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SUICIDE OF AN EX-NAZI

Wherever Chancellor Erhard went, Ewald Peters was sure to go. How did a Nazi executioner become Germany's secret-service chief?

By EDWARD BEHR

IN the last few weeks of his life Ewald Peters was a figure whom many people might have envied. A tall, handsome, smiling man of 49, he had reached the top level of his profession as department chief of the West German secret service, and so he accompanied Chancellor Ludwig Erhard on ceremonious visits to the leaders of the Western world. In Texas Peters was a guest at President Lyndon Johnson's ranch, attended a Presidential barbecue, and listened to a chorus of German-Americans singing *Deep in the Heart of Texas* in German—*Tief in das Herz von Texas*. And when he left, they presented him with a ten-gallon hat.

In London, Peters had accompanied Chancellor Erhard to a Lord Mayor's banquet, and in Paris he had shaken the hand of President Charles de Gaulle. Then came Rome, where Peters, a Catholic, stood by the chancellor during a Vatican audience with Pope Paul VI. Peters noted down all the details so that he could report them to his elder sister, a nun in a German convent. There were other meetings that also impressed Peters. Chancellor Erhard conferred with Pietro Nenni, the Socialist vice premier whose daughter died in a concentration camp. Erhard publicly expressed his sympathy for Nenni's sufferings, and the Italian press commented favorably on the tactful candor of the new German leaders. Peters understood the importance of such gestures, for he was part of this new Germany. One colleague described him as "shy, compassionate, modest," the antithesis of the strutting Gestapo official. To his wife, Wanda, Peters wrote that the trip to Rome was the most enjoyable he ever made in the line of duty.

On January 30, the day Peters returned from Rome to Bonn, Wanda Peters recalls that he was, "so happy, so gay. Then, while he still had his coat on, two men came. They said they were from the police, and I thought they were subordinates reporting to my husband on some business or other. I was making coffee. A few moments later my husband came into the kitchen. He was white. In one minute he had changed very much. . . . He was crying. God, how he was crying."

The police took Ewald Peters away to prison. The charge was mass murder. Two days later, on February 2, Peters methodically tore up the sheets on the bed in his cell, knotted them together, and tied one end around the iron bed. Then he made a crude noose for himself. Back in his first-floor Bonn apartment, in a block reserved for government officials, there were scrapbooks full of appreciative letters from foreign governments and ambassadors; there were medals and decorations, including the French Legion of Honor; there was a silver-framed photograph of President Kennedy, whom Peters had helped to guard during the President's visit to Germany last summer, inscribed: "To Ewald Peters, with very best wishes, John Kennedy." In the West German prison cell, Ewald Peters slipped the noose around his neck. By the time guards reached him, Peters was dead.

The news of his death came as a shock to those who knew him. "As far as I am concerned," said Dr. Ernst Brückner, the overall head of Bonn's Security Group, "the question of his guilt is by no means established. Peters was an unusual type to be in the police. He loved music; was a skilled etcher, the last person you

could ever imagine to be a war criminal."

Wanda Peters, an attractive, intelligent, diminutive blonde who teaches music at a Bonn public school, is also convinced that a "monstrous judicial error" was perpetrated. "My husband's conscience was absolutely clear," she told me. "We had discussed the war quite freely. When cases of war criminals came up, my husband would say, 'I really am lucky not to have been mixed up in that sort of thing. I was only in the criminal police. I wouldn't have liked to have been in their shoes.'"

But the German prosecutors responsible for tracking down war criminals refuse to believe that Peters's death came as the result of any judicial error. "It was tragic that he should kill himself," said Dr. Heinrich Hesse, chief prosecutor for the State of North-Rhine Westphalia, where Peters would have been tried. "But if he had come to trial, justice would have been done. Believe me, our evidence was solid."

And the evidence against Ewald Peters indicated that the chief of Chancellor Erhard's security guard was indeed a war criminal, that in German-occupied Russia between October, 1941, and March, 1942, he had taken part in rounding up and killing 12,000 Ukrainian Jews.

The case of Ewald Peters is not an isolated one, nor can it be isolated from the recurring question of whether the Germans have really purged themselves of the collective guilt that has stained a whole people. As the war drew to a close in 1945, and Allied troops recoiled at the grimacing skeleton creatures who tried to smile in gratitude at being released from Dr. and Professor Josef Belsen—Belsen such a horror that British forces bulldozed the fetid barracks to avert

cholera—there first arose the question: Who did these things? Though Hitler, Himmler and Goering all escaped punishment by suicide, 21 top Nazis were condemned by the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg. But 21 men could not have operated all the machine guns, the torture chambers, and the gas ovens—yet neither could all 80 million Germans have been guilty of mass murder. For those in between the 80 million and the 21, the destruction and chaos of 1945 brought an opportunity for a reprieve. Not only towns and factories had gone up in flames, but so had archives and records. Some Germans could change their names and become completely new people—as did Richard Baer, the last commandant of Auschwitz, who spent more than 10 postwar years as an obscure woodcutter named Neumann. Still others could forget the details of the past and maintain that they had only followed their chosen careers as doctors, lawyers, bankers, diplomats, generals and policemen.

