



PARTIAL PAYBACK

Lawyers help Holocaust survivors apply for pensions

By MARIE P. GRADY

When he was a small boy growing up in Brooklyn, N.Y., Victor Stern once asked his father what the letters “K.L.” stood for on the tattoo on his left wrist.

“Kiss Libby,” his father replied with a smile, speaking of the boy’s mother.

Years later, when he was almost a man, Stern would find out the real meaning behind the letters seared into his father’s flesh. Unbeknownst to his father, Victor was sitting in the audience at a Jewish summer camp in upstate New York when his father spoke publicly for the first time about surviving the Holocaust.

K.L. stood for “Konzentrationslager” — or concentration camp.

As an adult, Stern realized the gift his parents had given him as a child. “With Holocaust survivors, or anybody who has been through a traumatic experience, you don’t tell your children because you don’t want them to feel the agony you went through.”

It is a history Stern recently had to recount again as he sought to help his mother gain some small measure of reparation from the German government for the stolen years she and her husband spent toiling for the Nazis in Jewish ghettos.

Assisting Stern with the complex application for pension funds was attorney Andrew Zeitlin, a partner in the Stamford offices of Shipman & Goodwin. The firm, along with Aetna Insurance Co.’s in-house lawyers, is again involved in a national pro bono project that began in 2008 when lawyers helped Holocaust survivors apply for one-time payments of about \$3,000 from the German government.

Now there’s more money available. In 2009, a German court found the govern-



Victor Stern, center, is helping his mother gain reparations from the German government. He’s receiving assistance in filling out a complex application form from Shipman & Goodwin attorneys Christopher Tracey, left, and Andrew Zeitlin.

ment was interpreting a 2002 pension program too strictly, unjustly denying thousands of Jewish survivors monthly pensions and back payments for work performed in Jewish ghettos.

For Zeitlin, whose father-in-law narrowly escaped the Holocaust, the effort is a personal one.

A few years ago, 11 of his family members traveled back to Frankfurt, Germany, and stayed in the house his father-in-law grew up in, now a small hotel. His father-in-law had to attend a separate school for Jews back then, but he was spared a worse fate after his parents had the foresight and

means to get his family out of the country in 1936.

“It was an emotional, moving experience,” Zeitlin recalls.

Cruel Odyssey

The national pro bono effort is being coordinated in more than 30 cities by the California organization known as Bet Tzedek, or House of Justice. In 2009, the Holocaust Survivors Justice Network won the American Bar Association’s Pro Publico Award, one of the most prestigious pro bono recognitions in the nation.

In addition to Shipman & Goodwin and

Aetna, firms involved in the past include Cohen and Wolf, P.C., of Bridgeport. Day Pitney, which also has a substantial presence in Connecticut, has coordinated efforts in New Jersey.

More than six decades after the Holocaust claimed the lives of 6 million Jews and millions of people of other backgrounds, the numbers of survivors are dwindling. But Joan Margolis, director of operations for Jewish Family Services of Greater Hartford, said a significant number remain in Connecticut. In addition to the thousands who emigrated after the war ended in 1945, there are 1,000 or more from the Ukraine and other parts of the former Soviet Union who came to America beginning in the 1970s.

For Stern, a consultant who retired after a long career with United Technologies, the effort concludes a cruel odyssey his parents began more than six decades ago. His mother, a Romanian Jew, was deported when she was just a teen to Transnistria, on the Ukraine border. Along with her parents, she ended up digging potatoes in a field in a German-controlled ghetto town called Shargorod. In the three years she spent there, she watched as both her parents died of typhus.

Stern's father, who died four years ago, had to take over care of his family at age 16 when his father was forced to flee Poland over the Russian border as the Germans hunted down able-bodied men. He and his mother and sister joined a grandmother in Krakow, only to end up in a ghetto in Gorlice, Poland, where he was assigned road work and built military barracks. He was later moved to the Mielec Concentration Camp in southern Poland, and then put on a train to the infamous Auschwitz death camp.

Because Stern's father had learned about aircraft manufacturing at the Mielec Camp, he was not forced off at Auschwitz. Instead, he was sent to the Flossenbürg concentration camp near the Czech border. There, he and other emaciated prisoners labored until they were prodded into a death march that ended with liberation by the U.S. Army.

Stern's parents met in Italy after the war, and eventually ended up in Brooklyn, N.Y.

For Stern's father, the toll of the Holocaust was unimaginable. His mother and his sister were murdered by the Nazis; his brother survived because he went to the area that would become known as Israel after the war.

Years later, Stern discovered that two of his father's aunts and one uncle were saved by Oskar Schindler, the ethnic German indus-

trialist credited with saving 1,200 Jews from concentration camps by persuading the Nazis they were essential to his munitions factory in Krakow.

Given the enormous toll of the Holocaust, no amount of reparations seems enough.

Coming To Grips

Attorney Zeitlin, whose practice area at Shipman & Goodwin is commercial litigation, says it is not mere money that motivates, but the need to remember.

"There's no way you can possibly compensate people for what they were put through. On the other hand, if they are eligible to receive these benefits, why shouldn't they?" he asked. "I have to say, it feels very good to help people with this."

Lawyers involved in the program go through a training seminar and may meet with clients over multiple sessions to help them properly fill out a questionnaire written in German and English identifying ghettos they worked in and the nature of the work.

Clients who were rejected under the previous, stricter criteria may be eligible for back payments from the date of the initial application in the tens of thousands of dollars with additional monthly pension payments of \$300 or more. Clients can keep the larger of the \$3,000 one-time payment or the monthly pension funds, but not both. The legal work involves both analysis and statutory construction, and about 25 clients have been referred to Shipman & Goodman since the program began.

As for Stern and his family, applying for the pension is not the only – or first – way of trying to come to grips with history. Stern's father eventually wrote a book about his experiences that was published in Germany. His mother's memoirs were published in an anthology of Holocaust survivors' recollec-



Attorney Andrew Zeitlin, left, whose father-in-law narrowly avoided the Holocaust, said 'it feels very good' for him and fellow attorney Christopher Tracey, right, to help clients apply for money from the German government.

tions. One of Stern's daughters, now a filmmaker in Germany, produced an award-winning documentary in 2003 called "Terezín, 1944," which was about children at a concentration camp.

A half century after the liberation of the Flossenbürg Camp in 1945, Stern and his brother joined his father for a moving memorial there hosted by the German government. Along with 20 other survivors, they walked the death march and later raised a glass of Bavarian beer with Jewish survivors and Germans alike.

"My father didn't hate the Germans; he taught me not to hate Germans," Stern said.

Still, the grief remained. "He broke down at one point," Stern said of his father. "He was unable to forgive himself for allowing his mother and sister to die. We told him it was not his fault. But he saw his mother and sister get on the train, cattle cars, really, toward the concentration camp.

"Years later, he seemed to always be looking for his sister; the only trouble was he was looking for a 19-year-old woman. She would have been nearly 70 then."

In Flossenbürg, a Jewish memorial bears an inscription already etched into the hearts of survivors and their survivors. In Hebrew, the word *zachor* means "remember."

For more information on the Holocaust Survivors Justice Network pro bono project visit the web site of Bet Tzedek at www.bet-tzedek.org/holocaustrep.html