

# CLAIMS RESOLUTION TRIBUNAL

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In re Holocaust Victim Assets Litigation  
Case No. CV96-4849

## **Certified Award**

to Claimant [REDACTED]

## **in re Accounts of Wilhelm Witrael**

Claim Number: 221832/JT

Award Amount: 181,680.00 Swiss Francs

This Certified Award is based upon the claim of [REDACTED] (the “Claimant”) to the accounts of Wilhelm Witrael (the “Account Owner”) at the Zurich branch of the [REDACTED] (the “Bank”).

All awards are published, but where a claimant has requested confidentiality, as in this case, the names of the claimant, any relatives of the claimant other than the account owner, and the bank have been redacted.

## **Information Provided by the Claimant**

The Claimant submitted a Claim Form identifying the Account Owner as his godfather, Wilhelm Witrael, who was born on 13 February 1877 in Oradea, Romania, and was married to the Claimant’s cousin, [REDACTED], née [REDACTED], on 22 March 1925 in Oradea. The Claimant explained that [REDACTED]’s mother, [REDACTED], née [REDACTED], was the sister of his maternal grandmother, [REDACTED]. The Claimant stated that his godfather, who was Jewish, was a textile technician in Oradea, where he lived on Koschut Street at number 9 or 7. The Claimant further stated that his godfather’s business was located a few doors away from their home on the same street. According to the Claimant, the street name where his godfather lived changed during or after the Second World War, but due to the passage of time and his age, he cannot recall the new street name. The Claimant indicated that his godfather and his cousin had one child together, [REDACTED], who was born on 10 September 1929. The Claimant stated that his godfather and his cousin raised him as their son and financed his education. The Claimant further stated that he was separated from them in 1944, when he was deported to a concentration camp. The Claimant indicated that his godfather and his godfather's family were deported to concentration camps, where they all perished on unknown dates. The Claimant submitted a family tree in support of his claim.

The Claimant indicated that he was born on 6 May 1926 in Marghita, Romania.

## **Information Available in the Bank Records**

The bank records consist of a 1959 list of dormant accounts prepared by the Zurich branch of the Bank, documents prepared in connection with the 1962 Decree on Heirless Assets in Switzerland (the "1962 Decree"), and printouts from the Bank's database. According to these records, the Account Owner was Wilhelm Witrael who resided at 2, Avram Jancu in Oradea, Romania. The bank records indicate that the Account Owner held one custody account, numbered 281088, and one demand deposit account.

The custody account was included on the 1959 list of dormant accounts, and the last date of customer contact with the Bank was listed as 1938. According to the records, this account was not registered in a 1962 internal Bank survey. The account was later closed on 13 December 1986, unknown to whom. The amount in the account on the date of its closure is unknown.

The demand deposit account was opened on 2 June 1933, and was also included on the 1959 list of dormant accounts. The amount in the account as of 7 September 1959 was 765.00 Swiss Francs. According to the records, this account was registered in a 1962 internal Bank survey. The demand deposit account was later closed on an unknown date, unknown to whom. The auditors who carried out the investigation of the Bank to identify accounts of Victims of Nazi Persecution pursuant to instructions of the Independent Committee of Eminent Persons ("ICEP" or the "ICEP Investigation") did not find this account in the Bank's system of open accounts, and they therefore presumed that it was closed. These auditors indicated that there was no evidence of activity on this account after 1945. There is no evidence in the bank records that the Account Owner or his heirs closed these accounts and received the proceeds themselves.

## **The CRT's Analysis**

### Identification of the Account Owner

The Claimant has plausibly identified the Account Owner. His godfather's name and city of residence match the published name and city of residence of the Account Owner. The CRT notes that while the specific street address of the Claimant's uncle as noted by the Claimant and the address as recorded the bank records are not the same, both specify the city of Oradea as the Account Owner's city of residence. In support of his claim, the Claimant submitted a family tree. Moreover, the CRT notes that a database containing the names of victims of Nazi persecution includes a person named Ilona Witrael, née Fischer, and indicates that her city of residence at one time was Timisoara (near Oradea), Romania, which matches the information about the Account Owner's wife provided by the Claimant. The database is a compilation of names from various sources, including the Yad Vashem Memorial of Israel. The CRT notes that there are no other claims to these accounts and that there is only one person named Witarel in the entire February 2001 published list of 21,000 accounts of probable or possible victims of Nazi persecution in Swiss banks from the 1933-1945 period.

