Germany: Trial in Hamburg for former SS security guard at Stutthof concentration camp

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The trial of 93-year-old Bruno D, a former Nazi SS (Schutzstaffel) security guard at the Stutthof concentration camp, commenced on October 17, 2019. The public prosecutor accuses Bruno D of aiding and abetting in the murder of at least 5,230 people.

Bruno D was part of a team of SS guards at the Stutthof concentration camp from August 9, 1944 to April 26, 1945. Due to Bruno D's age at the time—he was just 17-18 years old—the trial in the city of Hamburg is being held in the city's juvenile court. It is estimated that around 65,000 people were murdered by the Nazis in the Stutthof concentration camp, which is located about 40 kilometres east of Gdansk in what is now Poland.

From the start of the trial the statements made by co-plaintiffs, survivors of the Stutthof concentration camp and their relatives, have played an important role in graphically demonstrating the cruel and murderous conditions prevailing in the camp together with the role played by the SS guards.

A statement was read out in court by Judy Meisel, who is 90 years old, lives in the US and was no longer able to travel to Germany. She was transported to Stutthof as a 13-year-old girl, together with her mother, who was murdered in the gas chamber. In her statement, read out by her lawyer, she stated: "Stutthof was mass murder organised by the SS and made possible by the security guards. They made sure that nobody could escape from this hell."

In his testimony the accused, Bruno D stated he had mainly served on the guard tower of the concentration camp and had never used a weapon. Although he could remember a number of details from the camp, he claimed he could not recall the smell from the crematorium where bodies had been cremated every day. Survivors of the concentration and extermination camps all say that this smell can never be forgotten.

Bruno D also claimed that he had seen no way to evade concentration camp service. His claim was contradicted by historian Stefan Hördler, who has acted as an expert witness in several similar trials.

Hördler pointed out that the SS guards played a crucial role in the functioning of a concentration camp. They had the task of shielding the camp from the outside, preventing prisoners from fleeing, leading them to their daily forced labour, as well as guarding incoming trains and the selection process that led directly to the murder of many of those transported.

Bruno D's lawyer posed the question as to why the trial was taken place at such a late stage, given the age of the accused. The main reason is that there was never a genuine political and legal reappraisal in post-war West Germany of the countless crimes committed by the Nazis during World War II. Numerous judges, prosecutors and officials continued to hold leading positions after the war in a largely seamless transition from the Nazi era. For example, of the approximately 6,500 SS members involved in duties at the Auschwitz concentration and extermination camp who survived the war, only 29 were sentenced in the post-war Federal Republic.

A new legal basis for prosecution was only first introduced in 2011—66 years after the liberation of the concentration camps and long after most of the perpetrators had died peacefully in their beds. The new legislation stipulated that there no longer needed to be evidence of a specific crime to be convicted of involvement in the mass murder committed by the Nazis. Instead, any form of involvement in the operations of a concentration camp was sufficient, given that the entire purpose of the camps was to facilitate extermination of inmates.

As a result, a number of former guards, including Ukrainian security guard John Demjanjuk and SS man Oskar Gröning, have been sentenced since 2011 for their involvement in the murder of thousands of victims.

The importance of the trials currently taking place is primarily to show that there is no expiry date for the mass crimes of the Nazi dictatorship. This in turn provides at least some relief and justice for survivors of such atrocities and their families who have had to live with the consequences of these terrible experiences for a lifetime.

In the lawsuit against Bruno D, several of the co-plaintiffs heard so far have stressed the significance of the trial, given the current resurgence of far-right extremism and fascism in Germany, Europe and worldwide. One co-plaintiff, Christoph Rückel, said that the trial was "urgently necessary," following the murder by a neo-fascist of the state president in Hesse, Walter Lübcke, and the more recent terrorist attack on a Jewish synagogue in the city of Halle. Every far-right-wing act must be "relentlessly" pursued, Rücken stressed.

