



Department of Justice

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
FRIDAY, MAY 24, 2002
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CRM
(202) 514-2008
TDD (202) 514-1888

FEDERAL COURT REVOKES U.S. CITIZENSHIP OF FORMER DEPUTY TO NAZI OFFICIAL RESPONSIBLE FOR MASS KILLINGS

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The Department of Justice announced today that a federal district court judge in Chicago has revoked the U.S. citizenship of a Lockport, Illinois man charged by the Government with participation in the persecution and murder of Jews and other civilians during the Nazi occupation of Lithuania in 1941.

The federal court entered a default judgment yesterday revoking the citizenship of Peter John Bernes (a/k/a Petras Bernotavičius), age 79. The Government's denaturalization case against Bernes was instituted in January 2002.

According to documents filed with the court, Bernes departed the United States for Lithuania in January and did not respond to the complaint. The complaint alleged that Bernes worked as deputy to Werner Loew, the Nazi-appointed mayor and police commander in Kupiškis, Lithuania. Bernes and other men participated directly where ultimately more than 1,000 Jewish men, women, and children and at least 300 other civilians were taken from the jail and shot to death at pits near Kupiškis acting on Loew's orders.

Michael Chertoff, Assistant Attorney General of the Criminal Division, said, "The Justice Department's pursuit of Nazi persecutors demonstrates that the perpetrators of crimes motivated by the victims' race or religion cannot hide behind the mere passage of time to avoid being held to account for their offenses."

Office of Special Investigations (OSI) Director Eli M. Rosenbaum stated that the question of further legal proceedings against Bernes is for officials in Lithuania to decide, as Bernes now

resides there. In July 1999, Lithuanian prosecutors publicly announced that they had opened a criminal investigation of Bernes for his alleged role in the mass murders in Kupiškis.

Bernes immigrated from Germany in 1947 and was naturalized as a U.S. citizen in Chicago in 1954. Documents filed by OSI with the court reflect that Bernes was interviewed by a Lithuanian investigator in February 2002. Bernes told the investigator that he “respected” Loew as an “intelligent person” and admitted working for Loew during the summer of 1941 after the Nazis appointed Loew as mayor.

The complaint alleged that prisoners were taken from the Kupiškis jail and shot to death nearly every evening during July and August 1941, and that the resulting gunfire was heard throughout Kupiškis. During his interview with Lithuanian officials, Bernes admitted that he escorted prisoners from the jail to Loew’s office for questioning and that he sometimes went to the jail with Loew in the evenings to assist in removing prisoners. However, Bernes denied knowing anything about the ultimate fate of those prisoners or the town’s Jewish residents.

Bernes is the 68th alleged Nazi persecutor to have been stripped of U.S. citizenship since OSI began operations in 1979. 55 such individuals have been removed from the United States and 165 suspected Nazi persecutors have been stopped at U.S. ports of entry and barred from entering the country. More than 170 U.S. residents are currently under active investigation by OSI.

The case against Bernes was brought by OSI and the US Attorney’s Office for the Northern District of Illinois.

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