Cash carries weight of closure

By Peter Eisler, USA TODAY

Jack Wolf waited decades for the letter he got last week, the one saying U.S. officials had won him German compensation for a boyhood spent in Nazi concentration camps. He watched his father wait before him, watched him die waiting with $900 to his name.

Now, the letter in hand, it's hard to stop thinking about why it took so long.

"The (United States') role in this has not been good," says Wolf, 70, whose Jewish mother was a U.S. citizen living with his Dutch wife and their children in Amsterdam when the Nazis took them. They were sent to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. His mother fell ill, dying a month after their liberation.

"The money is coming now, and (U.S.) officials did work hard in the last couple of years," Wolf adds. "But there's been a lot of foot-dragging."

Wolf is among 235 or so people who will get lump-sum payments of $30,000 to $250,000 under an agreement that provides $18.5 million in German compensation for Holocaust survivors who were U.S. citizens at the time they were imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps. Checks should go out in the coming weeks under the pact, negotiated by Germany and the State Department.

But the money has been a long time coming, resisted at first by U.S. officials, then delayed by bureaucratic snafus.

In the meantime, several claimants have died; others are aging, falling ill.

The agreement "is about closure as much if not more than it's about the money," says Steven Perles, a Washington lawyer for several claimants. "But ... both governments could have done a lot better by
One problem is there weren't enough claimants to get political attention.

Of about 18 million people held in concentration camps during World War II, most were Jews and other ethnic and religious minorities from Europe. Very few were Americans - some U.S. Jews caught in Europe, plus select POWs.

Agreements struck over the decades to provide German compensation to European survivors made no provisions for Americans. And the U.S. government, not recognizing its stake, stood aside.

Then, Hugo Princz came along.

Princz, a New Jersey man who spent three years in Nazi concentration camps, filed a federal suit seeking damages from Germany. But the State Department fought him, arguing for German immunity.

It wasn't until 1995, after several members of Congress took up Princz's cause, that the State Department brokered a settlement with Germany. Princz and 10 other U.S. Holocaust survivors shared $2.1 million.

The settlement also promised a second round of compensation for any other living American survivors. It was up to the U.S. government to find them.

That process took years. Officials expected maybe 50 claims; they got hundreds, each requiring hundreds of hours of examination and documentation.

It wasn't until March 1998 - six months behind schedule - that the claims were verified so the State Department could begin negotiating a final settlement amount with Germany.

"Considering the obstacles we've faced, we've moved quite expeditiously," says Ronald Bettauer, the chief U.S. negotiator. "We all recognized that (survivors) are aging and need to be paid."

Once German and U.S. officials agreed in January on a 34.5 million German mark settlement, delays continued: German officials needed parliamentary approval before they could wire the money to the U.S. Treasury. And that delay proved the most costly.

Between the time the agreement was struck and the German parliament's appropriation of the money, the U.S. dollar's value slipped substantially against the mark. Claimants will end up getting
roughly 12% less money than they would have in January.

"This money should have come out of German assets immediately after the war," Holocaust survivor Wolf says. "And if Germany wanted to pay this money, they could have done it anytime. They weren't eager to do it, and there was no pressure."

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Holocaust claimants sought by US courts

By John Authors In New York

The US courts will this week start placing advertisements to reach survivors of the Holocaust who may be entitled to money under a $1.25bn settlement from Swiss banks.

The advertising campaign, which will use 500 newspapers in 40 countries, follows almost a year of legal wrangling over how to distribute the funds, which UBS and Credit Suisse, the two biggest Swiss banks, agreed to pay in August last year.

It is unlikely that any Holocaust survivor, or their heirs, will receive payment until May next year, despite their advanced age. Swiss banks have already started making payments into the fund.

The US district court in Brooklyn, where the settlement was brokered, has appointed various US legal firms, along with the World Jewish Restitution Organisation and the World Council of Orthodox Jewish Communities, to represent claimants.

Decisions on how to allocate the funds have been delayed by arguments over legal fees. Most of the lawyers who acted for the Holocaust survivors did so pro bono, for no fee, but others did not. At most 1.8 per cent of the fund, or $22.5m, will be paid in legal fees.

No process for evaluating claims has yet been established, and claimants are being offered the opportunity to comment on the settlement until October 22, ahead of a formal court hearing on November 29.

An outreach programme, which will be supported with toll-free numbers and a website, is necessary because people who did not hold a Swiss bank account might receive payment.

UBS and Credit Suisse signed a global settlement in which they agreed to make payments on behalf of the Swiss national bank and the government, in an act described at the time as buying peace for the Swiss nation.

Potential claimants include:

- holders of assets on deposit before the end of the war at any Swiss bank, investment fund or other custodian;
- people whose assets were looted by the Nazis, and then handled by the Swiss;
- former slave labourers for companies that deposited their profits with Swiss banks;
- people who attempted unsuccessfully to enter Switzerland to escape Nazi persecution.

Problems thrashing out a payment system for the Swiss cases have also affected negotiations with German companies and insurers.

In both instances, all parties are hoping to agree to a distribution process as part of any settlement, and both aim to start payments to claimants before those eligible for payment from the Swiss fund receive their money.
Holocaust survivors sue over real estate

NEW YORK (AP) - A group of Holocaust survivors and their heirs sued the Polish government Friday, demanding the return of real estate lost during World War II.

The federal lawsuit, which seeks class-action status, was filed on behalf of 11 plaintiffs and others, including some driven out of Poland in what the lawsuit calls "a common scheme of ethnic and racial cleansing."

The suit alleges the victims were never allowed to return to reclaim homes and other assets. It also says Polish archives contain proof the Holocaust survivors are the rightful owners of thousands of parcels of land in Warsaw, Krakow and other parts of the country.

The plaintiffs' attorney, Mel Urbach, said Polish officials have refused demands to return the property. Urbach was one of the attorneys who negotiated a $1.2 billion settlement last year for Holocaust survivors in a similar suit against Swiss banks.

Jaroslaw Kurek, spokesman for the Polish embassy in Washington, said, "It's too early to comment."

The plaintiffs include Bella Jungewirth, 79, a New York City resident who lived in Poland until being forced into slave labor by the Nazis, court papers said.

When Jungewirth returned to her family's Krakow home after the war, she found someone else living there. She later fled Poland because of death threats.
Jewish group aims at Arabs as new restitution target

NEW YORK (Reuters) - A prominent Jewish group that has forced European countries and firms to compensate Holocaust victims said on Monday it plans to seek restitution from a new target -- Arab countries that seized assets from Jews after Israel became a state.

"Nearly one million Jews, from Iraq to Morocco, under various conditions of duress, had to leave those countries to go to Israel, and they lost enormous sums in property and assets," Elan Steinberg, executive director of the World Jewish Congress, said in a telephone interview.

The WJC is one of the biggest players in what it sees as a global battle to get moral and economic justice for Holocaust victims whose assets were looted during World War II.

The group's plan to expand into a new restitution arena could affect Middle East peace talks because Palestinians also have big compensation claims against Israel for appropriating their property after it became a state in 1948.

"I think everyone on the Arab side has expected that the Jewish claim would be presented and the counter to the Arab claim," Arab American Institute President James Zogby said.

Adding the period should be impartially researched, he said: "Where there are legitimate grievances it's important to consider them. I feel, of course, that Palestinians have legitimate and ongoing grievances about the situation in Israel and a continuing and developing situation in the West Bank and Jerusalem, where land is still being taken."

Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians left Israel beginning in 1948 at the outbreak of war, expecting to return within weeks. Israel stopped them returning and confiscated their property on grounds of abandonment.

Steinberg said the new restitution effort was realistic. "I think it's a very real possibility because Arab countries have indicated that the rule of law is important to them." He also stressed the issue's moral importance: "It's part of Jewish history in its entirety, educational and historical, as much if not more than financial."

How the Arab world has responded to previous compensation claims varies from country to country, Steinberg said, adding that typically, the more democratic nations have been more cooperative.

Last year, the WJC helped push Swiss banks into a $1.25 billion accord with Holocaust
victims to settle charges that the banks since the end of World War II had blocked survivors and their families from collecting assets and accounts.

It now is in the midst of negotiations over Holocaust-era assets with Germany and its companies over claims they benefited from Nazi war crimes, and in talks with a number of Europe's insurers that it says prevented Holocaust victims from collecting on life insurance and other policies.

At a June 24 meeting in Jerusalem, the WJC plans to review all the Holocaust restitution cases, and authorize its executives to take what steps they deem necessary -- including sanctions -- against European financial institutions that it thinks are not fully cooperating with Holocaust victims. The new initiative against the Arab world also will be taken up.

"The issue has been there for quite a number of years, but no systematic effort has been undertaken so far," Steinberg said.

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Israel in call to speed Holocaust compensation

By Judy Dempsey in Jerusalem

Israel insisted yesterday that European insurance companies compensate families of Holocaust victims in eastern Europe at "today's real value" and called for a "fast track" mechanism to speed payment of unpaid claims.

