

# Trials begin of former SS guard and secretary at Stutthof concentration camp

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The trial of the 100-year-old former SS guard at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp began in Brandenburg an der Havel in October. Josef S. is accused of 3,518 cases of aiding and abetting cruel and malicious murder between January 1942 and February 1945 in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

On the second day of the trial, the defendant denied having been in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. As a result, a criminal investigation officer from the State Security Department of the Brandenburg North Police Directorate, Heike Trautmann, reported on her research in archives and at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp memorial.

The name of the accused, his date of birth, and his rank at the time were found in the archives of the memorial, in the Koblenz Federal Archives, and in files of the Stasi, the secret service in the former East Germany. From the documents, it is clear that the defendant was active in six different companies of SS guards from October 23, 1941 to February 18, 1945. During this time, he rose from the rank of Private to SS-Rottenführer (Corporal).

According to the official's investigations, more than 38,110 people were murdered during Josef S.'s term of service. In addition, there are 10,936 prisoners known by name who are listed in the death register of the Sachsenhausen camp memorial. Trautmann presented the court with a 14-metre-long list on which officials had noted earlier the daily killings. The methods of killing listed included shootings, hangings, gassings and inhumane living conditions.

For organisational reasons, the trial of Josef S. before the Neuruppin Regional Court is being held in a sports hall of the Brandenburg an der Havel prison.

According to Wikipedia, the Sachsenhausen concentration camp near Berlin had a special role. The concentration camp was built from 1936 onwards by prisoners from other disbanded camps. Due to its proximity to Gestapo headquarters, it served as a training ground for concentration camp commanders and SS guards and was used to test various methods of killing.

A total of about 200,000 prisoners were deported to Sachsenhausen concentration camp, of whom only about 140,000 were registered. In August 1941, an execution facility for shooting prisoners in the neck was built, which was used to murder at least 13,000 Soviet prisoners of war. The concentration camp was expanded by numerous subcamps, where prisoners were lent, or "rented out" as forced labour in industrial and armament factories, including Siemens, Demag-Panzer, Henschel-Werke Berlin, Daimler-Benz and I.G. Farben, which made the poison gas used to kill prisoners.

One of the joint plaintiffs in the trial is 84-year-old Christoffel Heijer. His father, a Dutch resistance fighter, was cruelly murdered in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

A report in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of October 7, 2021 states: "At the beginning of May 1942, 71 Dutch resistance fighters were also executed in the Erschießungsgraben [shooting trench] of 'Station Z.' They were

shot by members of a company of the SS Death's Head Guard Battalion. A publication by the Sachsenhausen memorial site describes in detail this 'division of labour', i.e. the 'interrelation and meshing together' of the command staff and the guards of the concentration camp, using the example of mass murders, including that of the 71 Dutch men. One of them was Johan Hendrik Heijer, born in 1900 [the father of Christoffel Heijer]."

There were gas chambers and incinerators in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, which were then used on a large scale in the Auschwitz extermination camps and elsewhere in Nazi-occupied Poland for the industrial mass murder of Jews, Sinti and Roma, political opponents, Soviet prisoners of war and others. Killing by starvation and hard labour was also widespread. It is impossible to fully enumerate the list of Nazi atrocities here.

It is completely inconceivable that the guards in the camps were unaware of these atrocities. Firing squads were assembled from their ranks to carry out the mass murders. They had to guard the prisoners, who were forced daily to undertake the hardest forced labour outside the camp. They knew the catastrophic conditions under which people in the camp vegetated. Thousands died from hunger, cold and disease.

During the reading of the indictment, prosecutor Cyrill Klement went into detail about the systematic killings of thousands of camp inmates during the years 1941 to 1945. This included mass shootings in special facilities, extermination in gas chambers, and deaths by exhaustion and disease. "The accused supported this knowingly and willingly at least by his conscientious performance of guard duty, which fitted seamlessly into the killing system."

The trial of Josef S. had to be interrupted at the end of October for the accused to undergo a medical procedure. The joint plaintiffs hope that the trial can be continued. For the next part of the proceedings, historian Stefan Hördler was to be heard as an expert witness. The testimonies of a concentration camp survivor from Israel and a descendant of an inmate from France, who are joint plaintiffs in the trial, were scheduled for the beginning of November.

## The case of Irmgard F.

Almost simultaneously with the trial of Josef S., the trial of the 96-year-old former concentration camp secretary Irmgard F. was to open at the end of September. Between June 1943 and April 1945, she was secretary to concentration camp commander Paul Werner Hoppe at the Stutthof concentration camp near Gdansk in Nazi-occupied Poland.

Irmgard F. is accused of aiding and abetting murder in more than 11,000 cases. The charge against her is that in her function as secretary to the camp commander at Stutthof between June 1943 and April 1945, she

“aided and abetted those in charge of the camp in the systematic killing of inmates.”

The trial is taking place in a warehouse converted into an improvised courtroom in the industrial area of Itzehoe in Schleswig-Holstein. Here, too, survivors and relatives of the deceased from the Stutthof concentration camp are among the joint plaintiffs. The trial is being held before the Juvenile Chamber of the Itzehoe Regional Court, as the accused was 18 or 19 years old at the time of the crimes.

The trial had to be postponed because Irmgard F. did not appear for the opening proceedings. She had left her retirement home in Quickborn by taxi on the morning of the trial and was arrested later that day in Hamburg. After a short period in custody, she was released with an electronic ankle bracelet. She then appeared at the new hearing on October 19 so that the indictment could be read.

