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Mengele Unmasking the “Angel of Death”

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Speaker: David Marwell

Transcribed by: Rachel E Lieu

[Holocaust Living History Workshop](#)

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- Time Transcription
- 00:00 [Read Write Think Dream / The Library Channel / UC San Diego /
www.uctv.tv/library-channel]
- 00:09 Deborah Hertz: Greetings everyone. This quarter, I've been teaching a course called Holocaust As Public Memory. One of my students said a few days ago, Well, we really need to preserve the diaries and biographies of leading Nazis, and that too should be part of Holocaust memory and memorials. And, I was very taken aback, and I thought about it as I read David Marwell's, wonderful book, it's come back over and over again that comment. The key dilemma here, I think, is whether we should be humanizing or demonizing Nazis, either leaders or followers. So, if we understand better how the Holocaust happened by studying the perpetrators, will that help us prevent future genocides? That's at least the hope. Now, this book has had an enthusiastic reception. What's exciting about it is that he proceeds to destroy several myths, and it's a good read.
- 01:08 Deborah Hertz: Myths about, and he can talk about these, I'm sure he will, his childhood, the atrocities in the Ukraine when he was in the Waffen-SS, whether he applied to work at Auschwitz, his supervisor, [Otmar Freiherr von] Verschuer, who worked with the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute. The twin research is obviously a tremendous interest, and why he was recognized so often by survivors as the key figure on the ramp. So, I wanted to just ask four questions for us to think about. I know that David may answer some of them, and some of them may remain. If he was so proud of his work, why did he run and hide? If he was not raised as an ardent anti-Semite, why did he volunteer, it seems, to work in Auschwitz in this leading position as a physician? Should his boss, Verschuer, who's not in the SS as far as I can see, be considered complicit in the crimes? And then, had he been captured by the Mossad, would his capture had been as important as Eichman's was for so many, in so many ways? David Marwell has his Ph.D. from SUNY [State University of New York], Binghamton, and wrote a great dissertation on Putzi [Ernst Franz Sedgwick] Hanfstaengl, who was a friend of Hitler's, a really fascinating topic. He's had a string of amazing appointments: Assistant Director of the US Holocaust Museum, Director of the Berlin Documents Center, the Chief Investigative Researcher of the US Department of Justice, especially important for sources he used for the Mengele book, and very dear to my heart, also President, The Leo Baeck Institute, New York, Berlin. With great pleasure, I introduce our speaker. Thank you.
- 02:50 David Marwell: Thank you very much, Debra, for that very thoughtful introduction. And uh, I hope to address some of the questions you asked. If not, then people can re-ask them during the Q&A period. Josef Mengele is best known for his activities at Auschwitz, the Auschwitz concentration camp. He took up his duties there exactly 78 years ago, this week, on May 31st, 1943. My book [Mengele: Unmasking the “Angel of Death] chronicles Mengele's life and career, and I will

summarize both in a few minutes, but it is important to know that my book is not only about what Mengele did, it's also about what people thought or fantasize that he did. By the time Mengele went bathing in the ocean on what was to be his last day on Earth, one month before his 68th birthday, in February 1979, when he suffered a stroke and drowned, he had already emerged as a larger-than-life symbol. A process of what one might call iconification began after Mengele's service at Auschwitz. Aided by his representations in popular culture, you all remember Gregory Peck from [The] *Boys from Brazil*. Mengele became a figure in many popular films and novels and plays. That process of iconification continues today, long after his death. Indeed, he's become, for some, an outsized character who represents not only the Holocaust but also the failure of justice at the end of World War II, which saw so many Nazi criminals escape any reckoning. He's also regarded as the exemplar for science gone mad.

04:43 David Marwell: When I started work on my book about five years ago, I set up a Google alert so that I would be notified each time Mengele was mentioned on the internet. And since then, I've received messages nearly every day and on most days, multiple indications that Mengele's his name had been invoked, sometimes as a historical figure, but just as often as a benchmark for evil, as a malign metaphor. Since the COVID pandemic, those mentions of Mengele have increased significantly as issues of medical ethics have emerged and as people have sought the right means to express anger, fear, or describe evil behavior. Here's the front page of a Greek newspaper, which compares Mengele to Albert Bourla, who is the Jewish CEO of Pfizer. I think today I received eight or 10 Google alerts that Mengele was mentioned somewhere. The more Mengele has become a symbol, however, the more obscure he has become as a human being, as a man. My book chips away at the myth that has attached itself to Mengele, and that has served to elevate him to his iconic role, and at the same time, it hopes to replace that frightening caricature of a monster with an even more unsettling picture of the human being that he was. Beginning in 1980, I served as a Historian for the US Department of Justice, Office of Special Investigations, where I conducted research in support of US prosecutions of Nazi war criminals living in the United States. This badge, as dramatic as it seems, was really for commemorative purposes. We didn't really carry it for identification. We had one of those flip badges that you see on TV, but this is one of my most prized possessions even today. In 1985, I was assigned to the investigation of Josef Mengele, with the goal of discovering if and how he might have been used and assisted by the United States after the war and finally, to find him and to bring him to justice. The investigation was soon joined by two and then three international partners, with the Israelis and the Germans coming on board in early 1985, and the Brazilians, in the summer of 1985, after a body thought to be that of Josef Mengele was discovered in São Paulo, Brazil.

