

Ernst Zündel, Holocaust Denier Tried for Spreading His Message, Dies at 78

By Sewell Chan

Aug. 7, 2017

Ernst Zündel, who from a ramshackle Victorian house in central Toronto churned out books, posters, audiotapes and memorabilia denying the Holocaust and spreading neo-Nazi messages worldwide, died on Saturday at his home in Bad Wildbad, Germany. He was 78.

The death was confirmed by Marina Lahmann, an official in the town. No cause was provided.

Mr. Zündel was convicted twice, in 1985 and 1988, under a rarely invoked law criminalizing the knowing publication of false news that caused, or was likely to cause, harm to the public interest, which the authorities interpreted to include Canada's commitment to tolerance.

But both convictions were overturned, and critics said the prosecutions, however well intentioned, did more harm than good by giving Mr. Zündel and other Holocaust deniers, including Robert Faurisson of France and Ditlieb Felderer of Sweden, a platform and a chance to bring truth itself into disrepute.

Mr. Zündel showed up at court wearing a hard hat and a bulletproof vest, claiming to be the victim of a conspiracy to silence him. Renowned historians, including Raul Hilberg and Christopher Browning, were subjected to withering cross-examination. Several Auschwitz survivors, among them Dennis Urstein and Rudolf Vrba, gave grueling testimonials about what they had endured.

At times it seemed — as one 1985 headline in The Miami Herald put it — as if the Holocaust itself were on trial.

The first conviction was tossed out on a technicality, and the second was overturned in 1992, when the Supreme Court of Canada found that the law was an unreasonable limit on freedom of expression.

Mr. Zündel, who moved to Canada from Germany as a teenager, was twice denied Canadian citizenship. In 2000 he moved to the United States, where he ran a website and lived with his third wife, Ingrid Rimland.

In 2003, American authorities arrested Mr. Zündel for overstaying his visa. He was sent back to Canada, but the authorities there did not want him. They detained him as a threat to national security, given his ties to neo-Nazi groups, a decision that drew criticism from some civil liberties advocates.

After another lengthy legal process, Mr. Zündel was deported to Germany in 2005. A state court in Mannheim, after yet another tumultuous trial, convicted him in 2007 on 14 counts of inciting hatred and one count of violating the memory of the dead. (A member of his defense team, Sylvia Stolz, was jailed and disbarred for signing “Heil Hitler” on a legal document.)

Mr. Zündel was sentenced to five years in prison but released in 2010, partly in consideration of his time spent in pretrial detention.

Recently, Mr. Zündel petitioned the American authorities to allow him to travel to Tennessee to care for his wife, who is 81. The administrative appeals office of the Department of Homeland Security denied his request on March 31.

“The record shows that the Applicant is a historical revisionist and denier of the Holocaust, distributing writings, books, tapes, videos and broadcasts to promote his views,” the office found. “The record indicates further that these publications agitated for aggressive behavior against Jews. Furthermore, the Applicant has been a leader in these activities for decades and has shown no regret or remorse for his actions.”

On Monday, the Center for Israel and Jewish Affairs, Canada's leading Jewish advocacy organization, said in a statement: "Ernst Zündel's death brings to a close an especially pernicious saga that plagued Canadians for decades."

In a phone interview, Bernie M. Farber, who was the chief executive of the Canadian Jewish Congress, now part of the Center for Israel and Jewish Affairs, said that "for decades, he was the gasoline that fed Holocaust denial" in Canada.

Mr. Farber, now the executive director of the Mosaic Institute in Toronto, added, "He was Canada's most famous hatemonger, and he reveled in it."

Mr. Zündel was on some levels "a run-of-the-mill neo-Nazi and Holocaust denier," said Deborah E. Lipstadt, a professor of modern Jewish history and Holocaust studies at Emory University in Atlanta. But, she said, he had stood out for his determination to use mass media to spread his views.

"Prior to the digital age, he was responsible for spreading these materials across Europe and the Americas," she said. "They became important resources for an array of neo-Nazi, white-supremacist and Holocaust-denying groups."

During Mr. Zündel's trials, his defense team commissioned a report from a self-proclaimed expert on executions, Fred A. Leuchter Jr., who denied the existence of the gas chambers. In fact, he had no such expertise and was later charged with fraud.

"The report, which became and remains a cornerstone of the Holocaust-denial movement, claimed that gas chambers were a scientific impossibility," Professor Lipstadt said. "Based on shoddy methodology, it was riddled with basic scientific errors, miscalculations and false claims."

Taking the witness stand at Mr. Zündel's second trial, David Irving, perhaps the world's best-known Holocaust denier, vouched for the Leuchter report. He later wrote the introduction when it was published as a book. (In Britain, Mr. Irving unsuccessfully sued Professor Lipstadt for libel, a case dramatized in the 2016 film "Denial.")

Professor Lipstadt was among those who expressed worry that the attention Mr. Zündel received over the years was what he wanted. "On a strategic level, sometimes I wondered if the various trials did not create a modicum of sympathy for a man who deserved not sympathy but utter contempt," she said.

Ernst Christof Friedrich Zündel was born on April 24, 1939, four months before Nazi Germany's invasion of Poland, in Calmbach, now part of Bad Wildbad. He moved to Canada in 1958 to study advertising and graphic arts.

In a 1983 interview with The Globe and Mail, the Toronto newspaper, Mr. Zündel said that he had grown up in an apolitical family and knew scarcely any Jews.

He said of the origins of his beliefs, "The absolute God's honest truth is that it was a reaction to the incessant anti-German propaganda stereotyping the Germans."

He added: "Look, I am not a neo-Nazi. If I wanted to be a Nazi, I would be a real one."

Mr. Zündel, twice divorced, had two sons, but details about survivors were not immediately available. Reached by phone on Monday, his wife, Ms. Rimland, replied, "Whoever calls will get the same answer from me: I will give no comment because the mainstream media is too biased."