

## Wannsee Conference – Protocol

‘I saw a disturbing documentary on the TV yesterday,’ Otto announced midway through dinner. ‘About the Wannsee Conference. Have you heard of it?’

‘Enough to know we both would have been on Hitler’s hit list,’ grinned Henry, his husband of five years and life partner for far longer.

‘That’s right. It wasn’t only the Jews that Hitler wanted to exterminate. He also targeted gays and the mentally ill.’

Henry gazed across the table, noting for the umpteenth time the physical attributes that he still found attractive after a lifetime together – Otto’s tall, slender physique, blue eyes and perfect oval face.

Otto was a doctor who had dedicated his life to geriatric medicine. Gentle, compassionate, he was a man, well suited to his profession. Henry’s heart still lifted when Otto took his hand, or smiled at him with such kindness. He found Otto’s tenderness both endearing and sustaining.

Henry was less fond of the image that confronted him each morning in the mirror, although he would never admit it ... even to Otto. His upright bearing was meant to compensate for his lack of height, and to constrain his stout midriff, but Henry feared it did neither.

Yet he was an extrovert, a barrister who dominated the courtroom with confidence and flair. His emotional intelligence enabled him to read people, a talent that came in handy when he cross-examined witnesses, who he often reduced to tears. One of his colleagues at the bar once

commented that Henry's performance in front of juries should be worthy of a legal Oscar if there were such a thing. Having learned discipline through military drill during his short time in school cadets, he was a determined man who knew how to get what he wanted.

Otto and Henry first met on the beach at Portofino. Henry had just graduated from Melbourne Law while Otto had finished his internship year at Charité Hospital in Berlin. The attraction was instantaneous. After a long-distance relationship of several years, while Otto qualified as a specialist in geriatric medicine, he emigrated to Australia.

They agreed that Otto would convert to Henry's faith of Progressive Judaism. That meant he would turn his back on Christianity, the church, its Friday fish fries, the bacon for breakfast and the wine with wafers on Sundays. They agreed their intended children should be brought up in a Jewish home.

They were lucky enough to be in the House of Representatives visitor gallery when the bill legalising gay marriage was passed on 7 December 2017. The next month, Henry and Otto took their own vows in front of Rabbi Gersh Lazarow at Temple Beth Israel in East St Kilda. Henry smiled at the memory.

'It's no laughing matter!' Otto barked across the dinner table. 'I hate the Nazis! I hate them! Hate them!'

Henry looked at his husband in shock before murmuring, 'So do I, Otto. So do I.'

'They filmed the documentary at the same time of the year,' Otto continued. 'It was a snowy morning on the 20th of January 1942.'

'Aha,' Henry replied, unsure where this was going.

'Fifteen men, eight of whom had doctorates, attended an invitation-only conference,' Otto said, 'at an elegant, opulent villa...'

'At Wannsee,' Henry concluded. 'Remember, we went there. Golf courses, the lake, leafy avenues ... 'I've seen photos of the building, but I don't think we visited it.'

'Apparently, in preparation for the conference, Adolph Eichmann calculated the number of Jews throughout Europe. In all, eleven million Jews were to be slated for death. Half were in countries under the direct control of the Reich, and the other half were in countries at war with Germany.'

'At least Eichmann got what he deserved when the Israelis caught up with him in Argentina,' said Henry.

'Yeah, twenty years later,' groused Otto. 'But in 1942 he was cracking jokes while planning mass murder. They sat around a big oak table while white-jacketed waiters plied them with brandy and cigars.'

'Evil bastards,' muttered Henry.

Otto nodded. 'And the meeting was presided over by Reinhard Heydrich, the head of the Reichssicherheitshauptamt, a mouthful that translates as Reich Security Main Office.'

'Heydrich got his as well later that year, didn't he?' asked Henry. 'I saw a film about it. *Anthropoid*, I think it was ... But why are you so interested in the Wannsee Conference?'

