

MEILI'S RECEIVE HUMANITARIAN AWARD

(1998)

Bank guard saved Holocaust era records

Christoph Meili, a 27-year-old bank guard was making his rounds at the Union Bank of Switzerland when he discovered boxes of Holocaust era bank documents about to be shredded. After discussing the matter with his wife and receiving her agreement and support, he secretly took over some of them to a Jewish organization in Zurich and to the police. His action caused a storm of controversy in Switzerland. Although at first denying that the records were from the Holocaust era, Switzerland's largest bank finally confirmed that the documents discovered by Meili near its shredder now are related to property sold by Jews to the Nazis. Union Bank of Switzerland admitted its chief archivist previously shredded documents but it is not known which documents were destroyed. Swiss law prohibits the destruction of documents that might relate to investigations into the WWII era. Some of the documents were relevant to the research of an international panel of historians investigating Switzerland's dealings with the Nazis. Saul Freidlander, the holder of The "1939" Club Chair on Holocaust Studies is a member of that panel.

As a reward for his heroic actions, the bank fired Meili while the Swiss government said Meili may have violated the country's secrecy laws and could be jailed. The investigation is still pending. Meanwhile, Meili, his wife and two children fled to the United States after receiving hate mail and death threats.

Testifying before the Senate banking Committee, Meili stated that he received threats that his children age 2 and 4 would be kidnapped "and held for ransom for the money he'd be getting from Jews."

Meili also testified that he saved the bank records just weeks after he had seen Steven Spielberg's film "Schindler's List."

Senator Barbara Boxer praised Meili's action: "Rest assured that you did the right and moral thing in turning in the documents to the Hebrew Congregation of Zurich and subsequently to the Swiss police" she said.

Senators hailed Meili as worthy of the title "righteous gentile" conferred on non-Jews who saved Jewish lives during the Holocaust.

“You have joined this very august group of people” said Senator Christopher Dodd who recalled his own father’s work prosecuting Nazi bank officials as the lead U.S. prosecutor at the Nuremberg trials.

Christoph Meili and his family can now call the U.S. their home. President Clinton has signed into law a bill, unanimously adopted by both houses of Congress, granting permanent U.S. resident status to the Meili family. The Meili family has the distinction of becoming the only Swiss nationals to ever be granted political asylum in the U.S.