

The Mengele Twins and Human Experimentation: A Personal Account

Eva Mozes-Kor

To look back at my childhood is to remember my experiences as a human guinea pig in the Birkenau laboratory of Dr. Joseph Mengele. To recount such painful memories is to relive the horrors of human experimentation, where people were used as merely objects or means to a scientific end. I envision the chimneys, the smell of burning flesh, the medical injections, the endless blood taking, the tests, the dead bodies all around us, the hunger, and the rats. Nothing that is close to human existence existed in that place.

The Laboratory

It was early spring in 1944. I don't know the exact date. It was likely the beginning of April. We had travelled from our small village in Portz in Transylvania, not knowing where we were going or what fate lay ahead. Our cattle car train came to a sudden stop. I could hear German voices yelling orders outside. Inside I could smell the stench of cramped bodies. We were packed like sardines. I could see a small patch of gray sky through the barbed wires. My father, Alexander Mozes, gathered the family around him. My mother was 38 years old, my oldest sister Edit was 14, my middle sister Aliz was 12 and we, the twins, Miriam and Eva, were 9. We listened quietly as my father spoke: "promise me that if any of you survive this terrible war, you will go to your uncle Aaron Mozes in Palestine, where Jews can live in peace and freedom." I did not really understand what my father meant by those words, but I sensed that the situation was grave because he had never spoken to us that way before. We cried, and with tears in our eyes promised him that we would do as he said. My father was a very religious man; he was 44 years old at the time we were deported. His faith in God was the guiding force in his life, and with all that had happened to us, he had turned even closer to God.

My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the cattle car door as it swung open. "*Schnell, schnell.*" The SS soldiers were ordering everybody out. As soon as we stepped out onto the cement platform, my mother grabbed my twin sister and me by the hand, hoping somehow to protect us. Everything was moving very fast. I suddenly realized that my father and my two older sisters, Edit and Aliz, were gone. I never saw them again. I think the whole thing took 10 minutes; they were lost in the crowd as Miriam and I clutched my mother's hand. The SS soldiers walked by, shouting louder. Suddenly, they stopped my mother and looked at my twin sister and me, because we were dressed alike and looked very much alike. "Are they twins?" one soldier asked my mother. My poor mother was bewildered. What was a good answer and what was bad? She asked the SS soldier if being a twin was good. The guard nodded his head. My mother said very hesitantly, "yes, they are." Without any further explanation, the Officer grabbed Miriam and me,

and another SS soldier grabbed my mother and pulled her in the opposite direction. We screamed and pleaded as we were separated. I remember looking back and seeing my mother's arm stretched in despair as she was being pulled away. I never even said goodbye to her. I did not know that was the last time we would see our mother.

Miriam and I joined a group of about 10 or 12 sets of twins. We waited for a long time at the edge of the railroad ramp. They seemed to be waiting for everybody to be detained and all the twins to be gathered. I looked around the camp. Everything appeared dark, gray, lifeless. Near the train, as the victims were being separated into two distinct groups, there stood one SS officer dressed in a neatly pressed uniform. He looked very sharp in his beautiful gleaming boots. It appeared to me that he was in charge. The officer doing the selection was Dr. Joseph Mengele.

Our group was led to a huge building near a very tall barbed-wire fence. I had never seen a fence like this before. The building looked like a big gymnasium that was divided in two; one half was occupied by bleachers and the other half by many shower heads. We were ordered to undress, and our clothes were taken away. I felt numb, paralyzed in body and mind. It seemed like a nightmare that would be over as soon as I opened my eyes. All the twins were given short haircuts. Miriam and I had arrived at the camp with long braids and ribbons in our hair. The barber explained to us that the twins were privileged; therefore, we could have short hair instead of having our heads shaved. Our clothes were returned with a big red cross painted on the back. This identified twins as part of medical experiments. We were lined up for registration and tattooing. Four people, two SS soldiers and two women prisoners, restrained me while they heated a pen-like gadget over an open flame, dipped it in ink, and forced it into my left arm, burning into my flesh, dot by dot, the number A-7603.

Early in the evening we were taken to a barrack in camp A, the women's camp. I could see groups of prisoners returning from work. They looked like walking skeletons. One poor victim stepped out of line, trying to talk to us. She said, "Children, children, where did you come from?" she was killed on the spot. The SS guards were everywhere. They marched us to every activity: to the labs, to the showers, to Auschwitz, and to the other experiments. Our interaction with the other prisoners was extremely limited, as the twin experiments were top secret.