### Status of the Account Owner as a Victim of Nazi Persecution

The Claimant has made a plausible showing that the Account Owner was a Victim of Nazi Persecution. The Claimant stated that the Account Owner was Jewish, and that he and his family perished in concentration camps. Additionally, as noted above, a database containing names of Victims of Nazi Persecution includes a person named [REDACTED], née [REDACTED], and indicates that her city of residence at one time was Timisoara (near Oradea), Romania.

### The Claimant's Relationship to the Account Owner

The Claimant has plausibly demonstrated that he is related to the Account Owner. There is no information to indicate that the Account Owner has other surviving heirs.

### The Issue of Who Received the Proceeds

Given the death of the Account Owner during the Holocaust, the inclusion of both of the Account Owner's accounts in the Bank's 1959 list of dormant accounts of Nazi victims, the inclusion of one of the accounts in the 1962 survey, and the application of Presumptions (b), (h), and (j) as provided in Article 28 of the Rules Governing the Claims Resolution Process, as amended (the "Rules") (see Appendix A), the CRT concludes that it is plausible that the account proceeds were not paid to the Account Owner or his heirs. Based on its precedent and the Rules, the CRT applies presumptions to assist in the determination of whether or not Account Owners or their heirs received the proceeds of their accounts.

### Basis for the Award

The CRT has determined that an Award may be made in favor of the Claimant. First, the claim is admissible in accordance with the criteria contained in Article 18 of the Rules. Second, the Claimant has plausibly demonstrated that the Account Owner was his godfather, and that relationship justifies an Award. Finally, the CRT has determined that it is plausible that neither the Account Owner nor his heirs received the proceeds of the claimed accounts.

### Amount of the Award

In this case, the Account Owner held one custody account and one demand deposit account. Pursuant to Article 29 of the Rules, when the value of an account is unknown, as is the case here with respect to the custody account, numbered 281088, the average value of the same or a similar type of account in 1945 is used to calculate the present value of the account being awarded. Based on the ICEP Investigation, in 1945 the average value of a custody account was 13,000.00 Swiss Francs. The present value of this amount is calculated by multiplying it by a factor of 12, in accordance with Article 31(1) of the Rules, to produce an amount of 156,000.00 Swiss Francs.

The bank records indicate that the value of the demand deposit account as of 7 September 1959 was 765.00 Swiss Francs. According to Article 29 of the Rules, if the amount in a demand deposit account was less than 2,140.00 Swiss Francs and in the absence of plausible evidence to the contrary, the amount in the account shall be determined to be 2,140.00 Swiss Francs. The

present value of the amount of the award is determined by multiplying the balance as determined by Article 29 by a factor of 12, in accordance with Article 31(1) of the Rules, to produce an amount of 25,680.00 Swiss Francs. Consequently, the total award amount is 181,680.00 Swiss Francs.

### **Scope of the Award**

The Claimant should be aware that, pursuant to Article 20 of the Rules, the CRT will carry out further research on his claim to determine whether there are additional Swiss bank accounts to which he might be entitled, including research of the Total Accounts Database (consisting of records of 4.1 million Swiss bank accounts which existed between 1933 and 1945).

### **Certification of the Award**

The CRT certifies this Award for approval by the Court and payment by the Special Masters.

Claims Resolution Tribunal

March 28, 2003

## APPENDIX A

In the absence of evidence to the contrary, the Tribunal presumes that neither the Account Owners, the Beneficial Owners, nor their heirs received the proceeds of a claimed Account in cases involving one or more of the following circumstances:<sup>1</sup>

- a) the Account was closed and the Account records show evidence of persecution, or the Account was closed (i) after the imposition of Swiss visa requirements on January 20, 1939, or (ii) after the date of occupation of the country of residence of the Account Owner or Beneficial Owner, and before 1945 or the year in which the freeze of Accounts from the country of residence of the Account Owner or Beneficial Owner was lifted (whichever is later);
- b) the Account was closed after 1955 or ten years after the freeze of Accounts from the country of residence of the Account Owner or Beneficial Owner was lifted (whichever is later);
- c) the balance of the Account was reduced by fees and charges over the period leading up to the closure of the Account and the last known balance of the Account was small;
- d) the Account had been declared in a Nazi census of Jewish assets or other Nazi documentation;
- e) a claim was made to the Account after the Second World War and was not recognized by the bank;
- f) the Account Owner or Beneficial Owner had other Accounts that are open and dormant, suspended, or closed to profits, closed by fees, or closed to Nazi authorities;
- g) the only surviving Account Owner or Beneficial Owner was a child at the time of the Second World War;
- h) the Account Owners, the Beneficial Owners, and/or their heirs would not have been able to obtain information about the Account after the Second World War from the Swiss bank due to the Swiss banks' practice of withholding or misstating account information in their responses to inquiries by Account Owners, Beneficial Owners, and heirs because of the banks' concerns regarding double liability;<sup>2</sup>
- i) the Account Owners, Beneficial Owners, or their heirs resided in a Communist country in Eastern Europe after the War; and/or
- j) there is no indication in the bank records that the Account Owners, Beneficial Owners, or their heirs received the proceeds of the Account.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Independent Commission of Experts Switzerland - Second World War, Switzerland, National Socialism and the Second World War: Final Report (2002) (hereinafter "Bergier Final Report"); see also Independent Committee of Eminent Persons, Report on Dormant Accounts of Victims of Nazi Persecution in Swiss Banks (1999)

