

Along the twisted road



"I DIDN'T REALIZE he was not Jewish," a Yad Vashem staffer said when I told her I was interviewing Prof. Karl Schleunes for an article on the younger generation of non-Jewish Holocaust researchers in the U.S.

For six months Schleunes could be seen sitting in the Yad Vashem library and in the room housing its micro-film projector. Why indeed should a person spend that much time on the Holocaust – unless he had a Jew's emotional relationship to the event?

But Schleunes, 52, and his friend and fellow Yad Vashem *habitué*, Prof. Christopher Browning, 45, have their own relationship to the Holocaust. While this interest is primarily professional to them as historians, there is doubtless also a wider dimension. As Schleunes wrote in the introduction to his seminal book *The Twisted Road to Auschwitz*, soon to appear in paperback.

"By the time the National Socialist movement was swept from the stage of history it had destroyed the lives of at least 30 million and perhaps as many as 40 million people. The institutions which most appropriately symbolize the Nazi era – Auschwitz, Dachau, Treblinka, and some 50 other camps – had no precedents.

"The realization that some men will construct a factory in which to kill other men raises the gravest questions about man himself. We have entered an age which we cannot avoid labelling 'After Auschwitz.' If we are to begin to understand ourselves we must somehow come to grips with the reality of Auschwitz."

Schleunes then continues in his brief and straightforward manner,

A human need 'to come to grips with the reality of Auschwitz' motivated two non-Jewish historians to darken their minds with the blackness that is the Holocaust

Ernie Meyer

which no doubt contributed to the popularity of his book: "The Final Solution as it emerged in 1941 and 1942 was not the product of a grand design. In fact, when the Nazis came to power, they had no specific plans for a solution of any sort. They were certain only that a solution was necessary. This commitment carried the Nazi system along the twisted road to Auschwitz."

Thus it is this all-human need "to come to grips with the reality of Auschwitz" that motivates these two sensitive non-Jewish historians to darken their minds with the blackness that is the Holocaust.

How does a nice young Protestant American get to become a Holocaust researcher?

KARL ALBERT SCHLEUNES was born in 1937 in the small town of Kiel, Wisconsin. His family came to the U.S. in 1854 from Hesse-Nassau along with 100,000 immigrants, the biggest wave to come from Germa-

ny during that century. He studied modern history at the University of Minnesota and in 1961 spent a year at the Free University of Berlin. Fluent in German, he had earlier spent a semester at the University of Vienna.

In 1966 he received his Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota with a thesis on German history between 1933 and 1939. After teaching at the University of Illinois he moved to the University of North Carolina, at Greensboro, where he has been a full professor since 1971. He teaches German history and a course on the Holocaust.

The idea for *The Twisted Road to Auschwitz* came about in the early 1960s. "The Holocaust was not much talked about," he recalled. "I could not comprehend how it had happened. So I had two choices; either to ignore it or to study it and try to understand."

The book came out in 1970 and was a success. "After that I was

tired of the subject. I didn't want to spend the rest of my life studying the Nazis. I wanted to deal with the history of decent people for whom I could have a measure of respect. So I turned to the history of education in Germany and the phenomenon of mass schooling."

Did his German descent have anything to do with his interest in the Holocaust?

"I'm a fourth-generation American. It's possible, but I'm not sure. My descent may have influenced me subconsciously. I'm certainly no apologist for the Germans," Schleunes said.

His Holocaust course, which he started last year, now attracts 35 students, of which only two are Jewish. In addition to history students, undergraduates from the faculties of literature, psychology, business administration and theatre are attracted to it.

In 45 lectures, Schleunes covers the history of Jewish-Christian relations in Europe from Roman to modern times.

Schleunes has been commissioned to contribute a volume to the 24-volume History of the Holocaust planned by Yad Vashem. The series will devote one volume to Jews in each national grouping, the writers being for the most part Israeli historians. But the editorial board also felt that it needed two volumes on the shaping of Nazi policy. Schleunes is writing the volume covering the period up to 1939; Browning will cover 1939-1945.

Schleunes is on a year's sabbatical from his university. His wife Brenda, who heads a children's theatre company at home, is dramatizing the story of a Holocaust rescue while she is here. The Schleunes's

daughter Anna, 20, is a student of political science.