Valuation is one of the issues dominating a two-day meeting of the International Commission of Holocaust Era Claims which opened yesterday in Jerusalem.

Bobby Brown, a member of the commission and adviser on diaspora affairs to Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's outgoing prime minister, said he would press the commission to make compensations for east European policy holders set at today's value.

But Assicurazioni Generali of Italy, the largest seller of life insurance policies in eastern Europe before the second world war, said it had no intention of agreeing to such a criteria since the amounts demanded far exceeded the value of payments the insured would have received had they lived.

Generali said it recognised "a moral imperative of resolving the Holocaust era insurance claims". But "we do not have any legal obligations," said Guido Pastori, deputy general manager of Generali. "We were nationalised following the communist takeover of eastern European after 1945. Those governments took over our liabilities and those assets backing those liabilities."

Some members of the commission were hoping several issues would be resolved by today before another meeting in Washington next month. These include valuations, public access to Holocaust records held by insurers and criteria for eligibility before making final assessments.

The commission was established last year to persuade European insurance companies to reach a global settlement of unpaid Holocaust-era insurance claims. It is chaired by Lawrence Eagleburger, former US secretary of state. Five big European insurers — Generali, Allianz of Germany, Axa of France, and Winterthur and Zurich of Switzerland — are members.

Mr Brown said he wanted payments to survivors or families of victims to start as soon as possible, Holocaust records held by insurance companies made public and the valuation of claims finally settled.

Lebanese banks 'falling behind'

Lebanese banks are falling behind in a regional movement towards transparency, a senior analyst at Thomson Financial BankWatch, the specialist rating agency, warned yesterday, Reuters reported from Beirut.

"We are not satisfied with overall transparency and the assessment methods of asset quality. There are no uniform procedures to rate loans," said Maurice Iskandar, Thomson's vice-president for Middle East and North Africa.

In neighbouring countries such as Jordan, financial regulations are getting more advanced, especially in banking-related fields such as capital markets, he argued.

"They are not hiding their problems in Jordan. They are putting in place more stringent regulations and more banks are seeking to be rated."

Tunisia's state-dominated banking sector is being restructured with the help of the World Bank and the EU.
Fallout From 'Mr. Pope' Comment

By: ERIC J. GREENBERG, Staff Writer

Jewish leaders in Poland and U.S. say rabbi’s faux pas could hurt negotiations on Auschwitz cross; Rabbi Avi Weiss sues Holocaust Memorial Council.

Polish and American Jewish leaders say last week’s “Mr. Pope” incident between Poland’s chief rabbi and Pope John Paul II has damaged Jewish-Catholic relations in Poland, and could undermine negotiations involving the controversial Auschwitz cross.

And adding to the Auschwitz cross controversy is Riverdale Rabbi Avi Weiss, who on Tuesday filed a federal lawsuit against the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council in Washington for violating his First Amendment rights by barring him from speaking at this week’s biannual board meeting.

Rabbi Weiss, president of Amcha, the Coalition for Jewish Concerns, said he wanted “to warn” the board that a Jewish coalition team led by Holocaust Memorial Council chairman Miles Lerman is taking positions in negotiations with the Polish government that would, among other problems, leave the controversial 26-foot cross standing at its present location, on property adjacent to the main Auschwitz camp.

The complaint, filed in U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, seeks to allow the rabbi to speak at future meetings of an organization that receives millions in federal funds and whose chairman and board is appointed by the President of the United States.

A council spokeswoman said Rabbi Weiss’ topic was not on the board’s agenda and that he was permitted to speak at last December’s meeting. A June 11 letter by council attorney Gerard Leval stated that the meetings are forums for council members only, and that Rabbi Weiss failed to “use the established communications channels of the Council” for his request.
No court decision was expected this week.

Meanwhile, leaders of Poland's resurrected Jewish community told The Jewish Week they are especially furious with the 79-year-old Chief Rabbi Menachem Joskowicz, who took it upon himself to ask the Pope to remove the Auschwitz cross in the most public and embarrassing way: speaking in slang Polish in a seemingly disrespectful way on live television broadcast across the Catholic-dominated country.

"He transgressed all normal and diplomatic ways," declared Stanislaw Krajewski, a board member of the Union of Jewish Communities in Poland. "Many Jews here say that it will take years before we overcome that."

Rabbi Joskowicz, an Auschwitz survivor and member of the Ger chasidic sect, held the title of Poland's chief rabbi since 1989 after being appointed under the communist Polish government. He retired under a cloud last Sunday after years of tension with Poland's Jewish community.

Krajewski said Rabbi Jokowicz's encounter with the Pope "has strongly decreased the chances to find a solution, and certainly to relocate the cross in the foreseeable future."

He said most Catholics believe the rabbi was the main spokesman for Polish Jews, but insisted "he does not represent us, the majority of Polish Jews."

The Jewish negotiating team was expected to meet in New York Thursday for a strategy session on how to proceed with negotiations with the Polish government over the Auschwitz cross, weeks after Polish officials removed 300 smaller crosses erected by Polish Catholics opposed to the removal of the large icon, a memorial to slain Polish World War II patriots and a symbol of the Pope's 1979 visit there.

Lerman said the Pope incident "definitely will make our negotiations more difficult."

Lerman said Rabbi Joskowicz' action came at "the wrong time, the wrong place and the wrong manner. The fact that it was on live television, the [newspaper] picture of him pointing his finger in the Pope's face, makes it worse. I wish it had never happened."

Krajewski said the rabbi used his title to gain access to the Pope in what was supposed to be merely a receiving line.

"The Pope was just shaking hands and receiving hand kisses from a series of VIPs, and some said one sentence," Krajewski recounted. "[The rabbi] started a whole speech. He was addressing him by 'Mr. Pope,' which in Polish at least sounded horrible. He was behaving in a way that showed disrespect, although I am not saying it was intentional."
Rabbi Joskowicz had urged the Pope directly “to bring his people to take the last cross out of the camp so that Jews who come here can say their final prayer before dying.”

John Paul did not appear taken aback by the incident and reportedly treated the rabbi with respect and whispered a response.

Jewish officials did not question the sincerity Rabbi Joskowicz’s appeal. Many told The Jewish Week they agree with its substance — that the Auschwitz cross needs to be moved.

“It’s hard to condemn the chief rabbi for doing what he did,” said Abraham Foxman, director of the Anti-Defamation League. “Here is his one opportunity to meet with the Holy Father. What was on his heart was on his tongue.”

Nevertheless, Foxman said the manner was inappropriate. “People do not challenge the Pope in public, especially in Poland.”

But several American Jewish officials strongly approved of Rabbi Joskowicz’s conduct. “I applaud what the rabbi did,” declared Rabbi Weiss. “This was a Jew who was a patriarchal individual who spoke truth to a person he viewed as an equal, as he should.”

Elan Steinberg of the World Jewish Congress said the Polish rabbi “was respectful and open with the Pope, and it is disgraceful that his plea should be so excoriated by other Jews.”

But Polish Jewish authorities explained that the “Mr. Pope” incident was the last in a long series of faux pas by the white-bearded, well-dressed rabbi, who routinely spent half the year in Israel running a pharmaceutical company.

They noted that he once advocated that Auschwitz be made an international site — a political blunder that both upset the Poles and Jews concerned with Jerusalem.
A poisoned chalice

Few people would deny that the World Jewish Congress has engineered some highly impressive propaganda coups in its time: By consistently making effective use of its extensive contacts in Western business and government circles, the WJC has helped to arrange all forms of generous financing—public and private, legal and illicit—for Zionist projects since before the modern state of Israel even came into existence more than 50 years ago. All of this has been helped immeasurably by an unprecedented decades-long public-relations campaign that has parlayed continuing Western guilt over the Holocaust into shoring up the Jewish state’s “credentials” as a victim among nations.

The group has also led a battle in this decade to recover billions of dollars from banks and insurance companies whose vaults are still bursting with the proceeds of the Nazi-era plunder of Jewish communities in several European countries.

Again, private contacts and widespread public sympathies especially in the United States have been the key to obtaining what Jewish groups rightly describe as the “moral justice” of recovering what was stolen by the Nazis. Banks have a funny way of cooperating with your “requests” when your friends wield enough clout to shut down their operations in the state of New York: Lose your access to that market, and you might as well call it a day.

But this time for once the WJC might very well wind up wishing that it had shown a little more forethought and a lot less ambition.

By announcing that it will seek financial restitution from Arab countries whose governments seized assets from resident Jews following the creation of the Jewish state in 1948, the powerful organization risks opening up a troublesome can of worms for its favorite beneficiary.

Going after private companies that profited from Nazi atrocities is one thing, but taking on sovereign powers is quite another, especially when any legal battles the WJC manages to win will also serve to set firm precedents making the Jewish state liable for gargantuan claims stemming from its own predations against the Palestinians.

Each and every Palestinian on the planet will then have a detailed map to follow toward obtaining similar judgments against the Israeli government for a ruthless policy of confiscation that continues to this day as will any number of Lebanese, Jordanians, and Syrians.