07:17 David Marwell: In the course of the investigation, I visited Mengele's hometown and his hideouts. I read his private correspondence and intimate musings. I interviewed his family, friends, colleagues, victims, and in the end, I held his bones in my hands. I originally set out to write about my experience with this investigation, a kind of memoir in a sense, but in the end, I changed my plans. Instead of restricting myself to writing solely about the investigation, I expanded my effort into a biography of the man himself. I had discovered a rich body of newly released records and brilliant scholarship, both of which shed light on areas of Mengele's life and career that had been unknown to me, and which became available only after I started writing. My book is based on records which I found in archives in Germany, Israel, and the United States, and some also in South America. I used the one-stop secret CIA file on Mengele, which was released and declassified in the year 2000, and the secret Mossad report declassified and released only in 2017 after I had finished - nearly finished - the first draft of the book. It is based on interviews with participants, and on my own recollection of events in which I participated. It is also based on Mengele's own writings. Here's a picture of the notebooks and diaries and writing efforts that Mengele was engaged in that were discovered after his death. Notably, it is based on an autobiographical project that Mengele had begun in the early 1960s and continued to write through the 1970s, the early 1970s. He decided to write the story of his life for his family, not as a strict memoir or autobiography, but rather as a novel - believing that if he were freed from the bounds of literal truth, he could use literary devices to make certain points about his life and to apply it to a wider range of life situations. He believed that his life in some way had important lessons for his family. So he wrote a novel that was based on the facts of his life.

09:46 David Marwell: Now, you can imagine as a historian and as an investigator for the Justice Department, how complicated this source was for us because it was admittedly fiction, but it was based on fact, and the effort was to try to tease out what was true and where he had embroidered or had distorted the truth. And I believe I was able to do that. In the book, I tell one of the key stories about how I was able to use his autobiographical novel to discover very important issues about his post-war whereabouts. I begin the book by describing Mengele's childhood. I admit to finding no hint there of the man that Mengele was later to become. He was born as the first of three sons, into a prosperous and prominent family in the Bavarian town of Gunzburg, where his father owned a farm machinery manufacturing company, and which became the major economic force and major employer in the town of Gunzburg. The family had status, and Mengele was welcomed into a warm and supporting home. There are no stories of Mengele having exhibited any signs of the extreme behavior that was later to characterize his activities. No torturing of pets in the backyard, and no sign of extreme politics that were to animate his life later. Catholic and conservative were the words used to describe the family by family friends. I describe Mengele's education. He was a middling student in secondary school in what we would call high school, but he

was on the academic track. He was quite ill as a young person and did reasonably well, but was not a star in the classroom.

11:46 David Marwell: The inspiration for his later life really came when he went to the university, which he began in the summer term, which begins in Germany in April of 1930. I described this elite education, the inspirational teaching that he received from Nobel Prize laureates, those who had already received the Nobel Prize, and those who would later receive it in their career. His decision to study, I talk about his decision to study medicine and anthropology. He earned PhDs in both of these fields. He not only earned his medical degree, meaning that he could practice medicine, but he earned an advanced degree in medicine, which allowed him then to have an academic career, to be a professor, or to lead an institute, or a laboratory. Here's the matriculation card from the University of Munich, which details his academic career. He studied at the University of Munich, at the University of Bonn, at the University of Vienna, and later at the University of Leipzig. Very common for German academics at that time to go, to study at different universities within the German system. This is a picture of him when he started in April of 1930. This is Mengele as a young student with some of his colleagues. Here he is with his white lab coat. With another student colleague. Here he is having fun with one of the faculty here, a nurse in the Institute in Frankfurt where he was an assistant, and another photograph of him. Mengele was a very promising student. He published in respected journals. Mengele's medical dissertation on cleft palates was cited as late as the early 1970s in a medical journal. He published book reviews, he published notes in journals. He had all of the promise of becoming a significant contributor to German science as it was understood at the time.

