

The Holocaust Historiography Project

Remarkable Nonsense about the Holocaust

Court Reporter Still Haunted (7/30/1999)

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By ALEXIS CHIU

.c The Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) -- When she was 21, Vivien Spitz embarked on a dark, two-year journey. Her destination: the Nuremberg trials of accused Nazi war criminals.

Spitz wasn't a lawyer, a victim or a relative of the millions killed under Adolf Hitler's regime. She was a court reporter whose job was to record the atrocities of the Third Reich.

Now a 75-year-old retiree, Spitz is still haunted.

"I have never really recovered from it," said the Aurora, Colo., resident, in Boston on Thursday to address the 100th anniversary meeting of the National Court Reporters Association. "It was a horrific experience. We had to write sometimes with tears in our eyes."

The Allies -- the United States, Soviet Union, Britain and France -- set up the international tribunal to bring Hitler's henchmen to account. More than 200 Nazi military leaders, diplomats, government officials, industrialists and doctors were tried. Many were sent to prison, a few were sentenced to death and some were acquitted.

In all, the 13 trials produced 330,000 pages of testimony.

Spitz was one of 26 American court reporters who went to Germany in 1946. She used pen and paper, while others used stenotype machines.

Spitz sat through nearly two years of wrenching testimony and graphic evidence, including scores of photographs and videotapes depicting the dead and tortured.

One of the most dramatic moments for Spitz was in June 1947, as prosecutors were presenting evidence of the Nazis' "sea water experiments," conducted with the goal of finding a process to make the briny water potable.

"The victims were German, Czech and Polish gypsies deprived of food and given only sea water for weeks, which resulted in excruciating pain and foaming at the mouth and, in most cases, madness," Spitz recalled.

One witness was a survivor of the experiment who, when asked to identify his torturer, darted toward the defendants' section and leaped over a table, arms outstretched toward the German doctor. A guard later told Spitz authorities found a knife on the witness.

"This little man (was) futilely bent on delivering his own brand of justice," said Spitz, who is half German, adding that the victim was later sent to jail for three months for contempt of court "after all of the torture he had already suffered."

At Nuremberg, Spitz met an Army policeman she would marry. Since divorced, they have two grown sons.

Spitz went on to serve as court reporter in criminal and civil trials in Denver and in military courts around the country. She was a reporter of debates for the U.S. House of Representatives from 1972 to 1982 and, after another stint in Denver courts, retired in 1985.

Spitz said she reopened the wounds of Nuremberg when she learned a Colorado teacher reportedly told students that the Holocaust, which killed 6 million Jews, was a hoax.

"That fired me up so badly," Spitz said. "I just hauled out my files and put together a prepared lecture. A mission has found me."

In the last 10 years, Spitz has spoken about her experiences to more than 19,000 people in at least 30 states.

For years after Nuremberg, and occasionally since, Spitz had a recurring nightmare set in a concentration camp. In the dream, she is trying to escape with five small children through an underground tunnel, holding a candle for light and praying the Nazi guards above do not hear her.

She always wakes up before the ending, never escaping that tunnel -- or her memories.

"I have not escaped to this day," she said.

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