History

The Internal Motivations of a Nazi Hunter:
A Comparison of Simon Wiesenthal and the Klarsfelds

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Introduction

“Uno momento, senor,” Mossad agent Peter Malkin nervously said to Adolf Eichmann in broken Spanish after coming into direct eyesight and locking eyes with the Nazi who had sent thousands, perhaps millions, of Jews to their death during World War II. Eichmann panicked and began to back pedal, Malkin realizing this was his chance raced towards him.¹ The two men wrestled for a bit ending with Malkin on top with one hand on Eichmann’s right hand to prevent him from grabbing his revolver and the other on his throat to prevent him from calling for help. Moments later two other agents assisted Malkin in putting Eichmann in the back seat of their limousine. They threw a blanket over his head and warned him that if he spoke he would be shot. After riding awhile Malkin released his hand from Eichmann’s mouth and a few minutes later Eichmann murmured, “I am already resigned to my fate.”² The year was 1960 and the chase for Eichmann had now reached its fifteenth year. Eichmann’s trial began less than a year later in April 1961 and in May 1962 he was hung.

For Nazi hunters, this case was the pinnacle of their work. The job of the Nazi hunter, however, has become extremely difficult with the passage of time, legal complications, and the reluctance of host governments to cooperate and yet Nazi hunters continue to put their lives on the line in the name of justice.³ While many people throughout Europe felt as if World War II should be forgotten in order to move forward, Nazi hunters made sure that Nazi war criminals were never forgotten and were indeed punished for their actions.

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² Ibid, 228.
The history of Nazi hunting has been, for the most part, solely a story of seekers of justice. Indeed, justice plays a large role in the work of any Nazi hunter. Other motivations, however, appear more prevalent than a cursory examination might suggest. In fact, a deeper understanding of Nazi hunting requires an analysis of motivation as not merely justice but potentially as revenge and fame as well. The motivations of a Nazi hunter can be thought of as a triangular continuum. Each corner of the continuum represents a separate motivation: justice, revenge, and, fame. An individual’s motivations never lie solely in one corner; rather they fall in to place along the continuum. While this location lies in between the three motivations, it indicates which motivation remains more prevalent.

**Literature Review**

In evaluating and creating this triangular continuum, one needs to look no further than the most famous Nazi hunters: Simon Wiesenthal and the Klarsfelds. While the two obviously have distinct motivations, these two cases prove that we cannot identify Nazi hunters by a single motivation or on a single point on the triangular continuum. Until recently, historians and commentators have identified Nazi hunting universally as a quest for justice. Only recently have writers like Guy Walters and Lawrence Swaim begun a critical engagement with Nazi hunting, opening the possibility that at root Nazi hunting was about revenge or fame rather than justice. In this paper I seek to explore the three poles of justice, revenge, and fame through a comparative analysis of Simon Wiesenthal’s cases of Karl Silberbauer and Hermine Braunsteiner with Serge and Beate Klarsfeld’s cases of Kurt Georg Kiesinger and Klaus Barbie. These cases show that Nazi hunting cannot be categorized simply by a single motivation. Contemporary writers typically place their motivations into three categories: revenge, fame, and justice. While they typically emphasize one of these three categories over another, one can clearly see that both Wiesenthal and the Klarsfelds can hardly be explained by one specific category.

The idea of chasing down Nazis for revenge appealed to the Jewish community directly after the war. Many concentration camp victims took to this. Some even went as far as to get jobs as border patrolmen in Germany and other neighboring countries so that when Nazis tried to escape they took their revenge, often with tacit approval from their superiors. While revenge served as a quick and easy way to attack the former Nazis and one that many Jewish men utilized, the most well-known Nazi hunters, Simon Wiesenthal and the Klarsfelds, opposed it. They made it clear that their actions as Nazi hunters represented not revenge but justice. Attacks on Wiesenthal as a man of revenge are few, launched by Nazi sympathizers who believe no actions should have taken place after World War II to track down and prosecute Nazis. Other accounts of these Nazi hunters come as
a stretch of the definition of revenge itself. While Berel Lang states that the Nazi hunters were not motivated by revenge, he adds that some argue that “in locating the Nazis they have sought or, once they were found, in having them tried or punished- they have forced them to live underground and that this is itself a form of revenge.” While finding sources pinpointing Wiesenthal as a revenge-fueled Nazi hunter may be extremely difficult, the same is not true of the Klarsfelds. The Klarsfelds had no problem pursuing Nazis by violent measures if they failed by other means. Beate Klarsfeld often confronted, harassed, and violently intimidated former Nazis but no documented case of Wiesenthal ever taking part in such actions exists. As Edward Alexander writes, “Whereas Wiesenthal concentrated on documenting war crimes, the Klarsfelds have specialized in publicly confronting the criminals.”

