

West Berlin 1988

By Werner Zellien

Villa Wannsee – Melancholy Grandeur

A midsummer's day in West Berlin 1988. On the way to the Villa Wannsee, I drove past children strolling down to the bathing beach at Wannsee. Sailboats, paddleboats, ice cream, the splendour of the sun and the many trees. Berlin was flaunting itself in those weeks as the cultural capital of Europe. The previous year, the city, including its eastern part, had marked its 750th anniversary with some success. The myth of Berlin was being celebrated. No one seemed unhappy. That morning, sitting in Café Einstein on Kurfürstenstrasse, I had read a brief report about the decision of the Berlin senate to declare the Villa Wannsee a public memorial. Essentially, it was a good decision. Even so, it electrified me, for in recent years the *genius loci* of historically important buildings had all too often been so transformed by renovation work and the installation of shelves and cupboards that hardly anything remained of their original character.

Once, many years ago I had stood in front of these wrought-iron gates. Then, as now, they were closed. And so I set about looking for a gap in the fence. The Max Liebermann Villa offered no opening. Hadn't Max Liebermann said, on seeing the Nazis' torch-lit parade through the Brandenburg Gate in 1933 that he could never eat the amount he wanted to puke¹? Only after exploring the walled estate from the lakeside did I find a section of fence that I could climb over with camera and tripod. With hunched shoulders I walked through the unkempt park round to the front. On the driveway was a man watering the straggling roses. He shook his head at me. But after I had explained my purpose, he was willing to let me inside. Actually I didn't say much more than that I had an assignment, one that, admittedly, I had given myself.

So there I was on the forecourt to the villa. I had no idea what awaited inside. Slowly, my heart slithered into my boots. The blinds were down, it would be dark in there. Along the edge of the roof were baroque-style cherubs, while in front of the entrance was a birdbath adorned with similarly baroque-like cherubs of carved marble. Under this roof, the organisation and implementation of the "Final Solution" that was already underway was discussed, recorded by Eichmann; and sealed with cigars and cognac.

What was I doing there? What was the big idea? Wasn't there enough historical material to prove, to illustrate, the way things were? Was it my job to show what happened? There I stood, facing this historic witness of a German history rich in low points. While waiting for the friendly caretaker to finish watering the roses, I stood with my back to the wrought-iron gates, studying the villa. In the 43 years since the German defeat, the villa had suffered a chequered history. First, the Red Army occupied it. Following the division of Berlin into four sectors, it was taken over by the American army. From 1947 to 1952 the building was used by the August Bebel Institute of the Berlin SPD, which duly handed it over to the municipal district of Neukölln to serve as a school camp until 1988.

The story of the man behind the memorial to the Wannsee Conference, the Jewish resistance fighter and Auschwitz survivor Joseph Wulf, is harrowing². He survived the camps having managed to escape during one of the death marches. After 1945, he initially lived in Poland, before emigrating to Paris, where he founded the *Centre pour l'Histoire des Juifs Polonais*. In 1952 Joseph Wulf moved to Berlin. In the years that followed, he published numerous books on National Socialism. His many attempts to have the Villa Wannsee turned into a memorial were invariably rejected by the Berlin Senate. Even his books only found recognition years after his suicide. As a historian, trained rabbi, resistance fighter, and Auschwitz survivor, he was accused of lacking the appropriate objectivity the subject required.

Why I am here

I was born six years and 10 months after the fall of the Nazi domination. Bad-tempered, foul-mouthed, violent men who smoked noxious smelling cigars and constantly jeered at the new democratic society haunt my earliest memories. Some of them had wooden hands covered in black leather. Others sat in narrow wooden boxes on wheels. We children had to be careful not to come within reach of their crutches. Some were blind; others had disfigured faces, yet others had fearsome scars on their various extremities, which we tried surreptitiously to observe during visits to the swimming pool. Sometimes I preferred to let my friends make fun of me rather than enter the water with such men.

