

Germany convicts 97-year-old woman for complicity with Nazi murder of 10,000 people

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In what could be the last trial of its kind, Irmgard Furchner — dubbed the "secretary of evil" — was handed a two-year suspended sentence by a court in Itzehoe.

Berlin, December 21 (RHC)-- A 97-year-old woman who worked as a secretary at a Nazi concentration camp was convicted by a German court Tuesday of being an accessory to the murder of more than 10,000 people. In what could be the last trial of its kind, Irmgard Furchner — dubbed the "secretary of evil" by German media — was handed a two-year suspended sentence for helping the Stutthof concentration camp to function during World War II.

The trial, which was briefly delayed when Furchner went on the run by fleeing in a taxi, took place in juvenile court because she was 18 and 19 years old when she worked as a secretary for the camp's SS commander.

Furchner was handed a two-year suspended sentence by the court in the northern town of Itzehoe early Tuesday for being an accessory to 10,505 counts of murder and five counts of attempted murder, a spokesman for the court confirmed to NBC News in an email.

That's in line with what prosecutors had sought, while survivors of the death camp and relatives of victims who appeared as joint plaintiffs also said that it was not in their interest for the 97-year-old to serve any time in prison.

Furchner was charged with "aiding those in a position of responsibility at the former Stutthof concentration camp with the systematic killing of those imprisoned there, due to her work as a shorthand typist/secretary in the Camp Commandant's Office between June 1943 and April 1945," according to a court press release.

Her defense lawyer had asked for her to be acquitted, arguing that while it was clear that thousands of people were killed in Stutthof, the evidence did not show beyond doubt that Furchner knew about the systematic killing at the concentration camp, according to a press release by the court. In Germany proof of intent is required for criminal liability.

Earlier this month, Furchner broke her silence and delivered unexpected final remarks. She said that she was sorry for what had happened, that she regretted that she had been at Stutthof at the time and that she had nothing left to say. Previously, Furchner had attended but remained silent throughout 14 months of court hearings.

Holocaust survivors and their representatives had begged Furchner to speak up during the trial, according to German media reports. The German tabloid Bild dubbed Furchner the "secretary of evil," a reference to "the banality of evil," a phrase introduced by the Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt in 1963 when reporting on the trial of Adolf Eichmann, one of the primary organizers of the Holocaust.

Furchner skipped the start of her trial by leaving her home in a taxi on the morning it was due to start in September 2021. She spent five days in custody but was later released. The court later explained that because of her age and condition, she did not expect to "actively evade the trial."

More than 60,000 people died in the camp near Gdansk, in today's Poland, according to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website — many by lethal injection and in the camp's gas chamber, others from disease or starvation. Among them were Jews, political prisoners, accused criminals, people suspected of homosexual activity, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Furchner's trial is not the first time that people who were not directly involved in killings in concentration camps have been found guilty of aiding and abetting murder.

Oskar Gröning, who worked as an accountant in Auschwitz, and John Demjanjuk, who worked as a guard at Sobibor, were both found guilty of accessory to murder in German courts.

But the trial against Furchner could be the last of its kind, as accused Nazi war criminals get older and become ill.

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