Otto forged on, oblivious to Henry's question. 'Heydrich opened with an account of the anti-Jewish measures taken in Germany since the Nazis' seizure of power in 1933. He announced that between 1933 and October 1941, 537,000 Jews had emigrated from Germany, Austria and

Czechoslovakia. But that wasn't enough. And Himmler had prohibited further Jewish emigration anyway.'

Henry looked at Otto in silence, feeling a niggling sense of disquiet over his husband's unusual behaviour.

'Heydrich announced that Jews would now be deported to the East for forced labour, but that wasn't enough.'

'Merely a step towards the final solution of the Jewish question,' Henry observed.

'No doubt about that. Remember that the Babi Yar massacre took place in September 1941 – 33,000 killed over three days at the ravine outside Kiev. And by January 1942, SS Einsatzgruppen had been shooting Jews throughout Russia for six months already.'

'I remember reading the Yevtushenko poem at uni,' Henry said, blinking as he recited the words of *Babi Yar*. "Today I am as old in years as all the Jewish people."

'So it's clear the orders came from the top,' said Otto, hesitating long enough to acknowledge Henry's poetic recitation.

'Yes, Hitler must have approved of what was going on. The problem was the shooting operations were slow and traumatic for the Einsatzgruppen troops. Poor dears,' said Henry with bitter sarcasm. 'Hope they all hanged themselves.'

'Indeed,' agreed Otto, 'but the fact remains there were simply too many Jews to shoot. The Nazis felt that they had to mechanise mass murder in order to achieve their goal of a Jew-free Europe. In December 1941, Hitler announced to the senior Nazi leadership a policy of total

annihilation. After Himmler met with Hitler, he noted in his appointment book: “Jewish question – to be exterminated as partisans.”

‘And what about Eichmann?’ Henry asked.

‘He knew all about it. The information was contained in the briefing paper Eichmann prepared for Heydrich before the Wannsee meeting. It called for able-bodied Jews to be separated by gender and transported to the East where they would work on roads and rail lines. The expectation was that most of these people would die from overwork and poor treatment. But the remainder ... the elderly and children ... were marked for death immediately. The only question was how.’

Henry filled his wine glass and took a long swig before muttering, ‘Evil beyond belief.’

‘Yes,’ said Otto. ‘The children had to be killed in order to cut off the “seed of a Jewish revival”, as they put it.’

Henry examined his wine.

‘Hope I’m not boring you.’ Otto fixed his gaze on Henry.

‘Not at all. What makes you ask?’

‘Just wondering. Your thoughts seem far away.’

‘Of course I’m interested. It’s just ... that this is all so terrible.’

‘But important,’ said Otto. ‘So, at Wannsee, Heydrich conveyed Hitler’s instructions to prepare a “total solution of the Jewish question”. It took only ninety minutes for the participants, who included bureaucrats from the transport and justice ministries, to endorse a plan to murder every Jew in Europe.’

'Is something bothering you, other than the current discussion about Nazis?' asked Henry.

Otto shrugged.

Henry had sensed something strange about Otto's demeanour. Now he thought about it, there had always been something reserved about Otto, throughout their entire relationship and more so during their marriage. He hadn't wanted to admit it, but it often made him feel uneasy. He'd tried to ignore it, but it had always been there, just under the surface.

Meanwhile, Otto was continuing with his disquisition, heedless of Henry's knitted brow and solemn face.

'The participants at the Wannsee Conference were informed of extermination methods that had already been tried and found wanting. The gas vans at Chelmno proved less than efficient at the sort of mass murder Heydrich was envisioning.'

'Otto, this is all too depressing. Can we change the subject, perhaps?' Henry pleaded. 'You've made me lose my appetite.'

'No we can't!' bellowed Otto as Henry shrank back in his chair in shock. 'And I'm appalled that you're thinking about food when we're discussing this!'

'You mean you're discussing it,' said Henry. 'I just wanted to eat dinner.'