In the houses and flats of certain friends the walls were hung with garish oil paintings, produced during the Nazi era, glorifying scenes from World War I; family portraits drawn and painted in the style of Arno Breker; when the alcohol flowed, we had to be extra careful. The

war was not a subject for discussion, only for whispers. When an inebriated ex soldier made too much noise, the others would quickly silence him. Most sinister of all were the silent women with severe hairdos and stony expressions that betrayed no remorse. The children were sent out, and secrets flourished. There was the First but not the Second World War. Once I heard the phrase 'whipped to death'. It wasn't until years later that I heard the story of the farmer's wife who, in the lawless days between the flight of the SS units and the arrival of the American troops, was whipped to death by those who had toiled for her as forced labourers. How much do you have to torture humans for them to take such terrible vengeance? As a young boy, I leafed through books about World War I. The pictures of tanks, driving across trenches, turning while over them so as to bury the soldiers beneath; the dead horses with gas masks, dogs with explosives strapped to their backs, the bizarre skeletal remains of woods, the aerial photographs of apocalyptic landscapes full of craters, the flattened relief of a man on the road; I knew what horror was before I learnt the word. A frequently recurring dream: a muddy landscape beneath a blood-red sky, in front of me a lake of foaming, black blood. The gas is coming. I have to hold my breath while fleeing along the road behind me. I feel the cold gas touch my face and my heart beats like crazy. Unable to scream for help, nothing more than a whistle emerges from my throat. And thus I developed asthma. Never since have I felt so abandoned by God and the world as I did as a child waking in the night, gasping for breath. Thin and short-winded, I was always the runt of the litter when playing with friends.

My schooling was entrusted to former teachers fetched out of retirement, or younger ones returning from the war. In their estimation, a democratic society was a weak society. Thus we children were able to enjoy the benefits of a rigorous even military-style education. In keeping with the rules of the Hitler Youth, we should be as fast as greyhounds, as hard as steel, and as tough as leather. Military is perhaps an exaggeration, but standing to attention, a controlled gaze, and killing were all taught in school. After the corn harvest in midsummer, the whole class, equipped with spades from home, were ordered out into the fields. In long rows, we had to comb through the stubble in search of hamsters, which we would dig out and kill. The sharp tips of the stubble poked through my sandals until my feet bled. Warily, I dragged my spade around only occasionally striking at the earth. All around I heard the clamour of the other children and the commands of the teacher; in fact he was just a head forester with a penchant for shooting wild boar and deer in the early winter. Behind us came a line of girls, whose task it was to collect in bags the ears of corn that had been missed during the harvest. Again, I endured jeers, because my spade wasn't bloodied. In late autumn, there was a potato holiday. The school classes were

assigned to farmers, so that we could pick even the smallest potatoes from the loamy soil with our fingers. It wasn't really all that bad, except that it was all enacted in the tone of the parade ground and, of course, without empathy. On finishing a session of monotonous work, the adults would speak of doing something to the point of 'getting gassed'. As a child, I was determined that, one day, I would understand what they were talking about and why everything here was so out of joint. Practically every child suffered to some extent under his or her sometimes excessively authoritarian parents and teachers. And from sheer fear of a thrashing, each of us walked with a stoop.

The American soldiers brought joy, fun, and music to our little town. They drove through streets bespattered with cow dung in what seemed to me gigantic pink convertibles. The soldiers came from another world, another planet. I admired them. A different kind of dream seemed possible.

This small Westphalian town, a town like so many others, founded around 1100, firmly in the hands of Jesuit Catholics, is a town of farmers, traders, artisans and the clergy. By the early 18th Century, only Bavaria could compete with Westphalia for the number of witches burnt in public.³ In the nearby Wewelsburg, which Himmler would later declare the centre of the world for the thousand-year Reich; there was a torture chamber. There, under the supervision of pious churchmen, the alleged witches were tormented into making their so-called confessions. After the pogroms of 9 November 1938, forty-two Jews were imprisoned in the very same cellar prior to their deportation to Buchenwald. As a young girl, and later as well, my mother greatly regretted not being able to buy camelhair coats and patent leather shoes in the Jewish shops. She was eight years old in 1938, when those shops were plundered and the synagogue burnt to the ground. The following year, her father, a civil servant, was drafted into the army for the attack on Poland.

