EFRAIM ZUROFF

by DAVID GREEN

How would you picture a "Nazi hunter"? Stern, dour, a chain smoker with angular features and a bad coffee habit? Efraim Zuroff, who has devoted the better part of his career to tracking down war criminals who have at this point escaped justice for six decades, does not fit this description.

He's a cheerful, approachable, gregarious, essentially optimistic ex-basketball player from Brooklyn who ends every phone conversation and meeting by urging his interlocutor to "take it easy." Despite repeatedly confronting some of the darkest behavior in the history of civilization, Zuroff believes that humanity is capable of improving its performance and, through the educational work he does, is trying to bring that change about.

Considering the time that's passed since the end of World War II, one may wonder why Zuroff, who is often referred to as the

world's last Nazi hunter, is still at it. Are there even Nazis left to hunt? The answer is: not many. And those who are still alive are generally in their eighties or older, and are often in a physical or mental condition that is more likely to evoke pity than a desire for vengeance. (Zuroff calls this the "misplaced sympathy syndrome.")

But Zuroff's work isn't about vengeance, it's about justice, and in his moral universe, justice can only be based on truth, on historical accuracy. As long as there are individuals who are living on fabricated identities, having concealed from the world the acts they perpetrated during the war – not to mention nations that persist in refusing to acknowledge their recent histories – then the fight for the truth is still being waged, and Zuroff remains a busy man.

But what of the arguments that the remaining Nazis are too old to undergo trials, that they don't pose a threat to society, that they should be left to live out their last years in peace? Zuroff replies to these questions readily; years of thought have honed his responses. He has several answers, among them: "The passage of time in no way diminishes the guilt of the perpetrator," "Killers do not deserve a prize for reaching old age," "Every victim deserves that an effort be made to bring their murderer to justice," "There is such a thing as moral pollution…if society does not prosecute these people. That's a stain on society's morality, and it undermines the underpinnings of society," and that to stop prosecuting people at a certain age would be tantamount to allowing people to get away with genocide.

The home of the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Israel office, which Zuroff has directed since 1986, is a modest office on the ground floor of a small apartment building in Talbiyeh, an upscale Jerusalem neighborhood.

Nazi-hunting today lacks some of the drama that one associates with the kidnapping by Israeli agents of Adolf Eichmann, one of the architects of the Final Solution, from in front of his house in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1960. (Eichmann was secretly flown back to Israel, tried and convicted for "crimes against humanity," and executed.)

The type of Nazi-hunting Zuroff does is more likely to take

place in archives than it is in the dark alleys or smoky taverns of South American border towns, and the skills required are those of a researcher well-versed in history, geography and languages. In short, it's painstaking, nitty-gritty research. This makes someone like Zuroff, whose doctoral dissertation in history at the Hebrew University dealt with aspects of the Holocaust, well placed to work in the field.

Zuroff is "a force of conscience internationally" who is "indefatigable in pursuing justice," according to Eli Rosenbaum, head of the Office of Special Investigations (OSI) of the U.S. Justice Department. Zuroff, he adds, "has felt to the depth of his being the stories of the victims and the survivors and devoted his life to acting on their behalf."

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Zuroff had a comfortable upbringing in a middle-class Orthodox Jewish family in Flatbush, Brooklyn. Both of his parents were American-born, and the family was barely touched by the Holocaust. The one exception was Zuroff's maternal great-uncle, one of six brothers, and the only one who remained in his native Lithuania (then Poland) in the decades preceding World War II. A scholar and yeshiva head from Vilna, the uncle was killed, together with his family, by the Nazis in Ponar, in 1941. Confirmation of his death only reached the family in 1948, when Effie's grandfather, Samuel Sar, a communal leader in the U.S. and one of the founders of Yeshiva University in New York, was in Europe, organizing the religious needs of Jewish survivors still living in displaced-persons camps.

Sar's mission in Europe coincided with the birth of his first grandson. When Zuroff's father cabled his father-in-law to tell him he had become a grandfather, Samuel wrote back: "Suggest naming him Efraim," in memory of his murdered brother.

Despite that legacy, Zuroff says that while he was growing up, in the 1950s and '60s, the Holocaust "was not a topic" in his home. In that sense, his family was no different from most other American Jews, including strongly identifying ones. It's not that the subject was forbidden, he says – "it just wasn't of interest." In those

years, American Jewry was looking to the future, not to the past, and its mind, he suggests, was set on "achieving material success, into integrating into society, into making it."

