

# Presentation at UNH looks at those behind 'Final Solution'

By Mark Zaretsky



Photo: Mark Zaretsky / Hearst Connecticut Media

Hans Christian Jasch speaks at the University of New Haven Thursday in West Haven.

**WEST HAVEN — They were just ordinary, everyday Nazis, getting together at an old villa in the Berlin, Germany, suburb of Wannsee to come up with ways to solve a problem.**

It was January of 1942.

What the 15 men at Wannsee, along with others working before and after them, came up with has become known in the annals of history as “the Final Solution” — the solution to what the Nazis, who tended to use such sweepingly-sanitized euphemisms, called “the Jewish question.”

People “tend to look at them as ‘perpetrators,’” said Hans Christian Jasch, director of the Gedenk-Und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz — the Wannsee Conference House Museum — speaking about the participants at Wannsee to about 50 people Thursday at the University of New Haven.

But when you look closely at them, “They were ordinary men from very different walks of life and different religious backgrounds,” said Jasch, co-editor of a new book, “The Participants: The Men of the Wannsee Conference.”

Jasch described the book as “sort of small biographies of the 15 people who attended the Wannsee Conference,” which originally was to have taken place on Dec. 9, 1941 — two days after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and two days before Germany declared war on the United States — but was changed to Jan. 20, 1942.

The purpose of the book is to try to answer the questions, “Who were these ‘monsters’?” and “How did they come about?” he said.

As part of the book, Jasch looked at the people at Wannsee and found that their average age was just over 42 years old, he said.

They were mostly Protestants and mainly from Prussia. Most — 11 — came from a bourgeois background. Seven took part in World War I as soldiers. Ten of the 15 went to universities. Eight had doctorates. Nine had studied law. Only four were “early members” of the Nazi Party — and three joined as late as 1937, Jasch said. The book’s conclusion is that “the participants were typical, average representatives of the higher echelons of the (Nazi) regime” and German society, said Jasch.

While scholars are still learning about how the Nazi regime crafted what we now call the Holocaust, “We know that it was not simply a top-down process ... but relied on the conditions in different parts of Europe at that time,” as well as on the personal ideas of some of the perpetrators, he said. Long before they began executing Jews, gypsies, gay people and other people deemed undesirable, the Nazis began passing laws that gave them a “legal” framework within which to work — although mass executions began in countries to the East, such as Lithuania and the Baltic nations, much earlier and without benefit of such laws, he said. “The Holocaust is a modern crime. It’s a crime that exists on modern principles,” Jasch said. “The Holocaust in the West was organized in ‘legal’ terms,” although this was less the case in the East, he said. What was the Wannsee Conference and events leading up to it, such as passage of The Nuremberg Laws of 1935, about?

Among other things, they were about “defining Jews and depriving them of their rights,” Jasch said.

That happened incrementally. The Nazis did so by defining “who is an Aryan,” with rules that dictated that anyone descended from non-Aryan parents or grandparents — particularly if any of them were Jewish — was non-Aryan, he said. Jews in Germany at that time “were a small minority who were very well assimilated,” Jasch said.

But the Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor of 1935 prohibited marriages and extramarital relations between Jews and Germans. “You can see that this is an attempt to create second-class citizens” by defining “those of so-called ‘German blood’ and those who are not,” he said.

Germans were divided into four categories, depending on the religion of their grandparents, which “determined your possibilities to participate in public life,” whether they could go to universities or hold certain jobs, Jasch said. Before the Nazis arrived at the so-called “Final Solution,” there was discussion of “a territorial solution” such as sending Europe’s Jews to Madagascar or north Africa.

Before there was genocide, there were mass deportations, which began simply by driving Jews across the border to France in 1941, and progressed to creation of ghettos all over German-occupied Europe. There was a legal framework for the deportations, called the 11th Decree on the Reich Citizenship Law of Nov. 25, 1941, which specified that “a Jew who has his ordinary residence abroad cannot be a member of the German State” and further declared, “The assets of the Jew who loses his German Nationality by virtue of this decree are expropriated by the Reich when the loss of nationality occurs.”

Meanwhile, the seeds of genocide already had been sown with mass executions beginning in Russia, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. One of Wannsee’s attendees, Reinhard Heydrich, a high-ranking Nazi official who was chief of the Reich Main Security Office — and considered the main architect of the Holocaust — was tasked by Hermann Göring with coordinating the “Final Solution.” His job was to make a proposal to Göring, one of Adolf Hitler’s top deputies, as to how the “Final Solution” might work. Among the things scholars have found is that while the generally accepted figure is that 6 million Jews were among those who died in the Holocaust, the Nazis decided that 11 million Jews across Europe might be “taken into consideration” as part of the “Final Solution,” Jasch said.