

Germany: Auschwitz survivors testify against former SS officer

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On April 21, legal proceedings were opened in Lüneburg against 93-year-old former SS officer Oskar Gröning, who worked as a security guard and “accountant” in the Auschwitz concentration and extermination camp from September 1942 to October 1944.

The trial has met with great international interest. More than 60 survivors and relatives of victims from the US, Canada, Israel and Hungary travelled to Lüneburg to attend the trial and testify in court as witnesses.

The trial began with the reading of a charge accusing Gröning of being an accessory to murder in 300,000 cases. His job was to stand guard on the concentration camp’s reception platform. Following the division of victims newly arrived into those suitable and those unsuitable for slave labour, he took their belongings and valuables, counted and registered their looted money and then sent it to the SS headquarters in Berlin.

According to the 85-page indictment, Gröning’s role in the Auschwitz administration had “assisted the Nazi regime economically and contributed to the systematic extermination”.

Prosecuting attorney Jens Lehmann provided details concerning the selection process, gas chambers and the cruel use of Zyklon B, which chokes breathing and cramps muscles to inflict an agonising death. “Some corpses had to be separated with axes,” he said. He read out the names of the dead and summarised what Gröning had done as an assistant of the killing machine and administrator of the valuables and luggage that had belonged to the forced labourers and the dead.

Gröning, who had voluntarily enlisted in the Waffen-SS (armed wing of the Nazi party) as a staunch National Socialist at the age of 21 and was transferred to Auschwitz in 1942, partially admitted to the allegations in the indictment during his approximately

hour-long testimony to the court.

He conceded that he had learnt of the gassing of Jews on his arrival in Auschwitz in 1942. He described at length how, during a search for escaped concentration camp inmates, he had witnessed a gassing in a specially converted farmhouse, and heard the slowly dying cries of the victims. He also told of how he witnessed another SS officer bashing a crying baby against a truck and killing it. At the same time, he claimed that he himself had never been involved in the killing of inmates.

He said: “For me it is obvious that I have made myself morally complicit. And I confess as much here, in repentance and humility before the victims.” He concluded his statement with a request for forgiveness. Addressing the court, he said: “You will have to decide on the issue of criminal liability.”

On Thursday, April 23, survivors of the Auschwitz extermination camp also testified for the first time. Among them was 86-year-old Max Eisen from Canada. He was 15 years old when he was forced to part from his father and uncle within a few seconds of arriving in Auschwitz. His father said to him: “If you survive, you will tell the world what happened.” Eisen knew at the time: “This is the end of my family.”

In harrowing detail, he described to the court how his family was carried off to their deaths. People had already died on the rail journey from Hungary to the extermination camp. Upon arrival in Auschwitz, his father and uncle asked people: “Are we going to see our family again today?” The other prisoners answered: “Your families have gone up the chimney.”

Eisen never saw his mother, little sister and two brothers again, or his aunt and grandparents. His father and uncle were gassed. He himself was freed in May 1945, after surviving a death march.

For him and most of the other plaintiffs, the purpose of the trial—so long delayed by the authorities—is not so much about securing a lengthy prison term for Gröning. They believe it is more important that the world knows exactly what happened.

Eighty-seven-year-old Hedy Bohm, who came to the trial in Lüneburg from her adopted home in Toronto, Canada, told the press the day before the trial began: “I see this as a gift of fate.” When she was a teenager, she and her family were deported by the Nazis to Auschwitz-Birkenau. She survived the horror because she was considered fit for work, but her parents and many of her relatives were killed in the gas chamber.

“It’s never too late to have these people face justice,” Bohm said in reply to a reporter’s question. The penalty is a secondary matter. At issue is the determination of guilt.

When asked what she expected from Gröning, 89-year-old Eva Pustai-Fahidi from Budapest, who also survived the hell of Auschwitz, said: “He stood on the platform when my family arrived. Forty-nine members of my family were murdered in Auschwitz. Can he give me back these 49 family members? I really want to see what he has to say. He’ll probably say that he didn’t do anything. He’ll say he just stood on the platform.”

As one of the co-plaintiffs, Pustai-Fahidi said she was “rather gratified” to be able to testify as a court witness against the former SS officer. After many decades, she could finally expose to a German court “something that was a crime at the time, is still one today and will be one tomorrow and forever”.

“I’m not concerned about punishment. The important thing is the court ruling, society’s legal view of what happened,” said Pustai-Fahidi. She described how in 1944 she had been deported with her family under incredibly barbaric conditions from the Hungarian town of Debrecen to the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp.

A gesture made by Auschwitz survivor and plaintiff Eva Mozes Kor caused something of a stir in the courtroom and later. Testifying during the first week of the trial, she described how she arrived in Auschwitz at the age of ten, and only escaped being gassed because the camp doctor, Josef Mengele, wanted to use her and her twin sister for his medical experiments.

After the proceedings, she went over to Gröning and

told him she forgave him. She said he should tell his “fellow Nazis” that they should admit to what happened in Auschwitz. She shook hands with him and hugged him, while previously informed photographers documented the incident.

Following Mozes Kor’s defence of her gesture on the Günther Jauch ARD television talk show on April 26, several other co-plaintiffs and their lawyers stressed in a press statement that Mozes Kor spoke for herself and they did not share her views.

Cornelius Nestler, who together with Thomas Walther represents 49 co-plaintiffs in the criminal proceedings against Gröning, told the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper that he did not believe this development amounted to “discord” among his clients. He said the press statement was published only because of the special attention given to Mozes Kor by the media: “We see the need to draw attention to the fact that Ms. Kor’s behaviour is self-contradictory: a person is either a co-plaintiff (seeking a prosecution) or someone who is against a prosecution, as Ms. Kor expressly said on the Jauch programme. One should not use the role of a co-plaintiff to throw doubt on the content of an indictment that is being vehemently pursued by all the other co-plaintiffs.”

The press release states: “We cannot forgive Mr. Gröning his participation in the murder of our relatives and a further 299,000 people—especially because he has always considered himself innocent of any criminal liability. We want justice and we welcome the exposure of crime that this case has made possible.”



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