

Jewish mavericks hunt their last Nazi

by Tony Alien-Mills
Paris

IN A Paris sitting room stuffed with the bureaucracy of horror, an extraordinary 20-year quest for public justice and private peace came quietly to an end last week.

Beate Klarsfeld, 60, has hunted her last Nazi. The case that has eluded the avenging arm of Jewish retribution across half a century of hate and deceit is finally heading for a French court.

It was in 1977 that Klarsfeld and her husband Serge first uncovered the flight to a cosy exile in Damascus of Alois Brunner, the SS *hauptsturmführer* who masterminded the deportation of 24,000 French Jews to Hitler's death camps. It has taken the Paris judiciary more than a decade to piece together a case against the man once called "the very model of the degenerate Nazi, with the manner of a mad sadist".

The French decision, announced last week, to try Brunner for crimes against humanity represents a bitter-sweet triumph for the Nazi-hunting couple who have devoted their lives to the pursuit of Holocaust murderers.

Brunner will not be present in court next year to hear the charges against him — he is presumed to be still in hiding in Damascus and may already be dead. He would be 87 this year.

The Klarsfelds can hope for only the partial satisfaction of a public shaming of both Brunner and his Syrian protectors. But the case will effectively conclude a painful family saga that began in 1943 in Nice in the south of France, with German soldiers hammering on the door as a child hid with his mother.

The man the Germans were



The final chapter: SS officer Alois Brunner was tracked down in Syria by Beate and Serge Klarsfeld. Now a French court will try him in absentia for deporting Jews, including Serge's father, to Auschwitz

seeking that day was Arno Klarsfeld, Serge's father. "My father-in-law knew the soldiers would be coming for him," Beate Klarsfeld recalled. "He had built a false cupboard to hide his family. When the soldiers arrived, he told them the children had been sent to the country because of head lice and the flat had been disinfected. That ensured they didn't search too closely."

Serge Klarsfeld was eight when his father was seized and sent to Drancy deportation camp, in the suburbs of Paris, which for many French Jews was the last stop before Auschwitz. The commandant at Drancy was Brunner, the SS captain once described by Adolf Eichmann, architect of Hitler's "Final Solution", as "one of my best men".

According to one Jewish

survivor, Brunner's office at Drancy was "covered with bloodstains and bullet holes" from the interrogations he liked to conduct personally. After a slow start to Eichmann's plans to exterminate French Jewry, Brunner had arrived at Drancy in 1943 to introduce "the regime of Dachau and other German camps".

In her office at her home, stacked from floor to ceiling with German and Jewish archives, Klarsfeld took less than a minute last week to extract from a mountain of files the list of names on the Auschwitz-bound convoy No 61, the tram dispatched by Brunner from Drancy at 10.30am on October 28, 1943. She sighed softly as her finger stopped on the name of Arno Klarsfeld. Of the 1,000 Jews on board convoy No 61,

only 42 were still alive in 1945

Serge Klarsfeld met his wife in 1960 on a Metro platform in Paris. The Berlin-bom daughter of a Wehrmacht soldier, Beate shared her husband's horror that her countrymen could have acted so cruelly. Together they became the enfants terribles of the Nazi-hunting era. While Simon Wiesenthal, the American-based Nazi-hunter, was accumulating evidence that would be used in many trials, the Klarsfelds pursued confrontation and controversy.

Beate once broke through a police cordon and slapped the face of Kurt Kiesinger, then the West German chancellor and a

man with a hidden Nazi past. After Wiesenthal began to suspect that Brunner was living in Damascus under a false name — George Fischer — the Klarsfelds swung into action. They traced Brunner's wife and daughter to Vienna, where in 1977 they found a Damascus telephone number.

Beate concocted a simple scheme: to call Fischer, pretending to be the daughter of a Nazi friend of Brunner. She would warn Fischer/Brunner that Interpol was after him. His reaction might give a clue to his real identity. "If it hadn't been Brunner he would have put the



phone down or told me I had made a mistake," Klarsfeld said. "Instead, he thanked me warmly for warning him. The so-called Mr Fischer could only have been Brunner himself."

In 1992, outraged by Syria's refusal to acknowledge Brunner's existence, Klarsfeld disguised her appearance and slipped into Damascus to stage a public protest. Her husband had visited a couple of years earlier; both trips ended in arrest and instant expulsion.

Having hidden in Germany after the war, Brunner is believed to have escaped to Syria on false papers in 1954. He

later became close to Assad, reportedly becoming the president's security adviser.

In the only interview Brunner has ever given — to the German magazine *Bunte* in 19X5 — he remained unrepentant: "I don't regret getting rid of all that garbage," he said of the Jew's he deported.

Brunner was sentenced to death in his absence by two French military tribunals in the 1950s. He has twice been injured by letter bombs, possibly sent by Israeli agents. One cost him an eye, the other blew off several fingers.

However, there is no conclu-

sive evidence of his death. B> helping to uncover new evidence of Brunner's role in raids on Jewish orphanages, the Klarsfelds have given French prosecutors the legal pretext to file new charges in a civilian court.

"We are determined not to leave him alone," Beate Klarsfeld said last week. "Why should he live quietly until the end of his life? He has to pay for what he did."

Brunner may die before he faces judgment, but the Klarsfelds have at least succeeded in keeping the memory of his victims alive.