

Richard W. Sonnenfeldt (1923-2009), Chief U.S. Interpreter at Nuremberg and “Single Most Important Person”

*John Q. Barrett**

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Thanks to an oral history interview from the 1990s, we know that one of the European refugees who became United States government employees, translators and interpreters at the Nuremberg trial of the principal Nazi war criminals during 1945-46 retained this powerful recollection of a senior official who also served at Nuremberg:

There was a guy called Sonnenfeldt who was in charge of all personnel. He was probably the single most important person at the Nuremberg trial. He was so powerful [that] he could take anybody that the State Department had sent there and send them back to Washington as unqualified. He was in charge of the personnel at the Nuremberg trials and his name was constantly on the intercom.¹

That “guy called Sonnenfeldt” was Richard Wolfgang Sonnenfeldt. At Nuremberg, he was the chief interpreter—the live translator who relayed questions and answers between English-speaking lawyers and German-speaking prisoners—on the U.S. prosecution staff. Sonnenfeldt and the interpreters he assembled and supervised assisted U.S. lawyers in pre-indictment interrogations of many imprisoned Nazis and other witnesses. Sonnenfeldt personally interpreted interrogations with all 23 men (most of them many times) who became the indicted before the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg in October 1945. Over time, Sonnenfeldt himself also became an interrogator of these prisoners, other prisoners and prospective trial witnesses. On October 19th, a British lawyer and Sonnenfeldt served the Nuremberg indictment on each defendant in his

* Professor of Law, St. John’s University School of Law, New York City, and Elizabeth S. Lenna Fellow, Robert H. Jackson Center, Jamestown, New York (www.roberthjackson.org). An earlier version of much of this text, without the additions, footnotes and appended images, was posted to my Jackson Email List on October 30, 2009.

For a selected archive of Jackson List posts, see my homepage at www.law.stjohns.edu. To subscribe to the Jackson List, which does not display recipient identities or distribute their email addresses, send a note to barrettj@stjohns.edu.

¹ Harry Fiss interview, in BRUCE STAVE & MICHELE PALMER WITH LESLIE FRANK, WITNESSES TO NUREMBERG: AN ORAL HISTORY OF AMERICAN PARTICIPANTS AT THE WAR CRIMES TRIALS 97 (1998).

cell.² During the trial, which began the next month and ran through summer 1946, Sonnenfeldt continued to work with U.S. prosecutors as interpreter, interrogator and field investigator. His work is documented in many thousands of pages of interrogation reports and other documents that are central parts of the historical record of the Nuremberg trial.

More than nine years ago, I discovered, thanks to my wife's close reading of a "Meet Your Neighbors"-type newspaper story in our Long Island town,³ that Richard Sonnenfeldt lived less than three miles from my home. We met and, thanks to his generous spirit, we became friends.

When I first showed Richard the above passage about him, published in a book that he had not seen, he slapped the page and laughed out loud. Ever precise, he told me that there was no hallway intercom in the Palace of Justice at Nuremberg, so how, he asked, could someone have heard his name constantly? Not given to bragging, he read the phrase "the single most important person at the Nuremberg trial" aloud, smiled with some embarrassment, and shook his head no.

* * *

Richard Sonnenfeldt, who died on October 9, 2009, at age 86, lived a most amazing life. In outline form, these are some of the defining details and highlights of his life before Nuremberg:

- born Heinz Wolfgang Richard Sonnenfeldt in Berlin, July 1923;
- Jewish;
- raised by parents who were country doctors in Gardelegen, a town in north central Germany;
- happy, assimilated boyhood until Hitler, Nazism and Nuremberg laws changed everything, including shutting down his parents' work;

² See generally AIREY NEAVE, ON TRIAL AT NUREMBERG 60 (1978) (mentioning, in passing a "German-American lieutenant [sic]" who accompanied Neave as he served the indictment on the defendants); COL. BURTON C. ANDRUS, I WAS THE NUREMBERG JAILER 78 (1969) (mentioning "a sentinel" who entered a defendant's cell behind Andrus and Neave at this time, "carrying a large pile of the thick indictments in his arms"). A copy of Sonnenfeldt's signed "Oath Given to Interrogator Concerning of Indictments[,] Friday, 19th October 1945" is attached at the end of this file.

