Introduction

Why write another biography of a Nazi perpetrator? Why not instead write a biography of a *victim* of Nazi mass murder? The victims were almost always innocent and helpless, they could alter little about their fate and they possessed no means of influencing decision-making processes.[1] The mindset and conduct of someone who kills requires considerably more explanation than the mindset and conduct of someone who *is killed*. As the historian Timothy Snyder has noted, 'It is less appealing, but morally more urgent, to understand the actions of the perpetrators. The moral danger, after all, is never that one might become a victim but that one might be a perpetrator or a bystander.'[2] In view of the estimated total of between 200,000 and 250,000 Germans and Austrians – predominantly, though not exclusively, men – directly involved in the mass murder of European Jewry,[3] the selection of a single subject is neither an easy nor an obvious choice. Over the last two decades, there has been a boom in biographies of leading Nazis.[4] Only to a limited extent, however, has this trend extended specifically to front-line Holocaust perpetrators. Direct killers have not been studied as individual subjects in similar depth to the major figures. Alongside the studies of the leading architects of the Holocaust, Himmler, Heydrich and 'Gestapo' Müller,[5] we have only a small handful of individual biographical accounts of mid-level SS (Schutzstaffel, i.e. Protection Echelon) and police functionaries heavily involved in the genocide of European Jewry, for example, on Odilo Globocnik, Walther Rauff or Theodor Dannecker.[6] It remains unclear, however, to what extent the findings made about a perpetrator like Werner Best can be applied to *front-line* executors of the Holocaust, a group to which Best did not belong.[7] In Ulrich Herbert's landmark biography of Best, furthermore, Werner Best the person runs the risk of disappearing behind his status as a member of a generational category.[8]

Alongside the boom in biographies of leading Nazis, research into Nazi crimes has increasingly focussed in recent years on the mid- and lower-level perpetrators.[9] Frequently, the results of this research have taken the form of collective biographical studies[10] or collections of short biographical

sketches.[11] Despite their undeniable value, neither collective accounts nor collections of short sketches can replace in-depth individual biographies. As a result, we still lack biographies of many of the foremost protagonists within the SS, not least the Higher SS and Police Leaders, Heinrich Himmler's representatives in the German-occupied territories.[12] It can be observed furthermore that in scholarship on the Holocaust, there is a general dearth of biographies of SS officers who led commandos at the sites of mass murder.[13]

The lack of comprehensive individual biographies for direct perpetrators is particularly apparent when we look at the chiefs of the SS-Einsatzgruppen and their sub-units, the Einsatzkommandos and Sonderkommandos. In 2002, the historian Gerhard Paul noted that 'biographical portraits of individual commando chiefs are still rare'.[14] Well over a decade later, this remains true. Of the seventy-five men who commanded one of these groups or commandos in the German-occupied Soviet territories during the years 1941–1944,[15] biographies exist for merely three of them: head of Advance Commando Moscow (*Vorkommando Moskau*) within Einsatzgruppe B Professor Franz Alfred Six, commander of Einsatzgruppe B Arthur Nebe, and chief of Einsatzkommando 3 of Einsatzgruppe A Karl Jäger.[16] Ronald Rathert's treatment of Arthur Nebe's deployment in the East suffers considerably from the absence of any original documentation from the Einsatzgruppen or indeed from this five-month period *at all*, even though Rathert himself notes at one point that the almost daily incident reports compiled on the basis of reports sent back to Berlin by the Einsatzgruppen have been preserved intact.[17] Whilst Lutz Hachmeister's biography of Franz Six is altogether more comprehensive, Six's prominence was a result primarily of his position as Chief of Office II, later Office VII (Research on Enemies), in the Reich Security Main Office (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt*, or RSHA), just as Nebe is known first and foremost as the Director of the Reich Criminal Police (*Reichskriminalpolizei*).[18] Thus, whilst the third and most recently published of these three studies – Wolfram Wette's work on Karl Jäger – was marketed somewhat misleadingly as 'the first biography of a Nazi direct perpetrator in the field',[19] there is some truth in this claim, since Jäger (in contrast to Six and Nebe) was the subject of a biography primarily due to his activities in Lithuania as head of Einsatzkommando 3 between 1941 and 1943. Unfortunately, Wette's study suffers from a relative dearth of source material, which is limited to Jäger's SS personnel file, the notorious 'Jäger Report' and some survivor testimony, and which furthermore results in the exclusion of any coverage of Jäger's activity as an SS officer prior to his deployment in Lithuania or his role as a local police chief thereafter.[20]

