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“Operation: Last Chance” An End or a New Beginning?

During the last week in January 2005, two significant but ostensibly contradictory events regarding the Holocaust took place in Berlin. On January 26, the Simon Wiesenthal Center launched “Operation: Last Chance,” which offers financial rewards of up to 10,000 euros for information leading to the prosecution and punishment of Nazi war criminals, at a press conference at the Bundestag and on the next day Germany marked the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp in an official state ceremony in the same building. If six decades have already elapsed since the end of the systematic implementation of the Final Solution at the most notorious of the Nazi camps, is it still possible to hold any of the Holocaust perpetrators accountable? Current statistics on the prosecution of Nazi war criminals worldwide and the results of “Operation: Last Chance” in the eight countries in which it was launched prior to Germany clearly provide an affirmative answer.

“Operation: Last Chance” was conceived by Aryeh Rubin, the founder and president of the Targum Shlishi Foundation of Miami, Florida, who over the past fifteen years has actively supported and assisted the Simon Wiesenthal Center’s efforts to bring Nazi war criminals to justice. With time running out on these endeavors, however, he believed that a more proactive approach, which included financial rewards, should be attempted and guaranteed a generous contribution to undertake the project as a joint program of Targum Shlishi and the Wiesenthal Center, whose Jerusalem Office was entrusted with its implementation and coordination.

“Operation: Last Chance” was officially launched in July 2002 in Lithuania (July 8), Estonia (July 10) and Latvia (July 11). There were several reasons for starting the project in the Baltics. One was the extensive role played by the local population in the murders and the extremely high victimology rate in all three countries. (Over 95% of the Jews who were living under the Nazi occupation in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were murdered.) The fact that practically all the Jews killed were murdered near their homes (rather than in the death camps in Poland) increased the likelihood of being able to obtain information regarding the identity of the killers. In addition, we assumed that the relatively large number of local Nazi war criminals who had been convicted by the Soviets after World War II and had already served their sentences and had returned to their countries of origin might be willing to reveal the identities of their fellow perpetrators in return for the financial reward. While this possibility certainly raised a daunting moral dilemma, the fact remains that in numerous instances of mass murder, only perpetrators could possibly identify the killers and they were our only hope of being able to bring some of the guilty to justice.

The project was launched at press conferences held in each of the capitals, which were followed by ads in the local media, which purposely focused on the atrocities committed by the local population. Thus, for example, the illustration used in the ads in Lithuania was of the murder of Jews by Lithuanians in the Lietukis garage in Kovno, a well-known atrocity in which more than fifty Jews were murdered by a gang of Lithuanians wielding crowbars and who shoved fire hoses into the mouths of some of their victims and turned on the water until

their stomachs burst. The murders were witnessed by a crowd of men, women, and children who cheered as each Jew succumbed, and after all the Jews had been killed, sang the Lithuanian national anthem.

The caption of the ad published in the national media noted, "Lithuanian Jewry did not disappear. They were brutally murdered at Ponar (Vilnius), Fort IX (Kaunas), Kuzai Forest (Siauliai) and over one hundred places of mass murder." Besides announcing the reward of \$10,000, it listed the phone numbers of the local Jewish community, the local special prosecutor for crimes committed by totalitarian regimes (Nazi and Communist), as well as the contact numbers of the Israel office of the SWC.

In Lithuania, we benefited from the help provided by the local Jewish community, headed by Dr. Shimon Alperovich, which agreed to serve as our local partner and to record the incoming information. The issue of local partners ultimately turned out to be more complicated than originally anticipated. One would imagine, that local Jewish communities would be more than happy to support the project and provide the necessary technical assistance, but that was not the case. In fact, several communities, such as Estonia and Germany, refused outright to cooperate, whereas the Latvian Jewish community was publicly critical of the project even though they had initially agreed to cooperate.

A good part of the opposition by these communities undoubtedly stemmed from a fear of an anti-Semitic backlash. Yet while this concern was shared by all the communities, there were those such as Lithuania and Romania (headed by the late Prof. Cajal and Julian Sorin) which chose to provide excellent public support and cooperation, whereas others rushed to join the local critics. In retrospect, the responses of the local Jewish communities were not necessarily a function of their size (Romania has approximately 9,000 Jews and Lithuania 5,000, whereas Germany has over 100,000 Jews and Latvia has 12,000), but rather of the courage of their leaders and their commitment to bringing the murderers to justice. The latter factor was often influenced by whether these leaders' relatives had been murdered in that country during the Shoa.

During its initial year of operation, "Operation: Last Chance" received the names of well over 200 suspects, mostly from Lithuania. Encouraged by this success, the project was expanded in September 2003 to Poland, Romania, and Austria. Our principle in this regard was to focus exclusively on those countries in which the local population and/or its government (Romania for example) played an active role in the murder of its Jewish community and/or other Jews. While this fact was quite well known in the Baltics, the situation in the next three countries was more complex. The Poles, for example, were severely victimized by the Nazis (three million Poles, including a significant percentage of the Polish intelligentsia, were murdered) and were not given an integral role in the implementation of the Final Solution in Poland. Yet numerous Poles did play a role in the murder of Jews, a fact which many Poles refused to acknowledge, preferring to foster their country's image as a victim of the Nazis.

In Romania, the government's role in the mass murder of Jews in Romania and in the territories it annexed as well as in the Ukraine was largely covered up, a fact reinforced by statements by President Iliescu and others that "the Holocaust did not take place in Romania." Even though Iliescu subsequently retracted this statement, little effort was invested in educating the Romanian public about the crimes of its wartime government headed by Marshal Antonescu, who in certain circles is still considered a national hero. In fact, since Romania became a democracy not a single Holocaust perpetrator had been investigated, let alone prosecuted, and rehabilitations had been granted to several Romanian Nazi war criminals.