Given the high price of land in some parts of Israel and the occupied territories today, the WJC may be about to quaff from a poisoned chalice.
A poisoned chalice

A property whose value stood in mere hundreds of dollars when it was stolen in 1948 for example, might now be worth millions. Countering such claims might prove problematic for those who have helped to establish the very legal framework under which they will be made.

But even if most of the eventual legal claims against Israel were rejected outright - a likely scenario given the fact there is no shortage of Jewish lawyers in America willing to do free legal work for their cousins in the Middle East - many others would be certain to succeed.

This would undo the work of many years spent crafting, polishing and selling an image of Jews as eternal and global victims deserving of Western support despite the Israel's decidedly un-Western approach to such things as due process, human rights and genuine diplomacy. The impact of the political losses incurred in such a process would far outweigh whatever financial burden it imposed.

A familiar saying warns that "those who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones." The WJC can ignore this advice, but only at Israel's peril.

DS: 24/06/99
News at a Glance

Last updated Wednesday, June 23, 5:06 PM ET

• Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak asked his coalition partners on Wednesday not to travel abroad this weekend. The request, signalling that the negotiations are nearing their conclusion, came amid word that he will announce his government early next week. (For more on the aftermath of the Israeli elections, click here.)

• U.S. federal investigators announced Wednesday that they have recovered a large amount of "high-quality evidence" in last Friday's arson attacks on three synagogues in the Sacramento area. "We are all optimistic that this investigation will be done quickly and we will identify those responsible and bring them to justice," said James Maddock, the FBI special agent in charge in Sacramento. In a related development, California Gov. Gray Davis, after inspecting the arson sites, promised state financial support to erect a museum of tolerance in the state capital.

• A rabbi believed to be the last Jew living in Afghanistan is reportedly safe at home after being jailed for 45 days by the country's Taliban rulers. Yitzhak Levi said Tuesday he was turned in to the authorities by a Jewish man from the former Soviet republic of Tajikistan, Aaron Simantov, after Levi accused him of trying to steal a Torah scroll. Released earlier this month after he was accused by Simantov of practicing magic, Levi said he would remain in Afghanistan despite offers from Jewish groups around the world to fly him out.

• The World Bank reportedly put on hold preparations to provide $200 million in loans to Iran to protest Tehran's arrest of 13 Jews on espionage charges. World Bank officials postponed indefinitely a trip to Tehran to discuss the loans for sewer and health care projects, the Washington Post reported Wednesday, citing unidentified bank officials. Last year the World Bank approved some $720 million in loans to Iran.

• The leaders of Israel and Syria made favorable
• Some 150 Zionist Organization of America activists lobbied Congress on Wednesday against aid to the Palestinians and in favor of moving the U.S. Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem during the group’s first-ever Washington lobbying conference. The group also planned to lobby members of Congress to oppose humanitarian aid to Iran until 13 Jews arrested on espionage charges are freed.

• An international commission on Holocaust-era insurance policies is meeting in Jerusalem in an effort to resolve claims that could total billions of dollars. The commission, headed by former U.S. Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger, includes Israeli and Jewish organizations, insurance regulators from the United States and Europe, and the insurers against whom the claims are being made.

• California’s state insurance commissioner said Tuesday he is launching a probe of the U.S. subsidiaries of two Swiss and two German insurers to determine whether they paid claims of Holocaust survivors. The insurance firms are Germany’s Gerling Konzern and Munich Re, and the Swiss companies Swiss Re and Basler Lebens-Versicherungs-Gesellschaft. Commissioner Chuck Quackenbush also said he had initiated an administrative hearing on Munich Re’s California-based subsidiary, which is the first step toward revoking the company’s right to do business in the state.

• A Dutch insurance firm said Wednesday it had found unclaimed insurance policies belonging to Jewish victims of the Holocaust. The policies taken out with the Reaal company had a total value of some $47,000 in 1943, but the company gave no current value. Raal officials said they have asked the Dutch Jewish community for assistance in finding the rightful claimants.

• Palestinian officials attended a conference Tuesday in the West Bank town of Ramallah to discuss the challenges posed by their hoped-for state. Participants agreed that the current self-rule government lacks basic democratic norms and institutions.

• A record label’s denial that a song by the rap group Public Enemy is anti-Semitic is “completely unacceptable,” the Anti-Defamation League said Tuesday. The denial came after the ADL wrote to Atomic
Pop Records complaining that the song "Swindler’s Lust" contains "classic anti-Semitic code words and seems to blame Jews for the plight of financially underprivileged blacks."

- A historian specializing in the role ordinary Germans played in the Holocaust received one of 32 "genius grants" announced Tuesday by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Saul Friedlander, who published this year "Nazi Germany and the Jews, Volume One: Years of Persecution, 1933-1939," received $375,000, spread over five years, from the foundation. Friedlander, a professor of history at the University of California at Los Angeles, said he would use the grant to write the second volume of his study.

- Talk-show host Roseanne inaugurated the Jerusalem branch of a Los Angeles Jewish mysticism school where she studies Kabbalah. During a tour of Jerusalem on Tuesday, Roseanne, whose interest in the Kabbalah is well known, momentarily cried. When asked to explain her tears, she responded, "Because for 46 years, I’ve said, ‘Next year in Jerusalem.’"

- Undersea explorers found off the coast of Israel what they described Wednesday as the oldest known deep-water wrecks. The explorers, who found a pair of Phoenician cargo ships they said were more than 2,500 years old, used the same underwater tracking equipment that was used to locate the Titanic.

- An evangelical Christian group is setting up a camera trained on the eastern gate of Jerusalem’s Old City to capture what it hopes will be the Christian Messiah’s entrance into the city. The "Messiah-cam" established by Daystar International Ministry, which has offices in the United States and England, hopes to broadcast the Second Coming of Jesus at the beginning of the next millennium over its Web site.

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Holocaust survivors sue Poland over seized properties

By BETH GARDINER
The Associated Press
06/24/99 4:07 AM Eastern

NEW YORK (AP) -- Sruel Eizik Weller fled Poland just before the Germans invaded in 1939, leaving his wife and two young children behind but hoping to pay their way soon.

He made it to Brazil but couldn't save his family -- he learned years later that they died in Treblinka, a Nazi death camp, three among three million Polish Jews who perished in the Holocaust.

"His life went from tragedy to tragedy after that, because he was never able to overcome the loss of this beautiful family that he had before the war," said his son Judah Weller, born after the war, when Weller started a new life in America. "It haunted him and it haunted us for many, many years."

Sruel Eizik Weller died in 1973, but his American son is still seeking justice on his behalf.

Judah Weller, of Far Rockaway, is a plaintiff in a federal lawsuit that seeks to force Poland to return property that once belonged to Polish Jews, who numbered 3.5 million in 1939 and 500,000 when the war ended. The lawsuit accuses the Polish government and treasury of illegally seizing -- and sometimes selling -- Jewish properties after the war.

Lawyers filed the class-action suit in federal district court in Brooklyn Friday, on behalf of 11 plaintiffs who they believe represent tens of thousands of people whose property was illegally seized. Several of the plaintiffs, Holocaust survivors and their heirs, spoke publicly on Wednesday.

Judah Weller said the Polish government told his father that his first wife had sold the family's Polish business and property -- including an optical
shop, a factory, and their home -- in 1950, even though she died in 1942.

"Obviously, we feel that fraud was just another injustice against the family," Judah Weller said. "Our family would like to get our property back and to get back what my father tried to get back, that was rightfully his, throughout his whole life."

The lawsuit said individual Poles and the Polish government used violence, threats, torture and intimidation to prevent returning Jews from reclaiming their property and businesses after the war. Other surviving Jews, fearing anti-Semitic violence in their homeland, never returned. Their property, and that of victims who died, was seized.

For decades under communist rule, property records were inaccessible and claims were rebuffed, said Mel Urbach, a lawyer in the case. But with a democratic government now in charge, the time has come for 50-year-old claims to be honored, he said.

While survivors’ greatest losses can never be compensated, some are still angry about the financial gains other people reaped from their suffering, Urbach said.

"What about my house on 45 Targowa Street in Warsaw?" one survivor asked, according to Urbach. "The building is still there. ... What about my hotel in Lodz, that my grandfather struggled and worked and gave to my mother as a wedding present?"

A call to Jaroslaw Kurek, a spokesman for the Polish embassy in Washington, was not immediately returned Wednesday. He said last week that it was too early to comment on the case.

Returning property that was seized more than 50 years ago, and which may have changed hands several times since then, could prove complicated. The economically strapped Polish government is already working on a restitution plan to compensate Poles whose property was seized by communists. Officials expect those claims to total $37 billion, the size of Poland’s annual government budget.

Edward Klein, a lawyer on the suit, said the plaintiffs want their property back, but if it cannot be returned some might eventually agree to a cash settlement.

Urbach could not yet estimate how much property Poland seized from Holocaust victims and survivors or what the value might be of property sought by plaintiffs in his suit. Individuals who took property may also be added as defendants.

Urbach said tens of thousands of people might have claims, and the lawsuit could be expanded to include non-Jewish Holocaust victims.
June 23, 1999

Holocaust victims press Poland to return assets

NEW YORK (Reuters) - U.S. lawyers called on the Polish government Wednesday to start returning to Holocaust victims assets looted by the Nazis, saying such action would show that Poland was not shirking its responsibility.

"I would support that as a goodwill gesture," Mel Urbach, a New York attorney, told a news conference.

Urbach represents plaintiffs who have sued the Polish government and its Treasury, which they accuse of still holding about one-third of the Jewish assets the Nazis seized.

Poland's minister consular in Washington, Boguslaw Majewski, declined to comment on Urbach's appeal, saying his government had not yet seen a copy of the suit. The U.S. plaintiff attorneys said a copy would be given to Warsaw soon.

Theo Garb, a Holocaust survivor who said his father was known as "the Herring King of Europe," is seeking the return of his family's apartment building in Warsaw. "All I'm asking for is that I think justice should be done," he said at the news conference.

Interim payments are being considered in other lawsuits brought by Holocaust victims, who claim Europe's financial institutions blocked them from withdrawing a wide range of assets -- from gold to businesses -- after the Second World War. If it takes too long to reach a settlement, some elderly Holocaust survivors might not live to see it.

In Poland, the process of restoring Jewish assets to their prewar owners should begin with assets the Treasury now holds, as an interim step, Urbach said.

"Obviously, there is some flexibility on that," he added.

Such restoration could prove difficult. Many of the assets the Nazis looted are being used by the government or private individuals, who might resist attempts to regain them.

About 90 percent of Poland's 3.2 million Jews died in the Holocaust, the lawyers said.

One-third of the Jewish assets that were seized in Poland were given to local townships, often free of charge, the lawyers said. The remaining one-third is in private hands, they said.

How big a potential liability the Polish government might face is not yet clear because all the research has not been done. Still, the plaintiff attorneys said they believed a large number of properties would have to be returned to tens of thousands of Holocaust survivors.

Unlike huge class-action suits filed against German companies, the latest Holocaust
lawsuit, filed in federal court in Brooklyn last week, does not name companies. But the suit could be expanded to include them if research showed they had assets that were plundered by the Nazis from Jewish owners, the lawyers said. Noting that they had received calls from Holocaust survivors who were not Jewish, the lawyers said they might also expand the suit to include these victims. The U.S. lawyers did not reject the creation of a new compensation fund like one 16 German companies are setting up. In return for paying compensation, the companies want a guarantee they will not be liable for any future claims.
JERUSALEM (AP) — Insurance companies negotiating a settlement for Holocaust-era claims met here Wednesday after U.S. negotiators warned them they would "unleash" demonstrations by Holocaust survivors if the insurers rejected the emotionally charged venue.

The five insurers from Germany, Italy, France and Switzerland, are members of an international commission establishing procedures on how to identify and pay claims on insurance policies issued to Jews who perished in the Holocaust.

The commission, headed by former U.S. Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger and including regulators, representatives of claimants and Jewish organizations, is deadlocked on how to compensate claimants from eastern European countries, where insurers' assets were nationalized after the war.

A negotiator for one of the insurers, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the companies initially rejected Jerusalem as a negotiating venue. He said the companies were concerned they would come under pressure during this current difficult phase of negotiations.

Israel is home to more than 300,000 survivors and was founded as a haven for Jews after the Holocaust. The commission had previously met in European capitals and in the United States.

A negotiator close to U.S. insurance regulators confirmed that the insurers initially rejected Jerusalem as a venue. The negotiator, who also spoke anonymously, said U.S. negotiators promised to "unleash outrage" if the insurers rejected Jerusalem. That meant demonstrations by Holocaust survivors, he explained.

The insurers withdrew their objection.

Leading the commission members on a tour Wednesday of Israel's Holocaust memorial, Yad Vashem, Eagleburger reminded them: "We are here to ... honor 6 million Jewish victims and agree to handle one small part of the total problem to make up for what happened."
The Nazis and their collaborators murdered 6 million Jews during the 1939-45 German occupation of parts of Europe. In the years following, insurers demanded death certificates before paying claimants — a demand that was impossible to fulfill.

In May, the insurers agreed to pay out policies that meet a slightly lower standard of proof. The claimants must show policies, but are not required to show cause of death.

The five European insurance companies belonging to the commission are Assicurazioni Generali of Italy, Allianz of Germany, AXA of France, Winterthur and Zurich of Switzerland.

The main sticking point now is dealing with claims from Eastern and Central European countries where communist governments nationalized insurance company branches but refused to meet their liabilities — or paid out according to calculations that rendered the claims virtually worthless.

The insurers on the commission represent 35-40 percent of claims. An agreement would likely help them fend off claims in the courts. Other insurers opted out because they had little-to-no business in the United States and apparently did not fear legal or publicity repercussions there.
54 years overdue

Tucsonan being compensated for Nazi brutality

By Sara Hammond
The Arizona Daily Star

A Tucson man is among 235 American survivors of World War II concentration camps being compensated by the German government for their wartime suffering.

Winfield “Nick” Rosenberg spent three months in the Berga slave labor camp and nearly four weeks on a “death march” in 1945 after being captured during the Battle of the Bulge.

Rosenberg has waited more than 50 years for acknowledgement that he and others were victims of the Nazi regime.

This week, the U.S. State Department announced that Germany has agreed to provide $18 million in compensation to U.S. citizens held in recognized concentration camps.

Rosenberg, 78, said Tuesday that he had not received any notification of the settlement.

“It’s wonderful, if I get anything,” he said.

“So far, I haven’t heard anything. I don’t know how much I will get,”
he said.

The State Department said payments average about $76,000 per victim, but the amount each will receive depends on the length of confinement.

"It will never make up for the suffering, what I went through," Rosenberg said.

William Marks, a Washington, D.C., attorney who represented Rosenberg and several dozen others before the Justice Department’s Foreign Claims Settlement Commission, said he is sending documents to the victims this week, and payments could be made in four to eight weeks.

Marks also represented Hugo Princz, whose successful claim against Germany in 1995 paved the way for the latest settlement. Princz and 10 other Americans split $2.1 million from the German government, and that case prompted a fresh government review.

"It’s quite significant that after 50 years these men and women who survived in most cases unspeakable brutalities get what is rightfully theirs, compensation for their suffering," Marks said.

"It is tangible acknowledgement from Germany that they committed wrongs against them," he said.

"It is long overdue."

Marks said that given Rosenberg’s physical suffering - his legs, feet and back were badly damaged from the cold and hours of standing and walking - "it doesn’t come close to compensating him," Marks said.

"We feel that people should be compensated for injustices suffered under the Nazi regime," a State Department official said yesterday.

The spokeswoman said addressing the human and non-human sides of the Holocaust - including property seized during the war - has been a priority for the Clinton administration.

Marks said the 350 American prisoners taken to the Berga camp in 1945 were "truly the forgotten victims" because the U.S. government refused for decades to acknowledge that the camp even existed.

Rosenberg’s story was part of a three-day series run in The Arizona Daily Star in December 1994, marking the 50th anniversary of the Battle of the Bulge.
Rosenberg and 349 other mostly Jewish American soldiers were taken from Stalag 9B at Bad Orb, put on a train for five days and then led to barns near Berga, where Adolf Hitler was building underground mines.

After arriving at Berga, the men walked two miles to the mines and were forced to remove rocks from the dynamited shafts, even as they got weaker and weaker from cold and the lack of food.

Rosenberg said as Allied forces moved east across Germany, many of the prisoners from the hard-labor camp spent more than three weeks on a “death march” until they were liberated in April 1945.
Bad reputation?

Swiss feeling 'almost European' after 2006 sunb

GENEVA (AP) -- In a national bout of soul-searching following the unexpected loss of the 2006 Winter Olympics, Switzerland has concluded that it is isolated and unloved as never before.

The weekend decision by the International Olympic Committee to award the 2006 Games to the Italian city of Turin rather than Swiss front-runner Sion has unleashed anger and accusations of dirty tricks in the scandal-ridden International Olympic Committee.

But it also is seen as a political rebuke for the Swiss, whose international reputation has been tarnished by allegations of wartime collusion with the Nazis. There is a growing realization that the small Alpine nation -- which champions its neutrality and is a member of neither the United Nations nor European Union must change its ways.

"I never even dreamed that we had such a bad reputation," Sports Minister Adolf Ogi told the *Le Temps* newspaper in an interview published Tuesday. "We have a strong economic presence worldwide, but politically we are alone."

"I heard delegates say they wanted the Swiss to lose. People don't like Switzerland."

The issue of neutral Switzerland's World War II role and its treatment of Holocaust victims' assets has led to frayed relations with the United States and other countries. Jewish groups have accused it of profiting from the Holocaust, by retaining the assets of Jews slain by the Nazis and acting as Adolf Hitler's banker, trafficking in gold stolen by the
Nazis.

Last August, after much foot-dragging, Switzerland's two biggest banks agreed to pay SFr 1.25 billion in an out-of-court settlement of Holocaust survivors' claims for wartime losses.

