

The Los Angeles Times
January 16, 2004
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Suit Says Firm Denied Claims After Holocaust

Six Holocaust survivor families sued an Italian-based insurer in Los Angeles Superior Court on Thursday, seeking to recover policy benefits they claim have been wrongfully denied to them since the end of World War II.

The survivors assert that Assicurazioni Generali of Trieste, Italy, acted in bad faith by failing to honor contracts on life insurance policies purchased by their parents or grandparents who perished in the Holocaust.

The plaintiffs, most of whom live in the San Fernando Valley, said that they have sent letters to the company, which has a California affiliate, but that Generali officials have rejected their claims.

"I know my father had three policies because he gave them to me, and I sewed them into my pants," said Jean Greenstein, who lives in Tarzana. "But when I got caught" in Hungary, the Germans confiscated the documents, he said.

Greenstein said Generali initially rejected his attempts to get payments on the policies, saying it could not find them.

After many attempts, Greenstein said, the firm paid him \$2,806.80 on one policy. But he said company officials told him they couldn't find the other two policies, which he said were worth much more.

Ebi Gabor, 76, of West Hills, who wrote a book titled "The Blood Tattoo" about her experiences in the concentration camps, said she believes she is the beneficiary of three insurance policies issued by Generali that had been bought by her father, Grunblatt Mor, who owned a winery in Hungary, and a dowry policy bought for her by her grandfather Jakab Katz.

Greenstein, Gabor and the other plaintiffs are seeking damages and are asking the court to grant an injunction against Generali's allegedly unfair business practices.

A source close to Generali said he could not comment on the individual claims. However, he provided a letter sent Wednesday by the company's director general, Meir Lantzman, to Israel's Knesset, stating that Generali had paid out \$45.5 million in claims to 2,751 individuals as part of its Holocaust compensation program.

The source said Generali had allocated \$100 million to be paid out either on individual claims through the International Commission on Holocaust Era Insurance Claims, or for "humanitarian assistance" to elderly Holocaust survivors who could not prove their claims.

But Claremont attorney William Shernoff, who represents the plaintiffs in the suits filed Thursday, said Generali had turned over decisions on paying claims to the international commission, which he said had frequently made "low-ball" offers to survivors.

"These survivors have opted to file lawsuits in the hope of recovering their full life insurance benefits due

them rather than accept payments offered by [the commission], which only pays out a fraction of benefits due," said Shernoff, who also represents a dozen other people suing Generali.

The commission has been the subject of criticism from many Holocaust survivors, insurance regulators in California and several members of Congress.

Shernoff said it was highly likely that the new lawsuits would be transferred to a federal court in New York, where virtually all of the pending Holocaust reparations litigation is before U.S. District Judge Michael B. Mukasey.