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'The Rat Line'

Barbie's Exit Was U.S.-Made

This is the last of three articles adapted from the forthcoming book, "Barbie: Butcher of Lyon," to be published in the United States by the Pantheon Press.

By Tom Bower

Eugene Kolb and other American Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC) officers give three reasons for deciding to protect Klaus Barbie during his years in postwar Germany.

First, they believed that his work as an informer was valuable.

Second, they felt that his alleged crimes against the French Resistance were acts of war and that the French pursued him out of a desire for revenge, not justice. Most of them also insist that they were never aware of the atrocities of which Barbie was accused.

Third, and most important, they didn't trust the French. France, in the American view, was riddled with the communists in the late 1940s. The Americans believed the French sought Barbie's extradition on behalf of the communist wing of the French security services, which wanted to interrogate him about the extent of the American penetration of the German communist party.

"If the French had got Barbie," Kolb said, "I have no doubt that he would have been in Moscow within a few days."

Barbie had other fears, namely that he would not survive the French interrogation, because his appearance at the trial of Rene Hardy, accused of betraying French Resistance hero Jean Moulin, would be too embar-

assing to France. He knew too much about French collaboration.

Formal inquiries and extradition requests from the French government were made in May, July and November of 1949 to no avail. The correspondence between the two governments was recently discovered by Serge Klarsfeld, a French lawyer who for 10 years campaigned for Barbie's extradition from Bolivia.

On July 28, 1949, M. Schmelk, head of the German justice division at French headquarters in Baden-Baden, supplied an outdated address for Barbie and wrote, "I feel I must respectfully point out that Barbie is protected by the American authorities, and it is possible that these authorities will not help our inquiries, so preventing us completing the formalities for a valid application for extradition."

The French ambassador in Washington, Henri Bonnet, approached the State Department on the matter. His inquiry was turned over to the office of John J. McCloy, the high commissioner for Germany. McCloy informed State that "we have no record of request for extradition of Klaus Barbie by French."

Herbert Bechtold, Barbie's CIC handler at that time, recalls that the French were given such a runaround by the high commissioner's office that the U.S. Army, out of embarrassment, decided to make Barbie available for another interrogation by the French. This occurred on Dec. 8, 1949, near Augsburg.

Barbie was so nervous about the interview that the CIC sent a special officer down from Munich, Capt. Hugo Sandford, to "babysit" Barbie through the interview.

The stage was now set for an extraordinary farce, which would play for the next 14 months. On one side, the State Department, the high commissioner's office in Frankfurt, the U.S. Army's European headquarters in Heidelberg, the CIC headquarters in Stuttgart and the CIC office in Augsburg were performing a charade of denials. On the other side, the exasperated French were trying to use every channel available to discover Barbie's elusive custodian.

At one point the Americans offered to make Barbie available to testify at Hardy's trial, provided the French would guarantee his return to Germany. The French rejected the offer. They then began a serious effort to persuade the high commissioner's office to extradite Barbie.

They also brought pressure on the American government in Washington but encountered a stone wall. Ambassador Bonnet cabled his government in June that the State Department had "just replied that they do not have in their possession any new evidence permitting the discovery of the present residence of the party concerned."

The ultimate responsibility for Barbie's protection was McCloy's. As the senior American official in the zone, his office definitely dealt with the problem. But both McCloy and his assistant John Bross deny any recollection of the French demands. There were, they said, thousands of telegrams and files passing through the high commissioner's office daily.

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The French pressure had its effect, however. Army headquarters in Heidelberg decided that something had to be done so that everyone was covered. The message was passed down and reached Kolb that Barbie should be "taken off the books." This meant, Kolb was told, that Barbie could still be used as an informer but his name and fees should be laundered through another agent's file.

Bechtold was informed that he would be reassigned. The reason, which he was ordered not to pass on to Barbie, was that Barbie's career with the Americans was coming to an end.

With very little notice, Barbie was handed over to Lt. Joe Strange and Leo Hecht, a 23-year-old German-born Jew.

Two weeks later, Hecht told Bechtold that "the whole [Barbie] family are learning Spanish." In March, 1951, the Barbie family left Augsburg with a CIC escort.

