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By Henry Weinstein

Ruling May Help Victims Seeking Holocaust Damages

The U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco ruled on May 18th, that any foreign companies sued in Holocaust-related lawsuits must answer questions regarding their ties to business in California. The decision may help a number of Holocaust survivors and their families seeking restitution from European insurance companies, who insurers allege have acted in bad faith in failing to honor legitimate claims on policies issued between 1929 and 1945.

The ruling came in a case against Ergo Versicherungsgruppe AG, the successor company to Victoria Insurance of Berlin.

The irony in the case against Victoria is that the suit has been filed by the elderly grandchildren of a former executive of Victoria, Heinrich Stahl, who was seized by the Nazis and put into a concentration camp where he died of pneumonia in 1942.

Although the court's ruling did not render a definitive ruling on the Stahls' right to pursue their case, the appellate judges advised federal District Judge William D. Keller in Los Angeles to take account of changes made to California law in 1999 that give plaintiffs an easier avenue for pursuing Holocaust suits.

William Shernoff, attorney for the Stahl family stated, "This decision will help establish that courts in California have jurisdiction over European companies that have been trying to hide from justice and hopefully will make them face up to their responsibilities."