

THE NAZI HUNTER

In your time at the Simon Wiesenthal Centre (SWC), you have uncovered the postwar escape of hundreds of Nazi war criminals to Western countries. These efforts have influenced the creation of special laws in Canada (1987), Australia (1989) and Great Britain (1991). How instrumental was the SWC in prompting these countries to pursue such legislative measures?

The SWC was one of several groups in each country that fought to convince these governments to take legal action against the Nazi war criminals living in Canada, Australia and the UK. The local Jewish community organisations, such as the Canadian Jewish Congress and B'nai B'rith in Canada, and the Executive Council of Australian Jewry and Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council in Australia, usually played a leading role in the lobbying efforts, but our help was unique since we were able to find numerous suspects to make the campaign for prosecution that much more effective. On the other hand, we were a foreign organisation, which has advantages and disadvantages in such campaigns.

Can you walk us through the process of finding the names of Holocaust perpetrators and their locations, verifying the details of their identities and eventually, watching them face a trial?

Due to the urgency of our work, we have to proceed differently than the police, who start with a specific crime and then try and find the perpetrators. We start with an allegation and then try to determine if it has any serious basis. Information reaches our office or other offices of the SWC all over the world and we begin to investigate whether there is any basis to the allegation. The investigation methods depend on the nationality of the suspect and the location of the crime. We have an excellent researcher in Germany, Dr Stefan Klemp, who has been working for us for about 14 years and has played a major role in our successes. In other countries we have hired historians and/or researchers to help verify the accusations. I should point out that very few of the allegations, about 1.5 per cent, lead to a prosecution. Aside from doing the detective work to find suspects and the historical research to find the evidence, a lot of my work deals with creating political will to prosecute Nazi war criminals because most countries do not want to bring these criminals to trial for a variety of reasons – international embarrassment, expenses and unpopular public opinion locally.

Operation Last Chance (OLC) launched in 2002 to facilitate the prosecution of Nazi war criminals, primarily in post-communist Europe and in areas where the local population actively participated in the killing of Jews during the Holocaust. What did the operation yield?

OLC dealt with eight serious cases, one of which, that of Dr [Aribert] Heim, was already known long before the project was launched. The German police asked that he be named the number one target of the project when we launched it in Germany in January 2005 and we



Dr Efraim Zuroff is determined to bring Nazi war criminals to justice.

The Simon Wiesenthal Centre's Dr Efraim Zuroff has spent more than three decades searching for the people who orchestrated and implemented the Holocaust. **Timna Jacks** talks to the renowned Nazi hunter about his life's work.

agreed. During the decade since it was officially launched in Vilnius in July 2002, OLC recorded the names of 634 hereto unknown suspects, 102 of which were submitted to local prosecutors. These names yielded seven official governmental investigations of the crimes alleged to have been committed by the suspects, four arrest warrants, two extradition requests, and one trial with another trial in the offing. But the impact of OLC went far beyond its practical judicial results, focusing attention on the highly important role played by local collaborators in Eastern Europe in the mass murder of Jews, an important historical fact that is being minimised or hidden in most post-communist countries.

Have Jewish communities in various regions assisted your cause? Do they share a commitment to the Nazi hunt?

Every Jewish community is a separate story. The responses, contrary to what most people would assume, are not based on the size of the community, but rather on the courage and

determination and Holocaust consciousness of its leadership. I want to commend the leaders of the Jewish communities of Lithuania and Romania especially, as well as Austria, and prefer not to comment on the others. It is upsetting when local Jewish leaders refuse to cooperate with OLC, but their fear is palpable. Only the really good ones, and they are few and far between, can rise to the occasion.

You have recorded an extensive list of alleged Nazi criminals who have taken refuge in Australia, such as former Australian chess champion Karlis Ozols, property developer Konrad Kalejs and Perth resident Charles Zentai, who was due to be extradited to Hungary but whose extradition was recently rejected by the High Court. How involved have you been in the Zentai case and are you optimistic that he may eventually be extradited?

I worked on the Zentai case for almost eight years. I was not involved in the investigation since all the evidence had already been collected before I was even born.

My job was to bring the evidence to the attention of the Hungarian and Australian authorities and press them, especially the former, to take legal action against him. In that respect, I was successful, since in March 2005 Hungary asked for Zentai's extradition. I have no idea whether Hungary will renew the effort to extradite him following the recent Australian High Court decision barring his extradition.

You have said in another interview that Zentai's children have assured you that their father is a good man, a good father, and never uttered an anti-Semitic slur in their presence. You have unique insight into the personal stories and the families of these alleged Holocaust perpetrators. Can you recall and reflect on these experiences?

The story of my meeting with three of Zentai's children in Perth, which I relate in detail in my book, *Operation Last Chance; One Man's Quest to Bring Nazi Criminals to Justice*, was actually a very rare occurrence. The only other such meeting was with the illegitimate daughter

of Mauthausen doctor Aribert Heim, the story of which also appears in the book. In both cases, the children found it very difficult to deal with their parents' alleged past. Zentai's children clung to their father's denial of his participation in the murder of Peter Balazs, although they had no concrete proof, other than their father's account. In the Heim case, the daughter claimed never to have even seen her father.

Why did you decide to write the book?

Writing the book was in certain respects a labour of love for the memory of the victims of the Shoah and to explain my mission. It took me about nine months. So far I have had many wonderful moments, but my share of frustrations as well. Writing a book is ultimately like having a child. You put tremendous effort into creating, raising and nurturing a child and you often have high expectations, but a child grows up and lives his or her own life.

"Zentai's children clung to their father's denial of his participation in the murder of Peter Balazs."

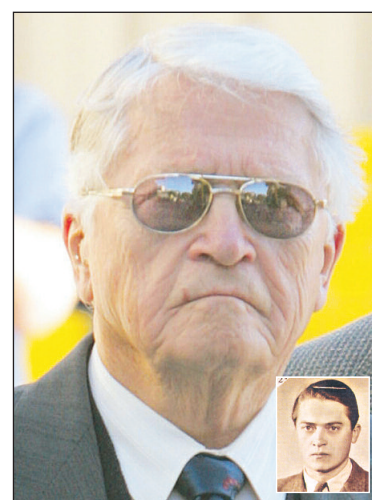
Did members of your family go through the Holocaust?

Almost all my close relatives emigrated to the US before World War I; however, my maternal grandfather's youngest brother, his wife and two sons were murdered in Lithuania and I am named for him. Recently, I learnt that apparently additional relatives, on my father's side, were also murdered in the Holocaust. I have to point out, however, that the Shoah was never an important issue in our home while I was growing up and this was not in any way unusual in Brooklyn, in homes of American-born Jews.

What is Operation Last Chance II?

OLC II focuses on death camp guards and members of the Einsatzgruppen (mobile killing units) in the wake of the [John] Demjanjuk conviction in Germany in May 2011. That verdict was the first time that a German court convicted a Nazi war criminal without any evidence of a specific crime against a specific victim. Basically, the court asserted that anyone who served in a death camp like Sobibor, whose sole purpose was the mass murder of Jews, was automatically guilty of at least accessory to murder. That decision paved the way for all death camp personnel and murder squad members to be prosecuted in Germany, even without proof of a specific crime. So far we received the names of 34 new suspects, but none from the death camps or murder squads. Our biggest problem is the lack of resources to publicise it in Germany, where ads are very expensive. Any help in this regard would be greatly appreciated.

For further information and enquiries:
www.operationlastchance.org



Alleged Nazi war criminals who found refuge in Australia, from left, Konrad Kalejs, Karlis Ozols and Charles Zentai