While few have depicted the Klarsfelds as wanting to obtain fame for their role as Nazi hunters, the obvious fact is that they obtained it whether it was sought or not. In fact, Beate Klarsfeld became so well known that in 2012 she ran as a candidate for the presidency of Germany. Although defeated, Klarsfeld and her husband remain as central figures in the Jewish community. If the Klarsfelds never sought fame for their work, the opposite can be argued of Simon Wiesenthal. Until fairly recently Wiesenthal has been beyond reproach as a near stainless man of justice. Guy Walters and Lawrence Swaim, however, find fault with Wiesenthal for the exaggeration of his work as a Nazi hunter and for using the Holocaust as a way to gain personal fame and recognition for himself as well as the Simon Wiesenthal Center, a global Jewish human rights organization. Even the warmest reviews of Wiesenthal take notice of the fact that not all his claims add up. Israeli historian and author Tom Segev, who provides one of the most stellar accounts of Wiesenthal, states that there are still “inconsistencies, contradictions, and fabrications.”

While Tom Segev and Kimberley Ducey dismiss Wiesenthal’s inconsistencies...

cies about his personal life as well as his works as lapses of memory or small blemishes on an exceptional career, Walters and Swaim regard Wiesenthal as a fame seeker who had no problem exaggerating his work. Swaim, a religious civil rights advocate, cites Wiesenthal as a man motivated by fame and that his true ambitions were to use the Holocaust as a means to raise money for his center. Wiesenthal’s later ideas, Swaim maintains, were only given serious consideration because of the public persona he had invented as part of his “entrepreneurial and overly imaginative self promotion.”

Perhaps the most brutal attack on Wiesenthal’s work and character comes from Guy Walters’ 2009 book, Hunting Evil: the Nazi War Criminals Who Escaped and the Quest to Bring Them to Justice. Walters states that Wiesenthal greatly exaggerated his role and had very little if anything to do with one of the greatest manhunts in history, the Adolf Eichmann case. Walters maintains that many other Nazi hunters were tracking down former Nazis in a much more efficient manner and goes a great distance to show that Wiesenthal was fully aware that he was making false claims. Wiesenthal supporters defend his legacy saying he made many false claims later in his life when his memory faded, but Walters points out that Wiesenthal was often regarded as having an “astonishing memory that was almost photographic.”

Despite the possibilities that Nazi hunters may have been driven by revenge, justice, or some other motive, Segev, Ducey, and Michael Curtis still hold that justice was their main goal. Both Wiesenthal and the Klarsfelds were directly influenced by the Holocaust, though Beate in a different way than Wiesenthal or her husband Serge. All three clearly put their lives on the line for a cause while most others did little to correct the past. Curtis still portrays the work of the Klarsfelds as a quest for justice, albeit a more violent one than that of Wiesenthal. Curtis regards the Klarsfelds as instrumental in their field in pursuing justice, stating that the Klarsfelds were the foremost researchers of the reality of the Holocaust in France and the leading pursuers of war criminals and successful in examining the French governmental institutions and their involvement in the atrocities.

Serge Klarsfeld’s work as a writer and as a Nazi hunter, Curtis maintains, not only constituted a search for justice, but a search for the “memory, names, and faces” of those lost in the Holocaust.

Despite these recent criticisms, Wiesenthal himself declared many times throughout his years that justice was his aim. He even went as far as entitling his

10 Swaim, 127.
11 Walters, 81.
12 Ibid, 85.
14 Ibid, 18.
Segev and Ducey, who have extensively examined his work exempted his relatively small miscues and declared him a man of justice. Segev provides one of the warmest critiques of Wiesenthal’s work as a Nazi hunter, suggesting Wiesenthal should be recognized and remembered for his contributions to the “memory and belief that remembering the dead is sanctifying life.” Wiesenthal’s work has guaranteed that the Holocaust, rather than fade into distant memory, has become a “universal synonym for evil, a warning sign for every nation and every person.” He completes his evaluation of Wiesenthal by saying “his memory stands as a tireless warrior and a central figure in the fight for human rights.”

Wiesenthal’s work still stands as a labor of justice rather than revenge or fame in the public perception. Ducey designed an entire class around one of Wiesenthal’s works, The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness. The course is centered on the concept of forgiveness and justice and she remains a strong advocate and defender of the Wiesenthal legacy. Ducey claims that Wiesenthal brought personal reality to the Holocaust and made Germany realize it needed to accept responsibility for the atrocities without any exaggeration of his own role. Ducey, like Segev, regards Wiesenthal as a moral exemplar of justice and an advocate of human rights.

While Segev and Ducey understand Nazi hunting as a practice motivated by justice alone, revenge and fame both have their place in certain individuals. The sensitivity of the Holocaust influences writers such as Segev and Ducey to only focus on the moral and good aspects of hunting down former Nazis. Only recently critics turned their attention to Nazi hunters and only in the last few years have condemnations as extreme as Walters’ emerged. Until recently authors, like Segev and Ducey, freely looked past Wiesenthal’s exaggerations and examined the Klarsfeld’s work as noble justice rather than a vengeful quest.

