

Eichmann

Banal nobody or Incarnate of the Evil?

- The classic dilemma within the Eichmann literature is that he is either a banal nobody or evil incarnate. Everything we know about Eichmann implies that there was nothing striking or remarkable about his personality. He was averagely skilled. He had middle-class tastes. Like most of his peers, he too enjoyed drinking and hiking. At the beginning of the thirties he roamed Austria's roads like an early James Dean, impressing the girls with his company motorbike.

Authoritarian socialization

- His father was an accountant and his mother a traditional middle-class housewife, mother to five children. Young Adolf was seven when his family moved from Solingen, Germany, to Linz, Austria. Although both were German-speaking towns, it was a huge change. This Protestant family went from a small German town to the Catholic surroundings of Austria's third largest city. In 1916, his mother died aged 32. His widower father soon remarried. The family's eight children (seven boys and one girl) grew up together. Eichmann described his father as a strict man, expecting his children to be obedient at all times. His mother could not have had too much time for her oldest son, with a new baby born every other year. His stepmother came from a rich, Lutheran family, and Eichmann remembered her as a devoted, extremely conscientious lady. She read from the Bible every morning. At home „there was no disorder. We were brought up in a strict way and we had a normal, quiet life.”

Germans, not Austrians

- The residents of Linz saw themselves as German. The town's mayor was German nationalist Carl Beurle, who was not in the least bit shy about expressing his hatred of liberals, priests and Jews. Perhaps it was no coincidence Adolf Hitler's favourite town happened to be Linz. The future Führer was born in the border town of Braunau, but spent his childhood in Linz. He went to high school here between 1900 and 1904 –coincidentally, exactly where Eichmann would later attend. Both boys were taught history by Dr. Pötsch, of whom Hitler wrote: „When we listened to him we became afire with enthusiasm and we were sometimes moved even to tears. It was still more fortunate that this professor was able not only to illustrate the past by examples from the present but from the past he was also able to draw a lesson for the present. He understood better than any other the everyday problems that were then agitating our minds. The national fervour which we felt in our own small way was utilized by him as an instrument of our education, inasmuch as he often appealed to our national sense of honour; for in that way he maintained order and held our attention much more easily than he could have done by any other means. It was because I had such a professor that history became my favourite subject.”

Misfit

- Thanks to family and school acquaintances, the young Eichmann soon settled right in into the essentially German community of Linz. Studying however, just like Hitler at his age, was not his strong point. He left high school and then failed to complete the vocational qualification offered by the Höhere Bundeslehranstalt für Elektronik, Maschinenbau und Hochbaut. He left without a certificate. At 19, he gained his first job from his father, before finding work at the sales section of a manufacturing firm. In 1927 he became an agent for the Vacuum Oil Company. He gained the job through his stepmother's Jewish relatives. He completed his tasks with enthusiasm, his sales district was Upper Austria. He sped from place to place selling fuel. He completed orders with precision and turned out to be a good organiser. In 1933 Eichmann was promoted, but amidst the financial difficulties, his job soon fell victim to the cut-backs.

Exposure to Nazi subculture

- Outside of work, he and his friends joined the youth branch of the German and Austrian Front Veteran's Association (Deutsche-Österreichischen Frontkämpfer-Vereinigung). Its leader, a former colonel, was an obsessive anti-Semite who blamed the Jews for the fall of the monarchy. He was demanding that the Austrian State ban Jewish immigration, deny Jews citizenship and banish them from the country. Eichmann regularly marched through the streets protesting against the 'Jewish Marxists' and 'Jewish Bolsheviks'. The organisation gave its members military training (drill, shooting). As fate would have it, a friend of his father was the brother of Austrian Nazi Party lawyer Ernst Kaltenbrunner, who later hung for war crimes as leader of the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt*. With his influence, in 1932 Adolf joined the (illegal) Austrian Nazi Party and then the SS. This marked the beginning of a lifelong relationship, to last until death. He took part in the SS party meetings. When he lost his job in the economic turndown, he logically turned to his Nazi and SS friends for help. On Kaltenbrunner's advice he left for Germany. He gained military training in Dachau. Discipline suited him well, and he remained proud of his physical performance and stamina until the end of his life. Influenced by the organisational culture, he renounced the church. The monotony of the military base however was hard to bear. He thus applied for a job in the then-unknown SD (*Sicherheitsdienst*), the security service of the SS and the Nazi Party.