He points to two watershed events that caused Jews – not only in America, but worldwide, including in Israel – to begin examining that darkest chapter in their people's history. One was the Eichmann trial, which Israel used as an opportunity to teach the world many details of the Final Solution; the other was the Six-Day War in 1967. That latter event culminated, of course, in a stunning military victory for Israel, but part of the drama derived from the fact that in the tense lead-up to the war, Israel's Arab neighbors were threatening to destroy the Jewish state.

By then, Zuroff was attending college at Yeshiva University, where both his grandfather and his mother were administrators (his father, Rabbi Abraham Zuroff, was the director of a network of modern-Orthodox high schools in New York). Zuroff says that growing up, he hated being the son of a rabbi, even if his father didn't hold a pulpit, and the grandson of someone very prominent in the Orthodox movement. "It's not that I had something against what they did. Actually I thought that what they were both doing was very good. But I didn't want any part of [it]."

Zuroff spent his junior year, 1968–1969, at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. At the time, Israel was still in something of a state of euphoria, following the victory of a year earlier. It was his first visit to the country, but a year in Jerusalem was enough to convince him that he wanted to return to Israel to live. He felt, he says, that that was "where it's happening. I didn't want to be a spectator; I wanted to be a participant."

Following his graduation from YU, Zuroff returned to Israel as a new immigrant. He received a scholarship from the Hebrew University to study toward a master's degree in history, in its Institute of Contemporary Jewry. When he had to choose an area of concentration, he realized that "the question that interested me intellectually was: How was the Shoah possible?"

Zuroff's graduate work led to a master's degree and later a

PhD, completed in 1997. His revised doctoral thesis was published as a book, *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States: The Activities of the Va'ad Hahatzala Rescue Committee, 1939–1945* (2000). The book is a critical examination of the work of the group, which the rabbis of the ultra-Orthodox community of the U.S. organized in order to save as many Eastern European rabbis and yeshiva students – and later Jews in general – as possible from death at the hands of the Nazis.

That book was Zuroff's second, following a memoir called *Occupation: Nazi-Hunter: The Continuing Search for the Perpetrators of the Holocaust* (1994) in which Zuroff describes how he began his detective work, and some of the more interesting cases he was involved in up to that point. He has also written over two hundred articles and op-ed pieces, chiefly dealing with the Holocaust and related issues.

After finishing his master's degree, and parallel to the years he spent researching his doctoral thesis, Zuroff worked briefly for Israel's Ministry of Religious Affairs in Jerusalem and also at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial and museum. However, it was only in 1978 that he really found himself set on his career path. That's when he was invited by Rabbi Marvin Hier to go to Los Angeles to become academic director of the newly established Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies (as it was then called; later the last three words were dropped).

By that time, Zuroff was married – to Elisheva Bannett**,** the Israeli-born daughter of Americans who had immigrated to Israel at the time of independence – with children, and he agreed to leave Israel for only two years.

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When he returned to Israel, in 1980, Zuroff spent several years doing contract work as a researcher for the newly formed OSI, whose task was to identify war criminals who had immigrated to America after the war under false pretenses. Eventually, in 1986, he opened up the Jerusalem office of the SWC, whose main pursuit has continued to be investigations.

The Center was named, of course, for Simon Wiesenthal, the charismatic Viennese Jewish Holocaust survivor who lost most of his family to the Nazis and devoted his life after the war to tracking down escaped Nazis. By the late 1970s and early '80s, Wiesenthal, who had been born in 1908, was slowing down somewhat, while at the same time, says Zuroff, "the focus of the hunt was moving to the Anglo-Saxon world, which had admitted hundreds of thousands of refugees after the war, who included thousands of collaborators and perpetrators." And so the Wiesenthal Center, which had been set up principally as an educational and pressure organization, became increasingly involved in the hunt for fugitive war criminals.

When Zuroff was still working for the OSI, he was assigned to the hunt for Josef Mengele, the infamous doctor of Auschwitz. The U.S. government had received information – incorrect, as it turned out – that Mengele had been briefly held by the Americans after the war, and then-President Ronald Reagan ordered the OSI to search for Mengele. During his investigation, Zuroff realized that he could track many escaped Nazi war criminals by using post-World War II refugee records, a discovery that was a major investigative breakthrough.

The postwar report on Mengele's whereabouts had come from a survivor named David Fryman, who as a prisoner had been assigned to Mengele's laboratory at Auschwitz, and the OSI assigned Zuroff the job of tracking down Fryman. A colleague of Zuroff's, who worked at Yad Vashem, suggested he use the records of the International Tracing Service (ITS), which included basic biographical data about everyone who requested recognition by the International Red Cross as a refugee after the war. (As an aside, Zuroff notes that the ITS files comprise "a significant portion" of the contents of the Bad-Arolsen Archive in Germany, which was recently declassified, to significant fanfare. In fact, the ITS portion of the Bad-Arolsen Archive has been accessible to the public for the past five decades at Yad Vashem.)

