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Op Ed: Fiscal Cliff for Holocaust Survivors

There is not much similarity between the fiscal cliff most Americans face and what is ahead for far too many Holocaust survivors. The one commonality is that both crises are man-made and within man's power to remedy.

Jewish Social Service agencies around the US are dealing with shortfalls with regard to funds for needy Holocaust survivors. What is not widely known is that almost half the survivors in the US live at or below poverty level. Though the number of survivors diminishes daily, those still with us have increasing needs. People who went through the bottomless evil that was the Shoah are dealing with the ravages of poverty in old age.

The German government has provided monies to help the survivors but not all the money collected in the name of survivors ever reached them. The organization responsible for distributing this money, the Claims Conference, has failed in several major respects and has quite a checkered history.

The Claims Conference took it upon itself to decide that not all the German funds were needed for survivor care so they initiated a system where some of the monies would go to projects they deemed worthy. They decided that about \$18 million of the money they distributed annually would not be used for survivors. Instead it would be used for educational and other programs including many programs of Claims Conference board members and their affiliates. As the public outcry got louder because the needs of the survivors were not always being met, the Claims Conference raised the amounts devoted to survivors but refused to cut non-survivor grants to various Jewish organizations. The aggregate amount of these diverted funds for over a decade exceeds \$250 million.

As long as there is even one survivor in need, every single penny should go to their care. It is unconscionable that any member of the Jewish community, let alone the leadership of major Jewish organizations, would allow our aging survivors to suffer again. The monies were collected in the name of the survivors and should go directly to their care. Anything less than that is morally bankrupt.

Where are these monies going? Who is getting the money and why? Is there any conflict of interest in that monies are going to member organizations of the Claims Conference board? Do the major Jewish organizations need to be subsidized for

educational programs with funds that could be used for dental care, hearing aids or utility subsidies for indigent survivors? What are we supposed to think when \$50,000 was contributed for a one night gala concert at the Kennedy Center organized by the special negotiator of the Claims Conference when the most a needy survivor can get **annually** from emergency funds is \$2,500?

For years survivors groups, notably Holocaust Survivors Foundation (HSF) – USA and *Generations of the Shoah International (GSI)* have called for transparency and accountability from the Claims Conference. Instead we learned that a monumental fraud took place and tens of millions of dollars were stolen from the Claims Conference. Had there been greater transparency and accountability this might not have happened / might have been discovered sooner. In any case the Claims Conference's statement that the money lost will have no impact on survivor care is absurd. \$50,000,000+ could have helped a lot of survivors get food, medicine, etc.

Now we are faced with a tremendous problem so what kinds of solutions can we come up with? Here is one: for years the Claims Conference has sided with foreign insurance companies, who sold policies to Jews before WWII but have not satisfied all outstanding claims, **against** survivors who want to take these insurance companies to US courts. Instead of fighting against the survivors the Claims Conference, and the major Jewish organizations who are members of / recipients of funds from the Claims Conference, should support the survivors' rights to recover all unpaid policies, and for the insurers to disgorge remaining ill-gotten gains by providing long term health care and other services for the survivors.

In their hour of greatest need the Claims Conference is failing Holocaust survivors and we are watching this happen. Have we become bystanders? That behavior was reprehensible during WWII and is totally inexcusable now.

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