

# Jeanette Wolff: Restitution for Nazi Victims (1955)

## Abstract

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In 1955, Jeanette Wolff, a Social Democratic Bundestag representative, who was herself Jewish and had lost most of her family in the concentration camps of the “Third Reich,” took the Bundestag floor and demanded that the budget line for compensation (Title 311) be increased in the wake of the passage of the first national-level compensation law in 1953. She criticized the fact that widows of high-ranking Nazi military and civilian officials were guaranteed high pension benefits, whereas widows of persecutees had to make due with modest payments.

## Source

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### Second Debate on the Draft of a Law to Determine the Federal Budget for the Fiscal Year 1955

#### Bundestag Speech on June 22, 1955

[...] This year, the federal minister of finance has kindly requested *100 million DM more* to implement the Federal Law for the Compensation of Victims of National Socialist Persecution. He justified this request by explaining that the 160 million DM he already asked for would be spent this year in its entirety. Mr. Finance Minister, we are very grateful to you for realizing that it is necessary to finally speed things up before the victims of this terrible time are in their graves. But, Mr. Minister, those of us schooled in the practical work of the state restitution offices know that this sum will [still] not suffice if we want to do justice more quickly to the claims of those who are waiting. Therefore, once again, my parliamentary group submits on *Umdruck* 409 the motion it has already proposed several times over: to increase the scheduled amount in Title 311 to 250 million DM. [...]

Allow me to recapitulate a short report from the Federal Ministry of Finance that was presented to the budget committee. According to the report, entitled individuals in salary groups B 2 to B 7 were compensated or are receiving pensions today; these are the special allowances. I would like to give you an overview of how many people we are talking about. There are 3,141 individuals who are receiving what they asked for and what they believed they were entitled to. Their base salaries fluctuated between 15,000 DM and 24,000 DM per year. On top of this, they receive a 40% supplement and a housing allowance. These gentlemen are entitled to up to 75% of these remunerations as a pension. For the lowest groups, this means 15,750 DM per year, or 1,312 DM per month plus the housing subsidy; for the highest groups, 18,000 DM per year, or 1,500 DM per month plus the housing subsidy. Also, 1,842 surviving spouses of members of this group are receiving a widow's pension equal to 60 or 45% of the [deceased's] regular salary, including a cost-of-living increase and housing supplement, and 20 or 15%, respectively, for the children. I have recounted these figures in order to draw a comparison between what is being paid to the widows of those killed in the concentration camps – that is, the widows of victims, and the pensions of those who occupied very high posts in the military in the Nazi period. Their widows are receiving, in the lowest groups, 9,000 DM per year, or 750 DM per month, in addition to 3,000 DM per year for each child, or 250 DM per month. The widow's pensions in the highest classes are 15,750 DM per year, or 1,250 per month. By contrast, the widows of concentration camp victims are receiving 200 to 250 DM per month. And the others [i.e. the widows of Nazi officers] also receive the housing allowance.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have not spoken of these things out of some kind of resentment; for although I

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myself am someone who was affected by the Nazi period, I am among those who are able to get along very well economically. I speak for those who, unlike me, did not have the good fate to return to a profession or get involved in state affairs or politics or some other area where it was possible for me to earn a decent living. I speak for those who are still suffering from want today. I speak for those who are standing on the edge of their graves today. I speak for those widows who went gray at a young age because they suffered the ignominy of being regarded as the wives of victims of National Socialism. They are still in a situation of need today, and they are the ones we should be looking after.

We must also think about how it looks in the public eye when, for example, a judge who is presently overseeing an investigation into a Nazi concentration camp commander receives threatening letter after threatening letter and is told: "If you do not stop these investigations soon, your livelihood will be at stake, and you will have to pay in arrears what this man has since earned!" – We are talking about an income of over 1,000 DM. I can attest to that, for I am one of the chief prosecution witnesses in this trial. I am among those who survived this terrible camp.

Sad, perhaps – perhaps good! But it is necessary for once to state very openly what must be done in the spirit of our young democracy – namely, when we read the papers and see how cautious people are in issuing sentences against those who are guilty of murders during the Nazi period; whether or not these people were acting on orders from higher up is irrelevant. Here, we must think and act in the spirit of our democracy. These sentences are so lenient that we believe that those circles of people who are forever stuck in yesterday must be thinking: How weak this democracy is – so weak that it does not dare take action against its own murderers!

(How right! from the SPD)

In the interest of *defending against the undermining of democracy*, we must remember that we must do justice to the victims of the Nazi period. That would be the best rebuff to those who still believe that they can assert their demands in the Federal Republic or in Berlin, and who are speaking, with loud saberrattling, about the rebuilding of a Germany in line with their ideas; the eternally unteachable and also the malicious who, under the slogan of being democratic, undermine democracy and place sticks of dynamite under the edifice of our young democratic state. The best lesson would be to say to them: this democratic Bundestag, in consideration of democracy, wants to do everything within its financial power to do right by the victims of the Nazi period.

(Applause from the SPD.)

This Bundestag has not forgotten these victims, just as this Bundestag and this democratic state will never forget what those criminals who are sounding off again today did to the German people and their descendants.

It is for that reason, ladies and gentlemen, that I want us – we, who, after all, approve high pensions for the one group – to move to increase the budgeted sum in Title 311, so that the many people who are still waiting today can receive quicker and more comprehensive restitution payments as early as this year. Better than all the press releases, better than all the public speeches is the deed itself – also for those persecuted in the Nazi period. It can only improve our standing abroad if we finally think of the persecuted who are still living in Germany and whose family members are eking out a living, often in great misery.

I therefore ask the High Parliament in the name of the many who still have not received justice, those whose family members died in concentration camps or prisons, or who were themselves victims of a terrible period in history, to approve the Social Democratic motion to increase Title 311. Ladies and gentlemen, for me, an approval of this increase would be the best birthday present the Bundestag could

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give me.

(Applause from the SPD and in the center.)

Source: Herbert Wehner, ed., *Frau Abgeordnete, Sie haben das Wort! Bundestagsreden sozialdemokratischer Parlamentarierinnen 1949–1979*. Bonn: Verlag Neue Gesellschaft GmbH, pp. 53–56.

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