

Film to explore Polish restitution for Jewish property

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Estimates of the current value of property owned by Jews in prewar Poland – both residential and commercial – run as high as \$65 billion (US).

The vast majority of those owners did not survive the war or leave descendants. But among the small minority who did and who have the documentation to claim they are the rightful owners of those houses, factories, land and so on, obtaining restitution has been arduous, and often ultimately futile.

Independent Montreal filmmaker Eric Scott wants to know why – why a country like Poland, which was governed by law before World War II and today wishes to join the family of modern democratic nations, continues to refuse to address this issue in any concrete way.

He also wonders why owners or their heirs are often so reluctant to pursue justice, or to talk openly about the efforts they have made to reach a settlement.

Scott plans to be in Poland in October to begin shooting a documentary about this issue, to which he has no personal

connection.

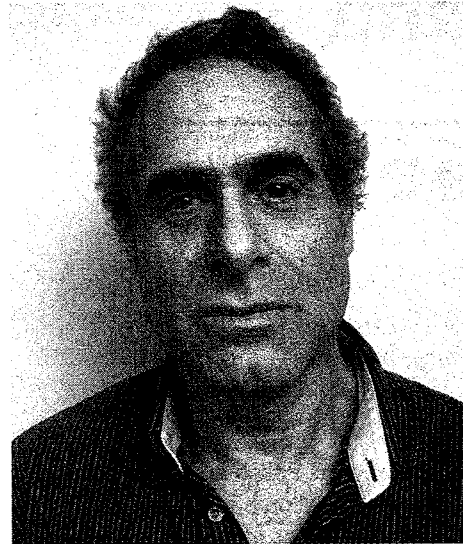
He does have a great deal of empathy for those Polish Jews who returned from the camps or from their hiding places, thinking their home and/or business would still be theirs, only to find someone else occupying it. And the new occupants had no intention of relinquishing it or offering compensation. In fact, they were hostile, even physically threatening.

After the communists took over and private property was nationalized, the whole matter became even more complicated.

“Decades pass, and the communists disappear,” Scott said, “but their property has been bought and sold behind their back. The new democratic government won’t take any action. The country’s prospering economy is built upon [those Jews’] losses.”

Poland is the only major European Union country that has not passed a restitution law compensating individuals whose property was confiscated by the Nazis, he pointed out, despite a 2009 agreement in principle known as the Terezin Declaration on Holocaust-era assets.

Only through an “exhaustive” journey through the court system have a few of



Eric Scott JANICE ARNOLD PHOTO

the dispossessed received some compensation.

Worst of all, according to Scott, the Poles refuse to recognize their responsibility to the victims of the Holocaust – or even discuss it.

This is all very perplexing in a country where the celebration of Jewish culture and history has become something of an obsession.

“I wish they would skip the klezmer concerts and folklore festivals and pay back what they owe,” said Scott, who has visited Poland twice before – most recently in 2009 – because his earlier films were being shown there.

It was discovering this “strange combination of nostalgia, longing and fear” among Poles toward Jews that prompted Scott to start delving into the restitution question almost three years ago.

The Poles’ own sense of victimhood has gotten in the way of their seeing what they owe their fellow Jewish compatriots, he thinks.

There were approximately 3.3 million Jews in Poland before the war, or 10 per cent of the population, and they owned roughly 15 to 20 per cent of the property, Scott found out.

Scott insisted that he does not want to “play judge and jury” in deciding what is right. His goal is to get people from all sides of the question to at least talk about the issue.

“There are many Poles who legitimately fear they will be put out on the street should a restitution law ever pass,” he said.

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