

Bet Tzedek Ghetto Reparations Program Reaches Other Cities

By Anat Rubin
Daily Journal Staff Writer

LOS ANGELES — Albert Rosa's job was to pick up the dead bodies.

The year was 1943, and the Germans had just crushed the month-long resistance that would come to be known as the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Rosa was there with thousands of other Jews to clean up the mess and destroy what was left of the ghetto.

The bodies, Rosa said, were everywhere.

"There were maggots and worms all over them," he said, his voice breaking. "They were crawling out of their mouths and nose and ears."

Rosa, 83, told his story Thursday to a volunteer attorney from Latham & Watkins at the Bet Tzedek "Ghetto Work" reparations clinic.

Bet Tzedek established the clinic last year in response to the German government's creation of a new reparations program aimed at compensating Holocaust survivors who worked in German-controlled ghettos.

The German government estimates 50,000 survivors alive today could be eligible for the one-time payment of about \$3,000. Some 20,000 of those survivors are in the United States.

"This is probably one of the last, if not the last, program coming out of Germany," said Bet Tzedek attorney Volker Schmidt. "Most of our clients are in their 80s and 90s. One of our clients is 104."

Bet Tzedek attorney Wendy Levine said the German govern-

ment is not offering a lot of money. But for many survivors, Levine said, it's one last chance for justice.

"We have many clients who have never wanted to talk about the Holocaust and now are at a point in their lives where they want to tell their story and they want somebody to be held accountable," said Levine, who runs the clinic with Schmidt.

For others, she said, the money is critical. At least 25 percent of survivors in the United States are living below the poverty line.

"We have survivors who previously said, 'I don't want Germany's money,' and now they're at a point where they need it," Levine said. "A lot of our clients are living in dire circumstances. This money makes a huge difference."

In just four months, Bet Tzedek has helped 350 survivors file claims.

"The response has been extraordinary," Levine said.

So extraordinary, in fact, that Bet Tzedek is expanding the program to cities across the country.

With help from pro bono attorney Stan Levy of Manatt, Phelps & Phillips, Bet Tzedek will train pro bono attorneys and match them with social service agencies to help



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survivors file claims.

"Many of these social service providers are aware of the [reparations] program but have not sent out mass mailings yet because they're afraid of being overwhelmed," Levy said. "It's a very specific program and a relatively complicated form with vague questions."

The Ghetto Work Payment Program is not for those who were forced to work during the war.

"If you were in a forced-labor camp, that's different," Levy said.

The German government offered compensation to victims of forced labor in a program that ended in 2006. The new program stipulates the applicants must have worked voluntarily, meaning they had some level of choice in how the work was performed.

"In the ghetto, even if you weren't forced to work, you had to work," Levy said. "No one was holding a gun to their head, but they worked to survive."

Ruth Kirschner, a social worker with Jewish Social Services in Washington, D.C., said she would welcome the legal assistance Bet Tzedek is offering.

"It would make a huge difference," Kirschner said. "This is not our area of expertise.

"Every time you file a claim, it dredges up all the emotional baggage. It's horrific. At the end of each application, it says, 'Please include any documents you have to prove you were there,' and it starts everyone crying. They say, 'What documents? I don't even have a picture.'"

Levine said that's the reason some survivors eligible for past reparations programs didn't apply.

"They have to relive the worst atrocities of their lives and have those atrocities reduced to little boxes on a piece of paper to send to the country that perpetrated the atrocities so it can make a decision about whether they suffered enough," she said. "We want to make sure they feel like their stories are being heard and that they have advocates on their side."

When Rosa talks about the family he lost, his voice breaks again.

"Seventy members of my family were wiped out," he said. "I'm the only one alive."

After his work in the ghetto, Rosa was marched, with 30,000 other Jews, to the Dachau concentration camp in Germany. He was one of the few to survive the march.

He made his way through several concentration camps before he was able to escape, hiding inside a barn full of manure. When he ran across the American troops, he joined them.

"I have five medals from the U.S. Army, including a purple heart," he said.

"I've never taken anything from the U.S. welfare system," he said. "But from Germany, I'll take every penny I can get."