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At the end of October, 93-year-old Marek Dunin-Wasowicz took the stand in the trial of Bruno D. Dunin-Wasowicz, who had travelled from Warsaw, was one of the political prisoners held at the Stutthof concentration camp. Together with his brothers and parents he had supported the resistance against the German occupation.

Dunin-Wasowicz described the horrific conditions in the camp and described how thousands of Jews were transported to the camp in autumn 1944, hounded and beaten by SS men. Many of them were no longer seen later in the camp, i.e., they had been immediately murdered and their bodies destroyed. He reported that the sight of human corpses was commonplace in the camp.

Dunin-Wasowicz also described conditions in the barracks, where three people had to share a bed of straw on three-storey bunks. Hunger was pervasive. Internees were given a slice of bread for breakfast and a ladle of soup for lunch. Many people forced to work under these conditions died of hunger and exhaustion. Dunin-Wasowicz was fortunate enough to survive the death march organised by the Gestapo in January 1945 and managed to escape.

According to spiegelonline, Dunin-Wasowicz declared at the end of his statement that he only appeared in court because he felt it was his duty. He had come to pay homage to all those imprisoned with him and who had died in Stutthof. He also stressed that he would do everything in his power to ensure that what he had experienced would never be repeated.

"When I see what's going on in Germany, Poland, France and many other countries: with nationalism and racism on the rise—and even fascism—then I am fearful," Marek Dunin-Wasowicz said "That's why I have come. I don't want revenge."

At the beginning of December, camp survivor Abraham Koryski travelled to Hamburg. The 92-year-old came from Israel with his daughter and two other relatives to testify about the sadistic atrocities committed by the SS. At the age of 16, he was sent to the Stutthof concentration camp in August 1944. Prior to his odyssey through a number of camps ending in Stutthof, Koryski had spent years in the ghetto in the old town of Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. The National Socialists transported thousands of Jews from Vilnius to Ponar where they were destined for mass elimination.

Koryski was also forced to take part in a death march shortly before the end of the war. The prisoners were not permitted food, drink, warm clothes or shoes. Whoever died was shoved to the side of the road while the rest were forced to continue running. "We ate snow," Koryski said. He had to sit down several times because he could no longer bear the pain. Then he got up again. He was finally freed by the intervention of the Soviet Red Army.

Koryski expressly wanted to testify in the trial. He said, "It's not easy for me. I don't come out of revenge. At the same time, I do accuse; I will not forgive. I want the world to know what happened. Everyone should know everything." That is particularly important for the coming generations, he said. "My revenge is my family, my relatives who are here in this room," Koryski said. "They demonstrate that I managed to survive it all."

On January 24, the Hamburg regional court heard the moving testimony of another survivor of the Stutthof concentration camp. It was read out by Gunnar Solberg, the son of 97-year-old Johan Solberg from Norway. He is currently in hospital and was too ill to travel to Hamburg.

Johan Solberg belonged to the resistance movement that fought the German occupiers in Norway. He was arrested and taken to the Stutthof concentration camp with 44 men and 18 women. He stated that he still remembers the "smoky-sweet smell" that hovered over the camp.

Solberg arrived on August 10, 1944, and immediately faced a horrific scenario: about 15 emaciated bodies lay in front of a barrack, as a man tore the gold out of their teeth. Solberg also described the complete overcrowding of the barracks. Jewish prisoners had the worst fate. He saw hundreds of people being led to the gas chamber every day. Many of them were crying. "Everyone knew where they were going," he said.

Solberg also described how all the prisoners were forced to turn out if one was punished. He witnessed 11 executions. The cruellest case involved two Russian boys who were hanged next to a Christmas tree a few days after Christmas Eve 1944.

His son reported that he saw the television series "Holocaust" with his father in the 1970s and asked him, "Was it really that bad?" The father replied, "No, it was worse."

In his statement Johan Solberg stressed, "I hate the Nazi system, but not individual people. Revenge doesn't solve problems."

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