Like most commentators, Ogi said the overwhelming 53-36 vote in favor of Turin was principally a backlash against Swiss IOC member Marc Hodler. It was Hodler who blew the whistle on wrong-doing by Salt Lake City and forced the Swiss-headquartered Olympic movement into an anti-corruption drive which forced out nine members and cost the rest their privileges.

"But it also has to do with our attitude," Ogi conceded.

Numerous IOC members and other Olympic officials have said the loss was as much because the Swiss were perceived as arrogant and overconfident.

"We claim to be the best. We play at being school masters and teaching others lessons. We overestimate ourselves," said Ogi, who also is the Swiss vice president.

Despite initial concern about costs and the environment, Switzerland's Olympic bid was remarkable because of the popular enthusiasm and financial sponsorship it gathered in this traditionally cautious country. The red-and-white Sion logo was emblazoned over trains, buses, bottles of wine, chocolate and even toilet paper.

An IOC evaluation commission earlier this year gave Sion a much better rating than Turin or other rivals. After losing out to Salt Lake City for the 2002 Games, the Swiss brimmed with confidence and planned a huge party in Sion's main square to celebrate.

There were hopes the Games would create up to 15,000 new jobs and revitalize the tourist industry in the southern Valais Alps. The Games were also seen as a vital chance of repairing the public relations damage inflicted by the Holocaust controversy. The mass influx of visitors also was expected to make Switzerland more open to the outside world.

Even though the nation is geographically in the heart of Europe, voters in 1992 rejected government plans to join a lose trade pact, putting a formal membership application for the European Union on indefinite hold.

After tortuous negotiations, Swiss ministers signed an agreement Monday for freer trade in sectors like agriculture, transport, labor and research. But diehard defenders of Swiss neutrality have indicated they
will try to drum up enough support to hold a national referendum to throw out the accords.

"Now we are almost European," was the headline comment in the mass-selling Blick newspaper Tuesday.

But the paper topped its front page with a survey on "Why the world doesn't love us" in which its foreign correspondents canvassed foreign opinions about the Swiss.

From Italy came the view that the Swiss are racist; from France came the notion that all Swiss were "stinking rich."

The British criticized the Swiss for being boring and obsessively tidy. Israelis found them anti-Semitic and "a good sleeping pill."

Americans said Switzerland was a "sterile picture postcard" inhabited by colorless people always looking for their own advantage.

"We are pedantic and humorless. We are greedy profiteers. We are arrogant. We are bad losers," summarized Blick.

"That's how the world sees us."

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German parliament faces historic vote on Holocaust memorial

By ANNE THOMPSON

BERLIN (June 24, 1999 2:18 p.m. EDT) - Hoping to resolve a debate that has divided Germany for nearly a decade, parliament will vote Friday whether to build a national Holocaust memorial in Berlin and - if the decision is yes, as it most likely will be - choose between two designs.

The project's controversy stems from the sensitive question of how Germany should best acknowledge its Nazi past as the government returns to Berlin, the staging ground for Hitler's crimes.

"This will be the most significant day in the history of the German republic," sociologist Helmut Dubiel, author of a book about the Holocaust memorial debate, wrote in a recent essay about Friday's vote.

"Never in the past 50 years of the Bundestag has there been a decision of comparable symbolic weight expressing the chastened self-image of the Germans."

At the same time, moving Germany beyond that "chastened self-image" has been a hallmark of Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder's new government, now in its ninth month.

Significantly, the Holocaust memorial vote comes just weeks after lawmakers made another symbolic decision: sending Tornado jets to join NATO's bombing campaign in Yugoslavia, Germany's first combat mission since World War II and a sign of its growing confidence.

During a debate expected to last most of Friday, the Bundestag, or lower house of parliament, first will decide whether there should be a Holocaust memorial at all. Next comes the trickier and more contentious question of whom the memorial should remember.

Project organizers - a group of private citizens and representatives of the Berlin and federal governments - envisioned a memorial "to the murdered Jews of Europe." But critics, including Schroeder, want to include other innocent Nazi victims such as homosexuals and Gypsies.

Choosing a design, however, will be the major step toward bringing the $8 million project closer to construction on its designated site, a plot about the size of two football fields in the heart of Berlin near historic Brandenburg Gate.
The favorite, by New York architect Peter Eisenman, is a field of about 2,700 concrete pillars spaced less than a yard apart. From a distance it resembles a cemetery. A multimedia Holocaust research center will be at the site, partly underground.

The other design under consideration was proposed just last year by theologian Richard Schroeder, a state judge and one of the founders of the Social Democratic party in the former East Germany. His idea: a pillar inscribed with the Fifth Commandment, "Thou Shalt Not Kill," in several languages including Hebrew.

Fans of this design call it less bombastic than Eisenman's and less of an invitation to neo-Nazis and other graffiti vandals. Critics in the local press have derided the pillar as simplistic and a "scolding finger."

And then there's the mayor of Berlin, Eberhard Diepgen, who thinks the site is wrong. He fears the memorial will turn Berlin into a "city of mourning," a view he'll present Friday to the Bundestag.

In the end, Diepgen may not have much of a say, as parliament also is considering appointing a large foundation to take over management of the project. It would include Jewish leaders, intellectuals, representatives of Holocaust victims groups, curators of concentration camp museums, and others.

After the years of arguing - the numerous newspaper editorials, the designs chosen and then abandoned - cultural critic Michael Cullen is skeptical that Friday's vote will be decisive.

Cullen, who also has written a book on the Holocaust debate, says unless the Bundestag sets a deadline and appoints a small committee to meet it, the project will just drag on.

"They've got to name names and pick a date," he said. "Otherwise they'll wind up repeating this whole process in a year's time, and saying 'How did we get here?""
Insurers told to settle Holocaust claims by July 31

By Judy Dempsey in Jerusalem

European insurance companies must settle all outstanding issues for compensating families of Holocaust victims by the end of July or risk finding a decision imposed upon them, the head of the committee trying to secure a deal warned yesterday.

Lawrence Eagleburger, chairman of the International Commission of Holocaust Era Insurance Claims, made his demand to five companies at a two-day meeting of the commission in Jerusalem.

The meeting had become acrimonious due to disagreements over how to value claims of policy holders – a disappointment for all sides who originally had hoped the Jerusalem meeting would provide a symbolic agreement.

Instead, negotiators also faced disagreement over how to establish criteria of eligibility for compensation and over publicising the names of former policy holders.

Mr Eagleburger, a former US secretary of state, told the closed meeting he wanted a proper negotiating process set up by July 22 when the commission reconvenes in Washington. Payments for claims should begin by the end of next month. If not, he could be forced to impose decisions on the insurers.

The commission was set up late last year to try to reach a global settlement of unpaid Holocaust-era insurance claims. It includes representatives of European insurers, US and European insurance regulators, and of Holocaust victims.

Mr Eagleburger's warning came after the five insurers which have agreed to be bound by the commission's decisions – Generali of Italy, Allianz of Germany, Axa of France and Winterthur and Zurich of Switzerland – rejected attempts by Israel and other commission members to compensate eastern European Holocaust-era policy holders at today's "real" value.
Holocaust Survivors Get Access To 1938 Records, Says Fla. Dept. Of Insurance

TALLAHASSEE, Fla., June 24 /PRNewswire/ -- An insurer under scrutiny for unpaid Holocaust-era life insurance claims has given officials a list of 100,000 policies it had in force back in 1938, Florida Treasurer and Insurance Commissioner Bill Nelson said today.

The action by Assicurazioni Generali culminated earlier today in Jerusalem at a meeting of the International Commission on Holocaust Era Insurance Claims, said Nelson, who is one of three state insurance regulators on the 12-member panel.

Former U.S. Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger is chairman of the panel, which also includes representatives of the State of Israel, the World Jewish Restitution Organization and the European insurance companies. The commission was formed in 1998 to help recover insurance claims of Holocaust survivors and their heirs.

"This is the first, big crack in the wall of resistance by companies so far unwilling to publish their Holocaust-era policyholder lists," said Nelson. "It's going to give us and the survivors access to company lists so we can determine whose life-insurance benefits were paid, and whose were not."

Four other European insurers have not yet turned over similar policyholder lists, but are expected in the wake of Generali's decision to follow suit by the time the international commission meets again July 21 in Washington D.C., according to Nelson.

"As a first step toward full disclosure, this is a good sign," said Sam Dubbin, a representative of the South Florida Holocaust Survivors Club. "The more disclosure the better. The earlier the better."

Also in July, the commission will initiate the process under which the insurance companies will begin paying outstanding claims, said Karen Asher-Cohen, a Florida Department of Insurance attorney who was Nelson's designee at the Jerusalem meeting.

Officials estimate there could be more than 100,000 such claims.

To date, the Florida Department of Insurance has received more than 500 inquiries from Holocaust survivors living here, many of whom believe they or their relatives had life insurance policies not honored by the insurance companies.

Florida, New York and California have the largest Holocaust survivor populations in the country. Nelson and the state insurance regulators from those two other states were selected last August to serve on the commission created to settle outstanding claims.

