

1. General Information

Full Title

Children of the Flames: Dr. Josef Mengele and the Untold Story of the Twins of Auschwitz

Author

Lucette Matalon Lagnado & Sheila Cohn Dekel

Publisher and Year First Published

William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991 (reprinted by Penguin in 1992)

In general, what is the book about?

Infamous Nazi villain Josef Mengele was more than just a generic evildoer during the Holocaust. He was also a genetic scientist of dubious repute, a licensed physician, and a fractured human being. His political manipulations and adherence to party dogma gained him a position at the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp, where his horrifying medical experiments on human test subjects earned him the nickname “The Angel of Death”. *Children of the Flames* is an oral history hybrid that details in their own words the experiences of the victims of Mengele's experiments on twins while citing historical documents to weave the story of the war criminal's own fascinating life. The result is a parallel tale of the ravages of war on both civilian casualties and the monstrous perpetrators alike.

2. Preface

What does the author say in the “Preface”?

The preface of *Children of the Flames* establishes the original impetus for the authors to explore the topic. Lucette Matalon Lagnado was assigned to write an article in 1984 on the “twins of Auschwitz” for *Parade Magazine*; whereas, Sheila Cohn Dekel was drawn to the subject by her late husband, who, interviewed extensively throughout the book, was one of the eponymous twins. To contact the victims, the authors placed ads in Israeli newspapers and relied heavily on word of mouth references. The authors acted with the help of CANDLES, an aid organization benefitting the survivors

of medical experimentation at Auschwitz. The preface sets the tone of the interviews with the victims, explaining the catharsis and trauma associated with reliving the experiences as well as the guilt many of the survivors felt simply for surviving. The interview process proved to be especially emotionally difficult insofar as the interviewees were just children with a naïve conception of the world at the time they were victimized. It was nearly impossible for them to reconcile the horrors of the operating table with the cheerful demeanor of the charismatic man that a number of the children came to call “Uncle Mengele”. Uniformly, the survivors were altered irrevocably by their experiences at Auschwitz-Birkenau, and memories of their handsome and merciless torturer will haunt them for the rest of their lives.

3. Thesis

List and discuss each of the points that the author will try to prove in the book.

Children of the Flames, forgoing the structure of a conventional historical narrative, seeks to acquaint the reader with a specific facet of the Nazi death machine. Most readers are familiar with the overarching concepts of the Holocaust, while few are aware of Josef Mengele's motivation and strategies, particularly in regards to experimenting on twins. This book gives an historical and scientific context for the medical experimentation performed at Auschwitz-Birkenau in addition to explaining the conditions, under which these atrocities were performed.

Furthermore, the authors illustrate the subjective experiences of the participants rather than dealing with the topic in the abstract. Inserting verbatim quotes from surviving victims, Lagnado and Dekel emphasize the humanity of the test subjects whose early lives were stolen from them, numbers substituted for names.

Finally, the postwar experiences of everyone involved in the experiments are compared, and, while the gulf between those of the victims and those of the culprits are vast, the incontrovertible conclusion is that the war devoured everyone in its path.

4. Individual Chapter Analysis

Chapter Number and Title

Chapter 1: “Mengele and His Children”

Chapter Summary

Josef Mengele was a precocious and well-liked child with a special attachment to his mother and a deep-seeded respect for his father. He was a poor student throughout school and an underwhelming physician, but hard work and an interest in pseudoscientific, genetic research garnered him a mentor in a well-connected Nazi party member. His industriousness carried over into his career as an officer in the SS, where his dress and demeanor remained immaculate, and, due to his placement in Auschwitz-Birkenau, he was in a prime position to help his mentor carry out the “Final Solution” – the racial purification of Germany through the elimination of those, such as Jews and Gypsies, deemed genetically inferior to Aryans. In service of this goal, Mengele performed genetic experiments on living human test subjects, with a special interest in twins. Twins, it seems, are a scientific anomaly from a researcher's perspective, as medical tests can be performed on one twin while the other serves as a control – the variable in a scientific experiment that remains unaltered in order to observe environmental effects external to the experiment.

