I must confess I felt drawn to review *Hunting Eichmann*, for the same reason I have always been galvanized to read everything I can about the Holocaust and its genesis; it is nothing short of a compulsion; a perpetual search for understanding. I’m not certain when this began but I do have memories of watching grainy black and white footage of the liberation of the camps being shown to me while I was still a young school child living in a sleepy Long Island Jewish town where most of us had just arrived from Brooklyn. I couldn’t erase those images from my mind; they became a template of sorts against which I measured other things. There was a code of silence about the Holocaust back then during the late 1950’s and early 1960’s; a seemingly conscious decision among the Jews I lived with to remain quiet, to turn our attention elsewhere. If someone had lost a relative “over there,” we did not speak of it. My parents were already hopelessly smitten with the American dream which was then and still is today primarily a Gentile one. Conversations swirled around Kennedy and Camelot and Sinatra’s demise, and there was a ridiculous amount of attention paid to the new fancy cars that let you roll the top down and gaze at the stars. But my gaze was always inward; dark thoughts consumed me about what had happened to the Jews.

It is this sense of personal heartbreak that is missing from Neil Bascomb’s suspense driven narrative about the hunt for Adolf Eichmann, the high ranking Nazi responsible for designing the concentration camps and transport systems required to bring millions of Jews to their deaths. Bascomb always remains the journalist, the storyteller, and the tireless researcher who does not allow himself to interject his own emotional responses or judgments or analysis into his work. He doesn’t even attempt to tackle the larger questions about anti-Semitism that his impeccable research uncovers. He never enters the story and keeps his lens pointed and narrow, and the book suffers from his reticence.

Using information from newly released classified documents, Bascomb reconstructs for us Eichman’s capture by Mossad agents, his trial and eventual hanging, and the unbelievable circumstances that led to finding him. Eichmann escaped after the war and had been living for years in Argentina with his wife and sons. He had managed to secure for himself a new identity and went under the pseudonym Ricardo Klement. In an inexplicable act of stupidity and arrogance, he permitted his sons to keep the Eichmann name. When the eldest Eichmann boy ate dinner at his girlfriend’s house and began spewing anti-Semitic rhetoric, the girl’s father Lothar Hermann, a half-Jew who had escaped from Europe with his Gentile wife, became suspicious that the young man was the son of Adolf Eichmann. He became more alarmed when his daughter told him that she was never allowed to visit her boyfriend’s home and that he always insisted they meet at a mutual friend’s house. It was this tip by Lothar Hermann that led to the capture of Eichmann.
Bascomb writes about Nazi hunter Tuviah Friedman whose parents Itka and Hershel were killed by the Nazis. He describes Friedman as a man “who survived the ghettos, the slave labor, the murderous whimsy of the SS guards, and a half-planned breakout from a work camp through the sewers. He had ultimately managed to escape by burying a bayonet into the neck of a German soldier.” Friedman tracked down one of Eichmann’s mistresses after the war and obtained a picture of him that was invaluable to the Mossad when they were attempting to confirm his identity.

Friedman worked closely with the famous Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal who warned Friedman as he left to move to Israel in 1952 to “keep reminding the Israelis about Eichmann; don’t let them tell you to forget it. Let the Israeli government do everything it wants to do-build houses, teach everybody Hebrew, develop a strong army…But they must start looking for Eichmann. Make them do something…Think of it. When Eichmann is caught, he will be tried in a Jewish state. History and our people’s honor, Tadek: Both are at stake.”

Bascomb explains that David Ben-Gurion also believed that capturing Eichmann would be an ingenious way to educate young Israelis and the world about the crimes of the Holocaust. Only a decade after the war, America was already obsessed with the Cold War and using ex-Nazis for intelligence about the Russians. West Germany’s new government was littered with ex-Nazis intent on forgetting the past. Seeds of neo-Nazism were growing and in West Germany there were incidents where swastikas were being painted on the streets and the remaining synagogues were being attacked. Ben-Gurion understood the restorative power a public trial in Israel would have, particularly for the Holocaust survivors living in Israel who had not been given a public platform to talk about what they had endured.

The team of Mossad agents put together to accomplish this task all seem to have experienced horrendous loss and hardship as part of their biography. The picture of them Bascomb shows us in the front of his book reveals a group of thin Jewish men, mostly in their thirties and forties, but they all seem much older; destroyed by unspeakable tragedies.

One story stands out in particular. Peter Malkin kept Adolf Eichmann under close watch in a safe house in Buenos Aires after they had grabbed him on the street in front of his home. Malkin had come to Palestine with his parents and his brothers before the Nazi assault. His sister Fruma had remained with her husband and three children; all were murdered. Malkin’s job was to watch Eichmann and he struggled with his feelings of rage and helplessness. In an attempt to keep his distance or perhaps his sanity, he began to draw charcoal sketches of Eichmann. The pictures grew more and more disturbing; there were images of Eichmann in Nazi regalia, pictures of him laying on top of railroad cars, and then pictures of the sister he lost with her large eyes gazing into nothingness. The other guards watching Eichmann in the safehouse worried about Malkin. He went on to become the chief of operations for the Mossad and continued drawing and painting. Years after Eichmann’s death, when his own elderly mother was on her death bed, he ran to her to let her know that he had been part of the Mossad team that got Eichmann, that he had avenged his sister Fruma’s death. The nurse tending his mother said she could not
hear him, that she had been semi-comatose for days, but his mother’s eyes opened briefly in his presence and she acknowledged his admission.

Martha Gellhorn, writing for The Atlantic, attended the Eichmann trial as a journalist in 1962 and chronicled this impression of Eichmann in his glass booth: “The only sound ever heard from his glass cage is when -with a large white handkerchief- he blows his nose. People coming fresh to the courtroom, stare at him. We have all stared; from time to time we stare again. We are trying, in vain, to answer the same question: how is it possible? He looks like a human being, which is to say he is formed as other men. He breathes, eats, sleeps, reads, hears, and sees. What goes on inside him? Who is he; who on God’s earth is he? How can he be what he was, done what he did? How is it possible? ...Adolf Eichmann is the most dire warning to us all. He is a warning to guard our souls; to refuse utterly and forever to give allegiance without question, to obey orders silently, to scream slogans. He is a warning that the private conscience is the last and only protection of the civilized world.” Eichmann was responsible for the deaths of six million Jews, one million of them children.