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WASHINGTON POST
4 July 1983

Barbie Was Shielded From France By U.S. Agents He Had Helped

This is the second of three articles adapted from the forthcoming book, "Barbie: Butcher of Lyon," to be published in the United States by the Pantheon Press.

By Tom Bower

Klaus Barbie got a new handler and a new home after he was released from the G2 interrogation center at Oberursel early in 1948 to resume operations as an informant for the U.S. Army.

The new handler was Erhard Dabringhaus, 31, now a retired professor of German history at Wayne State University in Detroit. Born in Essen, Germany, he had emigrated with his parents to the United States in 1930 and returned to Europe as a major and a trained interrogator, with the 1st Infantry Division.

Dabringhaus left the Army in 1946, but he reapplied at the end of 1947 and was appointed a civilian special agent in the Army's Counter Intelligence Corps, assigned in March, 1948, to the 970th Detachment at Augsburg.

Fourteen weeks later, he was ordered to take a truck to the Bavarian village of Kempten to help two German agents move their belongings from a 970th facility there to new quarters in Augsburg. The agents were Barbie and Kurt Merk, a former German intelligence officer who had persuaded Barbie to join him in working for the Americans.

Dabringhaus arrived at their house at 7 Schillerstrasse in Kempten on June 15, and helped them load their belongings into the truck.

He drove them to their new home at 109 Mozartstrasse, a large corner house in a pleasant leafy suburb of Augsburg, a "safe house" provided by CIC.

Soon after their arrival, their German neighbors protested to the local authorities. The house had been requisitioned by the Americans from an anti-Nazi family who thought it would be used by Americans. It was infuriating that they had been evicted to make way for ex-Nazis. Their protest was ignored.

Merk lived downstairs with Andree Rivez, the French mistress he had acquired during his wartime service in Dijon. Barbie lived upstairs with his wife and two children.

Dabringhaus' initial task was to formalize Merk network of informants. A proper office was obtained for Merk and Barbie on the first floor of the U.S. billet next to the town's swimming pool. They brought their own secretary, the widow of an SS officer killed in Russia. At 9 a.m. each day, they would assemble with Dabringhaus to discuss current operations.

Dabringhaus is convinced even today that Barbie had a network of between 60 and 100 informants throughout western and eastern Europe, and boasts as his achievement that he cut it down to 25 "because the rest were giving us nothing and we were stupid enough to pay for it."

Munich headquarters objected, Dabringhaus said, because they wanted more information, not less.

"They had gone way beyond their original mission which was to penetrate the French zone, French intelligence and the French communist party," Dabringhaus said. "Instead, they had sub-agents in Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Romania and were getting information from Gunther Bernau in Stuttgart, who sold information supplied by 125 former SS officers."

Among the valuable intelligence acquired, Dabringhaus said, was that the Czechs were mining uranium, a fact commonly known before the war.

"Merk's biggest coup," Dabringhaus said, "was to produce two double agents who confided that the French were trying

to penetrate U.S. intelligence. That's why we lost confidence in the French."

That is a strange assertion, not the least because Barbie's role was the same, except in reverse. It confirmed the extraordinary naivete of CIC which Barbie fully understood.

On several occasions, Barbie took Dabringhaus to local Communist Party meetings, once even at 2 a.m. Dressed in German clothes so that he would not seem out of place, Dabringhaus could submit eyewitness reports on "communist agitation" which amounted to little more than protests by underpaid workers. But anything supplementing American ignorance was welcome.

It was the very nature of the American operation and of Dabringhaus' position that both he and headquarters were taking everything that Barbie told them on trust. Dabringhaus knew the names of "no more than a dozen" of the informants Barbie was paying, and he rarely met any of them. Instead, he said he regularly supplied Barbie with up to 12 different forged identity cards at a time and handed over a regular yellow envelope with his wages and expenses—from \$700 to \$1,700 a month.

Other CIC officers deride this account, insisting that American currency was never used, only military scrip. One, Earl Browning, who now lives in Washington, said he didn't even use scrip; he paid informants with goods from the PX, such as cigarettes and coffee.

But Merk and Barbie also were supplying information to other American agencies which were not prevented from using dollars. Nevertheless, Barbie consistently complained to Dabringhaus that he could not support his network on 8,000 marks per month.

Barbie was, however, proud that he could use his position to help many SS men leave Germany with officially prepared ID papers and money.

This was just one of Barbie's many rackets which prompted him to brag to Dabringhaus of how easy it was to fool the Allies.

Said Dabringhaus, "Barbie always told Merk that I was too weak. 'When you've

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get an enemy in your hands, he would say to Merk, 'you've got to crush him.' "

Dabringhaus now says that he was appalled by Barbie's past as the Gestapo chief in Lyons, where the French say he had ordered and participated in many atrocities and murders. But there is no contemporary record to support Dabringhaus's claim.

Their association ended late in 1948 when Dabringhaus was reassigned. His successor was Herbert Bechtold, who lives now in Richmond, Ind. Bechtold, like Dabringhaus, was born in Germany and emigrated to the United States in 1935.

He spent the war fighting in North Africa, and through Europe from the Normandy landings to the Rhine. He was discharged at war's end but reenlisted and was assigned to the CIC in Munich in 1948.

Barbie and his new handler developed a close relationship. Bechtold helped resolve Barbie's money complaints. Barbie described to him how life had been under the Nazis, and talked about his problems in fighting the French Resistance in the early 1940s.