- Against this backdrop, Eichmann's career continues to rise, effectively demonstrating the organisational subculture of disorganisation. Even his entry into the SD was probably down to a misunderstanding. Apparently he handed in his application to the wrong place. He thought that he had applied to the party leaders' body guards, but to his huge surprise found himself at the intelligence agency. To start with he dealt with freemason matters in SD-Hauptamt II-112. The work was boring and futile. He did the administration for the executive officer of an exhibition on freemasons. He was in charge of the exhibits, categorising stamps, personal records and symbols. Just as in his previous and later roles, here too he stood out for his diligence and precision. Although in the Third Reich Jewish policy is of particularly significance, it does not even have its own standalone SD department for a long time. Organisationally, Jewish and Freemason matters are treated together. On the cusp of 1935-1936, the Section (*Referat*) of Jewish Affairs was created, led by Leopold Edler von Mildenstein. Happily for Eichmann, his new boss knows him, values his precise work, and offers him a job. He accepted gladly: -"Back in those days I would have taken any job just to get rid of those damned coins and stamps" – he remembered.

In the SD

- Jewish Affairs were split into three areas. Subsection II-112-1 dealt with assimilated Jews, II-112-2 dealt with the Orthodox, and II-112-3 with the Zionists. Eichmann is randomly assigned to Zionist affairs. The subject is new to him, the organisations and people involved unfamiliar. He reads newspapers, prepares news summaries and writes short résumés of books, sets up organizational charts. When Mildenstein leaves he is replaced by Dieter Wisliceny, according to whom the only way to de-Jewify the Reich is to support the Zionist emigration wave. At this point documents still refer to the 'Solution to the Jewish Question' rather than the 'Final Solution'. As proof of institutional chaos, yet another head, Herbert Hagen, is very soon taking over the unit. At long last, after many years of wasting time, the systematic work begins. They collect data on prominent Jews, and with the approaching Anschluss, about Austrians in particular.

The first successes

- „Tomorrow I will check again on the offices of the Jewish Community and the Zionists. I do that at least once every week. They are completely in my hands here, they dare not to take a step without checking with me first.”
Despite being merely a Second Lieutenant, his office is in the Rothschilds’ palace and he drives an ‘Aryanised’ black luxury car.
- Cited by Arad-Gutman-Margaliot 1999, p. 94.

Assembly line of dehumanization

- Just like a modern industrial complex, the emigration centre works on the conveyor belt principle. “It all went like on an assembly line” - boasted Eichmann. In the words of Gideon Hausner, the Israeli Chief Prosecutor: “A Jew would entered the office of the Zentralstelle; he was still somebody, having a job or a shop, an apartment to live in, some property and cash in the bank, his child still registered at school. As he proceeded from window to window, he was stripped of all these things one by one. When he finally left the building, he was jobless, his property had been requisitioned, his child crossed off the school, his apartment taken away. All he had now was a passport with the letter ‘J’ valid for two weeks. It was his task to find a foreign visa.” Any Jew unable to get a visa winds up in a concentration camp. This is the preliminary evolutionary build-up to the Auschwitz death factory. There are many similarities in the methodology: bureaucracy, brutality, violence, dehumanisation. In Vienna this process’ end product was a Jewish émigré who has lost everything including his citizenship. Later in Birkenau however, all that remained was just a handful of dust.
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Resettlement plans

