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Florida man funds war-crimes project

\$10,000 rewards offered for information on Nazi-era figures in the Baltics

BY ELINOR J. BRECHER

There should be no peace for Nazi war criminals, Aryeh Rubin believes, even if they are old, sick or respected in their re-made lives.

That's why the Golden Beach investment manager is underwriting a Simon Wiesenthal Center Nazi-hunting project in the Baltics that's offering \$10,000 rewards for information leading to arrests and convictions of locals guilty of World War II atrocities.

It's called Operation Last Chance, because nearly 60 years after World War II, time is running out to track down an exceptionally brutal class of oppressors, said the Wiesenthal Center's Jerusalem director, Efraim Zuroff.

Rubin and Zuroff are in Vilnius, Lithuania, where today they'll announce the rewards at a news conference. Then the two -- friends from their student days at Yeshiva University in New York in the 1970s -- will repeat the offer in Riga, Latvia, and Tallinn, Estonia.

"We have obtained a degree of technical cooperation from those governments," Zuroff said. ``They've agreed to let us publish ads with the phone numbers of the prosecutors."

Rubin, who turned 52 Sunday, already has donated \$50,000 toward the project and has guaranteed twice that for rewards.

"I'd like to give away \$100,000," Ruben said. ``It's a tool."

Rubin is counting on an eyewitness or "a perpetrator who may feel some guilt and have regrets" to reach for the bait -- \$10,000 being a small fortune in countries where the average annual income is \$2,500-\$3,500.

"Without trying to be crude, I consider this a test market," Ruben said. ``I'd like to take this to Germany."

He's convinced that war-crimes trials ``act as a conscience, and force societies to come to terms with the past . . . This is about justice, not revenge."

This isn't the first foray into Nazi hunting for Rubin, whose parents narrowly escaped the Holocaust but lost many relatives. His mother died in 1976, his father a decade later.

Rubin was involved in pressuring the Costa Rican government into pursuing a one-time Broward County motel owner who fled deportation from the United States in 1981. A West Palm Beach federal judge ruled that Bogdan Koziy, a Ukrainian, lied to U.S. immigration authorities about his war-time activities, which included the murders of 17 Jews in the village of Lysic, Poland -- one of them a 4-year-old girl shot in the head as she begged for her life.

Rubin, who once owned a New York medical publishing company and a popular but short-lived national magazine called Jewish Living, paid for Wiesenthal Center ads in Costa Rican newspapers warning that "the world is watching" to see if a democratic government would harbor a war criminal or return him to stand trial in his homeland.

Then he threatened to follow up with ads in international travel magazines calling tourism-dependent Costa Rica "the land of tropical rain forests and Nazis." But he did not act on the threat because, he said, three days later "the Costa Rican Supreme Court ruled in favor of his deportation. We made waves."

But Koziy remains in Costa Rica because the Costa Rican government has yet to act on his deportation.

In another case, Rubin helped Zuroff expose an ex-Nazi who became an Icelandic citizen in 1955: Evald Mikson, WWII-era deputy commander of the Estonian Political Police.

Implicated in the murder of Jews during the war, he changed his last name to Hinriksson and became a national figure in Iceland after he introduced professional basketball. His sons were national soccer-team players.

Rubin: "It was not very popular to take him on."

As authorities closed in, Mickson fell ill.

"I found myself in the curious position of praying for the guy's good health," said Rubin, greatly disappointed when Mickson died last year before facing formal charges.

The Wiesenthal Center has been relentless in pushing Baltic governments to confront the well-documented enthusiasm for Hitler's agenda.

(A Gulfport man, Algimantas Dailide, is awaiting deportation to Lithuania after losing his U.S. citizenship for lying about his activities with the Lithuanian security in Vilnius during the war. He is appealing the deportation order).

LITTLE SUPPORT

"There is very little support for prosecution of local criminals," he said. More than a decade after independence, "not a single Nazi war criminal has sat in jail" in the Baltics, "and not for lack of suspects. These countries had the highest percentage of Jews killed by the locals, and the locals were sent overseas to help carry out the Final Solution."

Kestutis Jankauskas, minister-counselor for political affairs at the Lithuanian embassy in Washington, notes that his is "one of the few countries that has amended its laws to allow prosecution in absentia. We have completed one of the first cases a year ago."

