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Book With Swastika Angers the Swiss

By ELIZABETH OLSON

WASHINGTON, Dec. 24— The provocative book jacket a swastika made of gold ingots laid over the Swiss national flag -- was posted for months on Web sites, including Amazon's, and no one objected.

When this jacket for "Imperfect Justice," an account of the tortuous international negotiations in the late 1990's for reparations to Holocaust survivors, was shown at the Frankfurt Book Fair this fall, and when 300 reviewers worldwide received copies, the reaction was negligible.

But when the jacket appeared in Swiss newspapers this month fierce anger erupted, rekindling still-sharp emotions about how wartime Switzerland dealt with Jews who sought refuge from the Holocaust or who stashed their assets in Swiss banks to avoid Nazi confiscation.

This book, with its white cross on a red field overlaid with Nazi-stamped gold bars, is subtitled "Looted Assets, Slave Labor and the Unfinished Business of World War II," and was written by a former Clinton administration official, Stuart E. Eizenstat.

The 400-page book is not due in bookstores until January, but its cross-and-swastika cover has drawn furious denunciations from top Swiss government officials, who said their flag had been desecrated. They argued that linking their country's flag with the swastika made Switzerland appear to be an accomplice of Nazi Germany. A foreign ministry spokesman was quoted in Swiss newspapers as saying that the government wanted to ban the book in Switzerland, and in an unusual move for a country with its own democratic traditions, that it would try to stop the book's publication in the United States. The Swiss Embassy in Washington was asked to examine the legal options.

Mr. Eizenstat, now a trade lawyer at a Washington law firm, said the anger over the cover took him by surprise. He has been besieged by requests from the Swiss news media and has appeared on Swiss television to explain the cover. His American publisher, PublicAffairs, has received impassioned e-mail messages, some of them anti-Semitic.

"I'm sorry if the cover caused offense," Mr. Eizenstat said in an interview. He approved the jacket image and said he regretted that it had been "interpreted as a slap at the whole country."

Mr. Eizenstat, who helped engineer the \$1.25 billion settlement agreed on in 1998 between Swiss banks and the holders of dormant accounts and their heirs, has been the focus of Swiss ire before.

His 1997 report on wartime activities in Europe asserted that the Swiss National Bank changed money for the Nazis, an accusation that set off a diplomatic tiff with the United States.

Mr. Eizenstat's latest explanations have done little to mollify the Swiss.

"We are not the Nazis," said a Swiss Embassy spokesman, Alex Biscaro, who confirmed that the Swiss have consulted with American lawyers.

Mr. Biscaro denied that the Swiss government wanted to stop publication of the book in any country. "It was never about stopping publication -- you can't do that in Switzerland either -- but about the cover, which was hurtful and disturbing," he said, adding that, based on the advice it has received, the government is unlikely to pursue any action.

"The jacket has been misinterpreted," said Gene Taft, a spokesman for PublicAffairs, which intends to stick to its Jan. 7 publication date. He said the book has become embroiled in controversy that the publisher did not intend.

"All covers are artists' graphic representation of the message and contents," said Peter Osnos, the publisher and chief executive of PublicAffairs. "They are not political statements."

Mr. Osnos and Mr. Eizenstat, who was deputy treasury secretary under President Bill Clinton, were adamant that they would not change the cover, and argued that it depicted "the truth about the Swiss National Bank and the gold."

Mr. Eizenstat said the role of Switzerland's central bank in laundering looted gold was confirmed by an independent historians' commission, which spent five years investigating neutral Switzerland's wartime actions.

Even so, the commission president, the Swiss historian Jean-François Bergier, called the cover "simply outrageous."

Mr. Bergier, who could not be reached at his office in Zurich, has been severely criticized in his own country for the commission's findings, which are contrary to the historical version that the Swiss stood stalwartly against Hitler. But he drew the line at the Eizenstat book cover, telling the Swiss newspaper Blick, "The flag is the symbol of the people, and the people had nothing to do with the actions of the national bank."

Mr. Eizenstat said the flag could not be divorced from the Swiss National Bank, which uses the flag as its emblem. The jacket, he said, was not meant to offend, but to illustrate a central theme of the book: "the Swiss National Bank accepted Nazi gold and converted it into hard currency that the Nazis used to purchase essential items to pursue its war."

He added: "The Swiss were warned by the Allies to stop trading in looted goods before the end of the war. They agreed to stop, but they began again," showing that the wartime actions of Switzerland were more complex than a brave national resistance.

"The cover, by definition," he said, "shows only one piece of this complex puzzle."

In a decision that Mr. Eizenstat said was made before the Swiss controversy unfolded, the European editions, including that issued by Bertelsmann in Germany, would have a different cover. He said he had not seen designs for the European editions, but that they did not exclude a swastika.

Photo: "Imperfect Justice" will have a different cover in Europe.