

Man with a mission

Indefatigable Nazi hunter Efraim Zuroff, 67,
has no intention of retiring
By Paul Alster

HALFWAY THROUGH my interview with Efraim Zuroff, famed Nazi hunter and head of the Jerusalem office of the Simon Wiesenthal Center (SWC), we took a 10-minute break. He left to participate in afternoon prayers at a synagogue across the road. When he returned, we resumed our conversation and I asked what he plans to do when he retires.

“Oh, I’m going to move to Tahiti, sit under a coconut tree, and drink Piña Colodas,” he smiled, easing back in his chair.

“But you wouldn’t find a *minyan* there for prayers, would you?” I ventured to suggest.

“OK,” he says with a hearty laugh. “Now that’s a problem. Listen, I’m 67, and I consider myself very lucky as I’m one of those people who enjoy what they are doing and feel they are doing something important.”

He has no intention of being sent out to pasture just yet.

Few would argue with the statement that the task of attempting to bring Nazis to justice has been tremendously important, but enjoyable? Is it a vocation one can enjoy? Surely, you have to be somewhat obsessive to dig and dig, ferreting out mass murderers.

“I may be a lot of things,” he tells *The*

Jerusalem Report, “but obsessive is not one of them. I realized from the get-go that this is the kind of subject that can destroy a person. If you let this subject take over your life, you are in big trouble. I’ve managed to avoid that – until last summer.”

In summer 2015, Zuroff co-authored a groundbreaking book “Our Own,” together with popular Lithuanian writer Rūta Vanagaitė. The book, dealing with Lithuanian complicity in the mass murder of Jews during the Holocaust, was published on January 26. It caused a sensation in Lithuania and the original 2,500 copies sold out within 48 hours of its release. A much bigger reprint has been ordered and the signs are it could prove an unexpected best seller in a country that at last may be ready to look at itself in the mirror.

Zuroff has worn his heart on his sleeve for almost 40 years, ruffling feathers in the highest places, determinedly taking on governments and figures of authority, many of whom wanted nothing more than to sweep the crimes of their society under the carpet and get on with creating a new order.

A tall, imposing man, he still speaks with a strong Brooklyn accent (despite making Israel his home since 1970), is be-

spectacled, and wears a crocheted *kippa*. If he doesn’t have a photographic memory, then he must have something close to it as his recall of names, dates and events is unnervingly fast and accurate.

He has a fine sense of humor, a surprising side to a man often characterized as something of a bulldozer, but one that has clearly helped this veteran sleuth/historian keep a grip on reality while cataloguing and pursuing some of the most despicable people on the face of the planet.

“I’ve said this many times,” he smiles, “but I’m likely the only Jew who wishes for a long life for Nazis. As long as they stay alive I still have a chance of catching them.”

Old Nazis might be dying off quickly and the SWC’s high-profile “Operation Last Chance” is “in injury time,” to use Zuroff’s sports metaphor, but the final whistle hasn’t yet blown and, according to the man who has made it his life’s work,

Efraim Zuroff, director of the Jerusalem Office of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, gives a news conference on the center’s ‘Operation Last Chance – Late But Not Too Late’ in Munich, 2013





ILVA PITALEV / RIA NOVOSTI / AFP

Sympathizers rally at the Freedom Monument in Riga to commemorate the Latvian Legion of the Nazi Waffen-SS, March 2015

“there are hundreds, if not thousands left to hunt.”

The truth, though, is that providing sufficient evidence to bring about the successful prosecution of Nazi war criminals is very, very difficult. Even when the Shoah was fresh in the collective mind of world opinion it was tough, all the more so nearly three generations later.

“The prosecution of Nazis in the late 20th and early 21st century is all a matter of political will,” Zuroff contends. “The question is whether the countries that could have prosecuted them had the political will to proceed and bring them to justice. The bottom line is that the truth should be known. I am convinced that justice is one of the most effective educational tools there is.”

However, he acknowledges that his aggressive approach in the Baltic states, specifically Lithuania, in the aftermath

of their getting independence in the early '90s, was flawed.

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“I realize I made a mistake when I came in the early stages and made such demands on the Lithuanians who really weren't able to do it – to stop the rehabilitation and prosecute the Nazis,” he admits with surprising candor. “They were still in the euphoria of independence. They actually said to me ‘You spoiled the wedding – and you weren't even invited!’”

“Would I have done things differently,” he asks rhetorically, “I'm not sure. It had to be clear from the very beginning that these were issues. What I did succeed in doing is getting the issues on the table. We managed to get a joint Lithuania-Israel commission of inquiry on the rehabilitations that they gave. According to the law, anyone participating in genocide is ineligible to get rehabilitation – which is a pardon with all sorts of financial benefits – and ultimately 200 of these rehabilitations were canceled.

