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Taking the Last Chance

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A project offering rewards to residents of the Baltic states for tips on Nazi collaborators prompts a predictable wave of sometimes anti-Semitic protest but also, surprisingly, two dozen murder investigations

As a young girl early in World War II, Eleonora Vilcinskiene saw how Lithuanian militias committed atrocities against Jews even before the Germans arrived in 1941. In her home town of Rosikis, members of the local "Lithuanian Self-Defense battalion" marched their Jewish neighbors into deep mud, buried them up to their necks and cut off their beards with a long blade used to slaughter pigs, tortured them for two weeks and then murdered them. Today, Vilcinskiene, aging and in poor health, says she remembers everything and that "the guilty must answer."

But Vilcinskiene is one of a small minority. Most Lithuanians are totally opposed to efforts to bring to justice those of their countrymen who took an active part in the murder of Jews, and independent Lithuania has not sentenced a single person to date in connection with the wholesale slaughter of all but 8,000 of the 220,000-strong Jewish population under Nazi occupation. Indeed, Lithuanians complain they are being held collectively responsible for what they claim were the actions of a few criminals, and there is almost total denial of any wider Lithuanian role.

Just over a year ago, the Simon Wiesenthal Center — in cooperation with the Targum Shlishi Foundation headed by Miami-based Jewish philanthropist Aryeh Rubin — announced Operation Last Chance, offering rewards of \$10,000 for information leading to the conviction of any Holocaust criminal in the Baltic states. But after the media carried SWC's offer, websites were swamped with record numbers of anti-Semitic comments and angry attacks on Ephraim Zuroff, the head of the SWC in Jerusalem, who had launched Last Chance at a press conference here in the Lithuanian capital.

Last April, SWC issued eased terms for collecting a reward — \$1,000 for information leading to an official investigation, an additional \$1,500 for an indictment served against a suspect able to stand trial, and the remaining \$7,500 for conviction and punishment. This prompted another rash of internet comments, with references to Jews as cockroaches and elaborate theories of international Jewish conspiracy. Several comments likened anyone accepting the SWC offer to Judas.

Quite apart from the ongoing absence of reflection or regret in Lithuania over the murderous role some of its citizens played in the Holocaust, there is also a longstanding myth that during the era of Soviet occupation — before and after the Nazi 1941-44 period — most native Communists were Jews and that the Jews committed genocide against the Lithuanian nation through deportations to Siberia and summary executions. The combination is a recipe for continued widespread hate and misunderstanding of the Jews.

In this context, even the limited results of Operation Last Chance are remarkable. The SWC has received leads to about 241 possible suspects — 184 from Lithuania, 38 from Latvia, six from Estonia and even 13 from Ukraine, which wasn't initially included in the scope of the operation. In turn, the SWC has submitted 32 names to prosecutors in Lithuania, 13 to the U.S. and 10 to Latvia. Official murder investigations of 24 suspects have now been initiated in Lithuania. And this has now prompted the SWC to expand the project to Poland, Romania and

Austria. Still, the Lithuanian prosecutor in charge of Holocaust and war-crimes cases, Rimvydas Valentukevicius, told The Jerusalem Report that Lithuanian police and security agencies are having trouble locating the people named in many of the SWC tip-offs.

The SWC is offering total confidentiality to those submitting information. If indictments are served, said Valentukevicius, the judges will have discretion as to whether to hold public or closed trials. He had no plans for a witness-protection scheme, but did not rule this out. “We’ve had two of these cases go to trial so far,” he said — referring to pre-Operation Last Chances cases against former Lithuanian State Security Department officials and alleged Nazi collaborators Aleksandras Lileikis and Kazys Gimzauskas — “and there wasn’t any need for it then.”

(Lileikis and Gimzauskas were both stripped of U.S. citizenship in 1996 for lying on their naturalization forms. Lileikis was chief of the Vilnius section of the Lithuanian State Security Department, Saugumas, and Gimzauskas served as a deputy. Lileikis died in 2000, having been indicted only after it was clear he was medically unfit to stand trial for war crimes. In February 2001, a Lithuanian court convicted Gimzauskas of collaborating with the Nazis to murder Jews, but ruled he wasn’t mentally competent to face sentencing.)

While the offer of a \$10,000- or even a \$1,000-reward might seem alluring — the average Lithuanian monthly wage is about \$250 — Simonas Alperavicius, head of the Lithuanian Jewish Community, which is an address for Operation Last Chance callers, says that most of those who have come forward with information are not interested in the money, and this is confirmed by the informants themselves, who say they simply want to see justice finally done.

