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Adolf Eichmann's list

It is one of the enduring mysteries of the second world war. More than 800 Jews based in this hospital in the middle of Nazi Berlin survived the war, seemingly — and bizarrely — protected by Adolf Eichmann, the architect of the Final Solution. So who were they and why were they saved?

Sarah Helm

Russian soldiers fighting their way through the rubble of Berlin in the last days of the war turned the corner of Iranische Strasse, in the district of Wedding, and came across an elegant building almost intact. Fanning out to search the structure, the Russians ransacked the place, room by room. Medical equipment and rows of beds showed that it had once been a hospital. Searching deep into the bowels of the building, the Russian liberators burst open cellar doors, and in the darkness made out hundreds of cowering figures – more than 800 people in all.

The soldiers swept through in an orgy of rape. Only when the Red Army commanders arrived was the question asked: “But who are you?”

“We are Jews.”

“You are Jews?” exclaimed the astonished Russians, whose path to Berlin had taken them through the smouldering remains of Nazi death camps. “Why aren’t you dead yet?”

The discovery that 800 Jews had survived Hitler’s Final Solution in the middle of Berlin staggered the city’s liberators. That they had survived in the full knowledge of the Nazi high command beggared all belief. The Russians had stumbled upon the last Jewish sanctuary in Germany – and upon an extraordinary story of survival. And yet over the years it has been a story that few have been able or willing to tell. Because how could this have happened? Who were these survivors? And what was Hitler’s sinister purpose in permitting them to live?

Among those 800 men and women were personal dramas of every kind. They were the bravest of the brave, the lucky and the cunning. They were collaborators and spies. There were also many “privileged” Jews – spouses of non-Jewish Germans. But most mysteriously, they were Jews whose lives had been protected by the highest-ranking Nazis. Little is known about them because their files were burnt by the Gestapo just days before the Russians arrived.

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The new Wedding site of the Jewish Hospital was opened in 1914 by the prosperous Berlin Jewish community. But with Hitler’s rise to power in 1933, the hospital – along with every other Jewish institution in Germany – seemed destined for destruction.

As the Nuremberg race laws were imposed, Jewish doctors lost their licences to practise, and thousands joined the rush to leave the country. In 1933 there were 667,000 Jews living in Germany but, from the outbreak of war in 1939, more than two-thirds had emigrated and thousands more were desperately trying to flee.

The hospital was nevertheless permitted to remain open, and was even spared the rampages of Kristallnacht, the anti-Jewish pogrom of 1938. As war broke out, it was still run by a senior Jewish doctor, Walter Lustig, whose staff were given special permits to care for patients, and it became a haven for Berlin's remaining Jews.

But Lustig was already working under direct Nazi control. An ambitious, brilliant administrator, he had spent much of his prewar career as a doctor with the Berlin police, forging close ties with now-powerful figures in the Gestapo. From these men he now took his orders. His immediate boss was a senior Gestapo figure called Fritz Wöhrn, who had been appointed as the hospital's overseer by Adolf Eichmann, head of department 1V B4 of the Reich Security Head Office (RSHA). Eichmann's department was responsible for planning the extermination of Europe's Jews.

So although at the start of the war the hospital appeared to function normally, it was already just another of Eichmann's tools. Its continued operation helped deceive Berliners about what was planned for Jews. The Nazi high command, particularly Joseph Goebbels, the propaganda minister, feared the possibility of social unrest in Germany once the reality of mass Jewish deportation became clear. Nowhere was that concern more intense than in Berlin, where Jews were deeply integrated in the social strata of the city. With a Jewish hospital still functioning, and Jewish doctors and nurses still caring for the sick, it was possible to spread the lie that Hitler could not possibly intend to exterminate the German Jews. Among the hospital workers themselves, however, few failed to foresee the threat.

Ernst Boch, a pharmacist at the hospital, and his wife, Ruth, had been desperately trying to escape Germany with their baby girl. In 1939 the couple wrote to Ruth's cousin, already living in England, asking if she would take their daughter. They enclosed a photograph of curly-haired, three-year-old Nina, and the cousin readily agreed to take her. Nina was then put on the very last Kindertransport out of Berlin. "I remember visiting the Jewish Hospital before I left," says Nina, now living in East Anglia, "and seeing my father behind a counter, in a white coat. And I remember my mother when I left. She was so brave, on the station platform, smiling at me and telling me what fun I would have in England."

Her new English family wrote to Nina's parents to say she had arrived safely, and in a letter back the Bochs were still talking about fleeing. But by 1941 it was too late. With America about to enter the war, Germany banned all emigration. Deportations began, and a new wave of terror gripped the capital's Jews. Among those to be spared, at least for now, were Jews working at the hospital, where their services were still needed.

