

# Trial of Auschwitz guard continues in Germany

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The trial of the former SS member Oskar Gröning, which began in April at the Luneburg district court, recommenced on July 1 with the accused expected to give new testimony.

The indictment against Gröning charges him with acting as an accessory to the murder of 300,000 people. The former SS junior squad leader was an SS guard and “bookkeeper” in the Auschwitz concentration and extermination camp in Nazi-occupied Poland.

The indictment by the public prosecutor’s office in Hanover, which is responsible for pursuing the crimes of the Nazis, restricts itself to the time of the so-called Hungary action between May 16 and July 11, 1944. In this two-month period, the SS deported about 425,000 Jews from Hungary to Auschwitz. Approximately 300,000 were taken to the gas chambers and murdered immediately upon their arrival (see also “Trial of former SS soldier begins in Germany”).

The trial has been interrupted repeatedly on account of the state of health of the accused, who is now 94 years old. Testimony from expert witness Stefan Hördler, historian and head of the memorial in Mittelbau Dora in Nordhausen, was heard on June 17, the last previous session of the trial.

Mittelbau Dora was initially an external camp location subsumed under the Buchenwald concentration camp. Later, it became an independent concentration camp where prisoners, primarily from the Soviet Union, Poland and France, were forced to work for the German weapons industry in bestial conditions. Between 1943 and 1945, a third of the more than 60,000 people imprisoned there died as a result of the murderous working and living conditions.

Stefan Hördler cast doubt on statements made by the accused at the beginning of the trial. The accused claimed that he only provided his services at the ramp in Auschwitz, where the victims transported in cattle trucks arrived and were selected, on a “few occasions” and only in “exceptional cases.”

Hördler explained in detail how the concentration camp in Auschwitz was intentionally prepared for the mass destruction of the Hungarian Jews, which took place between May and July 1944. “Extermination experts were

intentionally brought to Auschwitz for the Hungary action,” the historian told the court.

After the Wehrmacht invaded Hungary in March 1944, Adolf Eichmann was sent from Berlin to Hungary to organise the mass murder of the Jews. A squad of about 700 SS soldiers accompanied him. The German occupiers relied on Hungarian police and other collaborators to round up the Jewish population and then cram them in trains to transport them to Auschwitz.

Hördler’s descriptions were shocking. He explained that the SS had ordered the building of a special rail line that allowed them to select victims and transport them to the vicinity of the crematoriums. However, the capacity to implement mass extermination was inadequate. So the SS brought together “extermination experts” from other camps, including “experts on open corpse burning.”

SS soldiers such as Gröning, who managed prisoners and who were responsible for watching over the ramp at the concentration camp, and, following selection, for gathering the possessions and valuables of victims, were also an important component of the terror and were regularly deployed at the ramp. The money, jewelry and other valuables confiscated were then counted, registered and sent to SS headquarters in Berlin.

An additional aspect of this “activity” consisted in gathering and carrying away the pieces of luggage belonging to the people who had been led away from the platform and the ramp. “In this way, traces of the mass killing were supposed to be removed from the view of subsequent detainees,” according to the 85-page-long indictment. In this way, Gröning supported the systematic killing of the Nazi regime.

During the so-called Hungary action, up to five trains a day arrived in Auschwitz with thousands of victims. The number of collection personnel was doubled in order to sort and make use of the clothing, money and jewelry.

Hördler expressed doubt about Gröning’s claim that he had applied several times for a transfer during his time in Auschwitz. According to Hördler, transfer requests were

documented in special lists. The lists are available, but there is no evidence of Gröning's alleged request.

In a discussion on NDR (Norddeutscher Rundfunk) radio, historian Susanne Willems, who has researched Auschwitz for a number of years and published a book on the topic, confirmed the statements and assessment of Stefan Hördler.

She said, "The entire Auschwitz complex operated like a factory designed for killing people on an industrial scale. Between 1940 and 1945, the largest Nazi concentration camp near Krakow (Poland) employed between 7,000 and 8,000 men and women from the SS—from concentration camp commanders like Rudolf Höß to ordinary SS soldiers. These men, and women as well, worked as a machine and each cog was connected with the next. One of these cogs was the SS soldier Oskar Gröning."

With regard to the activities of Gröning and those like him in Auschwitz who were responsible for looting the victims, Willems said, "in light of the hundreds of strollers, thousands upon thousands of glasses, shoes, pieces of clothing and gold tooth fillings, it had to be clear to everyone who was involved in the management of Auschwitz that he was part of the system of extermination."

Auschwitz survivors and the relatives of victims testified during the trial days in April and May (see "Auschwitz survivors testify against former SS officer").

One of the joint plaintiffs is 70-year-old Angela Orosz-Richt. She told the court at the beginning of June that she was born in Auschwitz. Her mother hid her from the SS and nursed her and another surviving baby at the camp in spite of her own undernourishment and exhaustion.

Orosz-Richt described in harrowing detail the cruel experiments conducted by camp doctor Josef Mengele on her mother while her mother was seven months pregnant with her. Mengele had earlier performed sterilisation experiments on her mother, repeatedly injecting her with burning substances. "These experiments are the reason I don't have any brothers or sisters," said Orosz-Richt.

She often spoke directly to the accused: "We still weep over what you have taken from us, Herr Gröning. How can I ever forgive you? I want to stand here and point my finger in accusation against those who were responsible for the inhuman conditions into which I was born, at those such as yourself, Herr Gröning."

The day of Angela Orosz-Richt's statement, June 2, would have been her father's birthday. He was murdered in Auschwitz. She told the accused: "Herr Gröning, I cannot go to the grave of my father and say a prayer, because he has no grave." His ashes are scattered somewhere in Auschwitz. "The past is still present, that's why it is impossible for me to forgive or forget those who were responsible for Auschwitz."

The trial of Gröning once again demonstrates the monstrous crimes of the Nazi dictatorship and, through the statements of the plaintiffs, survivors and relatives of the victims of Auschwitz, makes comprehensible the unending cruelty of these crimes. Even if far too late, it holds the former SS man legally accountable for his participation in these crimes.

But it cannot change the fact that the German justice system failed miserably in the pursuit, prosecution and punishment of all those involved in the crimes of the Nazi dictatorship.

The primary reason for this failure was the role played by German politicians and legal authorities, including many old Nazis, in systematically preventing a legal examination of Nazi crimes and their background.

Only a small percentage of the many thousands of Nazi crimes were ever brought before the courts. While the German judiciary investigated more than 100,000 cases after the war, only 6,500 defendants were convicted. Measured against the monstrous crimes in which they took part, most received lenient sentences. The perpetrators typically invoked "orders from above," which the courts recognised as a defence.

Of the 6,500 SS men who carried out their murderous work in the Auschwitz extermination camps and survived the war, only 29 were convicted in the Federal Republic and approximately 20 in the GDR, according to a report in *Der Spiegel*.

What the Gröning trial makes clear is that no matter how certain German historians seek to revise and sanitise these events, the German ruling elite cannot escape the shadow of the unspeakably horrendous crimes committed in the twentieth century, for which Auschwitz has become synonymous. With its recently proclaimed return to militarism and war, the German elite is preparing the way for similar, terrible crimes.



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