

Six Californians join Generali suit

Six more Holocaust survivors in California have joined a list of plaintiffs who are suing a large Italian life insurance company for allegedly reneging on payments for policies taken out before World War II by their parents and relatives who perished in Nazi concentration camps.

In their lawsuit, filed last week in Los Angeles Superior Court, the survivors claim that Assicurazioni Generali, one of Europe's largest insurers, has stonewalled their requests for payouts for up to 55 years or fobbed them off with meager settlement offers.

One plaintiff is Manny Steinberg, 78, who was a 14-year-old boy in Radom, Poland, when he was sent to forced labor at a munitions factory. Later he survived a death march, Auschwitz, and a Dachau satellite camp. His mother and a brother perished in the Holocaust, while his father and another brother survived.

"I still remember, when I was a young child, the Generali agent coming to my father's ladies custom tailoring store every two weeks to collect \$2 or \$3 in insurance premiums," said Steinberg. "And while we were in camp, my father kept reminding me, 'If we get out, there is an insurance policy waiting.' "

After six years of correspondence, Generali informed Steinberg that it is still auditing his records.

Generali told survivors George Brown and Ebi Gabor that it could not find any records of policies purchased by their parents.

The six survivors are seeking damages and an injunction against Generali's allegedly unfair business practices. They are represented by attorney William Shernoff, who over the last three years has filed similar suits on behalf of 12 other survivor families.

All the cases, as well as a number of class action suits on Holocaust reparations, have been transferred to a federal court in New York, where they are under review. Shernoff expects that the current litigation will also go to the New York court.

Complicating the matter is that all insurance claims against Generali and other European insurance companies have been assigned to the International Commission on Holocaust Era Insurance Claims (ICHEIC), headed by former US secretary of state Lawrence Eagleburger.

Peter Simshauser, Generali's attorney in Los Angeles, said the company has paid \$100 million to ICHEIC for its operations and to settle insurance claims against Generali.

"Some individual claimants have received in excess of \$500,000," he said.

Simshauser cited a letter sent last week by Generali director-general Meir Lantzman to the Knesset, stating that the company had paid out \$45.5m. to 2,751 individuals.

Shernoff rebutted that the current value of policies held by survivors and heirs of Holocaust victims is more than \$1 billion.

"It's a joke," he said. "Generali is paying out less than 10 cents on the dollar."

ICHEIC itself has been under heavy criticism by survivor organizations, state insurance directors, and some congressmen, who have accused the commission of foot-dragging and bureaucratic red tape.

Last September, three Los Angeles-area survivors, including Manny Steinberg, filed a suit against ICHEIC, claiming that it serves as a front for Generali.

The deadline for submitting claims to ICHEIC expired December 31. In filing the latest suit against Generali after this deadline, Shernoff said he wanted to make it clear that those who had not yet sent in a claim, or felt they had been given the runaround by ICHEIC or Generali, could still stake their claims through lawsuits.