³ See Ann Mathisen, *Public Faces/Private Lives: Dick Sonnenfeldt*, PORT WASHINGTON NEWS, Feb. 17, 2000, at 4 (mistakenly publishing a photograph of one of his sons, opening with the line "How very little do we truly know of our neighbors," and then describing Richard Sonnenfeldt as "chief interpreter for the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials [sic]").

- in September 1938, just weeks before *Kristallnacht*, getting out of Germany, along with his younger brother Helmut, to a boarding school in England;
- once Germany commenced active war against England in 1940, being interned there, at age 16, as an enemy alien;
- being shipped with other internees and POWs from England to Australia;
- being paroled from Australia to India and surviving there on his own;
- getting passage from India to the U.S. (because his parents and brother had, in separate miracles, made it to Baltimore);
- becoming, as his ship docked in New York harbor in April 1941, a media event because he, still only 17, had survived unsupervised “adventures” on four continents;
- becoming an American teenager while working and finishing high school in Maryland;
- being drafted into the U.S. Army, becoming a U.S. citizen, and shipping out to Europe as a U.S. soldier;
- fighting in Europe in the early months of 1945;
- briefly entering Dachau concentration camp as a soldier 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 Office of Strategic Services (OSS) interpreter; and
- moving with Donovan, when he became Justice Robert H. Jackson’s first deputy, into the war crimes project that became Nuremberg.⁴

* * *

At Nuremberg, Private Sonnenfeldt, age 22, assisted Justice Jackson and his team in the pre-indictment interrogations of many imprisoned Nazis and became U.S. chief interpreter. But Sonnenfeldt actually was much more than that—because of his flawless, idiomatic German and English language skills, his smarts and maturity, and his surprising rapport with and

⁴ See generally RICHARD W. SONNENFELDT, WITNESS TO NUREMBERG 77-199, 1-3 (2006).

control over many of the prisoners, he actually became, *de facto* and then officially, a senior interrogator.

Two Jackson moments capture, implicitly, some of what Richard Sonnenfeldt was and what he did at Nuremberg. The first occurred in September 1945, prior to the trial, when the U.S. lawyers were relocating from London, the site of the Allies' preparatory negotiations, to Nuremberg and catching up on the prisoner interrogations and document analysis that had already occurred. On arrival in Nuremberg, Jackson's son William, a young lawyer who was serving as his father's executive assistant, heard about Private Sonnenfeldt almost immediately. Colonel John Harlan Amen, the former "Murder Inc." prosecutor from Brooklyn who was heading the U.S. Interrogation Division, was chief interpreter Sonnenfeldt's direct supervisor—his chain of command ran down from chief prosecutor Justice Jackson to General Donovan to Col. Amen. As Amen briefed Bill Jackson, he described the ironic sight of then-prisoner and prospective lead defendant Hermann Goering, at the end of an interrogation session, making a "bow" to an interpreter, Sonnenfeldt, who was Jewish. Amen added, as explanation, that Sonnenfeldt was the only interpreter who was good enough to handle interrogation sessions with Goering. (Amen also told Bill Jackson that prisoner Julius Streicher, the former publisher of the notorious anti-Semitic *Der Stürmer*, had asked an interrogator, on entering an interrogation room and seeing two Jews—Sonnenfeldt and a female stenographer—"May I speak freely?" as a way of disparaging them.)

The second moment, involving Justice Jackson and Sonnenfeldt, occurred in summer 1946 as the trial was near its end. That spring, Jackson's administrative staff asked him to sign a stack of memoranda to high military authorities recommending various awards and decorations to various staff members. Jackson did the deed, but he sent the signed recommendations onward to his executive officer with a dictated memorandum that conveyed discomfort with this process:

I should say that nobody would be hanged for the crime of understatement in connection with these recommendations. Conceding the substance, they are pretty foreign to any style that I would think would be effective, but since these are the work of military experts I accept their assurance that it is in the style acceptable in military circles. I think you will agree with me that at points it reminds one of the

Barnum and Bailey style of literature. At any rate, best of luck about them.

