

## Ernie Meyer hears about attempts to bring to justice a war criminal sheltered by Syria

# The last quarry of the Nazi hunter

EAST GERMANY may well be the next country to ask Syria to extradite the last major Nazi war criminal to remain at liberty. Alois Brunner. And if East Berlin does make the request, it will be following France. Austria and West Germany - all of whom failed.

Nazi-hunter Serge Klarsfeld told *The Jerusalem Post* during a recent visit here that his wife Beate, who has an appointment with the East German justice minister, is to ask his government to seek the extradition of Brunner.

"In 1988, through the good offices of then-President Erich Honecker, we obtained a warrant for Brunner's arrest should he set foot on East German soil. In this way we hoped to be able to suggest to the Syrian's an acceptable way of getting rid of him," Klarsfeld said.

The strategy, he said, is based on the hope that the Syrians might finally have grown embarrassed by Brunner's continued presence. There are some in Syria who believe that recurring news stories about him are doing the country's image no good. Putting him on a plane to East Germany might prove a face-saving formula for Syria which has long enjoyed the support of East European countries.

ALOIS BRUNNER, who will be 78 in April, is the last major Nazi war criminal known to be alive. John Demjanjuk, who is in prison here awaiting the appeal of his death sentence, is a petty criminal compared to Brunner, who is accused of causing the deaths of about 127,000 Jews.

Brunner was born in 1912 in the small town of Rohrburn in the Austrian province of Steiermark. He joined the clandestine Austrian Nazi Party while attending a police academy in Graz, and in 1938 was admitted to the elite SS. That same year he started working at the Vienna Central Office for Jewish Emigration under the direction of Adolf Eichmann. He soon became Eichmann's closest collaborator and rapidly advanced to lieutenant. By January 1942 he was a captain and inspector of the Gestapo, or security police. That same year he married a Viennese woman, Anni Roeder, with whom he had one daughter, Irene.

By November 1942, Brunner, who had taken over from Eichmann, had completed the deportation of about 47,000 Austrian Jews. He then moved his staff to Berlin, where within three months he rounded up the remaining Jews, whose exact number is unknown. From Berlin he went to Greece, where he sent about 43,000 Jews to Auschwitz.

After Salonika came France, where Brunner became commandant of the Drancy transit camp in June 1943. He hunted Jews all over the country and caught about 25,000. One week before the liberation of Paris in August 1944, Brunner moved on to Slovakia, where another 12,000 Jews fell victim to his zeal.

After the war, Brunner was briefly held in American and British prisoner-of-war camps, but his true identity was not discovered. He eventually went to Egypt and from there, in 1954, to Syria. He is said to have assisted Syria's secret service, which explains his pension and the elaborate measures the Syrians have taken to guard him.

Simon Wiesenthal, the Vienna-based Nazi-hunter, was the first to note Brunner's presence in Damascus at the end of the 1950s. For the past decade or so, the Klarsfelds have waged a world-wide campaign for his apprehension.

Brunner has not gone unscathed. Parcel bombs were mailed to him in 1961 and again in 1980, costing him his left eye and four fingers on his left hand. The Israeli secret service is suspected of being behind those attacks, which also killed two Damascus postal clerks.

In 1954, two French military courts sentenced Brunner to death *in absentia*. Under President Kurt Waldheim, who was warmly received on a visit to Syria several years ago, Austria left it to the West Germans to ask for Brunner's extradition. Although born in



Serge Klarsfeld holds pictures of Alois Brunner when he was an aide to Adolf Eichmann (left) and after he lost four fingers in a parcel bombing. <AFP>

Austria. Brunner became a German citizen.

According to some observers, the West Germans under Chancellor Helmut Kohl have been lukewarm about seeking Brunner's extradition.

France's efforts were hampered by the fact that Lebanon was holding several of its citizens hostage and French officials did not want to antagonize the Syrians, whose help they sought in the release of their hostages.

Furthermore, since French law does not permit anyone to be prosecuted twice for the same crime, the Klarsfelds had to find a "new" crime to enable the French justice ministry to issue its extradition request in December 1988.

