



Back row, from left, Doreen Wener Shenfeld, Ronald B. Turovsky and Daniel Gryczman of Manatt Phelps & Phillips, Mitchell A. Kamin of Bet Tzedek, Harold McDougal of Manatt, Wendy Marantz Levine of Bet Tzedek and Christin Zeisler of Manatt. Front row, from left, Mark A. Rothman, Anette Mann, Celia Kirilover and Sandey Fields of Bet Tzedek.

Extraordinary Response Team

Los Angeles lawyers worked around the clock after Hungarian Holocaust survivors got an unexpected chance for reparations.



Photo courtesy of JESSICA ACCAMANDO

Hungarian Holocaust survivors Frida and Max Moldovan filed for reparations with the help of volunteer attorneys.

Frida Moldovan can never be compensated for what she lost. While living in Hungary, her family was sent to German labor and concentration camps. Her brother and parents died in Auschwitz. For Moldovan, justice might seem an empty word.

But when, earlier this year, Hungary announced it would reopen a 1997 reparations program for Hungarian Holocaust survivors, Moldovan wanted to file claims.

"What you can take from them, I would take from them," Moldovan said. "Because they can never, never pay us."

Filing for reparations is a "really important statement [for survivors]," said Bet Tzedek deputy director of litigation Wendy Levine.

It's a validation, she said, that their tragedy, quickly disappearing in the eyes of new generations, really happened.

The reopened program was expected to last only four months, with the deadline slated for July 31 of this year. All the documents were in Hungarian.

When Bet Tzedek began receiving calls from clients confused by the forms, the organization got up to speed, put together an English questionnaire that would allow inter-

viewers to interact with survivors, sent out a request for volunteers and advertised two clinics.

They expected 30 or 40 survivors to show up at the first clinic. Instead, 70 appeared.

"I walked in to do my little kickoff spiel, and it was stand-up room only," Mark Rothman, Holocaust services advocate for Bet Tzedek, said.

The need was greater than anyone had expected.

Bet Tzedek sent out e-mails to all its law-firm contacts, and those contacts responded. Firms sent everyone from partners to entire summer-associate classes. Sole practitioners signed up. Many firms sent notaries for the affidavits the application required.

"What made this an extraordinary response was the shortness of time, the lack of information available, and the large number of victims our clients represented," Rothman said.

Levine said Los Angeles' volunteer community has "an incredible ability to respond when the need arises." "They had people here when we needed them," she said.

Rothman said the organization was uniquely positioned to take the lead on the project, in no small part because of a summer law clerk

named Eszter Lengyel, who spoke Hungarian. "She was really the gift, the unanticipated miracle that allowed us to really understand what was going on," he said.

In total, volunteers at Bet Tzedek's clinics helped 318 Holocaust survivors file more than 1,222 reparations applications, one for each family member who had died or was forced into labor as a result of Hungary's actions during the Holocaust.

Lawyers don't usually describe a day filling out paperwork as the most rewarding experience of their legal career. But many of the attorneys who helped file claims for the Bet Tzedek clinics did.

"Everybody that came out of there came out of there feeling good about being a lawyer," said Anette Mann, a clinic volunteer.

The process was emotional for everyone involved.

"That room went through every emotion you could imagine," Cristin Zeisler, national director of public interest activities of Manatt, Phelps & Phillips, said.

"People got angry about the paltry sums" that the Hungarian government was paying out, Zeisler said.

But in many ways, it wasn't about the money.

"This isn't about \$1,800 per victim," she said. "This is about you sitting down and telling your story."

That's not to say the money won't be helpful. More than 25 percent of survivors are living below the poverty line, Levine said.

Once the information was taken from the survivors, the volunteers transferred it to the highly technical Hungarian forms. And while that might sound a little dry, the volunteers

who worked on the paperwork would hardly agree.

"The immensity of the event, of the Holocaust, you could see it in application after application," Steven Berliner, an attorney who volunteered on the project, said.

And just as Rothman remembers the unexpected crush at the beginning of the project, he remembers a moment of quiet at the end.

The volunteers were double-checking the applications, and the only way to do that was by the name of the victims.

So they sat there, in the empty Bet Tzedek library, reading aloud each victim's name.

Rothman realized, "We are essentially at this moment performing a memorial service for each of these victims."

The Hungarian government extended the period for filing claims until Dec. 31. Bet Tzedek attorneys don't yet know whether the claims have been accepted. But the project represented one of the last opportunities to lend

a hand to this population.

"Every day, the number of survivors that are alive in the world diminishes," Levine said. "We recognize that the next five to 10 years ... is a really critical period for helping survivors."

Daniel Gryczman, a volunteer from Manatt Phelps, agreed.

"There's nothing anyone can do to give these people real justice," he said.

But, he said, this was "a little token of justice."

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Bet Tzedek

By Emma Dewald
Daily Journal Staff Writer