

SIX ROADBLOCKS FOR YOUNG JEWISH CHILD SURVIVORS OF THE HOLOCAUST

By: Robert Krell M.D. and Sarah Moscovitz Ph.D.

We have recently conducted a survey of Child Survivors to inquire about their experiences with compensation for war-related consequences. Approximately one thousand questionnaires were widely distributed and six hundred and twenty were returned from the U.S., Canada Australia, Sweden, France, Holland, Belgium and Poland. The information gathered reveals that great injustice has been perpetrated through certain requirements, rules and regulations for application which effectively discriminate against people who were *young children* during the Holocaust.

In the first instance, many children between the ages of two to twelve at the end of the war, were neither informed about or assisted to make claims. By the time some did become aware, they were told they had missed the deadline for meaningful compensation (1965). These children have thus been effectively denied any meaningful restitution for damage done to them in their formative years. Most were orphaned, lost entire families and were robbed of their childhood years. They keenly feel, according to our survey, the emotional, social, educational and economic loss. They were also too young during the Holocaust to know if their families had insurance, property, etc., and many were left postwar so completely bereft of family that there was no one even to tell them about their families, let alone what they owned.

One would have thought it was these vulnerable persons of tender age that should have received the most attention and appropriate compensation. Instead they were faced with the following roadblocks—each briefly discussed as to the travesty of justice they represent.

Roadblock 1: Missed Deadline

Children who were placed in adoptive or foster homes were not in touch with the adult survivors nor the institutions and organizations that could have helped them to apply. In fact, Child Survivors were taught not to think of themselves as survivors. For more than thirty years that designation belonged only to older camp survivors who largely ignored the damage done to young children, told them to keep silent, that they were lucky to have no memories, and who discouraged them from talking about or mourning their losses. By the time some of these younger people came out of their second hiding (after the war) and realized they were entitled to restitution, various deadlines had passed. For others, the maze of application forms and procedures via the URO, the Claims Conference, and individual governments were too overwhelming and confusing.

According to our survey, over half have never applied or have applied and been rejected. One-third of all who did apply received a one-time lump sum payment, half of them for less than \$700 US. Many had to sign that this one-time payment would close possibilities for any future payment. Some in France were told that since they were too young to have worked, there was nothing to compensate them for since they lost no work! Generally, only one in six received any kind of pension.

In all, two-thirds of our total respondents received *no meaningful compensation*. Consider this against the fact that Child Survivors report themselves to be seriously and permanently affected: emotionally (81%), socially (69%), educationally (66%), physically (67%), and economically (65%)!

Roadblock 2: Documentation Requirements

- *"First they killed my family and now they want proof that they existed."*
- *"I have no Proof of origin, no papers, I was too young to remember the name of my hidiers in Poland."*
- *"I was too young to know my address."*

Applications typically required proof of the country of origin, birth certificates, death certificates of parents and names of witnesses. In most instances these do not exist or are beyond the Child Survivor's ability to obtain without incurring great expense for travel and lawyers in Europe, and incurring harmful emotional stress. Some fifty years later a few have taken great pains to overcome the fear of returning to the sites of their parent's murder and retrieved valuable documentation. But not everyone is presently capable of this emotionally or financially, and some documentation is non-existent. Witnesses too have died.

Roadblock 3: Time Requirements for Those in Hiding or in Ghettos

The length of time required to qualify for compensation, eighteen months in "Closed" hiding or eighteen months in Ghettos is too long. Consider this in terms of young children. Closed hiding meant not to be outside of one's hiding place. This implies that Jewish children in "open" hiding did not suffer enough to warrant restitution, discounting their having been taken from their parents, discounting the loss of security of home and family, and discounting the life-long toll for many of having been forced to assume a false identity and another religion, leaving them with feelings of abandonment, unworthiness, identity confusion and loyalty conflicts for the remainder of their lives.

There is also a mistaken assumption that children hidden in convents, monasteries, or in homes were emotionally safe, well cared for and not abused. However, a conservative estimate based on a 1987 study of child survivors hidden in such circumstances revealed over half were harshly treated and beaten, including one in five who were sexually abused. Half lived with threats of being turned over to the Nazis.

Eighteen months of survival in ghettos was seldom achieved by young children who were hunted down, as in Lodz, and deported even before their parents. In the Warsaw Ghetto young children were among the first to starve to death. Imagine a child comfortably at home, whether poor or rich, being uprooted, subject to starvation, illness, foraging for food and witnessing deportations, actions, death and living in constant terror. Does the requirement to survive eighteen months of life as a young child in this way reflect in any way a sense of justice? Eighteen months of such deprivation, abuse and neglect as a requirement is outrageous.

Roadblock 4: Time Requirement of Six Months in Concentration Camps

In Treblinka and Majdanek, young children were lucky to live more than one day. In Auschwitz, the majority of adults who were not murdered upon arrival lived no longer than three months. Why is a child required to have survived six months in a concentration camp? It raises the question: *“How many days in Auschwitz are required for the experience to have left its mark on a child?”*

Roadblock 5: The Means Test

It appears that if the above conditions are met (a virtual impossibility for most young child survivors) then a final means of exclusion comes into play. One's economic status must be at the poverty level, \$16,000 for a single person, and \$22,000 for a couple. It is precisely this group and those just above who are also struggling, who cannot afford legal advice and do not have the personal resources to pursue their rightful compensation. Survivors report that having to convince bureaucrats and social workers who were never “over there” of their suffering and need is a demeaning experience that is for the survivor a continuation of Holocaust trauma.

Roadblock 6: Requirement to Be Interviewed by a German Psychiatrist

There are certain circumstances in which a survivor must submit to an interview (for continuation of pension for example) with a German psychiatrist. We maintain that this is a continuation of war retraumatization, that there are no circumstances that can justify this. There is no reason why the evaluation of a competent, accredited, board certified psychiatrist other than one appointed by the German government, could not be arranged to save the survivor needless angst and retraumatization.

Conclusion

All of the above raise serious question that must be addressed. What circumstances can be invoked to reject the application of any Jewish child who survived under Nazi occupation, or who was displaced by that occupation, thereby losing home and family? What are possible grounds for rejection?

In our survey, we have yet to see a response where the child survivor has not suffered enormous loss, vast disruptions, and life-long adverse consequences. Only 1.5% claim that the war has had no permanent effect. How is it possible that one-third of Child Survivors who applied for

restitution were rejected? This rejection in itself has been injurious and a cause for continued suffering.

It is time for the Jewish Conference on Material Claims to create and fight for a New Restitution Category to recognize the Extraordinary Vulnerability of young child victims. Child Holocaust victims were robbed of parents and family, comfort and security, physical and emotional nourishment, education and encouragement, and true identity—all during the most sensitive, formative years of their lives with resulting lifelong consequences. Now at last is the time to provide justice and apology to child survivors before it's too late.

Robert Krell M.D. is Professor Emeritus at the University of British Columbia, Canada and Sarah Moskovitz Ph.D. is Professor Emeritus at California State University, Northridge.