

Simon Wiesenthal: Nazi-hunter dead at 96—part 1

“Only a regime which admits to historical truth can learn from the past”

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The following is the first part of a two-part obituary of famed Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal, who died September 20, at age 96, at his home in Vienna, Austria. The second part will be posted on Tuesday, November 15.

Simon Wiesenthal was a courageous man who played a significant role in bringing Nazi leaders to justice in the aftermath of World War II.

Wiesenthal was dogged in his effort to achieve “justice not vengeance” by pursuing tens of thousands who carried out crimes of genocide under Germany’s Third Reich. This work, he believed, was his duty as a survivor—to speak for the dead—and his obligation to the future—to inoculate future generations against susceptibility to fascism, and lay “the basis of moral restitution for the Jews.”

His conception was that the biggest deterrent to crimes against humanity was for the perpetrators to be hounded, prosecuted and subjected to public trials, with the results writ as large as possible in the public psyche.

While the concept of war crimes tribunals has now been twisted into show trials for blatantly imperialistic purposes (e.g., Slobodan Milosevic, Saddam Hussein), in the immediate postwar period the Nuremberg tribunal set a powerful precedent, exposing Nazi atrocities and educating public consciousness in the crimes of the guilty.

Credited with helping to bring 1,100 ex-Nazis to trial, Wiesenthal made this his life’s work. His positions were always controversial: he opposed those Zionists who argued for summary execution of Nazi captives; he opposed the “collective guilt” arguments of author Daniel Goldhagen; he rejected Eli Wiesel’s failure to address the millions of non-Jews who perished at the hands of the Nazis; and he embraced all forms of media attention and publicity.

In many ways, Wiesenthal was an anti-intellectual. His political trajectory veered both left and right. It is a glaring flaw, from the standpoint of his own self-defined mission that he never sought to understand the basic political issues involved in the rise of European fascism; he avoided these difficult intellectual and political questions, and remained an uncritical bourgeois liberal.

This left him rudderless in dangerous political waters. And like many in his generation, he became increasingly conservative politically.

While in his earlier years, his work was an embarrassment to the Western powers, by the 1970s he served a useful and semi-official role, becoming a “human rights” celebrity in many circles. He adapted himself to right-wing political forces, from Helmut Kohl to Ronald

Reagan, and turned a blind eye to contemporary attacks on the working class, specifically endorsing the crimes of the state of Israel against the Palestinian people. Fundamentally, he never made the connection between the capitalist profit system, its inherent social contradictions and the rise of fascism. Without an understanding of this process, he was unable to provide a genuine way forward or perspective for the future. Instead, his political alliances bolstered the right and contributed to the confusion of those whose respect he commanded.

Simon Wiesenthal was born in Galicia, Ukraine, in 1908, an area which became part of Poland during the interwar years. He grew up in Vienna, where the family moved when he was seven years old. As a young man, he studied architecture in Prague and established a small practice in Lvov, Galicia’s largest city.

In 1939, under the terms of the Hitler-Stalin pact, Poland was partitioned and Galicia was transferred to Soviet control. The NKVD began arresting members of the Jewish intelligentsia. Wiesenthal’s stepbrother was shot, and his stepfather was arrested and died in a Soviet prison. Simon was able to bribe an official and secure passports for himself and his wife Cyla to flee the area. The remaining Jews were largely deported to Siberia.

These experiences shaped a life-long anti-communism. His biographer Hella Pick writes of Wiesenthal’s attitude, “It did not require much reflection: ‘In Galicia we had had too much first-hand experience of Communism.’ ” He was attracted to right-wing Zionists, the Jabotinsky Revisionists after that, moving to a more moderate Zionist party, but ended up with a position, “I vote for individuals, not for political parties.”

In June 1941, the Germans broke the non-aggression pact and invaded Soviet-controlled Poland. SS troops under the command of Reinhard Heydrich brought in the Einsatzgruppen with orders to execute the “Bolshevik intelligentsia,” meaning the Jews and the socialists.

Wiesenthal recounts his first close call at the hands of the Nazis in his autobiography *The Murderers Among Us*. He had been hiding in the cellar of his house, playing chess with a Jewish friend. They were found and taken to the Brigidki prison. In the courtyard were about 40 Jews, lawyers, teachers, doctors.... They were ordered to form a row and put their arms behind their necks. Next to each man stood a wooden crate. Then the shooting started; beginning at the left side of row, each Jew in turn was shot in the neck.

After each shot, time was left for the body to be thrown into the crate and removed. Wiesenthal's turn was just about to come when the church bells rang out. A Ukrainian shouted, "Enough. Evening Mass," and the shooting was interrupted for the day. The 20 Jews who remained were led off to two cells. Wiesenthal was later rescued from the cell by a Ukrainian construction worker with whom he had worked. Six thousand Jews in the area were murdered.

Again, like too many of those who passed through these bitter experiences, the combination of Stalinist persecution and the Stalin-Hitler Pact, were sufficient to convince Wiesenthal to place his hopes in liberal capitalism and reject the possibility of an independent socialist road for the working class.