- In October 1939 he gets orders to draw up plans to resettle Jews from the Reich to the territory of the occupied Polish General Government. He gets to work immediately, driving and flying around half of Eastern Europe. The plan is soon ready: a 'Jewish Reservation' is to be established next to Nisko on the banks of the River San. Convoys of on average 1,000 people arrive from Vienna, Katowice and Ostrava. Conditions are atrocious. There are no blocks, the provision is miserable and the Jews first have to erect the guard towers. Many freeze in the snow, others are chased by SS guards across the nearby German-Soviet border. The operation soon runs aground and the deportations are ceased due to opposition from the Wehrmacht and the Governor-General of Poland, Hans Frank. Eichmann attempts to use bureaucratic means to disguise the bitter failure: he orders the Jewish leaders to register the homecoming survivors as "returning from vocational training"

Madagascar

- In 1940 the Wehrmacht occupies most of Western and Northern Europe. This is when the bizarre Madagascar Plan is frequently on the agenda. This tropical island on the other side of Africa is the Nazi's proposed destination for resettling the Jews. Originally it is the Poles' idea, keen to get rid of their three million Jews. They have already sent a delegation to Madagascar years ago to assess the situation. In the summer Eichmann already speaks openly to the Jewish leaders about the "total solution to the European Jewish question". He draws up plans for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Heydrich detail the deportation of four million Jews to Madagascar. The British however are fighting hard, ruling the seas. Meanwhile, some German planners also realise that the plan is impossible for both logistical reasons (lack of ships) and poor provision (millions of Jews would starve to death). The Madagascar Plan is soon shelved. At the end of the year Eichmann writes to Himmler, stating that 5.8 million Jews must be expelled from the European German sphere of influence to a "territory yet to be determined".

IV/B4

- In 1941 Eichmann's section (by then referred to as IV/B4) is entrusted with directing Jewish affairs. The organisation's big moment is the completion of the logistical repertoire of the *Endlösung*: marking, assembling, transportation and extermination. Coordinating and fine-tuning each of these links in the chain becomes Eichmann's forte. All of Europe opens up before him. Hundreds of thousands of German and collaborating politicians, diplomats, policemen, bureaucrats and soldiers work on the local Final Solutions built up from these stages. Eichmann and his personnel keep their fingers on the pulse throughout; they play an important role, preparing, moderating and in the final phase, executing the operations. They dot the i's and cross the t's.

Teambuilding

- The other factor in the success is Eichmann's emerging talent for leadership, teambuilding and human resources management. His department is recruited from two main sources. Firstly, workers arrive from the *Zentralstelle* and its later satellite branches, for the most part Austrians born between 1907 and 1913. They are far from being 'specialists' in anything. They include a motorbike mechanic (Rahm), a carpenter (Zita), a printer (Novak), a commercial apprentice (Alois Brunner), commercial clerk (Anton Burger), a technician (Girzick), and agent (Weiszl) and a locksmith (Bückler). Most were unemployed; some were Social Democrats (e.g. Anton Brunner). One (Stuschka) was not even capable of completing high school. To these neglected middle-class creatures, the Nazi movement is a kind of substitute, and the party career their only chance to break out and excel. The other source of personnel, often somewhat more qualified, is the link with the SS-SD-RSHA. They include a failed former law student (Seidl), a textile salesman (Dannecker), a Gestapo assistant judge (Hunsche) and an accountant (Hans Günther). This motley group lacks quality, qualifications and experience of civilian employment. Even so, Eichmann is able to mould them into a team of real specialists. They are soon sent to work in foreign embassies; they do away with hundreds of thousands of Jews in the occupied countries and grand old European cities, sending them to ghettos and concentration camps.

