

Use Restituted Funds for Urgent Survivors' Needs

David Schaecter

There are between 80,000 and 110,000 Survivors in the United States (about 400,000-500,000 worldwide). Their average age is around eighty years old and they are dying at a higher than average rate for their age group. Many are dying alone, without home or health care in their last years. No one is paying attention, especially the leaders of the American Jewish community.

Despite the headlines over the past few years suggesting that "billions of dollars" have been recovered for Holocaust victims from European businesses and governments, the truth is that the restitution process has largely been a disaster for Holocaust survivors and their families.

The banks, insurers, and manufacturers that profited from the Holocaust, many of whom are major international concerns (doing business in the U.S.) today, will pay out a mere fraction of their ill-gotten gains as a result of recent deals. They also will avoid anything close to full disclosure of their records from that period of time. The organizations that negotiated in the name of survivors are pushing to be the organizations that decide how to distribute the "leftover" money — the "Jewish People's Fund." While voicing empty rhetoric about "taking care of survivors first," they have given paltry support for the real social service needs of survivors today.

There are enormous and unacceptable shortfalls in social service funding, including long-term in-home health care that is essential to the dignity and health of survivors. They need an insurance-based, home health care program that would provide the necessary hours per week (five hours is currently the maximum) to care for medical needs of survivors such as basic health care management, post-surgical and home-based cancer treatment. Home care is essential for some survivors because they have no extended family to see to their needs. In addition to the long waiting lists in most communities for basic services, most survivors do not even present themselves for care, knowing that assistance is generally unavailable.

There are twenty-four members on the Conference on Material Claims Against Germany Board (the central repository of the assets of Jews who perished in the Shoah), and only two represent survivor organizations. The result is that large amounts of funds recovered in the name of Holocaust victims are not neces-

sarily used for survivor needs. The funds have become a source of "worldwide Jewish philanthropy" and millions of dollars have been earmarked for non-survivor projects dear to the hearts of individual board member organizations throughout the world. While many of these projects are worthy, they are not related to the needs of survivors. For example, millions of dollars are currently being committed by the Claims Conference to care for Russian Jews in the former Soviet Union. While 55 percent of those Jews are said to be survivors, 45 percent are not. In the year 2000, the Claims Conference allocated \$775,000 to the organization of Jews in Bulgaria, where there was no Holocaust, and \$1.45 million to the Yiddish Theatre in Tel Aviv. Shouldn't the general Jewish community take responsibility for these allocations rather than use funds recovered in the name of survivors?

A national organization has emerged to provide survivors a voice in this arena, the Holocaust Survivors Foundation USA, Inc. (HSF), which comprises forty-six member-organization groups from throughout the United States. The groups are unified in their demand for greater accountability and transparency from the Claims Conference, the operating entity with the funds. HSF also demands a voice in all restitution matters including how funds recovered in the name of Holocaust survivors are spent.

How can plans for a "Jewish People's Fund" go forward while survivors languish on waiting lists for the health care they deserve, especially after all they have endured? How dare these institutions presume to spend "restituted" funds for their favored "philanthropic" projects into the next century, using money claimed from the most terrorized victims of the past century?

Who will take responsibility for ensuring that the individuals around whom much of our modern Jewish existence is centered — Holocaust victims — are not abandoned a second time?

David Schaecter, a survivor, was elected President of the Holocaust Survivors Foundation, an organization created in 2000 to address the very issues identified in this essay. The HSF membership consists of leaders from across the United States who are elected by individual survivor organizations.