Meanwhile, the twins were subjected to marginally more humane conditions at the death camp than other prisoners, watching their families executed while they were kept alive and ignorant of their purpose in the hands of the Nazi killer.

Chapter Thesis

This chapter asserts that, while his victims were disadvantaged from the start, Josef Mengele was a child of privilege destined to succeed in his field of choice, largely through charisma rather than skill. For the victims in the death camp, it seemed advantageous to be a twin, but the reason for this was not forthcoming from the Nazi guards who pulled them from the lines.

Chapter Argument

The authors prove their assertions by explaining Mengele's amiability and wealth, and how

these factors assured him a spot of power with his mentor and in the Nazi party. They also refer to first hand accounts of the victims volunteering their twin children, and their children later being told of their parents' deaths.

Conclusion

The authors conclude that Mengele was aided invaluablely in his ascent to power by family connections and political manipulations, and that twins – and other test subjects – were more likely to survive the death camp than others.

Chapter Sources/Evidence

Primary Source

Weinreich, Max. *Hitler's Professors* (New York Yiddish Scientific Institute – YIVO, 1946), p. 9.

Secondary Source

Posner, G., & Ware, J., *Mengele: The Complete Story* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1986), p. 5.

What TYPE of source or what type of evidence would have made the author's argument/main idea more convincing?

Newspaper articles published in the victims' countries of origins at the time of the Holocaust would have bolstered the authors' claims of hysteria and panic in foreign Jewish communities.

Chapter Number and Title

Chapter 7: Fugitive's Idyll

Chapter Summary

After the liberation of Auschwitz-Burkenau by the Russians, the survivors of Mengele's twin experiments, now refugees and orphans most, were left largely to their own devices and survived through charity and their wits. Some went to foreign orphanages, some went to their native countries, and some were tempted by the promises of the new, Jewish nation of Israel. The scars of war made themselves evident on some survivors more than others, manifesting in a diverse array of mental and

emotional disorders among the children. Mengele, all the while, had used his connections and family money to smuggle himself out of Germany and into Argentina, where he found a number of former Nazis and Nazi sympathizers, with whom he could socialize. As his victims struggled to find their place in the world, Mengele enjoyed a quiet, tropical vacation.

Chapter Thesis

In this chapter, the authors assert that the outside world was unsympathetic to the plight of the survivors of Auschwitz; whereas, Mengele and other war criminals were allowed to enjoy their exile from Germany unbothered.

Chapter Argument

The authors prove that Mengele was allowed to enjoy a degree of luxury and even participate in academia by referencing articles he wrote for scholarly publications at the time. The authors argue for a cultural complacency toward Jewish refugees by including first hand accounts of poverty and destitution from interviews conducted after the fact.

Conclusion

The authors conclude that, while Mengele was aided by his family and political connections in the acquisition of status and comfort abroad, Jewish survivors were left to their own devices, and, those who succeeded in industry after the Holocaust did so through luck and individual merit.

Chapter Sources/Evidence

Primary Source

G. Helmuth (1953). "Die Vererbung Als Biologischer Vorgang," *Der Weg*, pp. 815-820.

Secondary Source

Farago, Ladislas. *Aftermath: Martin Bormann and the Fourth Reich* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), p. 275.

What TYPE of source or what type of evidence would have made the author's argument/main idea more convincing?

Interviews with Argentinean officials active at the time of Mengele's exile would have clarified the nation's specific stance on and motivations for accepting German war criminals into their country.

Chapter Number and Title

Chapter 11: The Burial of the Dead

Chapter Summary

After a stroke, Josef Mengele drowned while vacationing in Brazil. His death was kept secret due to his newfound status as a war criminal, convicted *in absentia*. His estranged family visited his grave in South America and dealt with matters of his estate and legal obligation. Meanwhile, the survivors of his medical experiments, themselves aging, formed an organization committed to support for one another and justice for Nazi fugitives. A well-publicized group pilgrimage to the site of the former death camp by the survivors in 1984 reinforced public awareness of Mengele's atrocities and outrage over international inactivity, spurring a large scale hunt for the deceased Nazi doctor. Newfound interest in the case made “Josef Mengele” a household name. The international community, as well as individual German citizens, acknowledged the horrors faced by the twins specifically and the Jewish population as a whole during the Holocaust. Some reparations were made, and the healing process finally began in earnest.

