

# Settlement Long Overdue

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Maybe it's the infectious holiday spirit, or perhaps the U.S. Justice Department was finally shamed into doing the right thing after years of stubborn refusal.

Whatever the inspiration, the government's overdue settlement in the Hungarian Gold Train case is a warm gift to thousands of Holocaust survivors.

Indeed, given the government's obstinacy to date, some would call the agreement a miracle.

America's guiding principles of accountability and fairness should have demanded such conciliation five years ago. That's when a presidential advisory commission revealed that most of the \$200 million in gold, jewelry, artwork and other treasures aboard a train in Austria had gone missing under U.S. watch.

The Nazis had seized the loot from the homes of Hungarian Jews during World War II, but then abandoned the train when the war abruptly ended. The U.S. forces, there to liberate a dying and desperate people, took possession of the train's treasures, promising to return them to their rightful owners.

Evidence shows instead that most of the valuables were plundered by the American military -- auctioned off in New York, even used to furnish the homes of high-ranking U.S. Army officials.

But rather than owning up to the 60-year-old crime, the government fought a 2001 class-action suit filed by 30,000 to 50,000 aging survivors, using delay, trickery and intimidation as its weaponry. Coming from a proud country that forced European governments, banks and insurers to make reparations to Holocaust survivors and slave laborers, the behavior only seems that much more offensive.

The settlement is a welcome about-face to a pattern of governmental conduct that further victimized the wronged. Perhaps the resolution will begin to allow the thousands of Hungarian Jews, including 2,000 Floridians, some peace.

The estimated \$25 million settlement -- amounting to an average of less than \$500 per plaintiff -- reportedly will be distributed to the sickest and neediest survivors. The others will get what they wanted even more: closure, accountability and fairness from a nation -- for many, their adopted nation -- that stands as the world's symbol of such principles.

For many Holocaust survivors who died waiting for justice, the settlement didn't come soon enough. For the rest, it can go a long way toward healing old wounds and reaffirming faith in all that America stands for.

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