

Elizabeth Barry White, December 16, 2015.

13.

What am I saying? 15, good grief. Yeah, I'm getting a little ahead of myself. That's my due date for the book. So maybe that was psychologically-- I'm sort of obsessing about that date.

Yeah, I don't know if you saw my previous book, Hitlerland, but the idea there was I took a lot of stories of Americans in Germany in the '20s and '30s, including the first Americans to meet Hitler in 1921-- the US military attache, the Hearst correspondent and so forth-- and sort of tried to retell the story through the eyes of the people there. And that one really trying to avoid history in retrospect as much as, sort of, putting people in the shoes of Americans and sort of makes you-- if it's successful, the idea is really to sort of make you pause and think not everything was so obvious as it always-- in retrospect, and having as a Newsweek correspondent, I went through the end of the Cold War and the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and so forth. And, you know, now people say, oh, yes, yes. It all led. It was all obvious. I said, no, no, no, no.

But this is somewhat different, of course. But the idea also is to recreate the atmosphere around these issues, and then who persisted with them. And there were fits and starts, as you know, and certainly in this country, but elsewhere as well.

So first, just a little bit of basic biographical information about yourself. How did you get into this field?

Well, I have a PhD in modern European history, specializing in modern Germany. And I wrote my dissertation on German influence in the Argentine army. I did most of my research-- all of my research, basically, in Germany and German military records.

And so as I was looking to hire a historian, I applied. It was right after I got back from Germany. At that time--

Right, German influence in the Argentine army when?

1900 to 1945.

I see. And so this is probably longer than you need.

Yeah, but--

Anyway, I had skills and experience. I particularly have a knowledge of German military organization and military terminology that they thought would be useful. So ultimately, I got a job there. I don't know if you want deeper reasons why we need to--

No, no, yeah, I do. I do. No, so sorry. Where did you do your studies?

I got my PhD from the University of Virginia and undergraduate Vassar. Also, I studied around different places.

Yeah.

I'm a native Virginian, so I think the experience of growing up in the segregated South definitely is one of the things that pushed me towards concentrating in modern Germany. Fortunately, my parents-- that's my dad right up there.

Oh, wow.

They were very active in ending segregation in the South, so I had the advantage of having parents who helped me see how wrong and unfair and cruel the system was. And so I've been wrestling with that question since about the age of 10,

of why so many people I knew who were generally good, kind, Christian, patriotic Americans would acquiesce in the system that was so clearly cruel and contrary to their principals, both religious and political. And so I think Germany was really kind of the epitome of that question.

You didn't have any German background.

I didn't have a German background.

Particularly in your family, right, right, right.

Yeah.

And can I ask-- I'm sorry. What year were you born? Just because it sort of places the--

'54.

'54, yeah, yeah. Especially when you're looking at the Civil Rights issue.

Yeah.

Yeah.

Yeah. So I don't know if you're aware of massive resistance in Virginia when the schools closed. They closed in-- I grew up in Norfolk, and the schools were closed in Norfolk. And my father headed up the--

Ah ha. So what period was that?

That was in '58, '59.

'58.

Yeah.

Yeah.

Headed up the committee to reopen the public schools.

They were closed to avoid segregation and for desegregation, right?

Yes, that was the policy of Virginia, was to close schools rather than allow them to desegregate. And so the high schools in Norfolk closed. And my father was head of the citizens group that working to reopen the schools.

He was a doctor, I--

He was a pediatrician.

Yeah.

Yeah, and he was the one who came up with the idea of suing the state on behalf of white parents. Because there was a suit that was going on. The Black parents had brought, sent their kids to the local school. And he came up with the idea of getting white parents to sue also, because their children were being denied public education.

Fascinating.

Yeah.

Do you have a copy of that obit of his?

It's from The Virginian-Pilot.

OK. OK.

From 1994.

OK, I can look it up. Yeah.

Yeah. Anyway, that's just kind of my background.

Yeah.

I don't remember that particular period, but I do remember the time we had a cross burned on our lawn.

Yeah, well in the '60s, I spent a little time in Mississippi as a college student.

Yeah. Yeah.

Yeah, not unfamiliar with--

Yeah.

--with that era.

Yeah.

