JEWISH REVIEW
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Crime Scene with a View

By **Benjamin Balint** April 14, 2026

“On the Roof of Himmler’s Guesthouse. The U.S. Army in 1945 in Wannsee”

House of the Wannsee Conference Memorial

Exhibition open until June 30.

> “All the chaps that were at Wannsee when the Jewish question was settled. We never laid hands on the half of them.”
> —George Steiner, *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.*

On the afternoon I visited the villa at the Wannsee last June, the lake was in full summer persuasion mode: sailboats gliding, lawns clipped into a serenity that borders on provocation. The house itself, built in 1915, belongs to a familiar European genre, the kind that suggests permanence, order, good taste; a place meant for leisure and cultivated conversation. And then, with the slightest nudge of historical awareness, the illusion collapses. The villa reveals itself for what it also is: a crime scene with a view.

It was here, on January 20, 1942, that fifteen senior officials of the Nazi regime gathered to coordinate the bureaucratic mechanics of the “Final Solution.” The meeting lasted roughly ninety minutes. At his trial in Jerusalem in 1961, Adolf Eichmann—who recorded the minutes—recalled that it was “conducted quietly and with much courtesy, with much friendliness. . . . The waiters served cognac, and in this way it ended.” The protocol of that meeting, its sole surviving copy discovered in 1947 by the Nuremberg prosecutor Robert Kempner, has since become one of the most chilling documents of the twentieth century: orderly, polite, and devastatingly efficient.

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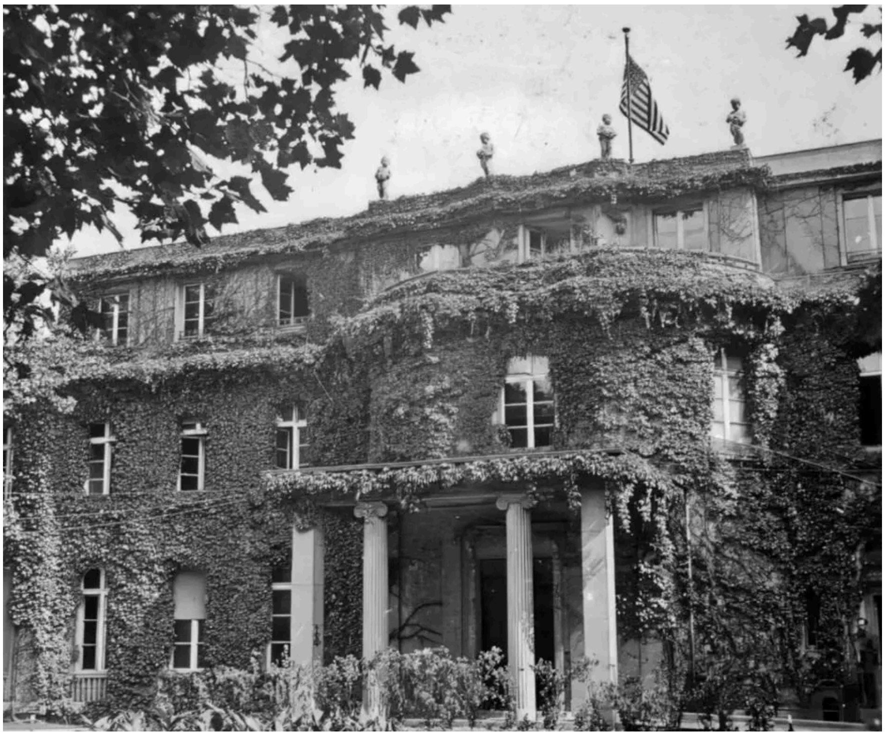
I was there to see the opening of an exhibition called “On the Roof of Himmler’s Guesthouse. The U.S. Army in 1945 in Wannsee.” Its title points to a photograph: the villa’s familiar façade, ivy climbing the walls, and above it, on the flat roof, the American flag unfurled.

The man behind the Rolleiflex camera was Fritz Julius Traugott. Born in Hamburg in 1919, he was a German Jew who had fled to New York in 1938, became an American, joined the U.S. Army, and returned to Europe in uniform. In the summer of 1945 he was billeted, of all places, here.



Wannsee villa, August 1945. (Photo by Fritz Traugott).

Even now the image is a kind of rebuke. The place where Reinhard Heydrich and his colleagues had arranged the administrative fate of millions became, for a moment, a stage for an American flag and a refugee’s audacity. But the exhibit’s power lies in resisting the temptation to let the symbolism do all the work. It insists on the human scale: the moral vertigo of living inside a building whose beauty had been conscripted into atrocity.

Traugott was one of the Ritchie Boys, the German-speaking intelligence soldiers trained at Camp Ritchie, Maryland, many of them Jewish immigrants. Their work was rarely glamorous: interrogations, document analysis, psychological warfare, the slow extraction of truth from men trained to varnish it. They moved with the advancing armies, collecting information from prisoners of war, then, after surrender, turning their attention to the identification of perpetrators and the scaffolding of what would become the postwar legal reckoning.

