



Eva Kor testified against former death camp officer Oskar Groening at his trial on April 21 in Lueneburg, Germany. Photo by Julian Stratenschulte/Pool Photo via AP

Former SS Sergeant Oskar Groening stood trial as an accessory in the murder of 300,000 Jews. AFP PHOTO/RONNY HARTMANN

FIRST
WITNESS
IN TRIAL OF
'AUSCHWITZ
ACCOUNTANT'



EVAKOR

BY NANCY HILLER

OF TERRE HAUTE

A **HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR** WHO BELIEVES IN **FORGIVENESS**

on

a Saturday this past June, Bloom writer Nancy Hiller and photographer Darryl Smith went to Terre Haute, Indiana, to meet with Eva Kor, a survivor of the World War II Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz. Kor, 81, founded Terre Haute's CANDLES Holocaust Museum and Education Center — the acronym stands for Children of Auschwitz Nazi Deadly Lab Experiments Survivors — which is dedicated to educating new generations about the Holocaust and the

dangers of hatred and prejudice. Before meeting with the Bloom team, Kor presented a 1 1/2 hour talk to an audience of 50, several of whom had come from as far away as India and the United Kingdom.

A woman of small stature and immense determination, Kor moves slowly these days, using a

walker. That literal pace notwithstanding, most people would be hard-pressed to keep up with her schedule. Beyond her lectures and writings, each year she takes groups of up to 100 on educational trips to Auschwitz, among them many people from Bloomington. —the editor



Eva (left) and her sister Miriam, now deceased, before a picture showing them as children shortly after the liberation of Auschwitz in 1945. Photo courtesy of the CANDLES Museum

Last April,

as apple and pear trees across Indiana were exploding with blossoms, the trial of former Nazi sergeant Oskar Groening, known as the “accountant of Auschwitz,” opened in northern Germany. Groening was charged as an accessory to the murder of 300,000 Jews. The first witness to testify for the prosecution was Eva Kor of Terre Haute, Indiana.

Seventy-one years ago this past spring, Eva and her family were transported by cattle car to Auschwitz. Her parents and two older sisters were almost immediately taken away and killed. Eva and her sister Miriam, both 10 years old, were spared; being twins, they were useful to Josef Mengele as guinea pigs in his perverse experiments to produce a master race.

After the liberation of Auschwitz in January 1945, Eva and Miriam returned to their home village of Portz in northwestern Romania and learned they were the sole

survivors of their family. A few years later they moved to Israel, where Miriam became a nurse and Eva, a sergeant major in the army. Miriam married and had three children. In 1960, Eva met Mickey Kor of Terre Haute, a fellow Holocaust survivor who was visiting Israel. They married, and Eva moved to west-central Indiana, where she and Mickey raised two children.

The settled appearance of the sisters’ new lives concealed unspeakable pain, both emotional and physical. When Miriam developed severe kidney problems during her first pregnancy, she learned her kidneys had not developed beyond the size of a 10-year-old’s because of Mengele’s experiments. When her kidneys failed completely following her third pregnancy, Eva donated one of hers.

“I was a good victim,” says Kor, speaking of her youth and early adulthood. “I hated everybody.”



To testify or not to testify

Following Miriam’s death in June 1995, Kor opened the CANDLES Holocaust Museum and Education Center. CANDLES is the only museum in the world dedicated to the twin victims and survivors of Mengele’s experiments.

After decades of working internationally to locate other Mengele twins, Kor is widely recognized for her activism in affirming the historical reality of the Holocaust at a time of increasing revisionism and outright denial. But she is also known for her exceptional magnanimity, which has led her to urge survivors of all sorts of crimes to forgive those who harmed them.

So when Kor’s attorney, Markus Goldbach, asked her last September to testify against Groening in Germany, she was reluctant. “I have forgiven the Nazis,” she told him. “I don’t want to deal with it.”

But as she considered the request, she realized the trial would not only offer an opportunity to bear witness to what she and Miriam had experienced; it would offer the world one of the very few remaining opportunities to learn about Auschwitz from an official who participated in its operation. It would also provide a highly visible stage from which Groening could corroborate the reality of Auschwitz to neo-Nazis, among whom Holocaust denial is de rigueur and who routinely dismiss survivors’ accounts. After all, Kor reasoned, a former Nazi has no interest in saying Auschwitz existed; if anything, he has a personal interest in denying it.

