

# '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?



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.



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

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?**

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### WORD WATCH

**Auschwitz** – Auschwitz, in southern Poland, was split into three: Auschwitz I, which was a prison camp; Auschwitz-II Birkenau, which was built purely as an extermination camp, and Auschwitz III (Monowitz), which was a series of factories where prisoners worked.

**Selections** – When deported Jews arrived on trains at Auschwitz-II

Birkenau, they were ‘selected’. Strong men were sent to the prison camp; women, children, the elderly and those deemed unfit for work were sent straight to their deaths.

**SS** – The Schutzstaffel (SS) was a major paramilitary organisation under Adolf Hitler’s Nazi party. It was responsible for many of the crimes against humanity during the Second World War.

**Heinrich Himmler** – Himmler was the head of the SS and one of the people most directly implicated in the Holocaust. He was the facilitator and overseer of the concentration camps.

**Reinhard Heydrich** – Heydrich chaired the 1942 Wannsee Conference, which formalised the plans for the ‘Final Solution of the Jewish Question’. He was assassinated in Czechoslovakia later that year.

### YOU DECIDE

1. Should Gröning’s age come into question when deciding his sentence if he is found guilty?
2. Should the organisers of the Holocaust bear all the blame?

### ACTIVITIES

1. Set up a mock trial in your class, with one half putting the case for the prosecution, and the other half in defence of Oskar Gröning.
2. Imagine you are a German living under Nazi rule in 1940s Germany. Write about the changes you are seeing around you.

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 **NOTES**

