TOMÁŠ KRAUS

THE ISSUE OF RESTITUTION IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

During the existence of the so-called First Czechoslovak Republic (1918–38) the Jews enjoyed unprecedented freedom, equality and safety. Czechoslovakia's Jewish population numbered 350,000 by 1930, of which 120,000 lived in Bohemia and Moravia, which consitute today the Czech Republic, and 120,000 in Slovakia, while the rest resided in sub-Carpathian Ruthenia, a region that is today a part of Ukraine. After 1933 the Jewish population rose to more than 400,000 due to the influx of German Jews, who escaped after Hitler took power and rightly viewed Czechoslovakia as an oasis of freedom and democracy in an otherwise hostile Europe.

The Holocaust was a complete disaster for Czech Jewry. It began, for the first time in Europe, with the expulsion of the Jewish population from the Sudeten-German regions after the Munich Treaty in 1938 and it ended with the closing of the Terezín concentration camp only in fall 1945 after the typhoid epidemic. Only about 30,000 Jews started to recreate Jewish life in Bohemia and Moravia in 1945–46. Only a few years later those who were still in the country faced a further challenge when communists took power in February 1948. Those who remained (emigration to Israel was possible for some time) went through an antisemitic period marked by the so-called Slánský trial in the early 1950s. They then enjoyed some freedom in the late 1960s, to which the Soviet-led invasion in August 1968 put an end (again many Jews left the country) to be completely drowned by the communists' so-called normalisation led by the Husák régime. It was the 'Velvet Revolution' in November 1989 that brought freedom to Czech society and its Jewish community. Today there are ten Jewish communities in Bohemia and Moravia with approximately 3,000 registered members of which the half reside in Prague. Other Jewish institutions account for approximately another 2,000 people; however, it is estimated that there are an additional 10,000 to 15,000 unregistered Jews in the country.

AFTER THE 'VELVET REVOLUTION'

In one of his first speeches as President – at New Year in 1990 – Václav Havel addressed several issues which were of utmost concern to the Czech Jewish community – re-establishing diplomatic relations with Israel (broken off in 1967 after the Six-Days-War) and the restitution of property, including Jewish property. President Havel became one of the most active advocates of this process, though his moral appeal sometimes fell on deaf ears. Still, Jewish topics were brought to public attention and there was considerable sympathy and support from wide circles of the population.

There were many reasons for this, above all the fact that some of Jewish personalities helped – as opponents of the regime – to overthrow communism. The image of the Jews as victims of the Holocaust, a fact that for twenty years could not have been mentioned, played a substantial part as well.

RESTITUTION OF JEWISH PROPERTY

The process of restitution of Jewish real estate properties began in 1992 before the split of Czechoslovakia. The Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic assembled at that time around 1,000 records of communal Jewish property, i.e. real estate owned by Jewish communities and by other Jewish institutions (foundations, unions, clubs, etc.) throughout Bohemia and Moravia. After careful evaluation, the final list included 202 items, as most of the buildings and lots were not claimed for various reasons. For instance, many synagogues had been given during the post-war years to various Christian – mostly Protestant – churches with the consent of the Jewish community leaders who – aware of the impossibility of recovering Jewish life in most of the 153 pre-war Jewish communities – preferred at that time to see religious services being held in the buildings, rather than their conversion into warehouses. Another example was plots on which different infrastructure had been built over the decades, e.g. roads. The final list of 202 items formed, however, just one part of a bill submitted – due to the split of the country only in late 1993 – to the Czech Parliament. The bill included another two parts: the return of the State Jewish Museum and draft legislation enabling individual claims to Jewish property.

