every week — they seem calm. "After the bombing in Rue Copernic we received police protection at our home as we were on the list of people threatened by the extreme right. We try to protect ourselves as best we can, but there is no perfect system," sighed Beate.

In her autobiography "Wherever They May Be" (Vanguard Press, New York) in 1975, Beate wrote: "As I arrived at Orly from La Paz in 1971 I searched for Serge in the crowd. Then I saw him hanging back, smiling at the whole scene. 'Make your life a poem. Lift it to the level of an inspiring experience.' That's what he had written to the little German girl whom he had just met back in the spring of 1960. Without him by my side, without his complete and tactful involvement without his everlasting energy, what could I have accomplished? Another man doubtless would have required me to cut myself off from Germany. Serge had helped me to become a real German."