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HOLOCAUST VICTIMS

Dade man takes Nazi hunt to Germany

Sixty years after the end of World War II, a South Florida man is offering German citizens a reward for leads on Nazi criminals and collaborators.

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Operation: Last Chance, a Golden Beach man's Nazi-hunting project, is headed for Germany, birthplace of the Holocaust.

Investment manager Aryeh Rubin and Efraim Zuroff, who heads the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Israeli operation, launched the effort in July 2002 in the Baltic states and Eastern Europe, hoping to smoke out aging war criminals with \$10,000 rewards for tips leading to prosecution and conviction.

They'll announce the same deal to Germans Jan. 26 at the German Bundestag in Berlin, the day before Germany marks Holocaust Memorial Day.

So far, the effort has generated 326 tips, many about local collaborators in Croatia, Romania, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Ukraine, Poland and Austria.

Tipsters have identified people, burial sites and towns where residents were wiped out.

One man who didn't want a reward told of watching four armed local collaborators haul off 10 Jews from his Lithuanian town in a wagon.

A half-hour later, the man wrote, shots rang out. Soon, the wagon returned with the armed men and a pile of clothing, said Zuroff, 56, during a phone interview from Jerusalem.

Rubin, 54, had what turned out to be a fantasy: that people would unburden a guilty conscience by turning themselves in.

It didn't happen, he said. Nor has anyone identified a relative.

Still, Operation: Last Chance has been able to refer 72 names to prosecutors in Ukraine, Latvia and Lithuania; the latter two countries have opened 18 pretrial murder investigations involving dozens of suspects.

Referred cases have met three criteria, said Rubin: "We try to find out if the information regarding the crime is

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reliable; whether [the suspect] is alive and healthy; whether he's been prosecuted in the past."

Rubin's Targum Shlishi foundation has paid \$5,000 so far, half of a reward to a young Croatian man whose information led to a 90-year-old accused Nazi collaborator.

Accused perpetrators don't deserve a break just because they're old, Rubin believes.

The project has generated much publicity overseas, accomplishing Rubin's second goal: bringing Holocaust awareness to countries reluctant to confront their histories, prosecute war criminals, or combat the anti-Semitism festering within their borders.

Through media coverage and ads for the rewards, people all over the world "have been exposed to atrocities of the Holocaust," Rubin said.

He said that most Jewish communities in countries where Operation: Last Chance has gone have welcomed the effort, although some Jewish leaders didn't want to rock the boat.

In Romania, where tipsters generated 15 leads, 'we met with the elders in a group, conducted the meetings in English and Yiddish, and it was tearful. . . . One elder said, 'There is no question we want to support you, but why are you 20 years too late?' "

Rubin called Germany "the main event . . . We wanted to have our track record and be able to go where it all started and do an appeal to people who are receptive."

The German government has the best record of prosecuting Nazis in Europe, he said, and has stripped many ex-Nazis of their pensions.

"It has paid a lot of blood money to survivors and, as ironic as it sounds, is the best friend Israel has in Europe."

But revisionists and generations coming of age amid renewed anti-Semitism "want to forget the past," he said.

While he doesn't expect to find many more suspects, Rubin wants his campaign to focus attention on their deeds.

"It's clear we're at the end of the road," he said, given that the war ended 60 years ago. "The top guys are gone. Ninety percent of those who killed Jews got away with it. But the world has to realize if you harm a Jew, there are people yet unborn who'll come after you."

Zuroff praised the German government's commitment to Holocaust education and memorial, but said "the prosecution dimension is not getting its due."

There have been a couple of near-misses. The tipster who got paid identified the Croatian collaborator Milivoj Asner who, said Zuroff, was rewarded for his loyalty to the Ustasha fascist movement with the responsibility of keeping public order in the town of Slavonska Pozega, where 150 Jews once lived.

Asner stood by as Ustasha looted and burned the Pozega synagogue, then established a detention camp where, Zuroff said, more than 300 detainees were killed in August 1941 for "ostensibly" trying to escape.

A postwar official state investigation found him "among those who bear direct responsibility for the murder of members of the Pozega Jewish community" after the war, Zuroff said.

Alen Budaj, a 27-year-old Croatian researching his family's Jewish roots, found an anti-Jewish directive written by Asner in the national archives, along with other incriminating information, and passed it on to Operation: Last Chance.

Asner lived for many years in Austria -- which hasn't prosecuted a Nazi war criminal since the 1970s -- then returned to Croatia in 1991, where he founded a right-wing political party.

Last June, Zuroff met with Croatian President Stjepan Mesic, who was "shocked" by the information and ordered an investigation, according to Zuroff. When the investigation was announced at a news conference, Asner fled to Austria, where Zuroff said he lives openly in the city of Klagenfurt.

"The Croatian authorities have not officially approached Austria in this matter [for assistance in law

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enforcement]," Johann Sattler, a spokesman for the Austrian embassy in Washington, D.C., said in an e-mail.

"They also did not transfer any documents regarding the allegations against Mr. Asner, which would allow the authorities in Austria to start criminal investigations."

Zuroff said he has given the same information to the Austrian government as he had given Mesic.

"Once again, I'm very disappointed [in the Austrians], but hardly surprised."

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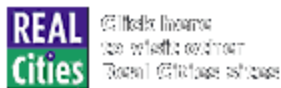
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