

# Lawyering the Holocaust

## Free legal-aid program assists aging survivors

by **Richard Greenberg**

Associate Editor

The opportunity to receive token — but not inconsequential — compensation for their suffering brought six Holocaust survivors to the Jewish Social Service Agency in Rockville last Friday.

They are among perhaps dozens of Washington-area Jews now in their 70s, 80s and 90s who hope to qualify for a modest reparations payment under a new program unveiled by the German government. It will award 2,000 Euros each (roughly \$3,000) to Jews who can demonstrate that they performed so-called “voluntary” work in a Nazi-controlled ghetto.

There are now roughly 60,000 potentially eligible survivors worldwide, including 25,000 in the United States, according to organizers of last week’s program. An estimated 1,500 survivors live in the Washington area.

Those on hand last week at JSSA were shepherded through the compensation application process by 10 attorneys from the District-based law firm of Latham & Watkins, which is handling their cases free of charge.

Latham is one of at least five local law practices that are offering their services gratis, and roughly 30 others have expressed an interest in helping, according to a participant.

All the attorneys participating Friday were Jewish except Lori Robbins, 33, who said she had never before had direct contact with a Holocaust survivor. “Anything we can do to help these people is wonderful because they so deserve it,” she explained. “I want to be a part of that.”

Robbins was teamed up with 99-year-old survivor Sonia Golubcow of Rockville, whose Holocaust-era work — primarily peeling potatoes, washing dishes and other kitchen chores — was performed in a small ghetto near Vilnius in Lithuania.

Like the other participating attorneys, Robbins is acting as Golubcow’s officially designated representative, responsible for handling every aspect of the application process. Compensation checks are sent

directly to the survivors, however.

To qualify for compensation, survivors must provide detailed information describing many aspects of their Holocaust-era experience, including where they lived, how exactly they were persecuted, and what work they did while staying in a ghetto.

They must also reveal any payments they have already received from the German government (or even applications for those payments).

Golubcow, like the other survivors present on Friday, already receives some money from the German government. Although that doesn’t necessarily bar survivors from receiving payments under the new program, discrepancies between information provided during different periods can be grounds for rejection of a claim, according to Ruth Kershner, a clinical social worker with JSSA, who has worked extensively with Holocaust survivors.

Golubcow was asked how she might spend the money if her claim is successful. “I have bills to pay,” she said, “but let’s get the money first.”

Betty Blogier, an 84-year-old Rockville resident, worked in the Vilnius ghetto. “We did everything,” she told her designated attorney, Andrew Stein, 29. “We cleared snow, we got wood, we did housework, we sewed buttons for them.”

She added: “No matter how much they give, it isn’t enough.” Later during the session, however, she confided: “I need money for my teeth. I need dentures.”

Halina Peabody, 75, of Bethesda, lived and worked in the Krakow ghetto in Poland, although her memory is hazy about some details. “Whatever my mother did, I did,” she said. “I helped her clear snow, whatever.”

Peabody is already compensated by the Germans for injuries she suffered in an explosion that blew off part of a finger. “Does that pay for the psyche of a 9- or 10-year-old when you almost lose a hand?” she asked.

Peabody said if her claim is successful, she plans to spend the money on her



**Holocaust survivor Betty Blogier of Rockville relates her story to attorney Andrew Stein last Friday during a workshop for survivors. The session was co-sponsored by the Jewish Social Service Agency in Rockville, in conjunction with several area law firms that are providing free legal services to survivors seeking compensation under a new program unveiled by the German government.**

Photo by Richard Greenberg

grandchildren. “I’m a grandma,” she explained with a smile. “That’s what I do.”

“Voluntary” or “unforced” work — as distinguished from slave labor or forced labor — is defined as tasks performed by individuals who had some choice about whether to work and how to do their jobs.

The lawyer-assistance initiative for survivors was launched in April by the Los Angeles-based legal aid organization Bet Tzedek. Wendy Levine, deputy director of Bet Tzedek, said that nearly 30 percent of

the 600 claims filed nationally under the ghetto workers compensation program have been approved and none have been rejected. More than 400 are still outstanding. Some have been processed in as little as four weeks, Levine added.

Additional legal-aid sessions at JSSA (the co-sponsor of Friday’s program) are scheduled for tomorrow, June 27, July 1, July 7, July 18, July 25 and July 28; additional ones will be organized if demand warrants it



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