In the barracks we met many other twin children. After our evening meal of a two-inch slice of black bread and a brownish liquid, two Hungarian twins briefed us about the camp. They explained that the camp was called Birkenau. Auschwitz, they said, had one gas chamber and one crematorium, while Birkenau had four gas chambers and four crematoriums. "We don't understand these words – *gas chambers, crematorium,*" Miriam and I interrupted. They took us to the back door, where we looked toward the northern sky, to see a giant smoking chimney towering over the camps. I could see glowing flames rising high above the structure. I asked, "what are they burning so late at night?" "The Germans are burning people in the

ovens. They want to kill all the Jews, and after every transport, the chimney burns day and night." "Burning people? That's crazy. Why would they want to burn people?" I asked. "Did you see the two groups of people on the railroad platform this morning?" they asked. "They are probably burning them right now. Only those who can work stay alive, and only as long as they are strong enough to work. The weak, the sick, the old, and the children all end up in the gas chambers and in the flames." "But," I said, "we are children too, and we are alive. Why don't they kill us?" It seemed to me a very good question. "They will someday, but right now, they want us alive because we are twins and they use us in experiments conducted by Dr. Joseph Mengele" they replied. "You will meet him tomorrow; he comes in every morning after roll call."

The Experiments

No one ever attempted to explain anything to us. No one explained why we were in Mengele's "laboratory," what was going to be done to us, or what would be our ultimate destiny. There was never an attempt to minimize our risks. In fact, we were there for one reason: to be used as experimental objects and then to be killed. Mengele had two types of research programs. One set of experiments dealt with genetics and the other with germ warfare. In the germ experiments, Mengele would inject one twin with the germ. Then, if and when that twin died, he would kill the other twin in order to compare the organs at autopsy.

In June or July, about 3 months after my arrival, I was injected with some kind of deadly germ. After a visit to Dr. Mengele's lab, I became ill with a very high fever. I was desperately afraid of revealing this fact because it was well known that the illness would result in my being separated from Miriam and sent to the hospital. We knew that many children became sick, were taken to the hospital, and never came back. On the next visit to the lab my fever was measured, and I was sent to the hospital.

The hospital was a camp filled with some 15 to 25 barracks for the sick. I was placed in a barrack filled with moving and screaming skeletons. I called the ward the "barrack of the living dead." I was told by the other children that we were not given anything to eat here because people were brought here to await their turn for a place in the gas chambers. Twice a week, a truck would come to pick up the living dead. These sick people were thrown on the truck like a sack of potatoes. The screaming of these poor souls will stay with me forever.

The next day a team of five doctors, including Mengele, came to study my case. They looked at my fever chart and then Mengele said sarcastically, "She is so young. Too bad. She has only two weeks to live."

The doctors never examined me and never ran any tests; they only looked at the fever chart. I was between life and death for 2 weeks. It was then that I made a silent pledge: "I will do everything in my power to prove Mengele wrong, and to survive and be reunited with my sister Miriam." During the first

2 weeks I was unconscious most of the time, but I do remember waking up on the barrack floor while trying to crawl to the other end of the barrack to a water faucet. I was given no food, no medication, and no water.

Then I realized that my temperature had to be normal before I would be reunited with Miriam. I understood that I had to convince Mengele and the other doctors who were monitoring my disease that I was getting well. I accomplished this by manipulating the thermometers so that it appeared that my fever had gradually disappeared. It took me 3 weeks to allow my temperature to be read as normal. Three weeks later I was released and reunited with Miriam.

Upon my return, Miriam told me that during the first 2 weeks of my hospitalization, someone had stayed with her continually. She was not fold of my condition, but it was clear that had I died in the hospital, Miriam would have been taken immediately to Mengele's lab to be killed. After the 2 weeks, when it appeared that I would not die, Miriam was no longer under surveillance at all times. Instead she was taken back to the lab, together with all the other twins, and was injected with something. When I got back from the hospital, Miriam was very ill.

The daily routine for Mengele's twins was regimented. We awoke every morning at 5 A.M. and helped the younger twins to dress. In our barracks there were twins from 1 ½ to 13 years of age. By 6 A.M. all of were standing for roll call outdoors, "whether it was winter or summer, rain or snow. Everybody had to be accounted for as either dead or alive. The bodies of dead children were brought out and counted as well. Mengele became very angry when a child died in bed because of the conditions of the camp. These deaths meant the loss of valuable guinea pigs for his medical experiments.