The trial of Irmgard F. is the first case in which a civilian employee of a concentration camp has faced the court. The prosecution intends to show what Irmgard F. knew as a typist in the camp commander's office, what she herself witnessed. An expert report for the trial suggests that she may have known a great deal. The correspondence of Commandant Hoppe is said to have passed over her desk. This is said to have included execution orders, transportation lists with the names of women and children deported from Stutthof to Auschwitz, and correspondence between the concentration camp and the Reich Security Main Office in Berlin.

The Stutthof concentration camp, like every Nazi concentration camp, was an institution for torturing, humiliating and murdering people, a death machine. All those who worked in it were guilty of aiding and abetting these atrocities and thus of aiding and abetting murder. Claims by defendants that they had no knowledge of much of what was going on in the camp and, for example, of the existence of a gas chamber, are not very credible.

### **On the history of the Stutthof concentration camp**

The Stutthof concentration camp is less well known than the camps at Auschwitz, Buchenwald or Dachau. It was opened on September 2, 1939, one day after the invasion of Poland by the German Wehrmacht (Army), and existed until the end of World War II. It was not liberated until May 9, 1945, one day after the end of the war, by soldiers of the Red Army.

Initially, civilians were imprisoned at Stutthof—Polish intellectuals, teachers, members of parliament and academics from Danzig (today, Gdańsk). With the beginning of the Polish campaign, the Gestapo began to carry out mass arrests. The prisoners had to construct buildings on the camp grounds under the most brutal conditions. Of several hundred Danzig Jews who were imprisoned here until mid-September 1939, most died within a few weeks.

Because of its early origins, Stutthof is considered the first concentration camp outside German borders. On January 29, 1942, it was given Level I status, which it retained until the end of the war. Its incorporation into the concentration camp system created the conditions for including the inmates in the war economy of the German Reich. The economic profit that the SS derived from the exploitation or “renting” of prisoners to private companies and farms amounted to an estimated 10 million Reichsmarks for the years 1942 to 1944 (approximately \$29.6 million today).

At the beginning of 1943, the new concentration camp, which was secured with an electric fence, was built right next to the old camp. The camp had 39 external subcamps. The largest were Thorn (Toruń) and Elbing (Elbląg) with about 5,000 Jewish women each. A gas chamber was built in early 1944. At least 65,000 people, mostly Jews, were murdered at

Stutthof.

Right up to the end of Nazi rule, the most brutal crimes were committed at Stutthof, including mass shootings by SS men on the beach at Palmnicken on January 31, 1945, when some 3,000 Jewish prisoners were shot or driven into the Baltic Sea by machine gun fire. Only 15 people survived this massacre.

Max Pauly, who was commandant of the Stutthof concentration camp from April 1, 1940 to 1942, was tried by a British court-martial in Hamburg after World War II along with 13 others responsible for the Neuengamme concentration camp, his next post. He was sentenced to death, and hanged in 1946.

His successor at Stutthof, Paul Werner Hoppe, was sentenced to nine years jail in Bochum in 1957, of which he served only three. He was released from prison in 1960 and led an inconspicuous life in Bochum until his death in 1974. Theodor Meyer, Hoppe's Adjutant, was sentenced to death in the second Stutthof trial on October 31, 1947 and executed by hanging in Gdansk (Danzig) on October 22, 1948.

Irmgard F. testified as a witness in the trial against Paul Werner Hoppe. Now she is asking why she was not arrested at that time, if she was considered to be complicit.

### **Delayed trials**

As in similar earlier trials, most of the joint plaintiffs are less concerned that the defendants, who are now very old, should receive a heavy sentence and go to prison, but that the unbelievably brutal crimes of the Nazi regime should come before the courts and be condemned. They do not want what happened over 70 years ago to be forgotten, and they want it to be known what was done to them and their relatives.

The trials of former members of the SS, and now the former concentration camp secretary, who were guilty of aiding and abetting murder in the Nazi death camps, are taking place so late because the German justice system showed little interest in prosecuting Nazi crimes and their perpetrators and accomplices throughout the postwar period.

Earlier efforts to bring to justice those responsible for the cruel and mass crimes in the concentration camps were often impeded or rejected. Of the 6,500 SS members at Auschwitz extermination camp who survived the war, just 29 were convicted in the Federal Republic (West Germany), and about 20 in the German Democratic Republic (East Germany).

One important reason for this was the almost seamless transition of German lawyers, judges and prosecutors with Nazi pasts into the judicial apparatus of the Federal Republic. There has never been a real appraisal and reckoning with those responsible for the monstrous crimes of the Nazi dictatorship in Germany.

For decades, SS henchmen who were active in the concentration camps had to be proven to have committed specific murders of specific persons in order for charges to be brought at all. This proved to be difficult to impossible due to the lack of surviving witnesses. This only changed with the Demjanjuk trial, which ended in May 2011 with the conviction of the accused. Since then, anyone who was in any way involved in systematic killings in concentration camps can be charged with accessory to murder. After this verdict, for the first time, a systematic search was conducted for SS members who were still alive and who had participated in the Holocaust.

This was followed in 2015, among other things, by the trial of former SS soldier Oskar Gröning, who worked at Auschwitz and was also deployed there on the ramp at which the selection of incoming prisoners took place, determining whether they were immediately killed or sent into the camp. Gröning's conviction for aiding and abetting the murder of more than

300,000 Jews in the Auschwitz concentration and extermination camp was upheld by the Federal Supreme Court in September 2016. However, he never served his sentence. Gröning died in a hospital in March 2018 at the age of 96.



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