

Author Neal Bascomb on *Hunting Eichmann*

Leslie Pardo, special to the WJN

The Holocaust Memorial Center in Farmington Hills is featuring the exhibit, "Operation Finale: The Capture & Trial of Adolf Eichmann." Currently scheduled to be on display through August 2020, the exhibit features 60 original artifacts and 70 photographs, including maps, printed case files, hand forged documents and a pair of goggles used to obscure Eichmann's vision during his capture.

New York Times bestselling author Neal Bascomb recently shared insight on his groundbreaking research into the Israeli secret mission to capture Eichmann, considered the architect of the Holocaust, and how it led to Bascomb's book *Hunting Eichmann: How a Band of Survivors and a Young Spy Agency Chased Down the World's Most Notorious Nazi*.

HMC: What brought you to write *Hunting Eichmann*?

NB: During my research, people asked me this countless times, and usually with the preface question of whether or not I was Jewish. When I responded in the negative to the first part, the overwhelming response was "Good"... then you'll be seen as objective. The second part of my answer weaves with the first. You do not have to be Jewish to understand the incredible significance of the operation to catch Eichmann. Without it, our knowledge and perception of the Holocaust would be much more limited. Prior to the Eichmann trial, the Nazi atrocities were largely swept under the rug, not spoken about. Only after the capture was there an expansive reexamination of the genocide and did it become rooted in our collective consciousness. In this respect, the operation is one of the most important, influential spy missions in history. Period.

HMC: How was chasing this story in Buenos Aires?

NB: Lots of resistance from all fronts. The Argentine government is very sensitive over this period of their history. Some secret files were offered but they had the scent of selective disclosure, and the government is adept at burying information in a sea of unindexed piles. At the immigration department, there are cavernous rooms filled with nothing but rotting towers of cardboard boxes filled with paper. It would take a lifetime to go through them, even if they were not restricted.

The German community is reluctant to

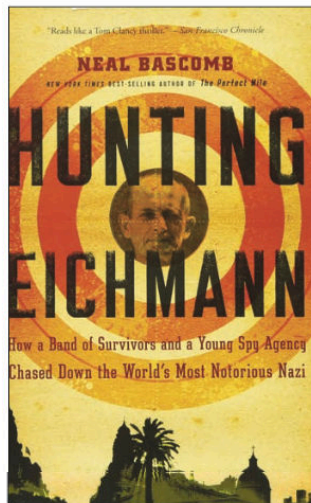


NEAL BASCOMB (PHOTO CREDIT: MERYL SCHENKER)

discuss, minimizing any connection to their support of the Third Reich, though at the German Club I was given a bland tour of their history only to pass a room with three members who were, jokingly perhaps, doing the Nazi goosestep and giving a Heil Hitler salute. When I met with an old Wehrmacht soldier who used to drink with Eichmann, it was mentioned that he had heard prior to my call that some American journalist was "asking a lot of questions." He had heard this from someone in a town hundreds of miles outside of Buenos Aires that I had not visited, and I had only been in the country for less than a week. Obviously, the old grapevine was intact.

HMC: Tell us about your find of the Eichmann passport

NB: Definitely one of the highlights of the research because the document is tangible proof of how Eichmann escaped Europe. At one point, I was looking through old Buenos Aires newspapers when I came across a story about a lawsuit filed by Vera Eichmann against the Israelis. Court records are always one of my favorite places to research because they're often overlooked and always meticulous. Through one of my researchers, I petitioned the courts to see the lawsuit files. No response. Then again. Come back in six weeks, they said, fill out this paperwork and that. Then again. You



need a lawyer, they said. Then again. Finally, we were given the record, which had never been accessed before. In the file was a long report about the Argentinean investigation into the capture, which was fascinating. But no passport! A few weeks later, we heard the judge who approved our seeing the file had gone through the file before agreeing to its release and given the passport to the Holocaust Museum in Buenos Aires. Fortunately, the judge credited my researcher for the discovery, and we were given full access to the passport.

HMC: What was the great challenge in writing the book?

NB: No debate. It was writing the narrative sections on Eichmann in the war, how he escaped, and how he lived while on the run. When I set out to write this history, I thought I would focus almost exclusively on the hunters, not the hunted. But after discovering a memoir by Eichmann on his post-war years, not to mention accessing two more well-known autobiographies, I really felt I could accurately portray his actions and mindset. This got me into his head...so to speak...and this was an extremely uncomfortable place to be. For a while, I had a bad case of insomnia, and when sleep did come, I had nightmares about his actions against the Jews. Although I knew I'd be affected by the subject matter, its level of

intensity was surprising.

HMC: How was tracking down the Mossad agents?

NB: Well, you can't exactly look them up in the phonebook. It was a lot about employing the theory of six degrees of separation...though I think with former spies, seven degrees is more the average. They were initially reluctant to speak, and on my arrival into Tel Aviv, I was told they had all canceled their interviews. Fortunately, I was able to turn that around, though the security services blocked me from speaking to a few individuals.

Most of the agents involved were in their early thirties at the time and they were the top level guys in the Mossad. Literally, numbers one, two, three, four. If the operation went south, Israel would have been left a gutted spy agency. Of the three top agents I met with, it was extraordinary how average of appearance and temperament they were. As one told me, the key is to look like everybody else, to walk into a room and leave it without anyone ever remembering your face. What also struck me was the casualness with which they talked of the danger involved, as if it was nothing. Incredible.

HMC: What surprised you most in the course of the book?

NB: That so much of the capture and securing the Nazi war criminal came down to ordinary people with no ties to any security agencies. They include the blind German and his daughter who lived in Buenos Aires and first identified Eichmann, to Simon Wiesenthal and Tuvia Friedman who were essentially amateur detectives, to Argentinean Jews in Buenos Aires who helped the Mossad agents, to the "monkey business" crews of El Al—pilots, navigators, stewards, mechanics, station chief—who brought Eichmann back to Israel. The Mossad was, of course, essential, but without these other folks, the capture would never have come off. Many of these individuals were also concentration camp survivors, which makes their contribution all that much more powerful.

The Holocaust Memorial Center teaches about the senseless murder of millions and why each of us must respect and stand up for the rights of others if we are to prevent future genocide and hate crimes. For more information, visit www.holocaustcenter.org or call 248-553-2400. ■