As time passed, and memories faded and prosperity returned, Germany came to need its doctors, lawyers, bankers, diplomats, generals and policemen. With the start of the cold war, says Prosecutor Henrich Hesse, "it seems an incontrovertible fact that the Allies lost interest in prosecuting war criminals." It is taken almost for granted that nobody asks questions about the Krupps, the Flicks and the Opels—the leaders of Germany's huge industrial combines, which were substantially operated with concentration-camp slave labor during the war. As for the belated prosecution of war criminals, the German police magazine *Kriminalstatistik* recently complained that there was "public reaction against dragging up Nazi crimes . . . causing deep emotional distress among the police involved. . . ."

In such a tolerant climate of amnesia, it was only natural that a number of ex-Nazis should find room at the top. Despite former Chancellor Konrad Adenauer's impeccable record of hostility to Nazism, his Minister of Refugees, Theodor Oberlaender, had to resign in 1960 after being accused of serving in a "Nightingale" police battalion in eastern Europe. Despite Chancellor Erhard's equally impeccable record, his own Refugee Minister, Hans Krüger, turned out to have been a Nazi judge in German-occupied Poland. At first, Krüger insisted he had been merely a "nominal" member of the Nazi Party—but the East German Communists, who have somewhat fuller wartime records than the West Germans, produced documents showing that Krüger had joined every Nazi association open to him, and had even abjured his Protestant faith to curry favor with the Nazis. It was symptomatic of Krüger's attitude, and not his alone, that he described himself primarily as a victim. In his letter of resignation, he wrote that "even today I am still unaware of any conduct which can be seen as a contravention of law and order."

Many of these "victims" justify their claim to be victims of East German Communist propaganda, for the Communists have tirelessly insisted that West Germany is run by ex-Nazis. The East Germans themselves, of course, have had no difficulty in finding useful work for ex-Nazis who are willing to profess their support for Communism. But the East German charges have an embarrassing way of turning out to be true. And the theory that the West can rely on ex-Nazis as staunch anti-Communists has an embarrassing way of turning out to be false. For years the CIA subsidized the unofficial intelligence apparatus of General Reinhard Gehlen, wartime intelligence chief of the German Army High Command, but last year three of Gehlen's ex-Nazi associates were convicted of passing everything they knew to the Soviets.

"You must remember," says Frankfurt's chief prosecutor, Fritz Bauer, "that 80 percent of the Germans were for Hitler. The reaction of most adult Germans, confronted with war criminals on trial, is: There, but for a certain amount of luck, go I." Bauer is more outspoken than many other Germans, for he is Jewish, one of the 30,000 Jews still alive today of a prewar population of about 500,000. It was Bauer—and younger men similarly interested in remembering justice more than in forgetting the past—who gathered the evidence which led to the present trial of 21 staff members of Auschwitz. But it was not easy. Germany recovered her full sovereignty only in 1955, and the first trials of German war criminals in German courts took place only in 1958. The West German government lacked background information, and had to go to the United States and Britain for photostatic copies of essential documents. Under the Bonn constitution, moreover, criminal prosecutions are the primary responsibility of local state governments, and the federal police have only limited authority. And there was reluctance of the kind expressed by one Auschwitz survivor, now a cook in a restaurant, who refused to give evidence on the grounds that "my customers disapprove of the trial, and I don't want to get involved in any unpleasantness which would lead to a loss of business."

It was only in 1958 that Bauer obtained a full list of Auschwitz guards. A half-charred copy containing their names had fluttered from the chimney of a Gestapo building in Breslau in 1945. It had been picked up by a Gestapo prisoner who held it as a souvenir for 13 years, unaware of its importance. Only last year a cupboard-full of documents was found in a West German police station. It contained the Order of Battle of the wartime *Einsatzkommandos*, the special security troops which arrested and killed by the tens of thousands in German-occupied areas of eastern Europe. Yet as the evidence kept flowing in, one clue led to another, one prosecution to another. Out of the fires and shadows of that period, there

Ewald Peters was born Ewald Czempiel in the long-disputed province of Silesia, now part of Poland. His father was a small-grocery-store owner, and the family was devoutly Catholic. He began studying law at Leipzig University, but, according to his superior, Brückner, "he gave up his university studies because his father died suddenly, and he lacked money to continue. As a young man he worked in a bank. He joined the criminal police only because opportunities for promotion were good for someone like himself, with a knowledge of accountancy." He was "well-noted" by his superiors, says Wanda Peters, adding that he was extremely thorough and meticulous, spending endless hours in tracking down minor criminals. "He liked his work and was good at it," says Wanda, "but he was perhaps too humane, too soft. He was always an easy touch and often helped destitute ex-criminals out of his own pocket." Despite his softheartedness, Peters apparently kept in mind what Brückner describes as "opportunities for promotion." Not too long after he joined the police in 1935, he dutifully became a member of the Nazi Party. And in 1940, under a "Germanization" law which enabled German Aryans with foreign-sounding names to adopt new ones, Ewald Czempiel became Ewald Peters.

