

Former Auschwitz guard convicted of accessory to murder, faces prison

By Kate Connolly, The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff on 06.24.16

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Former SS Sergeant Reinhold Hanning, 94, who served as a guard at Auschwitz, sits between his lawyers, Andreas Scharmer (left) and Johannes Salmen in the courtroom in Detmold, Germany, June 17, 2016. He was found guilty of more than 170,000 counts of accessory to murder on allegations he helped the Nazi death camp kill 1.1 million Jews and others. Bernd Thissen/Pool Photo via AP

A 94-year-old former Auschwitz death camp guard has been convicted of aiding in the murder of 170,000 people during World War II. His slow-paced trial took four months and is likely to be the last of its kind.

Reinhold Hanning was sentenced on Friday to five years in prison. He has been convicted for his role in facilitating the slaughter at the Auschwitz death camp in Nazi-occupied Poland, although he will remain free pending appeal.

The trial, held at a Detmold court in western Germany, was a last chance for a historical reckoning with Germany's Nazi past. It was also an opportunity to bring the retired dairy farmer to justice more than 70 years after the end of the war.

“You were in Auschwitz for 2 1/2 years, performed an important function,” said the judge, Anke Grudda. “You were part of a criminal organization and took part in criminal activity in Auschwitz.”

Grudda also said Hanning could have chosen a different path.

“It is not true that you had no choice; you could have asked to be transferred to the war front,” she told him.

Hanning showed no reaction.

Survivors Offer Testimony, Demand Details Of Nazi Crimes

Many Holocaust survivors and historians came from around the world to give testimony to the court. Hanning, who became a junior squadron leader with the SS, avoided their gaze. The prosecution’s case was built on the premise that Hanning’s presence at Auschwitz made him part of the Nazi death machine and that he should therefore share responsibility for the Holocaust in which 6 million people, mostly European Jews, were murdered.

One survivor, Leon Schwarzbaum from Berlin, said he would have liked Hanning to use the trial as an opportunity to speak more about what happened at the camp.

One dramatic moment came when Schwarzbaum took to the witness stand and told Hanning to speak out before he died. “Mr. Hanning, we are virtually the same age and soon we will face our final judge. I would like to ask you to tell the historical truth here, just as I am,” he said.

Until 2011, prosecutions for involvement in the Holocaust were only considered possible if it could be shown that the individual was directly responsible for murder or torture. The Hanning case has concentrated on the Hungary Operation, which took place over three months, from May to July 1944. About 425,000 Hungarian Jews were deported to Auschwitz, in Nazi-occupied Poland. Roughly 300,000 of them were gassed to death immediately on arrival.

Prosecutors argue that the episode underlines the industrialized nature of the Nazi slaughter machine. For it to work, it depended on the participation of a massive network of people carrying out orders, however large or small. They have produced evidence that Hanning was in Auschwitz during the Hungary Operation and is therefore directly implicated.

Initially, Hanning had refused to speak, provoking frustration and anger among the survivors in the courtroom and those following the trial around the world. One survivor, Angela Orosz, 71, who was born at the concentration camp, flew in from her home in Toronto, Canada. She took to the witness stand to urge him: “You know what happened to all the people. You enabled their murder. Tell us! Tell us!”

Orosz said what mattered was what Hanning told the court about what happened in Auschwitz. Then it would go on record and “enter the history books, so that even if some people might say ‘the Jews are lying’ they will hear from the mouth of the Nazi what (actually) happened.”

An Admission Of Guilt In April

Hanning did not divulge any of the details of his working life at the camp but he made a surprise statement in April asking for forgiveness. “I was silent my whole life,” he told a hushed court, which strained to hear his quiet, rasping voice.

“I want to say to you that I’m deeply regretful at having belonged to a criminal organization that was responsible for the death of vast numbers of people, for the destruction of countless numbers

of families, for misery, torture and suffering on the part of the victims and their relatives. I am ashamed to have stood by and watched those injustices happen and to have done nothing to prevent them.”

In an earlier statement read by his lawyer, Johannes Salmen, Hanning insisted he had been sent to Auschwitz after he was injured in the head by a grenade in Kiev. Salmen also argued that his client’s young age, 18, when he joined the SS should be considered to be a mitigating factor. “You can’t act today as if the defendant was a fully grown man back then who knew just what he was doing,” he said.

However, some of the survivors were angered by the suggestion that he could not have avoided being sent to serve in Auschwitz.

The trial, like others in recent years, gave survivors the chance to speak out for the first time. “This is to do with throwing light on what happened, with ensuring that something like this never happens again,” said Marcus Goldbach, a lawyer for one of the victims.

Sentenced Despite Poor Health

Court proceedings have been reduced to just two hours a day to take into account Hanning’s poor health and age. Hanging over the proceedings, as well as other cases against elderly concentration camp employees, is the question of what good it can do to punish people so late in life and in bad health.

Prosecutors had called for a six-year sentence for Hanning. His lawyer had said he should be acquitted because there was “no proof” he was involved in any killings or torture and he had not worked in Birkenau, the part of the camp where the gassings were done.