The Parliament rejected the bill as a whole in February 1994 with reference to a law passed in 1991 that transferred some of the state property to municipal authorities. The argument for the rejection was that if the proposed list had entered into force as a law it would have amounted to expropriation similar to that carried out by the communists. Shortly after the rejection of the bill the representatives of the Federation of Jewish Communities met Václav Klaus, who was prime minister at the time. He suggested that other ways should be found to solve this problem and appealed to municipalities to return Jewish property even in the absence of legislation – a similar appeal was signed by all three leaders of the ruling coalition parties. At the same time Klaus assured the Federation that everything owned currently by the state would be returned. Also the remaining two issues were promised to be quickly solved.

In June 1994 a law was indeed adopted by the Czech Parliament extending the existing individual private restitution legislation for claimants who lost their properties between 1938 and 1945 and who were unable to recover them by 1948 due to the communists coup-d´état. The law set a limited term for claims, but this was extended on several times occasions. (The last amendment came after a ruling by the Constitutional Court, which

abolished the condition of the claimant's permanent residence in the Czech Republic and set a new term until September 1996.) Though many individuals were successful in recovering ownership, many cases have still not been concluded. Often further court proceedings have been necessary: for instance, where a court ruling has gone against the philosophy of the legislation, stressing mere technical details rather than a just and moral settlement. In addition two large groups of individuals were not even affected by the legislation – people who were not Czech citizens as well as former owners of agricultural properties. Besides, another vast group of individual properties, those without heirs, was never even discussed. In general, however, it can be said that the first section of the bill drafted by the Czech Jewish Federation in 1994 was fulfilled.

The second part came to fruition when in October 1994 the State Jewish Museum ceased to exist and a new institution, the Jewish Museum in Prague, replaced it. The founders of this new body were the Federation of Jewish Communities, which regained ownership of the vast majority of Judaica collections from the Museum, the Prague Jewish Community as the old-new owner of the buildings, mostly synagogues housing the exhibitions, and the Czech Ministry of Culture which held a marginal part of the Judaica collection assembled since 1950 (when the Museum was nationalised). Together these three subjects launched an institution that was able, within a very limited timeframe, to change the entire image and work of the Jewish Museum, making it one of the most important and successful operations in the country.

The development of the third part of the original bill was less satisfactory. In March and May 1994 the Czech Government under Prime Minister Klaus decided to return all properties owned by the state. This did indeed take place, although with several exceptions. The state-owned properties formed, however, only about one quarter of the original 202 items on the list. The rest were privatised either by endorsing the ownership of town municipalities or by privatisation projects that legally transferred the real estate to private companies. The absence of a law exposed the Federation and the individual Jewish communities to long and complicated negotiations, which were not always successful. By mid-1997 less then a half of the items claimed in the original list had been returned to individual Jewish communities in the country.

The situation of Jewish restitution is reminiscent of a Talmudic image of a half-filled cup – the optimists would say it was half full, the pessimists would say it was half-empty. The truth was that thanks to this limited return of property some of the Czech Jewish communities were able to build a base for their future development. Unfortunately, with the buildings they also inherited the debts, as for a period of 50 years or more nobody had invested in these properties and in many cases they were literally falling apart. This created a need for either a return of the real estate or compensation for those still missing, in order to enable the Jewish communities to invest and continue in their efforts to restore and revive Jewish life in the country.

In early 1998 the Federation began negotiations with the cabinet of Prime Minister Tošovský. His government, however, was unable to deal with this issue, due to a short mandate in the interim before pre-election. The Social Democratic Party went into the election campaign with the restitution of Jewish properties as one of its program topics. After successfully winning the election this theme was included in the program of the Social Democratic Government. This act coincided with the global effort to recover Holocaust Era assets culminating at a conference held in Washington in early December 1998.

