



November 7, 2003

## What Did You Do After The War, Dad?

By Aryeh Rubin

In early September, I embarked on a trip to Poland, Romania and Austria to announce the launch of Operation Last Chance: Rewards for Justice in those countries. Operation Last Chance offers a \$10,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of Nazi war criminals.

The program, initiated in 2002, was conceived and is funded by my nonprofit foundation Targum Shlishi in partnership with the Israel office of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, which administers the program. Dr. Efraim Zuroff, director of the Wiesenthal Center's Israel office, and I have been asked repeatedly: What is the purpose of pursuing Nazi war criminals 58 years after the war? After all, these criminals are old and frail. We, the Jewish people, have more daunting and immediate issues with which to deal. Why bother?

The legendary 94-year-old Simon Wiesenthal has customarily responded to that question by saying, "When I go to heaven, the victims of the Holocaust will confront me and say, 'You were the lucky one, you survived. What did you do with your life?' I will be able to respond, 'I did not forget you.'" He speaks for all of us.

When I conceived Operation Last Chance, I didn't know what effect it would have. At the very least, I believed it would help undo a terrible legacy of inaction — a legacy that can be ascribed, albeit in very different ways, to both the Jewish people and the countries harboring Nazi war criminals. Few countries pursued these killers. In those that did, relatively few criminals were brought to justice. Of those, only a minute percentage received the severe punishment they deserved.

The simple but sad fact is that for the most part, the Nazi war criminals who perpetrated the largest and most gruesome genocide in human history got away with it. To my mind, now is our last chance to act before the murderers die peacefully in their beds, with their children and grandchildren wistfully looking on — a fate they certainly do not deserve.

The primary focus of our activities in bringing Nazi war criminals to justice is to prod reluctant governments to prosecute those who participated in the well-organized killing machine that murdered one-third of our people. In an ideal world, these governments would be moved to prosecute past misdeeds out of a sense of remorse, justice and/or conscience. But our firsthand

experience with Operation Last Chance reveals that in most cases, it is political expediency that motivates them. It is world opinion, political pressure and the status of pending European Union membership that nudges the haltingly slow wheels of justice.

In most of the countries where Operation Last Chance is or will be operational (the program has been launched in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland, Romania and Austria, with Belarus, Ukraine, Hungary and Germany scheduled for launch later in the year), Holocaust consciousness is not part of the zeitgeist. In fact, a revisionist view of history has resulted in citizens in most of these countries viewing their predecessors as victims of Nazi terror and not as participants in the murder of Jews.

Even in Germany, where the Holocaust is an integral part of the consciousness of the nation, incredibly there is of late a public discussion of the terrible German suffering during World War II. More disconcerting is that Holocaust denial is leeching its way into the very fabric of the local cultures.

Some 15 months after its inauguration, Operation Last Chance has yielded information on 241 suspects, with 55 names submitted to prosecution agencies. In Lithuania, local prosecutors have opened three murder investigations involving 22 suspects, and we expect additional investigations to be initiated in other countries. Also significant is the extensive media coverage coupled with an advertising campaign that has brought the horror of the Holocaust to the public consciousness in the 10 targeted countries.

The subtle but clear message: If you seek to harm a Jew, there will be those, perhaps unborn at the time of the crimes, who eventually will seek justice. This is particularly important in light of the centrality of the "Jew as victim" message that is a legacy of the Holocaust.

It is never too late. In the last three and one-half years, 24 Nazi war criminals have been convicted in the United States, Canada, Poland, Lithuania, France and Germany.

While we do not cast the sins of the fathers upon their children, we emphatically hold the grandparents responsible for their crimes against our people, and for crimes against humanity. Let those murderers of our families, be they 75 or 105, fear that knock on the door until their dying day, that they might yet face retribution.

To me, the relevant question is not why Operation Last Chance 58 years after the war, but why did we do so little to pursue Nazi war criminals?

How can we appeal to the world's judicial sense of justice when we ourselves were and continue to be asleep at the wheel? Just remembering, lighting the annual memorial candle, does not send the needed message to those who would dare do it one more time.

Aryeh Rubin, a Miami-based investment manager, is the founder and director of the Targum Shlishi Foundation. Special To The Jewish Week