No sadism

- He had no sadistic enjoyment of mass murder. Eichmann became known as the prototype of *Schreibtischtäter*, desk murderer. When Gestapo chief Heinrich Müller sent him to Chelmno, he was unable to look into the storeroom of the gas vans where Jews had been suffocated. The sight of gassed corpses being shoved into a mass grave made him sick: "...This was the hell of hells itself... I still remember I had to pinch the back of my hand to check I was awake, and that what I saw was real and not a dream." Travelling to the Belzec extermination camp, he was terrified that Commander Wirth would show him the gas chambers. He was relieved when he got away with an oral explanation. In Minsk, where he had to inspect the executions in 1942, he was late having drunk far too much the night before. He still had to watch as a woman pushed into a mass grave with a toddler in her arms pleaded with the murders. When the child was shot in the head and Eichmann's leather coat was splattered with "bits of brains", he broke down. He withdrew into himself, not speaking a word on the long journey from Minsk to Berlin. "I drank schnapps as if it was water. I had to drink. I had to dull my brain." He was also drunk at Auschwitz when he was shown the ditches for burning corpses.

Eichmann in Hungary

- After Bulgaria, Romania and France, he is used to having to make do with very little. It is clear to him that his only chance is to gain the cooperation of the Hungarian administration. It is a good omen that his departure for Budapest is on 19th March 1944, his 38th birthday. 56 days later the mass deportations begin. Another 56 days on, aside from the labour servicemen and Budapest Jews, there are no Jews left in the country. By July, also including *Einzelaktionen*, the trains have removed nearly 450,000 people. 97% of them end up at Auschwitz, which over these weeks results in the biggest mass-murder in history. Beating Treblinka's "record", this becomes the only camp with figures in the millions, and a universal symbol of the Holocaust.

German-Hungarian cooperation

- During the following weeks, German-Hungarian cooperation works logistical miracles, thanks to the friendship blossoming between Eichmann and Endre. The operation is orchestrated by 200,000 Hungarian gendarmes, policemen and officials, assisted by 20 of Eichmann's officers. With seven SS officers and NCOs and 40 SS guards Wisliceny has to deport the 150,000 Jews of Sub-Carpathia. But that is enough – the Hungarians do most of the work. Endre cooperates not as a German lackey, but as a long-standing committed anti-Semitic racist. On his recommendation, Eichmann even quadruples the speed of the deportations: instead of one train per day, they figure on four. If they had kept to the original rate, then by the end of the operation 'only' 170,000-180,000 Jews would have been sent to Birkenau, not almost a half a million.

Good days

- The most beautiful period of Eichmann's life was spent in Budapest. He lives in the Aryanised luxury hillside villa of industrialist Lipót Aschner, who (needless to say) is deported. In the Hungarian capital Eichmann enjoys his work and his accumulating successes. One day the *SS-Obersturmbannführer* enquires about Jewish culture, the next he threatens the Zionists and the members of the Jewish Council with Auschwitz. He also has time to relax. He rides his motorbike, plays tennis and spends holidays at Lake Balaton. He enjoys a lively social life, attending dinners, parties and drinking sessions. Despite being a mere lieutenant colonel, he is rubbing shoulders with members of the government. According to the *Auschwitz Standortältester* Höss visiting Budapest to complain, Eichmann is inundated with invitations. In summer however, the storm clouds are already gathering.

Demise

- The end of the war marks not only the end of his career, but ultimately the end of his life. Practically overnight, he goes from a powerful SS officer to a nobody, hiding under a false name. Luck and ingenuity protect him from being exposed, but he has no future. He was just as unsuccessful after leaving the SS as he was before he joined. When the Israeli agents are on his trail in Argentina, they find it hard to believe that this dishevelled man living in a shack of a house is the once-feared Eichmann. On his capture they discover that even his underpants are in rags.

Perverse immortality

- His deeds however left an indelible mark. The trial fifty years ago allowed Eichmann to achieve what he always wanted. He became immortal, albeit not as he might have liked. The trial did more than simply weigh up his conduct. The proceedings revealed far more than the actions of the accused. It formed the thoughts and attitudes of generations of people. It helped us step out of conventional moralising notions and understand the mechanism of modern mass murder. It is a twist of history that Eichmann, who at the beginning of his career was unable to get to Jerusalem was sentenced to death in this very town. Execution fulfilled for Eichmann what Hegel described as, “the trick of reason”.