

Picketing a Reminder of Horrors Past

By Andy Port

Mineola—Oh, but of course, any recollection of the holocaust is painful, they say. A word, a picture, the mere suggestion can trigger the memory of the ghetto in the Latvian city of Riga, where each of them journeyed in cattle cars 30 years ago.

For those in the first transport from Germany early in December, 1941, arrival in Riga was made unforgettable by the sight of recently killed Latvian Jews, whose blood drenched the snow.

Oh no, they can't possibly forget the hunger, the humiliation, the machine-gunning of those too young or too old to work. But now, together, they sought to ferret out a criminal, however painful the recollections.

And so, 75 of them journeyed to 232 Grant Ave. in Mineola yesterday, from Brooklyn and New Rochelle. Middle-aged men and women—once the teenagers of Riga—they carried placards and picketed the home of Boleslavs Maikovskis, a Latvian national accused of mass murder during the German occupation of Latvia in World War II.

For the Survivors of the Riga Ghetto, a five-year-old society with 250 members in the U.S., the decision to picket Maikovskis' home was an unusual gesture. Up till now, they have left the discovery and deportation of alleged war criminals to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service.

But it has been a long time since Maikovskis, now 70, was tried and convicted for war crimes by the Soviet Union in absentia and sentenced to death in 1965. The Soviet government, which took over Latvia during the war, asked for Maikovskis' extradition. Since there is no extradition treaty between the Soviet Union and the U.S., the U.S. refused.

The immigration service then began its own investigation of Maikovskis, interviewing 60 persons in 19 cities. The investigation was closed in 1966, without turning up the evidence needed for a deportation trial.

Since then, Hermine Braunsteiner Ryan, a Nazi prison guard, was deported to Germany in 1972, after a sensational trial. And Simon Wiesenthal, an expert on Nazi war crimes, has identified Maikovskis as a police officer in the Latvian district of Rezekne, and accused him of carrying out the execution of 15,000 Latvian and German civilians, mostly Jews.

And still, 22 years after he entered this country as a displaced person, Boleslavs Maikovskis, remains here as a carpenter and activist in Latvian-American organizations. And the Survivors of the Riga Ghetto want to know why.

"How could a man such as this one live in peace?" asked Trudie Schneider of Manhattan, who questioned the determination of the immigration service to deport Maikovskis. Others on the picket line expressed similar impatience. "How could I walk the same streets with the man who murdered my mother?" asked Vera Oppenheimer, 50.

The immigration service, which reopened the Maikovskis case last year, denies it has intentionally delayed the case. Samuel Zutty, the investigator in charge of the case, said that in order to indict Maikovskis on visa fraud, the first step in a deportation hearing, the service must have "clear, convincing and unequivocal evidence." That, he said, means an eyewitness to the killings. "With so few survivors, that's difficult," he said.

The Survivors of the Riga Ghetto say they have found an eyewitness in Canada, a 61-year-old traveling salesman, who is willing to testify. But Sol Marks, regional director of the immigration service, said that one eyewitness is not enough. He refused to say how far the immigration service is from bringing Maikovskis to trial.

Meanwhile, the pickets walked and chanted "Murderers must go, murderers must go," for 45 minutes yesterday in front of an empty house. Maikovskis, who has denied the charges in the past and has refused to answer questions, drove past his house minutes after the demonstration ended.



Newsday Photo by Cliff De Bear

Mia Ziering, 9, of New Rochelle, pickets outside Maikovskis' home in Mineola.