In June 1941 he served as a customs officer during the invasion of the Soviet Union, but was subsequently posted to Bialystok. The customs authorities had the task of managing the looting of Poland. On 27 June 1941, combat troops, who had already massacred over a thousand members of the Jewish population, herded more than seven hundred Jews into the Bialystok synagogue, which they set alight with hand grenades, and then shot anyone who tried to flee from the burning building. My mother's father was said to be a very gentle man who never raised his hand against her. Nobody, but nobody, can convince me he knew nothing. Everyone, except of course for those who were unfortunate enough to have a non-Aryan grandmother, or to be politically or artistically on the wrong side, or gay, had accommodated themselves quite

comfortably. Under the Nazis life was good, for the non-Nazis as well as the Nazis. There was no end to the eulogizing of the *Volksgenossen*; even once the war was over. It wasn't Adolf who was to blame, but all the little Hitlers. With the wages of a Wehrmacht soldier, the house on the new estate constructed as part of the Nazi building programme for this small Westphalian town was soon paid off. On home leave, in the trains, the latest photos from operations in the east were passed around. Everyone wanted to be kept up-to-date.

Six months after the pogrom in Bialystok and four months after the massacre at Babi Yar, in which over thirty thousand Jews were shot dead, the conference at the Villa Wannsee took place.

The Pictures

While waiting for the friendly caretaker to finish watering the roses, I prepared myself for the photographic work. The first picture should be of the façade with the driveway and the roundabout, the second of the entrance with the birdbath in the foreground and the stupid spruce that grew between them. But to slow down a bit. Why stupid spruce? Well, didn't children from the inner-city district of Neukölln spend their holidays here? Isn't it quite conceivable that this spruce was decorated for them at Christmas time? I should try to remain objective. But objectivity calls for a degree of impartiality and even of ease. These were things I didn't have. On the other hand, there is no objectivity in photography anyway. What is photographed is reduced, turned into history. The nature of photography has close affinities with dying. I also felt an inward numbness; where the villa was concerned my thinking became lethargic. I would have to rely on my eyes, my substitute brain; it would have to enter this box, turn on the few still-functioning electric lights and draw up the blinds, bit by bit, just enough to make the rooms clear.

At the risk of sounding trivial, I should describe how it was when I entered the villa. A cool breeze met me. It was a long time since anyone had heated or aired the place. It always takes a long time for a house with thick walls to adjust to the outside temperature. Hovering above me inside the entrance hall was the upper landing with its balustrade, which was reached via a curved staircase that ran along the rear wall. Standing behind the balustrade, one could make proclamations, stretch out an arm, intone greetings, or dismiss an intruder with a perfunctory gesture. From the moment I step inside the villa, the nature of the architecture has me in its grip. To the left of the base of the staircase, at the centre of the picture, the high

entrance to the rooms, and to the left of this, a narrow, upright, chipboard box. What is that doing there? Evidently, renovation work has already begun, and the box is there to protect its contents against careless humans, heavy tools, dust and dirt. But what am I supposed to do with it? As a maker of pictures, I have the sound of four instruments in front of me; the upper landing, the staircase that leads out of the picture to the right and behind me – the latter part of which, of course, I cannot see, although I feel it – the high doorway with its flanking columns, and the empty box. And here it is, this box standing in front of me, this void, that which is unknowable, unnameable, the nameless, and the absence in the box. Through the high doorway, a view into the hall, along the axis, central to which is a high, arched window, and divided with a cross. The light reflected on the floor, like a stretched out shroud. Didn't Büchner, in a tavern scene in his *Woyzeck*, give one of the drunken soldiers the words: "Let's piss over the cross, so that a Jew dies"?⁴

Next picture: to the left of the box, a passage leading off to two further corridors. Where do they take us? This is just a house, so what am I afraid of? This image is dominated by the passage that marks its centre, which is smaller than the box that stands to one side. Oppressive shadows of the stairs above, like a wafting black light clutching at what little grey there is. It is a landscape. Then two views back towards the elegantly curved staircase. Already, here in the entrance lobby, I start to turn on the spot, describing a kind of inner rotation, already aware that I am venturing into something labyrinthine. I resolve not to lose my bearings. But my worries are exaggerated, since the conference room could be felt from everywhere like an area of low pressure.

