One of the most famous German films right after the end of World War II was called *Die Mörder sind unter uns*—“The Murderers Are Among Us.” Susanne Wallner, a concentration camp survivor played by Hildegard Knef, returns to her devastated apartment in the ruins of Berlin. She finds Hans Mertens, a former German army surgeon already living there, succumbing to alcoholism and despair. The surgeon runs into his former captain, now a prosperous businessman, who had ordered the Christmas Eve massacre of one hundred civilians in a Polish village in 1942. Haunted by such memories, Mertens decides to kill the captain on the first postwar Christmas Eve.

At the last moment, Wallner convinces Mertens that such an act of vigilante justice would be a mistake. “We cannot pass sentence,” she tells him. The surgeon understands. “That’s right, Susanne,” he replies as the film ends. “But we must bring charges. Demand atonement on behalf of millions of innocent murder victims.”

The film was a spectacular success, attracting huge audiences. But its message was fundamentally misleading. It was left to the Allies, not the German people, to arrange the early war crimes trials. The victors soon largely abandoned such efforts, focusing instead on the emerging Cold War. As for most Germans, they were far more eager to forget their recent past than to contemplate atonement.

Among the chief perpetrators who were not immediately arrested or who were caught and not initially recognized by their Allied captors, there was certainly no talk of atonement either. There was only the impulse to flee. In Adolf Hitler’s case, it was by committing suicide in his
bunker along with Eva Braun, whom he had just married. After poisoning their six children, Joseph Goebbels, his propaganda chief, and his wife, Magda, followed suit. In the 1976 bestselling novel _The Valhalla Exchange_, the fictional Goebbels explains why he chose that course. “I have no intention of spending the rest of my life running around the world like some eternal refugee,” he declares.

But most of his colleagues and other Nazis guilty of war crimes had no intention of following Hitler’s example. Many of the lower ranking perpetrators did not even feel compelled to hide: they quickly blended in with the millions who were seeking to rebuild their lives in a new Europe. Others, who felt more at risk, found ways to flee the continent. For a long time, it looked like many of the people in both categories had succeeded in eluding responsibility for their crimes, often with the support of loyal family members and networks of _Kameraden_—Nazi Party comrades.

This book focuses on the relatively small band of men and women—both those serving in official positions and those operating independently—who worked to reverse their initial successes, not letting the world forget their crimes. These pursuers demonstrated tremendous determination and courage as they kept up their fight even when the governments representing the victors and the rest of the world grew increasingly indifferent to the fates of the Nazi war criminals. In the process, they also explored the nature of evil and raised profoundly troubling questions about human behavior.

Those who have attempted to bring the murderers to justice have been loosely labeled as Nazi hunters—but they have not been anything like a group with a common strategy or basic agreement on tactics. They often have been at odds with each other, prone to recriminations, jealousies, and outright rivalries, even as they pursued roughly the same goals. In some cases, this undoubtedly weakened their effectiveness.

But even if everyone involved in the pursuit of Nazi criminals had put aside their personal differences, the results would not have been significantly different. And by any absolute measure, those results can’t justify the claim that justice was done. “Anyone who seeks a balance between
the crimes that were committed and the punishment will be ultimately frustrated,” said David Marwell, a historian who has worked for the Justice Department’s Office of Special Investigations, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and the Berlin Document Center, and served as the director of the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York. As for the original pledge of the victors to prosecute all of those responsible for war crimes, he curtly added: “It’s too difficult.”

Too difficult to succeed on a grand scale, yes, but the efforts by those who refused to give up on the notion of holding at least some Nazi war criminals to account developed into an ongoing postwar saga unlike any other in the history of mankind.

At the end of past wars, the victors often killed or enslaved the vanquished, plundering their lands and exacting speedy retribution. Summary executions, not trials or any other legal proceedings aimed at weighing the evidence to determine guilt or innocence, were the norm. Revenge was the motive, pure and simple.

Many of the Nazi hunters were also initially motivated by revenge, particularly those coming out of the camps or those victors who helped liberate them and saw the stunning evidence of the horrors that the fleeing Nazis left behind: the dead and the dying, the crematoriums, the “medical” facilities that served as torture chambers. As a result, some Nazis and their collaborators were at the receiving end of immediate retribution at the end of the war.

But from the first Nuremberg trials to the hunt for war criminals in Europe, Latin America, the United States, and the Middle East that has sporadically continued to this day, the Nazi hunters have focused most of their efforts on initiating legal proceedings against their prey—demonstrating that even the most obviously guilty should have their day in court. It was no accident that Simon Wiesenthal, the most famous Nazi hunter, titled his memoirs Justice Not Vengeance.

Even when justice was so obviously falling short, with the guilty often getting away with the mildest punishments or in many cases not facing any sanctions at all, the other goal that began to emerge was educa-
tion by example. Why pursue an aging camp guard during his final days? Why not let the perpetrators quietly fade away? Many U.S. officials were more than happy to do so, especially as their attention was diverted to a new enemy—the Soviet Union. But the individual Nazi hunters were not about to let go, arguing that each case offered valuable lessons.

The point of the lessons: to demonstrate that the horrendous crimes of World War II and the Holocaust cannot and should not be forgotten, and that those who instigated or carried out those crimes—or others who may carry out similar crimes in the future—are never beyond the law, at least in principle.

