

The Quiet Death of a Nazi

Martin Sandberger's Last, and Only, Interview

By Walter Mayr

He was a Nazi officer on the front lines of the Holocaust, sentenced to death at Nuremberg -- yet with the help of powerful friends, he walked free. For decades, Martin Sandberger lived in Germany undisturbed. Shortly before his death, SPIEGEL found him in a retirement home. A final meeting with a criminal.

He must have been convinced that no one wanted to find him anymore. His name, Dr. Martin Sandberger, was printed for all to see on the mailbox next to the gray door of his apartment in a Stuttgart retirement home, until he died on March 30, 2010.

For years, amateur historians on the Web noted that a man named Martin Sandberg, born August 17, 1911, was the "highest ranking member of the SS known to be alive." But Sandberger's whereabouts were unknown to the public, until SPIEGEL tracked him down just before his death.

This is the chronology of a search in the winter of 2009/2010, and of an encounter with the last major war criminal to have worked in the SS's murdering machinery.

Hiding in Plain Sight

In May 1945, when the Third Reich was in ruins, Sandberger was arrested. He was a colonel and model pupil of SS leader Heinrich Himmler; a US military court subsequently convicted him of mass murder and sentenced him to death by hanging. In 1951, his sentence was reduced to life in prison, but he was released seven years later. After that, he disappeared.

There has been no word from Sandberger since then, nor do any more recent images exist of the man. The last available photo, taken in 1948, depicts him as a sullen-looking defendant during his war crimes trial in Nuremberg.

And then there it was, 60 years later -- a nameplate in a Stuttgart nursing home. Is it possible that someone like Sandberger, guilty of the mass murder of Jews, Roma and communists, could have disappeared for half a century, undisturbed and unquestioned, in the middle of a country where there are 270 accredited journalists at the trial of John Demjanjuk, a presumed guard at the Sobibor death camp?

"What, he's still alive?" says a stunned prosecutor in Stuttgart, after typing the search term "Sandberger" into her computer and coming up with an impressive list of reference numbers for closed investigations and witness summons in murder cases. Sandberger's address was always known to the authorities. It's just that no one had looked for him in almost 40 years.

And when new evidence came available after the fall of the Iron Curtain, no one tried to reopen any case against Sandberger.

The door of the apartment on the ground floor of the retirement home opens onto an old man sitting in an armchair. He sits near the window, surrounded by bound collections of Swabian folk tales, black-and-white photos of his ancestors and an old television set.

The man who appears in old photos as a dashing SS colonel with a prominent chin and imperious gaze is now in the last few weeks of his life, a thin, fragile old man. Sandberger, who is 98 at the time of the interview, doesn't hear well, doesn't see well and complains about pain in his legs. He says: "I'm too old. I don't want to do it anymore."

It's obvious, however, that his mind is still active. Where was Sandberger during the last half century? Does he still remember the images from the war: the march to the East at the rear of the northern army group, the years he spent between the Baltics and Russia, the assault boat on Lake Peipus, the Jews kneeling in front of freshly dug pits?

Sandberger closes his eyes, threatening to fall asleep at any moment. "He was doing very well just now," says the woman who is keeping him company on this afternoon. A sudden feeling of weakness, presumably. "Just keep on asking questions," she says.

Sandberger opens his eyes again and says, in a squeaky voice and with a strong Swabian accent: "What I remember is completely irrelevant."

A Poster Child of the Elite

Historians say that Sandberger's death represents the closing of the last door into the shadowy realm of the SS state. In his standard history *Die Generation des Unbedingten (An Uncompromising Generation)*, Michael Wildt describes Sandberger, a brilliant lawyer, as a poster child of the elite, academically trained type of perpetrator who, acting on orders from the Reich Security Head Office, organized systematic mass murder in the east -- as the spearheads of genocide. "They weren't the little wheels in an anonymous machinery of extermination. Instead, they were the ones who designed the concepts and built and operated the machines that made the murder of millions of people possible."

Sandberger was the last living member of the leadership of the special commandos in Himmler's murdering system. He used to appear, whether in Tallinn or Verona, as a demigod in the field-gray uniform of the SS. A total of 5,643 executions were carried out under his command on Estonian soil during the first year alone of the Nazi occupation. At the height of the power bestowed upon him by Hitler, all it took was Sandberger's signature to order the execution, behind the Eastern Front, of what he called "a subject of absolutely no value to the ethnic community."

