

# Death-camp doctors— Darwin's proctors

**Giants: The Dwarfs of Auschwitz**

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This book about a dwarf family focuses on the infamous medical research done by the Nazi doctors and how and why the research was done. A major reason for the research was an attempt to apply Darwinism to science with the goal of producing a superior race.

During the 1930s and 1940s, the Lilliput Troupe family of singers dazzled audiences with their unique vaudeville performances. The only all-dwarf show then, their small stature earned them fame—and, ironically, ultimately saved their lives in Auschwitz. After descending from the cattle train in the Auschwitz death camp, the Ovitz family—seven of whom were dwarfs—was plunged into the Nazi horrors during the darkest moment of modern history. They were separated from the other victims on the orders of Dr Joseph Mengele (1911–1979). Formerly “showered with flowers and besieged for autographs, these entertainers ... were now declared a ... genetic error that the state set out systematically to erase” (p. 91).

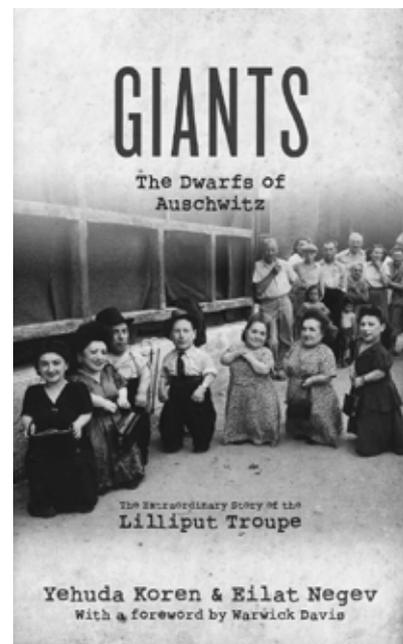
## Enter Mengele

In 1930 Mengele enrolled as a medical student at the University of Munich. He soon became intrigued by the then burgeoning field of Darwinism, heredity, and eugenics.

In 1935, Mengele received a Ph.D. in anthropology for a thesis “attempting to demonstrate that one could differentiate racial groups according to jaw shape” (p. 70). He claimed that “dental irregularities were hereditary and tended to appear with other hereditary abnormalities, like idiocy and dwarfism” (p. 71). Mengele’s doctoral advisor, Professor Theodor Mollison (1874–1952), even boasted that he could tell a Jew merely by looking at his photograph. A year later the 25-year-old Mengele was licensed to practice medicine. In 1937 he joined the Nazi Party, and the next year he joined the SS.

Mengele’s work was highly influenced by the Darwinian scientific establishment. Throughout his life, “Mengele instinctively bowed to authority figures; a charismatic science teacher shifted his interest from the arts to the natural sciences” and an esteemed professor turned his interest to Darwinism (p. 70). The latter’s Ph.D. work was the inspiration for Mengele’s genetic research in Auschwitz (p. 37).

After two years of military service, Mengele was wounded and reassigned to the Berlin headquarters of the Race and Settlement Office, which was responsible for the concentration camp medical experiments. Mengele was then able to resume his close relationship with his patron, Professor Otmar Freiherr Verschuer, who had recently moved “to Berlin to take up his new post as the director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics” (p. 72). Verschuer was a “renowned geneticist and ardent admirer of Hitler” (pp. 70–71). Mengele’s doctoral advisor’s



“... enthusiastic letter of recommendation won Mengele a highly coveted position as a research assistant at the Institute for Hereditary Biology and Racial Purity at the University of Frankfurt ... ‘Mengele was now at the epicenter of Nazi philosophical and scientific thinking, which held that it was possible to select, engineer, refine and ultimately purify the race’” (pp. 70–71).

The authors describe Dr Mengele as obsessed with eugenics. He ordered a series of loathsome experiments on the Ovitz family, and concurrently developed a disturbing fondness for his “human lab-rats”. Mengele “did not want simply to succeed”, but to become so famous that “his name would be in encyclopedias” (p. 70). He succeeded, but not for the reason he had envisioned.

Due to the war, Verschuer’s research on twins suffered a major setback because his access to new research cases dried up. Verschuer therefore encouraged Mengele to “apply for a position at Auschwitz, where they would have continual access to an unlimited supply of human specimens”. Mengele was



**Figure 1.** Auschwitz I concentration camp entrance

accepted, and on 30 May the 32-year-old doctor arrived at the Birkenau-Auschwitz complex. Because Auschwitz was eventually no longer able to deal with “the mass of racially undesirable peoples” sent there, the Birkenau camp began operation in February of 1942 (p. 72).

Mengele was then appointed chief physician of the Gypsy camp section, responsible for selecting which of the new camp arrivals should be sent to their immediate death or be assigned to the slave labour section of the camp. Soon his “enthusiasm, ambition, charisma and cruelty set him apart from the other death-camp doctors” (p. 72).

