

STALKING THE

THE MAKEUP ARTIST ARRIVED AT BEATE Klarsfeld's apartment, on the western edge of Paris, before dawn. Hers was a small but crucial role in Klarsfeld's mission, starting that morning, to force Syria to give up 79-year-old Alois Brunner—the last major Nazi criminal on Earth who was still alive, free, and unpunished.

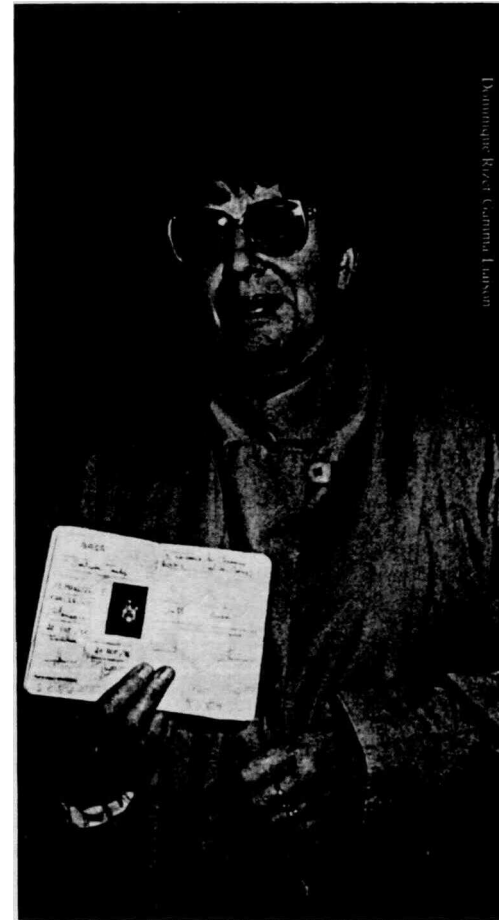
Brunner was a charter member of Adolf Eichmann's S.S. deportation team. Between 1941 and 1944, he sent at least 120,000 Jews to Auschwitz. His special penchant was to deport

the very old and the very young. Eichmann called him "one of my best men."

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BEATE KLARSFELD READIES FOR SYRIAN ACTION.

LAST NAZI

BY PETER HELLMAN



UPI/Bettmann Newsphotos

JEWS SEIZED IN PARIS ARRIVING AT PITHIVIERS CONCENTRATION CAMP IN FRANCE.



THE APARTMENT BUILDING IN DAMASCUS WHERE BRUNNER LIVED FOR YEARS.

tected him—and perhaps used his criminal expertise. But Hafez Assad's government has been far less hospitable to Beate Klarsfeld. The last time she attempted to enter Syria to protest its hosting of Brunner, in the spring of 1987, she was not allowed to leave the airport.

This time, Klarsfeld had prepared a daring ploy. She'd persuaded a Parisian friend, Gertrude Baer, to apply for a Syrian tourist visa and then hand over her passport to her. But Trudy Baer is a 65-year-old brunette, while Beate Klarsfeld is a 52-year-old redhead. The makeup artist's challenge, this past December 5, was to make them look the same. Or at least similar enough to let Klarsfeld pass Syrian airport scrutiny.

She did her job well. I failed to recognize Klarsfeld among the arriving passengers at Damascus airport at seven-thirty that evening—even though I've known her for thirteen years and expected her to be disguised. Not a strand of red hair peeked out from under her mousy brown wig. Makeup made her face seem to sag. Normally a crisp, stylish dresser, she wore a shapeless car coat over baggy slacks. Her black-framed glasses were identical to the ones Baer wore in her passport photo.

Klarsfeld whispered my name from a few inches away. Only then did I realize who it was. Her dark eyes sparkled at her having fooled passport control—and me. She kept right on walking. We'd agreed not to acknowledge each other in public while in Syria. Her job was to protest the presence of Brunner—and, if possible, to be arrested. My job, in a country where independent journalists are unwelcome, was to be Klarsfeld's witness.