In his memorandum, Justice Jackson added his comments on the list of proposed honorees. He also suggested various additions as he worked his way down the categories of honors and through the layers of his staff. When he reached the category that he mistakenly called “translators,” Jackson suggested that Sonnenfeldt and one other man be considered for recommendation for recognition.⁵ On July 6, 1946, Jackson’s executive officer recommended to the Commanding General of U.S. Forces in the European Theater that Technician Fourth Grade (T/4 or Sergeant) Sonnenfeldt—he had been promoted from Private during his time at Nuremberg—be awarded the U.S. Army Commendation Ribbon for his work.⁶ After this recommendation was approved, Justice Jackson personally pinned the Army Commendation Ribbon on Sgt. Sonnenfeldt.⁷

* * *

Before the International Military Tribunal returned its judgments that fall against the Nazi defendants, Richard Sonnenfeldt celebrated his 23rd birthday, returned to the U.S., received his discharge from the Army and became a student at Johns Hopkins University. He studied electrical engineering, graduating at the top of his class. He then continued a life of notable achievements and experiences:

- 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;
- serving as dean of a business school;
- becoming a husband and proud father;
- losing a wife to cancer;

⁵ See Justice [Robert H.] Jackson to General [Robert J.] Gill, 25 May 1946 (unsigned carbon copy), in the Robert H. Jackson Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division (“RHJL”), Box 106, Folder 1. An image of this document is attached at the end of this file.

⁶ See Brig. Gen. Robert J. Gill to Commanding General, USFET, *Award of the Army Commendation Ribbon for Non-Commissioned Officer*, 6 July 1946. An image of this document is attached at the end of this file.

⁷ See “Decorations Awarded,” undated, at 1, in RHJL, Box 106, Folder 1. An image of this document and a photograph of Justice Jackson pinning the Army Commendation Ribbon on T/4 Sonnenfeldt as Lt. Commander Whitney R. Harris watched, are attached at the end of this file.

- remarrying (very well, and lasting 29 years, until his death) and becoming a proud stepfather;
- becoming, over the past three decades, the very proud grandfather of fifteen;
- sailing his boat across the Atlantic Ocean three times, including once for his 70th birthday; and
- never talking much about his past until his eldest granddaughter got a grade school assignment to interview an immigrant, asked her mother where she could find one, and learned that she should “talk to Poppy.”

In recent years, Richard Sonnenfeldt wrote and published his autobiography, *WITNESS TO NUREMBERG*, which is very eloquent and powerful but only begins to tell his life story. He also wrote articles,⁸ appeared in many documentaries and gave many interviews.⁹ (His life now is the subject of many published obituaries.¹⁰)

* * *

Richard Sonnenfeldt was brilliant and highly accomplished. He lived his long life fully, creatively and extremely generously. In recent years, a stroke slowed his body (but not at all his mind) and he experienced

⁸ See, e.g., Richard W. Sonnenfeldt, *For Me, Robert H. Jackson Is Alive*, 68 ALBANY L. REV. 71-76 (2004); Richard W. Sonnenfeldt, *Witness at Nuremberg*, CONGRESS MONTHLY 13-16 (Jan./Feb. 2005); Richard W. Sonnenfeldt, *Memoirs from Nuremberg: The Psychiatrists Speak*, CONGRESS MONTHLY 17-19 (Jan./Feb. 2005); *Remarks*, Richard W. Sonnenfeldt, 27 CARDOZO L. REV. 1609-13 (Feb. 2006).

⁹ See, e.g., THE LEONARD LOPATE SHOW (Nov. 9, 2006), available at <http://www.wnyc.org/shows/lopate/episodes/2006/11/09>; CHARLIE ROSE (Apr. 30, 2007), available at <http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/8475>.

