

Testimony of Dame Helen Mirren  
Before the Subcommittee on the Constitution  
&  
Subcommittee on Oversight, Agency Action, Federal Rights and Federal Courts  
Committee on the Judiciary  
United States Senate  
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Chairman Cornyn, Senator Durbin, Chairman Cruz, Senator Schumer, Senator Coons, Members of the Committee. Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of S.2763, "The Holocaust Expropriated Art Recovery Act of 2016."

My name is Helen Mirren. I am an actor who portrayed the role of Maria Altman in the 2015 film *Woman in Gold*. In the film, I portrayed Maria Altmann. The film is the remarkable true story of a woman who overcame great odds and righted a wrong that had stood for decades. Sixty years after fleeing Vienna during World War II, Altmann, an elderly Jewish woman, began a years-long journey to reclaim family possessions seized by the Nazis. Among them was Gustav Klimt's famous painting, *Portrait of Adele Bloch Bauer I* – a family painting of Altmann's Aunt Adele – as known as the *Woman in Gold*. The fight to reclaim what was rightfully hers forced her to fight the Austrian establishment and to take her case to the U.S. Supreme Court. On a more personal level, Maria had to confront vivid memories of her family life in Vienna, returning to the country she'd been forced to flee by the Nazis and reliving the pain of having everything she held dear ripped away from her and the people she loved murdered in death camps.

Portraying Maria Altmann opened my eyes to mankind's capacity for indifference and it turned my attention to and fueled a personal resolve to do my part to try to open the eyes of others and help make people aware of the sad fact that - more than 70 years later - victims of the Holocaust and their families are still contemplating whether to seek restitution for what was stolen from them and lost under the most horrible of circumstances. But a lack of transparency, access to information concerning the location of stolen art, and legal assurance that these cases will be resolved on the merits, discourages them from taking action.

When considering the issue at hand, it's essential to understand what is preventing victims of the Nazis from reclaiming what is rightfully theirs. Logically, I think we could all agree that the right thing to do in every instance is to return the art to its rightful owners. The very act of Nazi expropriation was not only unjust but it was inhumane. And yet, still today, it seems there are still some out there who lack the will to recognize the victims and their families as rightful owners.

Art lost in the Holocaust is not just important for its aesthetic and cultural value, and restitution is more – so much more – than reclaiming a material good. Restoring physical parts of lost heritage to Holocaust victims and their families is a moral imperative. For me, for Maria Altmann, and for many families fighting to reclaim what rightfully belongs to them, art restitution has little to do with potential financial gains. Art restitution is about preserving the fundamental human condition. It gives Jewish people – and other victims of the Nazi terror – the opportunity to reclaim their history, their culture, their memories, and most importantly their families.

The generation of Jewish people that were burdened by the cruel acts of the Nazi regime had little choice but to carry on with their lives. After what they had experienced – tremendous loss, and deep sorrow – moving forward was the only viable path. It brings me pleasure to know that today we live in a freer world, where a new generation has emerged with the resources and time to finally begin to deal with this issue and pursue justice. It's incredible to see how many people have approached me sharing that Maria's story in the *Woman in Gold* is just like their mothers and grandmothers.

For what it's worth, Maria Altmann's story is one of noble justice, one that I believe is important to be told, and one that should continue to be told by future generations. It is a story that is not made possible without the United States. These are American stories, stories that capture the integrity and power of the United States, its justice system and the rule of law. Maria Altmann's story is as a refugee in the United States, who was finally granted justice through retaining what was rightfully hers, at the hands of the U.S. Supreme Court. But victims of Nazi theft should not have to demonstrate the boldness and capacity to commit the resources of Maria Altmann in order to recover what is rightfully theirs.

Art is a reflection of memories that are shared across familial and cultural lines. When the Jewish people were dispossessed of their art, they lost some of their heritage. Memories were taken along with the art, and to have no memories is like having no family, and that is why art restitution is so imperative. The lives of so many people could be rejuvenated through the actions and leadership of the U.S. Congress to insure that fair and equitable solutions in these cases are assured.

As humans, we are incapable of changing the past, but fortunately we have the ability to make change today. Thank you for your leadership and efforts to address this issue - in the modest reforms contained in THE HEAR Act – by ensuring that, at least here in the United States, access to justice and the courts will be ensured.

Thank you for this opportunity.