

Jiří Šitler - Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues and Combat of Anti-Semitism *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic (CZE)*

Audio Record 8:20

I would like to thank to members of the European Parliament Mr. Belder and Mrs. Sehnalová for hosting this event and the European Shoah Legacy Institute, to Halyna and her team for organizing it. Thank you also for giving me the floor in this panel as the first speaker, even though I think I don't deserve it. The panel should be opened by our Israeli friend because the biggest group of Holocaust survivors lives in Israel today. However, since this is a follow-up event to the Terezin conference held in 2009, and also to the Conference on Welfare for Holocaust Survivors and Other Victims of Nazi Persecution which took place in May in Prague at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and which I had the honour to co-chair with Ambassador Stuart Eizenstat, I am happy to start this event with some remarks and information about social care for Nazi victims in the Czech Republic.

I don't want to go too deep into to the history of how it was handled over the time from 1945. But I would have to mention the law 255 from 1946. The law 255/1946 is still in force today and still serves as a basis for the definition of survivors and a basis for many social programs which we have even today. The law concerns "fighters for national freedom" and within this group we distinguish different categories such as soldiers or members of resistance. The paragraph which is important to us is about so-called "political prisoners". The word Holocaust wasn't so much in use that time, and the group of "political prisoners" included victims of "political, national, racial, and religious persecution" as the definition of that time said. The group did include victims of racial persecution but it was not only about them, and until today holders of the "Certificate 255" (number of the law) are target of the social measures by the Czech government. Nevertheless, the certificate itself does not say why they were persecuted, whether the person was a member of the resistance detained in a concentration camp, or if he was Jewish or not. We don't know it, for our social programs it is important that they were incarcerated in concentration camps or Nazi prisons.

In communist times (after 1948) the law was still applied, even though there might have been some cases when people who deserved the certificate did not get it for political reasons. But in

general, the law was applied. People got all kinds of benefits for the special pensions, but it is also important to mention that at that time they had better access to housing or they could get a telephone line, preferential treatment, they had public transportation free of charge, and these kind of things.

After 1989, most of the relevant benefits were maintained (like the pensions), and some became obsolete (like the better access to phone lines etc.). I want to stress that Czech Nazi victims including Holocaust survivors along with all other Nazi victims from Central and Eastern Europe did not get access to any compensation from Germany, unlike victims who lived in Western Europe, the United States, and Israel. The reason was the Hallstein Doctrine according to which no payments were done to communist countries and this doctrine was even maintained after 1989. There was no German law or agreement with Germany which could be applied in countries of Eastern and Central Europe. The validity of the relative German legislation expired already in 1989 and has never been extended, ie victims in this region were not compensated according to the German BEG law.

This situation was partially remedied after establishment of the Czech-German Future Fund in 1998. The Fund approved a social program for Nazi survivors, and victims of Nazism received, in addition to the money they were getting from the Czech government, some money as a social contribution from Germany. It was considered rather as social assistance than compensation. Later, after conclusion of negotiations of compensation for forced labourers in 2001, the victims in Central and Eastern Europe including the Czech Republic received compensation for slave and forced labour – they were treated the same way as the victims in Western Europe. For the first time in the history of compensations, somebody living in the Czech Republic or Ukraine got the same as a person living in New York or Israel.

After 1989, before these programs from Germany, the Czech government tried to balance for the fact that victims of Nazism didn't get any compensation as those in the West. In addition to the inherited pensions from the communist times based on the law 255/1946, there were some new programs introduced and they consisted mainly of a series of lump-sum payments. The first one was in 1994, it was a special law where so-called political prisoners - including Holocaust survivors - received payment from the Czech government. If we calculate it in today's money, it was approx. 5000 EUR per capita. There were a series of other such lump-sum payments made by the Czech government for different groups. One important development took place: the definition of law 255/1946 was a little bit relaxed and became more inclusive, so more people had access to these payments. The extended definition included people who were forced to hide. Before, it concerned only victims detained in camps and prisons and the amount of compensation was derived from the duration of imprisonment. This extension took place in 2001.

In addition to these lump-sum payments there were several government decisions or laws by which the government paid money to different foundations providing social care for survivors, like the National Endowment Fund for Holocaust Victims, or the EZRA Foundation, and several others. I think that accumulated amount of money paid in these lump-sum payments would be

about 150 million EUR from 1989 in addition to the pensions, however there are no aggregate numbers for pensions available because it is very difficult to calculate how much was paid from 1946 till today.

Lump-sum payments and contribution to foundations were the main vehicle from the Czech government for assisting Holocaust survivors and other victims of Nazi persecution after 1989.

Just to give you some numbers how the situation has changed over the years: In 1994, when we had this first lump-sum payment we had over 25 000 people who were survivors of concentration camps, Gestapo prisons, and their widows and orphans, who received the lump-sum payment. In 2001, when we ran the program from Germany for forced and slave labour, for the same category which received the lump-sum payment in 1994, now defined as slave labour or so called category A, we identified over 8000 people. And today, when we try to collect data on how many survivors we have today from the same category, I think it won't be much more than 1500. Numbers have diminished dramatically, of course, by natural causes.

The numbers I am talking about concern only victims detained in concentration camps and Gestapo prisons. It doesn't refer to members of the resistance who weren't detained, or soldiers who fought against Nazi regime, since it is a different issue and different category.

In May when we had the honour and pleasure to host the European Shoah Legacy Institute's conference on welfare for Holocaust survivors and other victims of Nazi persecution in Prague under the title "Living with Dignity", we adopted the Concluding Co-Chair Statement, and there were some ideas what should be done to continue to care about Holocaust survivors who are still among us, and we are currently considering another program for the remaining 1500 victims of Nazism, or more (because we might include war veterans etc). However, these considerations are only in the initial phase now.

In the Concluding Statement, there was a call for more support for organizations providing care to survivors or for associations of survivors. The Ministry of Defense decided to relax the criteria of their organizational support and opened the possibility for organizations who fall under the law 255/1946, in addition to war veterans and soldiers. These organizations might be in the future able to apply for funding. The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs has decided to extend programs for senior citizens for organizations of victims of Nazi persecution or their associations which enables them to apply for the funding from that project.

Furthermore, we have been able to convince some private companies to contribute to social programs for Nazi survivors. Some bigger companies have their own foundations and we convinced them to target this group. We have already registered successful cases.

Also, the Czech government has decided to give additional 4 million EUR to the endowment Fund for Holocaust victims in the Czech Republic.

These are the most recent developments in the Czech Republic after the welfare conference held in May.