

“Holocaust Era Assets—After the Prague Conference”
Hearing of the U.S. Helsinki Commission
May 25, 2010
Rep. Chris Smith

Mr. Chairman, thank you for calling this hearing, and welcome to Ambassador Eizenstat and everyone joining us this afternoon. I'm sorry to note that one of the witnesses from one of the Commission's earlier hearings on Holocaust era assets, Mr. Jan Sammer, passed away just a few months ago. He was a principled and tenacious advocate for property rights in the Czech Republic and I am deeply saddened that the Czech Republic did not resolve its unjust and discriminatory practices before his death, and, indeed, has not done so yet.

Mr. Chairman, our government must pursue justice for those robbed by the Nazis and their accomplices, and still defrauded by governments who connive at the Nazis' crimes by refusing to make them right. Each year we lose more Holocaust survivors, and that precious generation of witnesses will soon be gone. The failure to return their properties is tragic proof of the axiom: “justice delayed is justice denied.”

Very often the failure to return properties is morally incomprehensible and impossible to justify, and reflects very poorly on the government concerned. Let me mention just one such case. Three years ago, I joined with other members of the Helsinki Commission to write to the Hungarian Foreign Minister regarding artwork looted from the family of Martha Nierenberg during World War II. The Hungarian Government does not dispute that these paintings were unjustly taken from the family – in fact, the family's paintings have been on display in Hungarian museums with signs stating as much. Yet the Hungarian government refuses to return the paintings. This is a blatant and gross injustice.

Mr. Chairman, many wrongs of the Holocaust can never, ever be undone. But this one can be. The Hungarian government has the legal authority to return these stolen paintings--and it has the moral responsibility to do so. Likewise other governments in Europe have a serious moral responsibility to return property stolen during the Holocaust. Really, it is hard to imagine how some people sleep at night, living in homes stolen from Jewish families during the Holocaust, enjoying paintings and real estate stolen from Holocaust victims, while the victims' descendants are cut off and shut out. How do the government officials that enable this injustice sleep at night?

Ambassador Eizenstat, welcome again, and thank you for your extraordinary leadership and vision in demanding justice for those who were unjustly deprived of their property during the Holocaust.