In view of the aforementioned enormous number of direct perpetrators, why is this particular Nazi perpetrator – Alfred Filbert – the subject of this book? Although the historian Christian Gerlach counted him in 1999 among the 'most important leadership personnel' within the SS and police apparatus in German-occupied Belarus,[21] Alfred Filbert remains little known, even among subject specialists. Although he never joined the senior ranks of the SS, he nonetheless ended the war with the same SS rank as the far better known Adolf Eichmann.[22] As the subject of a biographical study, however, he is both interesting and important above all for two reasons. To begin with, as the first chief of Einsatzkommando 9 of Einsatzgruppe B, he was a particularly radical enforcer of the mass murder of Soviet Jewry and known within the Einsatzgruppe for being the first commander to also murder women and children. His conduct during the months June–October 1941 sheds light on the question – still contested by scholars – of orders for the murder of Soviet Jews and the expansion of these killings. The question of the timing of the issuing of orders to extend the murders to include *all* Soviet Jews and thus institute genocide can now in fact be answered for the first time, at least for Einsatzkommando 9.[23]

Second, Filbert's biography exhibits two unique features that are not in evidence for any other prominent SS officer. First of all, his own brother was imprisoned by the Nazi regime for expressing regret following the failure of the attempt on Hitler's life on 8 November 1939; he was subsequently incarcerated in a concentration camp and did not survive the war.[24] The fate of his brother became a constant and decisive factor in Filbert's post-war portrayal of himself as a victim. Moreover, I argue that his brother's arrest and imprisonment played a key role in motivating Filbert to actively participate in genocide. Second, Filbert portrayed an SS mass murderer, 'Dr S.' (i.e. himself – Filbert went into hiding after the war under the name 'Dr Selbert')[25] in the West German feature film *Wundkanal* (Gun Wound), which addressed the continuity of Nazi biographies in the Federal Republic of Germany. It was directed by Thomas Harlan, the son of Nazi director Veit Harlan, and premiered at the Venice International Film Festival in 1984. A documentary film *Notre Nazi* (Our Nazi) about the making of *Wundkanal* was shot simultaneously and is even more revealing than its inspiration.[26]

The life of Alfred Filbert spanned almost the entire twentieth century. His biography provides insights into the path to National Socialism taken by the so-called war youth generation (E. Günther Gründel) and the academic elite of the interwar years; the motivation of Nazi perpetrators for participating in mass murder and their involvement in the expansion of the same; the incorporation of Nazi criminals into post-war society in

the Federal Republic of Germany and their prosecution (or, in many cases, their non-prosecution) by the West German judiciary; as well as the self-perception and self-portrayal of the perpetrators in the years and decades after the war.

Despite his unique life, not a single monograph, article or book chapter existed on Alfred Filbert when work was started on this biography. Since then only two scholarly articles specifically addressing Filbert have appeared, and both of these were penned by the current author.[27] Both a cause and a symptom of this anonymity is the unfortunate yet repeated misnaming of Filbert in the literature. This trend was started by the historian Michael Wildt in his well-received study on the leadership of the Reich Security Main Office, *Generation des Unbedingten*, in which Filbert is incorrectly referred to throughout as 'Albert'.[28] Regrettably, this error has been perpetuated by numerous historians since Wildt.[29] There is a contemporary precedent for the misnaming of Filbert as 'Albert', namely some of the official correspondence from 1974/75 concerning his early release from prison. This can be traced back to an error made by someone on the staff of the mayor of West Berlin at the time.[30] An earlier and more public precedent for misnaming him also exists: at the time of his arrest in 1959, he was sometimes referred to in the press as 'Georg Filbert'.[31]