¹⁰ See, e.g., A.G. Sulzberger, *Richard W. Sonnenfeldt, Nuremberg Interrogator, Is Dead at 86*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 12, 2009, at 23, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/13/nyregion/13sonnenfeldt.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=sonnenfeldt&st=cse; Richard Sonnenfeldt, *Helped Prosecute Nazis, Dies at 86*, NEWSDAY, Oct. 13, 2009, at A38 available at <http://www.newsday.com/long-island/nassau/richard-sonnenfeldt-helped-prosecute-nazis-dies-at-86-1.1520003>; Richard Sonnenfeldt, LONDON TELEGRAPH, Oct. 14, 2009, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/military-obituaries/6328365/Richard-Sonnenfeldt.html>; Richard Sonnenfeldt, 1923-2009, *Key Interpreter at Nuremberg Trials*, LOS ANGELES TIMES, Oct. 14, 2009, at 22; Christine Rayner, *Refugee School Pupil Defied Odds to Succeed*, FAVERSHAM TIMES, Oct. 21, 2009, at 4; Richard Sonnenfeldt: *Chief US Translator [sic] at the Nuremberg Trials*, LONDON TIMES, Oct. 22, 2009, at 51, available at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/obituaries/article6884388.ece>; M.J. Stephey, *Milestones: Richard Sonnenfeldt*, TIME, Oct. 26, 2009, at 19; Richard Sonnenfeldt, THE ECONOMIST, Oct. 29, 2009, available at http://www.economist.com/obituary/displaystory.cfm?story_id=14743425.

great physical pain. In all of this, he retained a spirit that impressed me constantly. In late July, for example, when he was confined to his bedroom, one of our conversations turned to the topic of India. Dick started to speak with great animation in a foreign and unfamiliar tongue. “What is that?” I asked, chuckling. “Hindi. Or maybe Urdu. Or maybe a mix of them,” he said. “It’s what I remember from living in Bombay in 1941, when I was 17.” “And what does it mean?” I asked. Smiling slyly, he said, “It means something like ‘Kind sir, thank you so much, if I may bother you, it would please me very much to have a very cold beer.’”

Richard Sonnenfeldt’s early life made him, to the end, a humble, grateful optimist. And how could he not be?—as he explained to Charlie Rose in April 2007, when Sonnenfeldt briefly entered the Dachau concentration camp exactly sixty-two years earlier as a liberating U.S. soldier and saw and absorbed the scenes of his fellow German Jews and others murdered or near dead, his

emotion was, how lucky can you be? How lucky can you be? I could have been one of those victims. I could have been one of those dead bodies. And here I was. I was a lowly private. But I was a member of a victorious Army that was putting an end to all this. And I thanked my good fortune and the Lord for my own good luck.¹¹

I know that Richard Sonnenfeldt’s appreciation for his luck would extend past his final earthly moment. He died on October 9th, which ironically is the date on which his former boss and hero Justice Robert H. Jackson died in 1954. If I had a chance to point out this coincidence to Richard, his comment would be characteristically wise, a bit bemused and triumphant: “*But*,” he would say, raising a finger and smiling, “Jackson got only 62 years. I got 86.”

It was my very good luck to know Richard Sonnenfeldt. If he was not “the single most important person at the Nuremberg trial” (and I’m not sure that he wasn’t), he was a true contender for that title in every other realm of his great life.

¹¹ CHARLIE ROSE (Apr. 30, 2007) (at the very end of the interview), available at <http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/8475>.

Office of U. S.
Chief of Counsel
APO 403 U. S. Army

OATH GIVEN TO INTERROGATOR CONCERNING SERVING OF INDICTMENTS

FRIDAY, 19th OCTOBER 1945.

COLONEL WILLIAMS TO THE INTERPRETER

Q What is your name?

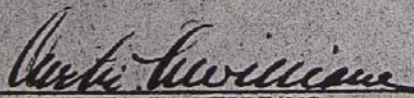
A Richard W. SONNENFELDT, at the present time assigned to Hqs Co, Hqs II Corps, APO 19, U.S.Army. My present duty is that of interpreter for the Office of the U.S.Chief of Counsel for the Prosecution of Axis Criminality.

