

WIEDERGUTMACHUNG

Stanley Robe

Wiedergutmachung is a German word which means compensation or restitution, in this particular case compensation for harm done to the victims of Nazi bestiality. However, when one analyses the components of the word *Wiedergutmachung*, it is actually made up of three separate words: *Wieder*, again; *gut*, well; *machung*, making. The whole then means Making well again.

Many years ago, in 1948, I called, with the solicitor the late Mr. J. Okno and the late Mr. Leo Fink, a meeting in the Kadimah Hall in North Carlton of former victims of the Nazi regime. The announcement in the *Jewish News* brought good results; the hall was full. We told the assembled of the Restitution Act and urged them to register for compensation. Every person who would receive compensation would be another proof of harm and damage done by the infamous Nazi hordes. A body called 'Victims of the Nazi Regime' was formed on the spot. It was eventually to comprise 1084 members and was the forerunner of the *Katzetler Verband*. On the committee sat Messrs. Balberyszki, Parasol, Ryczywol, Biederman and a few others, with myself as secretary.

My function was to interview each individual member and put the vital facts of their experiences down and later to transfer them onto official forms supplied by UNO. We finished by obtaining compensation for well over 900 individuals — 900 nails in the coffin of the would-be heroic Hitler's *Reich*. Many of the cases were similar: ghetto, concentration camp, inhumane treatment, hunger, humiliation. A few, however, were outstanding. I would like to describe them.

A young girl sits facing me at the table. She looks happy and vigorous. She gives her name and address and tells her story. At the age of fourteen she found herself in a camp with her parents. She was big and strong. They sent her with a gang to break stones and build roads. The gang was fed better than the old people. Her parents died, she survived. I noted all the details, assured her that we shall attend to her case and thanked her to signify that the interview was over.

'But it's not over', she exclaimed, 'what about my three little brothers?' Here the story unfolded. Her father was a grain merchant. He managed to place the three young toddlers with three peasant families he befriended. She was too old and spoke Polish with a distinct Yiddish accent: she could not be boarded out.

After the Liberation, she approached the peasants to return her brothers. But they refused: the boys were like members of their families, they explained. She stole the three boys from the different villages, crossed with them from Poland to Germany, made her way to France and found herself in Paris where she reported to HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society). 'Have you any family overseas? America, Canada, Australia, Argentine?'

Enlightenment came out of the blue skies. Suddenly she remembered! The eldest brother in Melbourne! HIAS found him. Here they are, all four of them with her brother. With a smile of triumph she added: 'Will you make out papers for my three brothers now?' There she stood smiling proudly, glowing with health and well-being, the sorrow of losing her parents and other relatives forgotten for a moment; forgotten the nightmare of the awful years of horror.

COMMITTEE OF
Victims of Concentration
Camps and Nazi Regime

קאמיטעט פון
געוועזענע קאצעטלער און
קרבות פון נאצירעזשים

Address all Correspondence to the Hon. Secretary S. Robe, Flat 1, 23 Pine Ave., Elwood, Melbourne, Australia.

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On behalf of the Committee

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פארן קאמיטעט

The other vivid memory is the story of a young woman who was hiding with her father from the Nazis in a forest in Eastern Poland. One day, hungry and tired, they came across a solitary fisherman. They were too exhausted to playact any more. They admitted that they were Jewish and had been hiding in the forest. The fisherman said: 'I'll hide you.' And hide them he did, at first in an abandoned hut in the forest, while he dug two deep holes in the ground near his croft and lined them with boards. Similar boards for closure, with earth spread over, made a well-camouflaged hiding space. There they spent many months. Every night a hand would reach down with food and drink; once a week a change of clothing, while the fisherman's mother washed the soiled garments.

After months of this hiding in the dank, dark grave, she noticed that she was growing long hair all over her body. To add to the horror of these days, one night, when she asked the usual question: 'How is my father?', the fisherman replied: 'He died tonight, I am going now to bury him.' And the following night he lifted her out of her grave and as she was unable to walk carried her to the forest to pray over her father's last resting place and then carried her back to her hiding hole. Soon after that, he told her that his mother died as a result of blood poisoning; she pricked herself on a rusty pin from the girl's clothing while washing her garments.

It took a long time till the Russian Army arrived in the village. The Germans retreated far away. The fisherman notified the Russians that he was hiding a Jewish girl. They took her to a hospital. There for a long time they fed her vast quantities of sugar to build her up. Gradually the long hair on her body disappeared. She returned to the fisherman's hut to thank him for saving her life. He told her that he was in love with her but realised that he, a simple peasant, was no match for her; he advised her to go West, to leave Poland and settle elsewhere. Her journey to Western Europe was an Odyssey in itself. Finally she arrived at her destination and met a man. They married and journeyed to Australia. She was then and probably is still on medication.

A young, very slim woman presented herself one evening at my little table at the Kadimah. She was an experimental object of the infamous Dr. Mengele. They found her after liberating the camp. A little thing, nearly skeletal, the size of a nine-year-old child. She was put in a box lined with cotton wool and sent as a priority express to a Western European hospital. There she was brought to partial health. However, even the hospitable Sweden was too close for her to all the places of horror she had survived. She asked to be sent to Australia. In Melbourne she improved further, although the doctors advised her that she would never be able to have children.

A young migrant fell in love with her and they married. They opened a small business which later grew, no doubt helped by the restitution money they received. And then the miracle happened, she became pregnant; now she has two children. Dr. Mengele was not the expert he was supposed to be. Well-to-do and retired now, she leads a happy life.

One thing 'bugs' me even today. Why do the Germans call the meagre compensation they give to the victims of concentration camps *Wiedergutmachung* — 'making good again'? Is it they or the indomitable will to live which made those three random samples good again? And will the young girl ever forget her life, breaking stones, building roads and illegally crossing frontiers? Will the girl saved by the fisherman ever forget the prayer over the lonely grave of her father in the forest? Will the victim of Dr. Mengele's experiments ever forget the tortures on the surgical table? *Wieder-gut-machung* indeed!