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One of the main questions I posed myself before embarking on the research for this book was the amount of original source material available on Filbert in light of his relative anonymity (though this should not be understood as a synonym for unimportance). In fact, for a mid-level Holocaust perpetrator and someone who remains, even for historians working in the field, relatively unknown, the source material is comparatively plentiful. One of the main sources used for this study are Filbert's trial records, comprising eighty-two files of defendant and witness testimony, prosecution and defence documents, and correspondence.[32] Naturally, testimony given in the framework of legal proceedings against Nazi perpetrators must be handled with great care – particularly that of defendants, from whom self-serving statements are to be expected.[33] With a total of six defendants and sixty-seven witnesses,[34] however, these documents contribute such a wealth of information that it would be foolish to overlook them as a historical source. If handled prudently and in conjunction with contemporary documentation, post-war testimony can provide important insights.[35]

Filbert's trial records were supplemented by documents from related legal proceedings,[36] but also by a substantial amount of contemporary

documentation compiled by numerous German institutions and agencies – including the Reich Security Main Office and the 403rd Security Division (to which SS-Einsatzkommando 9 was assigned for logistical purposes) – addressing the period of Filbert's deployment with Einsatzkommando 9.[37] Original source material from the years of Filbert's employment in the SD and the Reich Security Main Office both prior and subsequent to his stint in the occupied Soviet territories was also utilised.[38] Party and state documents from the Nazi period were supplemented by a thick file from Filbert's days as a legal trainee in the People's State of Hesse, his doctoral file from his studies at the University of Giessen and his student file from the semester he spent at the University of Heidelberg.[39]

Three different archives provided documentation from the years of Otto Filbert's persecution, particularly in Buchenwald concentration camp, namely the International Tracing Service Archives in Bad Arolsen, the Archives of the Memorial Site Buchenwald in Weimar and the Institute of National Remembrance in Warsaw.[40] Important documents stored in the Residents' Registration Archives of Bad Gandersheim in the federal state of Lower Saxony were utilised for tracing Filbert's years in hiding under a false name after the war.[41] Berlin's Tegel Prison, where Filbert served his term of imprisonment, no longer possesses any records on its former inmate. What they did at one time possess was either destroyed or, in the case of files considered to be potentially of historical interest or significance, passed on to the Regional Archives in Berlin.[42] The surviving files were also used for this biography. The aforementioned and many other records from a total of thirty-three archives in seven different countries were accessed for this book.

In addition, the substantial number of so-called ego documents available in the source material cited above was rounded off by two interviews with Filbert, the first conducted by the British psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Dr Henry V. Dicks in July 1969 during Filbert's imprisonment,[43] and the second carried out during the filming of *Wundkanal* and included in the documentary *Notre Nazi*.[44] I was fortunate enough to be granted my own interviews with Filbert's nephew Peter; the interpreter on the set of *Wundkanal*, Ursula Langmann; the widow of the director of *Notre Nazi*, Erika Kramer; and a survivor of the Holocaust in Lithuania, Fania Brancovskaya.[45] These interviews were supplemented by correspondence with Filbert's eldest son, Dieter, and Filbert's nephew Ralph (with the assistance of his wife, Erika).[46] Unfortunately (though understandably), Dieter Filbert did not feel comfortable being interviewed on the subject of his late father, and declined my request to this effect. The information provided by these eyewitnesses to the life of Alfred Filbert

nonetheless added much to the story told in these pages. When Filbert's widow died in 2003, the children cleared out their parents' apartment. No personal documents belonging to Filbert, such as letters or notebooks, were found. Thus, a self-contained collection of private papers belonging to Filbert evidently does not exist.[47] However, letters from Filbert himself and also from his father contained in other, aforementioned, archival collections were utilised for this book.

The main bulk of the archival material in German was supplemented by sources in Russian[48] and English. Published source material was consulted in German, Russian, English and French. Alongside the wealth of German-language literature, works in English, Russian, French and, to a considerably lesser extent, Italian were also drawn on. Survivor testimony was provided in Yiddish.

