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Title: Oral history interview with Seymour Rubin

Interviewee: Seymour J. Rubin

Interviewer: Neenah Ellis

00:00:00

**Q: Yeah, yeah. The Washington Post reporter, David Ottoway(ph), mentioned in his piece this fall about you, that, at the time of those agreements, there was very little attention paid to, to what was happening here. There were so many other things going in the news, that even the New York Times barely mentioned the fact that the, that an agreement had been reached. In retrospect, was that a...was it helpful to the negotiation or did that harm the negotiation in any way?**

A:Well, I wouldn’t say it harmed the negotiation. It certainly didn’t help them. I mean, it would have helpful, I think, had there been a little more publicity about what was going on. As, the point I made a little while ago, which was that one of the reasons why I think the Swiss came to the conclusion that they did at the very end, perhaps inadequate as that was, was that, the fear of publicity. And publicity here would have, I think, pushed them a little bit http://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word. It is not the primary source, and it has not been checked for spelling or accuracy.further on. They had a very competent ambassador here in town, Mr. Bruggemann, and my recollection is that we talked with him and he was very anxious to have this agreement concluded. I'm, I'm not...I don't recall very much that, that, that he took any part in the negotiations but I do have a very strong feeling that he was anxious to get this thing over with and he probably back home was pushing Mr. Stucki quite a bit, back home in the embassy here, the liaison. He was married, incidentally, to a lady who had been an American, who maybe still was an American, who was Henry Wallace's12 sister, who was apparently, allegedly, the only non-native born Swiss who ever spoke Schweizerdeutsch(ph) perfectly. Q:Do you, do you recall President Truman ever expressing any opinion about the course of these negotiations, directly?

A:I do not recall that we ever got to see Mr. Truman, that I...I don't recall any particular expression from him. I was reasonably sure that we had his support in the White House. Back in those days, you sort of stuck around where you were. You didn't go through back channels as much as they do at the present time and, and I didn't have any back channels at the White House anyway. Even Randolph, Randolph Paul, I, I, I doubt that he ever saw Mr. Truman about this. But, you know, the thesis was, when we began the negotiations, we knew what we wanted and we never had any lack of support. Now if we'd, if we'd perhaps said to the White House, why don't you go to see the, why don't you call in the ambassador13 and tell the ambassador in, here sitting in the Oval Office, that if they don't do something, we're going to be in, they're going to be in very bad shape. Maybe we should have done that, we never thought about doing it, as far as I know. And I don't think that Randolph Paul ever thought about doing it either. 12 Henry Wallace, Vice President of the United States in 1941. 13 United States Ambassador to Switzerland at this time was Leland Harrison. http://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word. It is not the primary source, and it has not been checked for spelling or accuracy.Q:Let me just check and see how I'm doing here for time. I'm in a position here where I don't know what I don't know. So I'm going to...I'm relying on you to help me fill in, you know, points that I should be asking or should ask differently. I think I'd like to go, if we've, if we've covered this, to go on a little bit to your work in the Hague Agreements, just to mention it and what your role was. But...or do you think it's worth talking more about this Swedish and the Portuguese and what other negotiations were you involved in, in a general way?

A:Well, I might talk a little bit about the Swedish negotiations just because it, it does form a very big contrast to the Swiss. And there's an article in, in one of the Swiss newspapers, the Swiss interviewed me a little while ago and there's an article which...have you seen that? Q:No, no.

A:...which says, difficult Swiss, amiable Swedes, something like that, about the... Q:Okay, okay, should we do that? Do you think that...

A:If you like, I don’t know whether this is relevant to this oral history or not, you know, I was very much involved in the negotiations with the Hague and, and that sort of thing. I think to a certain extent, but let me talk a little bit about the, the, the restitution process, the Jewish Restitution Successor Organization14 because that is very much involved here and people are saying that the Jews didn’t get what they should and... (Pause on tape) Q:Okay. Here we are back, okay.