'The Nazis were also murdering the Polish and Russian intelligentsia,' Otto said. 'Shortly after the invasion of the Soviet Union, the German army circulated the Kommissarbefehl, or commissar order, which called for the summary execution of all captured communist party members.'

'I know, I know all this, Otto,' Henry said quietly, but Otto persisted. 'Heydrich focused the discussion at Wannsee on the status of people who were half or quarter Jews under the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, and Jews married to non-Jews. After all, they'd had to define who was a Jew for the purposes of deportation.'

'The banal bureaucracy of mass murder,' muttered Henry.

'Quite,' agreed Otto. 'To widen the circle of victims, Heydrich ordered a rewrite of the laws so that people with two Jewish grandparents would be treated as Jews, and people with one Jewish grandparent would be treated as German. If a person was not Jewish, but was married to a Jew or lived in, or identified with, the Jewish community, he or she would be regarded as a Jew and condemned.'

'Presumably, that meant the slaughter of many people who never thought of themselves as Jewish,' said Henry.'

'Quite true,' Otto nodded. 'They used euphemisms to conceal what they were doing. Rather than words like shooting or gassing, they spoke of "sonderbehandlung", which translates as "special handling" but in reality, meant murder.'

'Vile assholes,' was all Henry could say.

'Heydrich addressed the conference for nearly an hour, apparently, followed by thirty minutes of questions and comments. Economics bureaucrat Erich Neumann argued for the exemption of Jews who were working in industries vital to the war effort and for whom no replacements were available. Heydrich assured him that this was already the policy; such Jews would not be killed.'

'They'd only be worked to death like dogs,' said Henry.

Otto lowered his head in agreement. 'Goering also wanted to save skilled Jewish workers. But SS Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler insisted that all Jews must be killed. And at Wannsee, Reinhard Heydrich insisted that Himmler's policy be put into action. A senior official from the office of the Governor-General for Occupied Poland, Josef Bühler, expressed hope that the killings would commence as soon as possible. He informed the attendees that the 2.5 million Jews in Poland could be murdered on the spot if they were declared unfit for work.'

'I've heard enough,' wailed Henry. 'Please let's talk about something else.'

'As the conference proceeded and the cognac flowed, the conversation around the table became more direct,' Otto continued like a man possessed, ignoring Henry's obvious distress.

'Euphemisms were discarded and the men began to compare different methods of murder using clear language. But as the confab wound down, Heydrich told Eichmann to make sure the minutes of the meeting did not include verbatim quotes. And before dissemination, the minutes were edited by Heydrich himself. But all in all, Heydrich was pleased with the meeting. He thought he might meet with resistance from some of the bureaucrats who attended. But from the Foreign Ministry to the Ministry of Justice, they all came on board.'

Henry's brow creased in a baffled frown. 'But, if the meeting minutes were written in opaque euphemism, how do we know all this?'

'Because the euphemisms weren't so opaque,' Otto explained. 'Most copies of the minutes were destroyed at the end of the war as participants sought to escape prosecution for war crimes. But in 1947, a copy was

found by a US prosecutor at Nuremberg in the files of the German Foreign Office.'

'Lucky the Germans are such fastidious record-keepers,' said Henry.

'True,' said Otto, 'but think of it this way. Heydrich didn't call the meeting to make new decisions on the Jewish question because mass killings of Jews were already underway. The extermination camp was under construction at Belzec at the time of the conference.'

'So why was the conference convened?' asked Henry.

'To determine the scope of deportations and ensure the fate of the deportees became an SS matter. Heydrich was determined to ensure the cooperation of the various departments by imposing his own authority on the various ministries and agencies involved in Jewish policy matters.'

'So what you're saying is that these bastards may have been mad as rabid dogs, but they weren't stupid,' said Henry.

'Not quite,' replied Otto. 'Heydrich was a mad dog, whose death couldn't come soon enough, but there were countless underlings who were prepared to accept his dictates. What the Wannsee Conference demonstrates so brutally is how far antisemitism had infiltrated the bloodstream of that most educated and sophisticated society – the same culture that produced Bach and Goethe also produced Himmler and Heydrich.'