14:06 David Marwell: This is a photograph from the meeting of what became the Physical Anthropology Society in 1937 at Tübingen University. You'll see right in the center, Mengele's mentors Otmar von Verschuer, Theodor Mollison, who was his mentor in anthropology at the University of Munich, Eugen Fischer, and other important leaders of the field. As was appropriate for his status at the time, Mengele is over here on the margins, but he's a part of an elite group, and he's in the context of a science that captured his imagination and his talent. I summarize Mengele's career as a student in my book in the following way, and I'm quoting now from the book. The years of Mengele's university study changed him just as profoundly as they changed both his country and the status of the science that had become his consuming passion. He entered university in 1930 at a time of political uncertainty. The impact of the Great Depression had not yet been fully felt in Germany. He emerged eight years later in the vanguard of a new science and committed to a new political vision, both of which promised to change Germany and the world. The combination of his studies in medicine and anthropology provided Mengele with the perfect scientific complement to Nazi politics. Indeed, it was Rudolf Hess, Hitler's deputy, who said that Nazism was applied biology.

Through medicine, with its focus on the human body and emphasis on genetic pathology, and through anthropology with its focus on the racial body, the racial community, and emphasis on the qualitative differences between races, Mengele had equipped himself to be a front-line soldier in the struggle that was at the heart of Nazi ideology and that defined its politics.

16:07 David Marwell: I explain how the role of the physician underwent a transformation under the Nazis, where the so-called racial community, the Volksgemeinschaft, was substituted for the individual as the focus of care. Nazi physicians could, in an intellectual and moral sleight of hand, remain faithful to their Hippocratic oaths and engage in Nazi racial and eugenic activity simply by substituting the perceived welfare of the people, of this racial collective, for that of the individual patient. And I quote now from a scholar who wrote about this phenomenon at the time. The physician must abandon his old humanitarian conceptions. He has one patient, the German people. The individual is no more than a single cell of the whole body. The people are transcendent. They are the only body. It is this popular body which must be preserved and treated. To maintain it intact, no sacrifice is too great. Just as a doctor will not hesitate to amputate a finger to save a limb or a limb to save a life, so the Nazi physician is prepared to undertake all aggression against the individual who menaces the people against individual Germans with an even greater reason against strangers. And that one should also apply to against Jews and others who were considered inferior. After his studies, Mengele joins the army when the war begins in 1939. I supply a very important corrective to past biographies of Mengele by explaining that his wartime experience as a front-line soldier with the SS Viking division saw him exposed to combat and extreme violence from the very beginning of the invasion of the Soviet Union in June of 1941 until the retreat from Stalingrad 18 months later. Here's Mengele in uniform as an Obersturmführer, or a First Lieutenant. This was taken when he was on leave at home in the summer of 1942. Another photograph of Mengele on the Eastern Front in Ukraine in October of 1942. Most books who talk about Mengele's career have him leaving the Viking division sometime early in the summer of 1942. In fact, he remained until January of 1943 when he was evacuated from the retreat from Stalingrad in January and returned to Berlin.

18:43 David Marwell: The unit that Mengele was in was involved in a number of mass shootings right after the invasion of Ukraine, killing tens of thousands of people probably. We don't know whether Mengele was involved in these mass shootings, but we certainly know that he knew about them and that they contributed to the environment and context of extreme violence that accompanied him for the 18 months that he was on the front lines of the German war against the Soviet Union. I devote an entire part of my book to Mengele's time at Auschwitz. I think the section on Auschwitz makes a significant contribution. I won't go into terribly much detail here, but for anyone who thinks they know what Mengele was doing at Auschwitz, especially if they cannot read German and know little about recent

scholarship on this subject, the book was surprised them. First, a lot of myths about Mengele. Many people believe that he was the only physician at Auschwitz. He was one of between 15 and 20 or even perhaps a few more physicians who were assigned to the camp. He had specific duties that did not involve murder or experimentation but involved a kind of public health function of the camp, which was not to protect the inmates of the camp, but rather to protect the German staff and German citizens who were, who surrounded the camp. This took the form mostly of the combating of epidemics, which because of the conditions of the camp, were a huge danger. Mengele instituted a number of very rash, and one could say grotesque, methods of clearing out epidemics as soon as they began by emptying out entire barracks of prisoners and sending them to their deaths. One of the problems about understanding Mengele's role at Auschwitz is that we simply don't know all that much about it based on documentary sources. There is a paucity of records surviving about Mengele's work at Auschwitz. We must rely on the testimony of witnesses and this testimony by its very nature is difficult in many cases to rely on completely.

