

# Deconstructing Mengele

Historian David G. Marwell seeks to answer the question of what made the German doctor a byword for evil

By Tibor Krausz

**ONE OF** the first Germans many of the Jews transported in cramped cattle cars to Auschwitz saw as they alighted after grueling days-long journeys was a mid-level Nazi officer of medium height. He was a German doctor with dark hair, boyish looks and a gap-toothed smile.

A single flick of his thumb left or right meant life or death for new arrivals. His gruesome experiments on inmates inside the camp made him widely feared and loathed. And so in survivors' recollections Dr. Josef Mengele would often loom larger than life.

Elie Wiesel, who survived Auschwitz, recalled him as a sinister figure who wore white gloves and a monocle, which Mengele didn't. Olga Lengyel, a Jewish-Hungarian prisoner, remembered him as tall and blond. Fania Fénelon, a French woman who played in Auschwitz's Women's Orchestra, called him a "handsome Siegfried" as if he had just stepped out of Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

Hermann Langbein, an Austrian historian who was interned in Auschwitz as a communist, attributed such disparate and embellished memories of the man to what he called the "Mengele Effect." Among inmates who encountered him, the Nazi physician acquired a mythical persona. Thus, the monstrous deeds of other doctors and guards came to be ascribed to Mengele, who was seen to embody and epitomize the unparalleled evil at the heart of Auschwitz's well-oiled machinery of mass murder.

Most Jews who encountered Mengele at the camp's infamous selection ramp where new arrivals were sorted didn't live to tell us about it. Of the 430,000 Hungarian Jews who were deported to Auschwitz between May and July in 1944 during Mengele's time there the vast majority were murdered upon arrival in the gas chambers.

Simply by pointing this way or that, the doctor sent "undesirables" like pregnant women, old people and children straight to

their deaths and separated those he deemed fit enough into forced labor units. The latter had a stay of execution until fatigue, disease or starvation so weakened them that they could no longer work whereupon they, too, were murdered.

By all accounts, Mengele went about this sordid business with ruthless efficiency. Other German physicians at Auschwitz too participated in selection, which grew out of the Nazis' large-scale euthanasia program wherein disabled citizens were evaluated by doctors and, if deemed physically or mentally unfit, dispatched in sealed shower rooms pumped full of carbon monoxide — in a precursor of the gas chambers.

Yet Mengele clearly stood out among his colleagues, for he earned the moniker "The Angel of Death" from prisoners. Stories, many of them apocryphal, abounded about his casual brutality. As the accounts multiplied, so his mystique grew. In popular culture too Mengele has become one of the most notorious Nazis, thanks to fictitious treatments like the 1978 Hollywood movie *The Boys from Brazil*, which was based on a novel by Ira Levin. The thriller's Mengele (played by Gregory Peck) seeks to resurrect the Third Reich by cloning Adolf Hitler.

The man behind the legend was less impressive than his reputation would have us believe, although in many ways just as vile. This is apparent from a new biography of him. In *Mengele: Unmasking the "Angel of Death"* by American historian David G. Marwell, the German doctor comes across as an everyman of sorts who was granted awesome powers over countless innocent people and proceeded to abuse those powers.

Marwell is eminently qualified to assess the character and career of Mengele. In the 1980s he worked as head researcher at the US Department of Justice's Office of Special Investigations into Nazi war criminals, including Mengele. "In the course of the

investigation," writes Maxwell, who also once served as director of the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York, "I visited his hometown and hideout [in South America]; I interviewed his family, friends, colleagues and victims; I inspected the scenes of his crimes and read his private correspondence and his intimate musings; and finally, in the end, I held his bones in my hands."

The historian views Mengele not as an inherently evil fiend but as an unscrupulous scientist who held crackpot ideas about immutable racial differences and whose misguided quest for knowledge led him down a dark path.

In Auschwitz, Marwell posits, Mengele saw himself standing "on the cusp of great success." An up-and-coming scientist in his early thirties, Mengele found himself enjoying unprecedented access to scientific "raw material" in the form of helpless human beings upon whom he was free to experiment in any way he wanted. He reveled in his status of being "liberated from the restraints that tamed ambition and limited scientific progress," Marwell writes.

Mengele joined other German doctors who had been experimenting on prisoners ostensibly with practical aims. In Auschwitz and at other concentration camps Nazi physicians had been testing new drugs on inmates, immersing them in ice-cold water to study hypothermia, injecting them with various pathogens, inflicting severe burns on them, and performing experimental surgeries on healthy people, including children.

Mengele set about performing other horrific experiments in the service of Nazi racial pseudoscience, a cockamamie cocktail of risible notions in which he became a firm believer. The idea that there was an "Aryan" master race whose members were genetically superior in every way to "inferior races" like Jews and Slavs was manifestly untrue. All you had to do to falsify it was to take a look at such prominent

purveyors of the notion as Hitler, Himmler, Eichmann and Mengele himself. None of them would strike you as particularly fine specimens with their small statures, middling physiques, mousy features, myopic eyesight and crooked teeth.