So that was a big part of it then, in terms of your kind of motivation, interest.

Yeah, I mean, academically, intellectually I got into history through languages and an interest in Europe. History just kind of--

You had studied German already in high school or--

I studied German, French, Latin, and Greek in high school. And then I took up Russian in college.

Oh.

So I did German and Russian history for my master's and modern European for my PhD. But as I was looking at European history and all the different things that I was interested in, it really kind of came down to Germany as kind of the focus--

Right.

--of what I was really drawn to.

And so after you did your PhD, did you-- you didn't go. Did you go straight into OSI?

Yeah, I got the job at OSI before I finished my PhD.

So that was, you had said-- what year that? That was--

'83.

'83. Yeah. Yeah. So you've gone all the way through.

Yeah, the time I was told the office would last three to five years max, and every new hire was told that for the first 25 years of its existence.

Oh, that's interesting. Yeah. But just the assumption was the cases would dry out?

Yes, actuarial limits.

Yeah, yeah. So they were told every-- three to four years max?

Three to five max, yeah.

Yeah. That's a great story. Yeah. And in terms of what you actually did there, in terms of as a historian there, what was your-- give an example. I mean, were you mostly examining documents? Were you interviewing people? What did you end up-- and how did you work with the cases and with the attorneys?

Yeah. I started out, I was doing Waffen-SS investigations. And so far as they turned into potential cases, they kind of got hived off. But I got pulled in very early in some of the special inquiries that we did and particularly the Verbelen investigation, which was a follow-up on the Barbie investigation. The conclusion of the Barbie report had been that they didn't find any evidence that the United States had assisted anyone else to escape Europe in order to escape prosecution, as they had done with Barbie.

With Barbie, yeah.

Yeah. And so then some groups came forward and said, well, look at this guy, Robert Jan Verbelen.

How do you spell his last name?

It's V-E-R-B-E-L-E-N.

Yeah.

So he would have been a criminal on behalf of the Nazis in Belgium. He had been a Flemish fascist, and he had fled to Austria at the end of the war. And he worked as a US spy for 10 years, and then through that protection was able to get Austrian citizenship. And so he escaped justice. So I was tapped to look into that.

And we ended up making a broader look at-- so we wouldn't have to keep on doing these things.

Right.

You know, so what was the policy and the practice of post-war military intelligence in particular in terms of using and assisting people who had been involved or tainted with Nazi Gestapo, that type of thing, or who were suspected of being criminals.

Yeah. Yeah. So is that in your article, by the way? Or is some of that in your--

Does it-- I forget if I mentioned. But it should be on the-- it used to be on the HRSP website. I'm sure Eli can tell you where to get a link.

I assume he's no longer alive, right?

No, he died some years ago.

But was he affected by what you found in any way?

No, not in terms. No, he had been-- he was living in Austria.

Right, right. So he was beyond this period.

Yeah, he got tried. He got convicted, but then it was overturned. And then they never retried him in the typical way things happened in Austria. In the early '60s, a couple of people came forward and fingered him, so they kind of had to do some sort of a trial.

Right, right.

But they refused to extradite him to Belgium since he had gotten Austrian citizenship. So for that, I did a lot of interviews of CIC personnel. I was also involved in interviewing Verbelen. And I did research on the Mengele investigation and did some interviews. So I was tracking down particular aspects of that. So I did a little research on the Waldheim investigation.

You did, yeah.

Yeah. But that was mainly Pat [? Trainer. ?]

Yeah.

So I got involved in a variety of kinds of investigations. So the Waffen-SS ones, these were the SS officers so we were going through the SS officers list and running them by immigration to find out whether any of those persons were in the United States. And then I did the preliminary investigation.

So in the course of that, I got to know a lot about the Waffen-SS and different units, what they were involved in and so forth. And then I got pulled into doing some of the concentration camp cases.

So then in '88, when David Marwell-- are you familiar?

Yeah, I know David. Yeah.

Yeah, so he was leaving OSI, and he had been running what we called our research and development program, which was this proactive way of trying to identify people who were involved in Nazi crimes, and then determine whether any of those people had come to the United States, instead of waiting for people to come to us.

I see.

And so I ended up taking that over, and I was given the title Chief of Investigative Research. And that was basically because I knew a little bit about a lot of things, as opposed to most of the other historians who knew a whole--

Very specialized.

