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Why Won't Those SOBs Give Me My Money?

by Si Frumkin

As banks, insurance companies, judges, presidents, and even Jewish organizations close off channels to individual claims, this survivor refuses to give up.

This is a rhetorical question. I know why they won't. They would rather keep it.

They figure, if I got along all this time without them paying what they owe me, well then, I can wait a while longer, and eventually I will be gone and that will be the end of the story. If they bother to talk or think about what I and the other survivors are bitching about, while they smoke their expensive cigars on chartered jets on the way to luxurious destinations, they're probably saying: you shouldn't bitch; you're lucky to be alive.

And yes, they are right. I am lucky to be alive. I have survived, I've lived a good life, I have seen much beauty, I have known much ugliness, and I am coming to the end of it all. Should I just relax and let it go? Maybe, but not yet.

I am angry. Angry with the SOBs in Germany. With our own SOBs in Washington. With the SOBs running the Jewish organizations that presume to speak and negotiate for me and others like me. With the criminals who run European insurance companies that stole hundreds of millions of dollars from people who died prematurely in gas chambers, and then hired stooges to make sure it's not given back.

I am a law-abiding American citizen. I pay my taxes and my traffic tickets. I vote. I have served on a jury. I fly my flag on national holidays.

In return, I expect my government to fulfill its constitutional obligations to me. One of them is my right to a trial by a jury of my peers. This has been denied me because, apparently, my government prefers to defend and uphold the rights of giant German corporations.

The SOB I know best is the one whose slave I was, the one that worked my father to death, the one my government is protecting from me. Called Philipp Holzmann A.G., it is a biggie—the second largest company in Germany and one of the largest in Europe.

During World War II, Holzmann owned my father and me for slightly more than a year. I was a 13-year-old Jewish kid from Lithuania given to Holzmann as a slave by the Nazi government. I didn't have a name. I was Jew #82191. My dad was #82192—he stood in line behind me when the numbers were given out. Then about 9,000 or 10,000 of us from Lithuania were loaded into freight cars and shipped to Landsberg, a town in Bavaria where Holzmann was constructing an

underground factory to build jet fighters for Hitler's air force.

Hitler needed the jets. The dozen or so prototype ME-262s flew about 100 MPH faster than anything the Allies could deploy. In their first month of operation they downed almost 100 U.S. and British bombers. Holzmann's job was to get the factory built in a hurry, and they did their best. Work went on twenty-four hours a day, in twelve-hour shifts, seven days a week. We lived on starvation diets—and when people died, more were brought in for free.

The factory was never finished. I was liberated at age fourteen, twenty days after my dad died. After a few years of wandering around Europe and South America, I ended up in California. By 1954, I had an American wife, a job, a college education, a tract home in the San Fernando Valley, and a newborn son.

In the late 1980s, when people started talking about German companies paying compensation to slave laborers during the war, I decided to figure out what Holzmann owed me. We worked eighty-four-hour weeks. At the unskilled-labor rate of twenty-five cents an hour, my fourteen months of work totaled roughly \$1,100. A 1944 dollar is worth about \$15 today—let's be generous and say \$10—so that brings us to \$11,000. Add the compound interest for fifty-eight years at a minimal 3% per year and you end up with \$70,000–90,000.

And let's get something clear. This isn't charity—it's compensation.

There is also the matter of my father's death. He collapsed on his way to work. The rest of the column kept on going, and I just managed to see him being taken away on a handcart. Dad was still alive when I came back from work. I said goodbye; I think he understood. And then he was gone. I have no idea how to calculate the value of my father's life.

In 2000, after California abolished the statute of limitations on compensatory claims by former slaves, about forty other former Holzmann slaves in California and I engaged a lawyer to sue Holzmann.

Naturally, Holzmann resisted. Powerful, expensive attorneys specializing in obfuscation did everything to beat us—to prolong the process, to tire us out.

And throughout, from one appeal to another, the SOBs had the support of my government. State Department experts during the Clinton Administration testified: "Lawsuits by former slave laborers would be tantamount to interference with the foreign policy of the United States." They insisted that the statute of limitations was still in force and that California's action was an unconstitutional usurpation of powers. We kept losing.

If that wasn't bad enough, several Jewish organizations appointed themselves as our representatives and began negotiating with Germany on the final resolution of all claims. A German foundation was created into which German slave owners would deposit \$5 billion as final compensation for all claims in perpetuity. All valid claimants would receive about \$7,500 each, and there'd be "legal peace," now and forever. There was jubilation all around.

