

Erich Priebke, just following orders

The unrepentant organiser of the Ardeatine Caves massacre, died on October 11th, aged 100

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A MAN without a leg is easy to spot; one without a conscience, less so. This was especially the case in the Andean ski resort of Bariloche in Argentina where, among the wooden Alpine houses built by 19th-century German immigrants, old Nazis would gently go to seed. A Gestapo agent would live here, a confidant of the Führer there; Josef Mengele, the “doctor” of Auschwitz, twice took his driving test at the town hall. And Erich Priebke, an SS captain stationed in Rome during the German occupation, ran the yellow-brick Vienna Delicatessen, where the cold cuts and cheeses were said to be the best in town.

Some customers called it “the Nazi deli”. Very few cared. Mr Priebke was a fine-looking, straight-backed, hard-working man, with the ingrained courtesy of someone who had spent his formative years as a waiter at the Savoy Hotel in London and on the Italian Riviera. Arriving in Argentina without a bean in 1948, he had worked his way up to become a pillar of Bariloche society. He also taught at the German school, and ran the meetings of the German-Argentine Cultural Association. At their dinner-dances he was famous for waltzing and polka-ing the night away.

He did not hide his past; he lived under his own name. But he was not expansive. So he was both polite and surprised when in April 1994, wearing his Bavarian hat, he was stopped on his way to his car by Sam Donaldson of ABC’s “Primetime Live”, who charged him, on camera, with killing civilians at the Ardeatine Caves outside Rome on March 24th 1944, and with killing children. In all 335 men and boys had been rounded up and shot, by far the worst reprisal of the war in Italy. Each prisoner had had his hands tied behind his back, and had been shot in the back of the head. And Priebke had been there, as a young man, doing it. “No, no,” he answered, laughing, turning his head as if to bat off a troublesome fly. “Not at all.”

He then backtracked a little, struggling with his rusty English. There might have been some civilians killed, but they were “morely terrorists”, communists. They had blown up 33 members of a group of German soldiers in the Via Rasella the day before, and (with a grim little smile) “for every German soldier, ten Italians had to die.” But “I didn’t shot anybody.” Besides, “that was our order.” Such things, he told Mr Donaldson, happened in war.

A British military tribunal in 1946 had acquitted him of the massacre for that reason. The ABC interview now forced his extradition from Argentina to Italy to face murder charges, but in 1996 an Italian court also acquitted him. His defence had not changed. The massacre had been ordered directly by Hitler: impossible to disobey it. His commanding officer had said that if any officer refused to take part in the shooting, he would be shot too. Priebke himself was not really a soldier, but had been recruited into the Gestapo as a translator and liaison with the Italian police. He didn’t want to kill anyone, it was a terrible experience, but he feared what might happen to his wife and his two young sons, George and Ingo, if he disobeyed.

This story had eased his path in the post-war years, when he escaped from a British prisoner-of-war camp, lived under an alias for two years in the Tyrol, and fled to Argentina with forged papers supplied by the Vatican. But the Ardeatine massacre had his eager prints all over it. It was he who worked all night on March 23rd-24th to draw up a list of victims—most of them already in prison for left-wing activity, but many not charged. Some he put on the list simply because they were Jewish. (Sending Jews to the camps, however, he said he had never done, for practical reasons: “We needed the railway cars for other things.”)

At the caves he read out the name as each prisoner came forward, and checked off the list when he fell. By some mistake, he had added five extra names on his

own initiative; they were shot too, as otherwise they would have exposed the massacre. Two prisoners he shot personally—he admitted it—with “an Italian machine pistol”. He stayed in charge of proceedings as his fellow officers, tanked up with cognac, grew more careless in their aim. When one soldier seemed unable to shoot, Preibke, the great waltzer, seized him round the waist and made him do it.

A body in limbo

The verdict that he had simply followed orders therefore crumbled away. He had been an enthusiast who now showed no remorse, convivially offering journalists wine when they came to discuss it; he slept soundly, “because you get over things”. In 1998 he was sentenced to life imprisonment for war crimes. As he was in his mid-80s, this was commuted to comfortable house arrest in Rome. The hatred he aroused there erupted only after his death, when no Catholic church was allowed to give him a funeral and his body, refused burial, lay in limbo at a military airport.

Even Bariloche, his “paradise”, did not want to take him. The town feared adding to its Nazi reputation. Among the gingerbread houses under the high peaks, his neighbours recalled a “gentleman” and some good *charcuterie*. He had regularly taken communion, supporters noted; therefore he must just as regularly have gone to confession. What a grim smile that might have drawn from Mr Priebke, to think that they assumed such a thing.