

IT'S easy to feel compassion for Charles Zentai, the snowy-haired 86-year-old Perth great-grandfather accused of war crimes allegedly committed in 1944. Well, don't.

Justice must now take its course. A Perth magistrate has ruled Mr Zentai should return to his native Hungary to face a charge of murder.

Mr Zentai has been accused of murdering a Jewish teenager, Peter Balazs, 64 years ago.

Balazs was apparently beaten to death because he was not wearing the yellow star that Jews were forced to display in occupied Europe during World War II.

At the time, Mr Zentai was a junior officer in the German-aligned Royal Hungarian Army.

Mr Zentai has only been accused of the war crime. He remains innocent and deserves to be treated as if he is innocent.

It is easy to argue that, after 64 years, the case should be dropped. Why pursue an old man to his grave? What good can it do to imprison a man for a crime committed nearly two-thirds of a century ago during the emotive heat of a dying war?

If there are credible witnesses to the crime, can they clearly remember the details of events which occurred 64 years ago? Is Mr Zentai himself capable of giving reliable evidence?

There must be concerns whether Mr Zentai has been properly investigated or whether he has been the victim of an international witch-hunt. Has he been fairly treated or simply demonised by obsessive Nazi-haters?

The Simon Wiesenthal Centre, established to track down World War II war criminals, does not exactly pursue its suspects with the balance and integrity of Scotland Yard.

There is a suspicion old war criminals have to prove their innocence, rather than the prosecution prove their guilt.

And, of course, the major victims of any prosecution will not be Mr Zentai, who is in the late autumn of his life, but his children and extended family.

Having said all that, if the justice system can establish there are sufficient grounds for prosecution, Mr Zentai should not be exempted or pardoned on the basis of his age or the historical perspective of his alleged offence.

Time does not lessen the horror or the gravity of serious crime.

It may be a cliché to say that the victims of war crimes - particularly young Peter Balazs - were not offered the privilege of growing old. A cliché, but none the less the truth.

If the 1966 case of the missing Beaumont children was suddenly solved and the perpetrator arrested, would the South Australian community be content to allow police to drop charges because the crime occurred 42 years ago? Of course not.

It is easy to feel sorry for a stooped, frightened old man being led into court. But as with most crimes, sympathy should not rest with the accused but with the victim.

The Zentai case is not about revenge for yesterday but about justice today and a warning for tomorrow. Nobody who commits a serious crime should be comforted by the precedent that time will erase the need for

prosecution. A crime committed half a century ago remains as serious and repugnant as a crime committed last night.

Perhaps the major difference is that the perpetrator has had to grapple with the fear of possible detection, and the ceaseless voice of his own conscience.

If, as Mr Zentai's family persistently claim, he is innocent and that the evidence being mounted is spurious and obtained under duress, he has nothing to fear.

Mr Zentai's case is a challenge for the Australian and international justice system. It must separate fact and truth from suspicion and allegation.

If, in the end, there remains sufficient evidence for Mr Zentai to be prosecuted, he must be offered no dispensation or exemption. Justice must take its course.

War criminals who paid the price

Hundreds of Nazi war criminals were tried and sentenced in the Nuremberg trials 1945-49, after World War II.

Hermann Goering, designated successor to German chancellor Adolf Hitler, committed suicide nine days after he was sentenced to death.

Hitler's deputy, Rudolf Hess, and chief of chancery of the Nazi Party Martin Bormann both died in prison after being given life sentences.

Leader of the German secret service Heinrich Himmler committed suicide in May, 1945, after he was arrested.

Other major Nazi figures, including Joachim Ribbentrop, Ernst Kaltenbrunner, Alfred Rosenberg, Hans Frank, Wilhelm Frick, Fritz Sauckel, Julius Streicher and Wilhelm Keitel, were all hanged in October, 1946.

Hitler committed suicide with a combination of cyanide poisoning and a pistol shot in his Berlin bunker on Monday, April 30, 1945.

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