21:08 David Marwell: The witnesses who talk about what he did very often, were not in a position to understand the full context of his work. They can speak authoritatively about what happened to them, but it's difficult for them to speak authoritatively about what Mengele's purpose was in the experiments that he was conducting there. But certainly in terms of criminality, on whatever scale you want to use, Mengele's major crime at Auschwitz was his conducting of selections on the ramp at Auschwitz. Trains from all over Europe would deposit their passengers, who board it from all corners of Europe, on the ramp at Auschwitz. First, the ramp is located outside of the camp of Birkenau, and then later in the spring of 1944, a rail spur - which you can see here in the photograph - was built into the camps so that prisoners could be released directly into the camp. Mengele managed the process along with other physicians at the camp. This was a duty that was assigned to physicians because it was considered, in a way, a kind of, also a public health function. He was to separate those prisoners who would be sent directly to the gas chambers and those who would be exploited first for their labor and for other talents that they might have had before they would be killed. So, the selection was the incoming prisoners' first experience with the camp. Among the first people that they would have encountered was the physician who was carrying out the so-called selection. He would divide the incoming prisoners who would approach him in a line, he would send some to one side and others the other side. Able-bodied men and able-bodied women who did not have children would be used for labor. They were sent to the camp and registered in the camp and got the tattoo and sent to a barracks. Old people, children, and mothers with children, and anyone who appeared infirm would be sent directly to the gas chambers. They would not have been registered in the camp and would have been sent either by foot, later on - when the spur was located in the camp - and before that by truck to the gas chambers.

23:34 David Marwell: Mengele carried out this duty not every day, he did it on a routine basis. There was a schedule that was posted and he did his, his, his share of the selections. He was not only selecting people who were to die and those who would be exploited first, he also used this process of selection to further his own scientific interests, most of which were conducted on his own time. Mengele established at the camp a kind of research institute patterned on the one that he had been associated with in Frankfurt and later in Berlin. He kept up a direct contact with his former colleagues in Berlin and his mentor, Otmar von Verschuer. He used his work at Auschwitz both to further the work of the institute in Berlin, the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, and also to further his own ambitions. In Germany, after you get your Ph.D., if you want to have an academic career, you have to do a post-doctoral dissertation called Habilitationsschrift. Mengele almost certainly was using his research at Auschwitz to further his own ambitions in terms of making his Habilitation. How do you set up an institute? Well, you need colleagues and what Mengele did is he sought, among the prisoners who arrived, he sought those who would be able to assist him in his scientific research. He looked for anthropologists, he looked for physicians, he looked for medical illustrators, he looked for medical technicians, he looked for nurses, he looked for all of those people who could assist him in not only conducting research, but also recording it and keeping the files accurately, and also caring for - to the extent, they were cared for - the subjects of his experiments.

25:39 David Marwell: He also sought subjects for his experiments among the arriving prisoners. Mengele was quite interested in twin research. This was not because he had a grotesque interest in twins, but because twin research was considered the gold standard of genetic research at the time. More than 200 dissertations were based on twin research and written in Germany during the period of the Third Reich. Twin research was conducted not only in Germany but also in the United States and in Great Britain. Some of Mengele's research, or the research done at his institute, was funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. The problem with twin research is you need twin pairs, you need both parts of a twin pair. Most of the time, twin pairs that remained together, they remained together as children but not as adults and so most of the experiments on twins were done with children. When the war started, the supply of twins basically dried up within German cities. Certainly, as the war progressed, children were removed to the countryside to protect them from Allied air strikes. It became difficult and expensive to be able to carry on a substantive twin research protocol. But at Auschwitz, where Mengele, when was there, perhaps 750,000 people arrived. If you think about the natural occurrence of twins is between one and two percent of the population. You can do the math and figure that thousands of pairs of twins arrived at Auschwitz, and Mengele had a nearly unlimited supply of subjects for his twin experiments. I won't go into great detail here, but I will tell you that most people if you ask them what was Mengele trying to do with twins at Auschwitz? They would say he was trying to discover the secret of twin birth because he wanted to increase the German

birth rate and was interested in using it to further populate Germany with Aryan people at a much quicker rate.

27:52 David Marwell: If you think about it, this doesn't make a great deal of sense and it wasn't true. Mengele's interest in twins was, as I said, part of his interest in genetics, and using twins, both identical twins, and fraternal twins was the accepted method for research on twins. If you think that he was interested in discovering the secret of twin births, he would have been interested in the parents of twins and not necessarily on twins themselves. And of course, he showed very little interest in the parents of twins. So, Mengele assembled this research institute. He had almost an unlimited supply of twins. He had a rich group of inmate physicians and other technicians who had little choice but to work with him and in the course of his time at Auschwitz, he was interested in, in the book I detail six areas of scientific interests. We don't know exactly what experiments he did, but we know that he carried out a series of experiments in the area of twins, which was normally kind of interested in pathology and disease. If both members of an identical twin pair have the same disease and both members of a fraternal twin pair do not in any great numbers, then you can posit that the pathology was related to genetics and not to environment and vice versa. That was essentially the program for twin research.