--lot about particular areas and particular types of cases.

Right.

So I was the office generalist, and I continued to do special inquiries that came up. I ran the watch list.

Waldheim stayed on the watch list the whole time, right?

Yes.

Yeah.

Yeah.

Yeah.

But we automated that in '89. So we ended up putting total one way or another more than 70,000 people--

On the watch list?

--on the watch list. And then we--

Which meant that if you were on the watch list, if you try to come to the United States, you will at least be questioned, right? It doesn't necessarily mean you're going to be denied, right? Is that the theory?

Yeah, well, it would be-- it would be something if somebody applied for a visa, that they should be questioned, and we should be notified. But the reason we automated-- we really rushed to automate it was because of the visa waiver program. So most European countries, including Germany--

[INAUDIBLE]

--you didn't have to have a visa. So then we put them on the immigration watch list so that when they came into the country, then they would be questioned. And we, ideally, would be called. So we always had somebody on duty to take those calls, since they usually came in at night or on the weekends.

Yeah.

So I usually fielded those from home.

So what would you do, say, if someone called and said, well, look, we've got-- we're at Kennedy Airport--

Got so-and-so.

I've got so-and-so here. He came up on your watch list.

Yeah, so then I would know, both from what was in the lookout that the immigration official was working for and from the list that I kept a copy of at home, what the basis was.

Right.

And so then I would give instructions for how to question the person. And sometimes people were paroled in, and then we had, like, four days to get together an investigation and a determination. But a lot of times-- so if somebody was an SS officer, they were automatically excludable.

But would it happen that they would be questioned and then they'd be let in because you felt satisfactory in the answers?

Yes, yeah a lot of people.

So being on the watch list was not necessarily an indication that you would be barred.

Not necessarily. I mean, there were some of the-- as I said, we had to really rush to automate the watch list. And so over time, we realized, well, some of this, we don't find good back up evidence for it, and so we would take them out over time. But then that was always a problem, because there were three different watch lists, basically the State Department's, the Treasury, and the Immigration and Naturalization Service. And they all fed into each other. So trying to take something out is really difficult.

Right. But the 70,000 were all people because of their role in the Nazi--

So they were SS officers. They were concentration camp guards and people who served in Einsatzgruppen. They were people who were indicted, who were extradited by the US Army to other countries and from post-war Germany-- indicted by other countries.

Yeah. Yeah. So, I mean, you had very little time to check these out when they actually show up.

Yeah.

I mean, did a lot of these people show up?

Yeah, for a while it was pretty many.

Just next time you have an eight-hour day off, just take seven hours of-- [THIS IS BACKGROUND NOISE, not part of this conversation]

I mean, we didn't always hear about it. Sometimes we would hear after the fact that there had been a thing. Either the person had been kicked out or let in or-- I'm sure there were ones that we didn't hear about.

Yeah, that got in without people--

So I think my stats were that we excluded 180 from the watch list.

180.

Yeah, so we obviously got lots more calls than that.

Yeah. Yeah. These were people who actually had come to the States and were kicked out.

Yeah, they were traveling-- trying to travel to the US.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. But usually already arrived in the US?

They were usually at a port of entry.

Yeah.

Yeah.

Yeah, yeah, OK. And just because you mentioned Mengele, quick question on that, because I also was-- I remember following that story and reporting on it from Europe on that story during that famous period when we all found out later, of course, Mengele had been dead for a few years.

Right.

What's your feeling? I mean, there were several people who were-- it wasn't just Wiesenthal who was wrong on that, right? I mean, there are a lot of folks who believe that Mengele might be still around or from that.

I mean, nobody knew what happened to him, so yeah.

Yeah, yeah.

There were a lot of folks.

Yeah, because sometimes only Wiesenthal's pointed at as sort of saying, well, you know, he was chasing phantom leads and so forth. But, you know, I remember during that period there was a lot of folks who believed that there's a good chance he was still alive somewhere.

Well yeah, sure. I mean, he was not-- he was certainly of an age where he could still be alive.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And within, say, OSI the assumption that he might still be alive was there.

Yeah.

Yeah. Yeah.