In the shadows beneath the stairs, stools stand stacked on top of each other. On the underside of one stool in a child's best handwriting are the words "Liebe Nicht" (Love Not), certainly from the days when the villa was used as a school camp. Happy days.

Then the walk along the corridor. The creak of the oak parquet floor; on the wall to the right, a cloakroom mirror, but concealed behind a wooden board. A black mirror. On the opposite wall, traces of coat hooks. In the centre, at the end of the corridor, two arched doorways. Passing through the first, one emerges from grey surroundings into a small, brightly lit vestibule, but which is only for passing through. From there one steps into darkness. What do the door arches remind me of?

From the hall, the view back to the front door. I sense that the conference room is to my left. Later. Not yet. First I have to study the hall. So I look up. In the angles where the walls meet the ceiling are Jugendstil reliefs of dancing maidens. Standard stuff. From the centre of the

ceiling hangs a chain, which almost certainly once supported a chandelier. Now a dusty, dud light bulb hangs by a cable that ends in a twist.

Two rooms further on, the view back through a sliding door. The view is through the doorway and down the hall to the entrance of the conference room. I take two pictures from there; the first with the sliding door half shut, as if an eye patch were blocking the view, the second with eyes wide open.

In this room, I open the blinds of one window and turn on the lights. Mirrored bulbs in a richly carved coffered ceiling. A detail picture of the double doors, looking down at the inlays and a lion's-head door handle. The brass lion has been rubbed smooth; I don't touch it.

Then I glance through those same double doors. There I see myself and my tripod for the first time reflected in the window opposite. In itself, nothing unusual, although in this place it serves to confirm me as a part of the whole. To the left of the window stand empty bookshelves. Instead of books one sees the back panel littered with sgraffiti. What noble books, law commentaries by crafty Nazi legal advisers, or perhaps literary works from Germany's oh-so-rich culture may once have stood here? Photography offers the possibility of selecting details. So I lay a white arm of the swastika around the shelf.

I am moving ever further from the conference room. More views of rooms with bare walls, ornate stucco ceilings, on which again and again one finds maidens dancing and satyrs blowing their flutes. And every now and then a glimpse of the park surrounded by a seemingly impenetrable wall of high trees and shrubs.

All at once I'm in the kitchen. Quiet, my heart, it's just a kitchen. Stainless steel work surfaces, blue and white, hand-painted Delft tiles, the door to the staff room has lost its handle, a view onto the forecourt, so one can see who is coming, grey walls tiled to high above the floor, a section of black rubber hosepipe, a telephone, barred window; were they afraid of burglary, of food thieves? What went on in here? Nothing, absolutely nothing. They prepared food here. It's a big kitchen, where you could cook for many people. You couldn't take a shower here, you could only cook. From the kitchen you enter the antechamber of the conference room. This means that the orderlies and the cooks were in the room next door. We can assume they could hear. Only the minutes of the conference, words formulated by Eichmann and undersigned by Heydrich, have survived. What conversations led up to those records we do not know. No one has ever admitted to knowing, or talked about it on the basis of direct recollection. Is it possible that I can't go on? I'm cold. Outside the dry, warm summer air would embrace me.

On my way home, the Avus motorway blurred before my eyes. Later, in order to do something enjoyable, I took pictures of white lilies in the evening light. The images turned out merely sad.