They escaped from Europe down the "Rat Line," a well-organized, adequately funded, officially approved route, established in 1945 by the U.S. Army's 430th CIC detachment in Austria. Under Col. James V. Milano, head of the CIC's clandestine operations, and Capt. Paul Lyons, the Rat Line team helped foreign agents used by the United States to flee the Russian zone in Vienna and reach safety in Salzburg in the American zone.

The "shipments" were mostly Russian defectors and valuable contacts who had suddenly become vulnerable.

Once in Salzburg, Milano and his team would put the "shipment" in a safe house and set about processing. Invariably, the safest, final destination for the "shipment" was South America, especially Chile and Peru, where the Americans had their best contacts. The only obstacles were the documents, passports and visas that were necessary to pass through the many checkpoints and borders of Europe and to enter South America.

But that was not a big problem. Milano had at his disposal a laboratory where his experts forged, rewrote and altered documents, passports and identity cards of every nationality, including American. Financing was supplied, with his superior's approval, from the intelligence fund.

When the paper work was completed, Milano's three-man team, with the "shipment" dressed in an American uniform, would drive in an Army jeep down to Bad Gastein and travel with the jeep on a train through the Alps to the Italian border. There, a "friendly" customs official would wave the party through, and the four would head for either Naples or Genoa, depending on the availability of the next ship across the Atlantic.

The contact in Genoa was a Croatian priest, Krunosla Draganovic, whom Milano called "the good Father." Draganovic had been discovered in Trieste on one of the earliest Rat Line operations and had proved to be enormously valuable for the American operation, especially because he had good contacts with displaced-persons organizations that managed quotas for emigration to South America.

At the time, South American countries were eager to attract skilled labor. And Draganovic informed the Rat Line which skills were in demand. It was then a simple matter of completing the "shipment's" documents.

Invariably there were delays at the port, and a small hotel was selected where no questions would be asked and the Americans could remain "babysitting" until the ship's departure. No one left Europe on the Rat Line with less than \$1,000. Some left with as much as \$8,000 in recognition of their services.

Both Milano and his successor, Jack Dobson, who authorized the Rat Line trip for Barbie, insist that they would never have approved "shipping" a Gestapo-officer. But by then Augshurg was quite proficient in lying about its star asset.

When Barbie entered the Rat Line, Hecht procured passport photos for him and his family, suitcases and other minor necessities for forging the documents and preparing the family for the journey. He also had to arrange for Barbie to meet his mother for a farewell. Hecht remembers that Barbie was "looking forward and rather expectant" about his new life. When a CIC officer, George Neagoy, came to collect the family, Hecht made the introductions and then left.

"Without Barbie," he said, "Augsburg was rather empty. He'd made such an enormous contribution, and we had no idea then what he'd done in France."

The CIC gave Barbie a temporary travel document for stateless people, number 0121454, issued by the American high commission office in Munich on Feb. 21, 1951. It was probably forged by the 430th CIC.

Barbie was described as Klaus Altman, born on Oct. 25, 1915, in Kronstadt, Germany, a mechanic by trade.

The family was loaded aboard an American Army truck and driven across the border to Salzburg. They left Salzburg by train for Genoa. Their ultimate destination, according to their travel documents, was Trieste.

The only complication arose at the Austrian border. The customs official realized that there was something wrong with the documents. Barbie is alleged to have said: "I said to him, 'Look, I've got children' . . . and he shouted at me, 'Get going, and I don't want to see you again.' I replied, 'You can be sure of that.'"

By Barbie's later account, "good Father" Draganovic was waiting for him at the Genoa rail station, holding a photograph that the Americans had sent ahead. He immediately took the family to a small hotel whose occupants, Barbie was to discover on the ship, were all Nazi fugitives.

His American escort officer presumably remained with him until he sailed.

Over the next days, Draganovic organized the Barbie departure. Originally, Barbie had intended to live in Argentina. But Draganovic convinced him that, with the possibility of oil discoveries, there was a better future in Bolivia.

The family sailed from Genoa in March, 1951, arriving in Buenos Aires in mid-April. They remained there for eight days before setting off by train for Bolivia and exile and prosperity.

Almost 32 years passed before the French caught up with Barbie and won his extradition to stand trial for "crimes against humanity."