

Josef Mengele

By Douglas B. Lynott

Selection



Selection of inmates at Auschwitz. Mengele is in foreground at far right with cigarette in hand.

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 5 crematoria 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.



Josef Mengele, Auschwitz in 1943

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

The Mengeles of Gunzburg

Josef Mengele was the eldest of three sons born to Karl and Walburga Mengele in the Bavarian village of Gunzburg. Karl was a local industrialist who owned a plant that manufactured farming equipment. He was known as a stern but fair employer and a hard worker. It was his wife, Walburga, however, whom his employees feared the most. An immense woman with a terrible temper, she was often known to storm onto the floor of her husband's factory and publicly chastise individual employees for laziness and poor workmanship. Warnings were hurriedly passed down the production line whenever Walburga was seen approaching the factory, and workers scrambled to stay clear of her wrath.

Walburga ruled her home with an equal amount of firmness, demanding respect and obedience from her three sons, Josef, Alois, and Karl, Jr. A devout Catholic, Walburga saw to it that her boys strictly practiced the faith of the Church. She was equally as cold and demanding in her relationship with her husband, Karl. One afternoon, Karl arrived home in a new automobile he had purchased in order to celebrate the growing success of his factory. However, instead of thrilling and impressing his wife with this purchase, Karl was greeted with spiteful admonishments for having so foolishly spent money on something as frivolous as a car without first consulting with her. It was a moment that exemplified the extent to which Walburga sought total control over her household and the lives of those who lived in it.

It is clear from his memoirs that his mother's behavior and the relationship she shared with Karl left a lasting impression on young Josef. He describes his father as a cold man, distant and

preoccupied with his work at the factory. Walburga is described as someone incapable of loving. While she may have indeed been able to mold a disciplined, respectful son in Josef, her cold-hearted methods may well have contributed to her son's capacity for murder and bloodlust as an SS doctor at Auschwitz.



Josef as a young man

Despite the lack of love and affection in his home, young Josef is remembered as a bright, cheerful boy in Gunzburg. Peers and adults alike greeted him as "Beppo," an affectionate nickname for the handsome, engaging young child. While never the top student in his classes, Josef nevertheless did well, and was recognized as a bright, ambitious student. He was the model of a well-behaved student, earning verbal compliments from his otherwise strict teachers, and high marks for conduct and punctuality.

As Beppo matured into adolescence, he continued to refine his social skills, becoming a strikingly handsome young man. Mengele is remembered as someone who exuded a natural self-confidence, a charming and articulate speaker who was much sought after by the village's young women. His perfectly-styled dark hair, the carefree light in his eyes, and his winsome smile, combined with his extraordinary social graces, imbued Mengele with a Kennedyesque charisma. It was at this early age that Mengele acquired the habit of dressing exclusively in hand-tailored clothing and sporting what would become his trademark, white cotton dress gloves, gloves that have been used by Auschwitz survivors to distinguish him from other SS doctors.

It was during this period that Josef and his ambition came into direct conflict with the wishes of his father, Karl. Josef's father wished for his eldest son to work for the family factory in Gunzburg, perhaps as an accountant. However, young Josef dreamt of a career far beyond the confining realm of business, and far beyond the boundaries of his provincial Bavarian home. Throughout his youth Josef dreamt of leaving Gunzburg and pursuing a career in science and anthropology. Making no secret of the scope of his ambitions, Josef once prophetically boasted to a friend that his name would one day appear in the encyclopedia. In 1930 Josef graduated from the Gunzburg gymnasium, or high school, and passed his Abitur, the preliminary college entry examination. While his score was unremarkable, it was good enough for him to be accepted to the University of Munich. Munich is the Capital of Bavaria,

and at the time was the heart of the growing National Socialist movement, and led by a political revolutionary named Adolf Hitler.

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 audiences, and intoxicated them with visions of a new German Empire populated by the German Super-Race.

