

Fighting for Holocaust Justice in Germany: Bet Tzedek in German
National Public Radio Broadcast *GERMAN PENSION LAW DISAPPOINTS
NAZI GHETTO SURVIVORS*

REPORTER (female)

ELSA BILDNER lives in Santa Monica, one of the better neighborhoods of Los Angeles. The petite woman with light blonde hair, brown eyes and a friendly manner opens the door to her tastefully decorated apartment.

ELSA BILDNER has problems with the German authorities. They refuse to give the 84-year-old woman a pension for the work she performed in a ghetto during the Nazi era.

ELSA BILDNER

When they set up the ghetto, I volunteered for work.

We were supervised by soldiers. I told one of them, I would like to have some cigarettes for my father, and he gave me a pack. Another one gave me a piece of leather to make shoes with.

REPORTER

ELSA BILDNER has applied for a pension for the time period during which she worked voluntarily in the ghetto. In doing so, she is relying on a 2002 German law, the Law Regarding Pensions for Work in Ghettos (ZBRG).

Applicants must meet two conditions: First, the work must have been performed voluntarily, as opposed to forced labor, and second, this work must have been paid.

Both of these conditions can be problematic, explains MARK ROTHMAN, Holocaust Services Advocate with Bet Tzedek, an organization that provides legal assistance on Jewish matters.

MARK ROTHMAN

You have to prove that the work was really voluntary in a situation where people were forced to give up their normal lives. They were strong and able-bodied and wanted to help keep things going in the ghetto so life could be as normal as possible.

ELSA BILDNER

Elsa Bildner was supervised by the German military, and in such a case, the authorities doubt the voluntary nature of the work. And there was usually no money. But that isn't very important either, as there was little to buy anyway. According to Rothman's colleague Volker Schmidt...

VOLKER SCHMIDT

The vast majority were paid with food, and the insurance institutions are still maintaining that that alone does not suffice as payment.

REPORTER

Elsa Bildner lived in Poland and came into the Biala Podlaska Ghetto. There was a Polish airplane factory there, which had been bombed right at the beginning of the war by the German armed forces. The rubble had to be cleared away and Elsa Bildner was there to help.

Her application for a pension was rejected for a third reason. The insurance institution took the position that there was no ghetto in Biala Podlaska at the time in question.

MARK ROTHMAN

Frequently, applications are rejected on this basis, but we have independent sources that say the ghetto existed at that time. This is why it is frustrating to have to debate this issue.

REPORTER

In Los Angeles alone, approximately 150 former ghetto residents have applied for a pension. Of these applications, 90% are rejected. Many do not understand this, especially since it is not easy for them to ask Germany for a pension in the first place.

VOLCKER SCHMIDT

Some just resign themselves to it - "that's how we were treated before, and they are still treating us the same way today." Others get angry and say, "It's like we're getting cheated all over again for the work we did."

REPORTER

Because of the many rejections, Bet Tzedek appealed to Ulla Schmidt, the German Social Welfare Minister with responsibility for this area. The organization, whose appeals have meanwhile gained the support of the Jewish Claims Conference and some Conference representatives, has never received a personal reply from her.

An official has promised a more thorough investigation, but no results have yet reached Los Angeles.

Basically, the Ministry takes the position that many of those who have been rejected did not understand the law correctly and have applied even though they have no entitlement.

Frequently, applicants must wait a year or even a year and a half to receive an answer from Germany. Given the advanced age of the applicants, many suspect the authorities of taking their time processing the applications, according to Rothman.

Elsa Bildner will try again. Bet Tzedek will file an appeal of the rejection.

REPORTER (cont.)

Up to this point, she's disappointed, says
the old lady.

ELSA BILDNER

I'm disappointed.