Another important "privileged" group were Jews in mixed marriages. Nazi hardliners argued that Jews married to non-Jews had "infected" the "Aryan" line and should be exterminated first, but Goebbels was still concerned about protests. These Jews were prosperous, and many had friends or relatives who were now senior Nazi figures. As Goebbels put it, the position of intermarried Jews was "sensitive" and their deportation was deferred – unless their spouses divorced them. So intimidation of the German spouses was stepped up to encourage divorce.

Manfred Pahl, a prominent artist who refused to divorce his Jewish wife, Aenne, was thrown out of the Berlin Art Institute in 1941 and into forced labour. Aenne, one of three sisters, had grown up in Hannover, in a highly integrated German-Jewish family. By 1939, both her sisters, Trude and Hilde, had fled from Germany, but Aenne and her husband stayed. They still hoped to be spared. They hoped the fact that Beate, their 18-year-old daughter, had been baptised a Christian, meant they would not be deported. "For a long time they believed, like many Jewish intellectuals in mixed marriages, the worst would not happen to them," says Iris Hilke, Beate's daughter. "They were in denial."

As the transports east increased, however, shock waves began to spread through every Jewish household, "privileged" or not. Hilde Kahan, a resourceful Prussian Jew, took the opportunity to optimise her own survival – and that of her elderly widowed mother – by taking one of the safest jobs in Berlin, as secretary to the director of the Jewish Hospital, Walter Lustig.

Lustig was already the most powerful Jewish figure left in Berlin. By now the hospital was playing an even more central role in the deception worked on departing victims. Lustig and his staff were ordered to "calm their people" by providing first-aid stations at a Berlin Sammellager, or holding centre, where terrified men, women and children awaited departure

for the death camps. The doctors and nurses also helped to spread a new lie: that the deportees were being sent east to work. In fact they were heading straight for the death camps near Riga and for the Lodz ghetto. "We were told to reassure our community, who were in such fear," wrote Kahan.

Staff also took part in an elaborate charade. The sick and disabled among the first selected victims were offered a medical examination so that they could prove they were unfit for "work" in the east, thereby avoiding transport.

With perfect bureaucratic order, Lustig was appointed by Eichmann's men to head a special "medical commission" to choose who should get exemption certificates. The commission consisted of six Jewish doctors, six nurses and six secretaries. Kahan wrote: "Ambulances waited outside the hospital, bringing the crippled and sick to try their luck before Lustig's commission. Now all the elderly and ill pinned hope on these examinations – but only a few had any success, and as we know only for a short period of time."

This selection work was "the most horrible memory I have", Kahan wrote. "During medical examinations we had to write down the results in the presence of the Gestapo after the doctor told us in a low voice all the details. There came blind people, handicapped people, people with TB and epilepsy, and they all had to wait hours and hours. The worst moments came when we staff walked through the waiting halls and friends or well-known people caught our eyes and then came running and pleading for us to help them."

By October 1942 staff working for Berlin's other Jewish organisations were being rounded up. As senior doctors were now selected, all hospital workers feared for their families and, using her influence with Lustig, Kahan secured "safe" work for her mother in a Gestapo kitchen.

Meanwhile, a young nurse called Dora Brüg was threatened by Lustig with transport east just because she was late for work. "So she escaped by hiding in an ambulance," says her daughter, Deborah Silverberg. Dora then hid out in Berlin for two years, living underground and providing sexual services in a massage parlour. "She had to do this to survive," says Deborah.

Gestapo officers, and even Eichmann himself, often visited the hospital, randomly picking out victims for transport. No records have survived to indicate why some were selected and some spared, but no doubt winning Lustig's favour was a protection.

Those leaving in 1943 were sent first to Theresienstadt concentration camp, declared by the Nazis to be a "model" camp. Such was the success of the deception that when news arrived at the hospital that this was the new destination, a party was held among staff to celebrate. Lilli Ernsthaft, a filing clerk, described in her memoir how she watched her own sick mother being driven away smiling on a lorry. "I sent her a cake for her birthday to Theresienstadt."

Yet word later reached the hospital that those on the Theresienstadt transports had swiftly been taken to Auschwitz, among them the pharmacist Ernst Boch and his wife, Ruth. After the war, Nina learnt that her parents had been gassed, and that two new baby sisters, born after she was sent to England, also died at Auschwitz.

In the spring of 1943 the screws on Berlin's Jews tightened still further as Goebbels declared that the city was to be made judenrein (cleansed of Jews) and the final roundup began. Nazi leaders abandoned all pretence regarding their plans for total extermination. The sick and disabled were taken straight from hospital beds to waiting lorries, and "privileged" Jews – even those whose spouses had refused divorce – were rounded up.

