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Accused Nazi collaborator John Demjanjuk, who is standing trial in Germany.

My Nazi Revenge

On the eve of what may be the last Nazi trial, the son of Holocaust survivors recalls encounters with two accused war criminals.

By Tom Teicholz | Newsweek Web Exclusive
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John Demjanjuk, 89, sits in a Munich prison accused of 27,900 separate counts of acting as an accessory to murder, crimes the prosecution says he committed more than 65 years ago as a guard at the Sobibor death camp in Poland in 1943 and 1944. Recently, the German courts ruled that he is medically fit to stand trial; the proceeding begins Monday. This is the latest in a 30-year series of trials against Demjanjuk, pursued in the United States, Israel, and Germany since he was first named as a Nazi collaborator in 1975 when he was living in a Cleveland suburb—a Ford factory worker with a wife and three children.

I have been following Demjanjuk's case since 1986. I attended his trial in Israel and wrote a book about it—*The Trial of Ivan the Terrible: State of Israel vs. John Demjanjuk*—for which I interviewed prosecution attorneys, judges, government officials, historians, and Holocaust survivors, as well as Demjanjuk's defense attorneys, supporters, and his family members. Demjanjuk himself I only observed and was able to consider through his numerous depositions and testimonies over the years—a collection of admissions, half-truths, lies, evasions, and denials so inconsistent that he remains a cipher. As a consequence, I have spent many years pondering Demjanjuk's role as an essential cog in the Nazi engines of death—and his life in the United States.

Demjanjuk's Munich trial may well be the last prosecution of a Nazi war criminal—the last Nazi trial. If it is, he is a suitable defendant. The Final Solution may have been conceived by the Nazi leaders and the bureaucrats at the Wannsee conference; the ghettos, concentration, labor, and extermination camps may have been planned, designed, and equipped by "desktop murderers" and staffed by German officers; but without the *Wachmannen*, guards like Demjanjuk, the rounding up, the herding, the torture, and the murder of millions of Jewish men, women, and children could not have been accomplished.

Demjanjuk's history as an experienced and efficient death-camp guard; his successful escape when the war ended and his disappearance into the ordinary bustle of postwar American life; his subsequent exposure as a willing participant in the Final Solution; the long and complicated legal struggles that followed his initial indictment—these are the classic elements, the essential beats in the true story of the Nazi next door, that, though it's been told many times before, never ceases to horrify.

Demjanjuk, who was born in the Ukraine, served in the Red Army and was captured by the Germans in 1941. Later, he would claim that he spent the rest of the war as a German POW, but German officials, documents and witnesses tell a different story. A German ID card, "The Trawniki card," filled with identifying information and a photo of Demjanjuk in Nazi uniform, listed him as having been trained to be a *Wachmann* at the Trawniki Camp in Nazi-occupied Poland and posted to the Okzow labor camp and the Sobibor extermination camp. A fellow guard, Ignat Danylchenko, described him in testimony to Soviet war crimes prosecutors as having personally participated in the mass murders.

After the war, Demjanjuk surfaced in the displaced-persons camps in Germany. From there, he filled out the forms that eventually brought him to the United States, where in 1958 he became a citizen. On those forms he wrote variously that he was Polish and that during the war years he had been a driver or a farmer in a town in Poland named Sobibor. However, in the mid-1970s when Demjanjuk was being investigated for his alleged wartime activities, 10 Holocaust survivors as well as a former German camp official identified him not as being at Sobibor but as being the Ivan who operated the gas chambers at the Treblinka extermination camp, a sadistic guard whom prisoners called "Ivan the Terrible."

The Ivan the Terrible charges took center stage, with the Trawniki card confirming Demjanjuk's Nazi service. In 1981, Demjanjuk was stripped of his U.S. citizenship. In 1983 he was ordered deported. Israel, which had not held a Nazi war-crimes trial since the Eichmann trial in 1961, requested his extradition. The idea that Ivan the Terrible would go unpunished was unthinkable. At the trial in Jerusalem, five Holocaust survivors gave moving and detailed testimony of their experiences and identified Demjanjuk from both his 1951 visa photo and the Trawniki photo. A host of historians and expert witnesses confirmed the authenticity of the Trawniki card. Demjanjuk testified in his defense, but his alibi was not found credible. Demjanjuk was convicted and sentenced to death.