By this time Germany was at war—1940 was the year of the great breakthrough in the Low Countries, the fall of France, the Battle of Britain, and, for a moment, we lose sight of Ewald Peters, although his police duties took him to Gotenhafen after that Polish seaport was annexed by Germany. Then he reappears with *Einsatzkommando 6* in the Ukraine in 1941. There is a group photograph of officers of the unit, with Peters in SS uniform. Wearing the uniform did not mean that Peters was a full-fledged SS member. His name appears nowhere in the register of SS members discovered after the war. Peters refused to abjure his Catholic faith, says Wanda, and this barred him from the SS. But the *Einsatzkommandos* were created to help carry out Hitler's "Final Solution of the Jewish Problem." Peters himself, confronted by two denazification boards before reentering the police, explained that he had simply been a sort of provost marshal at an army headquarters in Kiev in 1941, to investigate crime in the German units.

At the time, there was no evidence that he had been in the *Einsatzkommandos*. But there was considerable confusion about all members of these commando groups. After June 22, 1941, when Hitler attacked the Soviet Union, the German Army's advance was speedy and relatively bloodless. In Lithuania, in the Ukraine, in certain parts of Russian-occupied Poland, hatred for the Soviets took the form of collaboration with the Germans.

Thousands of Lithuanians, Ukrainians and Poles were hastily enrolled in German-officered militia units, some of them in *Einsatzkommandos*, moving in the wake of advancing German army units. Recruitment into the battalion-sized *Einsatzkommandos* was haphazard—one judge at the Nuremberg trials described the recruits as “an intellectual riffraff.” A large proportion of officers were expolicemen. German soldiers who had committed minor offenses were offered the choice of volunteering for “special duties” or facing court-martial.

During the summer of 1941, Himmler ordered the *Einsatzkommandos* to remain on the sidelines as much as possible. They were to lull the eastern Europeans into a sense of security and compile a list of all Jews in their areas, with the help of local Jewish leaders. Jews were told this was necessary because they would shortly be “resettled” in areas specially set aside for them. Then, in October of 1941, the *Einsatzkommandos* struck. Jews were told to assemble with their portable belongings for “resettlement.” They were taken to remote spots where mass graves had already been dug, and where the noise of gunfire could not be overheard. One survivor, a merchant named Oskar Berger, recalled the operation this way:

“Just before the ‘resettlement,’ all the sick, in homes as well as in the hospitals—some four or five hundred persons—together with the inmates of the homes for the aged and the orphans in the orphan homes, were either shot or killed by injection. . . . The bodies were flung into the pits dressed as they were, after we had searched them for jewels, gold and money, which had to be delivered to the SS. When the work had been done, we were assembled in the synagogue and Gestapo Chief Thomas picked some of us for shipment to Treblinka. The trip was a nightmare. We crouched in the cars, crowded together, children crying, women going mad. . . . We were herded out of the carriages as German and Ukrainian SS men mounted to the roofs and began to shoot indiscriminately into the crowd. Men, women and children writhed in their own blood. . . .”

What was Ewald Peters doing during this period? The evidence is incomplete. In those days of vast military movements across vast areas of southwestern Russia, there was indiscriminate killing on a vast scale on both sides—some in military action, some not. The actions of Ewald Peters, who always had a modest inclination to let others take credit for his work, remained shrouded in mystery. He apparently left the Ukraine after 1942, and is known to have held police jobs in Hungary and Romania. In 1945 he was taken prisoner by American troops. He appeared before a board grading ex-Nazis and was given grade D, the least important grade. It was then, in the confusion of defeat, that Peters and his childhood sweetheart, Wanda, after a separation of

some five years. They married in 1946.

Immediately after his marriage, Peters was arrested by a U.S. Army investigator. This time it apparently was a judicial error. The investigator was looking for a subordinate of the Nazi agent Otto Skorzeny with the name of Peters. Ewald Peters remained in a U.S. Army detention barracks in Regensburg for several months until the other Peters was traced. With some embarrassment, the American authorities in Regensburg offered Peters and his wife jobs teaching in a school for the children of U.S. servicemen. Wanda taught music and physical training; Ewald, Latin. “We got on marvelously well with everyone connected with the school,” Wanda recalls. “Parents and other school-teachers were so nice to us. It was as though there had never been a war.”