If the history of Nazi hunting has existed largely as a glorified quest for justice, its future appears to be a skeptical evaluation of character flaws rather than evaluations of work and documentation. While one can hardly say the Nazi hunters were misguided, given the violent nature of the Holocaust itself, most writers understand their motivations purely through the lens of justice. I will provide a third perspective: they were motivated by justice, by revenge, and, indeed, by a desire for fame. What distinguishes one Nazi hunter from another is to what extent they were influenced by these three motivations. Neither Simon Wiesenthal, nor the Klarsfelds, nor any other famous Nazi hunter can be placed wholly in

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15 Segev, 10.
16 Ibid, 7.
17 Ducey, 171-172.
any one corner of this triangular continuum. The motivations of a Nazi hunter are a combination of all three categories with one being more prominent than the other two, located more toward one corner of the triangular continuum than the other two.

**Research Section**

Although many sought to exact personal vengeance on former Nazis as opportunities arose in the immediate post-war period, Simon Wiesenthal, Serge Klarsfeld, and Beate Klarsfeld devoted their lives to hunting down Nazi war criminals. Wiesenthal survived multiple Nazi concentration camps and emerged as a leader in the field of Nazi hunting. He worked on over 1,000 cases, directed the Jewish Documentation Center from 1947 to 1954, and founded the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles and Jerusalem. He most famously worked towards the capture of Adolf Eichmann in 1961. He retired in 2003 at the age of 94, and passed away two years later on September 20, 2005. Serge Klarsfeld is a French Jewish Nazi hunter who survived World War II by fleeing to Italian-occupied Nice. His father, however, was discovered, sent to Auschwitz, and died in the gas chamber. Beate Klarsfeld lived in a quiet town in northeast Germany during the war after her father was relieved from his duties in the Wehrmacht after contracting double pneumonia. Serge and Beate met in Paris in 1963. The Klarsfelds’ work as Nazi hunters remained minimal until 1966 when they began to publicly attack Kurt Georg Kiesinger, a former Nazi propagandist who served as chancellor of West Germany by publishing articles and organizing demonstrations. Since 1966 the Klarsfelds have actively pursued former Nazi war criminals and been instrumental in providing a French perspective on the Holocaust.

Simon Wiesenthal and the Klarsfelds represent justice, but not justice alone. They also exhibit motivations of revenge and fame. The particular combinations of motivations become clearer through an examination of the specific cases Wiesenthal and the Klarsfelds pursued. For Simon Wiesenthal, the cases of Karl Silberbauer, the SS officer who arrested Anne Frank, and Hermine Braunsteiner-Ryan, the notorious Nazi female guard, delineate his motivations. For the Klarsfelds, the case of Kurt Georg Kiesinger, the former West German prime minister, and the case of Klaus Barbie, an SS captain nicknamed “The Butcher of Lyon,” reveal different sets of motive forces.

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Simon Wiesenthal

Simon Wiesenthal was born in 1908 in Lvov in present-day Ukraine. According to Simon Wiesenthal, by age 28 in 1936, Wiesenthal had married Cyla Mueller, received an architecture degree, and was living a relatively quiet a life.\(^{20}\) This pleasant lifestyle continued until 1939 when Russia and Germany signed a non-aggression pact and agreed to partition Poland. In September 1939, the Red Army entered Lvov and located in Poland. Wiesenthal was forced to close his business. In June 1941, Adolf Hitler invaded the Soviet Union and the eight days later the Red Army was replaced with Nazi soldiers in Lvov.\(^{21}\) On Sunday, June 6, 1941, Wiesenthal hid in the cellar of his house playing chess with a friend when a Ukrainian policeman barged in and arrested them. After escaping with the help of a former employee, Wiesenthal and his wife were forced to live in a Jewish ghetto. After just a few months in the ghetto they were taken to the Janowska concentration camp.\(^{22}\)

Janowska was the first of many concentration camps Wiesenthal would be sent to. Early in 1942 the Nazis initiated the “Final Solution.” After hearing rumors of the genocide inside a concentration camp, Wiesenthal cut a deal with the Polish underground. In exchange for detailed charts of railroad junction points, he got them to create false papers stating that his wife was Aryan and she walked out of the camp.\(^{23}\) Unfortunately for Wiesenthal, he remained in the concentration camps for the duration of the war, escaping death in multiple instances.