The next day I stood in the conference room. A pleasantly proportioned room, high-coffered ceilings, plaster reliefs of dancers as before. The adjacent orangery, or conservatory, is separated off according to an almost churchlike division of the space, behind a triptych-like portal, of which the higher, arched middle section is glazed. Here I stand on the parquet flooring, where the proud builder of the house might once have waltzed with his wife, where the boots of Red Army soldiers and American GIs probably made the woodwork creak, where children from one of Berlin's deprived districts might have played table tennis on rainy days, and where in January 1942 fifteen top officials of the Third Reich took their places around a long table. This, then, is where some of the most notorious criminals from German history sat; army officers with doctoral degrees, legal experts and civil service cynics, who, in harmonious spirit and without much ado, decided on a procedure for the physical extermination of Europe's Jews. More precisely, that extermination had long since been decided, for it was spelled out in the party programme it was the Führer's will. And of course, those who wanted to move up in the world were eager to do their bit. What was it doing to me, standing there? I felt numb, unfathomably ashamed and furious. But I was not alone in the room. In the glass of the triptych, I could see my reflection, a vague shimmer, like a silhouette, like one of Friedrich's figures contemplating the moon or the sea of fog.⁵ Welcome to the romantic era. Can I take this picture? Yes, here I stand confronting myself, yet at the same time I am within myself and am part of the room. If I don't take this picture, then none of the others will be worth a thing, and besides, the persistent question of who took the photo will then be answered.

The conservatory contains a historicised marble relief depicting a triumphal procession from antiquity. The naked Hercules with his club and lion skin over his shoulder follows a flute player and a female dancer ecstatically beating a drum. Below is a washbasin. At his trial in Jerusalem, Eichmann testified that, after the conference, at which all were in agreement, he felt like Pontius Pilate, who sought to wash his hands of guilt.

Then three pictures through the windows of the conference room. A small football pitch, views of the garden through the grid of windowpanes and my lowered gaze. In the next room, a fireplace hidden behind a wooden panel. On the wooden panel, the number 18. Above the fireplace a bad, pseudo-romantic painting. Two figures standing on the arch of a bridge that leads across a mountain stream towards a kind of church in absurdly distorted perspective. Is this

the fireplace around which the Nazi overlords enjoyed their cognac and cigars having successfully concluded their conference?

The view from the window of this room includes pine trees overgrown with ivy, laburnum, and the ugly limestone paving on the terrace. Obscured, but just visible, the severed tail of a marble lion. If it wasn't the shockwaves of nocturnal air raids that blasted the tails off the horses and lions, then they must have troubled the occupying soldiers. For someone had smashed out the teeth and knocked off the tails from these sculptures. On the lower garden level, I positioned myself in front of one wall that lay in shadow so that a dandelion formed the eye in the shadow of the lion on the upper wall.

The last picture in this series of 40 pictures is the small alley of chestnut trees in the park. One of the trees is my friend, for stepping out of line.

I then developed the films. Even so, they remained in my archive for months before I took them into the darkroom.

In my beloved German language there is no other word that stirs in me such revulsion, as does the word Nazi. It begins with a more or less nasally hummed N; this opens into an A, which is followed by a slight pause, almost enquiring, which is abruptly terminated by the lightning hack of the ZI. A self-destructive word. Repulsive.

Has there ever been a similar case in the history of mankind, of an entire generation and the one that follows it simply waiting for their parents or grandparents to die at last? I have seen them, people with faces of stone, barely able to make it to a funeral, whose tears when they wept were shed for their own fate. Their fate was that, as children, they dearly wanted to love their parents, to respect rather than fear their father, to be protected by their mother, who time and again betrays her children to their father for punishment. Thanks to all these sad people, Germany is now an utterly different country. The few idiots who still succumb to Nazi propaganda are small in number and under control. ??????????????????Even so, the fact that Nazi propaganda finds adherents even in countries like the United States gives us reason to be vigilant.

Some remarks on the title “Villa Wannsee – Melancholy Grandeur”

In the history lessons of my schooldays I learned more about ancient Germanic tribes and the Roman Limes, than about the Nazi era. And yet, the curriculum demanded that an account be given. One day, without warning, without preparatory lessons, we pupils between the ages of 13 and 16 were shown the original film footage of the liberation of Bergen-Belsen. Some of my classmates clammed up entirely, some vomited, while others giggled hysterically. I was one of those who affected a ‘Nothing new to me’ attitude. In the years after finishing school, I immersed myself in the history of the period. One thing that struck me in particular in the seventies was the immense ambivalence with which my generation defined its relationship to America. On the one hand, all relevant trends hailed from the USA, on the other, it was typical for political demonstrations to deride the United States by comparing it to the SA and the SS. Around that time I read the opening statement⁶ that Robert H. Jackson, chief prosecutor at the Nürnberg war crimes trials, delivered to the court in November 1945. This document contains a wide-ranging account of the Nazi era. In an almost modest, restrained, yet crystal-clear legalese, it describes in detail the gradual transformation of the German democratic state to a torture chamber operated by a gangster cartel. It describes how an initially internal war was carried over into the neighbouring states. It describes how the defendants organised their lives with eager obedience. It is great literature, the language borne up by both objectivity and lamentation. A couple of years later, Eugene Gerhart reports Jackson reminiscing about the trials: “Describing its setting he said: ‘The proceeding itself was invested with a certain melancholy grandeur both from its nature and from the character of the parties.’”⁷

In order to perpetuate the name of Robert Houghwout Jackson, whom I esteem so highly, I have taken the liberty to quote him.

¹ "Ich kann nicht so viel fressen, wie ich **kotzen** möchte." – from his home, Palais Liebermann at the Pariser Platz, Max Liebermann was watching Hitler's torchcourse through the Brandenburg gate; *quoted from Bernd Küster: Max Liebermann - ein Malerleben. Hamburg: Ellert & Richter 1988, S. 216.*

² Joseph Wulf's Initiative and the Inauguration of the Memorial Site, 1965-1992

The historian Joseph Wulf, a Jewish resistance fighter and survivor of Auschwitz, published the first comprehensive documentations on the NS regime available in Germany. In 1965 he strongly suggested to establish a documentation center in the villa. Wulf gained worldwide prominent supporters, but the Berlin Senate was not prepared to make the building available. In 1974, Wulf committed suicide. In the 1980s, his ideas were taken up again. Gerhard Schoenberner, a pioneer in publishing on NS crimes in Germany, was commissioned by the Berlin Senate to prepare the memorial and the permanent exhibition.

Information taken from the website of *Haus of the Wannsee Conference*:

<http://www.ghwk.de/engl/history.htm>

For further studies:

<http://www.zeitgeschichte-online.de/alg-agg/>

³ <http://www.theology.de/themen/hexenverfolgunghexengedenkstaetteninwestfalen.php>

<http://www.wewelsburg.de/en/index.php>

⁴ Georg Büchner *Gesammelte Werke, Dantons Tod, Woyzeck, Leonce und Lena, Lenz, Der Hessische*

Landbote W. Goldmann Verlag München, Band 395, chapter: *Wirtshaus (Tavern)* page 157,

Original quote: "*Zum Beschluß, meine geliebten Zuhörer, laßt uns noch übers Kreuz pissen, damit ein Jud stirbt! (Unter allgemeinem Gejohle erwacht Woyzeck und rast davon.)*"

My translation: "*In the end my beloved audience, let us piss over the cross, so that a jew dies! (Woyzeck awakens under the overall howling and storms off)*"

⁵ Caspar David Friedrich * 5. September 1774 in Greifswald; † 7. Mai 1840 in Dresden)

Early Romantic period in painting; see

"*The wanderer above the sea of fog*", self portrait 1818 Kunsthalle Hamburg and

"*Two men contemplating the Moon*", 1819 Gemälde Galerie Dresden

⁶ <http://www.roberthjackson.org/the-man/speeches-articles/speeches/speeches-by-robert-h-jackson/opening-statement-before-the-international-military-tribunal/>

for further research:

<http://avalon.law.yale.edu/default.asp>

⁷ Eugene C. Gerhart in *America's Advocate: Robert H. Jackson*, Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, (1958), Chapter: "War and the Rule of Law", p.441. Quotation from Rep, N. Y. S. Bar Assoc., Vol 70 (1947), p.147.