

Continuing Tragedies of the Shoah - 1997

Justice, Justice shalt thou pursue. (Deuteronomy 16:20)

Issue

The passage of time does not decrease the tragedy of the Shoah. For the decreasing numbers of survivors, many of whom are impoverished, the delayed financial restitution of assets belonging to Holocaust victims and/or their heirs is now urgently required. This must be done promptly even while those who deny the Holocaust must be reeducated to face its reality.

Background

Practices of Swiss banks long known for their secure and secret financial accounts have now come under close scrutiny for withholding assets deposited with them by Holocaust victims. Rightful heirs have been unable to access these funds which are believed to be worth multi-millions or even billions. The World Jewish Congress with the cooperation of the United States government has been instrumental in disclosing this issue.

A preponderance of assets stolen by the Nazis during World War II was handled by Swiss banks according to a report compiled by former U.S. Undersecretary of Commerce Stuart Eizenstat. In effect Hitler turned Swiss neutrality into a component of the Nazi war machine.

There is also evidence that at the end of World War II the Swiss failed to abide by the Washington Accords which required that the banks liquidate all assets they held belonging to Germans living in Germany during the war and turn over half the proceeds to the allied forces to help resettle war refugees.

However, it should be noted that not only Switzerland and Swiss banks but also Argentina, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Turkey and many other countries have been slow to recognize and acknowledge that they, too, pursued vigorous trade with the Third Reich which ultimately prolonged Nazi Germany's capacity to wage war. It has been further noted that Germany's Reichsbank had an account in Swiss banks for melted down loot from death camp victims including rings, coins and even gold teeth as well as gold reserves taken from looted countries.

After months of often secret negotiations and concern about adverse publicity, Switzerland and its banks have agreed to finance restitution to a Holocaust Survivors' Fund. They have published the names of some unclaimed accounts and have agreed to let an outside body decide the claims. The Swiss Banking Commission, Swiss Bankers Association and an international panel headed by former Federal Reserve Chairman Paul A. Volcker have agreed to a procedure for establishing deadlines for claims.

In The New York Times of Tuesday, July 8, 1997 an article from Berne states: "The president of Switzerland's fund to compensate victims of Nazi atrocities said today that \$11.7 million would be distributed to Holocaust survivors most of them living in Eastern Europe."

A panel, composed of four Swiss and three Jewish representatives, has designated funds from the unclaimed bank accounts largely for "double victims"—those who survived both the Nazi concentration camps and the Communist regimes. This could be as many as 60,000 of the oldest and most destitute of the victims. A panel member said that between 600,000 and 800,000 people living not only in central and eastern Europe but also in

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Israel and the United States qualify for compensation.

Resolution

Women of Reform Judaism, The Federation of Temple Sisterhoods urges its members to:

- 1) Study these issues and become sensitive advocates for just, swift and adequate financial restitution to Holocaust victims and/or their heirs.
- 2) Increase public awareness of the misinformation spread by those who deny the Holocaust.