Early in 1945 the Red Army marched west towards central Europe. Wiesenthal at this point appeared close to death. On February 7, 1945 he was transferred from Buchenwald to Mauthausen, his last camp. At Mauthausen he was assigned to the “death block,” unable to work and awaiting his demise. On May 5, 1945 Wiesenthal saw a large gray tank waving an American flag approach the camp.\(^{24}\) The tank had white stars on the side and Wiesenthal raced towards them. He was far too weak for sprinting, however, and collapsed some fifty yards from the tank. He awoke later to the smell of soup and was nursed back to health over

\(^{22}\) Ibid, 29.
\(^{24}\) Wiesenthal, 45.
the next few weeks. Just a few days later Wiesenthal went to the War Crimes Unit of the American forces at Mauthausen and reported from memory the names of nearly one hundred Nazi criminals. Simon Wiesenthal the Nazi hunter emerged. Claiming to represent the millions of Holocaust victims, he eventually worked on over 1,000 cases. He continuously stated that his work was in pursuit of justice alone, even entitling one of his own books, Justice Not Vengeance.

Although his work on Karl Silberbauer resulted in no indictment, it served as one of Wiesenthal’s most important cases. In the larger picture of the Holocaust, Silberbauer was a nobody. He never killed or even injured a Jew; he just arrested them as told. Silberbauer continued to work as a cop after the war, not making a substantial salary. However unimportant Silberbauer may seem, he served as the means to clarifying one of the most controversial myths of the Holocaust. While Silberbauer’s name never made it onto Wiesenthal’s lists, Wiesenthal quickly sought interest in him when he discovered he was the officer who arrested Anne Frank. Arresting and trying Silberbauer was of little concern to Wiesenthal but having the man admit he arrested Anne Frank would solve the issue of whether she even existed or not. Wiesenthal used this case to serve justice to not only a fifteen-year old Jewish girl, but to one of the main figures in the collective memory of the Holocaust.

“The play is a fraud. Anne Frank never existed. The Jews have invented the whole story because they want to extort more restitution money. Don’t believe a word of it! It’s fake!” These words printed onto a leaflet showered onto people viewing a performance of The Diary of Anne Frank in Linz, Austria. The police stormed in and gathered the names of the student protesters who had dumped the leaflets onto the audience and soon after the performance continued. It was October 1958 and throughout Europe there was a widespread belief that Anne Frank had never lived. Two days after the incident, Wiesenthal chatted with a friend in a coffee shop. His friend called over a boy he knew and questioned him about Anne Frank. After several questions, the boy’s opinion became clear; he did not believe in Anne Frank because no proof of her existence survived. Wiesenthal asked the young man, “Suppose the Gestapo officer who actually arrested Anne Frank were found. Would that be accepted as proof?” The boy decided it would.

It became clear to Wiesenthal that he had to search for the “missing epilogue to Anne Frank’s diary,” the man who arrested her. Searching for a few years unsuccessfully, Wiesenthal finally received a Gestapo directory and searched

27 Ibid, 175.
through thousands of names. Up to this point he thought he was looking for a man named “Silbernagel.” He then found the name “Silberbauer” and realized his search had gone cold previously because he had been looking for the wrong name.\footnote{Ibid, 179.} With the help of Dr. Josef Wiesinger who worked for the Austrian Ministry of the Interior, Wiesenthal found him. With Silberbauer’s admission that he was the officer who arrested Anne Frank, the epilogue to the diary was complete. While Silberbauer did not serve any jail time, the confession shed light on a dark myth throughout Europe that the Frank diaries were a hoax. Silberbauer was a nobody, he was responsible only for gathering Jews and obeying orders but the implications of his confession to arresting Anne Frank are substantial.\footnote{Ibid, 183.} The most famous figure of the Holocaust was now proven and any further speculation was moot.

The case of Karl Silberbauer allowed Wiesenthal to quiet the opinions throughout Europe that Anne Frank and her diary were phony. His work and the eventual admission of Silberbauer gave the Holocaust more depth, making it more real to those who read the diary. The Silberbauer case was a high point for Wiesenthal, not because he had captured an important Nazi, but rather because he sought after and found the undeniable truth. This case serves as an example for justice; Wiesenthal went after an unremarkable figure to find justice for the millions of Holocaust victims and survivors.

While the actual Silberbauer case did not even last an entire year many of Wiesenthal’s investigations dragged on for years, sometimes ending without result. The case of Hermine Braunsteiner-Ryan shows Wiesenthal’s dedication to bringing justice to those who wronged his people. The investigation lasted nearly twenty years but through hard work and dedication Wiesenthal was finally able to bring justice to one of the most horrific women of the Holocaust. Although sometimes forgotten or omitted, German women served in the concentration camps and had no lesser part than the men. One of the most notorious was Hermine Braunsteiner, a guard at Majdanek and Ravenstruck.

