

# Former secretary at Stutthof concentration camp sentenced to juvenile probation

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On December 20, 2022, the Itzehoe Regional Court in the German state of Schleswig-Holstein sentenced 97-year-old Irmgard Furchner, a former secretary at the Stutthof concentration camp near Gdansk, to a suspended juvenile sentence of two years for aiding and abetting murder in more than 10,500 cases.

Furchner worked at the concentration camp in Nazi-occupied Poland between June 1943 and April 1945 as a secretary to camp commandant Paul Werner Hoppe. There, according to the indictment, she “assisted those in charge of the camp in the systematic killing of detainees.” It is the first trial in which a civilian employee of a concentration camp stood trial.

Since Furchner was between 18 and 19 years old at the time, the trial against her was held before the Juvenile Chamber of the Itzehoe Regional Court. The trial took place in a warehouse in the industrial area of Itzehoe, which had been converted into an improvised courtroom, due to the great media interest, numerous joint plaintiffs and their attorneys, and social distancing rules from coronavirus protection measures. The case began on October 19, 2021, more than two weeks late, as the defendant had initially attempted to evade the start of the trial by fleeing from her senior citizens’ residence in Quickborn by cab on September 30, 2021.

During Furchner’s trial, the court heard witness testimony of eight joint plaintiffs over 40 days. These concentration camp survivors recounted the suffering and mass death at Stutthof. As in earlier trials, they desired to present the monstrous crimes of the Nazi regime, which they had experienced firsthand, to a German court. Through the international media they also wanted to let a larger audience know what had been done to them and their relatives.

All those involved were well aware that the sentence could only have a symbolic character after such a long time. But it was important to them that these acts, as well as those who had participated in and enabled them, be condemned. They did not want what had happened at that time to be forgotten. In this way, the joint plaintiffs, survivors of the Stutthof concentration camp and their relatives, simultaneously made a case against the current dangers of fascism and war.

The Stutthof concentration camp, like every Nazi concentration camp, was an institution for torturing, humiliating and murdering people, a death machine. Whoever worked in it was guilty of making these atrocities possible, and thus of aiding and abetting murder.

Claims by the defendants and their defense attorneys that they had no knowledge of much of what went on in the camp, such as the existence of a gas chamber, were not very credible from the outset and were refuted during the trial both by the historical expert and by the testimony of survivors of the Stutthof concentration camp.

The Stutthof concentration camp is less well known than the camps at Auschwitz, Buchenwald or Dachau. The camp in Nazi-occupied Poland was opened on September 2, 1939, one day after the German Wehrmacht [military] invaded Poland. It stood until the end of World War II and was liberated by Red Army soldiers on May 9, 1945, one day after the end of the war.

Immediately after the invasion of Poland by the Wehrmacht, the Gestapo began mass arrests. Polish and Jewish civilians, including teachers, members of parliament and academics from Danzig, were deported to Stutthof. Under the most brutal conditions, the prisoners were forced to construct the buildings on the camp grounds themselves. Of several hundred Danzig Jews who were captured and brought to Stutthof by mid-September 1939, most died within a few weeks.

Because of its early origins, Stutthof is considered the first concentration camp outside the German border. 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 enabled integration of the prisoners into 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.

In the Stutthof concentration camp, the SS imprisoned more than 100,000 people in deplorable conditions during World War II, including a great many Jews. At least 65,000 people were murdered at Stutthof. Many died by a gunshot to the neck (there was a special facility for this) or in a gas chamber built on the camp grounds. Most of them were worked to death. That is, they died of starvation, debilitation, and epidemics due to the deliberately inadequate food supply and nonexistent medical care.

The court was able to hear only two hours of proceedings per day of session because of the advanced age of the defendant. Here follow some of the statements made by the historical expert in the case as well as concentration camp survivors who appeared as joint plaintiffs. They are based on the *NDR (Norddeutscher Rundfunk)* account from December 20, 2022, “Stutthof Trial - A Chronology of Events.”

A key witness in the trial was historian Stefan Hördler, who spoke as an expert witness at 14 sessions. Among the testimonies Hördler read out in court on March 1, 2022 was that of an SS man who had married the defendant after the war. He had testified in 1954: “In the Stutthof camp, people were gassed. This was talked about in the commandant’s staff.” Another SS man, also from the commandant’s staff, testified in 1974, according to Hördler, that in about six cases he had observed men and women being forced to climb into narrow gauge rail cars whose doors had then been closed. Only later, he said, did he learn that these were gassings.

In April and May 2022, expert witness Hördler showed, based on several statements made by SS men and civilian employees of the Stutthof concentration camp in the post-war period, that the camp’s staff knew very well about the crimes committed in the camp. The expert rejected the defendant’s claim that only orders and invoices had passed over her desk. As evidence, he cited several letters concerning prisoner transports: One of these letters was about the deportation of almost 2,000 Jewish prisoners to Auschwitz.

On December 7, 2021, the first survivor, 83-year-old Josef Salomonovic from Vienna, testified as a witness before the court in Itzehoe. Salomonovic was the only survivor of the Stutthof concentration camp to

appear in court in person. He had long hesitated on whether to testify and came to Itzehoe only with the greatest reluctance, and only because his wife and his lawyer had convinced him of the importance of his testimony. In an interview with *NDR* shortly before the end of the trial, Salomonovic said: "I didn't want that. To see F. [Furchner] and talk for two hours, in a hall, in person. That caused me pain."

In court he described the deportation and the suffering of his family. Salomonovic was deported from Prague first to Auschwitz and then, at the age of six, to Stutthof. He had been deported together with his mother, his father and his brother, three years his senior. His father was murdered in September 1944 in the Stutthof concentration camp with a phenol injection to the heart when he asked for medicine in the camp hospital barracks.