In the Christian retirement home in Stuttgart, however, Sandberger expects compassion. He pays dearly for acts of charity: A two-and-a-half-room apartment in the home costs him a base rent of €2,519 (\$3,375) a month. Nursing care costs extra. For residents who are still sufficiently lively, the facility offers a sauna, physical therapy, shopping sprees and three-course meals, including delicious food from the "Land of Swabian Pockets."

Sandberger has meals brought to his room. The physical therapist also visits, at about three in the afternoon. Otherwise he reads with a magnifying glass or, once a week, allows himself the luxury of a reader. The woman usually reads him uplifting passages from the Bible.

Well-Documented Executions

Sandberger, who left the church shortly after Hitler came into power, returned to his roots after the war -- to the "hardcore milieu of Württembergian respectability, in the Protestant-Pietist functional elite," says historian Michael Ruck. The genealogy that SS candidate Sandberger once included in his Nazi ethnic file as his "evidence of great Aryan roots" is filled with the names of pastors and public officials. His transformation from the son of a well-heeled, upper-middle-class family to a leading henchman of the Holocaust happened quickly.

Unfortunately Sandberger, in his first and only interview, has "very few memories" of those years. But his memory suddenly improves when he is asked about periods before and after the war. Born in Berlin in 1911, where his father, a plant manager at the chemical firm I.G. Farben, had been transferred? "Correct, Charlottenburg, Suarezstrasse," says Sandberger. The family later moved to Frankfurt and eventually returned to Württemberg in southwestern Germany, where his parents were from. After finishing high school "with honors," Sandberger studied law at the University of Tübingen.

It was in Tübingen, before Hitler's "takeover," that the core of what would later become a terror group in the east developed. Four future commanders of SS special commandos attended the University of Tübingen. Sandberger, a member of the Nazi Party's *Sturmabteilung* (SA) since 1931,

was in the front ranks. He hoisted the swastika flag over the roofs of his alma mater on March 8, 1933 and, in the fall, listened to philosopher Martin Heidegger telling students: "The National Socialist revolution is and will become the complete re-education of people."

'Capable of Everything'

Sandberger was ambitious and distinguished himself on all fronts. He earned the highest grade in nine years in the state bar examination, and spent his spare time corresponding with his fellow Nazi Party member and later mass murderer in occupied Poland, Hans Frank, and received the seal of fitness for higher Nazi offices from Gustav Adolf Scheel, the future student leader of the German Reich. Sandberger, Scheel wrote, was "quick and decisive," had a sharp mind and was "capable of everything."

Reinhard Heydrich had a similar opinion of Sandberger. Six weeks after the war began Heydrich, the head of the security police and later mastermind of the extermination of the Jews, appointed Sandberger to head the "immigrant center" in Gdingen, the present-day city of Gdynia, Poland. Ethnic Germans living in the Baltics had to be brought home to the Reich, while Jews and Poles were to be deported to the General Government. Sandberger proved to be effective in his new position. He was later involved in the deportation of Jews in Strasbourg, France and, because he was clearly trustworthy, was informed early on, in the spring of 1941, of the Nazis' plans to launch an offensive against the Soviet Union.

What happened in the following four years under Sandberger's command is documented in the minutes of the Nuremberg Trials, as well as on thousands of pages kept in German, Russian, Estonian and Italian archives. The documents describe nothing less than the execution of communists, the mass shooting of Jews and Roma and the last days at the headquarters of the SS's foreign intelligence service.

The trail of blood that Sandberger left behind during his campaign through Europe has since dried up. The facts are safely locked away in bundles of files and on computer hard drives. What remained forgotten, until his death on March 30 of this year, was the culprit himself.

'I Wasn't Heavily Involved'

Sandberger is mentally alert as he talks about his years in the SS, while other residents of the retirement home make their last rounds of the afternoon with their rolling walkers in the park outside his window. As soon as the issue of racial fanaticism and genocide comes up, he says, unswervingly and without hesitation: "I wasn't heavily involved in all that."