I mean, we were bringing cases against people who were older than him.

Yeah, yeah.

There's no reason to assume that he would have died.

Right.

There was no information that he had.

Yeah. And during the Waldheim business, in terms of your involvement-- was in terms of when OSI began to look into it at the request of the World Jewish Congress? Yeah.

Yeah, I was doing some of the research at the National Archives.

Yeah.

I would run into Eli there.

Yeah, right? Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

But that was mainly-- Pat [? Trainer ?] was really the historian--

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

--the Waldheim case. Yeah, I'm just saying that I got pulled into a lot of different things, so I was kind of the generalist.

Right, right, right, right. And in terms of-- did you have personally or many feelings about, say, Wiesenthal and the Wiesenthal Rosenbaum [INAUDIBLE]?

Well, I spent a week with Simon Wiesenthal.

Yeah. When was that?

That was in '85 or so.



Oh, I'm seeing him a lot then, too. Yeah.

Yeah. And we were doing this-- very interested in this research and development approach to identifying criminals. And so the idea was I was invited to go, and I thought I was going to be able to look through his files and get names of people who were accused, said to be here or there or from his documentation had been involved in Nazi crimes. And basically, he parked me in the general reading room and wouldn't give me much.

In his documentation center.

Yeah, in his documentation center. And he was back in his office typing away on something for me, but not giving me access to anything.

He did not give you access.

No, no. Occasionally, when the assistant went out, I would go poke around. But I didn't find much there. And then at the end of the week, he proudly handed me this typewritten list, which was just he had taken all of the people in the SS officers' list who had Eastern European names. That was the list that he gave me. We'd already run all those, so it was pretty useless.

Oh. But did you have the impression he had real documentation there that he did want to show you, or that he really didn't have that?

I don't think he had it. I mean, he had a lot of correspondence from people and everything. But he was not-- he was not going into archives and research or anything like that.

Yeah, right.

I mean, I credit him for keeping the issue alive and so forth. But his claims are, I think, verifiably way overblown in terms of his actually tracking somebody down who was ultimately brought to justice.

And we would look into the people who were mentioned in his newsletters, or he would send us information about somebody. But he never had evidence to back it up. And so it was very difficult to do much with that.

I mean, it was-- what he was sending us generally was no better than what we were developing ourselves. And often what we had was better, because it was more targeted at people who were involved in activities that we were pretty sure could be the basis for prosecution and litigation in the United States.

Well, let me ask bluntly. Do you think-- I mean, Rosenbaum, of course, thinks he was basically a fraud. I mean, are you of that school?

Well, as I say, I credit him with keeping the issue alive at a time when people didn't want to pay any attention to it, you know? And so I think that from that point of view he was good at keeping the need-- keeping it very real for people and making it interesting that there were Nazi criminals who hadn't been brought to justice, and that they ought to be brought to justice.

Yeah. Yeah.

So for that I give him credit.

But you think-- do you think he was largely-- the rest was mythology?

He was good at promoting himself.

Yes, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Yeah. OK, well--

Well, he was a character.

Yeah, he was a great character.

You knew him, so if you went to visit him, you had to go down the hallway--

Yeah.

--getting shown all the different plaques that he had received.

Yeah, yeah.

Yeah.

I remember that well.

Also, I was able-- I speak Polish, so we spoke Polish together a lot, and he, sort of, always could get very effusive then.

Right.

Yeah.

Yeah. And I spoke German.

Yeah, yeah, I'm sure. Yeah. OK, well, listen. I mean, this I know is just sort of a scratching the surface at the moment. But it's really interesting. I'll read your article.

OK.

And if there's anything else you've written or was involved in that you think I should read, I'd appreciate whatever you could send me, anything that's not in some way restricted.

Yeah, I don't know that-- as I say, I got pulled into a lot of the side issues, so, you know, declassifying documentation related to Nazi crimes, and Holocaust assets.

Right, right, right.

[BOTH TALKING]

Right, right.

And that's really not the point of your books.

Right, right.

Most of my writings on that. And then I've written sort of on historical topics based on some of the work that we've done.

Right.

So again, I don't think that's really of interest to you. So this article basically.

OK, great, great. OK, well, thanks very much. Very nice to meet you.

Yeah.

Now let me just--