"The way he explained it," Bechtold said, "when they got Resistance people in the act [of interrogation], there was just no time to lose. They needed the names of the others fast and in war anything goes."

Another American who entered Barbie's life at this time was Gene Kolb, who took over from Dale Garvey as the chief of the CIC's Region 4 in Munich. Kolb also was German-born and had emigrated to the United States in 1925 at the age of 7. His war had ended at the Elbe and he had been immediately detached to a "T-Force" to search for Nazis and documents, work he says he did not like.

He was pleased when the order came down that the intelligence priority was to investigate the activities of the communists.

His relationship with Barbie was solidified by their mutual understanding, "a

common psychological community of interest" between professionals about intelligence work. Both recognized the communist danger but derided those who interpreted everything as a communist conspiracy.

Kolb, in his new job, soon concluded that the Merk network had become expensive and worthless.

"It dawned on people at all levels," he said, "that it was all hogwash. His system did not really exist. We were getting false information like a paper mill."

Kolb recommended that the network be dissolved, while retaining some of its best assets, one of which was Barbie.

Kolb today denies that he or anyone in CIC knew about Barbie's war crimes.

"If we'd known, we wouldn't have used him," he said. He said that he knew that Barbie was a former Gestapo officer, but "you have to make a sharp distinction between fighting the Resistance and the Jewish thing. Deporting the Jews was a war crime and we didn't know about it. Nor did the French ever mention it."

The evidence suggests that this is not implausible. The French investigation of German atrocities at Lyons began slowly in the postwar chaos in France. The purging and reconstruction of the Lyons police and judiciary was only partly completed at the beginning of 1945. By then, various agencies and officials had started uncoordinated investigations into Gestapo crimes.

They all faced innumerable problems. With few exceptions, all the Germans had disappeared. The victims who survived often did not know the name of the German who was responsible.

The best informed were the collaborators whose evidence was clearly prejudiced, not the least because they were about to be executed. But the greatest obstacle was the immaculate destruction by the Gestapo of all their records before their departure.

On Aug. 31, 1945, exactly a year after Barbie's departure from Lyons, the city's military tribunal issued a warrant for his arrest on charges of illegal arrests and murder. On Sept. 12, an examining magistrate issued another warrant charging him with murder and arson. Neither warrant mentioned the Jews.

In reality, these warrants were mere formalities. Thousands of warrants were being issued throughout France against thousands of Germans who were just faceless names, many of them misspelled. The Lyons magistrates could only hope that an allied soldier would see Barbie's name on one of the many wanted lists and notify the French government representative at Baden-Baden, in the French zone of West Germany.

Barbie, in fact, might have been forgotten in time had it not been for the trial of Rene Hardy. Hardy, a Frenchman, was suspected of collaboration with the Germans and, specifically, of betraying one of the most celebrated heroes of the French Resistance, Jean Moulin.

Hardy's first trial ended in his acquittal, but new evidence turned up and he was rearrested. These events rapidly made Moulin a legend whose betrayal and death had to be avenged. Few could reveal whether the legend had died because of the betrayal, one of them possibly the Gestapo officer himself, Barbie. The search began.

The first tip on Barbie's whereabouts came from an American G2 officer at Oberursel. After lengthy secret negotiations between the DST (the French equivalent of the FBI) and G2 in Oberursel, the Americans agreed that the French could secretly question Barbie about Hardy on the condition that the French not embarrass the Americans either by asking for Barbie's extradition or publicizing the interrogation.

The French, anxious only to discover the truth and being unaware of what crimes this particular German had committed, were quite prepared to accept any conditions.

The first session was held near Frankfurt on May 16, 1948. Two further sessions followed on May 18 and July 16 in a house near Augsburg.

During all three sessions, Americans remained in the room. The transcripts of the interrogations have not been released, but there is no doubt that Barbie told the French that Hardy was a traitor. They were, however, as much puzzled by the numerous contradictions in Barbie's account as French historians are today.

News that Barbie had been discovered came out at Hardy's retrial and prompted local demands for his extradition. There were many obstacles.

By the beginning of 1947, the allied military governors in Germany were under pressure both from their own armies and from Germans to end the trials of war criminals and to halt the extradition of Germans to the hostile communist bloc.

In June, the British announced an end to trials and severe restrictions on extraditions. On July 30, Lucius Clay, the military governor in the American zone, went further and announced not only a complete end of trials but also the end of extraditions after Nov. 1. Like many other governments, the French immediately protested, claiming that their list of 20,000 wanted criminals was growing daily and that their investigation had only begun. Clay rejected the complaint but retained the right to make individual exceptions on extradition.

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For France now to obtain Barbie's extradition, it had to submit in a very full and convincing dossier of Barbie's crimes. Further, the case had to be submitted to the Germans, who required a formal extradition trial to judge whether there was a *prima facie* case.

But the biggest hurdle was the American regulation that the French, like all the other countries, had to provide the address where the suspect could be found. The French had been allowed to retain a mere six-man war crimes team in the American zone and their headquarters in Baden-Baden was singularly incompetent.

Despite all that, Barbie was in danger.

A few days after Gene Kolb took over the CIC in Augsburg in early 1949, an acquaintance called with the news that a French team was in town looking for Barbie. Kolo ordered Barbie to stay hidden in his safehouse for a week. The "bewildered" Americans pleaded ignorance and the French left.

But they would be back, and more drastic measures would have to be taken to protect Barbie. Ultimately, he would be smuggled out of Europe through the "Rat Line."