Records from the machine room of the Holocaust prove him wrong. Incident reports and reports of Special Commando 1a of Special Operation Unit A, which was under Sandberger's command, read like this: "All conditions met for active deployment in the final solution of the Jewish problem" (September 1941); all Jewish men in Estonia, except doctors and confidants, "executed under the control of the Special Commando" (October 1941); 243 Roma shot (summer 1942); enough with this nonsense about "objectivity and humanity" toward communists (May 1943).

After the war, Friedrich Anijalg, a guard at the Jägala labor camp, testified that "Dr. Sandberger was present at the shooting site" during a mass execution in the Estonian town of Kalevi-Liiva. There is no evidence to support this claim. It is more likely that Sandberger's version is correct. His version is that whenever his underlings, wielding clubs, drove the Jews to the open trenches that contained the bodies of those who had already been shot, or when "enemies of the people" were executed, he was busy doing something else.

In her groundbreaking study, "The Security Police in Estonia: 1941-1944," historian Ruth Bettina Birn writes that Sandberger was guilty "of the murder of the Estonian Jewish population and the large-scale murder campaigns" beginning in the summer of 1941. According to Birn, Sandberger perceived himself as the "ideological motor" of his office. Restless, demanding, and a thorough Nazi, he was able to enthusiastically depict a future SS settlement as far afield as Arkhangelsk, Russia, on the

White Sea. Meanwhile, back in his humdrum routine at his desk in Estonia, he signed death warrants against anti-social elements, the "racially inferior," and Bolsheviks.

The euphemism used at the time for execution was "special treatment." Sometimes, however, Sandberger was more direct, and wrote "death by hanging" in the margins of records.

Four out of five of those executed in Estonia by the summer of 1942 were communists or people denounced as communists. Before the military court in Nuremberg, the defendant Sandberger would later quantify his share of the blame in a remarkable dialogue. "Were you in Estonia at the time?" -- "Yes, but it was not my responsibility that they (all the executed communists) were shot. I was only responsible for 350." -- "For 350?" -- "That is my estimate."

And what about the 450 murdered Jews from Tallinn, the court wanted to know? "They were shot, is that correct?" -- "Yes." -- A "consequence of the Führer's order?" -- "Yes."

The supposed "Führer's order" was the mantra of all those who, after the war, claimed that they were not guilty of the crimes committed behind the Eastern Front. They argued that Hitler issued orders to the SS commando units to murder all Jews before they began their march to the Soviet Union. The myth of the "Führer's order" as an instruction to carry out the Holocaust became "historically validated," not least because of Sandberger's statements, complains historian Birn. In truth, says contemporary historian Hans Mommsen, the SS extermination campaigns on Soviet soil, including those conducted by Sandberger's special commando unit, were the result of radicalization in the field -- in other words, "advance genocide."

Friends in High Places

If Sandberger was a pioneer of genocide and not a vicarious agent, why did so many people support him after the war? The list of his advocates reads like an excerpt from some almanac of upstanding German citizens: most notably, Theodor Heuss, West Germany's first full-term president; followed by Carlo Schmid, vice-president of the German parliament, the Bundestag; Gebhard Müller, governor of the state of Baden-Württemberg; Martin Haug, state bishop.

In 1955 President Heuss, an acquaintance of Sandberger's father, interceded on behalf of Sandberger and asked US Ambassador James Conant to release him from prison. "Imprisonment may -- and I only say, may -- have brought reformation," said Heuss, "and clemency is the most appealing aspect of the law."

Carlo Schmid, the deputy floor leader of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in the Bundestag and Sandberger's professor before the war, argued: "He was a diligent, intelligent and gifted jurist who, on the one hand, succumbed to the intellectual nihilism of the day and, on the other hand, frantically clung to the orderly world of middle-class life." Sandberger would have become a decent civil servant, according to Schmid's artistic sleight of hand, "if it hadn't been for the advent of Nazi rule."

"Oh, Carlo Schmid," says Sandberger, shortly before his death, sounding almost nostalgic as he reminisces about the days when he hoisted the swastika flag over the University of Tübingen. "I was his teaching assistant at the time." Efforts to intercede on behalf of the former SS colonel by members of the Free Democratic Party in southwestern Germany demonstrate that the Sandberger family's pre-war connections were still effective after 1945. Even a US senator felt called upon to write to President Harry Truman.