29:31 David Marwell: The other areas he was interested in were eye color, not because he was interested in changing the color of people's eyes by injecting blue dye into them, but because he was interested in the mechanics of eye color and the chemistry of eye color. So, he did put drops into subject's eyes, which was painful and alarming, but he did not attempt to change their eye color through the injection of dye, which is one of the myths that is often mentioned about Mengele. He was interested in something called specific proteins, which was a complicated story. He was interested in trying to find a cure for the disease of Noma and a number of other things. Another overarching interest of his was in growth anomalies, he was interested in dwarfs, dwarfism, and gigantism and would harvest the bodies of incoming prisoners who had these conditions, and then their skeletons were used for research. He was also interested in the gypsy population – so-called gypsy population - likely because of his anthropology training and was, according to one witness, writing a book about the variety of Roma and Sinti families and clans and their physical attributes. This is a picture of Mengele at the camp. He's now a Hauptsturmführer or captain. He's here with the high-level commandant of the camp. Another picture of him.

31:09 David Marwell: I conclude my section about Auschwitz in my book, in the following way. The notion of Mengele as unhinged, driven by demons, indulging grotesque and sadistic impulses should be replaced by something perhaps even more unsettling. Mengele was, in fact, in the scientific vanguard, enjoying the confidence and mentorship of the leaders in his field, the science he pursued in Auschwitz, to

the extent that we can reconstruct it was not anomalous, but rather consistent with research carried on by others in what was considered to be the scientific establishment. It was criminal and monstrous because of the absence of all barriers that ordinarily served to contain and regulate the temptations and ambitions that can push scientific research across ethical boundaries. To relegate Mengele and his research to the ranks of the anomalous and bizarre is perhaps more palatable than understanding that he was the product and promise of a much larger system of thought and practice. It is easier to dismiss an individual monster than to recognize the monstrous that can emerge from otherwise respected and enshrined institutions. Mengele left Auschwitz in January of 1945. The Soviets arrived on January 27th. Mengele with the rest of the guard force left around a week before, around the 17th or 18th of January. Mengele left. He went to Berlin, slightly north of Berlin to meet with the boss, the chief of all concentration camp physicians, where he received another assignment to be the chief physician at the camp out near Breslau, Gross-Rosen. By the time he arrived at Gross-Rosen, it was about to be overrun by the Soviets and he went to a subcamp of Gross-Rosen. By the end of the war, by May of 1945, Mengele was on foot walking back to Germany when he came upon a Wehrmacht, a regular German army field hospital. He was able to join that field hospital because he knew one of the physicians in there. He shed his incriminating SS uniform and became a member of the, considered to be a member of the staff of the hospital. He and his fellows went into a kind of an encampment in the forest that was stuck between the advancing Red army and they advancing Western allies.

33:47 David Marwell: He was there for about six weeks. This was an area called no man's land. When the war stops, the frontlines of both Eastern and Western allies froze, and there were some German soldiers who were caught in this no man's land in between. This gave Mengele a time to get to know his colleagues there, develop a very cogent cover story. But by the middle of June, he decided wisely with his colleagues that it was better to surrender to the Americans rather than to the Soviets. They got into their vehicles; they drove over and were taken prisoner by the Americans near Hof, in Bavaria, and he was in two American POW [prisoner of war] camps, was released in August of 1945, likely under his own name. You will ask me, how could he be released? Wasn't he the most wanted war criminal, war criminal around? The answer is he was wanted. He certainly wasn't the most notorious person in 1945. His name was on some wanted list, but we discovered in the course of our investigation that the wanted list, although they were printed and his name appeared on them, they weren't distributed, some of which didn't arrive at POW enclosures until December of 1945. So the people who were releasing people from the concentration camps, sorry, from the POW camps, had no idea that he was wanted. He also didn't have the Waffen-SS blood type tattoo under his left arm, which was the practice for all members of the Waffen-SS. As the medical officer in his unit, he was in charge of making sure that everyone had the tattoo. He was able to avoid this so that when Americans were releasing

German prisoners, they have them take off their shirts and raise their hands. If they had the blood type tattoo under their left arm, they would be shunted aside, selected in a way, and interrogated more harshly. If you didn't have it, then you were just released, and Mengele was released.

35:38 David Marwell: He went and worked on a farm as a common laborer for about three years. Eventually, in 1949, he made his way - with his family's help - to South America. He got this document from the International Red Cross. I mentioned before the family was wealthy. They were able to supply him with all of the necessary funds that were needed to bribe, bribe people, and to hire guides to help him through the Brenner Pass from Austria into Italy, and then made his way to Genoa where he boarded a ship for Argentina. He arrived there in 1949 in the summer, and for the first time in many years for him, he was able to in a way relax. He wasn't involved in the kind of heavy manual labor that characterized his time on the farm. He was in a cosmopolitan city that had bookstores and libraries and theaters and movie houses. He could revisit the life of the mind. He could associate with the German émigré community. It was a very benign environment. The reason, the reason being that the strong man in Argentina, Juan Peron, welcomed Nazi fugitives, and he had a kind of a supportive environment in which to live and work. And he worked, he started a small machine shop, represented his family's farm machinery business. Eventually invested in a pharmaceutical company where he was the chief scientific officer. He was so comfortable that he decided he would go back and visit Europe, which he did in 1956. When he returned from Europe, he decided that he would - although he was living under a false name in Argentina, the name Helmut Gregor - he decided to retake his own identity. He went to the German embassy in Buenos Aires and told them that he had been living under a false name. He got a German passport.