The artist Manfred Pahl's refusal to divorce his wife offered her scant protection by 1943, and Aenne had gone into hiding somewhere in Berlin. Their daughter, Beate, was also in hiding outside the capital. To her dying day, Aenne never divulged where she had hidden or who it was who helped her and Beate. But evidence pieced together by Beate's daughter, Iris, suggests that influential non-Jewish German friends had helped both women. Another Berlin artist, Karl Orasch, a protégé of Manfred's before the war, had formed a strong romantic attachment to Beate, whom he hoped one day to marry. Orasch now pulled whatever strings he could to keep Beate and her mother safe.

The roundup of "privileged" Jewish spouses, beginning with men, started on February 27, 1943, creating terror in middle-class households across the city and sparking protests from non-Jewish wives. As Goebbels' fears were realised and the protests grew, he advised that these Jewish captives, held in a building on Rosenstrasse, be released to avert wider public tension. In a rare example of capitulation, the Nazis bowed to the protesters and released some spouses. Aenne and Beate were temporarily reprieved as further roundups of intermarried Jews were once again deferred.

In the hospital, few staff or patients except for the intermarried Jews escaped. Selections became a "horrible" weekly routine, according to Lilli Ernstaft, the clerk. "Numerous patients had to line up, and the hospital's director, Dr Lustig, together with the Gestapo officer, stood in front of them and indicated the ones to be deported." Several female survivors explained how some staff kept off Lustig's lists. "Dr Lustig had a series of affairs with Jewish nurses at the hospital, and only if you surrendered to him were you a favourite," wrote a British survivor who testified anonymously to investigators after the war.

By mid-1943 everyone at the hospital expected it to be closed down. Staff had been told that the building was to be given to a Reich medical project for the young. Yet the transfer of the property to its new owners never happened. Evidence shows that the sale was blocked by Eichmann's department, 1V B4.

According to the Israeli scholar Rivka Elkin, it is highly likely that Eichmann himself blocked the sale. Even when Allied bombing intensified, leaving every department of the Reich crying out for space, the Jewish Hospital remained in place, and Eichmann argued it was "necessary for Jews". Yet how, by mid-1943, could a Jewish institution in Germany be sanctioned in any form? In the previous year alone, 2.7m Jews had been killed in the Holocaust. By 1943 the machinery of the Final Solution was operating

at full capacity. The remaining 7,978 German Jews arrested in the final roundup of early 1943 had been, or would soon be, deported. So why exactly were the Jews held here after 1943? By this time the building was certainly no longer functioning as a hospital. It had become a prison.

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A significant proportion of the occupants of the hospital ghetto were the “privileged” spouses of non-Jews. Though a decision to deport them had still not been taken, they faced random arrest and imprisonment, usually in the former hospital. Among those captured in the new roundups was Aenne Pahl. Venturing out on the streets of Berlin one day, she was arrested for not wearing a Star of David, and found herself in what she would later describe as “a prison for Jews”.

Alongside her were countless other Jews. Some were hospital staff who had so far dodged the transports. Others were patients who inexplicably had not yet been sent to their deaths in the east. There were also large numbers of Jewish children – often orphans – whose Jewish parentage could not be established.

The names of many such prisoners were recorded on lists found later at the hospital. But another group of prisoners were those on a so-called “B-list”, which was burnt in the Gestapo bonfire. They were admitted as “administrative detainees”. All had friends in high places.

It is only thanks to Hilde Kahan, who had access to Lustig’s secret files, that anything is known of them. She wrote in her diary that these people were “not deported but arrested there”. Their details were kept separately. “Their files were simply stamped B-list,” she says. “The B stood for Behördten, or ‘administrative order’. So they were obviously held under a special decree.”

Kahan is guarded about what she recorded of the B-list prisoners, but she reveals that they had not only to be “privileged” in some way but also well connected. “In most cases these were friends of very important personalities of the Third Reich,” she writes. She gives just one example, “an 80-year-old former minister and his daughter. They could both stay in Berlin. He was called ‘Exzellenz Sch’”. This person is believed to be Eugen Schiffer, briefly a minister of justice in the pre-Nazi German government. Why Schiffer should have secured the right to sit out the war in the Jewish Hospital is not known. But there were clearly many more like him. Another leading Nazi, Ernst Kaltenbrunner, fearing serious international protest if news got out that well-known Jews were disappearing, issued a directive saying that special care should be taken not to deport Jews “with special connections and acquaintances in the outside world”. And Heinrich Himmler, the Reichsführer SS, was not averse to holding “valued” Jews as bargaining chips with the Allies, hoping perhaps to exchange important personalities for Germans or money.

In 1944 a valuable prize fell into Himmler’s hands when Gemma La Guardia Gluck was captured in the roundup of Hungarian Jews. The sister of the New York mayor Fiorello La Guardia, she was held in a privileged cell at Ravensbrück and released unharmed at the end of the war.

