

Helping the Nazis' Victims

For those who labored in the ghettos, there's a chance for restitution.



BY BROOKS R. BROWN

“It was a very dark and sad time. Life was hard,” recounts Tamara Praw, a Holocaust survivor who labored under the Nazis in Poland’s Lodz ghetto during World War II.

In 1939, Nazis began forming ghettos in sections of European cities to isolate and control the Jewish population. Inside the borders of more than 1,000 ghettos, Jews were coerced into work. Food was scarce, and health, safety, and general living conditions were grim.

In 2002, Germany enacted a law, referred to by its acronym “ZRGB,” that granted pensions to Holocaust survivors who worked “voluntarily” in a ghetto under German control. But as a result of a complicated application process, more than 87 percent of applications were denied.

Responding to political pressure from the United States and Israel, the German government issued an executive order on Oct. 1, 2007, meant to correct problems under the ZRGB through a new Ghetto Work Repayment Program, which pays \$3,000 to survivors who worked in the ghettos.

To ensure that Holocaust survivors have the support and opportunity to secure such financial reparations, Bet Tzedek, one of the leading pro bono service providers in Los Angeles, established its Holocaust Ghetto Reparations Program in 2008. In particular, Bet Tzedek set up a clinic that helps people determine their eligibility for restitution and assists in filing the appropriate paperwork.

At the clinic, volunteer lawyers from a number of law firms work with individual survivors and listen as the clients struggle to accurately remember the painful details of the past. They help the clients fill out the application forms, which are difficult to navigate. The process can be an emotional undertaking for both the client and the lawyer.

But it’s also important. The Holocaust survivors are

elderly and, in many cases, living below the poverty line. The payments often help buy basic necessities like food and medicine.

HELP WITH APPEALS

To date, Bet Tzedek has assisted in the filing of 673 claims in Los Angeles totaling almost \$2.1 million. It has received approvals for 219 clients totaling close to \$670,000 in restitution. When clients are denied, often for arcane reasons, Bet Tzedek helps with appeals.

With more than 20,000 survivors qualifying for reparation, the need to take the program nationwide is great. To help with the expansion efforts, Bet Tzedek called on leading national law firms, including my firm Goodwin Procter, where I serve as the newly appointed member of the pro bono committee from Los Angeles.

Once word spread within the firm of our involvement in Los Angeles, it became clear that this project might interest the lawyers in the firm’s Boston, New York, and Washington, D.C., offices as well.

And when Bet Tzedek began discussing strategies for broadening the reach of the program’s services to the East Coast, we stepped up. In our D.C. office, we have had more than 25 lawyers and professional staff express interest, including six partners. In Boston, we have already engaged 13 people in setting up the clinic structure for that metropolitan area and in screening the 50 calls that have already come into the hotline.

‘GRANDPA, THAT’S YOU’

For many lawyers who have pledged time to this cause, it is a chance to create peace of mind for the elderly survivors who are able to receive assistance to complete the grueling application process. For others, the drive comes from a personal sense of obligation.

For Goodwin Procter associates Douglas Praw in Los Angeles and Shirley Paley in Boston, their commitment

to the program is motivated by the inspirational strength of their grandparents who survived the Holocaust and the Nazi ghettos.

Praw recalls an extremely cold day in Washington, D.C., in 1993 when his grandparents stood proudly awaiting the opening of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. They were unfazed by bone-chilling winds or painful memories brought back by the sight of other Holocaust survivors around them. Instead they waited with anticipation and nervous energy for the doors of the museum to open—50 years after their own liberation from the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

After touring the exhibits, Praw's family wandered into the museum's gift shop. Stopped in front of a display of videos called "Lodz Ghetto," Praw's brother exclaimed without pause, "Grandpa, that's you." On the cover of the video documenting experiences inside Lodz Ghetto was a picture of Praw's grandfather with a yellow star below his right lapel.

It was this experience and the footage on the video that first prompted Praw to ask questions about the ghettos. He wanted to better understand what his grandparents endured before being transported to the concentration camp.

Praw learned of the darkness and sadness that permeated the ghettos as a result of the inhabitants' daily struggle for food, water, safety, and survival. "We had very few possessions. Whatever we did have, including food, we had to share with our community," says Praw's grandmother, Tamara Praw.

Through Goodwin Procter's pro bono partnership with Bet Tzedek, Praw is able to provide some light to survivors now struggling with their applications.

MOVED TO TEARS

For associate Shirley Paley, it was the stories etched in her mind about her grandmother's experiences in Kovno ghetto and the Stuthoff camp that spurred her interest. Like Praw, Paley assists survivors with deciphering paperwork and helping to fill out the applications. She is one of many of the firm's lawyers spearheading the development of Bet Tzedek's program in Boston.

When Paley was a young girl learning about the Holocaust in school, she began prodding her grandmother for informa-

tion. With time, she learned more and more from her grandmother, who, up until that point, had refrained from telling even Paley's father about her experiences.

Shortly after completing her first training session with Bet Tzedek, Paley sent her grandmother an e-mail describing the program and her eagerness to get involved. Her grandmother responded, "I am proud that my granddaughter finds the time to help people."

I can clearly remember the call to my office that came shortly after Paley read the e-mail. She was in tears as a result of her grandmother's simple expression of pride. Her call reinforced my belief that pro bono work done by lawyers can be just as rewarding for them as it is for those they are helping.

It is sometimes difficult for lawyers to maintain focus on completing the applications when hearing about the "voluntary" work survivors performed in the ghettos. It included clearing vermin from the streets, cleaning up bodies, caring for the sick, performing janitorial duties in Nazi office buildings, and serving what little food there was in overcrowded warehouses.

Yet knowing that the clients are not only trusting them with their heart-wrenching stories, but also relying on them for much-needed assistance helps the firm's lawyers refocus on the job that they've been entrusted to handle.

The magnitude of the program's effects can be felt on many levels—by the survivors who withstand the application process and receive restitution as a small means of repayment for the atrocities experienced; by the lawyers, staff, and volunteers who give their time and skills to assist those in need; and by those finding ways to expand the reach of Bet Tzedek's services.

Each one takes something away from their experience. The stories told are clear, vivid, and haunting. Those privileged to hear them take away lasting impressions and life lessons.

For more information on Bet Tzedek's Holocaust Survivors Justice Network, please visit www.holocaustsurvivorsprobono.org.

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