However, he acknowledged, "the few indicted have been too infirm to stand trial."

That owes less to coincidence than to deliberate foot-dragging, Zuroff said.

Not only is this the "last chance" for Nazi hunters, Zuroff added, ``but it's the last chance for these countries. If there are no successful prosecutions, it will come back to haunt these societies for generations."

The Baltic nations ``want to get into NATO, and they really need to face their Holocaust past. The best way to do this under their own flags."

Indeed, a Lithuanian Foreign Ministry fact sheet on "post-Holocaust issues" notes that leaders of the Lithuanian Jewish Community are campaigning for that nation's NATO membership.

Nazi-hunting missions have helped Rubin come to terms with his own history. His mother left Germany on the eve of the war in 1939 and found her way to New York. His father fled Poland for the Soviet Union and ended up in Siberia where, in a 45-day period, he watched his father, brother and his 2-year-old niece die of hunger.

The niece's mother, father and their newborn died in the Majdanek concentration camp.

FAMILY LEGACY

Rubin and his Colombian-born wife, Raquel, named the youngest of their three daughters -- Maya Johanna, 5, or Malka Sheina Tchiya in Hebrew -- after the mother and a relative of Raquel's who perished in a labor camp.

Daughters Angelica and Felissa are 12 and 14 respectively.

They attend Jewish parochial schools, an institution that Rubin is trying to reform.

In 1992, Aryeh and Raquel Rubin established the Targum Shlishi Foundation -- Hebrew for "the third interpretation," which has to do with looking at Jewish issues from a new perspective.

It supports women's issues, Israel-related causes and Jewish education in addition to Nazi hunting and Third World land-mine clearing. Part of the education agenda involves interest-free loans to historically-underpaid teachers at Jewish day schools: the Peace of Mind Program, run by the Shul of Bal Harbour, a Lubavitch synagogue.

Rubin hails from the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, near but not part of the Lubavitcher Hasidic community.

"No one was telling Cinderella stories" to kids in his neighborhood, he recalls. Children grew up on their parents' Holocaust tragedies: ``This one threw his daughter from a train. That one hid in a latrine."

He and his family observe a hybrid of Jewish traditions: some Orthodox and some Conservative practices spiced with the influence of Reconstructionist Movement founder, Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan, who originated the practice of bat mitzvah for girls.

When he was 16, Rubin read *Mila 18*, Leon Uris's historical novel about the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. A passage about the shame of a rabbi forced to desecrate a holy Torah scroll galvanized Rubin's Jewish consciousness.

"I broke into a cold sweat," said Rubin, extracting the paperback -- now yellowed and disintegrating -- from a vast home library of Jewish books. ``This still travels with me everywhere."

INSPIRATION

In the mid-1970s, spent a year visiting concentration camps. The experience affected him profoundly.

He launched *Jewish Living* after he returned "as a response to the Holocaust trip." He described it as "a cross between *The New Yorker* and *Southern Living*," offering Jewish lifestyle features and profiles.

He's still publishing. He and his wife are working on a handbook for Orthodox Jews who -- like the Rubins -- want their daughters to become bat mitzvah (a practice that Orthodox Judaism doesn't recognize, as Orthodox women aren't allowed to read from the Torah).

For Felissa, the Rubins devised a makeshift synagogue, complete with Ark of the Torah. She read her Torah portion at that service, then the family and guests joined regular services across the street at The Shul.

NEW TRADITIONS

At an unconventional "Simchat Bat" ceremony celebrating the birth of a daughter -- Maya -- Rubin's note to guests said, ``Like many Jews today, I believe that the absence of law and tradition leaves us ample room to maneuver, improvise, and invent customs for our people. . . Previous generations did not face the challenges of bringing up daughters in today's society. . . Rabbi Kaplan was fond of saying that he had four reasons for instituting the bat mitzvah ceremony: his four daughters. . . In collating, adding to, editing and compiling this version of the Simchat Bat I have my own three reasons: Felissa, Angelica and Maya."

The bat mitzvah book, Rubin said, is bound to upset many in the Orthodox community.

"But I look for trouble, whether it's in Miami or the Baltics."

Zuroff, for one, appreciates that in his old friend.

"It's a very lonely thing to go to these places to hunt Nazis, and Aryeh has gone with me. He's been a tremendous support to me in every sense."