

*Hunting the Truth: Memoirs of Beate and Serge Klarsfeld*, trans. Sam Taylor. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018. Originally simply as *Mémoires*. Paris: Fayard/Flammarion, 2015. 454 pp.

With two pages of acknowledgements at the end of the book, as well as a thirteen-page Index, plus eight pages of black and white photographs inserted in the middle of the text, this is a double autobiography by two of the most important and famous of the Nazi hunters in Europe. This is the couple who have gone after Klaus Barbie, René Bousquet, Jean Leguay Maurice Papon, Kurt Waltheimer, tracked them down around the world, and forced governments to bring them to trial and the media to ensure that the public knows the truth about what these monsters did.

Vladimir Jankélévitch sums up the essence of the book:

...slapping an unrepentant chancellor [Kurt Georg Kiesinger], making a scene in parliament, chaining herself in the streets of Warsaw and Prague to bring attention to anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism before the indifferent eyes of the crowds there... These are, assuredly, “scandalous” act. But these scandalous acts, disturbing the good conscience of passersby, highlighted another scandal—an infinitely more serious scandal hidden by the forces of law and order: the scandal of the unpunished crime amid this triumph ant prosperity. (p. 216)

This stands for more than Beate Klarsfeld, but also her husband Serge, and also their attempts to kidnap Nazi war criminals living and prospering, while millions whom they murdered, their surviving families, and whole communities broken scattered suffer on, these “respectable citizens” and successful businessmen, government officials, and political leaders go unpunished. *Never Again* and *Never Forget* means not only to keep alive the names and faces of the victims who were ruthlessly killed, but also to expose and bring to justice their murderers—and all who abetted and prospered by such enormous crimes. Ignoring, denying and protecting the guilty are also crimes against humanity.

Serge Klarsfeld, a Jew, son of a father murdered by the Nazis, we can easily understand why he dedicated his life to the cause of chasing down and revealing the crimes of the men who were responsible for the Holocaust. Not every survivor or child of survivors can do as much for a whole variety of reasons, but who else will do it if not for the Jews themselves, since so much of the rest of the world is willing to turn their eyes away, let bygones be bygones, and forgive and forget the most horrible and enormous of crimes ever committed. But why Beate Künzell, a non-Jewish German girl, daughter of a soldier in the Wehrmacht?

The reasons are always more implicit than explicit. Beate’s sections of the book are full of more personal, domestic and emotional details than those of Serge. She has the babies, cares for their needs, often cooks or arranges for the meals, even as she keeps in touch with journalists, government agents, politicians and students. While she can get up close and personal with celebrities and world leaders, she also has to worry about dirty diapers, untidy rooms and personal hygiene. She can stand up as a *shicksa*, a *goy* and a German, whereas Serge has to be careful about being blocked as a Jew, a German who has become a French citizen, and as a man whose actions always seem more sinister, suspicious and dangerous than those of a woman. As a Jew, he can be dismissed: all the old slanders fall directly on his head. As a

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non-Jewish German who has become French she is a mystery, a confusing presence, a seemingly harmless female who can sneak behind the lines, slip into private meetings, stage shocking deeds that seem to puzzle victims and their minders.

It is expected that the former Nazis, their families and associates, along with the collaborators in France and other German-occupied countries during the Second World War, would try to block the revelations made by the Klarsfelds, but what is shocking to Beate and Serge as they mobilize their own allies to raise money and to influence journalists and politicians is the all too often denials and intransigence of Jewish communities—of people who are still traumatized by what had happened, fearful of rousing anti-Semitic actions against themselves, fearful of losing business with corporations and other sections of society under the control and leadership of the former directors and agents of the Holocaust. More than laziness or cowardice, such attitudes mark the very kind of moral failure that allowed the Final Solution to proceed as far as it did—and may do again.

Though the Klarsfelds gather support from many quarters, raise the necessary funding to carry on their work and to publish the documents they need to distribute so that judges and, lawyers and journalists are aware of what the issues, there is a disheartening aspect to the story; in that almost time a Nazi criminal is located, tracked down and attempts are made to bring him to trial, the same resistance shows up. There obstacles thrown up, letter bombs delivered, and aggressive persons try to block proceedings. Nevertheless, Serge and Beate persist, and one by one the guilty parties are exposed and many are brought to justice—though not all, for some commit suicide or die of natural causes before they have to face the consequences of their deeds. The point is not retribution or vengeance, but to honour the memory of the dead and the grieving of their surviving families. The chases are not only through Europe, but to South America and the Middle East, with witnesses traced to America, Canada, England and Israel.

The ethical dilemma poses itself: when is it justifiable, even necessary, to break the law to ensure that justice is done? They do more than organize rallies and circulate pamphlets. The Klarsfelds interrupt and disrupt public meetings, humiliate their opponents, spray-paint slogans and break windows, they hound supposedly good citizens in their workplaces and homes, bribe court officials and jailors, kidnap their prey and even threaten to kill them. They show the German public that thousands of Jews and their supporters can march through the streets demanding justice, the French that collaboration with the Nazis will not be excused or forgotten, and the whole world that there is no place for the fugitives to hide. The enormity of the crimes being exposed make all efforts to bring the criminals to account justified.

And it is not only former Nazis that the Klarsfelds went after. Their sense of justice and of responsibility have made them act on behalf of any group that is under attack and being persecuted simply for being what they are. Beate does so because, as a German, she feels it is her duty to see to it that no one behaves as her countrymen and women did during the 1930s and 1940s, and Serge out of a Jewish sense of duty to all mankind whoever and wherever they are. These same ethical principles pass on to their son Arno—that same little boy who interrupted his mother during important meetings, reminding her that her activism did not excuse her from family responsibilities—who joins his parents when he is old enough to do so, and who, after becoming a lawyer, takes over the Klarsfeld sense of active justice.

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There are some critics who argue that Beate and Serge cosied up too closely to the leaders of East Germany and the Stasi, that they were too harsh with Jews who felt it unwise and inexpedient to track down every former Nazi they could locate, and that they would be overly punctilious in asking for changes in memorial plaques and documents when the number of Jews murdered exceeded the actual facts. But the full weight of history is on the side of the Klarsfelds and they have gone in where angels feared to tread to make the point that no one who commits crimes against humanity, and the Jews, will ever be exempt from exposure—and the memory of the millions slaughtered will never be forgotten: their names will be found, their stories told, and their memories passed on as a blessing to future generations. Norman Simms. Waikato University.

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