Once the research has been carried out, how should the historian approach the structuring of a biographical study? For assistance in answering this question, we can draw on the thoughts of the nineteenth-century Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, who wrote,

> It is quite true what philosophy says: that life must be understood backwards. But then one forgets the other principle: that it must be lived forwards. Which principle, the more one thinks it through, ends exactly with the thought that temporal life can never properly be understood precisely because I can at no instant find complete rest in which to adopt the position: backwards.[49]

Perhaps we, in hindsight, can succeed in understanding a person's life backwards by retelling it in the same way it was lived: forwards. As the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has noted, a human life constitutes a whole, a coherent and orientated ensemble. Like a story, a human life has a beginning and an end, and a chronological ordering of this life (in the form of a biography) is thus also a logical ordering.[50] This biography is therefore structured chronologically and expands on events, which combine to form sequences that allow for an intelligible analysis of relations and thus of the life as a whole. Of course, the chronological ordering is not in all cases strictly adhered to, as this – to borrow once again from Bourdieu – runs the risk of the narrative thread being lost.[51] Ultimately, however, we can, like Bourdieu, regard the pursuit of a chronological portrayal as inherent in the representation of life as history.[52] This realisation is also implicit in Kierkegaard's reflections on temporal life.

Although this biography covers the whole 85-year span of Filbert's life (1905–1990), the two longest chapters are those addressing his four-month stint as chief of a mobile killing squad in the German-occupied Soviet territories from June to October 1941. There are two reasons for this principle focus: first, the atrocities committed by Filbert during this

period were the reason for his arrest in 1959, for him spending a total of sixteen years in prison and for him being cast in the role of an SS murderer in the film *Wundkanal* in the 1980s. Thus, his function as commando chief at the age of 35/36 decisively shaped the remaining forty-nine years of his life. Second, major historiographical debates continue to surround aspects of the National Socialist mass murder of Soviet Jewry, not least the escalation of the killing to include women and children, in effect marking the transition to genocide. For these reasons, the months of June–October 1941 require even more in-depth treatment than the other periods of Filbert's life. As such, the chapters in question furthermore constitute a systematic and thorough portrayal of the activities of one of the sub-commandos of SS-Einsatzgruppe B during the first four months of the German-Soviet war.[53]

1 'I went to school with quite a number of Jewish co-religionists and never knew hatred for Jews'

Childhood, youth and early adulthood, 1905–1932

On 14 November 1903, the 24-year-old professional soldier Corporal (*Unteroffizier*) Peter Filbert of the First Grand Ducal Hessian Lifeguards Infantry Regiment No. 115 (*Leibgarde-Infanterie-Regiment (1. Großherzoglich Hessisches) Nr. 115*) married the 22-year-old Christiane Kühner, an ironing woman, in Darmstadt.[1] Both were Protestant, as were their respective parents, with the exception of Kühner's mother, Franziska Kühner, née Weiß, who was Catholic.[2] The Lifeguards Infantry Regiment No. 115, garrisoned in Darmstadt, had been founded on 11 March 1621 and was as such the oldest of all German infantry regiments (see Figure 1).[3]

At ten o'clock on the morning of 8 September 1905, Karl Wilhelm Alfred was born in Darmstadt as the youngest of the three children of Peter and Christiane Filbert.[4] Their first child, Lina (see Figure 2), had been born on 26 July 1902 – almost sixteen months before her parents married – in Heidelberg,[5] the birthplace of her mother.[6] Their second child, Alfred's older brother Otto (see Figure 3), had been born on 10 May 1904 in Darmstadt.[7] Alfred would spend the first six years of his life in the Darmstadt garrison of the Lifeguards, at which his father was stationed.[8] During this time his father was promoted to company sergeant major (*Kompaniefeldwebel*, also known by the slang term *Spieß*).[9] Filbert would later state, 'We had a good life then. Of course I wanted to become a soldier. [...] After all – the Guards! I was enthusiastic [...] as a child.'[10] In 1911, when Alfred was six, Peter Filbert was taken on by the postal administration as a telegraph inspector. This meant that the family had to leave Darmstadt and move to nearby Worms.[11] It was here that Karl Wilhelm Alfred, known simply as Alfred, went to school. After attending the junior school (*Mittelschule*) and the upper secondary school (*Oberrealschule*) in Worms, he left the latter with his secondary school certificate (*mittlere Reife*) in March 1922 and began an apprenticeship at the *Commerz– und Privatbank* in Mannheim on 1 April of the same year. During this time he lived with his parents in Worms.[12]

