

The Nazi Archive: Should Germany Control It?

530 of

By Rick Atkinson
Washington Post Foreign Service

BERLIN—More than 100 times a minute, 7,000 times an hour, 50,000 times a day, a camera shutter clicks in a windowless basement in southwest Berlin, capturing on each frame a fragment of Germany's grim past.

Thirteen camera operators labor throughout the day on what some here say may be the most ambitious microfilming project ever undertaken: the duplication of 75 million pages of Nazi personnel documents stored in a former

Gestapo eavesdropping post now known as the Berlin Document Center.

The microfilmmers work swiftly because on July 1 the U.S. State Department intends to relinquish custody of the original documents to the German government. The duplicates—8 million feet of film on 38,000 rolls—will be flown to Washington this summer and deposited in the National Archives.

The pages passing beneath the camera lens range from the prosaic to the sinister: Heinrich Himmler's expense accounts; the seating plan for Joseph Goebbels's 1935 wedding; Nazi Par-

ty membership card No. 899,895, belonging to one Adolf Eichmann; Albert Speer's party census form, showing that he lived at 31 Schopenhauer St. in Berlin; Josef Mengele's dental records and membership sheet in the Nazi Physicians Professional Association; Hermann Goering's suicide notes, scribbled before he swallowed cyanide in 1946.

Returning the original documents to German custody is another milestone in the restoration of German sovereignty after a half-century of Allied occupation, "appropriate recognition of
See BERLIN, A21, Col. 1

BERLIN, From A1

Germany's full partnership with other Western democracies," as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Mary Ann Peters put it.

But the proposed transfer has met resistance. Historians, Jewish groups and Nazi hunters have bitterly objected to the State Department's plan. They complain that restrictive German privacy laws will hamper access to the original documents, that the National Archives duplicates will not be available for at least two years and that surrendering the files is morally wrong.

"We bought those documents with the most precious commodity we have: the blood of our young boys and the other Allied forces that had to fight the Nazi menace in order to liberate the world," Elan Steinberg, executive director of the World Jewish Congress, said in a telephone interview from New York. "I'm reminded of the old saying that if it ain't broke, don't fix it," he said. "The Berlin Document Center ain't broke right now, and I don't know why we're trying to fix it."

Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.), who led hearings on the document center last month, has threatened a full debate in Congress "on Germany's Nazi past" unless Bonn and the State Department resolve the controversy.

German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel recently promised Jewish leaders that rules governing access to the original documents will remain in line with U.S. regulations until the National Archives duplicates are ready for viewing. U.S. Embassy officials in Bonn are trying to hammer out the details.

"This is something that has been negotiated over quite a long period of time and has been reviewed from every angle that I can imagine. When concerns have been raised, they've been reviewed again," said Dan Hamilton, policy adviser to Richard Holbrooke, the U.S. ambassador to Germany. "To make it crystal clear—and we take all of this very seriously—we're talking to the Germans about the concerns to see what can be done."

Donald Kobletz, the State Department's lawyer in Berlin in the 1980s and now a private attorney here, said: "Can you tell a sovereign government, one of your closest allies, that 50 years after the war you don't really trust them to keep their own

records? After getting microfilm copies, paid for by the German government? I would consider it a gratuitous irritation to our relationship that really isn't warranted."

Some observers believe the heart of the matter has less to do with Nazi paperwork than with how to slake an unslakeable pain. "The issue probably has gone beyond the question of what's available in the documents and who will be using them and has become a lens for viewing the new Germany," said Andrew Baker of the American Jewish Committee in Washington. "What is the new Germany's commitment to the past?"

Many of the files were seized by Allied troops driving across Germany—such as some 10.7 million Nazi Party membership cards impounded by American soldiers at a Bavarian paper mill as the SS prepared to reduce them to pulp. The cards provided useful evidence for prosecutors at the Nazi War Crimes tribunal in Nuremberg.

Ever since, the archives have proved invaluable for historians scrutinizing the Third Reich, for German officials sorting out immigration requests and for Nazi-hunters looking for culprits. Last year the center processed 27,000 requests for information from official agencies and 1,300 from private individuals such as scholars and journalists.

Although few files in this collection contain direct documentation of mass murder, the information often helps corroborate other evidence. "When a guy writes in his resume, 'I was assigned to KZ [concentration camp] Auschwitz,' and he signs it, it's difficult for him to later claim that he wasn't there," said David Marwell, 42, the center's director.

As early as 1952, U.S. officials began discussing the eventual return of the archives to German control. Many other documents, such as papers from the Third Reich foreign ministry, were given to the Germans decades ago after being microfilmed for the National Archives' Captured German Documents division.

Negotiations over the Berlin Document Center were abandoned in the late 1960s, however, because of U.S. government concerns that Germany's proposed rules of access "were unacceptably restrictive of private scholarly access," Peters told

Lantos's hearing last month.

Moreover, German officials for years privately hinted that they were content to have such sensitive material remain in American hands. "I don't think the Germans really wanted the documents," said Kobletz, the former State Department lawyer. "There's a lot of showmanship on both sides of this issue. It's a bit of a hot potato for everybody."

