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Cop harassed on the job awarded \$540,000

Jury finds sergeant targeted officer with anti-Semitic taunts

BY PATRICIA MANSON
Law Bulletin staff writer

A jury has awarded \$540,000 in punitive damages to a Chicago police officer who was repeatedly mocked with such remarks as "burn, Jew, burn."

The jury in U.S. District Judge Joan B. Gottschall's court returned the verdict in favor of officer Detlef Sommerfeld after finding he was a victim of harassment and retaliation at the hands of now-retired sergeant Lawrence Knasiak.

On the verdict form, the jury indicated that \$540,000 is the equivalent of 10 years of pension payments.

Gottschall will determine later whether Sommerfeld is entitled to a compensatory damages award of lost wages and benefits.

Gottschall had not entered a judgment in the case as of this morning. She directed the parties to file any post-trial motions by Sept. 22.

Knasiak was the only defendant remaining in Sommerfeld's law-

suit. The city of Chicago was dismissed from the case in 2009.

Law Department spokesman John Holden said the city is not liable for any punitive damages assessed against Knasiak.

However, Sommerfeld's attorney, Joseph A. Longo of Mount Prospect, said the city will be responsible for paying the wages and benefits Sommerfeld lost as a result of Knasiak's actions.

Sommerfeld alleges Knasiak blocked his promotion to canine handler by falsely accusing him of insubordination.

Also, Sommerfeld alleges, Knasiak repeatedly mocked him because he is German — he was born in what was then West Germany and immigrated to the United States as a young man — and Jewish.

Among the comments Knasiak made, Sommerfeld alleges, were "Hitler should have killed all of you Jews" and "How do you fit 1,000 Jews in a car? In an ashtray."

Knasiak retaliated against him with further verbal abuse after he filed a complaint with the Chicago Police Department's internal affairs division (IAD) and a charge with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Sommerfeld alleges.

He alleges other sergeants and
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higher-ranking officials did nothing to halt Knasiak's harassment.

And the IAD deliberately dragged its feet investigating his complaint, Sommerfeld alleges.

While the EEOC determined within five months that he was a victim of harassment and retaliation, Sommerfeld says, the IAD took more than three years to complete its investigation.

The IAD waited until six weeks before Knasiak's long-planned re-

turnment to recommend that he be suspended, Sommerfeld says.

Knasiak never served the suspension and was not even reprimanded, Sommerfeld says.

In fact, he says, the city council twice commended Knasiak for his service on the police force.

Longo said Knasiak's harassment was particularly troubling because Sommerfeld lost relatives in the Holocaust.

"These remarks were extremely painful, particularly since Mr. Sommerfeld's family members were massacred by the Nazis," Longo said.

He said the failure of Knasiak's superiors to take action was even worse.

"What's more outrageous is the Chicago Police Department did nothing about this — nothing," Longo said.

The jury returned its verdict Thursday in *Detlef Sommerfeld v. Sergeant Knasiak*, No. 08 C 30925.

The lead attorney for Knasiak, Anthony L. Schumann of Grant, Schumann LLC, referred questions to the city.

In a separate suit against the city,

a jury in U.S. District Judge Harry D. Leinenweber's court in 2012 found that Sommerfeld had been subjected to a hostile work environment and awarded him \$30,000. *Detlef Sommerfeld v. City of Chicago*, No. 06 C 3182.

Adopting a recommendation by U.S. Magistrate Judge Jeffrey Cole, Leinenweber later awarded Sommerfeld \$430,000 in attorney fees in that case.

Cross appeals in that case are pending before the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

pmanson@lbp.com