After Mengele's visit, we received some food and then were taken to the labs for tests. We were examined, measured, and given X-rays. Three times a week we were taken to the blood lab. There, blood was taken from my left arm, and three or more shots were injected into my right arm. Afterward, we were usually taken back to the barracks. On one occasion, while in the waiting area of the lab, I observed one twin faint. She was being tested to see how much blood could be taken before death occurred. These experiments were felt to have a practical application on the battlefield.

Three times a week we were marched from Birkenau to Auschwitz, where we would go to Barrack 10. We were assembled, naked, in an enormous room. There, 10 or 12 doctors would study us. They measured parts of the body: the size of the mouth, the shape of the bones of the face and skull, and the colors of eyes and hair. We were compared to a chart in addition to each set of twins. Our bodies were marked with different color codes, and each doctor walked us around, continually taking notes. The "specimens" were photographed and catalogued. There was no way to protest and stay alive.

One of the twins, who was 19 years old, told of experiments involving a set of teenage boys and teenage girls. Cross transfusions were carried out in an

attempt to “make boys into girls and girls into boys.” Some of the boys were castrated. Transfusion reactions were similarly studied in the adolescent twins.

In the area of genetics, Mengele collected dwarfs, giants, hunchbacks, and people with abnormalities and defects. He studied genetic traits in the hope of “purifying” the “Aryan superrace.” He closely monitored eyes and hair color.

A set of Gypsy twins was brought back from Mengele’s lab after they were sewn back to back. Mengele had attempted to create a Siamese twin by connecting blood vessels and organs. The twins screamed day and night until gangrene set in, and after 3 days they died. Mengele also attempted to connect the urinary tract of a 7-year-old girl to her own colon. Many experiments were performed on the male and female genitals.

Liberation

In early November 1944 all the Gypsies were exterminated, and we were transferred to their camp, which was next to the gas chambers and crematorium. After we were transferred to the Gypsy camp, the experiments became less routine. We were still taken to the lab, but not as frequently. It was clear that something was happening. It was a midnight in January, 1945. We were awakened by the unbearable heat coming off the roof of the barracks. I looked outside; the whole sky was red with flames. The SS had blown up the gas chambers and crematoriums. The SS guards stood outside with their machine guns and ordered us to march.

On a snowy day, January 27, 1945, just 4 days before my 10th birthday, Auschwitz was liberated. I thought that once we were free, we would be able to go home. Of course, that was not the case. We were held in refugee camps until September 1945. We were then transferred from one camp to another.

I eventually made it back to my home city. Our home had been looted and ransacked. I found a crumpled photograph – the last photograph I have of my family. The picture was taken in the fall of 1943.

In 1948, Miriam and I applied for a visa to emigrate to the newly formed country of Israel. After 2 years, we were finally granted our request, and in 1950 we settled in Israel. In 1960, I married an American tourist and came to live in the United States. My son Alex was born in 1961 and my daughter Rina in 1963. I have tried to obtain copies of the medical experimentation records from the U.S. Government. My sister Miriam suffers from renal disease, and I have donated my left kidney to her. To this day, we do not know what substances were injected into us when we served as Mengele’s guinea pigs.

Conclusion

I hope that what was done to me will never happen again to another human being. This is the reason I have told my painful story. Those who do research must be compelled to obey international law. Scientists should continue to do research. But if a human being is ever used in the experiments, the scientist must make a moral commitment never to violate a person's human rights and dignity. The scientist must respect the wishes of the subjects. Every time scientists are involved in human experimentation, they should try to put themselves in the place of the subject and see how they would feel. The scientists of the world must remember that the research is being done for the sake of mankind and not for the sake of science; scientists must never detach themselves from the humans they serve. I hope with all my heart that our sad stories will in some way impel the international community to devise laws and rules to govern human experimentation.

The dignity of all human beings must be respected, preserved and protected at all costs; life without dignity is mere existence. I experienced such loss of dignity every day as a guinea pig in Dr. Mengele's laboratory. Forty-five years later, I still feel deep pain and anger for the way I was treated by the doctors. These same doctors had taken an oath to help and to save human life.

Reproduced from "Annas, G.J. & Grodin, M.A., eds., The Nazi Doctors and the Nuremberg Code: Human Rights in Human Experimentation, Oxford University Press, NY, 1992" with the consent of Eva Mozes-Kor and the kind permission of Professor George J. Annas