

Richard Sonnenfeldt's Memoir, WITNESS TO NUREMBERG

*John Q. Barrett**

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I am pleased to report the publication of an important and captivating memoir, Witness to Nuremberg (Arcade Press), by my friend Richard W. Sonnenfeldt.

During 1945-46, Richard Sonnenfeldt, age 22, was the chief interpreter on the U.S. prosecution team at Nuremberg. In this role, he served U.S. Supreme Court Justice Robert H. Jackson, the chief U.S. prosecutor, and his interrogation team as the lead interpreter in the pre-indictment interrogations of many imprisoned Nazis, including all 22 who became Nuremberg defendants.

Sonnenfeldt actually was much more than the U.S. prosecution's lead interpreter at Nuremberg. Because of his German and English language skills, his smarts and maturity, and his surprising rapport with and control over many of the prisoners, Sonnenfeldt actually became a *de facto* senior interrogator. His work and successes as interpreter and interrogator are recorded in the many thousands of pages of interrogation reports that are central parts of the Nuremberg trial and historical record. At the end of the Nuremberg trial year, Justice Jackson saw to it personally that Sonnenfeldt received a military decoration for his work.

But that's actually not the half of it. In outline form, this is Richard Sonnenfeldt's quite amazing life story:

- born Jewish, son of two physicians, in Gardelegen, a town in north central Germany, in 1923;
- happy, assimilated boyhood until Nazism and Nuremberg laws change everything, including shutting down his parents' work;
- getting out of Germany, along with his younger brother, to a boarding school in England;
- being interned in England as an enemy alien once active war with Germany started in 1940;

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- being shipped with other internees and German POWs from England to Australia;
- being paroled from Australia to India, and making it on his own there;
- getting passage from India to the U.S. (His parents, in a separate miracle, had made it from Germany to Sweden and from there to Baltimore);
- becoming, as his ship docked in New York, a media event because he was an unsupervised boy who had survived all of these "adventures";
- working, while still a teenager, as an electrician in Baltimore and entering Johns Hopkins night college;
- being drafted into the U.S. Army, becoming a U.S. citizen, and fighting in Europe as a combat soldier;
- entering the Dachau concentration camp in April 1945;
- in May 1945, being called out of a motor pool in Austria, because of his bilingual skills, to serve as General William J. ("Wild Bill") Donovan's OSS interpreter;
- moving with Donovan into the Justice Jackson/war crimes project that became Nuremberg;
- serving as the principal and preferred interpreter of each prisoner, including Hermann Goering;
- playing a significant role in interrogating and studying each of them;
- being half of the 2-man team that served the October 1945 indictment on each Nuremberg defendant;
- working for the U.S. prosecution throughout the trial;
- returning to Baltimore and succeeding as a Johns Hopkins engineering student;
- becoming a distinguished engineer with RCA, where he was part of the team that invented color television;
- working on NASA projects;
- working as an executive at NBC;
- obtaining patents on numerous inventions;
- becoming a husband and proud father;
- sailing three times across the Atlantic; and
- never talking much about his past until his grandchildren started to interview him for school projects and papers.

Richard Sonnenfeldt's life is an extraordinary true story, and he has written it modestly and well. His book deserves to reach a very large general audience, and I am confident that any reader, from children through seniors, will find it to be relevant, exciting and inspiring.

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One of Last Witnesses Recalls Nuremberg Trial

By Carl Schoettler

Baltimore Sun, November 5, 2006 (as adapted)

Richard Sonnenfeldt was greasing an armored car when the general known as Wild Bill Donovan plucked him from the motor pool to become American interpreter at the first Nuremberg War Crimes Trial. He'd been in a reconnaissance unit equipped with armored cars, jeeps and light tanks.

"Our job was to find the enemy, draw fire and get out of the way," he said during a telephone conversation. Heavier tanks and artillery would then "root out the enemy."

He had been born in Germany and he was just 15 years old when he escaped. He was Jewish, but not very religious. He had gone into the Army from Baltimore in 1943. He spoke excellent German.

Donovan spoke a couple of words of German to him, asked him to translate a few sentences from a document, then had him interpret while the general interviewed a man from the German underground. He complimented Sonnenfeldt on his English, "better than we've heard from any other interpreter."

Sonnenfeldt had worked hard to scrub the German accent from his English.

So he became an interpreter. He was just 21, soon to be 22.

"I was the youngest member of the prosecution," he said. He's now one of seven or eight who survive from the Nuremberg war crimes trials: a few guards, a prosecutor named Whitney Harris, and a couple of reporters, including Walter Cronkite. Sonnenfeldt has now written a

book about his experiences at the war crimes trial, Witness to Nuremberg.

Twenty-one high Nazis were defendants in the first of twelve war crimes trials in the Nuremberg court. They were, in fact, a bizarre, if deadly, bunch. Sonnenfeldt spoke to each one at least once.

"I am also one of two people who served the indictments on all of them," he said.

Among them was Hermann Goering, chief of the German air force and Reichsmarschall, a special rank which made him superior to all German field marshals, and Rudolf Hoess, the SS commandant of Auschwitz, where an estimated 3 million were killed by gassing, burning, starvation and disease.

Another was Rudolf Hess, the mentally unstable Reich minister who flew to England on a bizarre and singularly unsuccessful peace mission in May 1941. Sentenced to life imprisonment, he committed suicide at 92 in 1987, the last of the Nuremberg defendants.

The accused also included Ernst Kaltenbrunner, chief Nazi security officer, who controlled the Gestapo and the SS, Joachim von Ribbentrop, foreign affairs minister, Julius Streicher, editor of the racist newspaper *Der Stuermer* and director of the Central Committee for Defense against Jewish Atrocity and Boycott Propaganda, and 15 others.

In the early morning hours of Oct. 16, 1946, when many of the defendants met their executioners, Streicher went to his death defiant.

"Heil Hitler!" he said. "You know my name well. Julius Streicher! ... Now it goes with God. ... Purim Fest 1946! ... The Bolsheviks will hang you one day! ... I am with God."

Sonnenfeldt spent most of his interrogation time with Goering, who was the chief defendant. The chief interrogator was Col. John Amen, who once prosecuted Murder Inc. killers. Sonnenfeldt interpreted for him in this very different trial of murderers.

"Goering just never challenged my interpretations," Sonnenfeldt said, "after I had a little hassle with him."

He tells the story in his book.

Goering interrupted one of his first translations.

"Herr Gering," Sonnenfeldt said in reply, using a mispronunciation of Goering that meant "little nothing." "Herr Gering. When I translate the colonel's questions into German and your answers into English, you keep quiet until I am finished.

"You don't interrupt. When the stenographer has recorded my translation, you may tell me if you have a problem, and then I will decide whether it is necessary to consider your comments. ... "

He writes that Goering gave him a long look: "He said, 'My name is Goering, not Gering.'"

Sonnenfeldt would ultimately interpret Goering for "hundreds of hours."

Sonnenfeldt translated six to seven hours a day from July until Oct. 20, 1945, the day the indictments were handed out.

"They'd become defendants," he says, "and they had the right of silence. They had the right of silence anyhow. But we'd really gotten all the evidence we needed by then."

Sonnenfeldt was already back home in Baltimore and in class at the John Hopkins University when he heard of the first conviction of the Nazis at Nuremberg. He graduated in 1949, cum laude.

He participated in the development of color television and of computer technology for NASA moon shots. He retired about three years ago as CEO of NAPP Systems Inc., the world's largest producer of newspaper printing plates.

He began research into his life in Germany when his granddaughter Sara needed to write an essay on an immigrant and her mother suggested talking with him.