Mengele had remained apolitical up until this point in his life. He was satisfied in his pursuit of life's leisure pleasures. His quest for success and renown was confined to the realm of anthropology and academia. However, he easily succumbed to the contagious Nazi hysteria that swept up so many of his peers. In his memoirs he wrote:

"My political leanings were, I think for reasons of family tradition, national conservative. I had not joined any political organization. But in the long run it was impossible to stand aside in these politically stirring times, should our Fatherland not succumb to the Marxist-Bolshevik attack. This simple political concept finally became the decisive factor in my life."

This "political concept" that Mengele wrote of became his vehicle upon which he would seek to advance his career, his fame as a researcher and scientist. Wasting no time, he joined a nationalistic organization called the Stalhelm, or the Steel Helmets, in 1931. The Stalhelm wore decorative German uniforms and paraded to nationalist music during public events. While they were not yet affiliated with the Nazi Party at this time, they nonetheless shared the same rabid nationalistic ideology as the Nazis.

As his 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 were some lives not worth living, but 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 Nazis 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.

The Student Finds a Mentor

In 1934, Hitler ordered the SA, or Brownshirts, to absorb the Stalhelm organization, automatically making Mengele a member. However, a kidney ailment which left him in a weakened condition, forced him to resign from the organization. He was now free to devote all of his time to his studies. 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.



Josef as a Waffen SS officer in 1942.

Auschwitz



The 'Gate of Death' at Auschwitz

The death factory at Auschwitz was a gruesome kingdom of human misery. Barracks and their inhabitants were inundated with the foulest of sanitary conditions. Diseases such as typhus and diarrhea were rampant, as were lice, vermin and fleas. It was over this kingdom which Dr. Josef Mengele sought to preside. Mengele's stated mission at Auschwitz was to perform research on human genetics. His work was funded through a grant that Professor von Verschuer had secured through the German Research Council in August of 1943. The goal of Mengele's work was to unlock the secrets of genetic engineering, and to devise methods for eradicating inferior gene strands from the human population as a means to creating a Germanic super-race. However, despite the scientific premise for his work, Mengele's

accomplishments added volumes to the annals of human cruelty while contributing nothing of value to the greater understanding of human genetics and genetic engineering.

Mengele set out to immediately distinguish himself from the other SS doctors at Auschwitz. He already stood apart as the only doctor in the camp to have been decorated for his conduct in battle. Mengele made certain to festoon his impeccable SS uniform with the medals he had been awarded. He often made reference to his experiences on the front, and was obviously very proud and protective of his medals. But it was not merely his military background which would come to distinguish Mengele from his colleagues, but his obsessed devotion to his work at Auschwitz that established his reputation as a ruthless, cold-blooded killer whose name inspired fear even in other SS officers. He immediately demonstrated a deep capacity for wanton murder during a typhus epidemic that broke out in the camp just days after he had arrived. He ordered a thousand Gypsy men and women who had the disease to the gas chambers, while sparing the lives of German Gypsies. The significance of this incident is twofold: Mengele adhered to the Nazi belief that Gypsies were a subspecies of the human race, and therefore were "unworthy life". However, the fact that he spared the lives of German Gypsies, at least in this instance, may have resulted from the fact that Mengele himself had many Gypsy aspects to his own physical appearance, from his tawny skin to his dark hair and eyes. He did not at all resemble the ideal Nazi Aryan with blonde hair and blue eyes. At any rate, his willingness to execute 1,000 innocent people in one moment may point to a psychological need to purge the world of those things which he hated about his own self.



Ovens in the crematorium of Auschwitz

Whatever it was that inspired Mengele to commit this first act of murder, it continued to fuel his ambition to be Auschwitz's premier authority over matters of life and death. Nowhere was this more apparent than during the selection process, which was primarily held after trains carrying Jewish deportees had arrived at the camp. According to Dr. Ella Lingens, an Austrian doctor who was imprisoned at Auschwitz for attempting to hide some Jewish friends, Mengele relished his role as selector:

Some like Werner Rhode who hated his work, and Hans Konig who was deeply disgusted by the job, had to get drunk before they appeared on the ramp. Only two doctors performed the selections without any stimulants of any kind: Dr. Josef Mengele

and Dr. Fritz Klein. Dr. Mengele was particularly cold and cynical. He (Mengele) once told me that there are only two gifted people in the world, Germans and Jews, and it's a question of who will be superior. So he decided that they had to be destroyed.