I asked Schleunes whether a Holocaust could happen in the U.S.

"I think it's possible anywhere. What we have learned from Germany is that the human potential [for evil] is everywhere. But it is not likely, since we have the safeguard of our constitution and are a pluralistic society," he replied.

CHRISTOPHER BROWNING became drawn to the study of the Holocaust after one book – Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews*. It was in the late 1960s, when he was teaching the history of French diplomacy after World War I, that he came upon Hilberg's *magnum opus*. "The book changed my life," he said. "Who is interested in French diplomacy, when there is this subject to study."

Browning was born in 1944 in Durham, North Carolina grew up in Chicago and later attended Oberlin College in Ohio. His father is a professor of philosophy and his mother a public health nurse. His father's father came to the U.S. from Kent in 1880 and married into a German family. On his mother's side, Browning has Swiss, French and Scottish blood. Although one of his grandfathers was a minister, he describes himself as a non-practising Methodist.

In 1967, during the Vietnam war, which he opposed, Browning secured a teaching job to earn a draft deferment. It was during this period that he came across the Hilberg book.

In 1971, when he was past draft age, he went to the University of Wisconsin, at Madison, to study for his doctorate. He told his professor

that he wanted to write on a subject connected with the Nazis and the Jewish problem. He chose the German Foreign Office in the 1930s and 1940s.

His professor told him that it was a good topic for a dissertation, but that professionally there was no future in it. "He was right, at the time, but it's a good thing he let me follow my interest," Browning said. The dissertation eventually grew into the book *The Final Solution and the German Foreign Office* (published in 1978 by Holmes & Meier), which established Browning's standing as a Holocaust historian.

In 1970, Browning married Jennifer, a lawyer, and the couple have two daughters, Katherine, 15, and Anne, 11. While working on his thesis, Browning spent a year in the archives at Bonn and in 1974-75 did research in Jerusalem.

In the summer of 1972, while he was studying the criminal working of the German bureaucracy, Browning said he was struck by the stunning parallels between it and what was then taking place in the U.S. It was the time of the Watergate break-in, followed by the cover-up and President Nixon's resignation in 1974.

At the lowest level the criminal activity was being carried out by a group of ambitious lawyers, mostly from the University of Southern California, who when caught said they had just been "team players." Above them was a circle of political operators, which included John Mitchell, Bob Haldeman, John Erlichman and Charles Colson. These men never needed explicit written or oral orders from the president. All Nixon had to say was: "We're going to win the election," or "The Democrats won't spring any surprises on us." This was enough to get them to compete with each other in pulling dirty tricks on the Democrats. They simply understood what Nixon wanted.

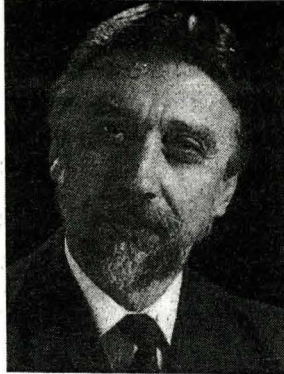
Browning then drew his frightening parallel with what he was learning about the bureaucrats staffing the Nazi Foreign Ministry under Joachim von Ribbentrop. These men were mostly young lawyers who had jumped on the Nazi bandwagon early on. The ministry's "Jewish desk" handled all Jewish affairs in countries under German control or allied to it. This desk often was in competition with the SS and it was Ribbentrop's political hatchman, Martin Luther, who guarded against political encroachments.

When the Final Solution began in 1941, Luther needed no written or verbal order to help carry it out. If killing Jews was now important to the government, he wanted a piece of the action. He was the representative of the Foreign Office at the January 1942 Wannsee conference, at which the destruction of the European Jews was planned in detail. He arranged his ministry's full cooperation with Reinhard Heydrich, the head of the security services.

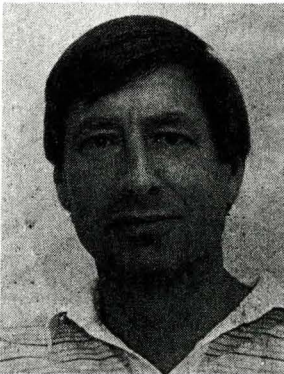
"While I was studying these people the same pattern of behaviour as that in Washington emerged. The way both bureaucratic apparatuses responded was very similar," Browning repeated.