JOINT COMMISSION FOR MITIGATING THE INJUSTICE OF THE HOLOCAUST

In January 1999 the Czech Government decided to establish a "Joint Commission for Mitigating Some of the Injustices Caused to Holocaust Victims" to deal with all issues concerning Jewish properties and assets. Headed by Vice Prime Minister Pavel Rychetsky it consisted of representatives of the Czech state and the Federation of Jewish Communities, which invited foreign participants such as the American Jewish Committee and the World Jewish Restitution Organisation. The Commission formed three working sub-committees, first to deal with legislation and unsolved individual restitution, second focusing on Jewish communal properties, and third searching the archives to reveal the fate of looted art, bank accounts, insurance and other valuables. The Commission proposed to the Czech Government several steps – legislation, government action, rulings, etc. – which would lead to rectifying the injustice caused to the Czech Jewish population during World War II and deepened in the decades of communism that followed. Concrete results were achieved – a report on Nazi-looted Jewish gold and jewellery was published and the report showed that part of the Red Army war-loot is still in Moscow.

INDIVIDUAL RESTITUTION

In cases of individual restitution the Commission stated that the legislation which was valid until August 1996 had enabled a number of claimants to recover their or their families' possessions. The Commission was at the same time fully aware of the fact that the approach of various courts was not always favourable and in many cases very formalistic. However, the Commission could not interfere in the independent judicial decisions and verdicts of individual courts. In this sense the Commission noted with satisfaction that the Constitutional Court had issued several verdicts that met the requirements of basic justice.

The same law also enables the Government to issue an order transferring real estate ownership from state institutions to the Federation, or individual

Jewish communities. The final list is now (as of September 2001) being discussed with the respective authorities and is due to be approved by the end of the year.

Though the Commission found the restitution legislation appropriate, it focused on two groups of claimants whose claims could not be raised at all – former owners of agriculture land and claimants without Czech citizenship. The Commission has submitted legislative proposals to the Government which would enable the first group to launch claims. This law was approved by the Czech Parliament in June 2000 and published in the Collection of Laws under No. 212/2000. As in the case of other restitution legislation, claimants with Czech citizenship could approach respective owners. If an owner was unwilling to return a property, the matter could be taken to a court of law. The deadline for claims regarding agriculture property was 6 June 2001.

The law also enabled the return of artworks in the ownership of state institutions such as galleries and museums even without the condition of Czech citizenship of the claimant. Such claims had to be addressed directly to the respective institution possessing the artwork. The claimant is not obliged to have Czech citizenship. The deadline for claims was the end of 2002 year. This was a breakthrough in Czech legislation but the Czech government was also among the very first European nations to issue this kind of law.

HOLOCAUST VICTIMS FOUNDATION

For the second group of claimants, those without Czech citizenship, the Commission elaborated an „extra-legislative" solution. Namely, the Government transferred a sum of 300 million CZK (i.e. around USD 750,000) to the "Holocaust Victims Foundation" established by the Federation with the participation of the Government. This Foundation will reserve approx. one third of this sum for the purposes of those who lost their property in the territory of today's Czech Republic in the years 1938–45 and were not able to recover ownership after 1990 mainly for procedural reasons. This concerns also the heirs of such properties. The Holocaust Victims Foundation will assemble all claims that would have met the conditions required by expired Czech laws and were not compensated before (e.g. based on bilateral agreements concluded by Czechoslovakia and other countries concerning compensation for property nationalisation). Unlike other legislation, the condition of Czech citizenship will not be required by the Foundation's regulations. The deadline for submitting applications was 31 December 2001. After evaluating the quantity and quality of claims the Foundation was to grant every claimant a financial sum, however, not as compensation but rather as a symbolic gesture. However, the Federation considers it necessary that individuals should receive the value of the lost property. This is particularly difficult in a situation where neither the total number of claims nor the values of claimed properties are

known. It is impossible therefore to estimate a total financial sum needed for compensation, if it is not to become a caricature of the original purpose, i.e. the effort of the Czech Government to rectify, to the best of its abilities, the injustices caused to Holocaust victims. The Federation therefore considers the given sum as an advance payment which should be increased after the final evaluation of all claims.