The potato got hotter in the 1980s when it was discovered that an estimated 10,000 pages had been stolen from the archives and sold to memorabilia collectors willing to pay up to \$3,000 for each signature of a high-ranking Nazi. Marwell was dispatched to Berlin to overhaul security procedures.

In 1989, with German unification imminent after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the German parliament voted unanimously to ask that the center be remanded to German custody. The microfilming project, which had begun in 1968 only to stop in 1972, resumed. Last October, the State Department signed an agreement to relinquish the archive on July 1.

In bulk alone the collection is staggering, covering 13,000 "running meters"—roughly eight miles of stacked paper. Just the party membership cards in their original wooden trays fill a large room. Many include photographs, and Marwell notes that "there's a very high percentage of men who had little Fuehrer mustaches." Among the cards is that of Oskar Schindler—party No. 6,421,477—and Amon Goeth, No. 510,964, the sadistic commandant of Plaszow concentration camp in Poland; both men were featured in the recent Academy Award-winning film "Schindler's List."

Among the old files with contemporary relevance is that of Erich Priebke, a former SS captain now awaiting extradition in Argentina on charges of helping to murder 335 Italians in Rome's Adreanine Caves in 1944. Priebke's file shows that he was born on July 29, 1913, that he joined the Nazi party on July 1, 1933, as member No. 3,280,478, and that he was assigned SS No. 290,305.

Even casual browsing in the archive reveals what Marwell calls "the overarching importance of racial theory in everyday bureaucracy." Medical records contain pseudoscientific criteria for evaluating Aryan characteristics, including the shape and size of noses. SS members

who sought permission to marry had to submit genealogies of the prospective groom and bride traced to at least 1800—or, for officers, 1750—with each generational entry verified with a red seal.

"You have what for most people is a private, if not intimate, activity, but it was played out in the hallways of a large bureaucracy, with people poking you and poking into your past," Marwell said. "And it's not because they wanted happy marriages. It was so the regime could have the right kind of children. In effect, it was a massive breeding program."

One file pulled by Marwell shows that a 28-year-old SS sergeant applied for marriage in August 1936 by submitting 127 entries tracing his "racially pure" lineage back six generations. His fiancée's application avowed similar purity and included character references attesting to her reliability, thrift and friendliness.

Both listed scores of relatives—parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, siblings and cousins—and swore that every last one was free of such flaws as deafness and alcoholism. "Do you consider this woman to be a suitable wife for an SS officer?"

the form asks, to which the examining doctor has written, "Ja."

But a postscript shows the nuptials never happened. It appears the prospective bride suffered an accident, which severely damaged her Achilles tendon. In a letter dated April 14, 1937, the groom begs off with the explanation, "I can't be expected to marry a sick woman."

Critics have long been reluctant to part with such treasures. In 1990, the World Jewish Congress warned the U.S. government that putting the archive in German hands "would be a betrayal to the memory of the victims of the Holocaust."

Much of the current controversy was stirred by a magazine article in the New Yorker by writer Gerald Posner, who questioned both the quality of the microfilming and the potential pitfalls in German privacy laws. The article contends, for example, that microfilm fails to distinguish between different colored inks

used on some documents and renders some writing less legible.

More significant perhaps are concerns about whether German archivists would hinder legitimate scholarship. German privacy law typically prohibits access to files on people until they have been dead for at least 30 years.

Posner quotes the man who will succeed Marwell as the document center's director, Dieter Krueger, as saying: "I am bound by the law and must protect the privacy of the person for 30 years after his death. I will sometimes have to reject access to the original documents. If someone is interested only in finding out whether a politician was a [Nazi] party member, then that is not historically useful."

In the congressional hearing last month, Geoffrey Giles, a University of Florida history professor, said, "The record of . . . German archivists toward academic historians trying to conduct research on the Nazi

period has, over the last 25 years, been at best a mixed one, and sometimes downright obstructionist."

Marwell and others contend the microfilming has been undertaken with care and rigorous quality controls. Comparisons of original documents and microfilmed copies at the center shows that microfilming in many cases makes faint writing more legible by enhancing the contrast. Microfilm archives are also cheaper, easier to maintain, easily copied and can be retrieved more quickly through computerized scanning systems.

And, many of the original documents now are crumbling, particularly those printed on the cheap, acidic paper used by the Third Reich toward the end of the war. If nothing else, the microfilm will preserve the files long after the originals have turned to dust.

"I don't think there's anybody who would say that microfilm is not suitable for faithful rendering of histori-

cal documents," Marwell said. "American historians have grown up using microfilm of German records."

As to the issue of accessing the original documents, Marwell expressed confidence that the German government will prove to be a fair administrator. Since 1988, Germany's Federal Archives has had the authority to screen requests from German citizens for entry into the Berlin Document Center; German officials contend that only one request from a scholar and less than 1 percent of requests from private citizens have been denied. Moreover, under the agreement signed last October, the Justice Department keeps the right to unrestricted access to the files.

"For the kind of access that people are concerned about—scholarship and Nazi war crime investigations—people won't see a difference," Marwell said. "Absent some dramatic change, I don't think scholars have anything to worry about."