The Nazis, the Vatican, and the Jews of Rome

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A Final Solution to the Jewish Question

When anyone first encountered Herbert Kappler, he didn’t seem particularly dangerous. He had a bony face and penetrating eyes. His puppet-like movements seemed awkward to some observers. He could be unassuming and then turn abruptly violent. The dueling scar across his face reddened when he became angry or upset. Kappler spoke in a monotone, a tone of calmness that seemed to be maintained with great difficulty. This was the view from the outside, but who was the man behind the mask?

Kappler was born in Stuttgart, the son of a chauffeur. An electrician by training, he joined the Nazi Party when he reached his twenty-third birthday. Kappler went from the SA to the Security Police of the SS and displayed a gift for secret police work. A failed attempt to kill Adolf Hitler in 1939 led to Kappler’s assignment to the team interrogating Georg Elser. Kappler’s principle job was to break down Elser’s silence. Elser was beaten into submission and confessed. Kappler also played a key role in examining a plot to topple Hitler involving the British Secret Service and was fast-tracked for important assignments, since his reputation as a hardworking loyal Nazi was firmly established. His rapid rise was due to his friendship with Reinhard Heydrich and Heinrich Himmler, his mentor. Kappler was a “fanatical Nazi who proudly wore a steel ring decorated with the Death’s Head and swastika inscribed, “To Herbert from Himmler.”” Those who received a similar ring were instructed to wear it on their left hand. They also received a letter from Himmler explaining that it was a “sign of our loyalty to the Führer, of our unchanging obedience towards our superiors.” Kappler was a rabid anti-Semite, a fact that endeared him to his superiors, particularly Himmler.

Kappler’s fluency in Italian and his background in espionage and security set him on an upward career path. As he approached his thirty-sixth birthday, he was accumulating quite a résumé of successes, not the least of which was locating Benito Mussolini. Major Kappler married Leonore Janns in 1934. She had been a typist in the Nazi Party’s office in Stuttgart. Their marriage was one of icy lovelessness. Kappler’s ascent in the SS would have been stymied if he remained childless. The Kapplers adopted Wolfgang,
“bastards of the Lebensborn—children of Himmler’s sexually degenerate scheme of finding and mating ‘perfect’ German men with German women of equal perfection.” Kappler despised his wife and sought to divorce her. His mistress, Helene Brouwer, a Dutch woman, had been trained in espionage at the SD school in the Netherlands. She arrived in Rome with Kappler ostensibly to serve as his personal assistant.

Kappler was not well liked by his peers and had few friends. Ambassador Rahn once called him “a cruel policeman,” and Albrecht von Kessel characterized him “a ferocious beast.” General Siegfried Westphal added, “I never wanted to have anything to do with him” and kept his distance. Kappler’s love of Etruscan vases, roses, photography, and dogs were in stark contrast to his cold, calculating, and ruthless inner self. Kappler completely believed in the mission of the Third Reich. He viewed his job as the protection of the regime’s security, and to that end he was prepared to carry out the orders of his superiors to the “last comma unquestioningly.” Kappler didn’t merely “collaborate with evil; he was part of the machinery.” He was not a man to be trifled with. He even arrested Princess Mafalda, King Victor Emmanuel III’s daughter. Kappler called her to come to his office on the pretext that her husband was calling from Germany. When she arrived, she was taken into custody and sent to Buchenwald, where she died.

Kappler was unaware that on the same day that Mussolini was rescued, Hitler had directed Karl Wolff to implement a plan to abduct the pope. If implemented, it would surely pose serious security issues for Wolff.

After the war, Kappler claimed at his trial that on the evening of September 12—when Wolff met with the führer—he was in his temporary office at the German embassy. He claimed that he received a phone call from Himmler’s headquarters in East Prussia. Kappler expected that he would be congratulated for his role in the Duce’s rescue and even receive a promotion. According to Kappler, he wasn’t disappointed, feigning surprise. According to his version of events, the nameless officer at the other end informed Kappler that indeed he had been promoted to lieutenant colonel (Obersturmbannführer) and head of the Gestapo in Rome. The importance of an individual in the SS was not by rank but rather by assignment. At the same time, he was going to be awarded the Iron Cross. According to Kappler, the officer conveyed Himmler’s personal congratulations and a verbal deportation order. He wanted Kappler to proceed with preparations for the roundup and deportation of Rome’s Jews. Kappler was also told that the operation would take place soon and that further instructions would follow. In essence, it was a get-ready order.

There are a number of inconsistencies and inaccuracies in Kappler’s account. At his postwar trial, only a few years had elapsed since the alleged phone call. Kappler had a prodigious memory, but he claimed that he could not recall who had called him and on what authority that person had to convey a get-ready deportation order. Four such important matters—the rescue of Mussolini, Kappler’s promotion, the Iron Cross award,
and a deportation order—were tied together, occurring on the same day, yet his memory had conveniently failed him. These events would have been etched in his memory with a dizzying effect on his self-esteem. How could they not? Why would he have received a phone call when he and his SS superiors were in daily radio contact during this period? Actually, the deportation order came after September 12.\(^7\)

Kappler was clever, a master at deception and politically astute. The reason for his deception was that placing the phone call early in the occupation would buttress his assertion that he attempted to abort the deportation of the Jews. If accepted, this account would save him from facing considerably more serious charges at his postwar trial. Placing the deportation order on September 12 implicated someone else, Karl Wolff. At the end of the war, Kappler was on trial not for the deportation of the Jews but instead for his role in the Ardeatine massacre. In addition, he exceeded orders by requiring the Jews to deliver their gold to avoid deportation.