Serge Klarsfeld, a French lawyer, discovered that Brunner's deportation of 200 Jewish children from Paris shortly before liberation had been overlooked in the original indictments. That deportation now serves as

the legal basis of the case against him.

Klarsfeld refrains from any facile predictions of success, but still voices the optimistic views he expressed in an interview with *The Post* four years ago. His methods remain unchanged.

"We try to enlist the help of the news media to build up public pressure, and then apply to the relevant court to reactivate a case that has been dormant. This applies in the case of Brunner, where death sentences and requests for extradition have been on the books for years.

"Before my attempted visit to Damascus in 1982 (he was not allowed in), the case was not 'alive.' But we go to the spot in order to alert the press and put pressure on governments."

Going to that particular spot takes courage. As long ago as 1973, Beate demonstrated in Damascus for the release of Israel

prisoners-of-war. Without any official diplomatic position, Serge and Beate Klarsfeld have only their international reputations to protect them.

SERGE KLARSFELD was at it again last month.

He showed me his Syrian visa, which allowed him to enter the country twice in a three-month period for "commercial" purposes. "The Paris embassy gave me this visa, although they know my and Beate's record well," he said. "I took the ease with which the visa was granted as a good omen."

On January 11, Klarsfeld tried to arrange a meeting with President Hafez al-Assad. He wanted to hand him a letter which said that extraditing Brunner now would be good for Syria's image. But at Assad's office, Klarsfeld was told that his letter could only be forwarded through the foreign ministry. Foreign ministry officials said the letter must come directly from France.

France, where Justice Claude Grellier had issued an international warrant for Brunner's arrest on June 10, 1988, also wants him brought to justice. In December of the same year, the French government signed a request for his extradition. "So I went to the French ambassador and 15 minutes later had his agreement to forward the letter through official channels. But the Syrians still would not accept it. Then I knew that I would not get any results this way."

Klarsfeld subsequently went to the West German ambassador, who promised to send a note to Bonn.

Changing tactics, Klarsfeld next decided to call a public conference - not a press conference. "There is no foreign press in Syria," he said. "Only Reuters, the Associated Press, Agence France Presse and the American NBC network have representatives in Damascus. But they are all Syrian journalists. Only the man representing NBC was willing to talk to me."

The subject of his conference was to be "From Barbie in Bolivia to Brunner in Syria." The hotel where he was staying had initially promised him a small hall, but later claimed that everything was rented.

Undeterred, Klarsfeld turned to the Syrian Bar Association. He told them he wanted to hold a conference on a "juridical problem." But the only help he got was in mailing his letter to Assad, special delivery.

Later, Klarsfeld saw someone speaking to the taxi driver who was to take him to the offices of the French news service. "I understood that he was a secret policeman, and I told him in French that it would be simpler if he came with me in the same taxi, which he did. Later we walked together to my hotel, and he told me about his school days."

After two days at his hotel, Klarsfeld's telephone stopped working. When he complained to the desk clerk, he was told that all the phones in the hotel were out of order. On his third and final day in Damascus, callers were told that Klarsfeld was no longer at the hotel.

Three plainclothes policemen came to Klarsfeld's door the following morning and told him he was being expelled from Syria. A policeman and a soldier took him in a taxi, which soon developed engine trouble. Moments later, a police car pulled up and drove Klarsfeld the rest of the way to the airport.

"They offered to pay my ticket, but I refused, explaining that I had my own all-airlines ticket." When they spotted an Austrian Airlines plane taxiing for take off, they radioed the pilot to stop and take Klarsfeld aboard.

Klarsfeld says there is no chance that an Eichmann-like capture of Brunner could succeed. Guards are posted at each end of Brunner's street, behind the entrance to his building, on his floor, inside his apartment and even on the roof. When I asked how he knew all this, he answered: "We know. We also have some people there."

I asked him if Brunner is the Klarsfelds last major quarry.

"Yes. He's the last one who escaped," Serge Klarsfeld said.