Chapter Thesis

In this chapter, the authors assert that it took public outcry and action by the victims themselves to force the international community's hand in its hunt for Josef Mengele. Due to the long period of inactivity between the crime and the pursuit of justice, the perpetrator was essentially allowed to live out his exile unperturbed. However, the awareness spread by this campaign finally allowed the victims some modicum of peace.

Chapter Argument

The authors reference bounties placed on Mengele's head by diverse agencies including the West German government and *The Washington Times* as late as 1985 – twenty-one years after his *in*

absentia conviction for war crimes during the Frankfurt trials – to illustrate judicial complacency in the hunt for Nazi fugitives. They also paraphrase an apology from the relatives of Mengele's mentor in order to demonstrate the public's renewed sympathy for the victims.

Chapter Conclusion

The authors conclude that, though justice came too late for Mengele and his victims, the eventual acknowledgment of and reparations for the crimes committed at Auschwitz-Burkenau turned the tide for survivors of the death camp, making lives lived in the shadow of war somewhat more tolerable.

Chapter Sources/Evidence

Primary Source

Mengele, Martha. Letter to author (Lagnado). 20 September 1985.

Secondary Source

Anderson, Jack. "The Twins of Auschwitz Today," *Parade Magazine*, 4 September 1984.

What TYPE of source or what type of evidence would have made the author's argument/main idea more convincing?

A detailed, forensic report on the alleged remains of Josef Mengele would have made the assertion of his death more convincing, especially given the controversy implied but addressed only in a limited capacity over the validity of the coroner's initial findings.

5. Overall Conclusions

The authors concluded that World War II in general and the Holocaust specifically disrupted and destroyed the lives of both the victims of the "Final Solution" and its Nazi perpetrators. Far from excusing the actions of war criminals, the authors simply drew parallels between Josef Mengele's postwar life spent on the run, unable to pursue his scientific ambitions, and the survivors' lives spent in existential anguish after their liberation from the death camp.

Furthermore, the authors found that, regardless of how it manifested, every survivor of

Auschwitz-Burkenau suffered some crippling debilitation as a result of their time in the death camp. Some underwent obvious mental breakdowns, while others spent a lifetime wandering the earth or sailing the oceans, and some experienced emotional problems and inabilities to connect and interact socially. Each victim remained a victim after the fact.

Finally, culpable parties in the Holocaust uniformly sought to distance themselves from that period of history, beginning immediately upon the conclusion of the second World War. Death camp functionaries fled the encroaching Russian army, destroying evidence of their involvement all the while. Argentinean political officials made excuses for their liberal immigration policies in regards to known war criminals, and, during its reconstruction, Germany reinstated former Nazis into its government and academia as though nothing had happened. It took decades for the country to even address its crimes. It was as though the world had fallen under the spell of some collective madness that abated as quickly as it came on.

6. Sources

Periodicals

Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science

Jerusalem Post

New York Times

Newsweek

Parade Magazine

Primary Sources

diary entries

interviews

letters

Benefits of Primary Sources

Primary sources have the benefit of collecting the facts unvarnished by the passage of time and the

conjecture of an uninvolved third party. They record events as they are perceived by the participants therein.

Problems of Primary Sources

Primary sources are almost necessarily biased by the observer. Due to the source's intimate relationship with the event, the record is subjectively skewed by the observer's personal involvement and may not be completely reliable.

Books on the Same Subject

Lifton, Robert Jay. *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide*.

London: Macmillan, 1986.

Nyiszli, Dr. Miklos. *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account*. New York: Frederick Fell,

1960.

Perl, Gisela. *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz*. New York: International Universities Press, 1948.

