

Trial of former SS soldier begins in Germany

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The trial of 93-year-old former SS sergeant Oskar Gröning began yesterday at the fourth criminal grand chamber of the Luneburg district court. He is charged with assisting murder in 300,000 cases. From September 1942 to October 1944, Gröning was an SS guard and administrator at Auschwitz concentration camp in occupied Poland.

More than 70 years after the liberation of Auschwitz by the Red Army on January 27, 1945, it is certain to be one of the last trials of living perpetrators of the indescribably hideous crimes committed by the Nazis at this and other concentration camps.

The name of the Nazis' Auschwitz concentration camp has come to symbolise the worst crimes and horrors of the twentieth century, and is a byword for the barbarism of capitalism in its most extreme form. More than 1.1 million people were brutally killed there. Hundreds of thousands were exterminated in the gas chambers immediately after their arrival, while others died from hunger, physical exhaustion or hideous experiments by sadistic doctors like Josef Mengele, nicknamed the angel of death by the prisoners.

Some 90 percent of those killed in the camp were Jews. In addition, 150,000 non-Jewish Poles, including political prisoners, 23,000 Sinti and Roma, 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war, other national minorities, as well as Jehovah's Witnesses and homosexuals were murdered.

In addition to Gröning, two other former SS soldiers currently face thousands of charges of assisted murder. An investigation by the state prosecutor in Schwerin is underway into 94-year-old Hubert Z from Mecklenburg Pomerania, and another against 94-year-old Reinhold Z from North Rhine-Westphalia led by the Dortmund state prosecutor.

The SS soldiers currently being charged allegedly were not directly involved in the murders, but through their service in Auschwitz, they contributed to the

functioning of the Nazi murder machine. Gröning himself described his role at Auschwitz as a "cog in the wheel."

Oskar Gröning volunteered for the Waffen SS at aged 21 as a committed National Socialist, and was ordered by the SS business and administration head office on September 25, 1942, to be sent to administer the Auschwitz concentration camp.

Since he had previously worked in a savings bank, he was placed in the administration of prisoners' money. His task was to stand guard as the victims were delivered to the camp in cattle wagons, and collect their possessions and valuables. The stolen money obtained during this process was then sent by him to the SS headquarters in Berlin.

The list of charges from the state prosecutor in Hannover, responsible for pursuing Nazi crimes in Lower Saxony, limits itself to the so-called Hungarian action of May 16 to July 11, 1944. In this two-month time frame, the SS deported some 425,000 Jews from Hungary to Auschwitz. Around 300,000 were sent directly to their deaths in gas chambers on their arrival.

Within this period, 137 trainloads arrived at the Nazis' death factory. Gröning's task was to collect the belongings left by those sent to the gas chamber from the train platform and camp entrance. "In so doing, the traces of the mass murder would be eliminated for subsequent prisoners," states the 85-page charge sheet. His activities had supported the Nazis' systematic mass murder.

The trial has met with great interest abroad and more than 60 survivors from Hungary, the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, and Israel wish to testify to the court as joint plaintiffs. Accordingly, the trial was moved from the Luneburg court to a larger building.

As with other trials on the subject of crimes during the Nazi period, the question is raised: Why has the trial taken so long?

The answer is largely that within the German political and judiciary systems, many former Nazis were utilised by the state and their careers continued unhindered after the war. A systematic legal investigation into the crimes of the National Socialists was consistently blocked.

Of the many thousands of Nazi criminals, relatively few were brought before the courts. Since the end of the war, the German judiciary has investigated 100,000 cases, but only 6,500 were convicted. They received relatively mild sentences considering the horrendous nature of their crimes. Generally, the perpetrators took the defence that they were just following orders, which the courts recognised as legitimate.

Of the 6,500 SS personnel who carried out their murderous work in Auschwitz and survived the war, only 29 were convicted in the Federal Republic, according to a report in *Der Spiegel*. In the GDR (East Germany) the figure was 20.

The Frankfurt state prosecutor had already investigated Gröning in 1997, but broke off proceedings in 1985. Lawyer Thomas Walther, who is now representing around 30 joint plaintiffs, victims of the Nazi regime and their relatives, commented on this to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, “They did not abandon the case, but buried it. In the 1970s and 1980s there were still ‘thousands of Grönings,’ so the investigators decided it was preferable to leave it alone.”

In *Deutsche Welle*, Walther explained, “in the Federal Republic, thousands of men and women would have to have been charged if current criteria had applied in the past.” But this was not desired, so the Nazi collaborators were not to be pursued. Oskar Gröning was never punished for his service in the death factory.

In 2011, the Munich district court sentenced the now-dead SS guard in Sobibor concentration camp John Demjanjuk to five years’ imprisonment for assisting in the murder of 28,000 Jews. Since then, there is no need to prove that a person being charged was directly involved in the murders. This is one of the reasons why trials are being conducted now against those SS soldiers who are still living.

In contrast to many previous defendants in these cases, Oskar Gröning has expressed his readiness to testify before the court on the events in Auschwitz. He had already spoken in interviews openly about his

experiences and actions in Auschwitz, and written them down for his friends and family.

When an acquaintance sent him a book about “the Auschwitz lies,” he sent it back with a note saying that everything reported about Auschwitz was true: selections, gassing, burning—1.5 million Jews had been murdered in Auschwitz, and he had experienced it. Nonetheless, he did not feel guilty about the murders because he had not been directly active in the gas chambers.

The course of the current trial will reveal how much it contributes to the uncovering of one of the greatest crimes of the twentieth century. The survivors and relatives of the victims taking part in the trial as joint plaintiffs are hoping for something, even if only very, very delayed justice.



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