But how many more such “prizes” were held at the hospital? Perhaps it was simply bribery that protected some of these Jewish “detainees”.

“Bribery of Jews with contacts with the Nazis was definitely part of the story of the Jewish Hospital. It is a very, very strange story and nobody knows all of it,” says Aubrey Pomerance, head of archives at the Jewish Museum in Berlin.

Aenne Pahl’s name does not appear on hospital- or police-ward lists, suggesting she was almost certainly on the B-list. Her imprisonment provides a rare insight into how such cases came about. Aenne later described conditions in the “prison” as horrifying, talking of backbreaking slave labour sewing soldiers’ uniforms, yet she had some privileges and protection.

For one thing, she was allowed visits. On several occasions, she was visited by her daughter and her husband’s artist friend Karl Orasch. Beate and Karl would come disguised as Mr and Mrs Schmidt. “My mother had no idea how this was arranged,”

said Iris Hilke, Beate's daughter. "When I asked her first, she didn't seem to know what this strange 'prison' was where she had visited Aenne. Then I showed her a photograph of the Jewish Hospital and she said at once, 'Yes, that's it! That's where we went to see mother.'"

Determined to find out more about her father – later, Karl did marry Beate – Iris discovered that early in the war he had worked in the propaganda section of the foreign ministry as a graphic artist. He evidently had strings to pull. Certainly, his visits with Beate to Aenne must have been sanctioned by Walter Lustig and therefore by Lustig's overseers in Eichmann's office.

"When I asked my mother what my father's role had been in it all, she said she didn't know," says Iris. "She got quite angry. She said, 'Are you saying he was a Nazi? Your father wasn't a Nazi. He saved our lives.' But I'm sure that it was my father who arranged this. And I think my mother married him because she was grateful."

Of other B-list prisoners' cases we know even less, as none of them ever spoke. Glimpses of these individuals do appear, however, in the memoirs of Lilli Ernsthaft. Describing how the prisoners had to hide during Allied bombings, she says: "They had to stay in the basement day and night. Among them were a few celebrities."

She names one of the celebrities as Ludwig Katzenellenbogen, known in prewar Germany as the third husband of the world-renowned actress Tilla Durieux. Durieux fled Germany with Katzenellenbogen before the war, settling in Switzerland, then Yugoslavia. He was deported back to Germany and sent to the Jewish Hospital. Ernsthaft writes that during the bombing she "comforted" him with her "love services" while they sheltered from the bombs.

The second celebrity she names is Theodor Wolff, a once-famous Jewish editor. Before 1933 his anti-Nazi writings made him a special object of hate for Goebbels, yet when arrested he mysteriously found himself in the hospital and not on a transport to a death camp.

The final terror of hiding in the hospital basement and the rampage of Russian liberators left some of the worst scars of all. Hilde Kahan says that everyone expected to die in the final confrontation. German radio was still insisting that the Germans would defeat the Red Army, and she, for one, believed it. "Our doctors, who had been fighting at the front during the first world war, laughed at me for losing my nerve in the very last moment," she writes.

But one doctor had already made his own escape. When the Russian liberators came, Lustig was nowhere to be found. Some reports suggest that amid the mayhem he tried to go into hiding, though others say he found work as a doctor in one of the many Berlin hospitals now under the control of the Allies. Countless reports claim, however, that Lustig was soon tracked down by Russian war-crime hunters. Though no proof exists, it seems most likely that he was denounced, charged with collaboration and shot.

He could certainly have revealed the full story of the Jewish Hospital's survival, and details of his own deal with Eichmann would have surely horrified his victims. For some B-list prisoners his early death came as a relief. He took their identities with him to the grave.

Adolf Eichmann, the other man who could have revealed the truth about the hospital, was never pressed for answers on a matter considered peripheral to the prime charge against him at his Jerusalem trial: enforcement of the Final Solution. As for the survivors, few knew anything of how the hospital became Eichmann's tool. And many were determined that the next generation should never learn how they themselves survived.

Reunited, Aenne and Manfred Pahl found consolation in their lifelong affection and continuing artistic work. Manfred's own diary reveals nothing about the war years, saying simply of Aenne: "Nobody was her enemy, except for the Nazis, who declared her their enemy, not personally, but much worse, as descendant of another race – sheer illusion."

The survival of the Jewish Hospital and its 800 Jewish prisoners remains, therefore, a mystery. But there is no doubt that their murder had been deliberately delayed by Nazi order.

Had the Russian liberators not reached Berlin when they did, each one of those Jewish men and women would have eventually been sent to the gas chambers. Hitler's solution was always to be "Final". The only compromise was over when exactly that finality would come

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