

Fugitive Henchman of Haddad Street

Nazi: Alois Brunner sent 128,000 Jews to their deaths. Syria, which has harbored Brunner for 30 years, should turn him over for prosecution for war crimes.

By **PETER HELLMAN**

Just about all the important Nazi criminals have been jailed, punished or have died of natural causes. The exception is former SS officer Alois Brunner, henchman to Adolf Eichmann and merciless hunter of Jews during the Nazi years.

For 30 years, Brunner has found safe haven in Damascus. Now 77, he lives openly in an apartment building at 7 Haddad St. His home is constantly guarded by armed members of the Syrian security force. Though masquerading as Dr. Georg Fischer, he admitted to a German magazine, *Bunte*, in a 1985 interview, that he is indeed Brunner. Only the Syrian government insists that his name is Fischer.

In January, Serge Klarsfeld, the French historian and Nazi hunter, went to Damascus to ask Syrian President Hafez Assad (not for the first time) to extradite Brunner to France, West Germany or Austria. All three countries seek Brunner's arrest.

Brunner joined the Nazi Party in 1931 at 19. By late 1938 he was a founding member of Eichmann's infamous Central Office for Jewish Emigration in Vienna. Throughout the war, he traveled around occupied Europe, deporting Jews to the death camps from Austria, Greece, France and Slovakia—about 128,000 in all.

Brunner, in the words of historian Mary Felstiner, had "no preoccupation but genocide." His colleague in the deportation service, Dieter Wisliceny, referred to Brunner on the eve of the Nuremberg trials as "one of the best tools of Eichmann."

Consider, by way of support for this appraisal, the convoy of 1,300 Jews that

Brunner sent from the Paris suburb of Drancy to Auschwitz on July 31, 1944. Filling that train hadn't been easy, since able-bodied Jews were by then becoming hard to find in France (more than 75,000 had already been deported). Brunner took sick and elderly Jews from hospitals and 300 children under the age of 18 to fill the train.

Brunner slipped into obscurity after the war. It's been reported that, like Klaus Barbie, he may have been on the U.S. payroll in the early phases of the Cold War.

Brunner surfaced in Damascus as Fischer in 1954—the same year he was sentenced to death for war crimes by a French tribunal. He became an agent for German manufacturers. In 1960 Syrian police arrested "Dr. Fischer." They thought, apparently, that money he was sending to his wife in Germany came from drug dealing. When he revealed himself as a fugitive Nazi rather than a drug dealer, he was released. Brunner went on to provide security services to Syria.

Brunner's case has a personal urgency for Klarsfeld. In September, 1943, Brunner led a special Gestapo commando unit to hunt down Jews in Nice. Klarsfeld was then 8 years old. One night, the Gestapo came calling. Arno Klarsfeld directed his wife, son and daughter to a hiding place behind a false wall. He was quickly deported to Auschwitz and murdered.

Neither Serge Klarsfeld nor his wife Beate had been allowed out of the Damascus airport in their earlier on-site attempts at gaining Brunner's expulsion. In January, Klarsfeld managed a four-day stay. But he failed to get anyone in the government to accept his letter to Assad and the foreign minister asking for Brunner's return to justice. The French ambassador also attempted to deliver the letter to the foreign ministry on Klarsfeld's behalf but was unsuccessful.

Klarsfeld's mission to Damascus last month went unnoticed in the U.S. press. There's a simple reason for that Assad, while occasionally granting visas to Western journalists, does not permit them to be posted in Syria. When

Robert Fisk, a London Times reporter, tried to interview Brunner in 1983, he was told pointedly by an official spokesman, "I think you want to keep good relations with Syria."

The lack of attention to the Brunner case is ironic, given the worldwide focus a few years ago on Klaus Barbie. Barbie took 41 children from the Izieu orphanage for deportation to Auschwitz in 1944. It was Brunner who sent those children to be murdered.

Each morning at 10 o'clock, Brunner takes a walk in Zenobia Park, near his home, flanked by a pair of guards. His health is said to be poor. To many, it seems time to let an old man die in peace. That is precisely what the Klarsfelds don't believe Brunner has a right to do.

In any case, Brunner seems not to have mellowed. In his interview with the magazine *Bunte*, he claimed he had "no bad conscience" for "getting rid of that garbage"—his term for those he deported.

In April, 1988, Jesse Jackson, at the Klarsfelds' urging, wrote to Assad, asking him to expel Brunner. It was to Jackson, after all, that Assad had released the U.S. Navy flyer taken in Lebanon.

Jackson's letter did no good. The Syrian government still maintains the fiction that the old German living under armed guard on Haddad Street is Georg Fischer.

Why doesn't Assad give up Brunner? For a country long identified with terrorism, it would be an easy way for him to gain points in the court of Western opinion. And lately, according to the U.S. State Department, Assad has shown more interest in doing just that. He even promised last spring to cause anyone in his country responsible for the bombing of PanAm Flight 103 to be "brought to justice."

Why, then, not Brunner? The only plausible answer, given the silence from Syria, is offered by Klarsfeld: "Assad must like playing host to Nazis."

Peter Hellman is author of the forthcoming book "Heroes.- Tales From the Israeli Wars" (Henry Holt).