In his writing, Browning has elaborated on the way in which Nazi policy regarding the Final Solution was shaped. There are two views on this: "intentionalist" and "functionalist."

Historians of the intentionalist school hold that Hitler from the beginning of his career "intended" to eliminate the Jews physically. Holders of the functionalist view, say yes, he hated the Jews with a demonic hatred, but their eventual destruc-



Prof. Karl Schleunes



Prof. Christopher Browning

tion was more a "function" of circumstances. These circumstances included the failure of earlier emigration policies for German Jews and the huge increase in the number of Jews the Germans found they had under their control following the Polish campaign and the invasion of Russia.

The terms intentionalist and functionalist were first used by the Brit-

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ish historian Tim Mason in 1980. He applied the distinction not only to the Jewish problem but also to other aspects of Nazi policy.

SCHLEUNES was a pioneer whose book forced fellow historians to look at the zig-zag pattern rather than the grand design leading to the Holocaust. According to the Mason definition, which Browning adopted, Schleunes should be described as a functionalist.

The British historian David Irving wrote a book in which he put forth the thesis that Hitler had not actually known about the Final Solution and that it had been engineered from below. The respected German historian Martin Broszat, in reaction, destroyed Irving's argument and said that Hitler had wanted and known about the destruction of the Jews, but had never ordered it. His thesis was that Hitler had merely ordered the Jews expelled to the east. When they subsequently piled up in ghettos in Riga, Minsk and

Lodz, local commanders began killing them in actions separate from those of the *Einsatzgruppen*. These spontaneous actions then developed into systematic murder, Broszat wrote.

Thus Broszat, the ultra-functional, claimed that Hitler had not ordered the Final Solution but legitimized it.

The outstanding representative of the intentionalist school, on the other hand, is Lucy Dawidowicz, who made her stand clear when she chose for her book the title *The War against the Jews*.

Browning described his own position as follows: "Unlike Broszat, I believe that Hitler was the key decision-maker, but like Schleunes, I believe in the Twisted Road concept. I'm a moderate functionalist."

Having explained this - and much more - at great length, Browning declared that the argument about the intentionalist and functionalist distinction was now closed. "It's time to go on to a new agenda."

Will Browning's volume for Yad Vashem on the shaping of Nazi policy be culled from earlier works? "Oh, no," he said, "I want to base myself on original research and zero in on how the Germans came to do what they did. I want to investigate how Hitler got people to murder without thinking of themselves as criminals."

Browning started on this enterprise in his second book, *Fateful Months: Essays on the Emergence of the Final Solution*, in which he described the killing of all Jews in Serbia, making Belgrade the first *Judenrein* capital in Europe.

In his next book he plans to describe a reserve police battalion - not an *Einsatzgruppe* - which massacred Jews in the Lublin area. Its 500 men were too old for the army, not members of the SS and included relatively few party members. Hailing from Hamburg, the unit included many former socialists and communists.

I asked Browning how long he thought he would continue with his study of the Nazis?

"I don't know. So far each subject has always raised new questions and topics for research."

Could this be a life-time occupation?

"It could well be. It's been half a life-time already."

Browning said that he accepted Elie Wiesel's statement that "Auschwitz is beyond the understanding of historians." But then he added somewhat enigmatically that in terms of how Nazi policy was made, Auschwitz was all too human and should not be mystified.

Browning teaches European history to undergraduates at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington. "Every fourth year I try to get a grant so that I can take leave without pay and devote myself to research. My college is very supportive," he said. He added that he would prefer to teach graduate students, but that in the U.S. there are few positions for teaching the Holocaust. "Even in this age of multi-million-dollar Holocaust museums it is easier to get funds for monuments than for research."

Browning and Schleunes were to read papers on Fascism and the Holocaust at a conference held this week at Bar-Ilan University.

"It is important for historians to attend conferences," Browning said. "When colleagues communicate in print, through articles and books, there is often a time-lag of years. But at a conference you read a paper and get an immediate feedback. That is important for the exchange of ideas."