In January 1964 Wiesenthal sat a cafe in Tel Aviv, Israel. While turning the pages of his magazine, he was approached by a group of women who recognized him for his work. They asked him what happened to Hermine Braunsteiner, a guard who loved to whip, kick, and sometimes even kill the prisoners. One of the women told Wiesenthal a story of a woman who carried her child in a rucksack. Braunsteiner whipped the rucksack and the child’s screams poured out. Braunsteiner then ordered the sack to be opened and when a child emerged, she shot it. The ladies proclaimed they would never forget the child’s face. Before the conversation ended Wiesenthal told the women, “From every one of my journeys I return
home with new names, the way other people bring back a souvenir, from this journey it will be the name of Hermine Braunsteiner."

Wiesenthal remained true to his word and quickly surveyed his data on the Majdanek camp. He discovered Braunsteiner had been arrested in 1948 and served three years for her brutality and then later moved to Halifax and married a man with the last name Ryan. Three weeks later, after talking with a Holocaust survivor in Toronto, he discovered she now lived in Queens, New York. He then sought the assistance of Clyde Farnsworth, the Vienna correspondent of the New York Times, who had written many favorable articles on Wiesenthal. Ten days later, a story appeared in the New York Times which informed the American public on the case and the atrocities Ryan had committed.

Ryan's first reaction was that she had served her time and that the press should leave her alone. Her neighbors seem to think she could have never committed such acts and that she was one of the nicest women they had ever met. Wiesenthal’s case dragged on for four years until 1968 when the U.S. Department of Justice applied for the revocation of Ryan's citizenship which she had been granted in 1963 after lying about her past. It took another three years for her to be stripped of her citizenship. It took another four years until her trial finally opened in Dusseldorf, Germany. The trial dragged on another six years until she was finally sentenced in 1981 to life in prison. While this investigation and trial took nearly twenty years, Braunsteiner-Ryan was finally brought to justice. Braunsteiner-Ryan had already been tried but Wiesenthal would not stand for a sentence of only a few years for Nazi guards who murdered infants. He made the world aware of the atrocities Ryan committed and she justly received a harsher punishment.

The Braunsteiner-Ryan case served as one of the premier cases of Wiesenthal’s career. It was a long and difficult legal battle, but through political pressure and exposing the atrocities Braunsteiner-Ryan committed, Wiesenthal ensured that justice prevailed. His dedication and ability to overcome adversity were evident. Although Braunsteiner-Ryan was not sentenced until 1981, Wiesenthal worked extremely hard and never forgot the story he heard in that Tel Aviv café in 1964.

While Wiesenthal’s reputation inspires thoughts of justice, one does not have to look much further than his personal biography to notice his fondness for exaggeration in the service of his own legacy. Wiesenthal never actually graduated

31 Ibid, 149.
32 Ibid, 150.
33 Ibid, 155.
from architectural school or worked as an architect. Instead, Wiesenthal worked in a furniture store prior to the war. Also, in some instances Wiesenthal claimed to have been in as many as twelve concentration camps whereas camp records have him being in no more than six. These inconsistencies have led people like Guy Walters to call Wiesenthal “a liar- and a bad one at that.”

Perhaps the biggest misconception of Wiesenthal’s work is the Eichmann case. Walters suggests that despite his many assumptions and claims, Wiesenthal had little to do with bringing Eichmann to justice. Walters claims Wiesenthal gave speeches about how he wrestled with Eichmann in a ditch before arresting him, an apocryphal tale nowhere near the truth. Whether fair or not, Walters’ criticisms show that Wiesenthal had a tendency to stretch the truth to create more gripping stories and impressive feats.

While Wiesenthal gained fame and sometimes exaggerated the truth in order to do so, the overwhelming evidence of Wiesenthal’s 1,000 cases prove that he sought to serve justice to Nazi war criminals. Although at times he sought to ensure his personal fame and place in history, these actions are overshadowed by the multiplicity and vastness of his work. He put in numerous hours every single day to ensure that justice prevailed over evil. Accusations of Wiesenthal as a revenge seeker can be quickly dismissed because he always sought out authorities in his cases, and never condoned violence. While justice remains as a key component of any Nazi hunter, the concern for justice Wiesenthal showed is not apparent in all Nazi hunters. The Klarsfelds clearly show more vengeance in their work. If Wiesenthal is aligned to the justice pole of the triangular motivational continuum, with a slight pull toward fame, the Klarsfelds inhabit a region closer to the pole of revenge.

**The Klarsfelds**

Beate Klarsfeld was born in 1939 in Berlin. Her father, Kurt Kunzel, joined the Nazi army three weeks after her birth. In the winter of 1941 he contracted double pneumonia and returned home to doing bookkeeping for the army. In 1945 he was released from duty by the English forces when they entered Berlin and Beate’s family anxiously awaited the arrival of the Soviet army. Her parents were not members of the Nazi party but had voted for Hitler because everyone

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36 Ibid, 303.
else had.\textsuperscript{37} At the war’s conclusion, her family never spoke of the war or of Adolf Hitler. She continued to live a quiet life.

