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Our 'good neighbors'

In search of Nazi criminals disguised as ordinary people

By Peter Gorner

Most of them were ordinary people until prosecutor Allan Ryan entered their lives. They came to this country after World War II and lived quietly, calling no attention to themselves. They became American citizens, flew the flag, never talked about the war or about the Jews. Never.

"They took on protective coloration," Ryan says. "Their neighbors never suspected a thing. Time after time, we'd be told, 'That sweet man? I can't believe it. Not him.' "

Hours after Ryan filed denaturalization charges against Brookfield resident Albert Deutscher, 61, the railway worker was struck by a speeding train in the suburb. His family called it an accident, but the coroner ruled suicide. Deutscher, Ryan charged, had been a Ukrainian militiaman in Odessa who met trains crammed with Jews and shot them as they were driven out.

In Boston, eight days after Ryan filed suit against him, Michael Popczuk, a 63-year-old carpenter, put a shotgun to his head and pulled the trigger. Popczuk, Ryan says, had been a Ukrainian auxiliaryman who, among other things, had harnessed Jews to wooden carts and forced them to pull cargo between villages, whipping them as he would oxen.

Recently, Arthur Rudolph, a German-born scientist who helped develop the Saturn V moon rocket for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, left voluntarily for West Germany after he was accused of having worked slave laborers to death at the Nazi V-2 rocket factory in the Dora concentration camp.

From 1980 to 1983, Ryan was chief of the Justice Department's anti-Nazi unit, the Office of Special Investigations [OSI]. He spearheaded the federal government's first concerted effort—albeit nearly 40 years late—to identify, bring to trial and deport Nazi war criminals from the U.S.

Ryan, 39, doesn't look like an avenger. Calm, thoughtful, he puffs his pipe and shows little emotion. He isn't Jewish and was a baby when the Holocaust occurred. Good grades in law school earned him a clerkship with Supreme Court Justice Byron White. After that, Ryan became a federal prosecutor and took the OSI job as a challenge. He quit after 3½ years to write a book because the work was getting to him, he says. Next month, he will become the assistant general counsel for Harvard University.

"My most conservative estimate is that at least 10,000 Nazi war criminals illegally came here after World War II," Ryan charges.

"These weren't just Nazi sympathizers or 'ex-Nazis.' They were war criminals, the handmaidens of Nazism, who eagerly took part in the persecution of millions of people. They haven't been hard to find, once we finally started looking."

Ryan's book, "Quiet Neighbors: Prosecuting Nazi War Criminals in America" [Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, $15.95], is a volatile indictment of governmental indifference and inaction. Ryan says war criminals were "invited in" because no precautions were taken to keep them out.

He places responsibility on the "brazenly discriminatory" Displaced Persons Act of 1948, charging that it "was written to exclude as many concentration camp survivors as possible and to include as many Baltic and Ukrainian and ethnic German refugees as it could get away with."

This occurred, Ryan says, despite the knowledge that such groups, while containing hundreds of thousands of innocent war victims, were "infested" with Nazi collaborators.

Some 400,000 refugees entered this country under the act between 1948 and 1952, and lax enforcement procedures made it easy for the collaborators to lie about their past and sneak through, Ryan says. Once here, they just lay low; nobody came after them.

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 loosened things up even more, abandoning the previous legal exclusion of former Nazis. Then the SS just walked in, Ryan says.

He believes that postwar discrimination against the Jews was no accident. He quotes isolationist former Sen. Alexander Wiley of Wisconsin, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, as urging the nation to "seek good blood and keep out the rats; we've got enough of them already." Former West Virginia Sen. William Chapman Revercomb was even less subtle: "We could solve this DP problem all right if we could work out some bill that would keep out the Jews."

Specific exclusion hinged on a clause in the act that said only refugees who had arrived at the 900 DP camps in Germany, Austria and Italy by Dec. 22, 1945, would be eligible, Ryan says.

"This looks innocuous," he says, "but it was understood at the time to be an exclusion of the Jews. In 1946, about 100,000 of the surviving Jews left the DP camps in Germany and went back to Poland. But they were driven back to the camps by pogroms. However, they missed the cutoff—their time had not been continuous. Others went to Palestine in 1946 and 1947. Only about 10,000 Jews, roughly 1 percent of the DP population, had been in the camps before the cutoff and thus were eligible to come here."

Conversely, Congress extended America's hand to

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