

Hunting the Last Nazis

Seeking justice for the Holocaust while there's still a little time

By Frank Brown
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April 12 issue - He is a dignified man with wavy white hair, upset at the course of a conversation. What happened 63 years ago in a Lithuanian forest? "It's a lie," he says. He never fired a shot. Besides, he claims there were no Jews in the area that summer in 1941, when a wave of killing began that didn't end until 93 percent of the country's 250,000 Jews were dead.

His name is Alfonsas Zaldokas, and at 82 he has already beaten the average Lithuanian male's life expectancy by 16 years. Now, suddenly, he complains that he can't eat or sleep—not because he is elderly, or because his heart condition has worsened. No, it's the accusation against him. Last month he was questioned by government investigators, acting on a tip that Zaldokas might long ago have been a member of a Nazi death squad. "I don't understand what is happening," he says, after years of quiet existence in his hometown of Kaunas.

The answer is Operation Last Chance, a program launched two years ago by the Nazi-hunting Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles. As the name implies, it seeks to flush out the last surviving Eastern Europeans who participated in murdering Jews during World War II. Given their advancing age, time is of the essence. To encourage people to come forward, Operation Last Chance offers an incentive: the promise of a \$10,000 bounty, put up by a wealthy Miami businessman, for information leading to a criminal conviction.

So far, no one has collected any reward money. Still, the program's newspaper advertisements and telephone hot lines have yielded 271 tips resulting in dozens of ongoing investigations. Nearly as important, says the sponsor, Aryeh Rubin, is the fact that more than "a billion people are being exposed to the Holocaust in places where they never knew about it." Soviet-era history glossed over Jewish suffering in favor of the Nazi killing of communists. And once communism fell, newly independent countries focused on their own victimhood at the hands of the Russians. Witness Lithuania's Museum of Genocide Victims, or Latvia's Museum of the Occupation, where Jewish activists say exhibits sidestep Latvians' complicity in the Holocaust.

Efraim Zuroff, the Jerusalem-based head of Operation Last Chance, travels across Eastern Europe soliciting information. "The Murderers Are Among Us," goes one ad soliciting tips. Along the way he has been deluged with anti-Semitic e-mail and phone calls. They "just don't get it," he says. In Latvia, where an estimated 60,000 Jews were killed by Nazis and local collaborators, Zuroff passed along the names of 41 local suspects to the Prosecutor General's Office, which claims 10 investigations are ongoing. One of those names came from Larisa Grekova, in Bauska, who described how an investigator came to her home and berated her for stepping forward. "She asked me, 'Why is this so important to you? You aren't even Jewish. Don't you understand that this is damning to our government?'"

That investigator's approach pretty much sums up attitudes toward the Nazi hunters. After joining NATO last week—and as Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia look forward to entering the European Union on May 1—there is a strong desire to move forward and get on with the daunting business of becoming "European" once and for all. That's accompanied by an equal reluctance to delve too far into the past. "Most people could care less about what happened back then," says Valentinas Brandisauskas of the Lithuanian Genocide Research Center. He adds that relatively few Lithuanians took part in the genocide—"maybe 2,000 or 4,000 or 6,000"—most of whom are dead.

Operation Last Chance started in the Baltics, moved on to Poland, Austria and Romania, and will wrap up in early summer in Germany. As for Alfonsas Zaldokas, he is engaged in a search of his own. As the head of the Union of Partisans of June 1941, an organization representing Lithuanians who fought to expel the occupying Red Army, he scours the countryside for unmarked graves and helps veterans gather the documents to qualify for government benefits. Like his accusers, he too has a keen sense of urgency about his work. "There's not much time," he says. "They are dying."