COMMUNAL PROPERTIES

Having consulted with its partners, the AJC and the WJRO, the Federation concluded that the sum – or at least two-thirds of it, i.e. CZK 200 million – which the Czech Government transferred to the Foundation can be considered, in the light of the present abilities of the Czech state, an acceptable form of partial compensation for Jewish communal property, which is owned today by the state and could have not been returned physically. These means could at least help to solve some of the tasks which Jewish communities, brought together in the Federation, cannot handle sufficiently today. These are great needs in the area of social care – primarily the needs of Holocaust survivors – Jewish education programs and projects for preserving Jewish monuments and cemeteries in the territory of the Czech Republic.

The sub-committee of the Joint Commission dealing with communal properties assembled numerous materials from the state and municipal archives. It concluded that Jewish communities and other Jewish legal entities possessed before 1938 approx. 1,500 real estate properties, cemeteries, synagogues, plots, communal buildings, etc. Many of these properties were destroyed not only during World War II but also during the decades of communism that followed. Many were returned in the short period of democracy between 1945 and 1948. Many have been privatised or taken over by municipalities after 1990. However, there are still several dozen properties owned and administered by the state. A full report focusing on structure and types of real estate will be published by the end of 2001. This historical research, however, has also served as a building block for the Government decree, which should return a selected number of state-owned properties to Czech Jewish communities by the end of 2001, as well as for further negotiations about respective compensation.

LOOTED GOLD

The purchase of precious metals, jewels, and other valuables representing Jewish property was conducted in the following manner: the owner(s) offered such items 'voluntarily' or under pressure to the Hadega Company. Through Hadega, the owner(s) simultaneously applied to the *Vermögensamt beim Reichsprotektor in Böhmen und Mähren* [Property Office of

the Reich Protector of Bohemia and Moravia] for the above-mentioned authorisation of the sale. When the sales permit was granted, the Foreign-Exchange Division of the *Vermögensamt* notified the owner(s) of the respective items and the banks where the respective items were deposited for mandatory safekeeping. The hand-over of the valuables from the banks to the Hadega Company was, in most cases, duly recorded, and the banks conveyed their hand-over reports to the *Vermögensamt*. After the concluded sale of precious metals or jewels to Hadega, the original owners received the sales proceeds less the cost incurred by all the institutions involved in the process, provided that the amount payable did not exceed 500,000 Protectorate crowns. Amounts exceeding such limit had to be remitted to the sellers' accounts which were maintained as blocked accounts in accordance with the notice of the Audit Department of the Protectorate Ministry of Finance of 23 January 1940 as published in the *Gazette* of the Protectorate Bohemia and Moravia No. 22 of 27 January 1940.

From the fall of 1941, confiscated jewels and other valuables were handed over to the *Vermögensamt* created by the Ordinance of the Reich Protector of 2 September 1941 and charged with the administration of enemy property. The *Vermögensamt* continuously collected such property at the *Böhmische Escompte-Bank* [Discount Bank for Bohemia]. By the end of 1938, police divisions and organs of state administration in the Sudeten area, which had been incorporated in the German Reich, received the order to report any confiscated Jewish jewels in their custody. However, according to their reports of January 1939, no such assets existed. Jewish religious objects were destroyed or stolen during the so-called *Kristallnacht* of 9–10 November 1938 (an organised pogrom during which most synagogues on land ceded to Germany were burned or torn down). Under the pressure applied by the occupation authorities, the National Bank was forced to assume the role of a clearing office used for purchases of gold from the Hadega Company in Prague and, from 1942, also from the *Zentralamt für die Regelung der Judenfrage* [Central Office for the Solution of the Jewish Question] and the *Auswanderungsfond für Böhmen und Mähren* [Emigration Fund for Bohemia and Moravia]. The activities of the Hadega Company centred upon purchases and re-sales of precious metals, precious stones and pearls from Jews, Jewish enterprises and Jewish associations. At the time of the mass deportations of Jews to concentration camps, gold ingots from recast Jewish jewels confiscated by the Hadega Company and/or by the *Auswanderungsfond für Böhmen und Mähren* were deposited at the National Bank. The right of disposal of this gold had the *Überwachungsstelle beim Ministerium für Wirtschaft und Arbeit* in Prague [Inspection Department at the Ministry of Economy and Labour] created in 1942. In name, the *Überwachungsstelle* was a German inspection unit, but in reality it was the governing body of the Protectorate Ministry of Economy and Labour (the Ministry was administered exclusively by Germans). The National Bank was further obliged to accept for safekeeping (from Hadega and the *Auswanderungsfond für Böhmen und Mähren*) any confiscated and recast Jewish sil-

