Holocaust-Era Reparations – Morality, History and Money

Holocaust-era reparations is truly the place where morality meets money. The amount of money handled by the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference) is, by any standard, large. As a result of negotiations by the Claims Conference since 1952, more than half a million victims of persecution by the Nazis have received close to $60 billion.

Yet Holocaust-era compensation and restitution is about much more than money. It is also about justice, history, law, politics and social work. It is about those who are entitled and about those who need help. It is about responsibility and about fairness.

As Israeli prime minister, David Ben-Gurion wrote in a 1952 letter to Nahum Goldmann, founder of the Claims Conference:

For the first time in the history of relations between peoples a precedent has been established whereby a great Power undertakes, under moral pressure only, to pay reparations to victims of its former Government. For the first time in the history of the Jewish people, oppressed and plundered for hundreds of years in all countries of the Old World, the oppressor and plunderer has had to hand back some of the spoil and pay collective compensation for part of the material losses.²

Half a century later, Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon used the fiftieth anniversary of the 1951 founding of the Claims Conference to note that it “has been at the forefront of the struggle for justice for Holocaust survivors in Israel and around the world.”³ On the same occasion, U.S. president George W. Bush wrote to acknowledge the significant role of the Claims Conference in the search for a measure of justice for survivors of the Holocaust. He commended the Claims Conference “on your efforts to use the memory of the past to create justice in the present.”⁴

Our society has a tendency to measure many complicated concepts in primarily financial terms. At the Claims Conference, we deal with one of the greatest moral challenges to humanity in the last centuries – the Holocaust – and seek to translate the quest for justice into one of the most basic forms of human interchange – money.

The task of the Claims Conference is, by definition, impossible.

The struggle to reconcile the irreconcilable goes back to the origins of the Claims Conference. Following efforts by Jewish leaders and the State of Israel, Chancellor Konrad Adenauer of West Germany addressed the German Parliament on September 27, 1951:

The federal government and the great majority of the German people are conscious of the immeasurable suffering that was brought to bear upon