Peters did not teach Latin long. West Germany was rapidly building up its economic strength, and there was a shortage of accountants. For seven years Peters worked for a Regensburg factory as an accountant while Wanda taught at the U.S. dependents’ school. “His employer,” said Wanda, “was most reluctant to let him go.” He wrote Peters a glowing testimonial.

Reinstated in the police in 1952, Peters was transferred to the secret service squad in 1956, and eventually headed it. He was respected, liked, and trusted—“several cuts above the usual police officer,” says Brückner. “A cultivated man, with a knowledge of music and so on.”

But unknown to Peters, or to any of his superiors, some prosecutors investigating war crimes were gathering evidence. When the first *Einsatzkommando* trials before German courts occurred in 1958, more and more names came to light. One case was to prove crucial: A former *Einsatzkommando* leader, Robert Mohr, was brought to trial in 1963. Mohr’s unit had murdered tens of thousands of Ukrainian Jews, and the prosecutors based their case against Mohr on evidence given by former rank-and-file members of the *Einsatzkommando*, who, as private soldiers carrying out orders from above, were not themselves charged with crimes. Some of the witnesses came from *Einsatzkommando 6*. They gave names of platoon commanders. One of the platoon commanders of *Einsatzkommando 6*, they said, was called Peters. They told how they had, under Peters’s command on dozens of occasions, rounded up Jews, dug mass graves and served on firing squads. Official reports from the Peters unit—sent to Berlin and found intact in 1945—had documented 12,000 executions in the Kiev area between October, 1941 and March, 1942. A new file was started: the Peters file.

The former soldiers of *Einsatzkommando 6* gave further details. The platoon commander called Peters, they said, had been born in Polish Silesia; before the war he had been a detective with the criminal police and he had held a police job in Gotenhafen; and he had changed his name to Peters only recently from some foreign-sounding name. Then came an anonymous tip: “The man you want is living in the Bonn area.” Peters is a common German name, but the investigators finally came across Ewald Peters of the security police. Three people recognized him from a photograph.

This was sufficient to convince a German magistrate that a warrant should be issued for the arrest of Ewald Peters. And on January 30, two men called at the Peters home in Bonn. That was the moment that Wanda Peters recalls with bewilderment. “He said that the men had come to take him away for something that had happened during the war in Russia, but, he said, ‘I had nothing to do with these things.’ I helped him pack.

“The next day I saw him for 40 minutes. He was very depressed. I comforted him, and he did not cry anymore. He even cracked a joke with the policeman who sat with us. He said: ‘I will see this thing through if you will.’ He again said he had nothing to do with any atrocities during the war.” In a letter written just before his suicide, Peters assured Wanda, “I am not involved. I did not do the things I am accused of. If there are witnesses, they are not telling the truth.”

After Peters’s death, all his neighbors called on Wanda to express their sympathy. She received hundreds of letters from friends, dozens of telephone calls. Some of the letters were from parents and fellow teachers they had known during their Regensburg days, and all expressed their firm belief in Peters’s innocence. Only one telephone call expressed anything but sorrow. A blurred, cracked voice said on the phone, the night after Peters’s death: “Has your old man met the Devil yet?”

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Ewald Peters, the smiling policeman who received a ten-gallon hat at the LBJ ranch in Texas, died because of the zeal of a relative handful of investigating attorneys. About 100 of them are pursuing the guilt of the past into the respectability of the present, and theirs is not a popular job. At the Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt, at the Limburg trial where four doctors are being prosecuted for murdering some 100,000 feeble-minded and psychotic patients, the galleries may contain a certain number of young people who come to learn of the crimes of their elders, who gasp at the daily testimony about shootings and gassings, about manacled prisoners set on fire and naked women machine-gunned as they fled through the snow, and children swung by the heels until their heads bashed against stone walls. Nobody can say what the Germans feel about these events today, but it is probably true that a majority of them wish that such testimony did not have to be heard, that such trials did not have to be held. And after May 8, 1965, most such trials will not be held. Except for specific cases of murder, the 20th anniversary of the German surrender will mark the day when the prosecutors' time runs out. A statute of limitations will absolve all war criminals not already charged. How many Germans, one wonders, are anxiously waiting for 1965—not only the guilty but the innocent too?

No trial, however, would have solved the mystery of Ewald Peters. Here was a man who, from all accounts, was an admirable human being, cultivated, refined, kindhearted. Yet for a brief wartime period, according to substantial evidence submitted to German courts, he was prepared to engage in the mass murder of what the German government then termed "subhumans." And when it was all over he showed no signs of remorse, no signs, even, of remembering that any wrong had ever been done. Perhaps if his prosecutors had been less energetic, or if the Mohr trial had been delayed a year or two, Ewald Peters would be alive today, touring the capitals of the Western world, bowing, shaking hands, and smiling. THE END