"Just as you were in World War I an officer in a field artillery unit," the lobbying senator argued in a note to Truman, "so Martin Sandberger was an officer in a German army unit, fighting in Russia during World War II. By order of a higher authority, he had many unpleasant things to do, including some executions. Some of his decisions must have cost him as much soul torture as your decision to drop the atomic bomb."

Meticulous as a Model Railroad Enthusiast

But Sandberger never mentioned the agony of his decisions in any of his deployment reports. After being recalled from Estonia, the SS officer arrived in Verona in September 1943, where he had been

assigned to a group charged with building an intelligence service in the occupied zones. Official Italy had just changed sides, Mussolini was in custody, and the Germans were preparing to deport the Jews.

The Allies were advancing on Rome, and time was short. Hitler had already given the order, as SS General Karl Wolff later said, to bring Pope Pius XII to Germany. Lichtenstein Castle near Reutlingen in southwestern Germany was under consideration as a residence for the pontiff.

Sandberger traveled to Rome and sounded out the situation. According to wiretapping reports by British intelligence, on Oct. 1, 1943, at 4:24 p.m., Sandberger reported to his superiors in Berlin that the Vatican feared both communism and a Europe that would be subdued and controlled by "Anglo-Americans." "If, after all necessary arrangements have been made, a relocation to Lichtenstein were proposed to the pope, he could agree," Sandberger reported.

It would not come to that. Sandberger and his fellow SS officers were otherwise occupied. Mussolini had been liberated from a hotel in the Apennines where he was being held, and the "Jewish Action" was getting underway. Sandberger's superior sent the following report to SS leader Himmler: "The deportation of the Roman Jews to Auschwitz began on October 18, at 9 a.m. (train number X70469)."

Meanwhile, Sandberger had devoted himself, as usual, to the minute details of the extermination machine with the meticulousness of a model railroad enthusiast. On Nov. 16, 1943, he informed a colleague from the military administration that it was not his place to become involved in the SS's "Jewish actions currently underway," which had been ordered by Himmler, and that the SS would provide him with any pertinent information at a later date.

Most of the Jews who reached Auschwitz alive, after a four-day journey spent crowded like cattle in freight cars, died in the gas chambers soon afterwards. Meanwhile, Sandberger was recovering from dysentery in his hotel in Verona. In early December he left Italy for Berlin. There he spent the remainder of the war, about one and a half years, as the head of Group VI A in the foreign intelligence service and as a close intermediary to Himmler.

On May 1, the day after Hitler committed suicide, Sandberger, according to British intelligence reports, was seen "with Himmler in Lübeck" -- in other words, with the architect of the Final Solution. But while Himmler killed himself by taking cyanide on May 23, 1945, two weeks after the war ended, his subordinate Sandberger went into hiding in alpine cabins in Austria. On May 25 he turned himself in, "voluntarily, by showing them my identification and service book," to officers of the 42nd Infantry Division of the United States Army in Kitzbühel.

In the ensuing months of interrogations, Sandberger engaged in artful maneuvers, attempting to shift the blame to superiors or dead comrades. But the chief prosecutor and judges at the Nuremberg "Einsatzgruppen Trial," which began in 1947, were unimpressed. According to the verdict, Sandberger had "willingly and enthusiastically" subjected himself to the Nazi system, and he was unequivocally guilty of war crimes, crimes against humanity and membership in a criminal organization.

The court ruled that Sandberger and his co-defendants, of which there were initially 23, were responsible for the murder of more than a million people in Eastern Europe alone. Fourteen death penalties were imposed against them -- more than in the main war crimes trial against Göring, Streicher, Frank and others. Looking back, Benjamin Ferencz, the chief prosecutor in Nuremberg at the time and in his 90th year today, says, "Sandberger was an active and presumably even a zealous member of the band of murderers who killed hundreds of thousands of innocent people." The death penalty against him, says Ferencz, was "well-deserved."

