

Estonia suspected of protecting murderer By John G. Westerman, Times Staff Writer Saturday, January 21, 2006

The chief Nazi-hunter of an international Jewish human rights organization is saying the legal system of Estonia - home to Westminster's sister city Paide - is protecting war criminals accused of killing Jews during World War II.

Efraim Zuroff, chief Nazi-hunter for the Simon Wiesenthal Center, calls Estonia's exoneration of Harry Mannil - suspected of participating in the murder of nearly 1,000 Jews in that country - a political whitewash.

Under pressure from the Simon Wiesenthal Center, the Estonian legal system began investigating Mannil in 2001 for his alleged participation in acts of genocide during the time he worked with Estonian security agencies under German occupation.

During the war, Estonian security authorities cooperated with the Nazis to round up and exterminate that country's Jewish population. According to Zuroff, 993 Jews were murdered in Estonia as a result of the campaign.

Following a four-year investigation that ended in December 2005, the Estonian legal system concluded there wasn't any evidence linking Mannil directly to the murders of Jews in Estonia.

"In the course of the investigation, the prosecution could not find documents showing that Mannil had been involved in arresting, executing or torturing anyone," said Kristjan Prikk, spokesman for the Estonian Embassy in Washington, D.C.

Prikk also said Mannil didn't have the authority to order executions, and that witnesses were unable to provide any facts linking Mannil to any executions.

"Mr. Mannil was a low-ranking assistant and didn't have any subordinates or people working under him," Prikk said.

From 1941 to 1942, Mannil worked in positions with at least two security authorities that had been created by occupying Germany, Prikk said. Those jobs included two positions that Mannil held for nine months collectively: one as a senior assistant at the Estonian Political Police and another as an assistant to the director of the Estonian Security Police.

According to a statement by Estonian State Prosecutor Heino Tonismagi, records preserved in the Estonian State Archives give evidence that on the second and third day in his position with the Political Police, Mannil interrogated seven people who were later executed or declared missing.

Because the files on those individuals did not indicate if they were suspected of any crimes, it can be assumed they had been killed because they were Jewish, Tonismagi's statement said.

Tonismagi also said Mannil admitted to participating in the organization of arrests and the interrogation of individuals who were later executed. However, Mannil claimed not to have the

authority to decide who was arrested, and that he was unaware at the time of what happened to the people he interrogated.

The statement also said Mannil's role with the Political Police was just to collect information for the purpose of finding communists and spies.

However, Zuroff claims the testimony is damning evidence that Mannil is guilty.

"It was clear that he worked for the body that carried out the murders of Jews in Estonia," Zuroff said.

Zuroff also said Estonia intentionally failed to bring Mannil to justice because of his political influence with Estonia.

"He's the most famous, richest Estonian in the world," he said. "We suspect this is part of the reason this decision was made."

While admitting that Mannil's employment with organizations that collaborated with the Nazis cannot be considered morally or politically acceptable, Prikk said Estonia was unable to move further with the case.

"After an extremely thorough investigation, it has been found that according to the documentary evidence and witness accounts collected from five foreign countries and ... people from all over the world, there was no evidence that he had committed something that could be prosecuted in court," Prikk said.

Mannil, 81, is now a successful businessman living in Caracas, Venezuela. In 2003, Mannil attempted to flee Venezuela to live in Costa Rica, but was expelled by the Costa Rican government for his connection to war crimes committed in Estonia.

Mannil is also on a U.S. Department of Justice watch list, which bars him from entering the United States. Department of Justice spokesman Bryan Sierra said he was unable to release any information the Department of Justice had on Mannil.

In September 2002, the City of Westminster entered into a partnership with the Estonian City of Paide with the National Guard's State Partnership Program. Two years later, the state's attorney's office began an investigation into Westminster's involvement in the partner city program and the city's role in several industrial and residential development projects.

Since beginning the partnership, the two cities have participated in a number of joint activities, including economic development initiatives involving Westminster business leaders and a benefit concert to raise money for Westminster's Paide partner city fund.

The Paide partner city fund was established in October 2002 and is managed by the Community Foundation of Carroll County Inc.

Tom Beyard, spokesman for the City of Westminster, did not have any comment on the outcome of Estonia's investigation on Mannil or whether it would affect Westminster's relationship with Paide.

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Westminster's connection to Estonia

In September 2002, the city of Westminster entered into a partnership with the Estonian city of Paide as part of the Maryland National Guard's State Partnership Program with Estonia.

Ten Maryland communities have partnerships with Estonian cities: Annapolis, Cumberland, Oakland, McHenry, Havre de Grace, Grantsville, Frostburg, Salisbury, Ocean City and Westminster.

Sources: The City of Westminster and the Estonian Embassy.

What is Estonia?

Estonia is an Eastern European country that borders the Baltic Sea and the Gulf of Finland. It is located between Latvia and Russia. The capital of Estonia is Tallinn.

Estonia was part of the Soviet Union, until its collapse in 1991.

Estonia is now a member of the World Trade Organization and the European Union.

Source: the CIA World Factbook