'I still find it hard to imagine how such a horror could have happened,' Henry mumbled.

'Step by step,' replied Otto. 'It began once the Nazis came to power in 1933. They launched a massive propaganda campaign to convince Germans that Jews were racially inferior and verminous polluters of Aryan

blood who had to be eradicated. In September 1935, the Nuremberg Laws stripped Jews of their German citizenship and prohibited marriages or intimate relations between Jews and non-Jews of Germanic extraction.'

'Jewish property was confiscated and Jews were excluded from the professions and from universities.'

'Yes, yes, I know, of course I know all this, Otto.'

Otto rose from his seat and began pacing back and forth, speaking as if to himself. 'Holocaust survivor Joseph Wulf, a historian, proposed during the 1960s to turn Wannsee House into a Holocaust Museum, but the West German government couldn't be bothered. Wulf later killed himself, but his idea ultimately triumphed. On the fiftieth anniversary of the conference, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of January 1992, Wannsee House re-opened as a Holocaust memorial and museum.'

Henry's hands were trembling. He placed his right hand over his left and squeezed his fingers together. 'Otto, there's something going on here and you need to tell me what it is.'

Otto cast a sidelong glance at him. 'What do you mean?'

'Something's not right. I know you better than anybody. So what's going on?' pressed Henry.

A long, silence ensued and Henry could hear the patter of raindrops hitting the glass.

At last Otto spoke. 'It wasn't long before we were married,' he said, breathing hard as he wiped a welling tear from the corner of his eye. 'I finally worked up the courage to do some research on an ancestry website.'

Moments passed, but Henry let the silence be. 'I discovered that what I feared was true,' Otto said.

'What do you mean just after we were married?' Henry asked. 'That was five years ago! So what's this terrible secret you've been hiding from me all this time?'

Otto's chin trembled. 'My maternal grandfather was a member of the Hitler Youth and then a member of the SS.'

'Naw!' exclaimed Henry, shaking his head. 'There must be some mistake.'

'No mistake,' muttered Otto. 'I went through the process three times.'

'I'm so sorry, Otto. I know how proud I am of my grandfather fighting in North Africa with the 9th Australian Division; I can only imagine the pain of knowing your grandfather was in the SS. What kind of SS man was he? Was he in the Waffen SS?'

'Oh, no,' said Otto. 'My grandfather got nowhere near the front lines. With a PhD from the University of Munich, he was much too valuable to serve as cannon fodder. As a matter of fact, I suspect he may have attended the conference at Wannsee.'

'Well, that explains your obsessiveness,' snorted Henry. 'But it doesn't explain why you've been keeping it from me all this time.'

'Growing up, I knew my grandfather served in the war, because my mother told me,' said Otto, his voice barely audible. 'He was a cold and unloving man who was very suspicious of strangers.'

'Maybe he was afraid of ending up like Eichmann,' Henry snorted.

‘The Nazis were bastards. I’m not ashamed of being German, but I am ashamed of what my grandfather did and what my country did.’

Henry shook his head. ‘I don’t believe in intergenerational guilt so I don’t blame you for what your grandfather may have done before you were born. And I don’t understand why you never saw fit to tell me.’

Otto shrugged. ‘I guess I was ashamed.’

‘It’s a question of trust,’ replied Henry. ‘The fact that you kept this family secret from me is distressing. I can’t help wondering what else you might be hiding.’

‘But ...’

‘Right now, there’s nothing you can say that will make this better.’

Henry gathered his plate and empty glass and left the table without looking back. He called over his shoulder to Otto, ‘I’m sleeping in the guest room tonight. Right now, all I know is that trust is like a piece of glass. Once it’s shattered it’s damn near impossible to restore.’

**Bernard Marin AM**

**11 November 2022**

*No part of this story may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.*

*The only exception is by a reviewer, who may quote short excerpts in a review.*