The ambitious Mengele was soon no longer content to work as Verschuer’s assistant, as he had up to this point, but wanted his own research project to better understand race and Darwinism; and in the spring of 1944, as Birkenau was preparing for a massive influx of Hungarian Jews, Mengele saw his opportunity. During “... his first year in the camp, he had mainly experimented on a few dozen cases, most of them sets

of twins, that he had discovered among the Gypsies and Czech Jews ... . But now, with the imminent arrival of hundreds of thousands of Jews, research vistas of unlimited scope and variety were about to open up for him” (p. 88).

After the mass extermination of almost half a million Hungarian Jews, the camp authorities turned to the Gypsies. The Nazis had “been undecided in its policies towards them: should they be exterminated as an inferior race, ... [or] locked away and sterilized?” (p. 119). The decision was they should be exterminated as an inferior race, so in May of 1944 the SS surrounded the Gypsy camp

“... in an attempt to lead all 6,000 inmates to the gas chambers. The troopers, however, met with fierce opposition—men and women armed with knives, iron pipes and any metal object, dull or sharp, that they could find ... . As a result, the camp administration changed its plan. Able-bodied Gypsy women were sent to slave labor camps, and Gypsy men from Germany were sent to the Wehrmacht to serve as live mine detectors” (p. 119).

Mengele once confided to the distinguished Jewish pediatrician Berthold Epstein (1897–1962), who was then imprisoned at the camp, that his (Mengele’s) goal in the war was to use his achievements “as a springboard towards a professorship ... in the shape of a scientific treatise that would confirm ... the indispensability of his research”.

“‘We are enemies—you will not get out of here,’ Mengele bluntly told Epstein. ‘If you perform scientific work for me and I publish it in my name, you will prolong your own life.’ As a result, Epstein extensively researched a deadly gangrene of the face and the mouth, conducting tests on Gypsy children and adolescents” (p. 88).

Epstein did get out of Auschwitz alive, although the rest of his family did not.

An inmate artist named Dina was assigned to draw other inmates. Not happy with her apparent preference for good-looking Gypsies, Mengele himself selected “elderly women and men ... to acquire visual documentation to support his racial theory” and to illustrate a book that he was writing (p. 100). Also, “a female Polish prisoner took the hand and fingerprints of all the inmates selected by Mengele for his experiments. Mengele instructed Dina to sketch their skulls, ears, noses, mouths, hands and feet” for his book (p. 100).

### The end of the Nazi Darwinian eugenics program begins

During his year as the head physician of the Gypsy camp, Mengele developed cordial relationships with many of its inmates. He had special “... fondness for the twin children and often smiled when they called him ‘Uncle Mengele’.

But when he received the final order to liquidate the remaining 2,897 Gypsies, most of them women and children, he carried it out obediently and diligently. ... he now made use of their blind trust by enticing boys and girls out of the hiding places with the same candies he had offered them after painful experiments. As he led them to their death, he ignored their frantic pleas” (p. 120).

After the annihilation of the Gypsies, Mengele was appointed First Physician of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp. In this position he continued to direct a myriad of medical tests on his new 350 Jewish victims, 250 of them twins (p. 123).

Because his former mentor, Prof. Verschuer, stressed that heredity can be most effectively researched on



**Figure 2.** The main entrance to Auschwitz II (Birkenau) concentration/extermination camp

complete families, when Mengele learned

“... that a large family with dwarf traits had just arrived he did not waste a moment. ... Crowding around him, the Ovitzes did not waste their chance to dazzle him. They answered his questions eagerly, and Mengele was indeed dazzled: ‘I now have work for twenty years,’ he said joyfully” (p. 74).

The first time the Lilliputs were evaluated at the camp clinic, the doctors that examined them assumed this “... was a routine admission procedure. But when the examinations were repeated day after day, it soon dawned on them that they had been selected for some medical purpose. Josef Mengele was only one of dozens of doctors who performed criminal experiments on the inmates of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Whereas German law protected laboratory animals, there were no limitations whatsoever on what could be done to human guinea pigs in the death camps” (p. 74).

Furthermore, the working conditions at the camp were ideal.

The laboratories were well equipped, and “the cream of academia was present—people with an international reputation,” allowing him to “carry out experiments on human beings usually only possible on rabbits” (p. 86). Dr Mengele “felt no compunction about experiments conducted upon the Jews. He argued that since they were all doomed to die anyway ... it would be a waste for science not to use them” for his brutal research to better understand evolution (p. 86).

#### **Science used to research Darwinian based racism**

The research was completed by a team of medical specialists who exploited the “unlimited pool of subjects to test any new substance or procedure that captured their eugenic interest, such as efficient, cheap methods of implementing mass sterilization and eliminating the mentally, genetically or racially unfit” races (p. 87). In the end, “thousands of young prisoners suffered radiation, repeated injections with various chemical substances, and operations without anesthetics. Those who did not die in the name of German science

often ended up gruesomely maimed” (p. 87). When a doctoral student, Mengele published an article that argued

“... it is not useful to take as many measurements as possible: one must restrict oneself to the most significant ones.’ However, with the unlimited time, human resources and research possibilities available at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Mengele ... unleashed himself and his team on his subjects in a relentless quest for detail” (p. 105).