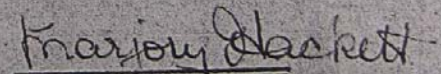
Q Will you raise your right hand please. Do you solemnly swear that you will truly translate from English into German and from German into English, the conversations concerning the serving of the indictments against the defendants named therein, which are being held today between Major Harry Neave of the International Military Tribunal and the defendants designated in the indictments.

A I do.


RICHARD W. SONNENFELDT

Subscribed and sworn to before me
at Nurnberg, Germany, on 19 October 1945


CURTIS L. WILLIAMS
Colonel, IGD


MARJORY M. HACKETT
Reporter.

OFFICE OF U. S. CHIEF OF COUNSEL

25 May 1946.

To: General Gill
From: Justice Jackson

I have signed the letter and recommendations as prepared by Col. Kimball and return them herewith.

I should say that nobody would be hanged for the crime of understatement in connection with these recommendations. Conceding the substance, they are pretty foreign to any style that I would think would be effective, but since these are the work of military experts I accept their assurance that it is the style acceptable in military circles. I think you will agree with me that at points it reminds one of the Barnum and Bailey style of literature. At any rate, best of luck about them.

I understand that Colonel Gurfein will be added to the list entitled Legion of Merit. I think General Watson, Colonel Andrus and Captain Gilbert are all entitled to whatever help we can give them toward recognition by their respective commands.

In the Commendation Ribbon class, in addition to those you have suggested, I think we should include Shea, Alderman, Albrecht, and Kempner. If it is possible, I should like to recognize the constant loyalty of Moritz Fuchs who has been a real comfort to me.

In the Commendation class, in addition to Jim Donovan, we might also consider the possibility of Zablodowsky and Kellogg; also Commander Kaplan and Sam Harris, and possibly Calvocaressi, although he is not of our own staff. A man who has done faithful work with our exhibits, which we seem always able to find in the Court's record in spite of the general confusion in the General Secretary's Office, is Willey, and he remained on the job in spite of some humiliation. I think he is entitled to some consideration.

Wheeler, Wallis, Brookhart, Farr, Barrett and Sam Harris seem pretty clearly entitled to commendation. Bill Baldwin did a good job early, but toward the end let things slip a good deal. I think it might be well to talk with Tom Dodd about him.

A man who did a good deal to help us early in the game with the establishment of the system for analyzing documents was Professor Sheldon Glueck of Harvard. He might be worthy of commendation. Dr. Walsh and a couple of the translators, Sonnefelt and Niebergall, might also be considered.

R.H.J.



OFFICE OF U.S. CHIEF OF COUNSEL

APO 124A U. S. Army

6 July 1946

SUBJECT: Award of the Army Commendation Ribbon for Non-Commissioned Officer.

TO : Commanding General, United States Forces, European Theater of Operations, APO 757, U.S. Army.
(Attention: G-1).

1. a. It is recommended that T/4 Richard W. Sonnenfeldt, 33902257, Cavalry, Army of the United States, Office of the United States Chief of Counsel, APO 124-A, United States Army, be awarded the Army Commendation Ribbon.

b. T/4 Richard Sonnenfeldt was serving as Chief of the Interpretation Section, Interrogation Division, Office of the United States Chief of Counsel, at the time of the service for which this award is recommended.

c. Name and address of nearest relative: Mr. Walter H. Sonnenfeldt, (father), 2708 Hollins Ferry Road, Baltimore 30, Maryland.

d. Entered military service from: Maryland.

e. Decorations previously awarded: None

f. The entire service of T/4 Richard Sonnenfeldt has been honorable since the rendition by him of the service upon which this recommendation is based.

g. A similar recommendation for this non-commissioned officer has not been submitted.

2. a. The officer recommending this award has personal knowledge of the service upon which this recommendation is based.

b. This recommendation is supported by the official records of the Office of the United States Chief of Counsel.

3. a. T/4 Richard W. Sonnenfeldt, while serving with the Army of the United States, distinguished himself by meritorious conduct in the performance of outstanding service. The accomplishment of the services for which the award is recommended extended from 11 August 1945 to 9 January 1946, and has been completed. This service was performed at Nurnberg, Germany.

