

'Accountant of Auschwitz' to face justice

Oskar Gröning, a 93-year-old former Auschwitz guard, is standing trial for war crimes. Were people like Gröning responsible for the Holocaust, or should the blame fall on those in authority?



A different man? Oskar Gröning as a young Auschwitz guard (left) and as an elderly man.

Oskar Gröning is now a frail 93-year-old. But during the Second World War he was the 'Accountant of Auschwitz'. As far as anybody knows, Gröning did not personally kill anybody. But he did count banknotes confiscated from prisoners, many of whom were sent straight to the gas chambers to be murdered on arrival. Gröning has always been open about his experiences at the death camp. Now he is standing trial.

It is 70 years since the liberation of Auschwitz, where 1.5 million Jews, Roma, Poles and many others were murdered by the Nazi German regime. This means he is likely to be one of the last people to be tried for Nazi war crimes. He admits to being present when the selections took place and admits to 'moral guilt', though he still protests legal innocence. If found guilty, he could face 15 years in prison. However, because of his age, a shorter sentence is more likely.

Gröning's devoted much of his life to confronting Holocaust denial, saying 'I have seen the crematoria, I have seen the burning pits and I want you to believe me that these atrocities happened. I was there.' His first-hand story is shocking: he describes SS guards indiscriminately murdering children on a daily basis.

The most recent trial for Nazi war crimes was that of John Demjanjuk, a former soldier in the Soviet army, who was convicted of the same charge as Gröning for crimes at the Sobibór extermination camp. When he died in 2012, aged 91, his conviction was pending appeal.

The vast majority of those who worked in Nazi concentration camps have never been brought to justice. However, a big debate rages over how responsible such people are. Were they simply following the orders of those more powerful, and should the burden of responsibility entirely fall on the shoulders of those in power? Or did people like Gröning have

a moral duty to do something about the atrocities they saw?

A share of the blame

If we are to fully confront the evil of the Holocaust, we must realise that all those who worked at the camps, however small their role, have to take some blame. Gröning was not forced to be the 'accountant of Auschwitz'; instead he could have shown some courage and told the world what was happening. The Holocaust could never have occurred without people like Gröning enabling it. This is why he must be brought to justice.

However, many agree with Gröning that he was not at fault for any deaths. If he had refused to do his job, someone else would have taken his place. Instead it is the leaders, from Hitler to Heinrich Himmler, Reinhard Heydrich and many others, who are to blame for the 20th century's greatest crime. Those who fulfilled small roles like Gröning were just cogs in the wheel.

Q & A

Q 1.5 million people?!

A Yes. It seems incredible, but 1.5 million people died at Auschwitz. Over a million of these were Jews (in total around 6 million Jews died in the Holocaust). Jews were not the only people to be killed at Auschwitz. The Nazis also wished to exterminate the

Sinti and Roma people, homosexuals, disabled people and Jehovah's Witnesses. On some days 6,000 people died, most of whom were murdered within minutes of their arrival.

Q Do people really deny that the Holocaust happened?

A A very small number of people claim the scale is exaggerated. However, almost all serious historians disagree with this.

Holocaust denial is actually illegal in Germany and some other countries and is a largely discredited position.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'There is nothing that compares to the Holocaust.'
 Fidel Castro

WHAT DO YOU THINK?



RAINFORD
HIGH

READING HOMEWORK

1. What is Holocaust denial? (You may need to research this.)

2. "Oskar Groning should not be imprisoned for his role in the Holocaust because he didn't actually kill anybody." How far do you agree with this statement?
