



In The Quiet Brownstone Near The Danube

By: Steven Plaut Wednesday, October 4, 2006

At first glance it looks like an ordinary brownstone. The front of the three-story building is a mixture of brown brick and painted stucco, like so many of the older buildings in Budapest. We are only a block from the Danube in the Obuda district at the foot of the Buda hills. There are plane trees in front of the building, with leaves already changing colors in the Hungarian foliage. Down the street are the remains of an old Turkish mosque, a leftover from the days of Ottoman occupation of Hungary. There are white curtains on many of the windows of the building.

It is a few days before Yom Kippur, in the middle of the Ten Days of justice and judgment. It is sunny and warm. Across the street from the brownstone is the small restored Frankel Leo Street Synagogue and Jewish community center. They are located inside a courtyard, originally constructed to hide the synagogue and the Jewish families living in apartments around the yard. During World War II the courtyard was used as a stable by the Germans. The synagogue was rebuilt and rededicated in recent years. From the stairs in front of the synagogue one looks directly across at the brownstone – which happens to be the home of one of the worst war criminals of World War II still at large. He lives openly in the brown building behind the plane trees.

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In the early 1940's, Hungary was allied with Nazi Germany but had not yet come under the direct control of Hitler's Gestapo. Ruled by a fascist government of its own, Hungary's armed forces conducted a series of atrocities against Jews and against some non-Hungarian groups. One area in which a large number of atrocities took place was Voivodina, an area now inside Serbia, but containing many ethnic Hungarians before the war.

At the start of World War II, Hungary invaded the Voivodina and annexed it to Hungary. Its capital city is Novi-Sad, called Ujvidek in Hungarian. Wartime Ujbidek had a Jewish population of several thousand. They had first arrived in the area after the Ottomans had been driven from the town, and they had a magnificent synagogue.

Sandor Kepiro held a doctoral degree in law when he volunteered to join the Hungarian gendarmerie. He served as captain in the militia that was stationed in Voivodina. Under his command, units of the militia massacred between 880 and 1050 Jews in Ujvidek over three days, beginning January 21, 1942. The Hungarian militia then murdered more than 2,000 others – Jews and Serbians – elsewhere in the province.

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The press conference is being held in the Frankel Leo community center. The event is the initiative of the Simon Wiesenthal Center. The head of its Jerusalem office, Dr. Efraim Zuroff, has flown into town especially for this. Zuroff is the leading hunter of Nazi war criminals in the world today, courageously filling the shoes of the late Simon Wiesenthal. He briefly tells the audience the story of the war criminal Kepiro. And where is Kepiro today, asks Zuroff? He points out the window across the street at the brownstone. Right over there.

Zuroff's translator into Hungarian is a young Christian Hungarian woman named Szilvia Dittel. She has blond hair and blue eyes and could easily be working as a fashion model. Instead, she serves as a guide and educator in the Holocaust Memorial Center in Budapest, which opened about two years ago. Before that, she attended courses at Yad Vashem. She and several others at the Center are members of the strongly pro-Israel Pentecostal Church in Hungary.

I notice an old man in the room, slightly bent over, with thick glasses. He catches my attention when I come in because he and I are both wearing American-style baseball caps. Zuroff calls on the old man to come forward. The old man sits with his back to the cameras and asks that the reporters not use his name.

He softly tells his story. He was six years old when the massacre took place. He and his parents were rounded up by the militia commanded by Kepiro. They were marched out onto the frozen Danube ice and lined up, stripped of clothing in the freezing cold. His parents held him in their arms, as groups of Jews were shot before their eyes. Because the Danube ice was so thick, the militiamen, intent on speeding up the killing, fired a cannon into it to break it up. Many of the Jews drowned in the waters of the Danube.

He and his parents were just moments away from being murdered when suddenly the killing stopped. Kepiro had just received a direct order from his superiors to cease the executions. The boy and his parents returned to their home, only to find the boy's grandparents murdered and lying in a puddle of blood in front of the building. The militia troops had killed the elderly of Ujvidek on the spot, not even bothering to march them out to the river bank. Other Jews were then rounded up and held in the local synagogue, and from there deported.

Kepiro was the commanding officer of the militia carrying out the murders.

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Kepiro was tried twice for the mass murders. In 1944, the Hungarian government tried him and several other militia officers, but on the reduced charge of "causing embarrassment to the military and the state." He was convicted and sentenced to ten years in prison. But the sentence was never served. The German army seized control of Hungary shortly thereafter and revoked the sentences.

At the end of the war, Kepiro went into hiding for three years in Austria. He was tried *in absentia* in Hungary in 1946 and sentenced to 14 years. When things got too hot in Austria, he escaped to Argentina, where he lived until 1996. Then he returned to Budapest, living under his real name just across the street from the synagogue.

He is elderly now, but healthy and energetic. He throws parties for other residents living in his building. Efraim Zuroff and his team had uncovered his whereabouts while investigating other ongoing cases, as part of what the Wiesenthal Center calls "Operation Last Chance."

Kepiro's name is on the list of doorbell buttons at the entrance to the brownstone. The front door is suddenly opened by one of the residents, curious to see what all the ruckus outside is about. The camera crews pounce on her. Did you know you were living next to a genocidal murderer? ask the dozen reporters in Magyar unison. She shrugs and says she knew her neighbor had been in the gendarmerie, and adds – somewhat enigmatically – that she knows what took place in the war.

This past August, Zuroff and the Wiesenthal people submitted the evidence they had amassed on Kepiro to the Hungarian State Prosecutor. But since then the Hungarian Prosecutor's Office and other government officials have been dragging their feet, stonewalling, inventing one excuse after another for why they cannot toss Kepiro into prison.

The 1944 conviction of Kepiro was for "embarrassing the state," not for crimes against humanity, and so is subject to a statute of limitations. The 1946 conviction was for mass murder, but because the trial was *in absentia*, Hungarian law requires a retrial.

Meanwhile, Kepiro is free as a sparrow, throwing parties for the neighbors, enjoying a nice view of the Buda Hills

and the synagogue. The Hungarian government is talking about starting a new investigation from scratch.

Zuroff and his people have submitted files for prosecution against 91 war criminals in Europe and are currently building cases for 450 more. Zuroff himself not only leads the hunt for the murderers, but is also a highly prolific writer, author of many articles and books, mainly about the *Shoah*. Perhaps his best known and also his most controversial is a 1999 book about the responses and activities of the Orthodox community in the United States during the Holocaust.

The reporters and TV crews listen in quiet awe as Zuroff explains the importance of taking action at once against Kepiro. Each day that Kepiro is still free is one day more of injustice, one day less in which Kepiro will pay for his crimes, and one more day in which the conscience and honor of Hungary is besmirched. The Wiesenthal people have demanded that Kepiro at least be placed under house arrest pending prosecution. He has not been.

Szilvia Dittel has spent the recent weeks working with the Wiesenthal people to prepare the press campaign. By the evening after the press conference, her sense of achievement has grown. A Hungarian Supreme Court justice has just spoken out about Kepiro, and there are reports that Serbia may file an extradition request.

Will justice be done regarding Kepiro? Perhaps, says Zuroff dejectedly, but so far there have been no concrete steps taken to make that happen.

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