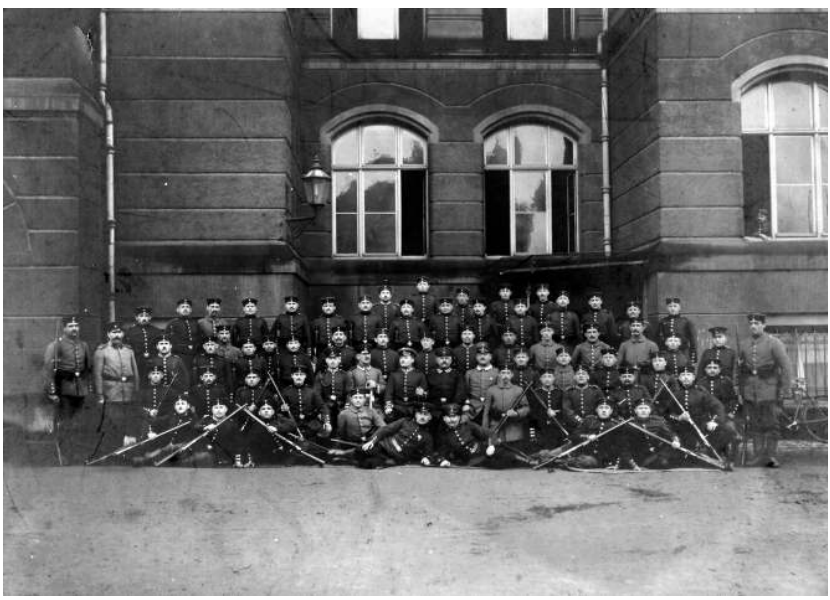

Figure 1 Members of the Lifeguards Infantry Regiment No. 115 posing in front of their Darmstadt barracks, around 1910. (Source: Hessisches Staatsarchiv Darmstadt, R 4, Nr. 31736 UF, 'Soldaten, gruppiert vor Fassade der Infanterie-Kaserne, Darmstadt, um 1910'. Photographer: Geschwister Strauss, Darmstadt. Reproduced with permission of the Hessisches Staatsarchiv Darmstadt.)

Filbert would later describe his upbringing as 'proper' (*korrekt*).[13] In his home and family life, he knew only 'command and order' (*Befehl und Ordnung*). Nevertheless, he regarded his father as kind and warm-hearted, looked up to him and missed him terribly as a child during his absence on active service, including during the First World War,[14] during which he served as a captain (*Hauptmann*) and company commander.[15] It was in fact left to his mother to be the disciplinarian; she, however, was 'too strict'. To prove his point, Filbert recalled that during one of his father's absences he had suffered a bad fall and lay on the ground yelling in considerable pain. His mother came out and beat him with a stick for weeping. Only then did she look at his leg and discover that it was broken. She then took him into the house. Filbert put his mother's strictness down in part to her being so busy looking after three children. It was his soldier father with whom Filbert identified and whom he would later attempt to make proud.[16] The historian Wendy Lower notes that whilst historians

Figure 2 Lina Filbert, elder sister of Alfred, about 1930. (Reproduced with permission of Peter Filbert, Weinheim.)

cannot put their subjects on the couch or into a laboratory, 'it is worth pointing out that most Germans of the Nazi era were raised in authoritarian households where regular beatings – certainly not inductive reasoning – were employed to discipline and motivate children'.[17]

Filbert would recall many years later that he and his older brother, Otto, had loved each other 'very much' as children.[18] Allowing for potential nostalgia, Otto was and would remain a key figure for his younger brother throughout the latter's life. In 1926, Otto Filbert left Germany for the United States, where he would remain for twelve years.[19] He departed