ver; the disposal rights of this silver were due to the *Reichsstelle für Edelmetalle* in Berlin. Any gold purchased by the National Bank from the *Auswanderungsfond für Böhmen und Mähren* became a part of the funds item called 'monetary gold acquired by purchase.' After a thorough evaluation of the surviving archive materials, the team of experts came to the conclusion that the total amount of gold provably confiscated from Jewish individuals, firms, and associations amounted to 614.62 kilograms. This amount represents the most conservative estimate of this category of 'Aryanized property' (lower limit), given that the records of direct sales to the Hadega Company are no longer available; in addition, it is now impossible to document the quantity of gold objects confiscated by the German customs authorities from Jewish emigrants crossing the Reich borders. As of 9 May 1945, the amount of gold procured from Jews and deposited in the vaults of the National Bank by the Hadega Company and the *Auswanderungsfond für Böhmen und Mähren* totalled 413.6 kilograms. A certain portion of this gold remained in the form of jewels and was stored as a bank deposit of the *Auswanderungsfond für Böhmen und Mähren*, above all at the *Böhmische Escompte-Bank*. The following numbers were established by the Commission with respect to silver, platinum, and diamonds (brilliant cut): 5.49 kilograms of platinum and 16,744.594 kilograms of silver (these precious metals were illegally confiscated from Jewish individuals and legal entities and were subsequently used for the needs of the German war industry); 5,128.8 carats of diamonds (brilliant cut) and 582.1 carats of diamond rosettes (Hadega's registered intake, 1941–44). The concluding chapter of the present report describes the fate of Jewish property unsold by the Germans and kept in the vaults of several Prague-based banks until the end of World War II. Until then, the Jewish assets forming the deposit (today, these assets are virtually untraceable) were administered by two institutions: the so-called *Vermögensamt* and the *Auswanderungsfond für Böhmen und Mähren*. In addition, the concluding chapter explains the fate of the Jewish gold which had become, due to a decision taken by the German-administered Foreign-Exchange Branch of the National Bank for Bohemia and Moravia, an integral part of the gold reserves registered with this banking institution during the war. As late as 1995, the renowned researcher Karel Sommer had to admit that the final fate of National Bank's gold was unknown. The conclusion of the Expert Commission is unambiguous: the entire amount of the Jewish gold committed to the National Bank and some of the above mentioned anonymous Jewish assets unsold by the end of the war were taken to the Soviet Union as Soviet booty. Some of the assets found in the vaults (i.e. nominal assets of the Jewish victims of German persecution) were exempted from booty and set aside for future restitution to the original owners. The scope of this restitution could be possibly verified by the Czech National Bank. In spite of its legally impeccable and straightforward basis for negotiations, Czechoslovak diplomats were forced to give up their efforts to have the above-mentioned assets exempted from the Soviet booty claimed; the Czechoslovak side yielded to

Soviet pressure after relatively long and complicated negotiations; it must be added that the Soviet side did not conduct these negotiations completely fairly. The Czechoslovak decision to surrender the claims was influenced by purely political reasons: it gave up the assets in question in return for Soviet support in the international arena and to obtain certain results important to the Czechoslovak state.

