

California Man Gets Second Life Term for Synagogue Attack

A 22-year-old white supremacist was sentenced Tuesday to life in federal prison for killing a woman and injuring three others in a shooting at a Southern California synagogue in 2019, adding to the life term he received three months earlier in state court.

John T. Earnest declined to speak in a courtroom full of victims, families and congregants. In state court, his attorney said he wanted to speak but a judge refused, saying he didn't want to give a platform for his hate-filled speech.

Earnest's attorney, Ellis Johnston III, said his client acknowledged his actions were "inappropriate," a statement that was greeted with skepticism by prosecutors. Peter Ko, a federal prosecutor, said Earnest's show of contrition came shortly after the shooting in a recorded phone call to someone else.

U.S. District Judge Anthony Battaglia said the federal and state life sentences would run one after the other instead of concurrently, acknowledging it was symbolic but that it was meant to send a strong message. The judge denied the defense attorney's request to have Earnest stay in state prison.

"Obviously this is as serious as it gets," Battaglia said.

Earnest was tied to restraints and looked straight ahead without expression during the two-hour hearing, which marked the end of legal proceedings against him.

He pleaded guilty to federal hate crimes in September after the Justice Department said it wouldn't seek the death

penalty. Defense attorneys and prosecutors recommended a life sentence, plus 30 years.

That same month, Earnest received another life term under a plea agreement with state charges that spared him the death penalty. His conviction for murder and attempted murder at the synagogue and arson for an earlier fire at a nearby mosque brought a life sentence without parole, plus 137 years in prison.

Minutes after the shooting on the last day of Passover, Earnest called a 911 dispatcher to say he shot up the synagogue to save white people. "I'm defending our nation against the Jewish people, who are trying to destroy all white people," he said.

The San Diego man was inspired by mass shootings at the Tree of Life Congregation in Pittsburgh and two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, shortly before he attacked Chabad of Poway, a synagogue near San Diego, on April 27, 2019. He frequented 8chan, a dark corner of the internet, for those disaffected by mainstream social media sites to post extremist, racist and violent views.

Earnest legally bought a semi-automatic rifle in San Diego a day before the attack, according to a federal affidavit. He entered the synagogue with 10 bullets loaded and 50 more on his vest but fled after struggling to reload. Worshippers chased him to his car.

Earnest killed 60-year-old Lori Gilbert-Kaye, who was hit twice in the foyer, and wounded an 8-year-old girl, her uncle and Rabbi Yisroel Goldstein, who was leading a service on the major Jewish holiday.

Family members and other congregants spoke of how Gilbert-Kaye brightened their lives with extraordinary kindness and called Earnest a coward, an evil animal and a monster. Gilbert-Kaye paid for medications for people who couldn't afford them. An

Easter basket for a poor family she met was found in her trunk after she died.

Hannah Kaye, her daughter, said it was “beyond comprehension” how Earnest—an accomplished student, athlete and musician who was studying to be a nurse at California State University, San Marcos— traveled down the rabbit hole” of violent anti-Semitism. She expressed willingness to meet with him at some point.

Earnest was also convicted of arson for setting fire to a mosque in the nearby suburb of Escondido about a month before he attacked the synagogue.

“All people in this country should be able to freely exercise their religion without fear of being attacked,” said U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland. “This defendant’s horrific crime was an assault on fundamental principles of our nation.”

Earnest’s parents issued a statement after the shooting expressing shock and sadness, calling their son’s actions a “terrifying mystery.”

“To our great shame, he is now part of the history of evil that has been perpetrated on Jewish people for centuries,” they said. {eo}

© 2021 Religion News Service. All rights reserved.

Follow breaking news like this on our new platform, CHARISMA PLUS.