Many are outraged that Nazi criminals go unpunished. Few do anything about it—especially if their action must take place in a hostile police state ruled by a leader as ruthless as Hafez Assad. The only private Nazi hunters to emerge in the aftermath of the Third Reich have been Simon Wiesenthal, Beate Klarsfeld, and her husband, Serge. He is the French Jewish son of a father killed at Auschwitz. She is the Berlin-born, Lutheran daughter of a Wehrmacht soldier.

They met in 1960 on a Metro platform in Paris—just a few steps from the modest apartment they now occupy on the Place de la Porte de St. Cloud. Serge was ready to start law school; Beate was an au pair whose father was sure she'd end up a prostitute if she left Berlin for Paris. They married in 1963—and since 1966 have devoted themselves to bringing Nazi criminals to justice. If this sounds like the plot of a made-for-TV movie, it's because there was one in 1986, starring Farrah Fawcett as Beate and Tom Conti as Serge.

AS NAZI HUNTERS, THE KLARSfelds don't like being compared to Wiesenthal. They point out that, even in his prime, Wiesenthal was content merely to collect documentation. They do that—but they also put their bodies on the line. Serge once crashed a neo-Nazi gathering in a Munich beer hall and was pummeled for announcing that he was a Jew. In 1968, Beate darted between bodyguards and slapped West German chancellor Kurt Kiesinger, then running for re-

election, as he was about to give a speech. She and her husband had uncovered Kiesinger's Nazi past. Germany couldn't rid itself of old Nazis, Beate reasoned, but it didn't have to re-elect one as chancellor. After the much-publicized slap, Kiesinger was unseated by Willy Brandt, who had been driven out of Germany by the Nazis.

The Klarsfelds readily credit Wiesenthal with having first sniffed out "George Fischer" in Damascus in the late fifties. But proving that Fischer was really Brunner would be more difficult.

They turned first to the dossier prepared for Brunner's 1954 war-crimes trial in absentia in France, at which he was sentenced to death. Papers showed that Brunner had been an early member of the Nazi Party, joining in 1931. Eichmann had hired him in Vienna in 1938. Brunner started by deporting Austrian Jews. Then, in 1942, he did the same in Berlin. After that came the unspeakable extinction of the Salonika Jews—whole trainloads of whom arrived at Auschwitz already dead from lack of water. In 1943, Brunner became commander of the Drancy transit camp outside Paris and deported 23,500 more, including newborns.

As the Allies pushed nearer to liberating Paris in August 1944, Brunner kept right on working. The very last train of Germans to leave the city included a rear car filled with Jewish deportees that Brunner had arranged for at the last moment. A month earlier, when adult victims had become scarce, he'd sent 300 children to Auschwitz.

Then, at Eichmann's bidding, he pushed on to Slovakia, where he deported another

14,000. In 1989, historian Mary Felstiner wrote, "Brunner's *policy*, his practice, and his personality constituted one unit, with no preoccupation but genocide."

IN 1977, SERGE KLARSFELD WENT TO Vienna and hired a private detective to gather information about Brunner's wife and daughter, who were still living in the city. Then he hired a second detective to be sure the first wasn't in cahoots with the family. Out of that investigation came a crucial phone number in Damascus. From the Klarsfelds' living room in Paris, Beate dialed it. Here is a translation of the conversation, as she remembers it, that she had in her native German with the man who answered:

"Herr Brunner?"

"No, Herr Fischer."

"Excuse me. You don't know me, but the father of a friend of mine worked with you in Berlin during the war. He's a special prosecutor now. He asked me to warn you of a new Interpol warrant for your arrest. If you leave Syria, they'll get you for sure."

There was a pause. Then, in a softer tone, "Herr Fischer" said, "Thank your friend from me for this warning. God bless him. And God bless you, my dear."

The ruse had worked.

Brunner is reported to have been a security adviser to the Syrian government long before Hafez Assad came to power in 1970. He's said to have invented a torture machine—a variant on the medieval rack. But the only verifiable facts about him are that until this fall he was walking his dogs in Zanoobia Park each morning and armed guards were posted in the hall of his third-floor apartment and outside the building. It also appears that he didn't have to worry about money.

