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By Donna Huffaker

Italian Firm Dupes Holocaust Survivors, Heir Claims

LOS ANGELES - In an effort to protect Holocaust survivors from giving up their rights to valuable insurance claims, an 89-year-old Los Angeles woman filed suit Wednesday seeking an injunction against the European insurer, Assicurazioni Generali.

Felicia Haberfeld alleges in her complaint that the Italian insurance company deceptively induced several hundred California holocaust survivors and their heirs to settle their claims against Generali for a fraction of their true values. Felicia Spierer Haberfeld v. Assicurazioni, BC250565(L.A. Super. Ct., filed May 16, 2001).

The plaintiff seeks class-action status.

"We don't [know] the value of Mrs. Haberfeld's claims yet," said William M. Shernoff of Shernoff, Bidart & Darras LLP, the Claremont firm representing Haberfeld. "We're just trying to stop Generali from using what we think are improper means to solicit these survivors to give up their rights for peanuts."

Lance Etcheverry of Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom, counsel for Generali, did not return telephone calls Wednesday.

The Haberfeld lawsuit is one of seven pending cases filed by Shernoff, Bidart & Darras LLP against Generali alleging the company acted in bad faith by refusing to make good on World War II-era life insurance policies purchased by the plaintiffs' families.

The heirs filed lawsuits against Generali under California's Holocaust Victims Insurance Act, signed by Gov. Pete Wilson in 1998. To date, Generali has settled five cases filed by the law firm.

Between 1939 and 1940, Haberfeld's husband, Alfons Haberfeld, purchased several policies from the Italian insurance company's branch office in Poland. Generali is headquartered in Trieste, Italy. Both the life insurance policy for Alfons Haberfeld and a policy for the Haberfelds' daughter, Franciszka, were to be paid by 1957. The life insurance was to be paid even if Alfons was still alive at that time.