Friday, December 12, 2003

Reparations sought in Nazi-era train looting



Holocaust survivors _ the first such claims

we should have a Judiciary oversight hear-

ing," said Specter, who is a member of the

growing clamor in Congress over the Gold

Train. Sen. Carl Levin, D-Mich., has accused

the U.S. Justice Department of foot-dragging,

and 14 minority members of the House

Judiciary Committee have called for hearings

The Gold Train is an "unexplained depar-

ture" from U.S. policy of returning property to

Holocaust victims, according to a 1999 draft

report from the Presidential Advisory

Commission on Holocaust Assets in the

In May 2001, a group of Hungarian

Holocaust survivors filed suit in U.S. District

Court in Miami, seeking a maximum payment

of \$10,000 each. Their attorneys have gath-

ered a list of more than 2,800 people who

have contacted the lawyers as potential mem-

along with her husband, Andrew Katona, 80.

The couple emigrated from Hungary in 1956,

arrived in the United States in 1958, and

became citizens. They now live in Bala

the United States and Canada are asking the

United States to take responsibility for the

The Katonas and others from throughout

The list includes Magda Katona, now 83,

'I think we've come to a point now where

Specter is the first Republican to join the

filed against the United States.

by that panel.

bers of a class action.

Cynwyd, Pa.

Magda Katona is shown in this undated childhood photo, taken prior to World War II. She and her usband, Andrew, hope to be part of a class action suit against the U.S. government for failing to proat their valuables on the "Gold Train," which fell into the possession of American forces at the end of

> By Jeff Shields KRT CAMPUS

PHILADELPHIA — In spring of 1945, as Allies were marching to victory in Europe, lagda Katona was riding a boxcar away rom Auschwitz, on a journey through Eastern urope toward her hometown in Hungary.

About the same time, another train was teaming in the opposite direction, out of lungary, away from the advancing Russian my. That train — later called the "Gold — was laden with precious valuables e Nazis had stolen from an estimated 25,000 Hungarian Jews.

The loot, loaded into 46 rail cars by the ngarian Nazi government, was staggering. In board were more than five tons of gold, rom gold bars to gold teeth broken out of neir owners' mouths; nearly 700 pounds of liamonds and pearls; more than 1,250 paintngs; 5,000 Persian and Oriental rugs; and nore than 1,500 cases of silverware.

The Gold Train, or 29 cars of it, fell into e hands of the U.S. Army in mid-May 1945 Austria, and the treasure ended up in a alzburg warehouse. According to estimates, e treasure would be worth \$1 billion today. he plunder and auction of those goods emain one of the dark passages of World War according to a U.S. commission that invesgated the case

This week, U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., ill ask the Senate Judiciary Committee to onduct hearings into the government's efusal to recognize claims of the Hungarian loss of the valuables that belonged to

Hungarian Jews. They point out that the United States has insisted on Holocaust reparations from the Swiss, Germans and others. The Americans kept telling everybody

that they should be responsible, but then when it comes to themselves, it's a different story," said Gabor Somjen, 72, a Hungarian Holocaust survivor now living in Morris County, N.J., with his wife, Agnes, who is a named plaintiff in the federal lawsuit.

Magda Katona was 23 when she accompanied her mother to the bank in April 1944 to "deposit" earrings, necklaces, bracelets, and rings, under order of the Hungarian Nazi Arrowcross Party. All Hungarian Jews were forced to put their gold, silver and other precious items in banks and abandon

Between May 15 and July 9, 1944, more than 437,000 Hungarian Jews were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, and more than 550,000 were murdered in the course of the Holocaust. Magda Katona lost her parents. Andrew Katona's mother and much of his family on his father's side were killed.

Far away from the Holocaust and content in her retirement, Magda Katona told her story stoically, but when she was done, she announced, "I won't sleep tonight."

After the war, while people such as the Katonas were staggering back to their homes to rebuild their lives, high-ranking U.S. military officers in Europe were dipping into the

Since the filing of the lawsuit, plaintiffs have obtained documents criticizing the U.S. actions, including a letter from the Army's fine arts officer in Austria, Evelyn Tucker, who was sent home in 1946 after complaining about the handling of the Gold Train.

"From then until October 1947 the negligence of this explosive situation was hardly short of being criminal," Tucker wrote in a 1949 letter to an Army official, included in an amended complaint filed this month. "There was no control then on what American officers sent home and there is very little now."

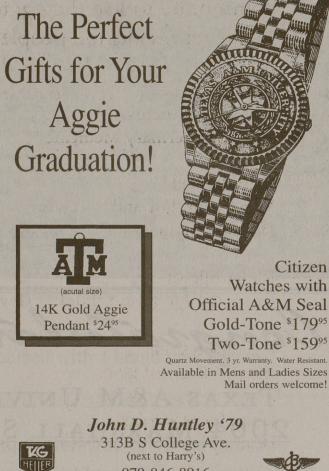
Though the French returned to Hungary portions of the Gold Train's loot that it had intercepted, the United States ignored repeated pleas to do so.

Instead, major parts of the cache were put up for auction in 1948 in New York to support war-relief efforts. A detailed inventory of those items has been made available online at www.hagens-berman.com, the Web site of the Seattle-based law firm that is leading the liti-

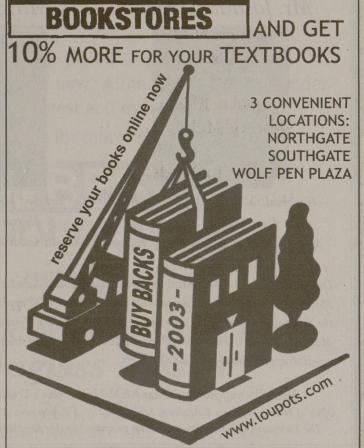
The Justice Department and the Army have declined to comment, citing the suit. But in a Sept. 17 letter to U.S. Sen. Rick Santorum, R-Pa., _ who forwarded a letter from the Katonas _ Assistant Attorney General Peter D. Keisler said, "I can assure you that the Department is committed to working with the plaintiffs on these sensitive matters in order to reach a full and fair resolution of their claims.'







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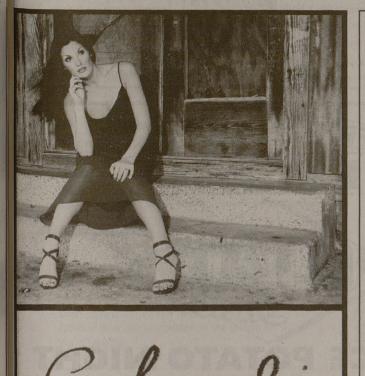
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