INSURANCE AND OTHER VALUABLES

Before World War II Czechoslovakia was a free market economy. From the turn of the century, banks already had controlling influence over numerous industries and had become a primary force in furthering business organisations. Inter-war Czechoslovakia was also an important inter-mediator between western economies, namely Britain and France, and South-Eastern Europe. At the same time, Western entrepreneurs were competing with German companies for their share of the Czechoslovak market. In response, German industry tried to extend its influence in order to undermine Czechoslovak economic connections with Western countries and allies in the region. While the principal direct investors were Great Britain and France, German entrepreneurs obtained their influence through cartel agreements. The insurance sector in inter-war Czechoslovakia was comparable to the insurance industry in any developed country. There was a tradition of availability of all types of insurance, and Czechoslovakia had very strong international ties. Foreign companies controlled much of the industry within the country

In order to understand the insurance policies of Holocaust victims, it is important to be familiar with the main legal tools for insurance before World War II: a regulation from 1924 prohibiting insurance companies from denominating their policies in currencies other than the Czechoslovak currency (in 1933, the same was done for policies denominated in gold) and the *Law on securing the claims of insurance companies' clients and concerning state supervision (No. 147/1934)*. This law mandated a necessary level of reserve funds for insurance payments. In 1938, there were twenty-eight domestic and six foreign life insurance companies in Czechoslovakia. The average life insurance policy face value was K 13,142 in domestic companies and 28,869 K in foreign companies. There were about 1,255 million people insured with Czechoslovak companies, while foreign insurance companies insured approximately 161,000 clients.

The Munich Treaty from 1938 also included, besides political, territorial and military clauses, an economic agenda. Consequently the issue of property claims against Czechoslovakia was raised immediately after the Nazi German annexation of the Sudetenland. Though the main concern was the division of the gold and hard currency reserves of the Czechoslovak Central Bank, the insurance industry was also subject to division. All insurance business in the Sudetenland was transferred from Czechoslovak com-

panies to German, Austrian, Italian or Swiss insurance companies. Although an international agreement about the division of insurance business between Nazi Germany and Czechoslovakia was being compiled before 15 March 1939, the final separation was carried out by 30 June 1939, three months after the occupation of the rest of the Czech territory.

After the Munich Treaty, the vast majority of the Jewish population in the Sudetenland escaped and moved to the territory remaining under Czechoslovak control. For those who did not, it is reasonable to assume that the fate of their insurance policies and other property was identical to that of the Jews from Germany and Austria, whose policies and other property were confiscated by the Reich. In 1943, the total premium income of insurance companies in the Sudetenland was estimated to be approximately 13 million RM in life insurance and about 30 million RM in general insurance.

After the Nazi occupation of the remainder of Czechoslovakia at the beginning of World War II, the business of insurance companies from nations at war with Nazi Germany was taken over by German companies. The first insurance regulation aimed directly at Jews was introduced only a few weeks after the occupation, on 29 April 1939. It declared that Jews could only receive their insurance payments in accounts within a selected group of banks, and that these bank accounts would be regulated by the state. Jews were not allowed to change certain conditions of their insurance policies, such as cession and changing of the beneficiary.

On 21 June 1939, the *Reichsprotektor* of Bohemia and Moravia decreed that almost all property had to be registered and administered under the control of the Protectorate. The Finance Ministry ordered in January 1940 that all payments to Jews had to go directly into their bank accounts, which were under state control. This limited Jews' possibilities of cashing their insurance policies directly. The application of all these regulations was so complicated that the Association of Insurance Companies published a special guide for the insurance industry with respect to *Jewish laws*. By law, Jews could only withdraw up to K 3,000 from their bank accounts per month. However, they were obliged to pay, from this amount, premiums of their private insurance policies up to the limit of K 750 per month.

