

Laogai Research Foundation Newsheet – Summer 1996

Harry Wu Meets Nazi Hunter

On June 10, 1996, Harry Wu, executive director of the Laogai Research Foundation, met with "Nazi hunter" Simon Wiesenthal in his Vienna office. During their meeting the two former prisoners discussed the similarities and differences between the Chinese Laogai and the Nazi concentration camps.

Mr. Wu questioned, "What is the key difference between Nazism and Communism?" Mr. Wiesenthal responded, "The ideology of Communism was not a crime, however its implementation is a crime." In theory, the Communist system proposes to "help" people by "reforming" them. However, as Mr. Wu noted, "thought reform" is often accompanied by beatings and torture. Simon Wiesenthal added, "In Nazism, the ideology was a crime, and its implementation was a crime."

Systematic discrimination became a means to create a single class society in Communist China and a homogeneous race in Nazi Germany. "Hitler divided people by race; Mao, by economic status", said Mr. Wu. He went on to say, "One should bear in mind the massive human proportions in China: in the 'Kristallnacht' 91 people were killed throughout Germany; in one day during the Cultural Revolution, 1714 people were killed in Beijing."

Mr. Wiesenthal asked, "How many victims actually died in the Laogai?" Mr. Wu said, "The official government figure as reported in 1984 said that there were 20 million Laogai victims in the period 1949-1984. I estimate there were approximately 50 million victims. Today, there are between 6-8 million people in the Laogai; 1100 camps have been identified." The concentration camps claimed about 6 million lives.

Regarding the function of these camps, Mr. Wu said, "The Laogai has two functions as seen in its guiding principle of 'reform first, production second'." Likewise, Mr. Wiesenthal said of Nazi policy, "The function of the Nazi camps can be divided into 2 periods: the first, labor for Germany's military industry while the war was being fought, and the second, immediate extermination when it became clear the war was lost." Mr. Wu compared the slogan, "labor makes a new life", found at the gate of the Laogai, to the slogan, "Labor makes free",

described by Mr. Wiesenthal at the gates of the concentration camps. This underscores the importance of labor in the two systems.

In contrast to the "physical" gas chambers found in the concentration camps, Mr. Wu said, "The systematic brainwashing through 'thought reform' can be construed as a 'mental' gas chamber." Both Mr. Wu and Mr. Wiesenthal concurred that crimes pervaded every aspect of the two systems. Mental and physical abuse, beatings, torture, starvation, and even execution became everyday occurrences. Commenting on the crime of organ trafficking, Mr. Wu said, "The removal of kidneys and corneas from executed prisoners, who sometimes are still alive is unconscionable. I hope to see these criminal doctors judged, as were several Nazi doctors at Nuremberg." In complete agreement, Mr. Wiesenthal responded, "Doctors and witnesses must be compelled to testify. Even the Nazis did not conduct medical experiment on such a massive systematic/commercial scale."

Regarding the economy, Mr. Wu pointed out, "In Germany between 1933-1938, GNP rose 74% and unemployment fell to 0%." Similarly, the conditions in China today are conducive to foreign investment. That the West has embraced these business opportunities, while remaining ambivalent to China's human rights record discourages Mr. Wu. He likened "this relative indulgence...to the West's 'appeasement' of Germany in the 1930s." According to Mr. Wu, "One of the best viable weapons, economic leverage, is being used to condone current violations, rather than improve conditions."

These comparisons serve to relate a fairly unknown system, the Chinese Laogai, to a world-wide symbol of evil, the Nazi concentration camps. As of yet, little mention has been made in the international community of the Laogai that continues to imprison upwards of 8 million people. By exposing the similarities between the two systems, Mr. Wu feels that the world cannot remain indifferent. Only by making the word "Laogai" a matter of public record and common knowledge can the injustices be corrected. In many respects, the world's best-kept secret of the twentieth century has also been its most horrible one.