

Volunteer Network Aiding Holocaust Funds Program

by Tom Tugend, Contributing Editor

A network of volunteers from many of the nation's leading law firms, recruited through a Los Angeles initiative, is helping to write what appears to be the last chapter in the long and contentious history of reparations to Holocaust victims.

The windup comes none too soon for the estimated 50,000 to 75,000 remaining eligible survivors around the world, most now in their 80s and 90s.

Credit for this development goes to pressure applied by American organizations and legislators, as well as some energetic red tape-cutting by the present German government.

The ghetto work reparations program applies to a little-known class of Jews who worked in the Nazi-run ghettos of Eastern Europe on a "voluntary" or "at-will" basis.

Such "volunteers" were compensated by meager payments or an extra loaf of bread and may have had little actual choice if they wanted to survive, but they were differentiated from "forced laborers."

Their work might range from cleaning German barracks, digging in peat bogs or removing maggot-infested corpses after the Warsaw Ghetto uprising was crushed. Many of the workers were later deported to concentration camps and perished in the Holocaust.

When the new program was an-

announced, survivors in Los Angeles turned, as usual, to Bet Tzedek, the House of Justice, for advice and help in navigating through the bureaucratic channels.

Now one of the country's premier public-interest law centers, Bet Tzedek was founded in 1974 and assists many thousands of low-income, disabled and elderly clients, regardless of race or religion.

With long experience aiding Holocaust survivors, Bet Tzedek was already familiar with the ghetto work program but realized that there were many other cities in the United States without such expertise.

Two men of widely disparate backgrounds got together to spread the word and set up a national training course for pro-bono lawyers and social service agencies, such as the Jewish Family Service.

One is Volker Schmidt, a German lawyer in charge of Holocaust-related services at Bet Tzedek, and the other is Stanley Levy, a senior attorney with the law firm of Manatt, Phelps & Phillips, as well as an ordained rabbi.

With the active support of his firm, Levy now spends half of his working time as national coordinator for a network of 40-50 major law firms in 20 cities to provide professional advice to survivors.

This kind of pro-bono arrangement by law firms is quite common, Levy said, adding, "Whatever you hear about lawyers, the indicator of a first-rate law firm nowadays is the extent of its community service."

Levy is getting ready to distribute 500 copies of a one-hour training DVD conceived by Schmidt to explain the forms and background information required of

applicants. The German government will make a one-time payout of 2,000 euros, now equivalent to \$3,000, to each former ghetto worker. This may not be a munificent sum, but it carries both symbolic value as an acknowledgment of responsibility and material value to many survivors.

"More than 25 percent of survivors exist below the poverty line," said Schmidt. "Every morning, on my way to work, I pass a food pantry and see some of them lined up. That's shameful."

Of the 50,000 (according to German figures) to 75,000 (say American experts) worldwide survivors who qualify for ghetto work reparations, about half are estimated to live in Israel.

In the United States, the figure is about 20,000, with half living in New York and 5,000 to 6,000 in Los Angeles.

Many eligible survivors are reluctant to apply for the reparations, saying that they have been denied their claims so many times in the past that they don't want to go through all the forms and traumatic memories again, Schmidt noted.

The original ghetto work reparation program started in 2002 and was administered by the Social Security offices of the various German provinces. It turned into a bureaucratic nightmare, in which responses were delayed by years and 92 percent of

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applications were denied.

After protests by the New York-based Claims Conference, Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Los Angeles), Bet Tzedek and others, a new German administration transferred responsibility to the federal Finance Ministry and eased eligibility rules.

Instead of having to provide nonexistent documentation of their wartime histories, survivors need only file a statement confirming their ghetto work and must not have received payments under a different reparations program.

"There is no deadline for filing claims but since reparations are paid only to living survivors, not their heirs, the real deadlines are their advanced ages," Schmidt observed.

Schmidt has filed 460 applications since January, of which 36 have been approved with zero denials, and he has just been notified that inhabitants of the wartime Shanghai ghetto, though it was not under direct German control, are also eligible under the program.

At 42, Schmidt has had dual legal careers in Germany and California, including stints at the German Supreme Court and in the Crescent City district attorney's office in northern California.

After private practice in Los Angeles, specializing in immigration and European law, he joined Bet Tzedek last October.

Schmidt, who was born well after the Nazi era, said he wasn't trying to atone for the crimes of an earlier German generation in his present work. However, he added, "as long as there is one survivor alive and in need, the chapter has not been closed." ●