37:52 David Marwell: He decided to marry. He got married to his brother's widow, and he was married in Uruguay in the summer of 1958. And just around the time he got married, his family and the Bavarian town learned that the German police were beginning to show interest in Mengele. They came to the town and asked where he was, did he survive the war. Where was he? They got word to Mengele in Argentina, and he decided that he couldn't stay there anymore because Argentina had a extradition treaty with Germany, and if they asked for his extradition, there was no guarantee would be extradited. So Mengele went to Paraguay, where if you became a citizen, you could not be extradited. Mengele through fraud was able to get Paraguayan citizenship in May of 1959. He began to build a life there under the name of Jose Mengele, citizen of Paraguay. In May of 1960, the Israelis captured Adolf Eichmann in Argentina, and everything changed. Mengele knew that he couldn't be extradited from Paraguay, but he could be kidnapped by the Israelis. So that represented a significant change in Mengele's life. He decided he had to go underground. He had to take on another assumed name, and he had to find his way to another country. And he found his way to Brazil where he lived,

always afraid that the Israelis would capture him, and they almost did. And I tell that story in the book, how the Israelis got very, very close to him. But in fact, he died, a frightened, hiding man, living in a way that no one imagined, in a kind of a lousy house in a poor suburb of São Paulo. When in February 1979 he went to the beach and drowned. So, I've left out the whole story about the search for him. I hope it if you're interested in that, we can talk about that in the Q&A, but I think I've used up my allotted time and I apologize for doing that. I'm going to stop the share and come back.

40:06 Susanne Hillman: Okay. Thank you so much David for a fascinating presentation and I haven't read the book yet, but I definitely want to now. We have a number of questions, and we will take more, but I will begin with a question by Lou. What did Mengele actually do to the prisoners that was so monstrous? I thought that was a fascinating question.

40:33 David Marwell: I can tell you, we know what witnesses say he did and which was to, there are stories of him doing surgeries without anesthetic and things like that. But I have to say that, in terms of actually understanding what he did precisely, we really don't know. We know that part of the investigation of twins, part of twin research, the first stage of that is to determine whether twins are identical twins or whether they're fraternal twins. Whether they have the same genetic makeup or whether they have the same genetic makeup that siblings have which they might share as much as 50 percent of the genetic, but fraternal twins have the same environmental history. So the first thing they do, and you might think well, it's easy to tell the difference between a fraternal twin and identical twin. Well, it wasn't in 1944. It's still occasionally not so easy today, but with DNA, of course, it's much, much easier. In 1944, they had to do a kind of painstaking research, comparison of similarities between the twins. This involved taking plaster casts of their teeth and comparing those, measuring all kinds of anthropometric values, circumference of the head and the length of the nose, and how broad the nose is. A lot of blood taking to determine blood factors and blood groups, fingerprints, and footprints. So, if you look at the twin testimony, much of it talks about that kind of preliminary investigation, of whether twins are identical or fraternal.

42:33 David Marwell: We don't have the testimony of the twins who died, so we don't know what happened to them, but we know many, many died. But for those who survived, if you read the testimony carefully, much of it deals with this initial sorting out of whether twins are identical or whether they're fraternal. We know that he took, that he used these unwilling subjects for taking their blood, for doing comparisons of their blood. We know that he, uh, there's witness testimony that he would have children who had growth anomalies, murdered and then have their, through the autopsy, have samples of their bodies sent to Berlin, to the institute. We know that in the eye color of experiments that he would have the eyes harvested from experimental subjects for, for examination in the laboratory, but all

of this is difficult to be absolutely precise about. What's monstrous about it, in addition to the individual harm that he did, is this, the basic notion that the people whom he was experimenting on had no standing as human beings and no rights as human beings. It surprises many to know that the German practice and German legislation before the war had tremendous protections for subjects of experiments. It was very difficult for Germans to do experiments on living subjects. That's why many German physicians would experiment on themselves, but Jews didn't count. So, and if there's a lesson to be learned from the book, it really is in a sense that these boundaries that Mengele routinely disregarded that we have to be careful about that today, especially with the powerful means we have now for research.

44:47 Susanne Hillman: Thank you. We have a couple of questions about that fascinating autobiographical novel that you mentioned. I was actually wondering about that too. Cassian is asking whether you can tell us, or if you can tell us more about this piece of literature and whether it's available. Odette is wondering whether there are any signs of remorse in the autobiographical novel.