In January 1990, Serge Klarsfeld managed to slip into Damascus. He delivered a letter to the government setting out the case against Brunner. The Syrians replied by expelling Klarsfeld from the country. Neither he nor his wife could expect to enter Syria again. Not, at least, under the name Klarsfeld.

The couple had had better luck with other Nazis. By getting the press to cover their cases, they forced the joint trial, in 1979, of the three highest-ranking S.S. men who had been active in France and were then living unpunished in West Germany. One of them was Gestapo chief Kurt Lischka. In 1986, the Klarsfelds finally saw Klaus Barbie brought to justice, fourteen years after Beate had located him living in La Paz, Bolivia. But their successes depended on a moral response from host governments. None was forthcoming from Syria.

The Klarsfelds could not reach Brunner behind his Syrian shield. But the mail got

through. In 1980, he received a parcel from Vienna. There was no reason to be suspicious. It bore the name of an herbal-medicine catalogue that Brunner had written for. But the package exploded, injuring Brunner's left eye. The Klarsfelds think the Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency, sent the bomb. The Mossad had already sent Brunner a letter bomb in 1961, the year Eichmann was tried in Jerusalem. That one cost Brunner four fingers on his left hand.

Brunner has grown old. But he remains as unrepentant as the young S.S. *Hauptsturmführer* (captain) who liked to lash his victims with a leather horsewhip laced with iron wire. He told reporters from the German magazine *Bunte*, who managed to interview and photograph him in 1985, that he'd do it all over again. "I don't regret getting rid of all that garbage," he said. Unlike Eichmann, he insisted, he'd never be taken alive. He produced a cyanide pill from his shirt pocket to prove it. Two years later, he told a Chicago *Sun-Times* reporter in a brief phone interview that "the lews deserved to die because they were agents of the Devil."

SIX MONTHS AGO, I ASKED THE Klarsfelds if they'd given up their efforts to bring Brunner to justice. Not in the least. In fact, they were looking for somebody who at least faintly resembled Beate who'd be willing to donate her passport to the effort against Brunner. They didn't have to look far. Gertrude Baer, whose father had been shot by the Nazis and whose mother and

wouldn't mean much unless it could be reported.

Syria controls visiting journalists closely. I turned in my old passport, with its offending Israeli visas, for a new one. Then I applied for a Syrian tourist visa. For religion, I put "Methodist"—probably safer than the actual "Jewish." (I had graduated from Methodist-affiliated Duke University.) For profession, I wrote "contributing editor."

I arrived in Damascus on December 4, one day before Klarsfeld and just after Hafez Assad won his fourth seven-year term as Syrian president. It was hard to see how the driver of the airport bus could know where he was going, since every window, including his own, was plastered with pictures of Assad. Multiple portraits were strung across the streets and covered every wall—Assad watching paratroopers, Assad's face bursting out of a red flower, Assad portrayed like a Greek Orthodox saint. His portrait was even superimposed on a painting of Saladin's troops routing the Crusaders eight centuries ago. The only image missing was that of Assad as protector of old Nazis.

The next night at nine o'clock, I slipped into Klarsfeld's room, three floors below my own, at the five-star Chain Palace Hotel. Already on hand was Dominique Rizez, a young French photojournalist for the newspaper *France-Soir* who'd been enlisted to take photos. Like me, he'd entered Syria on a tourist visa. His job wouldn't be easy. The previous day* I'd raised my camera to take a photo of an Assad portrait display on a public street only to have armed men appear from

ON PROTEST DAY

IMAGES OF HAFEZ ASSAD DOMINATED THE DAMASCUS STREETS. SO DID YOUNG MEN WIELDING UZI-STYLE GUNS.—



sister had been killed in the concentration camps, said she'd do it.