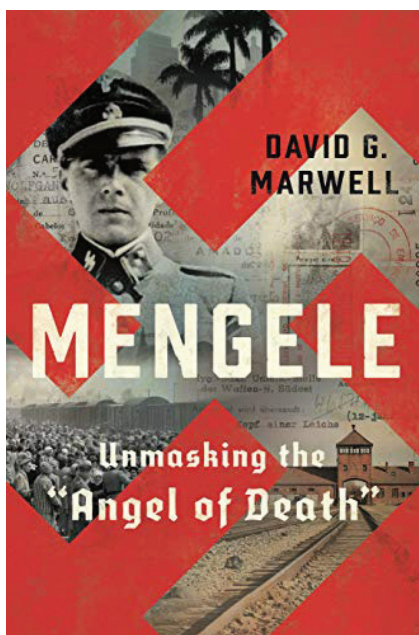
Yet embrace racial pseudoscience Mengele did – despite having started out as an empiricist in his prewar academic career. Born in 1911 into a well-off family of devout Catholics in the town of Günzburg in Bavaria, Mengele was drawn to science from an early age. He went on to earn a PhD in anthropology before he decided to branch out into genetics and its Nazi offshoot “racial hygiene” in his mid-twenties.

As his field of research he chose to examine the genetic underpinnings of cleft lips and palates, which helped earn him a doctorate in medicine in 1938. That same year he joined Heinrich Himmler’s Schutzstaffel, or SS, paramilitary apparatus. After serving with distinction as a physician on the Russian front in a Waffen-SS combat unit, Mengele was seriously wounded in action and so he was transferred to Auschwitz in May 1943.

To help him with his experiments at the camp, he recruited such bona fide experts from among the inmates as the renowned Jewish pediatrician Berthold Epstein from Prague and the Jewish-Hungarian forensic pathologist Miklós Nyiszli. In his quest for a better understanding of genetic heritability, Mengele was particularly interested in twin biology, dwarfism, physical deformities and mismatched eye coloration known as heterochromia. With Epstein, he also began looking for cures for the debilitating orofacial gangrene called noma that can affect malnourished children and was rife among famished Gypsy children in Auschwitz.

Nyiszli, who was deported to Auschwitz with his family in June 1944, was tasked with performing comparative autopsies on twins murdered simultaneously for Mengele’s benefit and on other prisoners who had served as the German doctor’s guinea pigs. Nyiszli had to preserve some of their remains, including skeletons and eyeballs in formalin, as macabre specimens for the collections of German scientific institutions.

In his postwar eyewitness account the Hungarian doctor portrayed Mengele, who was invariably courteous with inmates, as a cynical man who performed sadistic, gratuitous experiments on prisoners. One such



**Mengele: Unmasking the “Angel of Death”**

David G. Marwell  
W.W.Norton & Company; 2020  
480 pages; \$22.27

experiment involved injecting children’s eyes with ink to see if they would turn blue.

Marwell argues convincingly that the nature and aim of some experiments conducted by Mengele were misconstrued by some eyewitnesses. The German doctor, the historian says, likely injected drops not of ink but of adrenaline into prisoners’ eyes. His aim was to see what changes if any the stress hormone would have on eye pigmentation.

He carried out this experiment for a female colleague in Berlin who was a steadfast Nazi and researching heterochromia. Ever meticulous, Mengele undertook research on behalf of scientists at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity and Eugenics in Berlin.

Mengele, the author avers, “pursued his science not as some renegade propelled solely by evil and bizarre impulses but rather in a manner that his mentors and his peers could judge as meeting the highest standards.” That hardly makes those experiments any less inexcusable, nor does it absolve Mengele of responsibility for conducting them. Yet ultimately, Marwell stresses, Mengele “was the product – and promise – of a much larger system,” a com-

munity of scientists unmoored from morality and decency under the Nazis.

Alas, the historian devotes fairly little space to Mengele’s time in Auschwitz, preferring instead to dwell on his postwar life, the abortive quest to bring him to justice, and the forensic investigation to identify his exhumed remains. This approach makes it seem as if the German doctor’s time in the death camp was a passing phase in his life rather than the defining feature of it. That is a pity, for Mengele’s subsequent life was fairly humdrum, certainly by comparison, and most of it has already been a matter of public record.

With travel documents provided by the International Red Cross, the German doctor managed to slip away in 1949 to Buenos Aires in Argentina where he started a new life with the help of former Nazis and their local sympathizers. He began practicing medicine without a license; divorced his first wife, who had stayed behind in Germany; married his dead brother’s widow; and did his best to evade Nazi hunters.

Adopting an avuncular mien and living a quiet life, Mengele came close to being captured by the Mossad in July 1962 when Zvi Aharoni, who had helped nab Eichmann two years prior in Argentina, tracked Mengele down to a farmhouse in Brazil. With limited resources, though, the agency decided, for the time being, to focus on other priorities than capturing Mengele.

In the end, with his health failing and his nerves frazzled by a constant fear of being captured, it was a stroke that got Mengele, at age 67, causing him to drown while out swimming at a beach near São Paulo in 1979. Two years before his death, his son, Rolf, a lawyer in West Germany, traveled to Brazil to see him. Rolf described his father, a mustachioed elderly fellow who was a dead ringer for Stalin in his dotage, as “a broken man, a scared creature.”

Ironically, the man who was eager to preserve the skeletons of murdered Jewish inmates in Auschwitz as specimens is now himself a skeletal specimen. Decades after his remains were exhumed in Brazil in 1985, his bones were recently transferred to a medical school in São Paulo where they are used as aids in courses on forensic medicine.

In life Mengele, who spent his last years in penury and remained unrepentant to the end, wanted to serve the cause of science. At long last he is doing just that – in death. ■