

March 2002

## Leading Off ...

### “Shoe-Leather” Confrontation

As a supporter of the efforts to bring Nazi War criminals to justice, and having observed firsthand the efforts of Dr. Efraim Zuroff, director of the Jerusalem office of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, I wish to comment on a specific remark regarding “shoe leather” in the “Last Days of Nazi Hunting” article that appeared in Moment.

While Dr. Zuroff may not have made as many “shoe-leather” visits to the homes of former Nazi war criminals in the company of a reporter (that certainly garners the publicity), as Steven Rambam has, Zuroff has criss-crossed the globe in search of the murderers of Jews. Over the years, I personally accompanied him to Iceland, Costa Rica, Croatia, Lithuania, Latvia, Germany, and Estonia. On his own, he traveled to another dozen countries in his efforts to help achieve justice.

In these countries, his major objective was to attempt to convince reluctant governments to take action against Nazi war criminals. In the Baltics, he also instituted an innovative reward program to bring to justice unprosecuted murderers.

In 1999, in Croatia, Zuroff practically single-handedly brought about the prosecution of Dinko Sakic, the last remaining commandant of a major concentration camp (Jasenovac). Sakic’s trial is, to date, the only successful prosecution of a Nazi war criminal in post-Communist Eastern Europe. He was sentenced to 20 years, the maximum punishment under Croatian law. I attended the opening of the trial, and the closing some six months later, and can attest to the change in the moral climate and the consciousness of the Croatian people vis-a-vis the crimes of the Holocaust and their relationship to the Jews. One newspaper editor remarked how the trial was a watershed in modern Croatian history, and in that regard, how Zuroff’s efforts helped change the political climate of the country, and contributed significantly to the election of a much more liberal and democratic government.

In Iceland, a murder investigation was opened against a particularly brutal escaped Estonian Nazi, who was very popular in his adopted country. While Evald Mikson died before he could stand trial, again the consciousness of a people was raised to the atrocities of the Holocaust. In Costa Rica, we ran ads that pressured the Supreme Court to uphold the expulsion order of Bogdan Koziy, whom an American judge branded as a murderer in open court, (and thanks to Zuroff’s efforts, the Polish government recently opened a murder investigation against him). As a result, most of Central America was reminded of the Jewish plight during the Holocaust.

And in an ongoing campaign that was launched in cooperation with the Targum Shlishi Foundation in the Baltics this summer, more than 25 people came forward and provided more than 100 leads on the criminal activities of local collaborators. Two official investigations have already been opened by government prosecutors. The ads that we ran offering a \$10,000 reward also accomplished several other objectives. First, Lithuania and Latvia, countries that are about to enter NATO, had the worst

murder rates—and among the highest participation rates of local collaborators of any country—during the Holocaust. (More than 93 percent of the Jews in these countries were killed.) Lithuania and Latvia were suddenly forced to confront their bloody records during the Shoah and assume moral responsibility for their participation in this dark period of our mutual history. Second, the remaining thousands, and perhaps tens of thousands of locals, who participated in these horrible war crimes against the Jews, now fear a knock on the door. Just maybe, these old men and women might yet face retribution. (Who among us does not delight that we have raised their level of angst in their waning days?) Finally, a clear message is sent to an entire region that if you harm a Jew, there will be others, some as yet unborn, 20, 40, and even 60 years hence who will seek justice.

In an era when anti-Semitism is again raising its ugly head, these messages, I believe, go far beyond the shoe-leather confrontation. With very limited resources, with world Jewry preoccupied with other issues, and with political will missing in most countries of haven, Efraim Zuroff, more than anyone else, brought a modicum of justice for the victims of the Holocaust. He is the true successor to Simon Wiesenthal himself.

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