

ABC Local Radio, Australia

Posted on May 22, 2003

Nazi Hunter

BY MARK COLVIN

MARK COLVIN: The veteran Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal has just retired, at the age of ninety-four, and some old war criminals may be sleeping easier in their beds. But Mr Wiesenthal has successors who don't believe his retirement claim that there are "no more Nazis worth pursuing," and one of the most prominent of these Nazi hunters is an Australia.

Dr Efraim Zuroff is director of the Israel office of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre. As part of what's the Centre's calling Operation Last Chance, he's offering a reward amounting to about AUS\$16,000 for information leading to surviving war criminals.

He points out that the youngest perpetrators from World War Two would now be in their late seventies, and some may still in good health and relishing their continued freedom.

I asked him what he hoped the reward would achieve in Australia.

EFRAIM ZUROFF: Just in the framework of our project Operation Last Chance, we've already received the names of two individuals, who according to one informant were involved in the murder of Jews in Lithuania and subsequently immigrated to Australia.

MARK COLVIN: Can you tell us anything about those cases?

EFRAIM ZUROFF: Individuals who were involved in the persecution and murder of Jews in a town called Rokiskis, in which several thousand Jews were killed in the Summer and Fall of 1941, not longer after the Nazi invasion. The murders were carried out by Lithuanian police and people from the village.

MARK COLVIN: 96 per cent of the Jews in Lithuania were killed?

EFRAIM ZUROFF: That's correct.

MARK COLVIN: Presumably, among the four per cent, it's pretty unlikely that any of the survivors, the Jewish survivors, would be among your witnesses. Who are you trying to flush out? Are you trying to flush out people who were witnesses or might have been participants, but only minor participants- what?

EFRAIM ZUROFF: We're trying to get people who until now have maintained silence. The thinking behind the project was that there might be people who were, for example, convicted of these crimes and served their sentences and are now in a position to come forward.

[They] do not have to fear persecution, because of double jeopardy and can tell us the truth. I'm sorry to say that although we've obtained quite a bit of information ö over 200 new suspects ö no convicted murderers have yet stepped forward.

MARK COLVIN: If you found one of these people in Australia, what chance would you have of bringing that person to justice?

EFRAIM ZUROFF: I would say at this point the chances are not that good, because there's really very little political will in Canberra to proceed with these cases.

MARK COLVIN: Why do you think that is?

EFRAIM ZUROFF: I think that Australia initially started out with good intentions, established a special investigations unit, made a serious effort to bring these people to justice, but encountered initial failure in the first three cases.

Unfortunately, some of the people making the decisions reached the conclusion that there were no votes in bringing Nazis to justice, which was particularly unfortunate because it was precisely at this point that the archives in the former Soviet Union were being opened up and new important material was becoming available for the first time regarding crimes committed by people who were living in Australia, among other countries.

In the United States, they have stripped 71 Nazi war criminals of their American citizenship and deported 57. And Canada, which initially opted for criminal prosecution, several years ago chose to switch to de-naturalisation and deportation. They've won four cases, two additional suspects have voluntarily left the country and there are 17 cases in the courts right now.

MARK COLVIN: De-naturalisation and deportation – why doesn't Australia do it?

EFRAIM ZUROFF: That's what I've been asking myself for the past few years. We have in fact been in contact with the Government and have suggested to the Australian Government to switch to de-naturalisation and deportation, which quite frankly would be suitable for Australia.

Because Australia, after all, is not the country in which the crimes were committed, but is rather a country which offered haven to the people who settled here, who don't deserve the privilege of living in a great democracy like Australia.

MARK COLVIN: And you say we couldn't try them for these crimes here?

EFRAIM ZUROFF: It would be extremely difficult because one of the requirements of Australian law is that the witnesses personally appear in court. There's no video testimony for example, and given the fact that the witnesses in question are all elderly people, it's quite difficult for these people to make the trip to Australia and consequently that is one of the problems.

MARK COLVIN: So what does the Government say when you put these arguments to them?

EFRAIM ZUROFF: The Government has already switched the law to enable them to give them the power to take away Australian citizenship from individuals who lied upon entry and were subsequently involved in criminal activity or were previously involved in criminal activity, but that was not made retrospective.

It's from 1997 when the change was made, onward. And I think it would be very important and very beneficial to make that change retrospective and I want to point out that in many other countries these people are being brought to justice, quite successfully.

In the past 28 months, there have been 21 convictions of Nazi war criminals in different countries all over the world. That basically means that every four months, three Nazi war criminals have been successfully convicted. So it's happening. It's still possible.

As we speak, at the moment, Australia is the only country which admitted large numbers of these collaborators, Nazi collaborators and perpetrators, which has not taken successful legal action against a single one. And to be quite honest, it's very surprising and it's a bit strange, I would say.

If the Government will make a serious effort, then we'll re-think the policy and devote some renewed energy to this issue. I would say, my estimate is that between half a dozen or a dozen cases could be mounted.

MARK COLVIN: The Nazi hunter Dr Efrain Zuroff, Director of the Israel office of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre.