

Germany: Trial opens against SS guard at Auschwitz

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The trial of Reinhold Hanning, former SS guard at the Auschwitz concentration and extermination camp, began February 11. The 94-year-old is accused of 170,000 counts of accessory to murder.

Hanning was a member of Hitler Youth when he was young, and at the age of 19 voluntarily joined the Waffen SS. According to the indictment of the public prosecutor's office in Dortmund, between January 1943 and mid-June 1944 Hanning was a member of the SS Death's Head Unit and was stationed in the Auschwitz concentration and extermination camp as part of its guard detail. His responsibilities included searching for people who escaped the camp, guarding the selection process on the ramp, and accompanying the prisoners to the gas chambers.

Between May and June 1944 alone, hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews were brought to Auschwitz-Birkenau in cattle trucks and selected on the loading ramp (see: Trial of former SS Soldier Begins in Germany). "Almost all of them were gassed immediately afterwards," senior public prosecutor Andreas Brendel, head of the central Nazi war crimes investigation unit in Dortmund, told the radio station WDR. "We believe that the guards who were present provided assistance."

The most important reason why this trial and several others are only now taking place, 71 years after the Second World War and the fall of the Nazi dictatorship, lies with the German political and judiciary system, which allowed many old Nazis to continue their careers unhampered and systematically prevented a legal examination of Nazi war crimes and their background.

Relatively few of the many thousands of Nazi criminals were put on trial. Since the end of the war, the German judiciary oversaw over 100,000 cases, but only 6,500 of the accused were sentenced. Compared to the monstrous crimes they participated in, most of them received relatively mild punishments. As a rule, the perpetrators invoked "orders from above," a defence recognized by the courts.

Of the 6,500 SS soldiers who performed their murderous work in the Auschwitz extermination camp and survived the war, only 29 were punished in the German Federal Republic and only 20 in the German Democratic Republic, according to *Der Spiegel*.

Until a few years ago, German courts insisted that in order to indict and sentence former SS guards, it had to be proved that they had taken part directly in the murders in the extermination camps. This was difficult because of the lack of surviving witnesses. This situation changed for the first time with the Demjanjuk trial five years ago.

In 2011, the Munich state court sentenced John Demjanjuk, a former SS guard in the Sobibor extermination camp who has since died, to five years imprisonment for accessory to murder. Since then, concrete evidence of participation in murder no longer has to be demonstrated. This is one of the reasons why trials of former SS soldiers who are still alive are now once again taking place.

Following the Demjanjuk decision, the Central Office for the Investigation of Nazi War Crimes in Ludwigsburg has opened new investigations. Old pay and clothing lists offered clues about the man now accused in Detmold as well as three other suspected former SS guards in Auschwitz. As a consequence, three other men have been indicted in Kiel, Hanau and Neubrandenburg (see: Nazi war crime trial in Neubrandenburg threatens to collapse).

The trial of former SS guard Reinhold Hanning has met with so much interest in the population that the trial at the Detmold state court has been moved to the hall of the Chamber of Industry and Commerce. On the first day of the trial, February 11, senior state prosecutor Brendel read the indictment. Like SS squad leader Oskar Gröning, who was convicted in 2015, Hanning was also accused of accessory to the murder of thousands of Hungarian Jews.

Hanning's unit, a company of the SS Death's Head storm troopers, was deployed as guards of the Auschwitz I camp, the so-called main camp. The indictment also lists all the murders that were perpetrated there. These included: mass shootings against the "black wall" in the courtyard of the camp prison "with an unknown total number of victims," selections in the sick inmate barracks, "in which weak and sick prisoners were sorted out and mainly brought to the gas chambers to be killed," and "extermination by living conditions," which means hard work with inadequate clothing and nourishment, catastrophic hygienic conditions and inadequate medical care.