In the interview shortly before the end of the trial, Salomonovic and his wife stated that they were convinced of Irmgard Furchner's guilt. The sentence was not the important part. All that mattered to them, they said, was that she was convicted. "This is symbolic," Josef Salomonovic explained. "It is a matter of justice. For the state. For Germany. For conscience." He stressed that it was also important for future generations to understand that in a crime like the Holocaust, aiding and abetting must also be punished.

On December 14, 2021, 93-year-old Asia Shindelman recounted her ordeal via video link from the United States, where she lives. Shindelman was born in Lithuania in 1928. In 1941, after the German occupation, she and her parents were initially moved to a ghetto. Three years later, they were deported to the Stutthof concentration camp near Danzig. She described how SS guards received her and her parents, an uncle and grandmother with whips and dogs. The SS men were allowed to do anything, she said. "The Germans could also beat us to death." After a month, she said, she was taken to a external camp where she and other Jewish women were made to dig trenches for military defense.

Further, on January 25, 2022, Shindelman described her experiences on the death march from Stutthof concentration camp, which many did not survive. Preceding that, she told how she, then 15 years old, and her mother had had to help dig trenches and build tank traps as forced laborers in the bitterly cold last months of the war.

On February 15, 2022, 94-year-old concentration camp survivor Abraham Koryski described the atrocities he had witnessed and suffered as a 16-year-old in the Stutthof concentration camp between September 1944 and the end of January 1945. He addressed the court by video from Israel. Koryski reported how he had to collect the still-hot human bones in the crematorium, how guards had set a dog on prisoners, and that he had been surrounded by corpses every day. Repeatedly there had been beatings, and on several occasions he had observed executions.

Important in connection with the trial of Furchner was his testimony that everyone in the camp had known about the goings-on. From the barracks where he was housed, Korysik could see the commandant's office, the workplace of the accused.

On February 22, 2022, 97-year-old Towa-Magda Rosenbaum testified as a survivor. She, too, was connected via video link from Israel. Rosenbaum, who comes from Hungary, had been deported to the Stutthof concentration camp together with her sister. She spoke of the terrible hunger, the plague of lice and the blows of the guards. When the concentration camp was liberated, only about 900 women were still living, and many of them succumbed to their illnesses shortly thereafter.

On June 14, 2022, 95-year-old survivor Halina Strnad of Melbourne, Australia, described via video: "I was beaten, I was kicked, I was spat on." When she collapsed in pain and lay on the ground, the camp commander kicked her, she says. As a result of this brutal treatment, she suffered a fractured skull and several broken ribs. After the war, she had to undergo two operations as a result.

Strnad had been taken from Auschwitz to the Stutthof concentration

camp near Danzig in September 1944. At the beginning of 1945, almost all the women who were imprisoned with her in a barrack fell ill with typhus, including herself. Her mother died in her arms. She was told by fellow prisoners that the many dead were burned in a pit. The camp constantly reeked of burning corpses, she said. "I cannot imagine how it was possible not to know what was happening, since there was this permanent stench of burned corpses," Strnad said.

The 96-year-old Marek Dunin-Wasowicz, who testified by video link from Warsaw on June 28, 2022, had been taken to the Stutthof concentration camp with his brother in May 1944. He reported that he and his family had previously been active in the Polish resistance against the German occupiers. Dunin-Wasowicz said that since his time in the concentration camp he knew what fear and hunger were. He likewise reported that there was a constant stench of burned corpses in the camp, especially when there was not enough space in the crematoria. Then the murdered and deceased were burned on pyres.

The defendant Irmgard Furchner followed the testimonies of the joint plaintiffs and survivors via a monitor and headphones. She showed no emotion whatsoever. Furchner remained silent for the entire duration of the trial, which lasted for over a year. Only at the end did she utter three short sentences, "I'm sorry for everything that happened. I regret that I was in Stutthof at that time. That's all I can say."

One week after Furchner was sentenced by the Itzehoe Regional Court at the end of December, representatives of both the joint plaintiffs and the defendant's defense filed an appeal against the verdict. It is thus not legally binding. Furchner's two defense attorneys demanded an acquittal for their client. Even after the trial with its extensive evidence, they claim that it could not be proven beyond doubt that Irmgard Furchner had known about the systematic killings in the camp. The Federal Supreme Court must now examine whether there was a procedural error.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has previously clarified, these trials of the murderous regime's abettors have come so late because the German judiciary has shown little interest in prosecuting Nazi crimes, their perpetrators and supporters throughout the postwar period. Earlier efforts to bring to justice those responsible for atrocious mass crimes have often been prevented or rebuffed. One important reason for this was the virtually seamless transition of German lawyers, judges and prosecutors with Nazi pasts into the judicial apparatus of the Federal Republic.

In Germany, there has never been a real coming to terms and reckoning with the monstrous crimes of the Nazi dictatorship, let alone with those responsible for them.

For decades, it was necessary to prove that the SS henchmen in the concentration camps had committed specific murders of specific persons in order to be able to bring charges against them at all. This was often very difficult or impossible because fewer and fewer eyewitnesses were still alive. This only changed with the Demjanjuk trial, which ended in May 2011 with the conviction of the defendant. Since this verdict, anyone who participated in any way in systematic killings in concentration camps can be charged with accessory to murder. For the first time, a systematic search was conducted for SS men who were still alive and who had participated in the Holocaust.

In 2015, the trial of former SS man Oskar Gröning, who worked on the ramp at Auschwitz, took place. Gröning's conviction for aiding and abetting the murder of more than 300,000 Jews at 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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