A:I think what I would like to mention, briefly, I’ve only read two things, really. One is the question of the contrast between the Swiss and the Swedish negotiations. In both cases, we were looking for pretty much the same thing. We were looking for the German assets in the two countries, to take for reparation purposes. We were looking for restitution of looted gold, if there were any looted gold there, and we were looking for some kind of claims with respect 14 Jewish Restitution Successor Organization (JRSO): Based in New York, JRSO was organized by various Jewish philanthropic organizations to handle restitution issues. http://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word. It is not the primary source, and it has not been checked for spelling or accuracy.to the persecutees. In neither case, did we have any problem with respect to individual claims of people who had come in and identified their property. There never was any, any issue about that. So far as the Swedes were concerned, they also made a contribution so far as the Intergovernmental Committee for Refugees15 was concerned. But so for the difference between the two negotiations, was that the Swiss were very, very sticky so far as the legal aspects were concerned. Maybe legitimately, I don’t know. There still are people who argue that enemy private property is, is sacrosanct and maybe not. And they also were very difficult with respect to the one aspect, that I think is very important, the question of identification of, of heirless assets in, in Switzerland. In that particular case, it seems to me, they could very well at that particular point, have done basically what Paul Volcker is doing at the present time, with much less trouble than Mr. Volcker is having to go through: identify, if not 100 percent of the heirless assets, at least 95 percent or 85 percent or something like that, and restituted those to an, a successor organization like the Jewish Restitution Successor Organization which was operating very successfully back in those days, and right across the border in Germany. On the Jewish Restitution Successor Organization, I think it's important to note, in connection with the, the possible, their possible role in, in Switzerland, their possible role as a successful organization in Switzerland, that they did exactly that in the American Zone of Germany, very, very successfully. The JRSO did obtain a tremendous amount of, of property in Germany which had been looted from Jews and so forth, and that was, was properly restituted, etcetera. They also were able to participate in the negotiations with the Germans on, perhaps, the larger issue of the, of restitution of jobs, of taking care of people who had been in concentration camps and giving them some kind of compensation, inadequate, obviously, as monetary compensation ever would be for that kind of thing. They still were able to get people some 15 Intergovernmental Committee for Refugees (IGCR): "A body formed in 1938 to manage a solution to the problem of Jewish refugees. Switzerland was reluctant to involve itself with this body." (Source: Jacques Picard, Switzerland and the Assets of the Missing Victims of the Nazis.) http://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word. It is not the primary source, and it has not been checked for spelling or accuracy.kind of compensation for the loss of career, the loss of jobs, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. So the JRSO could have been a very, very effective operating agency here. On the question of heirless assets, they could have, I think, helped a great deal, and I am not minimizing the difficulty of identification of heirless assets, even in Switzerland. We had the same problem here in the United States. We had property in the United States which was vested by the Alien Property Custodian, on the grounds that it had come from Germany. And there was no way of telling whether that property coming from Germany had been the property of a Jew, who died in Bergen-Belsen or wherever, or had been the property of Mr. Goering,16 except by taking a look at the names. If you didn't have the names, basically all you knew, was that the account had been established by somebody in Germany and if the name was ambiguous and so forth, you didn't really know. We claim, we, the JSRO in the United States, claim that there should be about three million dollars on our best estimate, and that was an estimate made on the very, very crude business of taking a look at names and lists and things like that, in the assets which had been vested by the Alien Property Custodian and which were being turned over to the War Claims Commission here in the United States to pay United States war claims. Negotiations in the United States resulted in our first coming down to a figure of three million dollars as the amount of money which we thought would be adequate for this particular vested, vested asset, amount of heirless assets. Then that had to be reduced, because the War Claims Commission and others would refuse to accept it, to one million, and in the end, we had the Congress pass legislation which gave to the JRSO, only half a million dollars. Which indicates the difficulty of having, of identifying heirless assets even in a situation where you have the entire forces of the government trying to work with you. So, I think that perhaps the situation in, in Switzerland is, in a sense, understandable. I'm not sure how much there will be located in the way of heirless assets, 16 Reichs Air Minister and Economic Tzar: Responsible for huge amounts of looted art which he funneled into Nazi Germany's national collections as well as his own collections. (See Klaus Fischer, Nazi Germany, Continuum: New York 1995.) http://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word. It is not the primary source, and it has not been checked for spelling or accuracy.particularly in view of all of these other factors. But the assets should have been restituted to the, restored to the Jewish Restitution Successor Organization back in those days. It should have been made available in those days to the, either the Joint Distribution Committee or the Jewish Agency, and should have gone for purposes of relief which would have been much more relevant back then than, than they are at the present time. I say it would have been more relevant back then than they are at the present time, because even though I'm conscious of the fact that there are a number of people who are still impoverished here in the United States, I can not really believe that... Tape #2, Side B