45:18 David Marwell: Well, so we have, we have - I know about the autobiographical novel because I discovered it first because I read through the correspondence that Mengele carried on with his son, who was living in Germany. And he described to his son this project that he had undertaken, and he describes why he chose to write it as a novel and the advantages he thought it offered. He talks about the process of writing it and even some of the progress he was making. He says, well I've finished this section, what he called the farm period when he was living as a laborer on the farm. Then he describes in great detail his exit from Germany. He does not talk about Auschwitz in the autobiographical novel that we were able to locate. It is possible that he actually did something about it, but that it was withheld from the family or that was destroyed by the family before his death, or that he destroyed it. It is a very long-winded piece of work. He spends about 100 pages - these aren't full typewritten pages - but 100 notebook pages describing his birth, where you'd think it was one of the great events in the Western world at the time. We learned a lot about his education through his, kind of, talking about his professors and talking about his interest, and talking about science. He doesn't show any remorse whatsoever, either in the autobiography which is incomplete, or in his correspondence, or in what is for me a kind of very dramatic encounter that he has with his son right at the end of his life. When his son - who grew up not knowing that Mengele was his father - believing that Mengele was an uncle who lived in South America.

47:10 David Marwell: Later discovering that he was his father when Mengele went to visit Europe in 1956 when Ralph was young 12-year-old. And then Mengele's mother who had divorced - I'm sorry Rolf Mengele, the son's mother, Mengele's wife, divorced him before he went to South America, and she raised the son with her new husband. And so Rolf Mengele, the son, grew up in the 1960s in Germany as

a kind of a lefty alternative, long hair, studied to be a lawyer, progressive politics. He carried on a long correspondence with his father, which he did not like. He felt he was forced to do it. Rolf Mengele had in his own mind an understanding and appreciation, I believe, for his father's crimes. But at the same time, he was terribly conflicted as you imagine anyone might be. This kind of biological connection and this complicated sense of being attracted to him, being repelled by. Mengele's ability to kind of write around things in their correspondence where he wouldn't answer a question directly, he would kind of deflect it. Rolf thought he had to meet his father in person. So, he decides that he's going to go to South America, go to Brazil, and confront his father, and he plans it out very carefully. He swipes the passport from a friend of his who looks like him. He makes his way to South America. It's all very well documented in the correspondence between Mengele and the son and Mengele and other members of the family. He, through lots of, kind of, operational security, different taxi cabs, and changing cabs, he finds, he makes his way to where Mengele's staying, and eventually he confronts him. And uh he, I talked about this and I have, from Rolf Mengele, a description of what the encounter was like. I'll just quote from it here.

49:25 David Marwell: He's saying from his point of view, from his father's point of view, he is not personally responsible for the incidents there at Auschwitz. He didn't invent Auschwitz. It already existed. He couldn't help anyone. On the platform for instance, what was he to do when the half-dead and infected people arrived? It was beyond imagination to describe the circumstances there. His job was to clarify, only able to work, unable to work. He was able to grade people. He had tried to grade people able to work as often as possible. He thinks he saved the lives of thousands of people in that way. He hasn't ordered extermination. He is not responsible. Also, the twins owe their lives to him. He's never harmed anybody personally. This is what Mengele told his son during this very tense encounter. Rolf described his father as getting very excited, angry, even crying, asking whether I, his son, believe in lies told in the newspapers. At that point, the father breaks down, and the entire confrontation ends. Mengele the son, believes there's no real possibility for him to get any clear answers from his father. The father understands that his son has been, kind of, his mind has been polluted by the post-World War world and he has no appreciation of what his father did. And then in perhaps the last, nearly the last act of his life, he writes to the son. Mengele writes to Rolf a few months before he dies and says, now that I've met you in person and been able to look at you and see you, I can feel more comfortable about dying. There's no one on earth who cares more about - he didn't say heredity - about heritage and about environment than I do, as a scientist in this area. And so, my meeting you was very important for me to understand. I realized that there's very little I could do beyond certain things to influence your life positively. I understand that you can't really appreciate what I did in my life and I won't justify myself. I've already explained in the objective way, I hope I did, what I did, but I won't justify myself any further. And then he says, my patience has a limit

and that limit extends to the point where my family is harmed in any way or there is a threat to my racial community, to my Volksgemeinschaft, which is this very Nazi concept. It's a kind of sentence that he might've uttered in 1944. It shows that this kind of red thread of this concept ran through his life and that he died an unrepentant and believing in what he did.