“The problem is that the Lithuanians didn't keep a single promise they made to the commission. They proceeded on their own. These are people who give Righteous Gentile honors to people that have been rejected by Yad Vashem! In other words, they maximize the ‘righteous’ and minimize the killers.”

If you've ever wondered what steps you



COURTESY

Intrepid Lithuanian writer Rūta Vanagaitė

must go through to settle the score with a Nazi, here is Zuroff's six-point guide to concluding a successful investigation: 1) expose a war criminal; 2) get some sort of legal action going; 3) get an indictment; 4) go to trial; 5) achieve a conviction; 6) punishment.

"And how many times have you got to No. 6?"

He pauses before answering. "There are some cases where, very often, success has a lot of partners. For example, the Lithuanians put [former wartime chief of the Vilnius secret police] Aleksandras Lileikis on trial in absentia [he was eventually deemed too sick to attend], but he was discovered, denaturalized and deported by the Americans. He ended up in Lithuania, and I put pressure on the Lithuanian government to put him on trial. So, the ones who deserve most of the credit are the Americans – not me. But I

had a share in it, so I would say to you that I had a share in about 40 different cases in which some action was taken against Nazi war criminals. Given the circumstances I would say that is an achievement."

DESPITE SUSPICIONS that many thousands of cases could have been brought against Lithuanians who took part in or assisted the Nazis, only three people have ever been prosecuted since the country gained independence in March 1990. I suggested that while convictions have been the main objective, is it not the case that, in essence, Zuroff's work is a lot more symbolic – more about sending a message to Nazi fugitives? He smiles.

"Of course. As long as I'm working, no Nazi in the world can rest easy knowing that he will die in peace and tranquility. There is always a danger there will be a knock on the door and someone from the

authorities will say, 'You were a guard in Majdanek [in Poland]', or 'You were a commander of Jasenovak [in Croatia]'. You will never hear me say at a press conference that I'm giving up. That press conference will never take place."

His detractors charge Zuroff with pursuing helpless old men, saying it's too late and they are often too infirm to face justice even if they are guilty. He insists that he, personally, has yet to meet a Nazi who regretted what he or she did.

For some years now, the Simon Wiesenthal Center, based in Los Angeles, led by Rabbis Marvin Hier and Abraham Cooper, and named in honor of the famous Nazi hunter and Austrian Holocaust survivor, has been increasingly prominent in the fight against anti-Semitism, in warning of the dangers of the Iranian nuclear deal, and in opposing the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement.

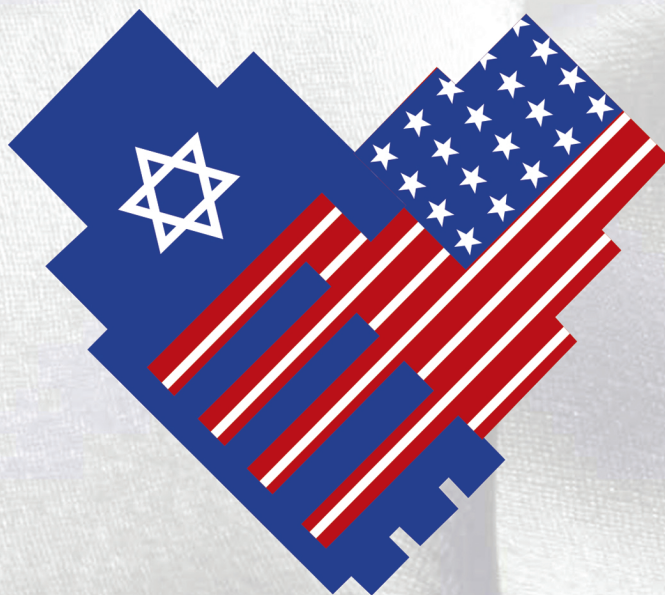
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The SWC has also developed a significantly increased presence on social media.

“The Wiesenthal Center in America has been dealing with fighting against Iran and the delegitimization of Israel, which, quite frankly, are more important than what I’m doing,” Zuroff concedes. “I’ll be the first person to say that, but I always say that we have an obligation on Holocaust issues. The [SWC] is happy to let me do this work and supports me in my efforts. Only last year, I was appointed in charge of Eastern European affairs because they trust me with tackling the issues in Eastern Europe.”