Mengele performed this task with relish, appearing at selections to which he had not been officially assigned, always dressed in his best dress uniform. He carried himself with grace and ease in his shiny black boots, his neatly pressed trousers and jacket, and his white cotton gloves, while a sea of misery washed up at his feet in the form of exhausted and starving prisoners. Dr. Olga Lengyel, another inmate-doctor, bitterly recalls Mengele's demeanor on the ramp:

How we despised his detached, haughty air, his continual whistling, his frigid cruelty. Day after day he was at his post, watching the pitiful crowd of men and women and children go struggling past, all in the last stages of exhaustion from the inhuman journey in the cattle trucks. He would point with his cane at each person and direct them with one word: "right" or "left." He seemed to enjoy his grisly task.

This "frigid cruelty" Dr. Lengyel spoke of would oftentimes give way to a searing hot rage which Mengele would unleash without warning upon those who sought to challenge the order he sought to establish in the camp. Inmate-doctor Gisella Perl recalls an incident when Mengele caught a woman in her sixth attempt to escape from a truck transporting victims to the gas chamber:

He grabbed her by the neck and proceeded to beat her head to a bloody pulp. He hit her, slapped her, boxed her, always her head — screaming at the top of his voice, "You want to escape, don't you. You can't escape now. You are going to burn like the others, you are going to croak, you dirty Jew." As I watched, I saw her two beautiful, intelligent eyes disappear under a layer of blood. And in a few seconds, her straight, pointed nose was a flat, broken, bleeding mass. Half an hour later, Dr. Mengele returned to the hospital. He took a piece of perfumed soap out of his bag and, whistling gaily with a smile of deep satisfaction on his face, he began to wash his hands.

Deadly Charm

Despite his demonstrated ability to be both frigid and detached as well as cruel and brutal, Mengele also demonstrated a carefree, charming side, which he used to disarm both colleagues and victims alike. He acted in a caring, concerned manner when confronted with exhausted women and their children on the ramp, only to send them to the gas chambers a moment later. His movie star looks and his confident, authoritative manner made him sexually desirable to the very women that he degraded, tortured and murdered. The totally

unpredictable nature of Mengele's personality became his most powerful tool for exerting control over both prisoners and prison personnel, for it instilled a deep-seated primal fear into all those with whom he came into contact.

In addition to the selections and beatings, Mengele occupied his time with other numerous acts of the most base cruelty, including the dissection of live infants; the castration of boys and men without the use of an anesthetic; and the administering of high-voltage electric shocks to women inmates under the auspices of testing their endurance. On one occasion Mengele even sterilized a group of Polish nuns with an X-ray machine, leaving the celibate women horribly burned. In 1981, the West German Prosecutor's Office drew up 78 different indictments against Mengele, charging him with the most heinous and bestial crimes against humanity, including:

Having actively and decisively taken part in selections in the prisoners' sick blocks, of such prisoners who through hunger, deprivations, exhaustion, sickness, disease, abuse or other reasons were unfit for work in the camp and whose speedy recovery was not envisaged... Those selected were killed either through injections or firing squads or by painful suffocation to death through prussic acid in the gas chambers in order to make room in the camp for the "fit" prisoners, selected by him or other SS doctors... The injections that killed were made with phenol, petrol, Evipal, chloroform, or air into the circulation, especially into the heart chamber, either with his own hands or he ordered the SS sanitary worker to do it while he watched.

Mengele even introduced sexual degradation to the already dehumanizing process of selection. Inmates from the various women's barracks were paraded before him, stripped totally nude. He often would make each woman stop and answer the basest questions regarding the intimate details of their sexual lives. While he constantly referred to Jewish woman as "dirty whores," it is impossible to escape the conclusion that Mengele's cruelty was at least in part rooted to a secret sexual longing for these women whom the Reich had deemed as verboten, forbidden.