This seemed a propitious time for Syria to turn over a new leaf. Its military sponsor, the USSR, was no more. Assad has tried to cultivate a better image in the West—working belatedly to free the hostages held in Lebanon. He would also like, no doubt, to be taken off the U.S.'s shortlist of states that sponsor terrorism. Riding himself of Alois Brunner could only help his cause.

Serge Klarsfeld asked if I wanted to be a witness to his wife's impending action in Syria—assuming she got in. Whatever she had up her sleeve for Damascus, it

two directions to wave me away.

Klarsfeld's plan was simple: She'd hoist a placard of protest in front of Assad's presidential palace and be swiftly arrested. *Et voila!* A Nazi remains free while a lone woman merely calling for justice is jailed. It's a technique meant to play to the public's sense of fairness. Klarsfeld has used it successfully before—notably in 1973, when she was jailed for five weeks in Germany for attempting to "kidnap" Kurt Lischka, then a Cologne businessman. Lischka ended up spending many more than five weeks in jail.

Kneeling now on the floor of her overheated hotel room, Klarsfeld printed her

message—in French—with a black marker on poster paper:

PRESIDENT ASSAD
99.98% OF THE VOTES ARE NOT ENOUGH
EXTRADITE THE NAZI CRIMINAL
ALOIS BRUNNER
LIBERATE THE JEWS
OF SYRIA

Finding the palace proved difficult. Leaving the hotel separately at ten-thirty that evening, the three of us flagged a cab a block from the hotel. "Give us a tour of the high spots of Damascus," we told the driver. "Especially the presidential palace."

The cabbie gladly showed us doctors and nurses dancing in front of their hospital to celebrate (perhaps not voluntarily) the re-election of Hafez Assad. But he got jittery when we pressed him to see the palace. He claimed not to be sure where it was. Still, he did whisk us past a heavily guarded side street in the northwestern section of town, where Assad and most of the diplomatic community live.

"Just try to go down that street and. . ." He finished the sentence by making machine-gun noises while drawing an imaginary knife across his throat.



The next morning, we tried to persuade another cabdriver to take us to the presidential palace. But he flatly refused to go anywhere near it: Syrians may love their leader, but only from a safe distance. Many of the 4,000 or so Syrian Jews would like to put even more distance between themselves and Assad. But he refuses to allow them to emigrate freely.

LATER THAT MORNING, I WALKED alone to the end of Hanano Street, where, according to the map, the palace was located. The street is lined with embassies and large private homes. Young men wearing jeans and wielding Uzi-style guns or two-way radios looked me over as I walked along. Twice I was stopped (politely) to have my briefcase searched. At last I came to the presidential palace, a modern building behind a high fence. No flags waved in front of it; it didn't appear official enough for Beate's protest. Besides, even if she managed to unfurl her poster there, Rizet would never be able to get away with using his camera.

The Foreign Ministry, farther back along Hanano Street, seemed at first like a possible site for Klarsfeld's one-woman demonstration. The guard in front wore blue pants, a white jacket, and big epaulettes heavy with gold fringe. He'd be most photogenic dragging away a protesting woman. But armed men all around would have also pounced on Rizet and his camera.

While I was exploring Hanano Street, Klarsfeld and Rizet were lunching at a downtown hotel. From the window, they noticed an ideal spot for her protest: the imposing, elegantly classical Interior Ministry. Bunting in the national colors draped its entrance on Al-Malek Farouk Avenue, which was busy and wide enough to allow Rizet to snap away unnoticed—particularly in the first few seconds after Klarsfeld hoisted her placard.

A red police station wagon manned by three cops was always in front of the Interior Ministry, and the sidewalk was blocked to pedestrians. Klarsfeld would have to cross over from the far side of the avenue directly in front of the police car. Then she'd hoist her poster while Rizet, also walking on the far side of the avenue.

MISSION COMPLETE

THREE COPS LEAPT OUT OF THE POLICE CAR. TAKING KLARSFELD BY BOTH ARMS, THEY ESCORTED HER ACROSS THE AVENUE.—

snapped pictures through an opening in his raincoat, like a flasher.