A Post-War Legal Advisor

It has become quiet in the Stuttgart retirement home. Dusk is falling, and Sandberger is mulling things over. Was his death penalty deserved? He says he would rather "not comment" on that, and that he prefers to talk about his life after the war. He wore the red jacket of death-row inmates, like

all the other prisoners at Landsberg Prison, where Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf*. But he was released in 1951. While five of his fellow prisoners were hung in the prison yard, Sandberger found a soft landing in postwar Germany.

Two brothers helped him after he was released: Eberhard Müller, a theologian and head of the Evangelical Academy, and his brother Bernhard, a member of the state parliament for the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), and later the party's liaison to the neo-Nazi National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD). Most of all, however, Bernhard Müller was the general agent of the Lechler group of companies.

"I prayed that God would send you to me." These were the words with which he was received by the head of the company at the time, says Sandberger. Hired as a legal advisor in 1958, he single-mindedly worked his way up to become the "right hand man and highly respected member" of management, as Walter H. Lechler, the current managing director, says today.

According to Lechler, the SS veteran apparently expanded his "knowledge of tax law considerably" during his imprisonment at Landsberg. However, as Lechler claims, Sandberger provided no details about his experiences during the war, and nothing was known about ongoing cases against him.

Based on the documents available in archives, this is hard to imagine. On the one hand, Sandberger had a few circumstances in his favor. Starting in 1966, Kurt Georg Kiesinger, a Württemberg native and a member of the Nazi Party after 1933, served as Germany's chancellor in Bonn. And Hans Filbinger, a retired Nazi naval judge, was governor of Baden-Württemberg. On the other hand, courts in southwestern Germany were not idle, as Sandberger would realize.

'Finally Terminated'

The tight-lipped legal advisor at Lechler was called to testify in a further "Einsatzgruppen trial" at Ulm in 1958, and, after 1960, before the Central Office for the Investigation of National Socialist Crimes in Ludwigsburg. Finally, the Stuttgart public prosecutor's office initiated investigation proceedings against him in May 1970. The proceedings revolved around the "shooting of Jews, communists and paratroopers in Estonia," the execution of an officer who had fired at a portrait of Hitler while intoxicated, and the murder of "1,400-1,500 Jews in Kalevi-Liiva" in the fall of 1942.

Soon, under the eyes of the prosecution, the health of the previously vigorous SS veteran deteriorated. Sandberger's attorney wrote in a letter to prosecutors that his client's abnormally high blood pressure, his near-blindness and the constant risk of a stroke had to be taken into account. The attorney, Fritz Steinacker, a former bomber pilot, is still considered an éminence grise in relevant right-wing circles. He defended the former concentration camp doctor Josef Mengele and the camp pharmacist at Auschwitz, Victor Capesius. He also represents the interests of Aribert Heim, known as "Dr. Death," a Nazi war criminal who may be still at large, **despite recent reports** of his death.

The Sandberger case is relatively straightforward by comparison. Under the so-called "Transition Agreement" between the occupying powers and Germany, it was sufficient to demonstrate that the SS colonel had already been summarily sentenced by the Americans in 1948 for the crimes the Stuttgart prosecutors were seeking to prove 23 years later. Steinacker succeeded. An indictment for the murder of Jews from Frankfurt and others transferred from the Theresienstadt concentration camp was also unsuccessful when the Stuttgart public prosecutor's office declared, in a letter dated July 13, 1972, that investigations against the defendant Sandberger had been "finally terminated" by the US military tribunal based on the state of affairs.

The phrase was like a deep sigh.

When, in the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War and the opening of archives in Eastern Europe, the first historians started to focus on Sandberger again, he kept a low profile. He spoke with no one and stayed put. There were reports from the Estonian capital Tallinn that "the biggest Nazi in Estonia" and "ambassador of death" was still alive. In late 2009, French bloggers speculated that Sandberger had been traced to a retirement home in Bavaria.

In Germany, on the other hand, there was silence until recently. Plenty of documents had come to light containing material for a possible new indictment, but no one wanted to stir up the case.

So does Sandberger feel ashamed, after all those years, with own death imminent?

The old man in the armchair, the last remaining ringleader in the biggest genocide in history, remains silent for a long time, as he seems to wrestle with himself. Then he says: "I don't want to talk about it."

It's his last word.

Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan

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