Mengele provided endless examples of his devotion to the Nazi order, and the cruel and murderous lengths he was prepared to reach in order to preserve it. On one occasion a camp Kapo, a Jewish inmate who assisted the Nazis in driving inmates to the gas chambers, attempted to retrieve some inmates from the gas chamber line and place them in the labor line. Mengele was so furious that he murdered the Kapo with his own pistol. On another occasion, when the crematoria became too full to accommodate the thousands of Jews streaming into the camp, he had trenches dug, which were then filled with gasoline and set ablaze. Both the

dead and the living, adults as well as children and infants, were thrown bodily into these pits to be destroyed under Mengele's supervision.

While it is nearly impossible to distinguish among Mengele's murderous acts as to which ones were worse than others, perhaps one incident exemplifies the demonic nature of the man perhaps better than most. A Russian inmate named Annani Silovich Pet'ko witnessed a scene that defies description and comprehension:

After a while a large group of SS officers arrived on motorcycles, Mengele among them. They drove into the yard and got off their motorcycles. Upon arriving they circled the flames; it (sic) burned horizontally. We watched to see what would follow. After a while trucks arrived, dump trucks, with children inside. There were about ten of these trucks. After they had entered the yard an officer gave an order and the trucks backed up to the fire and they started throwing those children right into the fire, into the pit. The children started to scream; some of them managed to crawl out of the burning pit. An officer walked around it with sticks and pushed back those who managed to get out. Hoess (the Auschwitz commandant) and Mengele were present and were giving orders.

The body of evidence against Mengele is staggering in both its enormity and variety in the acts of physical and emotional cruelty that he visited upon thousands of helpless victims. His behavior practically escapes description, while his motives are virtually beyond analysis. This is especially true in light of the fact that, for a man who so relished his role as SS doctor and researcher, who adhered so harshly to the Nazi concept of order and discipline, he consistently displayed not pleasure but detachment from the torment and suffering he both caused and witnessed. One psychoanalyst, Dr. Tobias Brocher, has postulated that "He (Mengele) didn't take pleasure in inflicting pain, but in the power (emphasis added) he exerted by being the man who had to decide between life and death within the ideology of a concentration camp doctor." While Mengele practiced this ideology within the context of selector, he also practiced it with equal fervor in the guise of researcher, the role for which he ostensibly had been sent to Auschwitz by his mentor, Professor von Verschuer.

Mengele's Research

Prior to his association with Mengele, Professor von Verschuer had concentrated his research on the subject of twins. His work had been limited to observing the behavior of twin subjects; he was prohibited from experimenting on living subjects by the ethical norms which had prevailed prior to the Nazi era. The Nazis swept away such norms and in Auschwitz, von Verschuer saw unlimited possibilities for his protégé, Josef Mengele, to conduct the types of in vivo experiments he had longed to conduct for so long. Mengele, ever anxious to please his

mentor, arrived at Auschwitz with a mission to plumb the depths of the human mystery, and to extract the secrets of human genetics from the living twin specimens at his disposal.



Eva and Miriam Mozes

Mengele ordered the SS guards who assisted him in the selection process to scour the lines of prisoners for twins. "Zwillinge, zwillinge," "Twins, twins," the guards would bark harshly as they marched up and down the ramp as trains transporting new prisoners arrived. Surviving twins, such as Eva Mozes of Hungary, remember the moment when they were removed from the line of the condemned and delivered to Dr. Mengele:

When the doors to our cattle car opened, I heard SS soldiers yelling, "Schnell! Schnell!" ("Faster! Faster!"), and ordering everybody out. My mother grabbed Miriam and me by the hand. She was always trying to protect us because we were the youngest. Everything was moving very fast, and as I looked around, I noticed my father and my two older sisters were gone. As I clutched my mother's hand, an SS man hurried by shouting, "Twins! Twins!" He stopped to look at us. Miriam and I looked very much alike. "Are they twins?" he asked my mother. "Is that good?" she replied. He nodded yes. "They are twins," she said.

