

‘Mengele’ Review: The Demon Doctor of Auschwitz

He saw himself as a serious man of science, plumbing the mysteries of heredity to perfect the Volk, and never felt a moment’s remorse.

By David Margolick

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In the popular imagination at least, Josef Mengele has come to personify the Holocaust. Hitler and Himmler, Heydrich and Eichmann: They all sat behind desks in Berlin. But Mengele manned the front lines, literally: two of them, one of men, the other of women and children. With a slight twist of his thumb, he determined who’d live, if only briefly, and who’d head off to the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

Nearly 35 years after the world finally mobilized to find him, which turned out to be six years after he’d died, Mengele still fascinates. You want to know how someone with graduate degrees in medicine and anthropology, a cultured man from a Catholic family who whistled classical music as he went about his work, could have done what he did, and how he felt about it, and could have walked off unpunished when it was over.

David Marwell has been thinking about Mengele for a long time. In February 1985, when the search for him reached an almost comical pitch—when Al D’Amato morphed (briefly) into Simon Wiesenthal—Mr. Marwell worked for the Justice Department’s Nazi-hunting office. He visited Mengele’s German hometown and his South American hideout, interviewed his friends and victims and dentist, and, ultimately, held his bones in his hands.



After the search for Mengele ended with discovery of his remains, controversy continued. Comparing images of his skull to known photographs was one method used to establish identity. PHOTO: ALAMY

Mr. Marwell's mission in his new book is to peel away the myths that have grown up around Mengele and, strange as it might sound, to humanize him. No, Mengele did not run all the selections; many other doctors—to the Nazis, they lent scientific legitimacy to the process—shared the work. But Mengele bucked up the more squeamish, arguing that since the higher-ups had already doomed all Jews, they really weren't deciding anything.

No, he wasn't some "handsome Siegfried," but short and dark, with a gap between his front teeth. No, he didn't wear the white gloves and monocle that Elie Wiesel recalled. No, he wasn't a man of "unfathomable perversity," trying to turn brown eyes blue for kicks. Mengele saw himself as a serious man of science, plumbing the mysteries of heredity to perfect the Volk. Auschwitz was his laboratory, offering limitless subjects and unbound by noisome ethical inhibitions. Where more than a million people lost their lives, Mengele found his.

He'd grown up in the small city of Günzburg, son of a local industrialist. He'd had a church wedding, unusual for an SS man (though his future wife was vetted for body type, eye color and the width of her pelvis). Only in 1938 had he joined the Nazi party. But he had focused his medical studies on the same issues of race, genetics and anthropology that obsessed the Germans long before the Third Reich, and, like Hitler, he had concluded that Germany had gone cellularly astray and needed to be cleansed.

The war—he'd been a doctor on the Eastern Front, in a unit that murdered thousands of Jews—shelved his research and ethnic errands: ascertaining the Jewishness of certain Germans, and the Germanness of certain foreigners. In May 1943, at age 32, he was assigned to Auschwitz, possibly at the urging of his mentor (whose own research on twins had once been funded by the Rockefeller Foundation), possibly after pushing for the post himself. As he later said, to have passed up such an opportunity would have been "a sin, a crime," and "totally irresponsible."

The work proved taxing to Mengele, and he resolved to his wife to take it easier. But duty called: After all, over three months in mid-1944, 430,000 Hungarian Jews had to be gassed and burned. Home leaves and family visits, including two from Frau Mengele, helped a bit. She stayed outside the barbed wire, picking blackberries for marmalade, noting only a "sweet" odor emanating from the camp. One of her visits to Auschwitz coincided with Anne Frank's. (Frank was to die in Bergen-Belsen.)

As the Red Army approached in January 1945, Mengele packed frantically, arranged to have two of the crematoria blown up, took care to fall into American, rather than Soviet, hands. Unaware of his background—he lacked the usual SS tattoo on the underside of his left arm—and overwhelmed by 3 million German POWs, the G.I.s let him go. After hiding for three years on a German farm, he absconded to Argentina.

Thanks to smuggled family money, Mengele settled in there: buying a house and car, publishing an article on genetics (under one of many aliases), traveling to Switzerland once by way of New York. He fraternized with former Nazis (he found Eichmann, broke and depressed, a drag) and eventually reclaimed half of his old identity: "José Mengele," he would become. But after the publication of Anne Frank's diary rekindled interest in him, German authorities set out to find and try him. The Israeli team that kidnapped Eichmann in 1960 tried picking him up, too.

Mengele fled to Paraguay, then Brazil. In July 1962, the Israelis thought they'd tracked him down on a farm near São Paulo. ("We've found him, the little s—!" a Mossad agent

exclaimed in Yiddish.) Only in 1985 did they, along with the Americans and Germans, learn that six years earlier, at age 67, following a stroke suffered while taking a dip, he'd washed ashore on a Brazilian beach. They promptly dug up his remains.

Mr. Marwell's account of that investigation is gripping, from the realization that he'd already died, to the farcical exhumation (the gravedigger first mangled his skull, then brandished it before the throngs of press), to the moment, seven years later, when he was incontrovertibly identified. Or as incontrovertibly as he ever could have been: For some, notably the twins on whom he'd performed his experiments, he was more potent as a fugitive than as a bag of bones.

To me at least, though, Mengele decomposing is far less interesting than Mengele alive, and I'd have liked a bit more. How did he unwind at Auschwitz, or pass all those years in hiding? Might not more have been squeezed out of all those documents—date books, letters, an autobiographical novel—that he left behind? One thing Mr. Marwell makes clear is that Mengele never felt a moment's remorse. He'd followed orders, he told intimates. He'd been part of a great historic epoch. And just think of all those Jews he'd saved by consigning them to work rather than to be murdered right away!

This sober and meticulous book generates all the sorrow and horror, despair and indignation one expects from such histories. The Holocaust, both in its astonishing vastness and heartbreaking particularity—the Hungarian doctor watching his wife and three young daughters walk off to their fates; the 20 Jewish children infested with typhus, then hung from steam pipes; the glass vials containing human eyes—is all here. Simply for coping with such material, Mr. Marwell is a hero, as is his wife, as he acknowledges. “She is, I know, as relieved as I am to get Josef Mengele out of our home,” he writes.

And in the end, his book is oddly reassuring. For Nazis of Mengele's ilk, retribution was often mercifully swift. It's a tiny bit consoling to know that Mengele's punishment went on for decades and took multiple forms. Though the efforts to find him sputtered, they were enough to torment him, prompting him at one point to disfigure his face. He missed the funerals of his parents and brothers. His two wives left him. He barely knew his son, who, when they finally got together, grilled him on his deeds. How was it, he asked, that so many of those sub-humans he dispatched were more brilliant than those who did the dispatching?

Cut off from his language, culture, profession and passions, stripped of his fancy degrees, bitter and self-pitying and at least said to be suicidal, Mengele always knew how history would judge him. Then there was his Job-like list of afflictions, God's only cameo in this whole horrific saga: migraines, swollen joints, a mouthful of rotten and missing teeth, a fecal stone he had to reach in and push aside whenever nature called.

Upon returning from covering the circus in Brazil, Ralph Blumenthal of the New York Times told his colleagues (I was one) of yet another of Mengele's ailments: hemorrhoids. “The anality of evil,” he explained.

Mr. Margolick is the author, most recently, of “The Promise and the Dream: The Untold Story of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy.”