- 52:19 Susanne Hillman: Okay. I was actually, while you were talking about Mengele's childhood, I was reminded of a trip I once took, that was decades ago to Gunzburg. This must have been in the late [19]70s, early [19]80s. There was still the Mengele company or whatever it is. The name was still there, visible. I don't know when you were last there. I remember how shocked I was seeing this sign. Apparently the Mengeles of Gunzburg, they didn't, or whoever owned the factory or company didn't see the need to change the name. That leads me to a question by Allison. Did the Germans actually devote resources to finding and prosecuting Mengele? Well, at least to finding him first.
- 53:05 David Marwell: Yes, they did. I mean, it was a kind of lackluster effort, but also a very difficult effort. I mean, the time to find Mengele was between 1945 and 1949 when he left Germany. And at that time, Germany didn't exist. They were occupied by the Allies. It was really the Allies' responsibility and really in the interest of justice, it would have been, it would have served justice in the way justice should be served if he, had he been found and prosecuted, probably at the doctors' trial at Nuremberg in 1947, [19]46, but that didn't happen. And the Germans, for, with the beginning of the Cold War, the Germans made very little effort throughout the 1950s to try to have any kind of accounting for Nazi crimes. It wasn't until the very end of the 1950s, in 1959, when the first major trial, the so-called Einsatzgruppen case was held in Ulm, which is not far from Mengele's home. And then of course, you had a great acceleration in those efforts with the Auschwitz Trial in 1963 and then several decades of much more robust effort to define Nazi criminals living in Germany. The Germans in terms of investigating after - in terms of police efforts to find him - they would respond to allegations that Mengele was seen here or seen there. And there's a lot of, I mean, I went through all of the police files. There are a lot of indications that they would stake out when Mengele's father died; they staked out the funeral. When Rolf got married in Munich, they staked out that the wedding, they had photo surveillance of it.
- 55:05 David Marwell: But one could question whether there was at the highest levels the political will to have done that more effectively. But you have to also realize how difficult it would be to do that, especially in a country that had the rule of law where you couldn't just eavesdrop on someone's phone, you had to get a court order to do that. There were so many people you had to listen to. There were so many people whose mail you had to intercept. It became a difficult issue. In 1985 when we started the investigation with the Justice Department, and when we joined with the Germans and the Israelis, the Germans were quite active in that. Of course,

Mengele was already dead but they were active and it was their efforts that actually discovered that he had died in Brazil. Their search of a Mengele family friend, they discovered that the documents that led them to São Paulo and led me to São Paulo.

- 56:02 Susanne Hillman: Right. Thank you so much, David. It was a real pleasure. I'm sure there's so much more in your book. I have questions for you, but we are running out of time.
- 56:15 David Marwell: If people want to go on, if you go on my website, davidgmarwell.com, there's a place to send me questions and I'd be glad to receive them. Davidgmarwell.com
- 56:28 Susanne Hillman: Thank you. Now, I would like everybody to stay on just for a couple of more minutes. I invite Erik Mitchell, the University Librarian, to join me.
- 56:39 Eric Mitchell: Hi Susanne. Thanks so much and thank you, David, for such an interesting and insightful discussion tonight. I think your presentation is really great and fitting conclusion to this year's series of events. Although the Holocaust Living History Workshop was founded to promote connections between local Holocaust survivors and the community. The study of the Holocaust clearly includes this other side of the grim story, the perpetrators. I think in this regard, it's really hard to think of a more disturbing figure than Dr. Mengele. So thank you for bringing him here this evening. As we're wrapping up the season, I'd like to take this opportunity again to thank everyone who's participated in the workshops this year. First and foremost, our sincere gratitude goes to our generous sponsors Laurayne Ratner, Phyllis, and Daniel Epstein, and of course, Judi Gottschalk. It's also my pleasure to acknowledge the endowment established in honor of Lou Dunst. We truly couldn't offer the high-quality programming without your sustaining support, so thank you. We are also so happy that the workshop has withstood Zoom fatigue and virtual event overload this year. In fact, we've actually been able to expand our audience in the past year. And really, a heartfelt thanks to each of you for joining us virtually throughout our series. With that, I think all that remains, for now, is for me to wish each and every one of you healthy and relaxing summer. Thank you so much and good night.
- 58:23 [Read Write Think Dream / The Library / UC San Diego / Channel / www.uctv.tv/library-channel]
- 58:27 [Mengele: Unmasking the “Angel of Death” / Featuring David Marwell / Historian and Author / June 2, 2021]
- 58:30 [Presented by / The Holocaust Living History Workshop / Deborah Hertz, Director, The Jewish Studies Program, UC San Diego / Susanne Hillman, Program Coordinator, The Holocaust Living History Workshop / UC San Diego Library / Erik

Mengele Unmasking the “Angel of Death” with David Marwell (2021)
Holocaust Living History Workshop

Mitchell, The Audrey Geisel University Librarian / Nikki Kolupailo, Director of
Communications and Engagement]

59:35 [UCTV / Producer, Lynn Burnstan / Producer & Editor, Marci Bretts]

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