By age eighteen her parents’ relationship became strained and Beate moved out to start a life of her own. To her parents’ dismay, she went to Paris in March 1960. She quickly learned French and began work as an au pair. One May afternoon in 1960, Beate met a man at a bus station. His name was Serge Klarsfeld and he was finishing his degree in political science. The two exchanged phone numbers and three days later went on their first date.\textsuperscript{38} Beate quickly learned that Serge was Jewish, a race of people she had been told to avoid. He explained to her that his father had been killed at Auschwitz and he had escaped death during the Holocaust by hiding. Startled at the atrocities Serge began to tell her, Beate realized just how much her country had hidden from its citizens. One summer night in June 1961 after an evening out on the town, Beate learned of the Holocaust from Serge’s mother.\textsuperscript{39} In November 1963, Serge and Beate Klarsfeld married. The Klarsfelds settled down in a nice six-bedroom apartment and began living a quiet life.

Not long after, the Klarsfelds learned of Kurt Georg Kiesinger’s plan to run for prime minister of West Germany. The Klarsfelds found several newspaper articles stating that Kiesinger worked for the Nazis as a propagandist during World War II. While many Germans were surprised, Kiesinger still rose through the polls. The Klarsfelds hoped he would not get elected, but he did by forming a coalition between the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats. Klarsfeld found that the Federal Republic knew about Kiesinger’s past and decided to ignore it.\textsuperscript{40} The time to remain silent had ended and the time for action began.\textsuperscript{41}

Beate Klarsfeld decided the first thing to do would be to take a public stand against Kiesinger. She wrote an article coining Kiesinger the “respectability of evil,” a term which characterized Kiesinger’s newly gained political fame and reputation after a career filled with hatred and racism. After writing an additional article she was fired from her job. She then researched Kiesinger’s record in detail. She found that in August 1940 Kiesinger was assigned by Joachim von Ribbentrop to the department of radio broadcasting. Kiesinger quickly rose through the ranks to the head of programming, becoming responsible for propaganda promoting

\textsuperscript{37} Beate Klarsfeld, \textit{Wherever They May Be!} (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1975), 4.
\textsuperscript{38} Klarsfeld, 7.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid, 11.
\textsuperscript{40} Walters, 349.
\textsuperscript{41} Klarsfeld, 18.
anti-Semitism as well as censorship.\textsuperscript{42} By 1968, Beate Klarsfeld launched a full-scale public campaign against the former Nazi, which came to a climax at the Christian Democratic Union’s annual party conference.

Beate gained access to the party conference by posing as a reporter. She drew near to the platform and eventually gained access to the platform where Kiesinger sat by sweet-talking a guard. Klarsfeld recalls what happened next:

“I slipped behind the dignitaries. As I got behind Kiesinger, he sensed my presence and half turned around. My nerves tensed agonizingly. I had won. Shouting, ‘Nazi Nazi!’ at the top of my lungs, I slapped him. I never even saw the expression on his face.”\textsuperscript{43}

This incident ended in Klarsfeld being sentenced to one year in prison but the sentence was suspended. The public outcry of her public campaign and slap caught the attention of entirety of Europe. The next year Kiesinger was voted out of office. In 1969, the year following the slapping incident, saw no former Nazis or neo-Nazis elected to the Bundestag. Klarsfeld stated that she finally felt as if she could call herself “German” again.\textsuperscript{44} While Kiesinger did not serve any jail time, it was through the work of the Klarsfelds that he was removed from office. Their work made people more aware of the Nazi past and made them more skeptical of allowing former Nazis back into politics.

While justice was necessary in the case of Kiesinger, the Klarsfelds approached the case in a vengeful manner. While perhaps this cannot be deemed as morally wrong, Beate Klarsfeld’s actions can be classified as revenge. Certainly Kiesinger should have never been elected prime minister and the Federal Republic should have never hidden his past; however, the aims of the Klarsfelds in the case cannot be described as merely justice. Beate Klarsfeld sought no means of higher authority or the German court system but rather took matters into her own hands and acted off of pure vengeful instinct. “The Slap” certainly characterizes revenge more than justice and represents the darker side of Nazi hunting.

If the Kiesinger case served as the Klarsfelds introduction to Nazi hunting, the Klaus Barbie was the zenith of their careers. The so-called “Butcher of Lyon,” Barbie joined the Nazi party in 1937 as a private. In May 1940 he was reassigned to the Jewish Affairs unit. Two years later he was assigned as head of security police in Lyon, France.\textsuperscript{45} Barbie developed a brutal reputation for his counter-insurgency

\textsuperscript{42} Klarsfeld, 29.
\textsuperscript{43} Walters, 349.
\textsuperscript{44} Klarsfeld, 90.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid, 218.
campaign against the French resistance. Maurice Bondet, a victim of Barbie's brutality, recalled, “When I was unconscious, he pushed me into a freezing bath... and had acid injected into my bladder. He really enjoyed other people's sufferings.”

