

Reparations sought in Nazi-era train looting



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

By Jeff Shields
KRT CAMPUS

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

About the same time, another train was steaming in the opposite direction, out of Hungary, away from the advancing Russian army. That train — later called the "Gold Train" — was laden with precious valuables the Nazis had stolen from an estimated 725,000 Hungarian Jews.

The loot, loaded into 46 rail cars by the Hungarian Nazi government, was staggering. On board were more than five tons of gold, from gold bars to gold teeth broken out of their owners' mouths; nearly 700 pounds of diamonds and pearls; more than 1,250 paintings; 5,000 Persian and Oriental rugs; and more than 1,500 cases of silverware.

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

This week, U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., will ask the Senate Judiciary Committee to conduct hearings into the government's refusal to recognize claims of the Hungarian

Holocaust survivors — the first such claims filed against the United States.

"I think we've come to a point now where we should have a Judiciary oversight hearing," said Specter, who is a member of the committee.

Specter is the first Republican to join 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 by that panel.

The Gold Train is an "unexplained departure" 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 United States.

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 gathered a list of more than 2,800 people who have contacted the lawyers as potential members of a class action.

The list includes Magda Katona, now 83, 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 Cynwyd, Pa.

The Katonas and others from throughout the United States and Canada are asking the United States to take responsibility for the 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 their homes.

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 Gold Train.

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 litigation.

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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