For instance, Justinas Jokubaitis of Klaipeda (formerly the city of Memel, in German East Prussia, but part of inter-war independent Lithuania), says the money was not an inducement — even though his monthly pension is only some \$100. Jokubaitis, who claims to have witnessed atrocities against Jews, says he came forward because there is so much talk about Soviet deportations of Lithuanians but total silence on the fate of the Jews.

At the initial press conference last year, Zuroff noted that Nazi collaborators were dying off, as were witnesses, and this could be the “last chance” (hence the title of the project) to bring prosecutions. But most Lithuanians who care even to discuss the issue contend that all Holocaust crimes were thoroughly investigated by the Soviet tribunals, all perpetrators were brought to justice long ago, and Zuroff is beating a dead horse.

Most responsible scholars, however, say the Soviet Holocaust trials were inadequate — show trials in the true sense of the word, aimed at doing away with potential political troublemakers. Liudas Truska and a small number of Lithuanian historians, working under the umbrella of the Lithuanian government's Commission for Assessing the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupations, are consolidating materials deconstructing long-held Lithuanian notions such as that myth, still espoused by the younger generation of nationalist Lithuanian historians, of Lithuanian Jews committing genocide against the Lithuanian nation after the introduction of Soviet power. Scholars on the commission also note that the Lithuanian exile community in North America condemned the Soviet trials in the 1950s, saying that only independent Lithuanian judges could try cases of war crimes on Lithuanian territory.

Vilcinskiene, a witness at those Soviet trials who, at age 15, says she saw her Jewish neighbors killed by her Lithuanian neighbors in the northern town of Rokiskis, insists that the Soviet authorities ignored her testimony, and that a number of those she saw murdering Jews later became important officials in the Soviet hierarchy. “Those same people, the partisans who are raised up as heroes by our government today, they committed murder,” protests Vilcinskiene.

In 1996 Vilcinskiene told her story again to Alperavicius, whose community organization represents Lithuania's 3,000 or so remaining Jews. And she contacted the SWC via the Lithuanian State Jewish Museum in Vilnius, which took her testimony last fall. Special prosecutor Valentukevicius visited her in May to take formal testimony. “They say they’re all dead now,” she continues, referring to the common perception of the perpetrators, “but I don’t think so. I have this feeling some of them are still alive. As long as Lithuania doesn’t come to terms with this dark part of its history, the country can’t move on.”

Zuroff echoes the sentiment, saying he saw how a single successful prosecution in Croatia — that of Dinko Sakic, commandant of the Jasenovac concentration camp, jailed for 20 years in 1999 for responsibility for the murder of thousands of camp inmates — can change public opinion. “I am hoping that powerful eyewitnesses and good evidence will help educate the Lithuanian public about the events of the Holocaust and the need for the country to confront its past,” he states.

But critics of Operation Last Chance are not only the cyber riffraff, as Alperavicius calls the authors of some rabidly anti-Semitic comments on the Lithuanian Internet. At least one Lithuanian parliamentarian has called for Zuroff to be declared *persona non grata*, for allegedly inciting anti-Semitism during his visits. And, however surprisingly, Operation Last Chance enjoys only very limited open support even among local Jews. In fact, some of the internet critiques came from self-described Jews, blasting Zuroff for souring Jewish-Lithuanian relations.

Lithuanian philosopher, TV personality and author of “The Vanished World of Lithuanian Jews,” Leonidas Donskis, who describes himself as an assimilated Jew and a child of Holocaust survivors, says the Lithuanian public reaction is understandable, in that it looks like SWC is trying to buy justice. “There are very few, if any, Holocaust deniers in Lithuania,” he says. “The stance of the vast majority of Lithuanians could best be described as a kind of defensiveness about an inconvenient past,” he asserts, adding that it will take decades for Lithuania to come to terms with its painful history. Still, Donskis says he takes some consolation from the fact that Lithuania has done more than Latvia or Estonia to change the curriculum in high schools — to introduce new teaching programs in Holocaust studies.

Dovid Katz, a Brooklyn-born, Vilnius-based professor of Yiddish language, literature and culture, opposes the project because of what he calls the “position and sensitivities of the older Jewish community here, the survivor community... They deserve to live out their days in tranquillity and peace,” he says. Initiatives relating to the past need to be pursued in a way that does not “cause resentments — now, at this hour, when we need to be building bridges.”

Alperavicius, of course, strongly disagrees, saying this is a simple matter of justice. He adds that he’s probably the only Jew in Lithuania to publicly support Zuroff. Many others, he suggests, “are probably afraid. But I’m not.” Taking the opposite tack to Katz regarding the interests of elderly Jews, he adds: “I’m old, there's nothing left to be afraid of.”