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Efraim Zuroff: It's Beneficial for Lithuania to Prosecute its Own Criminals

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Often called “Nazi hunter”, Efraim Zuroff spoke with Daiva Repečkaitė and talked about why he criticizes the Lithuanian government, and what he would like to see changed.

Please tell the readers about yourself first. You are called simply “Nazi hunter” in the press. What is your main work?

I am director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Israel office. The main goal of the center is that war criminals be brought to justice. Based on historical sources, including information provided by refugees, Nazi criminals are traced and the countries where they live, for example, Great Britain, Australia or Canada, are asked to enact laws needed to allow them to be tried. We track people who fled after the war, and many of them are Nazi collaborators from Eastern Europe, and especially the Baltic states.

Naturally because of this we also have to deal with the distortion of Holocaust facts today, because when a person is suspected of crimes in the past, history becomes a contemporary news issue. In Eastern Europe we witness not Holocaust denial but distortion of historical facts, namely for diminishing the role of collaborators. We aspire for the young generation to know the past and to learn how to deal with it.

What has been achieved in this work?

One of the major successes has been to focus attention on a lesser known dimension of the Holocaust, i.e., the role of Eastern European collaborators in

the actual mass murder. In independent Lithuania there have three trials, but no war criminal has spent even a minute in jail, while there hasn't even been one trial in Latvia or Estonia.

But one important success is that in Lithuania and Latvia the planned rehabilitation of war criminals who took part in the mass murder and who were prosecuted by the Soviet government was rejected. Back in 1990 Lithuania adopted a law so that people who took part in genocide could not ask for reduced sentences. It was possible with help from friends in Lithuania to show that the planned rehabilitation violates Lithuanian laws, and the 200 rehabilitations, some of which would have included financial compensation, were called off.

We hear you commenting on Lithuania often. Do you pay special attention to Lithuania? How does Lithuania differ from other countries in the context of your work?

I was interested in the region long ago, and after the USSR fell more documents and witnesses became accessible. Lithuania has excellent archives. We know that 99 percent of war criminals who had gone to live in the USA and Canada are from Eastern Europe (including Ukraine, Belarus and Russia). It was only discovered in the 1970s that some people who were accepted as refugees were in fact former Nazis. Since 2001 a total of 80 court verdicts have been rendered on Nazi war crimes around the world.

But it is in Eastern Europe that there is a lack of political will because this is unpopular. In Lithuania the cases are presented as if the defense of an elderly Lithuanian against criminal prosecution in a court of law is more important than all the Jews he murdered. This is the main tragedy, for Lithuania, not for me. In the end the best way to educate society is to prosecute your own criminals.

What in your opinion is the reason for this lack of political will?

It's a very painful thing to recognize crimes committed by one's relatives, one's own society. Crimes against humanity were committed in all the territories occupied by the Nazis, but it was in Eastern Europe (except for Poland and Serbia) that the Nazis managed to systematically include local helpers directly in the mass murder. In other countries locals mostly contributed to the first

stages of the “final solution”: they registered and arrested Jews and sent them to ghettos and concentration camps.

This is in no way said in defense of the compliant French or Belgian power structures, nor does it deny that the Nazis (Germans and Austrians) are the guiltiest for what happened, having created the preconditions. It took 40-50 years for France to recognize the role of French collaborators.

Only Germany has been prepared to look the past in the eyes from the very beginning, not having any other choice. Much weaker civil societies in Eastern Europe escape responsibility more easily because there isn't a lot of attention focused on them. At the same time, the witnesses are dying one after another, and the battle for memory is moving from the courtroom to the classroom.

Do you believe this is politically useful for someone?

Well, what state would not want to be considered a victim? For that reason the Lithuanian Government is enthusiastically pushing the Prague Declaration. Former Latvian president Vaira Vike-Freiberga is constantly comparing the deportations to Siberia with concentration camps, and so on. But the biggest losers from all this are the societies of these countries. People need to look at themselves in the mirror and ask what sort of future they want. Is their hero Aleksandras Lileikis [convicted of collaborating with the Nazis — D. R.] or Ona Šimaitė [librarian who used her job to save Jewish people, she is recognized as a Righteous Gentile — D. R.]?

The Prague Declaration, which seeks to equate Nazi and Soviet crimes, is one of my main concerns. I absolutely reject the idea that Nazi and Soviet victims ought to be honored in one common event, although of course I support the idea that a special day be set aside for remembering the victims of the Soviets and that Soviet criminals be prosecuted. But this shouldn't be accomplished through denying the uniqueness of the Holocaust, the greatest tragedy of humanity in the 20th century. To claim that the USSR is as guilty of war crimes as Nazi Germany is also false.

What is need to change the situation?

It will soon be too late to change the situation rapidly via the courts, which

would be the best way to heal the wounds of history. But Lithuania still has an opportunity to document the crimes and give significance to the memory of the victims. So far there is only talk of the horrible detestable Germans and Austrians who came to “our” country and murdered “our” Jews. Algirdas Brazauskas tried to make the situation better but it was difficult for him when he went into political opposition.

But it would be much easier for the current right-wing Government to change something: the Right is not usually accused of lacking patriotism and doesn't experience the kind of pressure the Left does. But the opportunity hasn't been used. So the Lithuanian government can thank only itself for their poor international reputation.

But it needs to be recognized that often without anyone realizing it different local educations, teachers and museum staff are quietly doing their jobs, collecting material and educating those around them on the Holocaust...

There are good initiatives. But to teach that as many Lithuanians rescued Jews as murdered them is false. Righteous Gentiles undoubtedly deserve the greatest respect, because punishments for helping Jews were extremely brutal. But the fact that 96.4 percent of Jews in Lithuania were murdered shows that there weren't an awful lot of these kinds of rescuers. Unlike the official version of history, the mass murder of Jews in Lithuania was the work not exclusively of criminal elements, but of representatives of all social strata: lawyers, pharmacists, clerics... Society needs to recognize this.

What needs to happen for you to say: my mission is accomplished?

It already is partially accomplished: attention has been focused on local collaboration. We are in debt to the victims, this is not a matter of ego whether there will be success in changing the telling of history. This cannot and should not be sought exclusively through external means: Lithuanians must direct the changes. It might take 10, 15 years, it might never happen.

But when I sense that people who think differently than the official position are afraid to speak, I think they need to be supported.

Appendix: Prague Declaration