The appointments followed successful efforts by Nelson and the other regulators to win commitments from five leading European insurers to open their records and cooperate with the new commission in settling claims.

SOURCE Florida Department of Insurance
Lithuania's poor record of prosecuting suspected Nazi war criminals proves that the country has turned into a haven for Nazi collaborators, Israel's ambassador to Lithuania said in a speech this week. Oded Ben Hur also said that Lithuania, as well as Latvia and Estonia, would find it difficult to integrate into the new Europe if they fail to cope with their wartime past and publicly acknowledge their roles in the Holocaust.

A former Croatian concentration camp commander on trial for war crimes said the Nazi puppet regime he served had harmed no one. Dinko Sakic's comments Thursday, made at the start of his defense, came despite reports that up to 85,000 Jews, Serbs and Gypsies may have perished in the Jasenovac camp while he headed it in 1944.

Two British judges are disputing the length of time a convicted war criminal should spend in jail. Anthony Sawoniuk, 78, was sentenced to life last April after he was found guilty of having killed Jews as a member of the pro-Nazi local police force, which was created in Belarus after the German invasion of the country in 1941. One judge wants Sawoniuk to spend the rest of his life in jail, while another is arguing that he should be allowed at least some hope of release.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak met with Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat to coordinate their positions on the peace process. Thursday's meeting came two days before Mubarak was to fly to the United States. He is expected to confer with President Clinton next Thursday.

An envoy of Syrian President Hafez Assad asked Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien this week to consider sending additional peacekeeping troops to the Golan Heights should Israel and Syria reach an agreement about the disputed territory. Chretien indicated that he would not contemplate sending in more troops at least
until Israel and Syria resume peace talks.

- A jury in Virginia convicted a Ku Klux Klan leader of cross-burning on Wednesday and fined him $2,500. Barry Black, a KKK imperial wizard, had faced up to five years in prison for violating a state law against burning a cross to intimidate any person or group of people. His black lawyer, David Baugh of the American Civil Liberties Union, had claimed that his client was exercising his right to free speech.

- A French court ruled in favor of an American writer who had suggested that a French Jewish art dealer collaborated with the Nazis. A panel of three judges said this week that Hector Feliciano, accused of slandering the late Georges Wildenstein in his 1997 book "The Lost Museum," had documents showing the art dealer "had direct and indirect relations with German authorities during the Occupation."

- An anonymous telephone bidder paid $937,500 for a 16th-century Jewish prayer book during an auction at Christie’s in New York on Wednesday. The book, part of a 148-item collection from the London Beit Din, sold well above the auction house’s pre-sale estimate of between $300,000 and $500,000.

- The Jewish Agency for Israel formally installed new officers during its closing session. Sallai Meridor officially took over the chairmanship from newly elected legislator Avraham Burg, and Alex Grass of Harrisburg, Pa., succeeded Charles "Corky" Goodman of Chicago as chairman of the agency’s Board of Governors. On Wednesday, the agency’s 300-member delegate assembly also approved in principle a strategic plan to broaden its work in Jewish identity, Jewish unity and Israel-Diaspora relations, in addition to its traditional role of being responsible for immigration and absorption in Israel.

- Archeologists this week discovered a 2,000-year-old factory underneath Jerusalem that made tools for the Second Temple. An archeologist was quoted by Israel Television as saying the factory, in which tables and cups were also reportedly made, was located on the edge of the Old City.

- Washington’s mayor expressed support for a proposal by Israel’s ambassador to the United States to set aside land in the nation’s capital for a monument to honor
David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister. Zalman Shoval proposed the idea for a privately funded monument on a donated plot of city land during a meeting with Mayor Anthony Williams on Wednesday.

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Holocaust Claims To Be Assessed

By RON KAMPEAS Associated Press Writer

JERUSALEM (AP) -- A commission administering Holocaust-era insurance claims will begin assessing them by the end of July, its chairman said Thursday.

The announcement came after negotiators broke a deadlock on paying for claims in eastern and central Europe.

The issue of claims in countries that became communist after World War II was the final stumbling block for the commission, which has been meeting for seven months.

Communist governments nationalized insurance company branches, but either refused to meet their liabilities or paid out according to calculations that rendered the claims virtually worthless.

The insurance companies represented on the commission had argued that those communist-era actions relieved them of further payment responsibilities.

Insurance regulators and Jewish groups disagreed, and on Thursday the companies capitulated. Claims will be paid in the real value of the dollar equivalent of the local currency at the time the policy was taken out.

The bulk of claims in those countries is held by two of the five companies on the commission -- Assicurazioni Generali of Italy and Allianz of Germany. The other three companies are AXA of France and Winterthur and Zurich of Switzerland.

More than 20 insurance companies have chosen not to participate and are more likely to face sanctions in United States courts.

The commission's chairman, former U.S. Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger, said the claims process
would begin at the July 21-22 meeting of the commission in Washington.

Several minor disputes remain.

Unlike the other companies, Generali has agreed to publish names of Jewish policyholders once it checks its list against the database of Jews who perished in the Holocaust that is administered by Yad Vashem, Israel’s Holocaust authority. The project will cost them $200,000.

Insurance regulators and Jewish groups hope the other companies do the same.

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Europe insurers could pay Holocaust claims in July

By Sofia Javed

JERUSALEM, June 24 - European insurers facing billions of dollars of claims from Holocaust survivors could begin making payments as soon as July, the head of a commission probing World War Two-era claims said on Thursday.

"The remaining issues will all be settled in the next two weeks," said former U.S. Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger, head of the International Commission of Holocaust Era Claims which met in Jerusalem this week.

Eagleburger told Reuters the commission, which includes representatives of five European insurers, had settled a number of issues in closed-door meetings on Wednesday and Thursday.

"The next meeting in July means that we will have completed all our negotiations with the companies and we are in business. We will begin then to send out claims," Eagleburger said.

Israel has urged European insurers to set up a fast-track mechanism to compensate ageing Holocaust survivors and their families who say they never collected on family policies from World War Two, pending final assessments of their claims.

The insurers, which include Generali of Italy, the largest seller of life insurance in Eastern Europe in the years before the war, agreed earlier this month to make interim payments to beneficiaries until final claims had been assessed.

The commission was established last October and charged with resolving all unpaid insurance claims of Holocaust victims.

Eagleburger declined comment on the decisions taken in this week’s talks, saying only that a statement would be forthcoming.
Outstanding issues included the value of claims, the fate of claims from countries where communist
governments nationalised insurance companies after the war and criteria for eligibility before making
final assessments.

Outstanding claims from families of Holocaust victims could run into billions of dollars. Generali
said in a statement on Tuesday that current demands were inflated.

One of the biggest obstacles to an accord appeared to have been resolved last month when the five
insurers -- Allianz of Germany, AXA of France, DBV Winterthur of Germany, which is part of the
Credit Zuisse Group, Zurich Allied of Switzerland and Generali, agreed at a meeting in London to
pay the real value of policies.

Category: European
Previous Story: FOCUS-EU seen blocking new GMOs until about 2002 (Reuters)
Next Story: FOCUS-BBC names Baywatch boss as new chief (Reuters)
The German parliament is due to vote on plans to build a monument in Berlin to the millions of people who died in the Holocaust.

Bundestag MPs will have a free vote on the issue which has divided the country's political parties.

The project has been under discussion for 10 years and is seen as marking a watershed in how Germany comes to terms with its Nazi past.

The plans have been controversial and raised questions as to what is the most appropriate way to remember the millions who died under the Nazi regime.

Former Chancellor Helmut Kohl first championed the idea of a central monument in Germany's capital.

Chancellor Gerhard Schröder has been keen to reach a decision and silence criticism over the lack of a central German monument to the genocide it perpetrated in...
Bundestag decides on Holocaust memorial

The mayor of Berlin, Eberhard Diepgen has spoken out against a large memorial fearing it will turn Berlin into a "city of mourning" - a view he will present on Friday to MPs in the Bundestag.

The fear being expressed is that the pillar design of US architect Peter Eisenman is an invitation for neo-Nazi vandalism.

It would be spread out over four football pitches and resemble a giant graveyard.

Despite these fears, correspondents say it is the more likely of the two proposals to be approved.

MPs must also decide whether to incorporate some form of Holocaust documentation centre to the memorial in keeping with Chancellor Schröder's wish for more "interactive" elements.

The view has been expressed that this will be a turning point in post-war German history.

Helmut Dubiel, author of a book about the Holocaust memorial debate has written: "Never in the past 50 years of the Bundestag has there been a decision of comparable symbolic weight expressing the chastened self-image of the Germans."

The proposed memorial to the victims of the holocaust would stand at the heart of the German capital, next to the Brandenburg Gate and within sight of the parliament's new home in the Reichstag building.

It would be almost directly above the site of Hitler's bunker during World War II.

The Bundestag debate is expected to last most of Friday. It will also consider whether to appoint a large foundation to take over management of the project.

