

Fighting Hate

Moshe Miller

Rabbi Moshe Chaim (Marvin) Hier, a feisty native of the Lower East Side who served as a pulpit rabbi for 15 years in the mainly kiruv community of Vancouver, now spearheads one of the most high-profile Jewish organizations in the world—The Simon Wiesenthal Center. Located in Los Angeles, this enormous organization boasts 400,000 member households and operates on a \$26 million budget. It pursues its goals of fostering tolerance and Holocaust remembrance through educational programs, extensive museums, award-winning film documentaries and other media venues.

Rabbi Hier hobnobs with the most powerful world leaders in his unending battle against bigotry and intolerance in general, and anti-Semitism in particular. The Center has observer status at the United Nations, and under Rabbi Hier's direction maintains close contacts at the top echelons of world governments in its unending mission to make the world a safer place for Jews everywhere. Zman was delighted to meet with Rabbi Hier in his California office, where he shared fascinating insights into the constant battle against hatred.

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Hier wrinkled his nose at the plane ticket he was holding in his hand. Boston! That wouldn't do—he and his mentor, Mr. Simon Wiesenthal, were heading for Chicago!

“Stay right here,” he said. “The airline made a mistake. I’ll take care of it right now.”

As Rabbi Hier headed off toward the Information Desk, Wiesenthal took a seat in the terminal, his alert eyes scanning the crowd. A Holocaust survivor and inmate in numerous concentration camps, Simon Wiesenthal has earned his reputation after the war as a relentless hunter of Nazi war criminals (see companion article, *A Nazi’s Worst Nightmare: The Life and Times of Simon Wiesenthal*). Only three years before, in 1977, Rabbi Hier had founded the Simon Wiesenthal Center, an organization devoted to fighting anti-Semitism in all its forms.

As Mr. Wiesenthal waited for Rabbi Hier to return, his eyes settled on the face of an older man in the crowd ready to board the plane. Over the years he had accumulated a file containing 300,000 documents on Nazis, including everything from eyewitness accounts of their atrocities to photographs of them. He took another long look at the face of the man in the crowd.... Yes—it was one of the Gestapo officers on his most wanted list!

Meanwhile, Rabbi Hier had just finished at the Information Desk. After they handed him Wiesenthal’s corrected ticket, he turned and walked briskly back toward Gate 5. As he neared the gate, he began to hear a loud disturbance. Rounding the corner, he was astonished to see none other than Simon Wiesenthal standing in front of hundreds of spectators, engaged in a heated yelling match with a tall, burly man and an older man standing behind him.

“What happened?” he bellowed, as he ran toward the scene.

Wiesenthal pointed an accusing finger at the older man, who was returning a hostile glare. “This man is a murderer! He helped the Gestapo. Now, he’s going on the same plane as us!”

Reb Moshe Chaim blinked, momentarily dumbstruck. Wiesenthal was nose to nose with the younger man, the man’s son, who was shouting and cursing at him.

“Listen here,” Rabbi Hier said in an authoritative tone to the huge man. “This is Simon Wiesenthal. If you lift your hand against him, you’ll find yourself in exactly the same place your father is going....”

Rabbi Hier grasped Wiesenthal’s hand and guided him toward the American Airlines representative. “Look,” he said, “there is no way that Mr. Wiesenthal is going on the same plane as these people. That man is a Nazi war criminal.”

“Let me speak with my supervisor,” she replied.

The bewildered look on her face indicated that she had never witnessed anything quite like this before. A manager appeared, and Rabbi Hier explained the situation. It was decided that, despite their having valid tickets for this flight, the father and son would be transferred and forced to take a later flight to Chicago.

Rabbi Hier and Mr. Wiesenthal continued on to Chicago where they located the appropriate authorities and began the process of bringing another Nazi war criminal to justice.

The Simon Wiesenthal Center

The owner of an anti-Semitic radio and TV station in Poland had just been invited to speak before the European Parliament. A Swedish art exhibit portrayed Jews as rats. A United Nations meeting (“Rio+20”) gave the floor to Iranian President Ahmadinejad, who said he will wipe Israel off the map. As a Jew, it pains you, but what are you going to do? Perhaps you accept virulent, public anti-Semitism in some quarters as inevitable; something not worth fighting against.

Think again, says Rabbi Moshe Chaim (or Marvin, as he is known to the wider public) Hier.

Among the large organizations devoted to combating anti-Semitism, the Simon Wiesenthal Center, directed by Rabbi Hier,

is one of the most notable. The Center, as well as Rabbi Hier, is famous for its tenacious repudiation of anti-Semitism and bigotry in all its forms.

The Center’s media watchdog teams are constantly on the lookout for lies and slanders against the Jewish people and Israel in the press and in electronic media, such as the ones mentioned above. They employ experts in many world languages such as French, Spanish, Arabic and even Persian. When they find, for example, an Iranian website with a message from Ayatollah Khamenei endorsing a plan to destroy the Jews, they expose it and denounce it to the world.

We may not think we can make a difference, but Rabbi Hier has, and he firmly believes that each of us can, as well.

Laying the Foundation

Reb Moshe Chaim was born in 1939 on the Lower East Side of Manhattan to immigrant parents. His father came from Litovisk in Galicia, and his mother was from Belz. His parents were able to make their way to America in 1917. Tragically, both of their families were left behind in Europe—and perished in the Holocaust.

Although his father barely eked out a living polishing lamps, Moshe Chaim’s parents wanted to ensure an authentic Jewish education for their son. The Hiers sent young Moshe Chaim to *cheder* at Yeshiva Rabbi Shlomo Kluger, where his *rebbe* was Rabbi Yankele Flantzgraben, a Satmar *chassid* and author of the *sefer* Beis Yaakov on *Shas*. Later, he attended Yeshiva Rabbi Yaakov Yosef (also known as RJJ), where he received his *semichah*. His *rebbe* there was Rabbi Mendel Kravitz, a close disciple of Rav Aharon Kotler.

“Reb Aharon used to come twice a year to give *shiurim* in RJJ,” Rabbi Hier told **Zman** in a nostalgic tone. “Reb Aharon, the *gadol hador!*”

Rabbi Hier has warm memories of his childhood on the Lower East Side, and has never lost his New York spunk. Eyes



The Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, California.



Rabbi Moshe Chaim Hier visiting with Mr. Simon Wiesenthal in Wiesenthal’s office.



Moshe Chaim Hier (far left) as a young rabbi standing next to R' Isaac Tendler, a rebbe in Mesivta R' Yaakov Yosef.

gleaming as he speaks, he peppered our discussion with a generous helping of Yiddish expressions. Today, he channels his energies into the relentless pursuit of his chosen mission in life: fighting anti-Semitism, or as he passionately terms it, *mechiyas Amalek* (“wiping out Amalek”).