

Mengele: Unmasking the “Angel of Death”

By David G. Marwell. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2020. Pp. xvi + 432. Cloth \$30.00. ISBN 978-0393609530.

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David G. Marwell has written an engaging and illuminating account of Josef Mengele’s life as well as the postwar efforts to bring him to justice. The work is also, in part, a memoir chronicling the author’s involvement, beginning in the 1980s, in the search for the Nazi fugitive and in the lengthy odyssey to confirm his death.

In “Part I: Becoming Mengele,” Marwell skillfully chronicles Mengele’s early years, focusing on his development into both a talented scientist and a committed Nazi. In fact, the author makes a convincing case that young Mengele’s political radicalization took place by means of his scholarly pursuits in the fields of medicine and anthropology—at the same time as the Nazi state placed racial hygiene at the center of the Third Reich, Mengele directed his anthropological studies toward possible qualitative differences between racial groups, while at the same time his medical studies centered increasingly on questions of genetic pathology. Also emphasized here is the formative experience of combat for Mengele. Marwell faults other scholars for ignoring the almost three years (late 1940 to early 1943) Mengele served in the 5th Waffen-SS Viking Division, concluding instead that his time on the Eastern Front—the combat itself as well as the close proximity to regular and widespread atrocities—further shaped Mengele’s character.

According to the author, these factors—Mengele’s experiences as a soldier and his scholarly activities regarding genetics and racial science—best explain how Mengele got to Auschwitz beginning in May 1943. What exactly Mengele did at the death camp is covered comprehensively in “Part II: Auschwitz.” In surveying Mengele’s various experiments, the author debunks some popular misconceptions. For example, Marwell makes a convincing case that Mengele’s experiments with twins’ eyes had nothing to do with trying to “Aryanize” their appearance—the experiments, part of a long tradition of research into phenogenetics, instead were devised by Mengele to develop easier ways to determine a person’s racial identity based on external appearance. More generally, Marwell concludes that Mengele wasn’t “unhinged, driven by demons, and indulging grotesque and sadistic impulses” (115), but rather acted as an established member of the German scientific community conducting research consistent with that being pursued by others, albeit—significantly and horrifyingly—without the usual ethical, professional, and legal regulations and guidelines. Such a truth is, according to the author, much more disturbing than the false view of him as a “medical monster.” (65)

More than half of the book—“Part III: Flight” and “Part IV: Pursuit” covers Mengele’s efforts to escape being located and arrested after the war. The author contextualizes the many reasons Mengele wasn’t identified while imprisoned as a POW and illuminates how Mengele was able to hide and ultimately flee. In fact, reconstructing Mengele’s flight from Germany showcases Marwell’s very careful and convincing analysis of the extant sources, many of which contradict one another. Mengele’s resumption of a mostly normal and even public life in Argentina is illustrated, as are the opportunities missed by the West German government to locate him in the 1950s. The narrative becomes quite thrilling when Mengele is forced to flee Argentina following the kidnapping of Adolf Eichmann and the beginning of the Germans’ and Israelis’ serious hunt for him. The author, for example, concludes, on the basis of a careful assessment of a 2017 Mossad report, that Israeli agents likely spotted him on a farm in July 1962 before losing him forever. In “Part IV:

Pursuit,” the work blends historical account with memoir as the author chronicles the creation and activities of a joint international investigation set up in 1985, in which Marwell directly participated as an official of the U.S. Office of Special Investigations. The almost immediate discovery that Mengele had possibly drowned in Brazil six years earlier did not, as the author shows, end the investigation. Marwell takes the reader through the numerous avenues US, German, Israeli, and Brazilian officials pursued to confirm Mengele’s death, from analyzing handwriting samples, to skeletal remains, to dental records, to, finally, DNA. The author does a particularly good job illustrating the political and historical forces that prevented some investigators from concluding for more than seven years that a “reasonable certainty” existed that Mengele had died in 1979.

Especially engrossing are the book’s epilogue and postscript. In the epilogue, Marwell illuminates the contentious relationship between Mengele and his son, Rolf. Years of correspondence culminated in a face-to-face meeting in 1977, when Rolf sought to compel his father to explain his actions at Auschwitz and elsewhere. Similar to Bettina Stangneth’s depiction of Eichmann in *Eichmann Before Jerusalem* (2011), Marwell shows a Mengele who, to his death, refused to acknowledge his criminal activities, maintaining instead that he had done nothing wrong. “Mengele was unrepentant to the end and expressed no remorse,” concludes Marwell. “His *Weltanschauung*, or worldview, was little changed from that summer day in 1944 when he had stalked the ramp at Auschwitz-Birkenau” (345). Neither father nor son got from the other what he needed—Rolf never understood Josef in the way the father wished, and Josef never explained sufficiently his notorious role in the Third Reich. In the postscript, Marwell shows that developments in science since 1945 have entirely undermined the racial theories Mengele and his contemporaries sought so hard to advance in the 1930s and 1940s. The mapping of the human genome, for example, has shown how little difference there is between racial groups. As Marwell concludes, “The science that had occupied such a crucial place at the center of Josef Mengele’s life had developed to the point where it made bankrupt the tenets by which he had lived” (348).

David Marwell has written a fascinating account that illuminates important aspects of Mengele’s life and the lengthy postwar efforts to bring him to justice. The book should be of interest to students as well as scholars specializing in modern Germany history, the Holocaust, and the history of medicine and science.

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Postwar Soldiers: Historical Controversies and West German Democratization, 1945-1955

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West Germany’s transformation from a National Socialist dictatorship that had plunged the world into its second global conflict within two decades to a thriving liberal democracy firmly embedded in Western political and cultural values has garnered a wide range of historical studies. West Germans’ reckoning with their recent past and their role in supporting