This would include Jewish leaders, intellectuals, representatives of Holocaust victims groups and curators of concentration camp museums and could well ensure the debate on a suitable memorial continues for some time to come.
German Parliament Starts Holocaust Monument Debate

BONN (Reuters) - The German parliament began a debate Friday over a planned monument to the six million Jews killed in the Holocaust, hoping to reach a decision on a project that has been dogged by 10 years of wrangling.

A site next to Berlin’s famous Brandenburg Gate has already been chosen for the monument but politicians, German Jewish and other interest groups have so far failed to agree what form it should take.

Critics have said it is a disgrace that the country that perpetrated the Holocaust still does not have a central monument to its victims more than 50 years later.

Opening the debate, Bundestag president Wolfgang Thierse said any monument chosen must evoke a deep response from all who saw it. “A memorial must not allow people to look away or be unmoved,” he said.

The four-hour debate will be followed by a vote on whether there should be a monument at all and then a run-off between the two designs which have attracted most support.

A draft by U.S. architect Peter Eisenman envisages the monument as a maze of 2,600 concrete pillars spread over the area of four football pitches and resembling a vast graveyard.

A second plan, put forward by leading east German theologian Richard Schroeder, proposes a simple stone memorial inscribed with the words “Do not kill.”

The idea of a central monument in Germany’s capital to commemorate victims of the Holocaust was championed by former Chancellor Helmut Kohl.

But Gerhard Schroeder, whose Social Democrats defeated Kohl’s conservatives last year, is more skeptical, saying no traditional monument can convey the full suffering of the genocide.

His cultural adviser Michael Naumann has proposed complementing the Eisenman design with an “interactive” documentation center but a parliamentary committee rejected that suggestion earlier this month.
Many ordinary Germans -- and even the country's remaining Jewish population -- have tired of the debate and popular enthusiasm for the project has waned.

Berlin city authorities, who originally had a say in the design of the monument before Schroeder entrusted the decision to parliament, have warned they will not necessarily recognize the decision of the Bundestag.

Earlier Stories

- **German Holocaust Memorial Debate Nears Conclusion (June 24)**
WWII Concentration Camp Commander Says 'No Harm Was Done'

SNJEZANA VUKIC
The Associated Press

June 24, 1999

ZAGREB, Croatia -- Declaring his conscience is clear, the last known living World War II concentration camp commander claimed Thursday that "no harm was done" to the inmates of Croatia's notorious Jasenovac camp.

Dinko Sakic is charged with carrying out or allowing torture, random killings and mass executions while running the camp in 1944. He maintained he intervened to save several Jewish detainees at Jasenovac, one of more than 20 concentration camps run by the then-Nazi puppet state of Croatia.

"No one came to Jasenovac because of religion, race or political attitudes; only those who actively worked against the Croatian state," Sakic said during his first day of testimony.

Tens of thousands of Serbs, Jews, Gypsies and anti-fascist Croats perished in the camp between 1941 and 1945.

Postwar documents also revealed names and photographs of children and elderly people slain in the camp. Survivors testifying in the trial have emphasized they were imprisoned only because of their nationality, or their opposition to the fascists.

Sakic, 77, is charged with crimes against humanity in the deaths of about 2,000 inmates.

But he said the charges against him were based on files "falsified" by postwar Yugoslav authorities. He stood by his claim that
Jasenovac was a "collective labor camp."

In previous testimony, camp survivors recalled starvation, forced labor and mass killings, some of them trembling as they described details of torture and hangings.

Sakic claimed he released "many Jews" from the camp at the request from a Croatian Jew, Ivan Heinrich, who, he said, "knew that we respected the inmates and that no harm was done to them."

Sakic added that Heinrich later helped him settle in Argentina. He used the three-hour testimony mainly to portray himself as an ardent Croatian patriot.

He also emphasized that he lived in Argentina for more than 50 years under his real name, traveling often abroad without being sought by anyone.

Argentina eventually arrested him in April 1998 under pressure from Holocaust survivors outraged by his claims about what happened at Jasenovac.

"But I wanted to come before a Croatian court," he said. "Not to defend myself, because ... my conscience is clear, but only to establish the truth."

Sakic, who was extradited to Croatia last June, defended himself without being questioned either by the prosecution or the judge, as allowed under Croatian law. If convicted, he could face up to 20 years in prison.
German parliament approves plan for Holocaust memorial

By ANNE THOMPSON

BERLIN (June 25, 1999 9:03 a.m. EDT) - Germany's parliament on Friday approved the building of a national Holocaust memorial in Berlin and selected a design by a U.S. architect, a field of tombstone-like pillars.

After nearly a decade of argument and indecision over the best way for Germany to remember the 6 million Jews killed by the Nazis, the Bundestag's decision was a crucial step toward realizing the project.

The winning design, by New York architect Peter Eisenman, defeated a proposal by German theologian and politician Richard Schroeder for a pillar inscribed with "Thou Shalt Not Kill" in various languages including Hebrew. The vote was 314-209, with 14 abstentions.

Lawmakers also voted in favor of devoting the memorial specifically "to the murdered Jews of Europe," instead of including other innocent Nazi victims such as Gypsies and homosexuals.

Construction of the $8 million project is expected to begin in early 2000 on a central Berlin site about the size of two football fields near the historic Brandenburg Gate.

Eisenman's design is a field of about 2,700 concrete pillars spaced less than a yard apart. From a distance it resembles a cemetery. A multimedia Holocaust research center will also be at the site, partly underground.
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
June 30, 1999

PRESS RELEASE

Lazio: Extend the Life of the Presidential Advisory Commission on Holocaust Assets in the U.S.

Lazio Wants to Increase Budget by $2.5 Million -- "There is still much work to be done"

June 30, 1999: Assistant Majority Leader Rick Lazio [R-NY] today introduced the Holocaust Assets Commission Extension Act to extend the life of the Presidential Advisory Commission on Holocaust Assets in the United States to December 2000, and to provide an additional $2.5 million dollars -- increasing the Commission's budget from $3.5 to $6 million.

The Presidential Advisory Commission on Holocaust Assets was created last year to conduct original research into the question of what happened to the assets of victims of the Holocaust that passed into the possession or control of the United States government. The Commission also has the responsibility to review work done by others about assets that passed into non-Federal hands, and to report to the President about appropriate next steps -- administrative or legislative.

Congressman Lazio discussed the legislation at a meeting today of the Presidential Advisory Commission on Holocaust Assets in the U.S. "There are millions of pages of documents that must be reviewed, and the Commission needs the additional time and money to get to the bottom of this historical mystery," Congressman Lazio said.

"We know too much to pretend that justice has been done," Congressman Lazio said. "We know that in Europe, banks sat on dormant accounts for five decades; that insurance companies evaded their responsibilities to honor policies held by victims; that unscrupulous art dealers sold paintings that were extorted from Jews who feared for their lives; and that gold from Holocaust victims was remelted and became the basis for financial dealings between large corporate entities. Now we must look at how the United States treated the assets of the six million Jews -- and millions of others -- who perished during the Holocaust," Congressman Lazio said.

Congressman Lazio stated that the Commission's work will demonstrate to the world America's willingness to review its own past in order to bring closure to this terrible period in the world's history.

The Presidential Advisory Commission on Holocaust Assets is bipartisan. Congressman Lazio is the only Republican on the Commission. "The effort to create the Commission has been bipartisan and will remain so. Honoring the memories of the victims and the pursuit of justice in their names cannot be sullied by politics as usual," Congressman Lazio said.

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Swiss, Germans should pay Holocaust victims now-WJC

By Joan Gralla

NEW YORK, June 29 (Reuters) - Swiss banks and German firms should start compensating Holocaust victims immediately, instead of waiting until final plans are agreed, because many survivors are elderly and might not live long enough to get any benefits, lawyers and Jewish advocacy groups said on Tuesday.

"They should try to create an emergency fund," Israel Singer, Secretary General of the World Jewish Congress, said.

In the past few weeks increasing attention has been paid to the need to compensate Holocaust victims as soon as possible.

Five European insurers decided on June 10 to make interim payments before reaching a final accord that will settle charges that the insurers failed to pay out on prewar life and property policies bought by Holocaust victims.

Singer spoke to reporters after a news conference that covered how 400,000 Holocaust survivors will be told about a $1.25 billion Swiss bank fund and how they can apply for a share. Switzerland's top banks last year set up the fund to resolve claims that they prevented Holocaust survivors from withdrawing their bank accounts and other assets.

Swiss banks should immediately pay out 10 percent of the $1.25 billion fund that they created last year, Singer said.

In return for paying compensation, European financial and industrial firms accused of making money from Nazi war crimes want to be shielded from any future claims.

Germany's banks and industrial firms, which are trying to settle a wide range of charges-- from looting Jewish assets to using slave labor -- also should begin making immediate payments, though their plans for a compensation fund still are in the early stages, Singer said.
A New York lawyer, Mel Weiss, agreed: "If the defendants want to make progress...they can start making payments immediately. They don't have to wait for legal closure."

The Swiss accord is much closer to being finalized. But the out-of-court settlement reached last year still must be approved by the U.S. federal judge who presided over the class-action suits that were filed against Swiss banks.