Klarsfeld left the hotel at 8:45 the next morning. Left behind in her room was the brown wig, which made her head itch; the hotel kept Trudy Baer's passport. Rizet and I were already outside, waiting to rendezvous with her under a five-story portrait of Assad on busy Alazmeh Square. Rizet had wrapped his head in a kaffiyeh he'd bought in the souk to make him look less like a Parisian.

Striding in front of the red police car at 8:55, Klarsfeld held herself proudly. A slight smile came over her face. If Delacroix had painted a Nazi huntress instead of Liberty leading the people, she'd have been his model. She unfurled the poster from beneath her coat and held it up in front of the police car like a toreador baiting the bull.

The three cops leapt out and surrounded her. Others dashed over from the ministry gate as Rizet snapped away. Her sign confused them. None appeared able to read French. And if they could, they probably drew a blank on Brunner. Even more

confusing was Klarsfeld's German passport (her real one). No matter how many times they rifled its pages, they could find no entry visa, a plain impossibility. Every foreigner must have an entry visa.

Taking Klarsfeld by both arms, the police escorted her across the avenue to a small camera shop. By this time, Rizet was already turning the corner at the end of the block. He would pick up his bags at the hotel and head directly to the airport for a twelve-thirty flight to Paris—with his film.

In the camera store, the police used the phone to call their superiors. Then they took Klarsfeld back to the police car. Twenty minutes later, a relief car arrived. I watched-as, bundled between two policemen in the back seat, with two more in front, she was driven off.

I returned to my hotel room and dialed Serge Klarsfeld's home in Paris. On his answering machine I left word that his wife had been arrested, knowing that he'd relay that information to the media. Then I walked to the German embassy, as I'd promised his wife, and left a note saying, "A German woman I met at the Cham Palace Hotel said that she expected to be arrested this morning and might need your assistance. She said her name is Beate Klarsfeld."

I HAD NO IDEA WHERE Klarsfeld was, but it seemed likely that if she were returned to the hotel rather than jailed, it wouldn't be for hours. So I walked south, across the garbage-choked Barada River, into old Damascus, and wandered through the big, bustling Al-Hamidiya souk.

At one o'clock, four hours after Klarsfeld's arrest, room 538 still did not answer. I went walking again, this time to Zanoobia Park, across from Brunner's home. Young Syrian couples took up most of the benches. Their courting reminded me of Orthodox Jewish couples in Brooklyn's Prospect Park—sedate, with no kissing and only fleeting touches.

The guards no longer patrolled at 7 Haddad Street. According to a Syrian friend of the Klarsfelds', Brunner had been removed by ambulance from his apartment in October. His current whereabouts are unknown.

At four o'clock, Klarsfeld was finally back in her hotel room. "I forgot to give you back your pen last night" was the first thing she said, poking in her bag for it.

"Never mind the pen. Tell me what happened," I said.

She didn't know what building the police had taken her to, only that the offices were filthy, the bathrooms indescribable. She'd been interrogated at length by a security officer speaking perfect French. She explained her mission simply: Syria must stop protecting Alois Brunner, the

last major Nazi criminal at large. He must be delivered to justice.

"No criminal is here," the interrogator retorted. "The criminals are in Israel, where they kill Palestinians daily."

Klarsfeld handed him a full dossier on Brunner. "Please read it," she said. "And please arrange for me to see President Assad so that I can explain to him why it is in Syrian interests as well as in the interests of justice to expel Brunner." She was surprised to see that her interrogator also had a dossier on her, including articles from the Beirut press. He chastised her for entering the country under a false name.

"I'd have preferred to use my own passport," Klarsfeld answered. "But then you'd have barred me. What choice did I have? Don't make me the criminal here."

Klarsfeld was then taken to the offices of a Syrian army general. She again demanded the expulsion of Brunner. The general's response was to order her placed under hotel arrest until further notice.

Hours of Syrian interrogation couldn't have been fun, but Klarsfeld seemed unfazed by the experience. Only the ride back to the hotel, escorted by the French-speaking security officer in a chauffeur-driven Peugeot, had bothered her.