In addition to having many French Jews being tortured or killed within France, Barbie sent thousands more to their deaths in Nazi concentration camps throughout Europe.

In the summer of 1971 the Klarsfelds began working on capturing Klaus Barbie. The case had been disposed of in a Munich court in June 1971 after Barbie had already been sentenced to death twice in absentia by the Lyon tribunal. Beate Klarsfeld was joined by Madame Benguigui whose children had been sent to their deaths by Barbie. The two went to Munich in September 1971 and Benguigui stood by Klarsfeld outside the Munich courthouse with a sign reading, “I am on a hunger strike for as long as the investigation of Klaus Barbie, who murdered my children, remains closed.” Their message eventually reached the people inside the courthouse and by that evening a prosecutor approached them who agreed to reopen the case if they could provide accounts of Barbie speaking of Jews being shot or deported. Serge Klarsfeld immediately found a Paris lawyer who provided information to the effect that Barbie was hiding in La Paz, Bolivia.

The problem now arose as to how to get Barbie back to Europe. The Klarsfelds found that Barbie was living in Lima, Peru under the name Klaus Altmann but when Beate Klarsfeld went to Lima she discovered he was in La Paz. Once she arrived in La Paz, Beate enraged the city, which was, like so many other South American urban centers, filled with former Nazis and their sympathizers. Unfortunately, this trip did not end in the capture of Barbie and Beate returned to Europe. On her second trip to La Paz, the leadership in Bolivia, which had previously been cooperative, changed its mind and a statement was issued that the Barbie case had been closed due to the passage of time.

The Barbie case would reach an even new low when Garcia Meza took over as dictator in Bolivia in 1982. One of Meza's biggest supporters, Barbie began operating a drug trade during this time. The dictatorship of Meza, however, was short lived and the new president Hernan Siles Zuazo was determined to “solve the Barbie problem.” The Bolivian government lured him in by making him repay a sum that Barbie and his colleagues had stolen during Barbie’s career traffick-

46 Walters, 37.
47 Klarsfeld, 215.
48 Walters, 351.
49 Ibid, 352.
50 Klarsfeld, 269.
51 Walters, 377.
ing drugs. When Barbie came in to pay he was arrested. He immediately began to plead his innocence. He was then blindfolded and told he was being sent to Germany. Believing he would be safe there, he felt relieved; however, when he arrived at his destination he quickly realized he was in France, a nation far more hostile towards him. \(^{52}\) Barbie was not to be tried until 1987 but at that time he was sentenced to life in prison and later died of leukemia.

Like Wiesenthal’s Braunsteiner-Ryan case, the Barbie case shows the intense dedication of the Klarsfelds. They sought to find justice for the many thousands of French Jews Barbie sent to the camps and were determined to achieve this no matter how long it took. While the Klarsfelds were not violent in the Barbie case, Beate often remarked that she was enraged during the process, at one point even stating that she saw some of the same “blackness” in her that existed in Kiesinger and Barbie. She was driven as much by her vengeful rage as she was by her desire to bring Barbie to justice. \(^{53}\) While the cases of Kiesinger and Barbie illustrate noble actions against former Nazis, there is a clear difference between the work of Wiesenthal and the Klarsfelds. The Kiesinger “slap” was certainly warranted but it was an act of vengeful public shaming, undertaken outside any legal framework, rather than an appeal to formal justice. The Klarsfelds were also certainly dedicated in their pursuit of Barbie and without their work he may have never been prosecuted but Beate Klarsfeld began to recognize the “blackness” and anger in her intentions.

**Conclusion**

In the sensitive instance of the Holocaust, the perception of Nazi hunters’ motivations remains unquestioned; most everyone sees their actions as justice. While the motivation of fame is much easier to understand and digest, the definitions of justice and revenge are much more difficult to grasp. While an element of justice certainly exists for any Nazi hunter, either directly or indirectly affected by the Holocaust, often times their actions cannot be explained by a desire for justice alone. In order to fully evaluate these circumstances, one must put aside the preconceived notions of these terms. Revenge is nearly always thought of as negative, but does it have to be? When a person experiences their entire family murdered in front of them are they wrong for taking violent measures against their attacker? On the same note, can we simply label violent actions justified?

In Western philosophical tradition, justice has been viewed as the “first virtue of society.” \(^{54}\) Justice remains, however, a term much more complex than

\(^{52}\) Walters, 379.

\(^{53}\) Klarsfeld, 275.

\(^{54}\) Dagobert D. Runes, *Dictionary of Philosophy*, [Rev. ed. (New York: Allied
this simple definition. Justice can be divided into two major categories: distributive and retributive. Distributive justice lays down the principles specifying the just distribution of benefits and burdens; the outcome in which all receive their due. Retributive justice seeks to balance an injustice by rectifying the situation, or by regaining an equality that the injustice overturned. Retributive justice can be summed up as “an eye for an eye” or “a tooth for a tooth.” Revenge is an intentional infliction of punishment or injury in return for a wrong to one’s self, family, or close friends. Modern social philosophy generally rejects the very idea of revenge as irrational and unjustified. Still others hold the traditional thought that revenge is emotional, personal, and not justifiable.