"My mistake," says Zuroff today, "was that I thought the ITS had files only of Jewish survivors." As he began to look manually

through hundreds of records, in search of information about Fryman, he realized that "there were tons of non-Jews," something that "immediately lit up a red light in my mind. I thought: We know that lots of war criminals registered [with the Red Cross] under their own names, and immigrated to the West posing as refugees. In theory, this archive is a gold mine because among biographical details listed is where people emigrated, what boat they took on what date, etc."

Zuroff says that he undertook a small experiment, taking the names of fifty Latvians and Lithuanians known to have been involved in war crimes, and searching for them in the ITS files.

"Lo and behold, twenty of the fifty were listed, and the beauty of it was that not only were they listed; it said where they went. And, since among the people whom we found were individuals who had entered countries other than the U.S., like Australia and Canada, it was clear that this information had implications that went way beyond my job as a researcher for the OSI."

Zuroff went to the SWC, telling it, "I have information that could help us identify the postwar escape of hundreds, maybe thousands of Nazi war criminals." Even though at the time only the U.S. had an office whose mission was to take legal action against war criminals living within its borders, Canada, Australia and Great Britain had investigations of individuals under way or ready to begin.

Zuroff says he told the SWC, "Let's go for the jugular. Let's convince these countries that they have to take legal action against Nazis, and that the best way to do it is to set up a special office that will deal exclusively with these cases." That, recalls Zuroff, "was really the turning point" – when he realized he had become a "Nazi hunter," that he had gone "from being just another researcher to being a person with a vision, whose scope expanded way beyond the initial work for the Americans, and who was basically trying to make a last-ditch effort to upgrade the entire Nazi-hunting effort in several different countries.

"I started churning out lists of suspects for Canada, the U.S., Australia and the U.K. After I compiled a list of seventeen suspects for the United Kingdom, which the Wiesenthal Center submitted

on October 22, 1986 to the British consul in Los Angeles, it basically created the problem of Nazi war criminals in Britain. Whereas in Australia and Canada, there were already investigations going on, our lists helped convince the governments that the issue was very important and urgent." For the latter two countries, Zuroff compiled the names of hundreds of suspects.

All three countries – Canada, Australia and the U.K. – "passed special amendments that enabled criminal prosecution of war criminals in their countries," in 1987, 1989 and 1991, respectively. In the U.S., the legal authorities had already concluded that the Nazis among them could not be prosecuted on criminal charges there. "So they adopted what I jokingly call the 'Al Capone compromise,'" says Zuroff. "They couldn't get them on criminal charges for war crimes, crimes against humanity, so they nailed them on immigration and naturalization violations." Violations because someone who had served, say, as a former concentration camp guard generally left that detail off his resume. More often than not, for both technical and practical reasons, it has been easier to prosecute such people on grounds of having lied on their residency or citizenship applications to their new homes than it has been to prove the crimes they committed during the war.

In practical terms, the results of these efforts had more of an educational and political impact than legal results. Very few prosecutions, and even fewer convictions, actually resulted. This can largely be attributed to the number of years that had passed. In retrospect, notes Zuroff, the U.S. decision to pursue these people on immigration violations rather than war crimes was smart: it was easier to build a case, and yielded better results.

"At the beginning," he acknowledges, "we thought it was a copout, but it turned out to be incredibly successful. The Americans have won cases against 107 Nazi war criminals. That's very serious numbers. And out of the sixty-nine convictions since 2000, thirty-four of them have been in the United States."

For five years, between 1986 and 1991, Zuroff and the SWC concentrated on the "Anglo-Saxon" democracies. Then the Soviet

Union fell, and a new world opened up to the Nazi Hunter. "All of the sudden, we had access to the archives, and to the areas where the crimes took place, to the witnesses."

Zuroff explains the significance of this development. "The difference between Eastern Europe and the rest of Europe, in terms of collaboration with the Nazis, is as follows: Everywhere the Nazis came, they found willing, zealous collaborators, even in Denmark. Even in Bulgaria. But the difference was the following: Let's say in Holland, the Dutch police rounded up Dutch Jewry. In Norway, the Norwegian police rounded up the Jews. And so on. But what these local collaborators did in those countries after rounding the Jews up was to send them to a transit camp, and then put them on trains. They did not murder the Jews themselves. That was not the case in Eastern Europe, where local collaborators actively collaborated and participated in mass murder.