Rounded up again, Wiesenthal would spend four years in Nazi camps including the Janowska labor camp, the Eastern Railway Repair Works, Plaszow concentration camp and Mauthausen.

The experience at Mauthausen, where 119,000 were killed—38,000 of them Jews—, convinced Wiesenthal that all the victims had an equal right to be counted. At this camp were Gypsies, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Spanish Republicans. All told, there were prisoners from 25 countries including Albania, Canada, China, Egypt, the USSR, and the US. "I am not dividing the victims," Wiesenthal would insist in years after.

Eighty-nine members of his own family perished in the camps, included his mother, whom he saw loaded into a railway car headed for the Belzec extermination camp.

After being freed from Mauthausen, Wiesenthal had a brief spell in the displaced-persons camp. He immediately volunteered to assist the Americans in pursuing the Nazis. He worked for the OSS from June 1945 until the end of the year collating information and arresting SS personnel. The OSS shut down the office and transferred Wiesenthal to the CIC (US Counterintelligence Corps). Much of his lifelong work centered on the cases from these early postwar months, when the SS prey was still relatively easy to find.

This initial work by the Americans culminated in the famous Nuremberg Trials. Originally conceived by Franklin Roosevelt, the trials were organized by the Allies to indict the major Nazi leadership. At the first and most substantial trial, conducted by an International Military Tribunal representing the Allied Powers, 12 top Nazis were condemned to death by hanging, including Hermann Goering, Julius Streicher, Joachim von Ribbentrop and Hans Frank, and seven others were sentenced to imprisonment.

Even while this first trial was taking place, the political climate was shifting. On March 5, 1946, in the midst of the prosecution phase of the tribunal, Winston Churchill gave his "Iron Curtain" speech, signaling the fracturing of the postwar alliance.

With the turn to the Cold War, the US had less and less concern with pursuing Nazis. Eleven subsequent Nuremberg Proceedings followed, but led to very small numbers of convictions, approximately 175. In contrast, Germany's central bureau to coordinate the search for war crimes at Ludwigsburg listed nearly 100,000 suspects.

As is now well known, thousands of the ex-Nazis—especially the most prominent—were being smuggled to Latin America, reintegrated into the highest levels of German society, or put to work by the Americans in various anti-communist capacities.

Wiesenthal was frustrated by the growing lack of zealotry by the Americans, especially their refusal to mount an intensive search for Adolf Eichmann, who was suspected of hiding in Austria's US Zone.

In 1947, Wiesenthal established his own Jewish Historical Documentation Centre. He began visiting the displaced persons camps

and taking oral histories of the survivors: where they had been, whom they had seen and what they had witnessed. After six months, he had a list of 1,000 crime scenes and witnesses.

Wiesenthal's work quickly became well known among survivors. He began receiving continuous information from throughout Austria and Germany. He would collate it and pass it on to the Americans. He lived an ascetic life, writing newspaper articles from time to time to earn an income to survive.

This period was the beginning of the escalating feud between Wiesenthal and the World Jewish Congress (WJC). Wiesenthal was outspoken in his objections to the policy of executing middle-layer Nazis that was adopted by the Brichah (an organization set up by the precursors to Mossad). Wiesenthal was far more interested in seeing Nazi criminals go to trial than in the outcome of those proceedings.

In fact, Wiesenthal never identified with those who would become the Zionist elite. He attempted many times to provide them with information and prompt their action, but was, in the main, snubbed. He came to the conclusion that they had little interest in tracking down the Nazi killers and resented his independence in doing so. While continuing to look to Israel for assistance, he preferred, as he put it, to live "in the belly of the beast" and ferret out the mass murderers.

During this period, Wiesenthal worked most famously on the Adolf Eichmann case. A participant at the 1942 Wannsee Conference at which the "Final Solution" was adopted, Eichmann was placed in charge of its implementation. He was the epitome of the "desk murderer" that Wiesenthal specialized in tracking down. After the war, there was no trace of Eichmann, and his wife tried to have him declared dead, a common ruse among the spouses of war criminals. Wiesenthal prevented this legal action by producing affidavits from witnesses who had seen Eichmann alive. He was later to learn that Eichmann had been hidden in a monastery in Rome and transported to Argentina.

With Eichmann out of Europe, Wiesenthal needed an organization with greater resources. He informed Nahum Goldman, president of the WJC, providing pages of detailed information. While Goldman assured him that the WJC would follow up, he not only buried the information but later denied he had ever received it. Moreover, it was clear that there would also be no assistance from the Israeli government, which was preoccupied with the struggle for control over the Palestinians.

Wiesenthal had labored, largely alone, in Vienna, sustained by correspondence from all over the world. His method of work was to piece together, from thousands of sources, the information to document Nazi crimes, their location and their witnesses. He would then pressure various legal authorities for action. It was an approach that depended largely on public opinion and sympathetic government functionaries.

By 1954, out of funds and demoralized, he closed his Documentation Centre and sent his entire collection of information, all but one file, to the Yad Vashem Historical Archives in Jerusalem. He kept only a single set of documents—those dealing with Eichmann.

To be continued



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