

USA TODAY
18 March, 1985

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 2A

Mengele: Elusive for 40 years

Documents, rewards spur a new interest

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USA TODAY

For 40 years he has wandered worldwide, eluding investigators, bounty hunters, adventurers. Seen everywhere and nowhere, he's believed to be alive, but may have been dead for years.

Josef Mengele — Nazi Angel of Death, Auschwitz death camp doctor, fiendish experimenter accused of killing 400,000 people, most of them Jews — is the most notorious of the Hitler men at large.

And now, suddenly, the hunt heats up. In recent weeks:

- A Senate Judiciary subcommittee will hold hearings on Mengele Tuesday. The government got interested in Mengele after the Simon Wiesenthal Center uncovered once-secret CIA documents it says prove the U.S. Army knowingly freed Mengele from a prisoner camp after World War II.

- Anonymous donors added \$1 million to the more than \$300,000 in reward money.

- The West German government appealed to the USA and 12 other nations for help in capturing Mengele.

- West Germany is investigating whether the German branch of Mengele's family is funneling money to him via a secret Swiss bank account.

- Canadian investigators began checking reports Mengele — using the alias Joseph Menke — entered Canada in 1962.

Why all this frenzy over an old man four decades removed from his crimes?

"This man is the ultimate terrorist of the Western World,"

said Washington lawyer Martin Mendelsohn. "We want him alive. It's important so the final chapter can finally be written."

Nazi hunters believe Gen. Alfredo Stroessner, ruler of Paraguay since 1954, protected Mengele for many years.

Paraguay was a logical hiding place: German is the second language, there's a large German colony, and it welcomed Nazis after the war.

Paraguay denies it knows Mengele's whereabouts.

But a New York lawyer researching Mengele's life says a high-ranking Paraguayan colonel, Alejandro von Eckstein, remembers spending weekends lounging by a pool with Mengele in Paraguay in 1960s.

The lawyer, Gerald Posner, says Mengele was seen in Brazil and Chile in the past 18 months.

The pursuit of Mengele by the U.S. Justice Department, General Accounting Office and Army investigators is top secret.

And scores of adventurers — mostly bounty hunters and freelance journalists — are hoping to pick up Mengele's trail in the remote plains and jungles of South America.

How fresh is the trail?

Hundreds of sightings have been reported, most bogus.

"These people make a living selling Nazi information to gullible journalists," said John Loftus, a former Justice Department lawyer. "It's like a cottage industry."