As far as Austria is concerned, its record on bringing Nazi war criminals to justice has been utterly abysmal, with not a single conviction recorded during the past three decades. This is not that surprising, however, in view of the fact that until about fifteen years ago, Austria touted itself as "Hitler's first victim," rather than as

Germany's zealous partner in crime. (Many of the leading Holocaust perpetrators, such as Adolf Eichman, Franz Stangl, Artur Seyss-Inquart, and Odilo Globocnik were Austrians.)

In the wake of this expansion of "Operation: Last Chance," we encountered our first legal challenge based on data protection. Questions apparently posed by right-wing nationalist elements prompted inquiries by the Polish Office for Data Protection which questioned the legality of the project and whether the transfer of information regarding Polish citizens to another country (in this case Israel) without their knowledge, was not a violation of Polish law. We later encountered a similar challenge in Hungary.

Another worrisome phenomenon, which we encountered at this state, was a plethora of anti-Semitic phone calls to our hotline in Austria. Out of approximately one hundred calls, more than ninety were of persons who called to express unequivocally anti-Semitic (and often anti-American) views. Typical of such calls were those who identified Bush and Sharon as "the real war criminals" and demanded the financial reward. Others sent copies of the ad we published in the Austrian mass circulation daily Kronen Zeitung under the caption "Der Morder sind unter uns" (The murderers are among us) along with similar comments to our office in Jerusalem. A recurring theme of these calls, letters, and emails was when will the Jews stop milking us due to the past?

While we received anti-Semitic responses in practically every country, it was only in Austria that their number was so large and in direct disproportion to the number of serious leads received. Elsewhere, we received not only hundreds of names of suspects (see accompanying table) but also expressions of support and information of historical value. In many cases the people who submitted the information stated that they did not want any reward, but felt an obligation to inform us. One such example was the following story received from Lithuania about the fate of the Jewish community of Panemunelis (in Yiddish Panemunok), a shtetl with about one hundred Jews, about whose murder during the Shoa no details were hereto known.

The informant related that as a young boy, in August 1941, he saw a wagon with ten Jews aboard, five from the Olkin family and five from the Jaffe family, along with four armed Lithuanians whom he named headed in the direction of the nearby town of Rokiskis. Thirty minutes later he heard shots ring out from the nearby Karolishkis Forest and some time after that he saw the same wagon return to the shtetl with only the four armed Lithuanians aboard and with a large pile of clothes in the wagon. According to the informant, who began his letter by stating that he did not want any reward, two of the four Lithuanians in question were no longer alive. Unfortunately, as it turned out, all four had already died by the time we received this information. Nonetheless, the information received shed hereto-unknown historical light on the cruel fate of this Jewish community.

In the summer of 2004, "Operation: Last Chance" was expanded to Croatia and Hungary. The launch of the project in the former was unique for three reasons, two of which were excellent, while the third was terrible. The first was that President Mesic himself granted us a meeting on the day of the launch to express his support. The second was the receipt of a complete dossier on former Slavonska Pozega police chief Milivoj Asner, including anti-Jewish and anti-Serb directives he had personally signed into law which clearly proved his complicity in Holocaust crimes. The third were death threats against Croatian Jews (whose community leaders chose to ignore our request for assistance), and the offer of rewards for the murder of the Croatian Justice Minister (\$75,000), our local partner (Dr. Zorin Pusic of the Civic Committee for Human Rights – \$50,000) and myself (\$25,000).

In Hungary we were challenged on legal grounds, as noted above, and the project aroused an intense internal polemic regarding its validity in which the critics were led by a well-known Holocaust historian of Jewish origin. Here too extremely incriminating evidence was submitted, in this case by the brother of a young Jew murdered in Budapest in 1944 by a Hungarian Army officer named Karoly Zentai, who escaped to Australia in

1950 and had never been tried for his crimes. To date he and Asner are the most likely to be brought to trial from among the suspects whose names were received in the framework of “Operation: Last Chance.”

With Germany just started, as these lines are being written in early February 2005, we are hopeful that the project will register its most successful results in the country which was the seat of Nazi power and whose nationals played such an important role in the implementation of the Final Solution. Contrary perhaps to common thinking, many Nazi war criminals have been convicted during the past several years and we are cautiously optimistic that “Operation: Last Chance” will help increase that ever-so-significant figure.

Having said that, it is now quite clear that any assessment of the project cannot be limited to its concrete judicial results. Besides attempting to facilitate the prosecution and punishment of Nazi war criminals, “Operation: Last Chance” has played an integral and important role in the struggle for historical truth in post-Communist Europe, where new national narratives (and textbooks) are being written about World War II and the Holocaust and the issue of local complicity in the murder of the Jews remains disputed and painful. Under these circumstances, “Operation: Last Chance” has a significant role not only in ensuring historical accuracy but also in helping combat contemporary anti-Semitism and paving the way for better relations between Jews and non-Jews in Europe. “Operation: Last Chance” Results to Date:

	Country	Launch	Names received	Submitted to prosecutors	
1	Lithuania	July 8, 2002	198	46	
2	Estonia	July 10, 2002	6	-	
3	Latvia	July 11, 2002	43	13	
4	Poland	September 10, 2003	15	-	
5	Romania	September 12, 2003	15	4*	
6	Austria	September 15, 2003	7	1*	
7	Croatia	June 30, 2004	11	1	
8	Hungary	July 13, 2004	7	1	
9	Germany	January 26, 2005	5	-	
10	Others**	22	13		
	TOTAL		329	79	

* to be submitted shortly

** Ukraine, USA, South Africa, Canada, Czech Republic

For full details on “Operation: Last Chance” in each of the above countries: www.operationlastchance.org