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(hereinafter "ICEP Report"). The CRT has also taken into account, among other things, various laws, acts, decrees, and practices used by the Nazi regime and the governments of Austria, the Sudetenland, the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, the Free City of Danzig, Poland, the Incorporated Area of Poland, the *Generalgouvernement* of Poland, the Netherlands, Slovakia and France to confiscate Jewish assets held abroad.

<sup>2</sup> See Bergier Final Report at 443-44, 446-49; see also ICEP Report at 81-83.

<sup>3</sup> As described in the Bergier Final Report and the ICEP Report, the Swiss banks destroyed or failed to maintain account transactional records relating to Holocaust-era accounts. There is evidence that this destruction continued after 1996, when Swiss law prohibited destruction of bank records. Bergier Final Report at 40 (stating "[i]n the case of Union Bank of Switzerland . . . , however, documents were being disposed of even after the Federal Decree [of 13 December 1996]"). The wholesale destruction of relevant bank records occurred at a time when the Swiss banks knew that claims were being made against them and would continue to be made for monies deposited by victims of Nazi persecution who died in the Holocaust and that were (i) improperly paid to the Nazis, see Albers v. Credit Suisse, 188 Misc. 229, 67 N.Y.S.2d 239 (N.Y. City Ct. 1946); Bergier Final Report at 443, (ii) that were improperly paid to the Communist controlled governments of Poland and Hungary, see Bergier Final Report at 450 -51, and possibly Romania as well, see Peter Hug and Marc Perrenoud, Assets in Switzerland of Victims of Nazism and the Compensation Agreements with East Bloc Countries (1997), and (iii) that were retained by Swiss Banks for their own use and profit. See Bergier Final Report at 446-49.

"The discussion on "unclaimed cash" persisted throughout the post-war period due to claims for restitution by survivors and heirs of the murdered victims, or restitution organizations acting on their behalf." Id. at 444. Nevertheless, the Swiss Banks continued to destroy records on a massive scale and to obstruct those making claims. ICEP Report, Annex 4 ¶ 5; In re Holocaust Victim Asset Litig., 105 F. Supp.2d 139, 155-56 (E.D.N.Y. 2000). Indeed, "[i]n May 1954, the legal representatives of the big banks co-ordinated their response to heirs [of account holders] so that the banks would have at their disposal a concerted mechanism for deflecting any kind of enquiry." Bergier Final Report at 446. Similarly, "the banks and their Association lobbied against legislation that would have required publication of the names of so called 'heirless assets accounts,' legislation that if enacted and implemented, would have obviated the ICEP investigation and the controversy of the last 30 years." ICEP Report at 15. Indeed, in order to thwart such legislation, the Swiss Bankers Association encouraged Swiss banks to underreport the number of accounts in a 1956 survey. "A meager result from the survey," it said, "will doubtless contribute to the resolution of this matter [the proposed legislation] in our favor." ICEP Report at 90 (quoting a letter from the Swiss Bankers Association to its board members dated June 7, 1956). "To summarize, it is apparent that the claims of surviving Holocaust victims were usually rejected under the pretext of bank secrecy . . . ", Bergier Final Report at 455, or outright deception about the existence of information, while wholesale destruction of bank records continued for over a half century. Under these circumstances, utilizing the fundamental evidentiary principles of United States law that would have applied to Deposited Assets claims had the class action lawsuits been litigated through trial, the CRT draws an adverse inference against the banks where documentary evidence was destroyed or is not provided to assist the claims administrators. See In re Holocaust Victim Asset Litig., 105 F. Supp.2d 139, 152 (E.D.N.Y. 2000); Reilly v. Natwest Markets Group, Inc., 181 F.3d 253, 266-68 (2d Cir. 1999); Kronisch v. United States, 150 F.3d 112, 126-28 (2d Cir. 1998).