

Punitive Damage Jury Verdict Affirmed for Jewish CPD Officer

by Jacqueline Carroll

While it seems now, more than ever in American history, anti-Semitism is on the rise, for Officer Detlef Sommerfield, enduring blatant anti-Semitic attacks was commonplace. To make matters worse, the pervasive harassment he endured occurred at work where he was an officer with the Chicago Police Department (“CPD”) and the perpetrator was his sergeant. This was part of the factual background in a recently decided Seventh Circuit case, *Sommerfield v. Sgt. Knasiak*, No. 18-2045, where Officer Sommerfield alleged discrimination, harassment, and retaliation based on his German national origin and his Jewish ethnicity.

Officer Detlef Sommerfield was a German born Jewish police officer with the Chicago Police Department. His superior, Sgt. Knasiak, harassed him on a regular basis for several years, spewing such horrible statements that the Seventh Circuit refused to quote them in its opinion, merely stating: “We prefer not to debase this opinion by repeating what Sgt. Knasiak said: suffice it to say that the vitriol invoked Hitler, the actions the Nazis took in the death camps, and regret that Jews today live in the United States.”

These pervasive discriminatory comments were made in front of other officers and superiors and the CPD did nothing to quell them. Officer Sommerfield reached his final straw when Sgt. Knasiak disparaged his girlfriend, who happened to be Mexican, and he did what most police officers are afraid to do—he filed a complaint register against his superior. After this occurred, Sgt. Knasiak filed his own complaint register against Officer Sommerfield. Though Officer Sommerfield was well qualified for a promotion, Sgt. Knasiak’s complaint register led to Officer Sommerfield’s suspension and ineligibility for the promotion. A jury awarded a verdict of \$540,000 in punitive damages against Sgt. Knasiak. Sgt. Knasiak appealed, claiming he was entitled to judgment as a matter of law, or at least a new trial, and the court should have reduced the punitive damages award. Finding no error, the Seventh Circuit affirmed, finding ample evidence for a jury to conclude Sgt. Knasiak filed his complaint register out of discriminatory animus and that his conduct was “extremely reprehensible.”

Sommerfield’s attorney, Joseph Longo, a solo practitioner with Joseph Longo and Associates, Ltd., fought side-by-side with Officer Sommerfield for fourteen years and believes the Jewish community should work together to stand up for victims of anti-Semitism, like Officer Sommerfield.

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