The campaign to notify Holocaust victims about the Swiss fund covers 108 countries and 29 different languages.

But that campaign will cost $20 million, and this expense, as well as concerns about the amount of time it takes to finalize a pact once a class-action suit is involved, could encourage lawyers and restitution groups to find a different solution for pending cases against French or German banks.

There are other dangers confronting the Swiss fund, including the risk that it will be rejected by Holocaust survivors. "Any appeal could tie up these funds for a long period of time," Weiss said.

Alice Fischer, who was deported from a Hungarian ghetto to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, said she supported the Swiss settlement.

But Fischer disagreed with plans to include slave laborers, whose work helped Swiss entities, and refugees who were turned away at Switzerland's borders, saying that while those people suffered, the focus should be on those whose assets were looted by Swiss banks.

Related News Categories: politics, US Market News
Holocaust Fund Payment Plan Revealed

By VERENA DOBNIK
Associated Press Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Starting this week, Holocaust survivors in 40 countries can look in the newspaper to find out how to get a piece of a $1.25 billion settlement with Swiss banks.

The full-page ads in 500 newspapers around the world were designed to notify hundreds of thousands of potential beneficiaries — survivors and victims alike — of the existence of the fund, which was established last year.

The media campaign, announced Tuesday, has drawn its share of criticism.

"What you have here is everybody jumping on the bandwagon!" complained Alice Fischer, 71, who after two decades has not recovered her family's assets.

The ad includes a clip-out form to be mailed to a California address. The campaign to distribute the funds will be carried out in 29 languages.

The money covers Jews and other Holocaust victims who deposited assets in Switzerland during the Nazi era and never got them back, as well as those whose belongings were plundered by the Nazis and apparently wound up in Switzerland, a wartime depository for gold and other treasures.

Hundreds of thousands of Holocaust survivors around the world, plus their relatives, are potential beneficiaries, according to Elan Steinberg, executive director of the World Jewish Congress.

In addition to the newspaper ads appearing this week, Jewish organizations will send out claims packages to as many as 400,000 survivors.

Exactly who gets the money — and how much — won't be clear until after all applications are submitted by Oct. 22. Then the settlement must be formally approved in a New York federal court on Nov. 29. And finally, a "special master" will draft a plan on how to pay out the money.

Payouts should begin by the end of the year 2000, Steinberg said.

Some think the definition of who will get compensation is too narrow. Others see it as too broad.
Mel Weiss, an attorney in the class-action suit that led to the creation of the compensation fund, said: "There is no such thing as a simple, fair plan. None of us can play God in this situation."

The fund was established in a deal with two Swiss banks, Credit Suisse and UBS AG.

Holocaust victims deposited money in Swiss banks as the Nazis gained power in Europe, expecting to retrieve it later. But after the war, the banks stonewalled, claiming they could not find accounts or requesting nonexistent death certificates of victims killed in Nazi camps.

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around Pristina. The KLA has 30 days in which to turn in its guns. From now on, KLA members are not allowed to wear uniform or carry weapons outside assembly areas.

An emergency decree was meanwhile issued by the UN interim administration to establish courts for the trial and sentencing of more than 30 people held by Kfor troops for crimes such as looting and arson in the past 8 days.

**Holocaust publicity campaign unveiled**

Lawyers working for Holocaust victims yesterday unveiled a $20m publicity campaign to reach all the people who might be entitled to a share of last year’s $1.25bn settlement from the two largest Swiss banks.

The lawsuit started after complaints from survivors whose accounts had been allowed to remain dormant after the war. The class of potential claimants is defined broadly, to include all groups persecuted by the Nazis, including Jews, Romanies, Jehovah’s Witnesses, homosexuals, and the physically and mentally handicapped.

Funds are available to those who had assets in Swiss banks, people who had property stolen which might have been taken by Swiss banks, people who performed slave labour for companies which banked the profits in Switzerland, and refugees who were refused entry to Switzerland during the war.

The campaign, sanctioned by the US courts, will cover 108 countries, and include advertising in 27 languages. No final system for adjudicating claims and dividing funds has yet been fixed.

Alice Fischer, a former concentration camp inmate and one of the leading plaintiffs in the legal action, said:

"There are two important factors we have to determine here. Who are the Holocaust survivors really? And for whom did the Swiss pay this money?"

"All of those who are jumping on the bandwagon were not here when the Swiss decided to pay this money," she said.

"The gypsies and the homosexuals – these people are not the impoverished Holocaust survivors which I know today."


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ote. But the result was constant tension within the coalition, particularly with the SPD’s leftwing.

In contrast, Mr Steinmeier, is – as he puts it – “a part of early warning system” for Mr Schröder. He has worked largely behind the scenes since last September’s election.

Mr Steinmeier’s appointment would further strengthen the pragmatic wing in the cabinet, allowing the resignation in arch of the leftwing Oskar Fontaine as finance minister and chairman of the ruling Social Democratic party.

With the end of Germany’s presidency of the European Union and the government’s move to Berlin underway, Schröder has a chance to start a fresh start on domestic issues. As a “trouble shooter”, Mr Steinmeier could be in demand.

There are a host of initiatives still to be pushed through: Saarland, Mr Fontaine’s home state, yesterday it may be in the Bundesrat, or second chamber of parliament representing the states, against the government’s plans to curb pension increases for the next two years.
Giant Berlin memorial to Holocaust victims agreed

By Ralph Atkins in Bonn

Berlin should have a giant memorial to Jewish victims of the Holocaust at its centre, the German parliament agreed yesterday.

The decision comes as the city, in the process of rebuilding, is on the brink of becoming a fully working capital again, with government ministers moving from Bonn from Monday.

Members of parliament backed plans by Peter Eisenman, a New York architect, for a field of 2,700 stone pillars, some as tall as a person, representing a Jewish graveyard. The decision - by 314 votes to 209 - comes after more than 50 years of agonised debate about how Germany should mark its Nazi past.

The memorial would immortalise the bleakest chapter of German history on a site the size of two football pitches near Berlin's Brandenburg Gate. MPs, including many born after the second world war, insisted a line should never be drawn under history.

"Nowhere is such a memorial so necessary as in Berlin, where this year the Bundestag [parliament] is starting to take up its work," argued Eckart von Klaeden, 33, an MP from the opposition Christian Democratic Union.

Since the idea of a memorial to the 6m Jews murdered by the Nazis was floated in 1989, politicians, historians and groups representing victims have argued about the aesthetic and political issues raised.

Eberhard Diepgen, Berlin's governing mayor, fought against turning the new capital into "the capital of remorse". An early design for a massive gravestone was rejected by Helmut Kohl, the former chancellor, as overwhelming - merely to trigger a debate on whether the enormity of Nazi crimes required a memorial of enormous proportions. The final Eisenman design has been reduced from its original size.

Mr Diepgen again criticised its scale, however, warning of the danger of vandalism by modern neo-Nazi extremists. But Mr von Klaeden countered: "The memorial that has to be built in Berlin has to be so accessible and so provocative that damage and defacement could not possibly be ruled out." Mr Diepgen backed a scheme proposed by Richard Schröder, the Social Democrat politician and theologian, for plaque with "You shall not murder" in different languages.

Memorials have to be understandable... People in 20 years have to know what it is about he said.

The Eisenman plan could still be amended, but Michael Naumann, federal culture minister, hoped construction could start next year.
Nazi Victims Given Details On Compensation Claims

By ELIZABETH OLSON

GENEVA, June 29 — A campaign began today to inform victims of Nazi persecution how to claim compensation from a $1.25 billion fund set up by two Swiss banks.

People can apply even if they or their relatives never had a Swiss account. A full-page advertisement ordered by a United States court is being published in 500 newspapers and magazines in 40 countries.

Toll-free numbers and a Web site in seven languages, including Yiddish, have been set up, said the World Jewish Congress, which with a panel of lawyers oversees the effort. The eligible victims or targets include Jews, Gypsies, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals and the handicapped.

The ad has a coupon that can be mailed for more information. Applications, which are not in the ad, are at www.swissbankclaims.com. The site lists toll-free numbers for many countries. In the United States, it is (888) 635-5483. Claims have to be filed by Oct. 22.

The campaign began with news conferences in New York, Tel Aviv and other cities. The plan, approved by Judge Edward R. Korman of Federal District Court in Brooklyn, lists these categories of claimants:

- People with rights to assets, including bank accounts or investment funds, deposited in Switzerland before May 9, 1945.
- People who had valuables, including art or similar assets that the Nazis looted or removed.
- People forced into slave labor for companies that may have deposited the revenues gained from that labor in Swiss companies.
- People who fled the Nazis but were turned away at Swiss borders or, after having entered, were mistreated.
- People forced into slave labor at a site anywhere that a Swiss company, bank or Government agency owned or controlled.

The settlement, reached in August, provided that the United Bank of Switzerland and Crédit Suisse pay the first installment of $250 million to an escrow account this year. Three additional installments start this year. The distribution of the money could begin late next year, said Elan Steinberg, executive director of the World Jewish Congress.