

Polish World War II property law raises ire of former Poles living in Israel

By Amiram Barkat

The association of former Poles in Israel has launched a public campaign against a bill to return private property to its owners that is now being discussed by the Polish parliament, charging that it grants de facto recognition to the Nazi regime's Nuremberg laws.

In a letter sent to the leaders of every parliamentary faction in Poland, the organization warned that the bill "would make Poland the only country in the world that grants legal validity to the Nuremberg laws, at least with regard to Jewish property."

The bill, which is currently being discussed in committee prior to its final approval, deals with the return of all property confiscated by the communist regime, starting from the late

1940s. It does not entitle people whose property was nationalized to get their actual property back, but offers them compensation equal to 15 percent of the property's real value.

But the association of former Poles argues that the bill is immoral, because it provides no restitution for Jewish property that was confiscated by the Nazis under the Nuremberg laws before the communists took power; it only compensates people who lost property to the communists, following World War II.

Moreover, it says, the bill adopts the definition of an order promulgated in 1946 that describes the property confiscated from Poland's Jews by the occupying Nazis as "abandoned property and former German property."

"The legal authorities of to-

day's democratic Poland are trying to revive this 1946 order instead of canceling it, and are essentially recognizing the Nazis' looting of Jewish property - looting that was an inseparable part of the plan for the total annihilation of the Jews - as legal," wrote organization chairman Naftalie Lavie and executive committee member Alexander Klugman in their letter to the Polish parliament. "From the perspective of the Polish Jews in Israel, as well as Jews throughout the world, this attitude toward looted Jewish property is unacceptable."

Officials from the World Jewish Restitution Organization said that the bill enjoys the support of a majority of Poland's parliament, the Sejm. "Even the Polish opposition supports the bill in its present form, so even if the current

government falls in the upcoming general election in September, chances are high that the bill will pass," said one official.

The exact extent of the looted Jewish property in Poland is not known, but most experts say that Polish Jews owned more property than Jews in any other country before the Holocaust. Rough estimates place the property's current value at some \$30 billion.

To date, though several Western European countries have paid compensation for Jewish property looted by the Nazis, no Eastern European country has. But in Poland, the issue of World War II property restitution is especially sensitive, due to fears of compensation claims from the descendants of millions of ethnic German Poles who were expelled from Poland following the war.