

Ukrainians Back Demjanjuk, Convicted and Stateless

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A sign reading "Ukrainian Village" by an Orthodox church in Parma, Ohio. **Tony Dejak**

CLEVELAND — Convicted of Nazi war crimes, in failing health at age 91 and lacking a country to call home, John Demjanjuk lives in a world with few allies, save for the fellow Ukrainians who are determined to help a man many of them say was a victim.

Supporters of Demjanjuk — who lived for years in the U.S. city of Cleveland and worked in an auto plant before accusations arose that he hid his past as a Nazi death camp guard — have spoken out against his conviction, nudged Ukraine to help, promised to lobby Congress and hope to see his U.S. citizenship restored.

"If there's any way that we can help him get his citizenship reinstated, we will do anything that we possibly can," said Tamara Olexy, president of the Ukrainian Congress Committee of America, an umbrella group of Ukrainian-American organizations.

"He should be with his family," she said. "Our heart goes out to him and his family being separate. It's terrible."

His son, John Demjanjuk Jr., said such support has been important.

"My father is and has always been very grateful for the support of the Ukrainian community here and abroad," he said in an e-mail. "Indeed, if it were not for the unwavering support of the Ukrainian community seeking fairness and justice, Israel would most likely have executed an innocent man years ago."

Demjanjuk was convicted in Munich on May 12 of 28,060 counts of accessory to murder as a guard at the Sobibor death camp. He was sentenced to five years in prison but was released to await an appeal that could take years. He's since been living in a nursing home on the German dime.

Pending the appeal, one of Demjanjuk's few options appears to be fighting to regain his U.S. citizenship based on a 1985 FBI document, uncovered in April by The Associated Press, calling into question the authenticity of a Nazi ID card used against the Ukraine native at his trial.

The German trial and U.S. citizenship issue are separate, and the federal judge in Cleveland who might handle the citizenship matter has said Demjanjuk must serve his sentence in Germany.

Olexy said her organization will lobby Congress on Demjanjuk's behalf, possibly for help regaining his citizenship, and urged Ukraine to help him with a May 18 statement calling his trial a case of selective prosecution that left him stateless.

No immediate help seems forthcoming from Demjanjuk's Ukrainian homeland. One official's comments are open to interpretation.

"Ukraine as a state that suffered huge human losses in World War II of course cannot remain indifferent to the case of Ivan Demjanjuk," said Hanna Herman, deputy chief of staff to Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, using the Ukrainian version of Demjanjuk's first name.

Demjanjuk lost his U.S. citizenship twice before, the first time after the Justice Department alleged in 1977 that he hid his past as a Nazi death camp guard known as "Ivan the Terrible." He ultimately was convicted in Israel and sentenced to die, but the case was overturned.

Demjanjuk has always maintained he was a victim of the Nazis — first wounded as a Soviet soldier and then captured and held as a prisoner of war.

Frustration among Demjanjuk's backers is partly fueled by a common feeling in the Ukrainian community that their native land was oppressed in succession by Stalin, Hitler and then the Soviets.

"Ukraine was ravaged by the Second World War," said Askold Lozynskyj, former president of the Ukrainian World Congress. "Russia wrote our history, so as a result, we've been scapegoats for a lot."

From his vantage point after decades of legal proceedings, Demjanjuk must know any resolution is years away. The Ukrainian community has been a steadfast source of moral support and financial help, but considering his age and multiple health problems, interest

in helping him this time around is somewhat tempered.

Since the conviction in Germany, neither Demjanjuk nor his family has asked for help from the Ukrainian community, Lozynskyj said.

With Demjanjuk ensconced in the nursing home, Lozynskyj said, it's not clear how much help he really needs.

Reaction was mixed in the Ukrainian community in Munich. Some pointed out that higher-ranking Germans have been acquitted.

"He was a victim himself and had to react in this way, because he needed to survive," said Rosalia Pankiewicz, a 64-year-old of Ukrainian heritage.

Minutes from Demjanjuk's neat ranch-style home in Seven Hills, Ohio, his ordeal hasn't been a big topic in Parma's Ukrainian Village, a quaint neighborhood of ethnic shops, cathedrals and Ukrainian gathering spots, according to butcher George Salo.

Among his Ukrainian-American friends and customers, Salo said there's a sense that the decades-long saga "is what it is," with little to be done on Demjanuk's behalf.

"The guy is 91," Salo said, noting that Germany was the architect of the Holocaust and continues to allow former Nazis to live there: "They're having a double standard."

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