The Insurance industry in the Protectorate was supervised by the Ministry of Interior until January 1942. After this date, the responsibility passed to the Ministry of Economy and Labour which was under the direct control of Nazi Germany. From May 1941, the centralisation of the insurance industry in the Protectorate paralleled that of Nazi Germany. The entire industry was controlled through a central institution, *the Zentralverband der Vertragsversicherung in Böhmen und Mähren* [Central Association of Private Insurance in Bohemia and Moravia], which was designed to serve as an intermediary between the insurance industry and the government. Two economic divisions were established under this Association; one for life insurance and the other for general insurance.

At the beginning of the Protectorate era, Jewish emigration was still viewed by the German authorities as the main solution to the 'Jewish ques-

tion'. Systematic expropriation of the property of Jewish emigrants was organised in order to strengthen the expansion of German banks and industrial groups in the Protectorate. By 29 March 1939, it had already been agreed by the representatives from German banks, the German Ministry of Economy, the Gestapo, and *Sicherheitsdienst* that Jews should be allowed to emigrate only if they were willing to leave their property under the care of a German bank. Otherwise, the Gestapo would not allow them to emigrate. Jews seeking an emigration permit also had to deposit their private insurance policies in an authorised bank. Official Jewish emigration was organised by the *Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung* which was founded by the Hitler-appointed German *Reichsprotektor* in July 1939. This institution was supervised by the chief of S*icherheitsdienst*, Walter Stahlecker, and it closely co-operated with Adolf Eichmann in the Berlin Gestapo Headquarters. In order to manage the Centre's property, the *Auswanderungsfond für Böhmen und Mähren* was established in March 1940. The occupation authorities intended to use the *Auswanderungsfond für Böhmen und Mähren* to support the German settlement of the Protectorate. The Centre had issued 16,782 passports by the first quarter of 1941. According to the report of the Prague Jewish community in 1942, 25,977 Jews left the Protectorate between 15 March 1939 and 30 November 1942.

The Gestapo confiscated the insurance policies of people who emigrated illegally, or who violated the Protectorate laws in any way. This policy applied to all former Czechoslovak citizens who decided to leave the Protectorate, and even to those who left before the Nazi German occupation. The *Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung* was responsible for the confiscation of the assets of Jews deported to concentration camps and to ghettos. People asked to register for emigration had to re-declare all their property, including private belongings such as suits, furniture, and food ration vouchers. They were forced to give a power of attorney to *the Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung* which administered this property.

From the beginning of the occupation, the Gestapo, which ordered the confiscation of assets of people and organisations that were declared 'enemies of the Reich', had to look after this property as well. However, with the growing volume of assets, it became more and more difficult to manage. In September 1941, the *Reichsprotector* established the *Vermögensamt* to administer the confiscated property.

There is evidence that the Gestapo and later the *Vermögensamt* or the *Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung* were not required to have the original insurance agreements in order to receive payments. The history of cash flows originating from confiscated policies is not yet fully documented. The archives of the former Czech Escomt Bank (CEB) and of the Dresdner Bank, could potentially reveal evidence of these transactions. The recent search in the archive of the Czech Union Bank (Deutsche Bank Group) uncovered documented evidence of the transfers of Holocaust victims' insurance policies to the *Vermögensamt* and to *the Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung*. The total sum of payments for confiscated insur-

ance policies, by Nazi authorities during 1938–45, was estimated after the war at 10,948,910,000 K.

The Czech Working Group on Holocaust Era Insurance was established in May 1998. It consisted of representatives from the office of Czech President Václav Havel, representatives of the Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic, the Czech Insurance Company, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In January 1999, the Joint Commission for Mitigating Some of the Injustices Caused to Holocaust Victims was established and this Working Group has been incorporated into its structure. Czech authorities have been also co-operating with United States insurance regulators, particularly the *Holocaust Claims Project of the Washington State Insurance Commissioner's Office*. The Czech Republic received 'observer status' at the International Commission on Holocaust-Era Insurance Claims (ICHEIC), through which most of the individual claims of Czech citizens have so far been processed.