

German court upholds conviction of 99-year-old former Nazi camp secretary

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Berlin, August 21 (RHC)-- A German court has rejected an appeal by a 99-year-old woman who was convicted of being an accessory to more than 10,000 murders in her role as a secretary to the SS commander of the Nazis' Stutthof concentration camp during World War II.

The ruling on Tuesday by the Federal Court of Justice in Leipzig is final. It came four months before Irmgard Furchner's two-year suspended sentence handed down by the Itzehoe Regional Court ends in December.

She was accused of being part of the apparatus that helped the camp near Danzig, now the Polish city of Gdansk, function.

Last month, Furchner's lawyers cast doubt on whether she really was an accessory to crimes committed by the commander and other senior camp officials, and on whether she had truly been aware of what was

going on at Stutthof.

In 2022, the Itzehoe court said that judges were convinced that Furchner “knew and, through her work as a stenographer in the commandant’s office of the Stutthof concentration camp from June 1, 1943, to April 1, 1945, deliberately supported the fact that 10,505 prisoners were cruelly killed by gassings, by hostile conditions in the camp”, by transportation to the Auschwitz death camp and by being sent on death marches at the end of the war.

Three more cases pending

Prosecutors said during the original proceedings that Furchner’s trial may be the last of its kind. However, a special federal prosecutors’ office in Ludwigsburg tasked with investigating Nazi-era war crimes says three more cases are pending with prosecutors or courts in various parts of Germany. With any suspects now at a very advanced age, questions increasingly arise over their fitness to stand trial.

The Furchner case is one of several in recent years that built on a precedent established in 2011 with the conviction of former Ohio autoworker John Demjanjuk as an accessory to murder on allegations that he served as a guard at the Sobibor death camp. Demjanjuk, who denied the allegations, died before his appeal could be heard.

German courts previously required prosecutors to justify charges by presenting evidence of a former guard’s participation in a specific killing, often a near-impossible task.

However, prosecutors successfully argued during Demjanjuk’s trial in Munich that helping a camp function was enough to convict someone as an accessory to the murders committed there.

A federal court subsequently upheld the 2015 conviction of former Auschwitz guard Oskar Groening on the same reasoning. Furchner was tried in juvenile court because she was 18 and 19 at the time of the alleged crimes, and the court could not establish beyond a doubt her “maturity of mind” then.

Initially, a collection point for Jews and non-Jewish Poles removed from Danzig, Stutthof was later used as a “work education camp” where forced labourers, primarily Polish and Soviet citizens, were sent to serve sentences and often died.

From mid-1944, tens of thousands of Jews from ghettos in the Baltics and from Auschwitz filled the camp, along with thousands of Polish civilians swept up in the brutal Nazi suppression of the Warsaw Uprising.

Others imprisoned there included political prisoners, accused criminals, people suspected of gay activity and Jehovah’s Witnesses.

More than 60,000 people were killed at the camp.

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