Last week a German court in Munich found John Demjanjuk guilty of 28,060 counts of accessory to murder, one for each of the Jews exterminated during the six months that he worked as a guard at the Sobibor death camp in Poland. The Demjanjuk trial will probably be the last Holocaust war crimes trial to grab the world’s attention.

For many, especially those in younger generations, the trial against Mr. Demjanjuk, a 91-year-old former Ohio autoworker now confined to a wheelchair, may seem the awkward fulfillment of the notion that history plays itself out first as tragedy, then as farce. Coincidentally, this year is the 50th anniversary of the trial of Adolf Eichmann, a case that, in its significance, appears to dwarf the Demjanjuk proceedings.

But while Eichmann did play a larger role in the Holocaust than Mr. Demjanjuk, we must resist the conclusion that one is more significant than the other. Indeed, the Demjanjuk trial, as much as the Eichmann case, has volumes to teach us about the complex relationship between genocide and justice.

The Demjanjuk case matters, above all, because there was never much doubt that he had been a vicious prison guard under the Nazis. After living for more than 30 years in the United States, he was deported to Israel in 1986, where he was tried and sentenced to death. Unfortunately, prosecutors had misidentified him as a guard at the Treblinka camp known as Ivan the Terrible, and Mr. Demjanjuk was released in 1993.

What followed was 16 years of legal wrangling as Mr. Demjanjuk, now back in the United States, fought efforts to retry or deport him. Finally, Germany succeeded in extraditing him in 2009. Last week’s decision, then, was proof that the rule of law works, however slowly.

Of course, it’s that slow pace that had many asking why Germany was bothering to try Mr. Demjanjuk in the first place. Wasn’t there something comic, even shameful, about dragging a dying man across the Atlantic to stand trial for a crime he committed over a half century ago? Shouldn’t there be a statute of limitations on even the most heinous crimes?

No, and the trial reaffirms that society rejects that idea. Those who participate in genocide, in whatever capacity, should never rest easy. Nor should they assume that if
they delay justice enough, their case will be abandoned. This lesson may matter more today than ever: after all, the hunt for Holocaust killers may be over, but the hunt for those who practiced genocide in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda and far too many other places must continue.

The Demjanjuk trial also underlines the lessons learned from Eichmann. Like Mr. Demjanjuk, Eichmann claimed he was only a small cog in the wheel. Both men argued that they did not have the choice to say no; it was kill or be killed.

However, as Hannah Arendt argued in “Eichmann in Jerusalem,” every machine part is of crucial importance. Removing a small cog has the same impact as removing a large one: the machine stops working. Both men could have said no with few consequences; no defense lawyer or historian has found evidence of someone being killed for refusing to participate in the Holocaust. But these men chose not to refuse.

True, the outcomes for the two men will be different: Eichmann was the only person in Israel’s history to be executed; Mr. Demjanjuk will probably die in his bed as his lawyers appeal his sentence.

But what happened at both of these trials is more important than the ultimate fates of the guilty. Now as then, the victims were given a chance to tell their story, not in a book, interview or speech, but in a court of law. At the Eichmann trial close to 100 witnesses testified about their suffering. At the Demjanjuk trial we heard from the victims’ children. They joined the prosecutor in pointing their fingers at the man who facilitated their parents’ murders. In other words, the Demjanjuk trial proves that while Eichmann himself may be history, the robust process that made Holocaust trials into something more than mere court proceedings is still effective.

And finally, the Demjanjuk case, by its very complexity, is a fitting coda to the Eichmann trial because it reminds us that adjudicating genocide is, like the act itself, rarely straightforward. These cases raise difficult questions about how to punish different types of participation in a genocide; does a guard who carried it out deserve more or less punishment than a bureaucrat who planned it?

These trials do not ever truly offer closure, even decades after the crime. Indeed, cases like Mr. Demjanjuk’s are in some sense only the beginning of a process of reckoning and understanding, a process whose burden now falls not on the courts, but on the rest of us.

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