Hanning has so far refused to reply to the indictment, which

thoroughly describes the crimes, “the many thousands of killings of camp inmates that were carried out by the main perpetrators,” which he supported or at least facilitated by means of his watch duty activities. Because of his old age and state of health, the trial is limited to two hours per day.

Speaking against the accused are the witnesses and joint plaintiffs in this trial, the few who survived or are relatives of the survivors of the horrors at Auschwitz. Forty joint plaintiffs and witnesses for the prosecution from both in and outside Germany are participating in the trial.

On the first day of the trial, Leon Schwarzbaum spoke. He was born in Hamburg and grew up in Bedzin, Poland, where the family had returned because of the mother’s homesickness. He described a happy childhood and youth until “the calamity” was brought upon them. “In 1943, my family and I were going to be deported by the police and the SS. For a reason unknown to me, on June 22, I was separated from my parents, who were transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau along with a large number of Jews from Bedzin, and they were both gassed on one of the three following days.”

Four weeks later, he was also deported to Auschwitz. Thirty-five members of his family were killed. He described how he was forced to observe an SS soldier shooting a 17-year-old in the head. “One suspects what happened in Auschwitz. The bricklayers who built gas chambers there described it. Parents threw their children out of the trains in the hope that at least they would survive.”

Schwarzbaum had to work as the errand boy of the criminal camp senior. Then he worked for Siemens in the neighbouring Bobrek camp. After this, he gave further descriptions of the terrible living conditions in Auschwitz, which ended in death for most of the prisoners.

“The images from Auschwitz pursued me every day,” he said. “The SS was cruel and sadistic.” Anyone who tried to flee was mauled by dogs. “In the camp, these dead people were then sat on chairs and we were supposed to pass by, for the purpose of deterrence.”

He then closed by directing his remarks to the accused: “Mr. Hanning, we are almost exactly the same age. We will soon stand before the highest judge. Say what you and your comrades have done and experienced!”

On February 12, the second day of the trial, witnesses Justin Sonder, 91, and Erna de Vries, 92, described their experiences.

Sonder is from Chemnitz. His parents were deported from the Theresienstadt concentration camp to Auschwitz in January 1943. His mother, who was 42 years old at the time, was sent immediately to the gas chamber. Because of the hard forced labour that his father was forced to perform, he survived in Auschwitz for only four years and died at the age of 50.

Sonder described the inhumane transport to Auschwitz and how he lost his own identity with his arrival on the ramp. “Children cried for their mothers, women for their husbands.” He said, “If one survived Auschwitz for three or four months,

one was already one of the older inmates.”

He described the fear of death during the repeated selections and the images burned into his memory. Every day at noon, a truck full of people who had been shot or struck dead or who had collapsed came from the headquarters of the Buna plants. The inmates had to spend the night standing up if the numbers were not right at the roll call. Exhausted prisoners were woken up on orders from the SS to do sports (quoted in *Spiegel Online*).

Erna de Vries is from Kaiserslautern and now lives in Emsland. She is half Jewish and insisted on accompanying her Jewish mother when she was put in prison by the Gestapo in 1943 and then deported to Auschwitz. She had to perform life threatening forced labour in Auschwitz and was extremely lucky that she survived. She was brought to Ravensbrück and survived at the price of having to take leave of her mother in Auschwitz forever.

At the end of the second trial day, Hanning’s defence council announced that they wanted to give a statement for their client in the course of the trial, to which he might make a supplementary statement.

Twelve dates up until May 20 have been scheduled for the trial in Detmold.

Speaking on the significance of the trial to the radio station WDR, Christoph Heubner, executive vice president of the International Auschwitz Committee, said: “For the survivors of Auschwitz, this is a further act of late justice, that once again the crimes of Auschwitz and the images of their relatives who were murdered there are being brought to the light of day.”

Senior state prosecutor Brendel said, with regard to the advanced age of the accused: “Accessory to murder has no statute of limitations. ... If I place the age of the accused and the crimes of which he is accused in relation, age plays no role for me.”



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