I object.

I never authorized any Jewish organization to negotiate for my father or me. There are, of course, some ex-slaves who gladly accepted the agreement—and they have the right to do so. Others, like myself, want the compensation to be decided in court by a jury of our peers—an option which appears to have been abolished by the decisions of my

government and some self-appointed Jewish machers.

And here's an interesting fact about my personal SOB, Holzmann.

Guess which construction company was awarded the \$56 million contract to build the National Monument in Washington to honor the GIs of World War II? The Tompkins Builders of Washington, DC, which is wholly owned by the J. A. Jones Construction Co., a subsidiary of J. A. Jones Inc. of Charlotte, North Carolina, a subsidiary since 1979 of Philipp Holzmann A.G. It's disconcerting: a monument honoring fallen American soldiers was built by a company owned by a corporation that tried so very hard to help Hitler manufacture the weapons that had killed them.

And now to a different cast of SOBs who won't give me my money.

My dad had a name before he became #82192. He was an educated, sophisticated man, a cosmopolitan businessman who traveled widely. It's inconceivable that my father wouldn't have provided for his family in case something happened to him. He must have had a life insurance policy. But I cannot prove it.

A few years ago, the world suddenly realized that European insurance companies had been holding on to hundreds of thousands of unredeemed insurance policies on the lives of Jews who died when the Nazis ruled Europe. The companies refused to pay. Even the few who recovered the actual policies were told that a death certificate was needed, or some other silly and cruel excuse.

By 1999, the pressure mounted—primarily from California, which enacted a law requiring any insurer doing business in the state to disclose information about policies sold in Europe from 1920 to 1945. With few exceptions, the insurers refused to open their files. Like the slave owners, they hired expensive lawyers and went to court.

The cases dragged on and on until June 2000, when the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the California law, ruling 5 to 4 that the state was improperly interfering with the conduct of foreign affairs. Really? Hiding the names of insured and murdered Jews was unacceptably influencing our foreign policy?

Annoyed by all the fuss, the European insurance companies came up with a brilliant scheme: the International Commission of Holocaust Era Insurance Claims, or ICHEIC, that would have the authority to decide the matter of all the claims concerning dead Jews. The insurance companies would be members of the commission as would insurance commissioners from several states. And retired U.S. Undersecretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger would be hired (at a salary of \$360,000/year) to run the ICHEIC out of London, far away from most of those pesky survivors.

During congressional hearings in September 2002—after almost three years of work—Eagleburger acknowledged that the ICHEIC had spent \$56 million on overhead, salaries, travel, etc. while offering \$35 million to settle claims by qualified claimants with “acceptable” proof. Many—maybe most—of these offers to people with “acceptable proof” were rejected by the claimants as being unfair and insufficient. A case in point is a friend of mine who is one of the few claimants to have a paper policy, for \$2,000, issued in 1936. Assicurazioni Generali, the Italian insurer that refused to acknowledge the policy for thirty years, finally admitted that it was valid and offered to pay \$5,000 as settlement in full. My friend rejected the offer. Apparently the ICHEIC formula values a 1936 U.S. dollar as being worth approximately two and a half dollars in 2002, rather than the actual \$100. (In 1936 a Cadillac cost about \$600, compared to about \$60,000 in 2002.) So, the \$2,000 life insurance should be worth \$200,000, plus the compound interest for 66 years. I estimate the total to

be about \$500,000—yet Generali offered \$5,000!

So far, Generali has been able to keep the money it stole. It, too, has the cooperation of the U.S. government and its judiciary in acknowledging ICHEIC—created, financed, and controlled by the insurance SOBs—as the only legitimate body to rule, decide, and control Holocaust-era insurance claims.

Still, I want to see those lists. I am sure that my father's name appears on one of them. I am also sure that tens of thousands of other Jews whose parents or grandparents perished will find the names of their relatives.

Hitler took away my father's name and gave him a number. The insurance companies took it away again by pretending that he never existed. I want them to acknowledge that he lived, that he died, and that the way he died matters to his son and to the grandchildren he never knew.

Si Frumkin, liberated from Dachau at age fourteen, went on to become the CEO of a textile business while dedicating himself to the causes of Soviet Jewry, Holocaust education, and political activism. He is a cofounder of the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews.