

JOSEPH MENGELE: THE ANGEL OF DEATH

The Making of a Young Nazi

Josef Mengele left Gunzburg for Munich in October of 1930 to begin his studies at Munich University. He enrolled as a student of Philosophy and Medicine, degrees that would ultimately lead his career path to the Heart of Darkness, Auschwitz. At the same time that young Mengele was beginning his studies, the City of Munich was in the throes of an ideological revolution. In 1930 the Nazis were the second-largest party in the German parliament. Adolf Hitler used Munich as the primary stage from which he would achieve domination over all of German society. His hateful, frenzied, nationalistic speeches incited his Bavarian audience, and intoxicated them with visions of a new German Empire populated by the German Super-Race.

As Mengele's political consciousness began to blossom, Mengele commenced his studies, focusing on anthropology and paleontology, as well as medicine. Medicine, or the art of healing, was truly a secondary interest of Mengele's; his growing passion was for eugenics, the search for the keys to unlock the secret of genetics and reveal the sources of human deformities and imperfections. Mengele's interest in this field of study arose at a time when a number of prominent German academics and medical professionals were espousing the theory of "unworthy life," a theory which advanced the notion that some lives were simply not worthy of living. It was here that Mengele began to strive in his efforts to distinguish himself, to both gain renown and respect as a scientific researcher and to advance the perfection of the German race. However ambitious Mengele may have been in this regard, his academic passion revealed little to nothing of the murderous zeal that was to one-day result from it. One of his university colleagues, Professor Hans Grebe, has stated that "There was nothing in his personality to suggest that he would do what he did (as an SS doctor at Auschwitz.)"

If Mengele himself became a cold-blooded monster at the height of his Nazi career, he certainly learned at the feet of some of Germany's most diabolical minds. As a student Mengele attended the lectures of Dr. Ernst Rudin, who posited not only that there was some lives not worth living, but also that *doctors* had a responsibility to destroy such life and remove it from the general population. His prominent views gained the attention of Hitler himself, and Rudin was drafted to assist in composing the Law for the Protection of Heredity Health, which passed in 1933, the same year that the Nazi took complete control of the German government. This unapologetic Social Darwinist contributed to the Nazi decree that called for the sterilization of those demonstrating the following flaws, lest they reproduce and further contaminate the German gene pool: feeble-mindedness; schizophrenia; manic depression; epilepsy; hereditary blindness; deafness; physical deformities; Huntington's disease; and alcoholism.

Five years after entering the University, Mengele was awarded a Ph.D. for his thesis entitled "Racial Morphological Research on the Lower Jaw Section of four Racial Groups." Through rather dry scientific prose Mengele postulated that it was possible to detect and identify different racial groups by studying the jaw. While devoid of any

racist (specifically anti-Semitic) overtones, Mengele's argument paralleled those made by others who claimed that physical characteristics such as the jawbone or the shape of one's nose could be used to determine if someone was Jewish. In 1936 Mengele passed his state medical examination and began working in Leipzig at the university medical clinic.

The next year, 1937, proved to be a turning point for both Mengele's career and the history of the holocaust itself. He was recommended for and received a position as a research assistant with the Third Reich Institute for Hereditary, Biology and Racial Purity at the University of Frankfurt. He was assigned to work for Professor Otmar Freiherr von Verschuer, one of the premier minds in the field of genetics. Von Verschuer was a public supporter of Hitler's, praising him for "being the first statesman to recognize hereditary biological and race hygiene." Mengele quickly applied himself in his unabashed pursuit of von Verschuer's praise and approval, which he quickly acquired. In von Verschuer Mengele had found the parental adulation and affirmation so sorely missing from his childhood. As von Verschuer provided Mengele with that for which he had longed for all his life, Mengele returned the gesture with an unbending willingness to please his mentor.

The two streams of ambition that had come to define Mengele's life, becoming a renowned scientist and a genetic purifier, had found unity within the Nazi movement. He became an official Party member in 1937. In May of 1938 he applied for membership with and was accepted into the Schutzstaffel, or SS. This was Hitler's elite corps of race guardians, those who demonstrated both the purist Aryan racial background and adherence to Nazi ideology and practices. By the age of 28, Mengele had climbed to a place of prominence within the Nazi hierarchy and was positioned to wield great power and influence.

Mengele conducting "racial purity" interviews in 1940 with an elderly Polish couple

This same year, Frankfurt University awarded Mengele his medical degree. It was also in 1938 that he received his first experience in military training, spending three months training for combat with the Wehrmacht, or German Army. For the rest of 1938 until 1940 Mengele remained with the Institute, assisting von Verschuer and reviewing the work of other researchers. In 1939 war broke out, and Mengele was electrified with the hope of fighting for Father Germany. He was not disappointed; although he had to wait until June of 1940 due to his prior kidney ailment, he was accepted to the Waffen SS, elite soldiers within the SS itself, and the most fanatical adherents to Hitler's call to preserve and protect the German race.

Mengele continued to distinguish himself, this time as a soldier. As a lieutenant, he was awarded the Iron Cross Second Class in June of 1941 on the Ukrainian Front. In January of 1942, while serving with the SS Viking Division deep behind Soviet lines, he pulled two German soldiers from a burning tank, and was awarded the Iron Cross First Class, as well as the Black Badge for the Wounded and the Medal for the Care of the German People. Wounds he received during this second Campaign prevented Mengele from returning to combat. Instead, he was posted at the Race and Resettlement Office in Berlin, where he was also promoted to the rank of captain. By this time his mentor,

Professor von Verschuer, was also stationed in Berlin at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Hereditary Teaching and Genetics. A prominent Nazi scientist such as von Verschuer certainly had first-hand knowledge of the Final Solution policy that had recently been formalized in Berlin by the top members of the Nazi hierarchy. He would have also correspondingly been aware of Nazi plans to construct enormous concentration camps across Europe, and that such camps held untold opportunities for *in vivo* experiments, living genetic research to be conducted on human subjects. Within a year after being posted to Berlin, Dr. Josef Mengele received a new assignment. In May of 1943, Mengele departed from Berlin for his next assignment: the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz, Poland.

SELECTION: WHO WOULD LIVE AND WHO WOULD DIE

The freight train rumbled to an agonizing stop on the rails inside of the Auschwitz compound. The human cargo that was packed tightly into its bevy of cattle cars continued to groan and clamor, suffering as they were from a four-day journey without food, water, bathroom facilities, or even fresh air. The Jewish prisoners were the latest victims of the Nazi campaign to liquidate the Jewish population of Hungary, the last Jewish community to remain intact during the war. Their final destination was the violent, Dantesque nightmare of Auschwitz, the premier Nazi death factory in southwestern Poland, the most efficient cog in the wheel of the Nazi's Endlösung, Final Solution, to the so-called Jewish question.

The doors of each cattle car were violently thrown open by Nazi SS soldiers carrying machine guns. "*Raus, raus!*" ("Out, out!") they screamed at the frightened and bewildered Jews, who hurried out the doors under a rain of cudgel blows and past the snapping, barking jaws of the camp's German Shepherds. The air was thick with the deafening and confusing sound of orders being screamed, dogs barking, and the stench of burning flesh and hair that spewed from the smokestacks of the camp's five crematorium 24 hours a day. Families were separated immediately, with the males forming one line and the females forming another. Most victims were unaware that this was the last time that they would see their loved ones alive, unaware of their lost opportunity to say last good-byes.

The SS troops marched the doomed prisoners to the head of the ramp onto which they had exited. They were led before an SS officer who, in the midst of all the madness, agony and death, seemed very out of place. His handsome face was set with a kind smile, his uniform impeccably tailored, cleaned and pressed. He was cheerfully whistling an opera tune, one of his favorites by Wagner. His eyes betrayed nothing but a cursory interest in the drama that was unfolding before him, the drama of which he alone was the chief architect. He carried a riding crop, but rather than using it to strike the prisoners as they passed before him, he merely used it to indicate which direction he selected them to go in, *links oder rechts*, left or right. Unbeknownst to the prisoners, this charming and handsome officer with the innocuous demeanor was engaging in his favorite activity at Auschwitz, selecting which new arrivals were fit to work and which ones should be sent immediately to the gas chambers and crematorium. Those sent to the left, roughly 10 to

30 percent of all new arrivals, had their lives spared, at least for the moment. Those sent to the right, usually 70 to 90 percent of all new arrivals, had been condemned to die without even a passing glance from their judge and jury at Auschwitz. The handsome officer who held omnipotent sway over the fate of all the camp's prisoners was Dr. Josef Mengele, the Angel of Death.

JOSEF MENGELE: THE ANGEL OF DEATH

At Harmony With Evil

In the words of several Auschwitz eyewitnesses and survivors, and of historians and psychologists, Dr. Josef Mengele was not merely of Auschwitz. Dr. Josef Mengele was Auschwitz. Through his actions and demeanor, Mengele was able to embody the unearthly contradictions of a death camp where arriving prisoners were serenaded with waltz music played by a prisoner orchestra, while a few yards away hundreds of people were reduced to ash in the crematoria; a camp where affection and comfort were lavished upon the children living in the Zoo, only so as to keep them healthy enough for twisted and pointless experimentation; a camp where Mengele himself escorted his beloved "children" to the gas chambers, referring to their walks as a game he called "on the way to the chimney."

The Web site below is VERY graphic in describing and showing you some of Mengele's experiments. I feel it is important that you are aware of what took place under the guise of "medical/scientific" experiments. However, if you find this site too gruesome, I will understand. In such a case, you do not have to continue viewing!

<http://motlc.learningcenter.wiesenthal.org/albums/palbum/p02/a0141p3.html> (revised 10/07)

It is never an easy task to imagine that any human being is capable of committing acts of such wanton brutality and base cruelty, acts that bespeak not merely the individual's disregard for the value of human life, but his endless desire to degrade and destroy it. The Holocaust has presented history with an enigma, with events and personalities that perhaps defy explanation and meaning. Yet it is in our efforts to prevent such future tragedies from occurring that we strive to understand what it is that motivates such individuals to behave in this way.

Josef Mengele harbored a deep-seated ambition to achieve greatness, and was internally driven from an early age to distinguish himself as an adult. This is evident in the choices he made throughout his career as a Nazi. He did not merely join the army, he joined the SS; and he did not merely join the SS, he joined the Waffen SS; and when posted at Auschwitz he did not perform some selections, he seemed to be present at almost all selections. In every way possible, Mengele sought to advance his own interests by demonstrating that there was no one else in the field who did things quite like he did, that there was no one else with his sense of devotion or zeal.

But does this go far enough towards explaining the leap from ambitious young scientist to murderous barbarian? Does this explain the transformation of an affable young man

named Beppo to a cold-blooded, torturous demon? Author and professor Robert Jay Lifton has posited that for one such as Mengele, such a duality was possible because of a phenomena he refers to as “doubling”:

The key to understanding how Nazi doctors came to do the work of Auschwitz is the psychological principle I call “doubling”: the division of the self into two functioning wholes, so that a part-self acts as an entire self. An Auschwitz doctor could, through doubling, not only kill and contribute to the killing, but also organize silently, on behalf of that evil project, an entire self-structure encompassing virtually all aspects of his behavior. The individual Nazi doctor needed his Auschwitz self to function psychologically in an environment so antithetical to his previous ethical standards. At the same time, he needed his prior self in order to continue to see himself as humane physician, husband, and father. The Auschwitz self had to be both autonomous and connected to the prior self that gave rise to it.

While there is a certain logic to Lifton’s argument, that doctors accustomed to adhering to the Hippocratic oath needed an “Auschwitz self” to function in the death camp, he himself points to Mengele’s especial affinity for work in this milieu. In other words, it was not a great leap that Mengele was required to make in order for the Auschwitz self to emerge from the prior self:

Mengele’s embrace of the Auschwitz self gave the impression of a quick, adaptive affinity . . . Doubling was indeed required of a man who befriended children and then drove some of them personally to the gas chamber. Whatever his affinity for Auschwitz, a man who could be pictured under ordinary conditions as a “slightly sadistic German professor” had to form a new self to become an energetic killer. The point about Mengele’s doubling is that his prior self could be readily absorbed into the Auschwitz self; and his continuing allegiance to the Nazi ideology and project enabled his Auschwitz self, more than in the case of other Nazi doctors, to remain active over the years after the Second World War.

Perhaps that is the greatest mystery, not that the process of doubling occurred within Mengele, but the fact that it occurred without conscious effort on his part, the fact that the Auschwitz self seemed to rise from within, rather than split off from, his prior self. Why did Mengele slip into the role of the Auschwitz self with such ease? What was it about his psychological makeup that allowed him to convey the appearance of his prior self while simultaneously behaving as the Auschwitz self? Because Mengele himself died before he could be captured and interviewed, it is possible that the last word may be that, at least in his case, such behavior was possible because he was simply an embodiment of evil, and there is no psychological way of explaining how he became so.

JOSEPH MENGELE: THE ANGEL OF DEATH

Epilogue

Dr. Josef Mengele fled from Auschwitz on January 17, 1945, as the Soviet army advanced across the crumbling German Reich towards Berlin. During the first few years of the post-war era, Mengele remained in hiding on a farm near his native Gunzburg. He assumed a fake identity, and worked as a farm hand, keeping informed of events through secret contacts with old Gunzburg friends. Incredibly, he at first aspired to continue his career as a research scientist, but it became increasingly apparent that the Allies were not going to let a notorious war criminal such as he simply resume the life he had enjoyed prior to the war without paying for the crimes he had committed during it. Mengele finally decided that he was no longer safe in Europe and escaped through Italy to an ocean liner bound for Argentina.

Mengele arrived in Argentina in 1949, a country that was ruled by the popular dictator Juan Peron. The right-wing ruler had already cultivated a friendly relationship with nazis in Europe, as well as with those who lived in the German expatriate community in Argentina. Mengele was able to slip unnoticed into such a setting with ease and had soon established a network of Nazi devotees who were willing to help him assume a new identity in South America.

Mengele was to spend the next thirty years on the run from international authorities. While he received aid and shelter from the neo-Nazi network in Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil, Mengele was also inadvertently assisted by a lack of commitment on the part of the West German government to bring the Angel of Death to justice, and a similar lack of commitment on the part of the United States Justice Department. The Israeli government had no such lack of commitment to his capture, trial and execution. In fact, Israeli agents were close to seizing Mengele on a handful of occasions in the early-to-mid 1960s. However, international uproar over Israel's kidnapping of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann from Argentina in 1960, and pressing security issues involving hostile Arab states, sidetracked Israeli efforts to pursue Mengele.

While Nazi-hunters such as Simon Wiesenthal continued to press for Mengele's capture and execution, the notorious Nazi doctor seemed to drop off the radar screen of most international governments. Interest in his case was suddenly reinvigorated when, on January 17, 1985, a group of Auschwitz survivors returned to the death camp to memorialize friends and family who had perished there. A week later, many of the same survivors gathered in Jerusalem to try Mengele in absentia. The event was televised around the globe, and for four consecutive nights, the airwaves were filled with images of survivors recounting their gruesome, barbaric treatment at the hands of Josef Mengele. Within less than a month, both the United States Justice Department and the Israeli government had announced that the case of Josef Mengele was officially reopened and strategies were redrawn to bring the Nazi doctor to justice.

However, these fledgling efforts were stopped in their tracks when, on May 31, 1985, West German police raided the home of Hans Sedlmeier, a lifelong friend of Mengele's, and his contact person in Europe. The police seized several letters from Mengele and other German expatriates living with him in Brazil, and Brazilian authorities were immediately notified. Within a week Brazilian police had identified the families that had harbored Mengele, and through them were able to locate the grave where Mengele's body had been buried after a drowning accident in 1979. Forensic tests on the skeletal remains confirmed that the body was indeed that of Josef Mengele. Survivors of Mengele's treatment who had longed all their post-war lives to confront this cruel and demonic man denied that this could indeed be him. Many still live for the day when they will be able to extract justice for their suffering from the man who was responsible for so much of it, both during and after the war. Alas, Mengele has escaped earthly judgment through that act over which he sought to wield total control – death itself.