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Can Josef Mengele Be Caught?

BY JACK ANDERSON

FOR 25 YEARS, I have been searching for Josef Mengele, the Auschwitz death camp doctor who for a terrible moment in time was god of the inmates, with life-or-death power over them. He routinely decided who should go to the gas chambers, who should be used for hideous medical experiments, who should be worked to death.

Witnesses remember him as a soft-spoken man who conducted his horrors with gentle efficiency while sweet melodies from his phonograph mingled with the cries of the tortured, and fragrant scents from his garden mixed with the smell of cooking flesh. Inmates called him the "Angel of Death."

Mengele kept meticulous accounts of his experiments, but both he and his files vanished after the Russians overran Auschwitz in 1945. I picked up his trail in 1960. I found some of his hideouts—a remote village in the fetid jungles of Paraguay, a cozy hotel room in Asunción, a Nazi settlement in the hinterlands of Chile. One time, I was only three weeks behind him.

Can he be caught? At this writing, he is still on the loose—the world's most-wanted fugitive. But his luck at last may be running out.

Last Sept. 2, I recounted in PARADE the anguished recollections of the Auschwitz twins. The Justice Department has since ordered a worldwide manhunt for Mengele, coordinating efforts with West Germany and Israel to find and prosecute him for "crimes against humanity." And nearly \$3.5 million has been put up as a reward for Mengele's capture—by Israel, the friends of the Simon Wiesenthal Center. *The Washington Times*, West Germany and the Nazi-hunters Simon Wiesenthal and Beate Klarsfeld.

Despite reports from Brazil on June 6 that Mengele may have died several years ago in a drowning accident, many believe he is still alive. Witnesses say he is now a haggardly handsome man

with a beleaguered air. They say he projects an eerily dignified presence, always wearing fashionable suits, even on steamy summer days.

According to his SS file, Mengele was born on March 16, 1911, in Günzburg on the Danube. He earned advanced degrees in medicine and philosophy. Photographs show a darkly handsome young man, with a trace of a smile, in immaculate civilian attire.

In 1943, he was assigned as a camp doctor at Auschwitz. Though only 32 years old, he was swiftly promoted to chief medical officer. A confidential SS evaluation said of him in 1944: "Mengele has always proved to be an excellent officer, respected and well-liked. . . He thoroughly commands the field of anthropology. . . Mengele has not displayed any weakness in character."

I sent my associate Lucette Lagnado to the scene of Mengele's crimes to look for witnesses and documents. At the Auschwitz Museum in Poland, the chief curator said that, after a 20-year search, she had found only a few documents: One was a paper signed by Mengele, "enclosing" a boy's hand for analysis.

After the war, Nazi war criminals were rounded up for prosecution. But Mengele was scarcely mentioned at the doctors' trial at Nuremberg. Lagnado spoke with Telford Taylor, who had been the chief American prosecutor at Nuremberg, and searched through his papers. The only relevant document, dated Nov. 7, 1947, noted that Mengele had sent to Berlin 20 to 30 shipments of blood at regular intervals. "It goes without saying that this blood was not derived from any blood donors," the document continued. "In fact, Auschwitz inmates were forced to submit to Dr. Mengele, who would then syphon their blood. . . until they would die."

Though the American prosecutors wanted to bring him to justice—and Dr. Gizella Perl, who had served under Mengele at Auschwitz, offered to testify against him—Mengele escaped prosecution. Taylor notified Washington tersely: "Our records show that Dr. Mengele is dead as of October 6th, 1946." The case against him was closed.

One Nuremberg investigator, Hans Wolfson, did try to pry information from the Mengele family, which he found living in luxury in Günzburg, in the American zone of Germany. Hours of interrogation yielded nothing. "They lied like hell," he recalled. One document, perhaps meant as a smoke screen, suggested the family had disinherited him.

How did the Angel of Death elude the Allied dragnet? Documents give brief, tantalizing references to Mengele. But either no follow-up was made or the file has vanished. Great gaping holes pock his escape route, a trail overgrown by years of assiduous cover-up.

My associate managed to get hold of a file on Mengele, heretofore unavailable in the West, which had been kept by the Polish Military Commission for the Investigation of Nazi War Crimes. Various memos and letters, dating to 1947, indicate that Mengele was hiding out not in the American zone, as the press has speculated, but in the Soviet zone of occupied Germany under the alias "Dr. Scapesius." The Poles tried to follow the Scapesius clue, but the Soviets reported that there was no evidence that Mengele/Scapesius had ever been in their hands. As one report put it, "Mengele was one of the few doctors in Auschwitz, maybe the only one, who disappeared without leaving a trace."

The Polish investigation concluded: "Until 1950, Mengele resided in Germany. Then, most likely through Greece and Spain, he left for Latin America." U.S. intelligence sources believe Mengele escaped through Italy, probably disguised as a priest. Both U.S. and Polish sources agree that the Nazi underground, known as "Odessa" but also called "Spider" by Nazi romantics, smuggled Mengele out of Europe. All sources also agree, in the words of the Polish report, that "Josef Mengele is still hiding out in the territories of Latin America."

I began my search in 1960 in Buenos Aires, where I cultivated the confidence of some former SS officers. (On Nov. 13, 1960, I revealed in PARADE the whereabouts of several Nazi mass murderers on the lam in South America.) These men spoke admiringly of Josef

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