Commanding General, United States Forces, European Theater of Operations,
APO 757, U.S. Army, 6 July 1946, "Award of the Army Commendation Ribbon
for Non-Commissioned Officer", cont.

b. As Chief of the Interpretation Section of the Interrogation Division, Office of the U.S. Chief of Counsel, T/4 Sonnenfeldt took a leading role in the establishment and supervision of an organization of approximately 50 persons which furnished the interpreters for the interrogation of over 75 different major witnesses including the 21 major Axis Leaders, then recorded, transcribed and processed the proceedings of the interrogations as well as the related statements and affidavits. His section compiled through this work more than 10,000 pages of testimony.

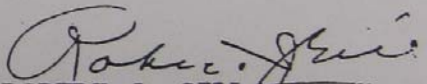
c. T/4 Sonnenfeldt recommended policies and procedures concerning the treatment of prisoners during interrogation, and these procedures were found so sound and practical that they were approved and have been used by the Interrogators to date.

d. Among the personnel in T/4 Sonnenfeldt's section were military personnel of grades and ranks higher than his and civilians of many different nationalities. He handled them with such amazing diplomacy and tact that he managed to enlist their whole-hearted cooperation in spite of so many differences.

e. Through his skill, leadership and devotion to duty Sergeant Sonnenfeldt has made a valuable contribution to the trial of the major Axis Criminals at Nurnberg, Germany.

4. PROPOSED CITATION:

For service as Chief of the Interpretation Section, Interrogation Division, Office of the United States Chief of Counsel for the Prosecution of Axis Criminality, at Nurnberg, Germany, from 11 August 1945 to 9 January 1946.


ROBERT J. GILL

Brigadier General, United States Army

DECORATIONS AWARDED:

		<u>G.O. No.</u>	<u>Dated</u>
Major Millas	Oak Leaf Cluster to BSM	105	13 April 1946
Col. Williams	Bronze Star Medal	105	13 April 1946
Lt.Col.Kaplan	"	105	13 April 1946
Major Boyle	"	106	13 April 1946
Major Coogan	"	106	13 April 1946
Captain Barrett	"	106	13 April 1946
M/Sgt Coufos	Army Commendation Ribbon		11 April 1946
Major Murray	Bronze Star Medal	218	6 July 1946
Captain Harris	"	218	6 July 1946
Lt.Col. Farr	"	218	6 July 1946
Lt.Col.Brookhart	"	218	6 July 1946
Sgt. Sonnenfelt	Army Commendation Ribbon		6 July 1946
Captain Rowand	"		6 July 1946
Major Wallis	"		6 July 1946
Sgt. Fuchs	"		6 July 1946
Lt. Niebergall	"		6 July 1946
Lt. Margolies	"		6 July 1946
Sgt. Majerus	"		6 July 1946
Lt.Col. Baldwin	"		6 July 1946
Lt. Schaefer	"		6 July 1946
Lt. Meltzer	"		6 July 1946
Commander Kaplan	"		6 July 1946
Major Ramsey	"		6 July 1946
Col. Wheeler	"		28 August 1946
Commander Donovan	"		(Submitted to Frankfurt)
General Gill	Distinguished Service Medal	216	30 August 1945

Decorations cont.,

-page two-

		<u>G.O.No.</u>	<u>Dated:</u>
Lt. Col. Kimball	Legion of Merit	166	4 June 1946
Lt. Col. Leger	"	166	4 June 1946
Lt. Col. Gurfein	"	166	4 June 1946
Lt. Com. Harris	"	166	4 June 1946
Major Hekking	"	166	4 June 1946
Major Nintz	"	166	4 June 1946
Major Vonetes	"	166	4 June 1946
Captain Kiley	"	106	13 April 1946
Col. Amen	Cluster to LM	166	4 June 1946
Col. Dostert	"	166	4 June 1946
Col. Storey	Medal of Freedom	109	16 April 1946
Mr. Dodd	"	166	4 June 1946
Mr. Dean	"	166	4 June 1946

Maj. Morgan Legion of Merit 107(WD) Series of 1946



With Justice Jackson