After inmate anthropologist Dr Martina Puzyna had completed the initial round of anthropometric measurements, the subjects were examined by a team of prisoner

“... specialists: an internist, a neurologist, a psychiatrist, an ophthalmologist, a dermatologist, a surgeon, a urologist, and an ear, nose and throat man—all of them prisoners ... . While Mengele reviewed all the results, he himself conducted none of the actual examinations” (p. 107).

The specialists “... evaluated the dwarfs’ entire anatomy by comparing the physical features and psychological

characteristics to those of average-sized humans in search of irregularities that would account for their arrested growth. ... the ... dwarfs supplied samples of urine, stool and saliva that were analyzed” (p. 107).

Dr Puzyna, although “ambivalent in her judgment of Mengele’s work ... insisted long after the war that its results ‘were of immense value to the science of anthropology’” (p. 105). The Ovitz family

“... felt they were consistently being violated for apparently needless and endless samplings, puncturings and probings. They saw their medical files grow steadily thicker, document by document, yet they could see no medically constructive or beneficial purpose whatsoever behind it all” (p. 123).

The research goals included deciphering genetic differences of Jews, Gypsies and others to determine their resistance, or lack thereof, “to various infectious diseases, and assemble as much material as possible from genetically affected twins or families” (p. 87). The scientists felt the key to race was in the blood. As a result, in

“... the 1940s, medicine was obsessed with blood and its constituents. It was generally believed that blood plasma retained all traces of illness and contained all genetic traits. German scientists considered blood as a key to the differentiation between superior and inferior races” (p. 93).

This is why “Mengele’s research relied primarily on blood tests, X-rays and anthropometric measurements. He had neither the time nor the inclination to test his hundreds of victims personally but then, he did not need to—not with the abundance of expert professionals among the hundreds of thousands of people

passing through the gates of Auschwitz-Birkenau” (p. 103).

### The focus on the eugenic racist ‘blood’ claims

Although Mengele acted according to standard practice, “he had no idea what he was looking for”. For this reason, the repeated tests took large amounts of blood for his research for no apparent reason (p. 103). Some gave blood to test for syphilis, even in the children, including baby Shimshon. “They, as well as the adults, all proved negative” (pp. 96–97).

“The Ovitzes were never told which tests were going to be performed on them on any particular day, but ... would find themselves lying naked and face down on the examination tables, and the bustle of medical activity around them only intensified their anxiety as they wondered where precisely their bodies would be pierced or jabbed or poked, and to what violent and devastating effect” (p. 123).

After the camp’s liberation, “in laboratory report-forms on samples of blood, saliva, urine and faeces, several thousand lab results were found intact” (p. 91).

When the Russian army liberated Auschwitz, the entire Ovitz family was still alive. After the war, Mengele “followed the Nuremberg trial of his former Nazi medical friends and colleagues in December 1946 with some degree of apprehension”. Seven were hanged; five received life sentences. “On the other hand, the ... [rapid] social and professional rehabilitation of his superiors, ... [and] their embrace by [the] post-war Germany ... academic community—must have stirred in him considerable envy” (p. 209).

For example, Mengele’s professional sponsor, Verschuer, the “head of the genetic and hereditary research program ... was declared a Nazi

sympathizer ... was fined [only] 600 marks”. Then, in “1951, he became Professor of Human Genetics at the University of Münster; three years later, he was promoted to the position of dean of the medical faculty ... honours were bestowed on him by the American, Italian, Austrian and Japanese societies for [his work in] human genetics” (p. 209).

Another example is Mengele’s academic competitor, Professor Hans Grebe, who soon obtained an academic “position in the department of human genetics at the University of Marburg” and in 1957 became president of the German Association of Sport Doctors. Ironically, the medical records kept by

“... Verschuer at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute are not available to researchers: in a bizarre irony, many decades after they were murdered, the Nazi doctors’ Jewish victims have been transformed by German officials into esteemed patients whose right to privacy must be steadfastly safeguarded” (pp. 209–210).

In an effort to dissociate it from its Nazi past, in 1948 the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute was renamed “the Max Planck Institute”. In June 2001, the society’s president, Professor Hubert Markl, admitted that scientific evidence exists “proving beyond the shadow of a doubt that directors and employees at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute were together intellectually responsible for, and sometimes even actively collaborated in, the crimes of the Nazi regime” (p. 210). The fact is “The biggest crime in history was carried out under the direction of leading scientists and distinguished institutions” who were under the spell of Darwinian eugenics (p. 210).