Zuroff continues to concentrate on his two strong suits – the pursuit of surviving Nazis, and attempting to draw attention to what he insists is the disturbing trend of Eastern European and Baltic governments rewriting the narrative of the Holocaust in their countries.

He is at the forefront of warning of the creeping return of neo-Nazi organizations riding along on a wave of nationalism that has risen in tandem with the fear of neighboring countries that Vladimir Putin’s Russia has growing territorial ambitions in the region. An example is Stepan Bandera, a Ukrainian leader who collaborated with the Nazis and allegedly sent many thousands of Ukrainian Jews to their deaths before later struggling against the Red Army. Bandera, who was assassinated in 1959, has become an iconic symbol of Ukrainian resistance.

According to Zuroff and his long-term academic colleague and Lithuania-based Yiddish scholar Dovid Katz, history in the Baltics, Ukraine, Hungary and elsewhere in the region is being rewritten to suggest equivalence between the crimes of the Nazis and the communist Soviet Union and to whitewash the role of local Nazi collaborators.

“All these countries, these new democracies, are desperate for heroes, which is only normal. So who are the heroes? They’re the people who fought against the Communists, like Bandera in Ukraine. In some cases, though, they are the same people who murdered Jews during the Shoah, which in theory should disqualify them from being heroes, but that has not stopped the authorities from glorifying people who had a role in the mass murder of Jews.”

The willing participation of these coun-

tries in the industrialized killing of Jews remains, according to Zuroff, a huge embarrassment to them. They prefer to bundle the loss of their Jews with the wartime losses suffered by their population as a whole and present themselves all as the victims – first of the Nazis, then of the Soviet Union. It’s a more comfortable narrative and an integral part of the troubling double genocide theory that is proving more and more amenable to many Eastern European historians and governments.

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“They are determined to undermine the uniqueness of the Shoah. We finally convinced the world that the Shoah was unique. Then along came the Eastern Europeans who say, ‘No, you got it all wrong. It wasn’t unique. The Shoah was terrible, but communism was just as bad.’ It is a very insidious, very sophisticated agenda. If a country has the choice between being a country of victims or a country of killers, it’s a no-brainer. Of course everyone wants to go along with this.”

IT’S A damning allegation, but one that is rarely heard with the exception of the small minority of voices in Europe who opposed the 2008 Prague Declaration, a document that appears to legitimize many elements of the double genocide theory. It was a declaration whose individual signatories include the now president of Germany, Joachim Gauck, one-time Federal Commissioner for the Stasi archives.

So what is it about the new book that has had such a profound effect on Zuroff, a man who, until compiling this volume, had apparently never let his work get to him?

“Well, first, it was very personal. The person I’m named for was murdered during the Shoah in Ponar, Lithuania. This book came about because Rūta Vanagaitė, a person with tremendous credibility in the eyes of the Lithuanian public, discovered two years ago that her

grandfather and her uncle were involved in killing Jews. In Lithuania, they very rarely speak about the role of local killers even though that role was very important.”

He suggests there are people who run the Holocaust industry in Lithuania, people with cushy jobs, some working for the government, who put out their version of the Holocaust and don’t want questioning voices like those of Zuroff and Vanagaitė to be given a platform, despite the fact that most of the Jews of Lithuania were murdered in the Holocaust by enthusiastic Lithuanian Nazi sympathizers.

“Rūta is not Jewish; she is Lithuanian. She is an amazing person. Her last book was the No. 1 best seller there for the last year. All of a sudden, it seems that she is the one who is going to save the whole project because I did not succeed. Basically, I’m passing the torch to Rūta. I’m saying, ‘You’re Lithuanian, your relatives were involved in killing Jews, and you are the one who can convince your people. I, obviously, had tremendous difficulty convincing them, as an outsider, as someone with an axe to grind. My dream would be to replicate this scenario in every other country in Eastern Europe, to find a local partner.’”

He summarizes the book as being about a descendant of the killers who goes with the world’s last Nazi hunter – “pardon me for *shvitzing*,” he laughs – on a mission of discovery and analysis.

“We go to 30 mass murder sites in Lithuania, and five in Belarus, because Lithuanian units were sent to Belarus to carry out the murders. We went to some places where people hadn’t been in years and interviewed eye witnesses who saw the murders as children. All the information came from local sources and, in some cases, local scholars and local trial records from the Vilna archive.”

The last word goes to Vanagaitė, the woman who has capably picked up the baton from Zuroff in Lithuania.

“This is a book for those who try to cover up the truth in the hope that it will disappear. The book tells the story of the killers and the killed. About Lithuanians and Jews. About what happened 75 years ago in Lithuania.” ■

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