In 1960 when a Mossad team kidnapped Adolf Eichmann in Argentina and flew him to Israel for trial, I was thirteen years old. I have no recollection of how much I was aware of what had happened, whether I was paying attention to the media coverage at all, but something had clearly sunk in. I know that because of a vivid memory from the following summer when Eichmann was already on trial in Jerusalem.

During a family visit to San Francisco, I was sitting in a luncheonette with my father. At one point, I started examining the face of an old man sitting at the other end of the counter. I leaned over to my father, pointed him out and whispered: “I think that may be Hitler.” My father grinned and let me down gently. Of course I had no idea then that, while working on this book half a century later, I would interview Gabriel Bach, the last surviving prosecutor in the Eichmann trial, and the two Mossad agents who led the team that seized him.

Eichmann’s kidnapping, trial, and hanging marked the beginning of a growing awareness that many Nazi criminals had gone unpunished, and signaled a gradual revival in interest in their crimes. It also soon spawned an outpouring of books and movies about Nazi hunters, often based more on myths than realities. I avidly read those books and watched those movies, fascinated by the characters—both the heroes and the villains—as much as by the nonstop action.

There was much more than the great chase that captured the popular
imagination. Especially for the postwar generation, the larger questions about the nature of the people who were objects of that chase, and even about their family and neighbors, were just as riveting. To this day, there are no easy answers to the question why so many millions of Germans and Austrians, along with collaborators in most of the lands they conquered, could have willingly enlisted in a movement dedicated to mass murder.

During my stints as Newsweek’s bureau chief in Bonn, Berlin, Warsaw, and Moscow during the 1980s and 1990s, I often found myself examining the legacy of the war and the Holocaust. Whenever I lapsed into thinking I would encounter no more surprises, only variations of similar stories, I was brought up short by some startling new revelation.

In late 1994, I was preparing my report for a cover story Newsweek had scheduled to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz on January 27, 1995. I had interviewed numerous survivors from many countries in Europe. Each time I was uneasy asking them to relive the horrors of those years, and I always told them to feel free to stop at any point if they felt the process was too painful. In most cases, though, the stories poured out of them; once they started, they just kept going and no further prompting was necessary. No matter how many such stories I heard, I was always mesmerized—and at times truly stunned.

After interviewing a Dutch Jewish survivor whose story was particularly moving, I automatically apologized for making him go through it in such detail, saying that of course he must have told his family and friends about his odyssey many times. “I never told anyone,” he replied. Seeing my expression of disbelief, he added: “No one ever asked.” He had carried his burden all alone for fifty years.

Three years later another encounter offered a glimpse of those who carry a very different kind of burden. I interviewed Niklas Frank, the son of Hans Frank, who had served as Hitler’s governor general of Poland during the occupation, presiding over an empire of death. A journalist and author who described himself as a typical European liberal, Niklas cared deeply about democratic values. He took a special interest in Po-
land, particularly during the 1980s when the independent trade union Solidarity was leading the human rights struggle that ultimately toppled that country’s communist regime.

Born in 1939, Niklas was only seven when he saw his father for the last time in Nuremberg, shortly before he was hanged as a war criminal. Along with his mother, he was led into the prison. His father pretended that nothing was amiss. “Well, Nikki, soon we’ll all be together again for Christmas,” he said. The young boy left “seething mad,” he recalled, because he knew his father was about to be hanged. “My father lied to everyone, even his own son,” he said. Later in life he thought about what he wished his father had said instead: “Dear Nikki, I’ll be executed because I did terrible things. Don’t lead the kind of life I led.”

Then came another line I will always remember. Describing his father as “a monster,” he declared: “I’m against the death penalty, but I believe my father’s execution was totally justified.”

In all my years as a foreign correspondent, I had never heard anyone speak that way about a father. That sentiment led Niklas to one more conclusion. He pointed out that Frank is a common name and most people he meets don’t know that he is the son of a major war criminal unless he tells them. Nonetheless, he knows the truth and cannot put it out of his mind. “There isn’t a day when I don’t think about my father and especially everything that the Germans did,” he said. “The world will never forget this. Whenever I go abroad and say that I’m German, people think ‘Auschwitz.’ And I think that’s absolutely just.”

I told Niklas that I felt lucky that I did not have to live with his sense of inherited guilt, since, as it happened, my father fought on the losing side when Germany invaded Poland in 1939. I knew that rationally the happenstance of birth is no reason to feel morally superior or inferior. Niklas knew that, too. But I fully understood why his one wish in life was to have a father he didn’t have to be ashamed of.

Niklas’s attitude was hardly typical for family members of Nazi war criminals. But to my mind his raw, brutal honesty exemplified what is best in Germans today—the willingness of many of them to confront, on a daily basis, their country’s past. It took a long time for that to happen,
though, and much of that would never have happened at all if it were not for the Nazi hunters and their arduous, often lonely struggles, not just in Germany and Austria, but all over the world.

That struggle is now coming to an end. Most of the Nazi hunters, along with the hunted, will soon only exist in our collective memories, where myth and reality are likely to become even more intertwined than they are today. Which is why their stories can and should be told now.