Eva Kor in June, chatting with a group of admirers who had come to the CANDLES Museum to hear her speak. Photo by Darryl Smith

A kiss that went viral

By early October, Kor had agreed to testify. “It is the first trial that I have attended,” she says of the experience, “and I found it interesting to be sitting in a German court where I was treated with respect by the judges and the attorneys and the court people. It was a little bit surreal to realize in some ways how far Germany has come, to actually let Jews testify against Nazis in a German court.”

At the same time, she finds it appalling that after voluntarily coming forward to fight the revisionists — “He’s been in the news for some time,” she notes — Groening is now sentenced to four years in prison, which will benefit no one.

“When he joined the Nazi party, he thought that they were going to be against Jews,” she explains. “He knew, or might have known, of some activities against the Jews. Somebody had to be blamed for what was going on in Germany, and when you are not very well-informed and the propaganda is the way it was — at age 21, 22, it might look okay ... He perhaps didn’t know at the time that it was a mass murder.”

Kor says that any of us may discover that our actions have dire consequences of which we’ve been unaware. It can be very complicated. “If we realize it’s wrong and we want to get out of it, we hopefully can. But what if we can’t? And that is the million-dollar question. What can you do? And how much is your responsibility for what’s happening? This is what I don’t think is being addressed.”

Groening likens his role at Auschwitz — counting money and valuables taken from newly arrived prisoners and sending it to his Nazi superiors — to that of a little screw in a big machine. But Kor counters that without the little screws, a big machine cannot operate. Without the hundreds of officers performing relatively minor tasks at Auschwitz, the giant killing machine would not have murdered the Jews so efficiently.

And still she counsels consideration of the big picture.

“The Germans are gung-ho, putting some Nazi on trial.

They [the German government] are not putting on any of the famous criminals because they are not going to come forward. Groening came forward because he wanted to fight the revisionists. He said, ‘Yes it happened, I was there. You cannot deny it.’ So they knew about him, and so they decided to put him on trial.”

After her testimony, Kor walked up to Groening to speak with him. While the two of them shook hands, he kissed her



‘It was a little bit surreal to realize in some ways how far Germany has come, to actually let Jews testify against Nazis in a German court.’

(above) After her testimony, Kor went over to Groening and shook his hand. Taken with a cell phone, this is the only picture of the encounter. Seconds later, he reached over and kissed her on the cheek. This small photograph has been published in newspapers and magazines all over the world. Photo courtesy of the CANDLES Museum



cheek, a gesture that provoked furor among many Holocaust survivors and went viral in the media.

“I wanted to thank him for having some human decency in accepting what he has done,” she wrote in a *Times of London* op-ed piece published April 25. “Society is so willing to be angry and will not ever accept any gesture of kindness. What is wrong with us, with the world?”

Instead of being sentenced to prison, Kor would like to see the 94-year-old Groening required to speak to German schoolchildren and to neo-Nazis about what Nazism really entails — a program she hopes would make them think twice before “wasting their life on a hateful idea.”

Encouraging this kind of testimony might persuade other old Nazis to come forward, she says, to perform some public service by fighting neo-Nazism “with ideas, not hand-to-hand combat ... Show them, tell them how that regime was ... We could use their testimony for some good — for them, for society, and for the world.”

The neo-Nazis, she says, “want that regime back. Well, who on earth would be best to show them how it worked, but someone who was there? The fact is that nobody benefited from it. Everybody was damaged — tremendously damaged — by it. So why on earth do you want it back?”

“I cannot testify the same way that Groening or other Nazis can, because they do not believe me since they do not believe Jews. But these are the Nazis who would be talking to them. I think it would make a difference,” she says.

Eva Kor then proceeds to impersonate Oskar Groening as she imagines him giving such testimony — a frail old man plagued by his memories of the atrocities he witnessed. “*You want that to come back to power? I have been there. I can tell you what went on. You are absolutely crazy to want that kind of a life.*” ❄

This photograph of Kor pointing to herself as a child was taken on January 26 in Krakow, Poland, at the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. Three of the other survivors of this image also attended the ceremonies. Kor took a large contingent from Indiana to Auschwitz for the anniversary, including several school children from Bloomington. Photo by Ian Gavan/Getty Images News/Getty Images