

"This work continues"

No retirement for Nazi hunter.

BY DANIEL MANDEL

In Melbourne recently, Efraim Zuroff, head of the Jerusalem office of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, took issue with the famed Nazi hunter whose name the Centre bears and who recently announced his retirement.

DM: Simon Wiesenthal recently said that he is 94, has retired and outlived the Nazis he hunted, that the work is done. What's your view?

EZ: With all the admiration and respect that we have for Mr Wiesenthal, I disagree. In the last 28 months, prior to May 2003, there have been 21 successful convictions and 16 new files. I think that clearly shows that this work continues and can continue.

DM: Do you think there are enough living Nazi war criminals who are fit to stand trial if they could be found and brought to justice?

EZ: You have to keep in mind that in order to murder six million people, you need an extremely large number of individuals. Although several million Jews were murdered in gas chambers, at least two million were murdered individually and one by one shot. Even those Jews who were murdered at death camps had to be rounded up by numerous Nazis and local collaborators without whose help none of this would have been possible.

DM: Is it in that context that you have launched this controversial initiative of Operation Last Chance?

EZ: It has only aroused controversy among those who have opposed the prosecution of Nazi war criminals. We launched Operation Last Chance as an innovative method of obtaining information which otherwise might not have reached the hands of prosecutors. We chose to launch it in the Baltic republics because the Baltics have three components that do not exist together anywhere else in Europe during the Shoah. One is the active zealous participation of large segments of the local population in mass murder of Jews. Second, foreign Jews were brought to each one of these countries to be murdered during the Shoah, in many cases by locals. French Jews were brought to Lithuania. Czech, Austrian and German Jews were brought to Latvia during 1941 and Czech and German Jews were brought to Estonia initially, not only after the invasion but later, and Lithuanian Jews were brought to Estonia. And units from each of these countries were sent elsewhere to participate in the implementation of the Final Solution. So there are many people who could give us the information that is needed for prosecutions. [Opposition to prosecution] stems from a sentiment that this was similar to tactics used by the KGB and that is always a sensitive subject in former communist countries, in the former Soviet countries.

DM: You mean they claim it is a case of financing people to denounce others?

EZ: Correct. And that reminded them of Soviet rule but the fact of the matter is that if the American government can offer \$25 million for information on Bin Laden, why can't they offer funds in return for information regarding Nazi war criminals?

DM: So what kind of success do you think you will have in that climate?

EZ: We have received more than 211 names. We have received 174 names in Lithuania, 37 in Latvia and 6 in Estonia. The special prosecutor from Vilnius has already opened two murder investigations regarding crimes committed during the Holocaust in the wake of information received from Operation Last Chance.

DM: In the Australian case, what is our situation here as you understand it to be?

EZ: Unless Australia will switch to denaturalisation and deportation [proceedings], it is highly unlikely whether Australia will take successful legal action against any Nazi war criminal. If Australia were to switch to denaturalisation and deportation, I think the chances of success would be considerable. I would estimate some 50 suspects at least living in Australia and I would say that perhaps maybe six to a dozen cases actually could be taken. This is precisely what is happening in the United States and to a lesser extent in Canada. The United States has had 11 successful convictions in the last 28 months and 11 new cases have been filed. The Americans to date have stripped 71 Nazi war criminals of their American citizenship and deported 57. Those figures I think, are quite indicative because the profile of the average Nazi collaborator/perpetrator who entered Australia is very, very similar to that of the Nazi collaborator/perpetrators who entered the United States [and] are under investigation by the Office of Special Investigations.

DM: You have travelled more than once to Rwanda. What lessons have you been able to draw in terms of dealing with the genocide that took place there?

EZ: The most important lesson is to record the testimony of all surviving witnesses and to invest as much interest as possible to be able to get the information while the information is as fresh as possible in the minds of the victims.

DM: I heard you make an interesting point the other day, namely, that the same techniques that we have seen immediately after the Holocaust, of denial and concealment, have emerged in Rwanda. Can you illustrate this a little bit for us?

EZ: It is quite interesting and frustrating. It is one of those things that really makes you pause and think. Immediately after the Rwandan genocide, already there were those who claimed it never took place, or, to the extent that it took place, that it was carried out by the Tutsis. The people who are spreading these lies are people connected to the Hutu extremists who carried out the genocide, or who are genocidists themselves. So on a certain level it is not surprising but at the same time it is absolutely infuriating.