The phrase “Ritchie Boys” can mislead: it sounds like a club, a nickname too jaunty for what it names. In fact it was an apparatus—an American improvisation made under pressure—built around the recognition that language is a weapon, and that refugees know what a regime sounds like when it lies. Some 19,000 servicemen passed through Camp Ritchie's intensive eight-week training course. They were forbidden—by order, and then by habit—from telling even their families what they did. A classified postwar assessment credited them with nearly sixty percent of the credible intelligence gathered in the European theater.

In April 1944, Fritz Traugott graduated second in his class at Camp Ritchie. On July 2, 1945, he entered Berlin with one of the first American advance detachments at the war's end: Mobile Field Intelligence Unit #2, a forty-seven-man team. Traugott and his team spent their first night camping out in the Grunewald forest, and the next day searching for a suitable place to house the larger unit.

In 1945 the Wannsee villa became a hinge between two worlds: one that had used paperwork as a weapon, and one that meant to turn it into evidence. The Ritchie Boys occupied the villa from July to September of that year.

The exhibition's opening event followed the ritual of such occasions—readings, greetings, introductions—yet the atmosphere felt unusually charged. The curators, Deborah Hartmann and Judith Alberth, guided us through their choices. Daniel Benjamin, president of the American Academy in Berlin, spoke of cultural memory as a kind of second occupation. "The ghosts of the past are always with us here," he said. Christian Heldt, the German Foreign Office's special envoy for antisemitism and Holocaust remembrance, put it even more starkly, calling Wannsee a site to which the *Zivilisationsbruch*—the rupture of civilization—will remain "forever bound."

The Traugott children—Mark, Michael, and their sister Kathryn—spoke of discovering that their mother, Lucia, had preserved hundreds of letters and photographs from the war. They didn't know, for most of their lives, what a Ritchie Boy was. "Our father never spoke at length either about his wartime experiences or about the events that had preceded them." Yet the Traugott children also gave tribute to the satisfactions of the ordinary life their father lived after the war: "[He] gave up whatever boyhood dreams of his future he may have had but lived a satisfying and fulfilled life wrapped in the love of his wife, adoring children, and gratitude for the country that welcomed him."

After the opening, Mark emailed me: "My father never made any reference, oblique or otherwise, to what he did during the war," and suggested that this silence was "part of how he had processed and internalized the events of his early life." Michael put it differently: "We didn't know about PTSD at the time, but in contemporary terms I am sure he suffered from something like that." He added that his father "was a strong believer in democracy and supporter of free speech," active in the Urban League and civil-rights groups, and that "these were values he instilled in us."

The exhibit, in other words, stages more than the irony of refugees returning as interrogators. It's about family knowledge: what gets told, what gets buried, what returns in the form of paper.

Fritz Traugott's letters—written to Lucia in Providence, Rhode Island—are full of ordinary things: daily descriptions, jokes, endearments. That very normalcy is part of the shock. Traugott wrote on stationery from "the Führer's adjutant's office" that he found in the Reich Chancellery ruins. It's one thing to read the minutes of Wannsee and be chilled by their bureaucratic decorum. It is another to read an American Jewish husband writing on scavenged Nazi stationery, signing off with affection under a swastika.

The Ritchie Boys' work was not performed in the villa's drawing rooms, though they slept there, ate there, wrote there. Nearby, on Königsstraße, they ran interrogations aimed at prying loose identities, chains of command, the names of men who had been, until recently, confident in their own impunity. Traugott writes to his wife (August 10, 1945):

> I talk to these criminals every day, to Gestapo men, concentration camp guards—the female ones are the worst—to Nazi bigshots, and all the other dirty bastards. . . . So many things have been done by the Nazis, directly and indirectly, it can never be fixed again.

Fritz returned home in October 1945, to Lucia and their infant son Michael.

The story of the Ritchie Boys has tended to hover at the edge of the public imagination, surfacing intermittently as an aside in the biographies of men who later came to embody American power and culture, including Henry Kissinger; Richard Schifter, Reagan-appointed assistant secretary of state for human rights; the writer J.D. Salinger; Gardner Botsford, a longtime editor at the *New Yorker* magazine; and Victor Brombert, a scholar of comparative literature at Princeton. But the larger fact is stranger and more surprising than any single famous alumnus of Camp Ritchie: a "first university" of sorts for thousands of young émigrés and refugees, trained to read a uniform like a text, to hear the lie in an accent, to translate bureaucratic German back into the murderous meanings that would help make trials possible.

Ritchie Boys trained in interrogation techniques that they used to extract information from German POWs. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Army Signal Corps/ theritchieboys.com.)

As the ceremony gave way to evening, I watched kids dart through the sprinklers on the lawn, shrieking with the heedless joy of summer, their feet slapping the grass where history had left no visible scar. When I left Wannsee, I found myself thinking less about the villains than about the man who once stood on that roof and raised a flag. Flags do not raise themselves. Neither, for that matter, do democracies. They depend on effort, on vigilance, on the maintenance of truth.

That, at least, is how Michael Traugott framed his father's legacy: a belief in democracy lived out quietly. At Wannsee the lake goes on shimmering. The house continues, at a glance, to look like a villa like so many others. And then you remember.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Benjamin Balint

Benjamin Balint is the author, most recently, of *Bruno Schulz: An Artist, a Murder, and the Hijacking of History* (W. W. Norton). He is a contributing writer to the Jewish Review of Books.