Articles on the Same Subject

Anderson, Jack. "The Twins of Auschwitz Today," *Parade Magazine*, 4 September 1984.

Boozer, Jac S. "Children of Hippocrates: Doctors in Nazi Germany." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 450, July 1980, p. 84.

Posner, G., & Ware, J., "How Nazi War Criminal Josef Mengele Cheated Justice for 34 Years," *Chicago Tribune*, 18 May 1986.

7. Your Impressions and Opinions

What did you like best about the book? What did you like least about the book?

I enjoyed the thematic link between the interviews with survivors and the account of Josef Mengele's actions during the same time frame. It made each chapter somewhat self contained while hinting at a much greater body of information. The reader therefore gained a limited immersion into both sides of the story, allowing for a more complete understanding of the subject matter.

I did not enjoy the fact that themes and major points were not explicitly stated in the material.

Rather, they had to be gleaned from context and the subtext of the narrative structure. While this is a perfectly reasonable practice in works of fiction, historical accounts, in my opinion, should be more on the nose with their conclusions.

Did you feel that the author was biased in presenting the subject matter? How so?

Notwithstanding the fact that all reasonable people should be biased against all human rights violations, the authors did come across as biased in their presentation of the subject matter. Sheila Cohn Dekel, one of the authors of the book, was married to one of the interviewees, and it is possible that his contribution to the narrative was overstated. Also, the authors may have gone out of their way to portray Josef Mengele as entitled and whiney; however, it is hard to criticize someone for making a monster appear more monstrous.

List three facts that you learned from the book.

Twins were especially sought after as test subjects by Josef Mengele during the Holocaust.

Argentina allowed more Jewish immigrants to enter its borders before and during World War II than the United States did.

Josef Mengele lived free for thirty-four years after the conclusion of World War II.

How does our textbook's treatment of the topic compare with the author's treatment of the topic?

First and foremost, our textbook primarily appeals to the political side of the second World War; whereas, *Children of the Flames* deals almost exclusively with the human element. The scope of our textbook is larger, and the tone is more objective.

Necessarily, our textbook emphasizes America's involvement in the war, while *Children of the Flames* mentions America only insofar as it was a destination for refugees. Because Americans were not interned at Auschwitz-Burkenau, their story is left for another book.

Because atomic warfare did not play a role on the European front, *Children of the Flame* makes no mention of it or the Pacific front in any capacity. Our book, with its focus on American involvement, concludes the chapter on World War II with the nuclear destruction of Hiroshima and

Nagasaki.

There are some similarities between the two books, of course. Both discuss the effects of depression economies on citizen populations during peacetime. Following World War I and a brief period of prosperity for some, many nations were plunged into a worldwide, economic depression that had similar effects in America as it had in Germany and eastern Europe.

Both books discuss America's refusal to grant asylum to foreign Jews and the subsequent destruction of the same at the hands of the Nazis. *Children of the Flames* naturally details the human consequences of this policy with more detail.

Both books include the stories of individual participants in the war effort. In Chapter 25 of our textbook: *The United States and the Second World War, 1939-1945*, we are introduced Paul Tibbets, the commander of the *Enola Gay* flight that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. *Children of the Flames* gives brief biographies of the surviving twins and many who were not so fortunate. This device serves to remind the reader that these stories are not mere abstractions. Humans beings fought and died during World War II.

Would you recommend this book to someone else? Why or why not?

I would recommend this book on the basis of its accessibility and its devotion to the subjects beyond the war. Whereas most books about the Holocaust stop after World War II, *Children of the Flames* continues through the 1980s, taking us on the victims' journey from refugee through adjustment to postwar life and eventually to adulthood. Additionally, the story of Josef Mengele's flight from justice is a fascinating one.

If you could write a book on some historical topic, what topic would you choose, and why?

I would write a book on the radium girls who, working in the United States Radium factory in 1917, contracted radiation poisoning and died horrifically. They established a precedent for legal protection from employers who cause occupational diseases, and their deaths serve as a cautionary tale for the victimization of poor, menial workers everywhere. People should know their story.