However, during the appeal, new evidence—testimonies discovered in the war-crimes trial archives of the former Soviet Union—was submitted to the Israel Supreme Court that another guard, Ivan Marshenko, operated the Treblinka gas chambers. The Israel Supreme Court ruled that although the trial evidence proved Demjanjuk was a trained Nazi guard who served at death camps, including Sobibor, and although the Holocaust survivors' identifications had been trustworthy, the new evidence created a reasonable doubt that Demjanjuk was Ivan the Terrible of Treblinka. The conviction was overturned. Given that Demjanjuk had already spent almost eight years in jail, Israel declined to retry him on the Sobibor charges and released him.

Back in the U.S., the courts restored Demjanjuk's citizenship and ruled that if the government wanted to pursue the Sobibor charges, they would have to start their case anew. Which they did, successfully, culminating in Demjanjuk's deportation to Germany this summer.

Demjanjuk's upcoming German trial raises the questions: Can the trial of an 89-year-old man who has managed to live a great part of his life in the United States with his wife, children, and grandchildren deliver any satisfaction? Any closure? Or must we settle for mere fantasies of revenge, like the vivid and enjoyably lurid scenes recently presented by Quentin Tarantino in *Inglourious Basterds*?

My own fantasies of Nazi revenge took hold in 1976, when I accompanied my parents—both Holocaust survivors—to St. Moritz, Switzerland. Late one afternoon, as we had tea at the Suvretta House Hotel with one of my parents' wealthy friends, I spied a cheery corpulent man sitting across from us. A waiter fawned over him. My parents' friend froze and hissed to us, "That's Menten." Born to a wealthy Dutch family, Pieter Menten was Holland's most notorious Nazi. As a member of the SS during the war, he participated in the roundup and murder of Jews in Poland, before amassing several trainloads of plunder, which he brought back to Amsterdam. In 1949, he served eight months for the lesser charge of serving in Nazi uniform. In 1976 as he was about to auction off his horde, journalists launched a new campaign to reveal Menten's war-times activities. Tipped off that he was about to be arrested, Menten fled to Switzerland where he took up residence at the Suvretta House.

"He goes up to the old Jewish ladies," my mother's friend said, "and asks if he can join our bridge game. Imagine that!" she said, appalled. I was outraged to see him sitting there, so self-satisfied. My own imagination turned to poison in his tea—perhaps posing as a waiter to administer it.

Though under Swiss law the statute of limitations for his wartime crimes had expired, Menten was eventually expelled as an undesirable alien. A Dutch court convicted him of murder—but the Dutch Supreme Court voided his conviction based on the revelation that in 1952 he'd received a promise of immunity from a former Dutch minister of justice. Retried in 1980, he was convicted again and sentenced to 10 years. In 1985 he was released for good behavior. He died in 1987, at age 88, in a Dutch nursing home. No cause of death was given.

Did I feel cheated of my revenge? Absolutely not. Although one might think that Menten never got his due—or that Demjanjuk will not get his—that's not true. If they thought no one would know, or no one would care, they were wrong. The history of Nazi war-crimes prosecutions, from Nuremberg to the present, has created a detailed record of evildoing. If the perpetrators got to live a life they didn't deserve, they also had to endure the years of revelations, and court hearings, of being hounded by the press and shunned by their neighbors. The time they had with their families will forever be balanced by what they made their families endure, and by the perpetual and immutable taint on their names in the annals of evil—and even on Google.

My parents, who survived the Holocaust, neither forgot nor forgave the perpetrators—but paramount to them was that they moved on. My own revenge fantasies are best left to the likes of Tarantino, a creative spirit not only willing to rewrite history but also English orthography. I have seen real-life Nazis, and for them, I wish not death but justice, in all its slow and revealing process, creating a historical record of their shameful (and shameless) deeds. That is my revenge.