A:...people who are still impoverished here in the United States, I can not really believe that these assets would be, if they went into this, this kind of account, very, very significant in terms of the total amounts that have been made available to the persecutees. The total amounts made available to persecutees come, basically, out of all sorts of sources, but I, I think, primarily, out of the sources that came from Germany in connection with the Hague negotiations, which, at Vassanar(ph) in which I participated in 1952 and '53, where we negotiated on behalf of both the government of Israel on the one side and the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany on the other side, as the two Jewish organizations, negotiated, negotiated there. And then the government of Israel was represented on its own behalf and then, of course, the Germans, represented by, very largely by a, a first class gentleman named Boehm(ph), I can't remember his first name, B-O-E-H-M, who was a wonderful, wonderful guy. And we did negotiate there, and there have been negotiations which have been going on ever since, and there has been a lot of money which has been paid into various accounts which, I think, has gone to recompense persecutees and their survivors, etcetera. I'm not saying, as I say, that the people who survived and the heirs and so forth, are not entitled. They're very much entitled to everything that they, they could possibly get. Certainly, they're entitled, if they can establish claims, to the property which was left by one of their own ancestors. And certainly, also, they're entitled to whatever http://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word. It is not the primary source, and it has not been checked for spelling or accuracy.amount may come into the pot which goes into a pot of heirless assets, basically. But that amount that's going to go into the heirless asset pot is going to be minuscule compared to the amounts which have already gone in and so forth. And that, I think, is probably true even with respect to looted gold. There may be some looted gold which should be recovered, which has come out of the concentration camps, but you have to remember, a large amount of that looted gold was recovered in Germany itself. It was recovered at the, at the death camps. I know that one of the officials of the International Refugee Organization17 came to Switzerland with a couple of jerry cans filled with bracelets and gold teeth and so forth, and brought them into the American legation in Switzerland, and by arrangement with them, they were taken over to a, a cooperating Swiss bank and they were...those things were all smelted down and the proceeds were paid to the International Refugee Organization for the account of the, of the survivors and so, paid into the, into the interest of the...probably through the Jewish Agency and the JDC, but they went for the purposes about...but most of that stuff was probably recovered in, in Germany itself. A large amount of it must have disappeared, as I say, a large part of it was confiscated, a large part probably confiscated by guards at the camps, and a certain amount of it, certainly, went into the smelting pots and was eventually stamped and came out again as the, with the Reichsbank stamp on it. So there may be some additional amount available there. How much is a, is a matter which I think will be very difficult to tell. One other thing about the Swiss, and the claim against Switzerland, most of the money, I think, probably went...a lot of the money at any rate, went through Switzerland and did not remain, remain in Switzerland. I doubt that there's very much of the German gold still sitting there in a bank vault. Maybe there is some...Jew..some property still there, either gold bars or the things we also consider to be looted property, paintings, silverware, etcetera, not only in the, in the large Swiss banks, but maybe in some 17 International Refugee Organization: The major organization dedicated to the relief of refugees from the Nazi menace. Also called the IFO. http://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word. It is not the primary source, and it has not been checked for spelling or accuracy.of the Swiss private banks, or in the hands of individuals in Switzerland. It's very, very difficult to, to tell about that. I, I think the amounts that we're talking about, that have been talked about recently, are, are substantially exaggerated. And, about the only thing I would like to add at the present time, is that I think the Swiss are, at the present time, maybe reluctantly and maybe under compulsion, making an effort to do something about it, despite the charges which were made just the other day that all this is on the basis of, of blackmail. And beyond that, so far as the...my participation in, in, in Vassanar(ph) and the Hague is concerned, about all I can say is that I was, as I said, a member of...I was working with the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Committee was very, very much involved in these negotiations which set up the negotiations at Vassanar(ph). I was one of the four people on the, on the Jewish delegation representing the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany. I think Moe(ph) Levitt(ph) representing the JDC, I representing, I don't know, a variety of organizations, I guess, certainly the American Jewish Committee, a fellow named Alec(ph) Easterman(ph) representing the Conference of, the Board of Jewish Deputies or something like that. And Maurice(ph) Bookstein(ph) who was representing, I guess, the Jewish Agency at, at the time. And we were the four so-called principal negotiators. Sitting up on top of us were Jacob(ph) Blaustein(ph) who was then President of the American Jewish Committee, and that absolutely glorious character, Nachem(ph) Goldman(ph) who then was, I guess, President of the Jewish Agency and the World Jewish Congress and so forth. And those were the two who did a lot of negotiating with...on behalf of these claims. Nachem in particular was a very...very close to Konrad Adenauer and Jacob Blaustein was absolutely essential, I think, in going to General Clay and other people in the United States government, and they did a wonderful, wonderful job there. I participated in those negotiations in the Hague... went on to be one of the few people together with Nehemiah(ph) Robinson(ph) who thought we would ever get anything out of the Austrians. And Nehemiah Robinson was with the World Jewish Congress. He and I were the only ones who thought negotiating with the Austrians was going to do anything at http://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word. It is not the primary source, and it has not been checked for spelling or accuracy.all because the Austrians had been declared to be an occupied country by the Allies by, way back in Moscow in 1943. And they were saying, who us? We're not guilty. And then we had some negotiations with the Austrians and in 1955, I initialed an agreement in Vienna with the entire Austrian cabinet on the other side of the table which resulted in the payment of about 50 million dollars into a so-called Hilth(ph) Fund, which was administered by the Jewish organizations, by the Committee for Jewish Claims On Austria. The big distinction being that we got a conference for Jewish claims against Germany, but a committee for Jewish claims on Austria. It was supposed to reflect the difference. And that fund was, as far as I know, administered. It was inadequate, but it was something that the Austrians did pay in despite the fact that they were considered to be more liberated than, and an occupied country, than an ally of Germany. And that, I think, is about it. Q:Okay. http://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word. 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