

# Israel May Lack The Will To Pursue Nazis

By Leo Noonan  
Staff Writer

If the charge had been made against the Soviet Union or the United States, it might have been easier for some to accept. But the target was the unlikeliest of countries. Israel is being accused of going soft in the pursuit and prosecution of suspected Nazi war criminals and letting others do what could be considered its task.

Efraim Zuroff, director of the Jerusalem office of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, made the charge.

"I have found an ambivalent attitude in Israel towards the Holocaust," he says. "There is no debate over whether former Nazis should be punished. The question they ask is, Why do we have to be the ones to do it? Israel doesn't want to confront the Holocaust, and I am not sure I know why."

This is not a casual observation by an objective party. Mr. Zuroff, 38, has been studying Nazism from close range all of his adult years. He was the chief historian or researcher and investigator for the Israeli branch of the U.S. Justice Department's Office of Special Investigation for six years. The OSI was formed in 1979 specifically to track down and try alleged Nazis living in this country.

Mr. Zuroff was the first director of the

Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles in the late '70s, and it was founded, in part, for the same reason as OSI, to bring Nazi war criminals to justice. Clearly, Mr. Zuroff has zeroed in on his central mission in life.

Rabbi Marvin Hier, dean of the Wiesenthal Center's main office, in Los Angeles, was asked if Mr. Zuroff's opinion represented the Center's. He said yes, adding that Mr. Zuroff is more familiar with the circumstances in Jerusalem.

Mr. Zuroff points out that the present trial in Jerusalem of Ivan Demjanjuk, believed to be one of the notorious concentration camp thugs, is the first such case to be tried in Israel in a quarter of a century. In fact, it is only the second in history. Adolph Eichmann was the first to be tried.

Mr. Zuroff charges that Israel has further shrunk from its responsibility by refusing to accept for trial the recently deported Karl Linnas and the late Valerian Trifa. "There would have been complicated legal problems with Israel taking them in for trial, but I think they should have," said Mr. Zuroff. "There was a just plain lack of zeal."

Are these fair charges?

The Jewish Journal went to attorney Jeffrey Mausner, a former Justice Department OSI colleague of Mr. Zuroff, who is a lawyer in Century City.

"There isn't an easy yes or no answer because in each case there are complicating circumstances," Mr. Mausner said. "Take the Linnas case. A large number of countries was asked to take him, and Israel was one of those that said no. Let's say they had said yes. They might have had trouble obtaining evidence on Linnas from the United States, from the Soviet Union or from Linnas himself.

"It may be the Israeli government's view that the country where the crimes took place is the one that should be responsible. Let's say Israel does take one of these suspected Nazis. They could get the people over there, start the

trial and then find they don't have access to critical evidence. In the Linnas case, there was a real question whether the Soviets would have co-operated with Israel since they don't have diplomatic relations," Mausner said. "Also, one of these guys could be acquitted. Then what do you do with him when you have him in your country?"

Mr. Zuroff believes that one of the reasons the Israeli government allegedly lacks the will to prosecute Nazis correlates to a rape case where the victim is reluctant to testify. The same may be true of Holocaust survivors in Israel, he infers.

Mr. Zuroff's attitude is that other countries are becoming unprecedentedly active in prosecuting Nazis, and Israel should do its share. One of the mandates in his position with the Wiesenthal Center, which he has held since last summer, is to convince key countries around the world to chase down and try wartime Nazis.

Mr. Zuroff and other Wiesenthal Center officials recently turned over the names of 240 suspects to eight governments. He takes a measure of credit because two countries that never have been known for their warmth toward Jews — Canada and Australia — have vowed to act on information given to them about suspected Nazis in their regions. "That is a real breakthrough," Mr. Zuroff says. "Another part of my assignment is to convince Israel to be more aggressive. So far, their attitude has been, Don't bother us. We have other *tsuris* (trouble)."

The Wiesenthal executive says the Israeli government soon may be forced to alter its position. "In the wake of the Demjanjuk trial,

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Efraim Zuroff, director of Jerusalem office of Simon Wiesenthal Center.

## Wiesenthal

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my feeling is that the public will press the government for more trials like this," Mr. Zuroff said. "See, the public has been swept away by the emotions of the Demjanjuk trial, and it has become a much, much bigger issue in the country than anyone ever thought it would be.

"When it started, the government wasn't sure there would be any interest. But it caught on quickly, and soon you couldn't get a seat in the courtroom, and it is all over the radio everyday. Now you are hearing people say to the government, We want Israel to fulfill its function as a Jewish state. I think that more and more people are beginning to believe it's necessary to hold these kinds of trials for education purposes and because it is the responsibility of the Jewish state to do it."

Mr. Zuroff speaks fast, forcefully and with the enormous confidence of one who is consumed with zeal for a single task. He is tall and husky, and he swings one long leg onto his desk and bites down hard on a piece of rock candy as he talks about his education.

He is a native of Brooklyn, who took his bachelor's degree at Yeshiva University and his Master's in Holocaust Studies from Hebrew University. He is presently working on his doctorate.

He almost snarls when he starts to talk again. "If it hadn't been for the damned Nazis, I'd be through with school by now," Mr. Zuroff says. "But I can get a doctorate anytime. These Nazis aren't going to be around much longer, and we have to get them now."