While the twins were spared from outright execution, they were delivered to a decidedly crueler fate. Mengele reserved a special barracks for his twin subjects, as well as for dwarfs, cripples and other "exotic specimens." The barracks was nicknamed the Zoo, Mengele's holding pen. The twins were his favorite subjects, and they were afforded special treatment, such as being able to keep their own hair and clothing, and receiving extra food rations. The guards were under strict orders not to abuse the children, and were to look after their well being lest one should fall ill and die. Mengele became explosively irate if one of his beloved specimens should happen to die. These twins were referred to as "Mengele's Children." It was here in the Zoo that the twins were to learn of their parents' true fate in the gas chambers, where Mengele simultaneously became to them a figure of death and of life, the man who had condemned

their parents and family members to annihilation, while at the same time sparing their own lives.



Ruins of the Infirmary at Auschwitz

Mengele's children were also spared from beatings, forced labor and random selections in order to maintain their good health. However, Mengele was not motivated by humanitarian urges, but by his desire to keep his specimens healthy for experimentation. Ironically, it was his very experiments that extracted the heaviest physical toll on the children upon whom he lavished such care and affection, and hundreds ended up dying as a result of his gruesome deeds. As with other inmates at Auschwitz, Mengele's imagination knew no bounds when it came to devising physical torments for his victims. Preliminary examinations of the twins were routine enough. The children filled out a questionnaire, were weighed and measured. However, a more gruesome fate awaited them at Mengele's hands. He took daily blood samples from his children, and sent these to Professor von Verschuer in Berlin. He injected blood samples from one twin into another twin of a different blood type and recorded the reaction. This was invariably a searingly painful headache and high fever that lasted for several days. In order to determine if eye color could be genetically altered, Mengele had dye injected into the eyes of several twin subjects. This always resulted in painful infections, and sometimes even blindness. If such twins died, Mengele would harvest their eyes and pin them to the wall of his office, much like a biologist pins insect samples to styrofoam. Young children were placed in isolation cages, and subjected to a variety of stimuli to see how they would react. Several twins were castrated or sterilized. Many twins had limbs and organs removed in macabre surgical procedures that Mengele performed without using an anesthetic. Other twins were injected with infectious agents to see how long it would take for them to succumb to various diseases.

It is clear that, despite the stated purpose for which he was sent to Auschwitz, Mengele's experimentation had absolutely nothing to do with true scientific research, and was instead the result of one man's ambitious and zealous adherence to the Nazi vision of Aryan supremacy. As surviving Mengele subject Alex Dekel states:

I have never accepted the fact that Mengele himself believed he was doing serious work — not from the slipshod way he went about it. He was only exercising his power.

Mengele ran a butcher shop — major surgeries were performed without anesthesia. Once, I witnessed a stomach operation — Mengele was removing pieces from the stomach, but without any anesthetic. Another time, it was a heart that was removed, again, without anesthesia. It was horrifying. Mengele was a doctor who became mad because of the power he was given. Nobody ever questioned him — why did this one die? Why did that one perish? The patients did not count. He professed to do what he did in the name of science, but it was a madness on his part.

Madness, indeed, on the part of a man who showered love and attention on the very children he would sooner or later subject to his cruel experiments, whom he would more likely than not murder in pursuit of genetic information that did not exist except in the imagination of an indoctrinated Nazi ideologue. Madness on the part of a man whom more than one surviving twin would remember as a gentle man who loved children! Whence does such madness spring, how is it possible for two separate and diametrically opposed personages manifest themselves within the same individual?

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 Buildings of Auschwitz

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.



Josef Mengele in 1956

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.

Epilogue



Mengele in Paraguay, 1960

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 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,

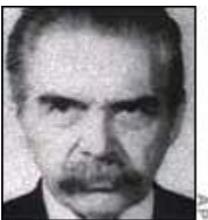
as well as with those who lived in the German expatriate community in Argentina. Mengele was able to slip unnoticed into such a setting with ease and had soon established a network of Nazi devotees who were willing to help him assume a new identity in South America.



Photo for Mengele's false ID card

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.



Josef Mengele, Nazi war criminal

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 of 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.

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