By evaluating these definitions, it becomes easy to see how retributive justice and revenge can be extremely hard to distinguish from one another. In terms of individuals hunting down war criminals after the most atrocious genocide in history, the picture becomes even hazier because the difference between justice and revenge cannot simply be defined as “good” and “bad.” The main difference is to be found in moral rectitude. In the case of revenge, vengeance is exacted by an individual in retribution for an individually perceived wrongdoing. Justice, however, involves the invocation of a larger concept of moral rectitude that transcends the interests of the individual. In the scenario of a Nazi hunter, justice requires patience and cooperation with the courts of law, while revenge serves as a quick fix providing personal temporary relief but no greater social closure.

In the case of Simon Wiesenthal two motivations were clearly present: justice and fame. Wiesenthal was hardly humble about his accomplishments and indeed, he made outrageous and exaggerated claims throughout his career, particularly in regard to the Eichmann case. In some instances Wiesenthal went as far as to claim to have been present when Eichmann was captured in Argentina. When asked about making this false claim Wiesenthal stated, “Journalists want sensations, so I told them and then repeated it in my speeches when I was questioned about the Eichmann operation. For the sake of livelihood and prestige I am ready to do anything.”

Yet there is a different side of Wiesenthal that clearly prevails over the fame seeker. Wiesenthal’s quest for justice is evident in the Silberbauer and

57 Walters, 302.
Braunsteiner-Ryan cases. In the first instance Wiesenthal went after a nobody to discover that the Holocaust’s premier young heroine really existed. In the second instance Wiesenthal spent nearly twenty years bringing a murderer of children to justice. His aims in both these instances summarize his overwhelming quest to ensure that Holocaust victims are never forgotten. Wiesenthal worked on over one thousand cases and oversaw the founding of The Simon Wiesenthal Center in 1977, an international institute for Holocaust remembrance and the defense of human rights. While Wiesenthal thrived on his fame, his overwhelming dedication and pursuit of justice significantly prevails. Wiesenthal’s motivations can be summed up in a conversation he had with a former Mauthausen inmate who went on to make a fortune in the jewelry business. The man asked, “Simon, if you had gone back to building houses you would be a millionaire. Why didn’t you?” Wiesenthal replied, “You’re a religious man. You believe in God and life after death. I also believe. When we come to the other world and meet the millions of Jews who died in the camps and they ask us, ‘What have you done?’ there will be many answers. You will say, ‘I became a jeweler,’ another will say, ‘I have smuggled coffee and American cigarettes,’ another will say, ‘I built houses,’ but I will say, ‘I did not forget you.’”

While justice and fame moved Wiesenthal to action, the Klarsfelds moved in a matrix defined by justice and revenge. Wiesenthal was a man dedicated to documenting war criminals and alerting authorities. The same cannot be said of the Klarsfelds. They had an extensive documentation system but they were not always quick in turning matters over to authorities. In many instances they took matters into their own hands and even committed crimes like the Kiesinger slap while pursuing war criminals. The case of Klaus Barbie shows the Klarsfelds’ dedication to bringing justice to former Nazis, the Kiesinger case shows a darker side. Kiesinger certainly should not have risen to prime minister in the Federal Republic but the incident Beate Klarsfeld created when she slapped him was unnecessarily violent. They never set out to become violent but they were not opposed to violence. In September 1989, Professor Robert Faurisson was nearly beaten to death after denying that millions of people died in the Holocaust. When asked to comment on the incident Serge Klarsfeld opined, “Someone who has provoked the Jewish community for years should expect this sort of thing.” The Klarsfelds were undeniably pursuers of justice but their efforts were colored by a vengeful rage, by a desire to exact a swift price without explicit appeal to higher moralities or higher courts.

There is a clear divide in the literature on Nazi hunting. Earlier sources give fabulous portrayals of Nazi hunting as an occupation motivated only by a desire for justice while more recent works have raised questions in a critical, if accusatorial, tone once unimaginable. The specific cases Wiesenthal and the Klarsfelds investigated, however, reveal that the matter is far more complicated. Simply identifying Nazi hunters’ motivations as only a search for justice, revenge, or fame would be incorrect for multiple motivations are present. Wiesenthal was driven by a desire for justice and fame while the Klarsfelds, though also moved by a wish for justice, were self-consciously stirred by a need for revenge. If we are to move beyond the poles of hagiography and accusation that now characterize the existing literature, we must allow for the human multiplicities in the hearts of Nazi hunters so we can have clearer insight into the forces that stirred them to devote decades of their lives to avocation.
Bibliography