"He drove much too fast," she said. "I was really frightened."

She stayed in her room that evening, content to wash her itchy scalp now that she no longer had to wear the wig. I brought her a spicy lamb schwarma from a food shop near the hotel. She didn't have much appetite. If the Syrians had treated her less courteously, she'd have been happier. That would have made Brunner's privileged situation seem all the more unfair. It did cheer her up to watch the evening news from Paris; it reported accurately that she was confined to her Damascus hotel after having been detained for demonstrating against Alois Brunner.

At eleven o'clock that evening, Klarsfeld had an unexpected visitor: Chris Hedges, the energetic young New York Times Cairo bureau chief who was in Damascus to cover the final chapter of the hostage drama. He'd known nothing about Klarsfeld until a Syrian contact tipped him off "at great personal danger." What did it say about the Assad government, Hedges asked, that it continued to harbor a criminal like Brunner?

The question invited pontification. Klarsfeld is more comfortable with facts, and she hesitated to answer directly. Her



AFTER THE PROTEST. A WELCOME FROM BEATE'S HUSBAND, SERGE, BACK IN PARIS.

husband had once answered the same question bluntly. "Syria protects Brunner," said Serge, "because Assad must like having around an old Nazi who killed so many Jews."

I returned to Paris early the next morning. Hours later, Klarsfeld was summoned to the hotel lobby with her luggage. Security officers drove her directly to the airport, even though she'd hoped to have an interview with Assad. "The president has no time," she was told, "because he is so busy receiving congratulations on his reelection."

She was confined in a hotel overnight before being put on a two-stop Syrian Air flight to Paris. Her own German passport had been returned to her. Trudy Baer's passport, she was told, would be returned to its rightful owner.

She smiled broadly as some 50 members of the press surrounded her that evening at Orly Airport. Serge Klarsfeld kissed her in the glare of TV lights and then stood to the side while she was interviewed. In the privacy of the taxi that took them home, he held her hand tightly.

It was almost ten o'clock when the family's two collies leapt up to lick Beate. She examined her husband's shirts, draped over a chair, to see which needed washing. Then she put on her apron and made dinner from leftovers, just like any woman arriving home late from work. Except that for her, work wasn't quite over. The BBC called at eleven o'clock for a radio interview.

Earlier that day, a spokesman at the Syrian embassy in Paris had again denied the presence of Alois Brunner in his country. But the denial had a hollow ring. And Roland Dumas, the French foreign minister, had announced that when he visited Syria later in the month, Brunner would be on his agenda. While Dumas had as-

ured the Klarsfelds in private that he would pursue the matter, this was the first time he'd gone public.

That announcement didn't sit well with Syria. It abruptly canceled Dumas's meeting with Assad. Once again, the Syrians insisted that the war criminals—notably, Ariel Sharon—were in Israel. This diplomatic contretemps, the Syrians grumbled, was the fault of the Klarsfelds. The couple took it as a compliment. (The Syrians stand to lose \$172 million in aid from the European Community, which has formally requested Brunner's extradition.)

AT SUMMER'S END IN 1943, Adolf Eichmann sent a *Sonderkommando* team to Nice to arrest Jews. Heading that team was "best man" Brunner, then the commander of the Drancy transit camp. Among those arrested during brutal sweeps of hotels and homes on the night of September 30 was Arno Klarsfeld. He'd gone to the door to meet the Gestapo, so that they wouldn't look for his wife, daughter, and eight-year-old son, Serge, hiding in terror behind a false closet wall. Arno Klarsfeld was murdered at Auschwitz.

Almost 50 years later, Beate Klarsfeld raised a poster against Brunner for a few seconds in Damascus. It was a small gesture whose only power lay in the force of its message—reported more thoroughly in Europe than in the U.S. Time is short, but because of her lone act of courage Alois Brunner may yet be called to answer for his crimes.

"We don't care about revenge," the Klarsfelds said the morning after Beate's return from Damascus. "We just don't want Brunner to die knowing he got away with his crimes." ^