

He Was There When 300,000 People Died

By Per Hinrichs

Oskar Gröning, a 93-year-old former SS officer is finally being held accountable for his crimes.



Thomas Walther presses the red record button on the old video camera, sits in a chair and rests his hand on the shoulder of the older man. “Now we are together with Max Eisen,” he says in English in a careful, grave tone of voice. “I would like to hear about the important things from you. The question is, what are the important things?” asks Walther. “And the answer, Max, is whatever is important to you. Look inside yourself, and start by telling us about when you were a happy child, a long, long, time ago.”

In the background the heater blows warm air into the small conference room on the 20th floor of the Novotel Hotel in north Toronto. Max Eisen, 86 years old, has ice-gray hair and a voice that would be perfect for dubbing the heroes of American Western films. He describes a happy childhood in Moldava, a small Hungarian city, located in today’s Czech Republic. He tells of his parents, grandparents, two younger brothers; of bike tours, countless friends, and endless summers spent on an uncle’s farm. Thomas Walther listens. The 71-year-old lawyer with long, white curls represents Max Eisen and 30 additional joint plaintiffs in one of the last large Nazi-era lawsuits, scheduled to begin at the Lunenburg District Court on April 21.

This time it's against the 93-year-old former SS Junior Squad Leader, Oskar Gröning. In Auschwitz, he led the prison administration's "Department of Foreign Currency." Thomas Walther traveled to Canada, where many of the survivors and surviving dependants live, to prepare them and himself for the approaching proceedings.

"You had a happy childhood?" asks Walther. "It was perfect," answers Eisen. This idyll disappeared when the Germans arrived in 1944. They deported young Max and his relatives. The Jews were brought in cattle cars over a span of many days to Auschwitz - up to 80 people per car, without water or food. "It is day or night?" asks Walther. "It is the middle of the night," answers Max Eisen. "Was it light?" "There were such strong floodlights that you could barely open your eyes," he says. The prisoner who opened the doors of the cars whispered to the boy: "Tell them that you are all 16!" Max Eisen wasn't yet but did what the man, dressed in a striped outfit that looked like pyjamas, said. He remembers how his younger siblings Shmuel, 12 years old, Moishe, 8, and Judith, 9 months, as well as his mother, Ethel Eisen, 40, were sent to the right. That's the last image he has of his family. He and his father went to the left, to the living quarters.

"I was totally shocked," says Max Eisen to the camera. "The first one that they killed was a man from my village." The new arrivals were herded into shower rooms. There, the man's glasses fell to the ground. Naked, he bent over and tried to find them. "The SS guard was so irate, he kicked him in the head so hard that he flipped over. Then he kicked him to death. I could hear his ribs breaking."

One day later young Max asked his fellow prisoners where their families were. Someone pointed mutely to the smokestack from which poured out smoke. They were made to go right, to the gas chambers. It was with this knowledge, that in the eyes of the Germans, their very existence was not only worthless, but "noxious," that the prisoners had to continue living and survive. At Auschwitz, whoever was younger than 16 was immediately murdered, their body burnt and ashes scattered. In this place, everything and everyone served one sole goal: to kill as many people as efficiently as possible.

"We had reached the bottom," wrote the Italian chemist Primo Levi in his book, "If This Is a Man," when he was deported to Auschwitz in 1943. "It is not possible to sink lower than this; no human condition is more miserable than this, nor could it conceivably be so."

Between 1940 and 1945 around 6,500 men and women worked at Auschwitz in the service of the SS. Only 49 of them have been sentenced in criminal proceedings, an “embarrassingly low number,” as the lawyer Walther finds. Now the few Holocaust perpetrators who are still living will have their day before court. Oskar Gröning, 93, will face the charge of 300,000 counts of accessory to murder in the extermination camp Auschwitz during the period of May 16, 1944 until July 11, 1944. During these eight weeks (the so-called “Operation Hungary”) the SS deported approximately 425,000 Jews to Auschwitz in at least 137 railway transports. Around 300,000 were murdered immediately in the gas chambers.

Gröning also stood on the arrival ramp. He watched over luggage and made sure that the train platform was cleared of blood and feces, and that luggage and clothes were removed - had the people in the next transports seen the abandoned belongings, a general panic would have been unavoidable. And in Auschwitz, everything was supposed to run smoothly. While Max Eisen and his father acquainted themselves with the prisoners’ everyday life of slave labor, hunger, and ceaseless executions and beatings, a thin, 23-year-old man sat in the camp administrative offices and counted money. It had been collected from the Jews’ belongings, and the bills and coins landed on Gröning’s desk. He carefully listed the sums and currency that accrued. The trained bank employee from Nienburg an der Weser bundled the bills and laid them in a steel locker. On at least three occasions, he traveled to Berlin and deposited large sums in the Reich Main Security Office. He was the head of the prison administration’s department for managing prisoners’ money. Gröning was Auschwitz’s bookkeeper. SS officers who worked in his department regularly stole money. The department was searched on multiple occasions and there were many disciplinary actions against SS officers who embezzled blood money or valuables. Gröning was not one of these men.

