

Storobin Assists Holocaust Survivor

Hit With Illegal Pension Tax

After a letter from the Senator, German government backs down

For Klara Zubutova, her monthly pension from the German government was a small token of respect, after all she'd been through.

As a young girl, Klara was detained at a concentration camp. But she survived, and she lives today in Brighton Beach. As a Holocaust survivor, Klara is entitled to regular pension payments from the German government. These pensions are not subject to taxation, for obvious reasons.

Klara, born in Russia, is bilingual in Russian and Yiddish, but doesn't speak a word of German. She's never lived in Germany for a day in her life. Which didn't matter much until a few weeks ago, when she got a letter in the mail, in German, from that country's *Bundeszentralamt für Steuern* agency – roughly translated as “Tax Law for Investors.”

Klara was confused. So she visited the office of her State Senator, David Storobin (R-Brooklyn).

Klara walked into the Senator's office in June and met with one of his Russian-speaking constituent aides. At the time, she didn't have any idea what the letter was all about. The Senator's office translated the letter from German for Klara, who realized it wasn't a routine piece of paperwork. It was a tax bill on her state pension as a survivor. The Senator's office saw that Klara's bill was erroneous, and that she didn't owe a dollar in taxes.

The Senator reached out to the German consulate in New York City, which confirmed the error in a letter to the Senator dated July 10. The Consul wrote, “It is a matter of course that Holocaust survivors have to be treated with the highest respect and consideration. I very much regret that those concerned feel inappropriately treated.” The German government exempted Klara of having to pay her offensive tax bill.

The Senator then penned a letter to Wolfgang Schauble, the German Finance Minister, asking the German government to review its records to make sure such errors are not commonplace. In the letter, the Senator called for the German government to return any taxes wrongly paid by Holocaust pensioners, and asked the German government to be more careful in the future in overseeing the pensions of Holocaust survivors.

Reflecting on Klara's story, Senator Storobin realized how fortunate it was that she thought to contact his office for help.

"So many people might have gotten this letter in the mail, in German, and just not known what to do," he said. "When most of us get a bill or a tax in the mail, we pay it without thinking, because we don't want to get in trouble. Thankfully, Klara visited my office."

Although Klara's story has a happy ending, the Senator is worried that the problem may be more widespread. After all, most recipients of the letter might have paid the bill upon receipt; and few would even consider contacting the office of an elected leader.

"The German government was contrite when I contacted them. But we just can't know how common this is," Storobin said. "My district in Brooklyn has thousands of survivors. Today, they are all senior citizens. I hope that they are not erroneously paying taxes on their German pensions."

The Senator personally invites Holocaust survivors who have gotten similar letters from the German government to call his office for help at (718) 743-8610.

"Let me be clear: you don't owe a dollar to the German government for surviving the Holocaust," said Storobin. "Don't be confused by letters in a language in a language you may not read, or intimidated by letterhead from a state agency. I'm here to stick up for people like Klara, who need it the most."

This story was broken in the [Jewish Week](#).

State Senator David Storobin (R-Brighton Beach) represents the 27th Senate District, which includes the neighborhoods of Bergen Beach, Brighton Beach, Gerritsen Beach, Gravesend, Homecrest, Marine Park, Mill Basin, Midwood and Sheepshead Bay.