"In 1991, for people like me, there was so much to do. And add to this the fact that these countries had been under Communist rule and during that period, they really did not have an opportunity to deal with their own complicity during the Shoah [the Holocaust]. And, since now they wanted to get into NATO, and the European Union, and they're convinced that the road to Washington goes through Israel, they realized that they now had to deal with the Shoah."

By 1991, the window of opportunity for prosecution was clearly not going to be open for long. But in these states, there were other missions to be fulfilled. Dealing with the Shoah in these newly democratic states, explains Zuroff, meant acknowledging what the relationship of their regimes to the Nazi occupiers had been, commemorating the Jewish victims, prosecuting perpetrators in their midst, offering restitution to survivors and undertaking to educate their publics about the Holocaust.

In Eastern Europe today, says Zuroff, "the fight is not only for justice. It's a fight against distortion of the Holocaust, because in these countries, they're trying to do everything possible to minimize the role of their own people in these crimes. They prefer to attribute

everything to the Germans and Austrians." At the same time, he works with – and often has to vigorously prod – the governments of former Soviet republics, such as Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, to come to terms with the Nazi collaborators among them, in many cases prevailing upon those governments to revoke pardons that had earlier been provided to people who had participated in the murder of Jews.

Zuroff says, "This is what I tell the Lithuanians, the Latvians and the Croatians: This is your problem. It's not my problem. You're the ones who want to make the transition to a liberal democracy. You want to build a model society. You can't build a model society on foundations of mass murder.

"My mantra in the past five years has become: What you have to remember is that the Holocaust was not a tsunami, an earthquake or a volcano. It didn't come down from heaven. It was done by human beings to other human beings."

He continues: "The worst thing in the world would be to mystify the Holocaust, as some people do, and say that it's beyond understanding. This is bullshit, in my humble opinion. The Holocaust is incredibly understandable. Because when you break it down into details, you understand exactly how it happened."

Today, the hunt for living Nazis is almost complete. With that in mind, the Wiesenthal Center's Israel Office, together with the Targum Shlishi Foundation (the sponsor of this book) announced, in 2002, Operation Last Chance, which offers cash rewards to people providing information used for the successful prosecution of war criminals. As of spring 2008 the program had launched in nine countries, received the names of 497 suspects and submitted ninety-nine to local prosecution authorities. The information yielded dozens of investigations and what Zuroff terms "six very solid cases which have led to the issuing of three arrest warrants and two extradition requests."

In his career to date, Zuroff has investigated 2,844 suspects whose names were submitted to governments. Of those, he says, "It's hard to say how many were 'seriously' investigated by those

governments." There have been approximately two dozen murder investigations opened and less than a dozen convictions.

Rosenbaum of the OSI stresses that the practical results of Nazi hunters' efforts have always been very limited, and sees the main value of their work as "shining the light of truth on the apathetic response of most governments, for decades now, to the problem of unpunished fugitive war criminals."

When Rosenbaum is asked how he justifies the time and expense of the continuing efforts of organizations such as his, and individuals like Zuroff and the late Simon Wiesenthal, to pursue the dwindling numbers of war criminals, he answers without hesitation: "No one who took part in such crimes should be allowed to go unpunished. There are still survivors of these ghastly crimes still crying for lost parents, siblings, even children…beyond that, I think the most important reason is to send a warning to perpetrators of would-be war crimes in the future, to say to them: 'If you dare to act on your horrible impulses, or you dare to follow a criminal order, and you participate in genocide or other crimes against humanity, there is a good chance that what remains of the civilized world will pursue you aggressively, and if necessary for the rest of your life, and that you'll never be able to put this behind you.'

"I want people to see pictures of white-haired old men and women being prosecuted, and to know that the world will never stop."

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Zuroff, who turned sixty in 2008, is not ready to slow down. He says he sees "the fight against Holocaust distortion" as the "next great battle," and envisions himself moving into the field of Holocaust education and information – mainly in Eastern Europe – as the hunt for war criminals winds down. In the past, Holocaust deniers was a term used for those who denied the extent or goals or even existence of the Holocaust. The issue has taken on a new facet in the former Communist republics. Zuroff's struggle is to have those countries acknowledge the roles that their own citizens played, to accept responsibility that they, too, persecuted Jews. Zuroff's goal,

he says, "is to set up a foundation to monitor Holocaust distortion in post-Communist Europe and to produce educational material in the local languages."

He laughs as he notes how in certain Eastern European countries he is already considered a "public enemy," at least in some circles. In his office, he keeps a front page from Lithuania's leading newspaper, where his photo was printed at the center of a target. "The message here is very simple: Stop Zuroff. I'm the problem. Kill the messenger."