Or, perhaps he was just more clever than his colleagues. His letter of reference, dated October 17, 1944, states that he had an “impeccable character,” that “his service as a soldier was always stalwart and correct” and that he was “of a steady ideology.” In other words, Oskar Gröning was a good SS man. What today might sound like a ghastly character reference did not harm Gröning’s career after 1945. He joined an insurance company as a salesman and later rose to become its CEO. He retired in 1985 and today receives 3,000 Euros monthly pension. Public prosecutors were interested in him several times in the past - they questioned the former SS officer and he served as a witness in other trials. The only preliminary investigation by public prosecution brought against

him and 61 additional men who worked as part of the “Administration of Prisoners’ Property” (GEV) was in 1977, by Frankfurt’s public prosecutor. It ended in 1985. The public prosecutor, Eberhard Galm, wrote that eight years of investigative work apparently resulted “without enough grounds for suspicion for public charges.” The reasons for the case dismissal were to be given at a later time “because they didn’t have enough time” to do so. But these reasons were never actually named by the official, although considering the nature of such a case this should have been imperative.

“This kind of behavior can only be explained if the guy in charge is in an unspoken mutual understanding with careless verdicts against Nazi era criminals,” says Walther. It is because of the joint plaintiffs’ legal representation that Gröning, at the end of his life, must now stand before court. It was Thomas Walther himself who changed everything, when in 2008 he led the pre-investigation against the concentration camp guard Jon Demjanjuk. This investigation ultimately led to charges from the Munich district attorney. At that time, Walther, an investigator from the central Ludwigsburg court, was able to convince the Munich judiciary department that less evidentiary hurdles than had been required in past decades were necessary in order to charge someone with accessory to murder. “If someone keeps lookout during a bank robbery, he is charged with aiding and abetting,” explains the lawyer. “But in earlier Nazi trials, in order to be charged with accessory to murder, the jurisprudence required evidence that the perpetrator had to have done something by his own hand; he had to have at least lifted a finger, for example, by selecting prisoners upon arrival.” This rule no longer counts since the Demjanjuk verdict. Germany’s highest courts also support Walther’s position. In 2007, the Federal Court of Justice declared a verdict against the Islamist terrorist aide Mounir al-Motassadeq, who supported the attackers on September 11 and was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment on 246 counts of accessory to murder. After this shift in jurisdiction regarding those charged with accessory to murder, it follows that basically anyone who wore an SS uniform in a concentration or extermination camp is effectively suspect.

As Gröning himself always said, he was a “cog in the machine” - admittedly, this was to exonerate himself. “In the federal republic thousands of men and women would have been accused, had today’s criteria counted back then,” says Walther. “But people didn’t want that.”

The Germans marched into Hungary on March 19, 1944, Évike’s sixth birthday. Her family was able to save letters from that time that help to reconstruct the drama as it unfolded. On that day, her mother, Margrit Mandula Weinberger, wrote a letter to her husband, who survived the war

serving in the Hungarian army: "Today is our little darling's birthday, whom we tearfully congratulate. I hope that she will be able to celebrate future birthdays under happier circumstances."

On June 3, 1944, 75 days after her sixth birthday, Évike was gassed and burnt. A few photos and letters written in wobbly child's handwriting are the only things that are left. "What might have become of this talented, gifted child?" asks Judith Kalman, the murdered child's half sister.

There are many of these "shadow families," who came about once the surviving father returned from the war and started a new family. For these descendants of murdered half-siblings, the Holocaust is always present: they live with it. Judith Kalman does not feel hate or resentment when she thinks of Gröning. She recognizes his attitude; he would claim that he never laid a hand on a Jew. "He is himself uncertain of whether he is guilty or not," she believes. "He would like so much to find peace for himself, he makes excuses for himself, but he knows that there is simply no vindication." After an hour and half, Walther pushes the stop button. "Thank you, Judith."

Accountability. Justice. These are terms that do not suit the Holocaust and attempts to process it. This is one way to explain the interest in the lawsuit. The trial in Germany is an important topic in the Canadian media. The television broadcaster "Global News Toronto" has reported on it and the "National Post" devoted a page to Thomas Walther, the guest from Kempten, and tells the story of the lawsuit. What drove Oskar Gröning, the model bank employee from Nienburg an der Weser? In his autobiography, written in the 1980s and released by the public prosecutor, he wrote a very detailed account of life and death in Auschwitz.

Already during his first day, an SS officer told him that one group of prisoners would be made to work and the other would be "disposed of." When, in November 1942, Gröning stood on the arrival ramp and guarded the luggage, he noticed a crying baby among the clothes. He supposed that its mother had left the infant behind on purpose, in an effort to escape the selection. An SS man took the baby by its tiny legs and smashed its head against a truck. Then he threw the lifeless body in the vehicle. Gröning approached the man, but he just bullied him into silence. Soon thereafter, he and his comrades were awakened one night to hunt for Jews who had escaped. When they arrived at a farmstead, the greater part of the prisoners had already been killed. But then the barn was used as a gas chamber, the remaining prisoners locked in. Gröning saw how Zyklon B

was poured in and heard the screams of the people who died a poisoned death. His "blood ran cold," he wrote. What does he have to say today?

Last Wednesday, the drive to meet one of the last perpetrators of the Holocaust led through the northern moorland, where tiny villages and settlements are divided by tracts of woods and endless black fields on the cusp of spring. In the street, horses graze in small paddocks; the first few neighbors weed their carefully-tended front gardens. Gröning opens the door of his white-painted bungalow. "Yes?" asks the man in the knitted slippers, gripping his walker tightly. "Hello, I'd like to speak to you about Auschwitz." "I don't want to, the trial is soon." "Will you speak then?" "If I am still alive, yes." He goes to shut the front door. "One more question, Mr. Gröning. Are you guilty?" He thinks for a moment. "No. Good-bye." Talking about Auschwitz is never easy. Sometimes it is nearly impossible. Even Thomas Walther has trouble.