

Demjanjuk Trial

Trial of accused collaborator and war criminal, John Iwan Demjanjuk, which took place in 1987 in Jerusalem. This was the second trial in Israel in which the death sentence was called for under the Nazis and Nazi Collaborators (Punishment) Law; the first was the Eichmann Trial of 1961.

In 1975 the US Department of Justice learned that Demjanjuk, a resident of Ohio who had immigrated to the United States from the Ukraine in the early 1950s, had collaborated with the SS and served as a guard in the Sobibor camp during the Holocaust. He was also identified by survivors in Israel as "Ivan the Terrible," a Ukrainian staff member at Treblinka. In 1981 an Ohio court ruled that Demjanjuk had indeed worked at both Treblinka and Sobibor, had lied on his immigration application, and had hidden the fact that he was an SS member. His American citizenship was taken away, and in 1987, Demjanjuk was extradited to Israel.

The trial began on February 16, 1987. Demjanjuk was charged with crimes against the Jewish people, crimes against humanity, war crimes, crimes against persecuted individuals, and murder. During the course of the trial, it was found that the Ukrainian Demjanjuk had been drafted into the Soviet army in 1940 and taken prisoner by the Germans in 1942. Soon, he volunteered for service at the Trawniki SS training camp, and several months later, was posted in Treblinka, where he supervised the gas chamber operations. He was horribly brutal, forcing the victims into the chambers with whips, pipes, swords, knives, or guns. He served at Treblinka until September 1943, except for a short assignment at Sobibor.

The defense claimed that the wrong man had been put on trial, that in fact, Demjanjuk was not "Ivan the Terrible" of Treblinka. In April 1988, the court found Demjanjuk guilty and sentenced him to death. However, the ruling was overturned by the Israeli Supreme Court, which accepted that there was serious doubt about Demjanjuk's identity. Demjanjuk was set free.