During the period leading up to September 12, Himmler was completely consumed with the rescue of Mussolini and had ordered all available SS and police forces to be employed in this operation. “All other activities were to be deferred.” Himmler’s phone logs do not reveal a phone call to Kappler on September 12.\(^8\) There are additional reasons to doubt Kappler’s version of events. On September 12, the Germans did not have full control of Rome. Kappler was not in a position to implement or even fully prepare for the deportation. That would come later after he had additional personnel at his disposal. Kappler was focused on other actions for which he had the capacity to implement successfully.

On September 15, SS general Karl Wolff met with Himmler twice, and they must have discussed the führer’s kidnap order and the “imminent roundup of Jews in Rome.” It was at this meeting that Wolff recommended Kappler’s promotion. It was not Himmler but rather Wolff who brought the good news of his promotion to Kappler upon his arrival in Rome on September 18. The RSHA didn’t even know of Kappler’s promotion until February 1944. Himmler had the paperwork for the promotion back-dated to September 12 so it would “coincide with the day of Mussolini’s rescue.”\(^9\) On September 18 Wolff, while in Rome, handed out the Cross of Merit decorations to at least two German officials.\(^10\) It’s likely that Wolff told Kappler about Hitler’s directive to kidnap the pope or hinted at it even though he was sworn to secrecy. Kappler heard rumors to that effect, since any move on the Vatican would have involved him and his command. It also would have compromised the inevitable deportation of Rome’s Jews. If the abduction plot were activated in September or even October, it would work at cross-purposes with the deportation plans of Himmler and Adolf Eichmann. Having met with Himmler, Wolff likely transmitted the get-ready deportation order verbally himself or at the very least reinforced it when he met Kappler. Thus, both men are more fully implicated in the deportation of the Roman Jews. At his postwar trial, Kappler
was not certain what Wolff would testify to if he were brought to trial and decided to cover his tracks by presenting his own time line to protect himself.

Himmler met with Ernst Kaltenbrunner, head of the RSHA, the day after his meeting with Wolff to discuss the “Jewish question” and reached the decision to proceed with the deportations. Kaltenbrunner was a man not to be crossed. Kaltenbrunner was dedicated to the implementation of the final solution. On a personal level, he was a “physical giant of a man,” also “paranoiac, a killer, and an alcoholic.”

Between September 18 and 19, Himmler’s office radioed by a marconigram a precise get-ready order directly to Kappler: “The recent Italian events impose a final solution to the Jewish question in the territories recently occupied by the armed forces of the Reich. The Reichsführer (Himmler) therefore requests Obersturmbannführer Kappler to actuate without delay all necessary preliminary measures (against the Jews) in order to assure the precipitous and secrecy of the operations to be carried out in the territory of the city of Rome. Immediate further orders will follow.”

Wolff knew that the deportation of the Jews was imminent. He did one thing that would assist the success of the impending roundup: immediately ordered the transfer of one hundred policemen from a German police battalion in northern Italy to Rome, giving Kappler the nucleus of a force of his own. Wolff also used Waffen-SS units to reorganize the fascist militia. All of these forces would be important during the next month. Kappler recognized that he could not depend on the Italian police to cooperate with the Judenaktion (meaning “Jewish action,” referring to the roundup of Jews). In fact, the “general unreliability of Italian police in Rome forced Kappler to take some Roman police officials into custody.” Since he knew about the order at this point in time and received a confirmation, he wouldn’t or couldn’t delay or obstruct a direct order. Kappler worried if he could successfully pull off the deportation with so few men. Wolff in part solved this problem. The deportation would be supplemented the next month with the arrival of Theodor Dannecker, Eichmann’s deportation expert.

At their meeting in July, Kappler pledged to Himmler his unquestioning obedience. Though there is no written record of their conversations; it is likely that the deportation of Rome’s Jews arose at their meeting. At minimum, Kappler knew Himmler’s thinking on the subject. Clearly, the deportation order was coming from the highest authorities (Hitler) and those in the RSHA whose moral callousness was plainly evident. Kappler would even claim no prior knowledge of the deportation of Jews in Europe or having ever heard of Eichmann’s plan. Any pretense on Kappler’s part that he didn’t know that Jews were being deported elsewhere was dispelled by the receipt of this order and the others that followed. He had been in constant contact with Himmler and Kaltenbrunner, and that they never mentioned the fate of the Jews to Kappler defies all credibility.
Kappler soon went to work and obtained from the Questura the list of the estimated number of Jews in Rome, including their names and addresses. As he reviewed the data, problems emerged. The total number of Jews in Rome was hopelessly inaccurate. Many of those listed who lived in the ghetto had the same or similar names. Kappler was under pressure to sort this out.