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## Holocaust survivors expect satisfaction in facing aged Nazi defendant

BY **MATTHEW SCHOFIELD**

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LUENEBURG, GERMANY — Oskar Groening, the elderly German known as “the accountant of Auschwitz,” is expected to make a statement shortly after his Nazi war-crimes trial begins Tuesday.

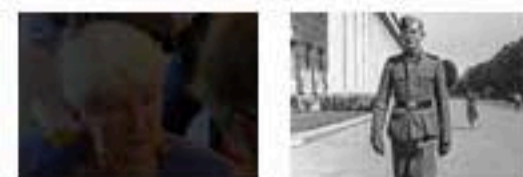
But what he says about his role in the 300,000 deaths with which he’s charged may not matter as much as the fact that his audience will include at least two of the Hungarian Jews who survived sharing an unloading platform with him, and the children of a dozen others.

As Auschwitz survivor Hedy Bohm, 86, put it during a news conference on the eve of the trial, bringing charges against a man who’s admitted he was on the platform during the infamous “selections” at the Nazi death camp in Poland is now more important as “process rather than punishment.”

Groening, after all, is 93 and unlikely to serve an adequate sentence for his crimes, even if he survives until the trial’s expected end in June. Bohm said she’d come to the medieval German city of Lueneburg from Toronto not so much to testify against a man who describes himself as a cog in Adolf Hitler’s killing machine as to bear witness for the sake of history.



Auschwitz Holocaust survivor Hedy Bohm (left), 86, of Toronto, spoke in Lueneberg, Germany on the eve of the Nazi War Crimes trial of Oskar Groening on April 20, 2015. Groening, known as the Accountant of Auschwitz, faces charges in 300,000 deaths of Hungarian Jews. He was known to be on the platform collecting cash and valuables at the time she arrived at the death camp. **CLAUDIA HIMMELREICH — McClatchy**



"The punishment is secondary," she said. "The process should and could have happened sooner, but thank God it is happening at all. To be able to face an SS guard in court, it's something I never imagined in my life could happen. It's a gift."

Eva Puzstai-Fahidi, 93, another Hungarian survivor of Auschwitz, agreed that the moment is a gift: "This is one of my most important moments since I left Auschwitz. It is not about Groening's verdict. It is about his crime. It remains a crime forever and needs to be brought to justice."

"Even the Lord was a nobody compared to what an SS man in Auschwitz was," she added. "He needs to realize what it meant to have been there. I could list 49 members of my extended family that marched past Groening. What can he say? Can he return them to me? Will he say he just stood there?"

There's a sense of history about this trial. There are perhaps two other Nazi war-crimes trials in preparation and others might be pursued, but as the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe nears, the fact is that there are a dwindling number of former Nazis left to charge with crimes.

Groening may have been only a cog in the machine, but it was a killing machine that defines modern evil. Six million Jews were murdered. Five million others – Gypsies, gays and communists among them – were also killed. Other upcoming trials deal with murders that number in the dozens. Groening's might be the last to deal with hundreds of thousands.

Overwhelming interest in the case forced court officials to move the proceedings from the district courthouse to a large nearby hall. That hall, the Lueneburg Knight's Academy – a former monastery that in 1656 was converted to a training ground for knights – serves as a reminder that Germany existed before the Nazis forever darkened its history.

Even so, the medieval cobbles and gables that distinguish this city were not untouched by the Nazi era. A meeting house established in 1491 for charitable works was a branch of the Neuengamme concentration camp, and housed 150 inmates.

Across the street, in the entry to the school for the ancient St. John's Church, which dates to the 14th century, three "Stolpersteine," or stumble stones, are embedded in the ground – small bronze plaques bearing the names of Holocaust victims. In this case, the victims were Reinhold Rose, born in 1929, Alois Reiminus, born in 1930, and Franziska Reiminus, born in 1931. All three were sent to Auschwitz in 1943, and all three were murdered there.

As the Third Reich collapsed, one of the primary architects of the Holocaust, Heinrich Himmler, was captured by British soldiers and, during an interrogation in this city, bit into a cyanide capsule and killed himself.

If this is the last Nazi war-crimes trial on a grand scale, it will mean that such trials have come full circle. It was here in September 1945 – before the Nuremberg trials, which would begin two months later – that Nazi officials at the infamous Bergen-Belsen camp were tried for crimes against humanity. At those trials, 11 Nazi officials were sentenced to death, a fate that does not await Groening. If convicted, Groening faces a minimum sentence of three years in prison.

Eva Judith Kalman, 61, also came from Toronto to face Groening. Her father was a forced laborer in Hungary under the Nazis, and of the 34 members of her family who were forced into a single boxcar and shipped to Auschwitz, 30 were selected for the gas chambers as soon as they touched down on the platform on which Groening collected the cash and belongings of Jews.

Kalman was born after the war ended. She noted that her first name is that of the sister she never met, who died in Auschwitz as a 6-year-old. Her middle name is that of a cousin who died that same day in that same selection. Her last name was one her father had to adopt when he was liberated, but it was still dangerous in Eastern Europe to be a Jew. She grew up surrounded by photos of the sister and letters from the family members she never met.

"It's my understanding that Groening was on guard at the point that my relatives arrived," she said. Among the tasks assigned to SS officers such as Groening was to clear the platform of the belongings of people who'd just arrived so as not to alarm the next shipment of human cargo. The pace was frantic; more than 400,000 Hungarian Jews were shipped to the camp as the Third Reich was failing.

"I'm here because it's important to speak on behalf of my murdered sister, to speak on behalf of all my murdered family members," she said. "There are some who say this trial is too little, too late. I say better late than never."

*SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT CLAUDIA HIMMELREICH CONTRIBUTED TO THIS STORY.-*

*Email: [mschofield@mcclatchydc.com](mailto:mschofield@mcclatchydc.com); Twitter: [@mattschodcnews](https://twitter.com/mattschodcnews).*

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