

CRIMINAL MEDICAL EXPERIMENTS

In his book *Oskarżeni nie przyznają się do winy* (The Defendants Plead Not Guilty) Karol Małcużyński wrote, It was hard to believe that in the middle of the 20th century a civilised state with a grand historic past produced and condoned a political system which sentenced other nations and other human societies to a death that elsewhere could not be inflicted on animals. That in the middle of the 20th century the head of that state, his government, his cabinet, the commanders of a great army and chiefs of a great police force met to systematically consult on ways and techniques of killing vast groups of people whose only crime was that they belonged to another race or another nation, or had been designated as a threat to Nazi plans to enslave Europe and acquire *Lebensraum*.

The greatest crimes of the Second World War were committed on Polish soil. Poland was the location Nazi Germany selected for the installation of the first ever camps of mass extermination. This was where the practical carrying out of the plan to biologically destroy whole nations was initiated. In the plans of Hitler and his henchmen Poland was chosen as the test pad for their gigantic policy of genocide. It was here that they carried out their experiments – not only to discover to what temperature it was possible to freeze a live human being and then bring him back to life. Here food rations were reduced to below what was regarded as hunger level up to that time, and the victims were forced to do physical labour beyond human endurance. Poland was turned into a laboratory for crime, a testing ground for the practice of atrocity.

Rudolf Höss, commander of Auschwitz, recalled how in the summer of 1941 he was summoned to by Himmler himself:

Himmler told me that the Führer had given the order for the final solution of the Jewish question to be accomplished. We, the SS, were to carry out the order. If we failed to do so, the Jews would later destroy the German nation. He chose the site of Auschwitz for its good access by transportation and the possibility of isolating the camp off. I was to perform that difficult task. I had to forget about all human considerations whatsoever and concentrate only on carrying out the job.

The principal Nazi criminals were put on trial before the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg. Proceedings lasted from 20 November 1945 until 1 October 1946. It involved 22 of the chief Nazi war criminals. One of the most interesting, but also the most horrifying of the 12 trials was the first one – against the Nazi doctors.

Of the 23 defendants 20 were physicians and 3 were high-ranking medical administrators. Of the 13 physicians found

guilty, 7 were university professors. Of the 7 professors 3 were sentenced to death, 3 to life imprisonment, and 1 got a sentence of 15 years in jail.

I will not name those notorious individuals.

When the National Socialists came to power in Germany doctors who were members of the Union of Socialist Physicians were dismissed from state appointments, declared enemies of the state and sent to concentration camps. They were gradually eliminated. This happened to about 10 thousand German doctors.

In the new conditions under the Third Reich the Union of National Socialist Physicians started to grow at a rapid rate. On 30 January 1933, when Hitler came to power, it had a membership of 3 thousand doctors. Two years later the figure had gone up to 14.5 thousand; by 1939 it was 30 thousand; and in 1942 46 thousand out of a total of 60 thousand German doctors belonged to it. Evidence was found against about 350 out of that number, proving beyond all reasonable doubt that they had participated in criminal activities.

Professor Józef Bogusz wrote,

The Nuremberg doctors' trial was extremely important in the disclosure of the full horror and degradation of Nazi



Rodziny żydowskie w drodze do gazu
Jewish families on their way to the gas chamber

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medicine by such practices as the systematic and secret murder of hundreds of thousands of people in the so-called euthanasia programme, including citizens of countries occupied by Germany – the murder of the mentally or incurably ill, disabled children, or elderly people with the use of poison gas, lethal injections, and by other means. These people were regarded as “useless devourers” leading “lives that were not worth living.” Practices from the Middle Ages, when in the times of the cruel Inquisition the mentally ill were beaten, starved and burned at the stake, were multiplied over and over again in the hell of the Nazi camps. The experiments Nazi doctors carried out on human beings, defenceless prisoners in the concentration camps, were done with the deliberate disregard of the elementary humanitarian principles. Hitler's physicians, including many professors of Third Reich universities, outstanding representatives of medical science, violated and trampled underfoot the most fundamental principles of medical ethics and deontology.

Calling what happened “criminal medical experiments carried out on humans” seems to be exactly right. The Germans themselves called it “inhuman medicine” (*unmenschliche Medizin*).

Already by 1941 prisoners were being systematically murdered in Auschwitz and Buchenwald by the injection of phenol into the heart, and in Ravensbrück Professor Karl Gebhardt and Dr.

Herta Oberheuser were conducting ruthless experimentation on Polish women. In his defence Gebhardt said that the victims, who were members of the Polish resistance, had been legally sentenced to death. However, incontrovertible evidence was produced that no-one ordered him to carry out the experiments, but that he himself solicited the means to do this.

One of the defendants was Professor Gerhard Rose, a distinguished researcher and expert on tropical medicine at the Robert Koch Institute in Berlin. He took a deliberate and active part in a research programme on typhus carried out in the concentration camps. He tried to justify his actions by claiming that the state could order experimentation on prisoners sentenced to death without their consent.

In his book *Auschwitz: The Nazis and the Final Solution* the distinguished British film-maker and historian Lawrence Rees writes that SS physicians participated in every stage of the slaughter, from selection on the ramp where prisoners were put off the trains, to the murder of selected prisoners. The fact that Cyclone B was transported into the camps in a fake ambulance marked with the Red Cross emblem was a sign of their complicity. In absolute obedience to criminal orders,

SS doctors made an active contribution to the mass murder of defenceless victims on a hitherto unprecedented scale. On graduation they had taken the Hippocratic oath, which requires doctors always to endeavour to dispense treatment to the sick, help them recover and save their lives.

SS doctors launched their careers as murderers by assisting in the killing of the sick and disabled. The destruction of "life not worth living" was raised to the status of medicine's supreme duty. This depraved logic made it possible for a physician, Dr. Irmfried Eberl, to be appointed head of the death camp at Treblinka. By the time Eberl became chief of Treblinka the concept of "life not worth living" had been extended to include Jews alongside the mentally and physically ill. In their attempts to justify their part in the killing of human beings, SS doctors resorted to the lies fabricated earlier by Nazi propaganda, that the Jews had a destructive influence on society. "Of course I'm a doctor", said Fritz Klein, one of the Nazi physicians, "and I want to save lives. Out of respect for human life I would remove a festering appendix from a patient's body, and the Jew is a festering appendix on the body of mankind."

So, from the Nazi point of view, Auschwitz, like all the other death camps, was part and parcel of their health policy: it enabled them to dispose of persons who were a burden or a threat to the development of the state. That is why the first victims who were killed in Auschwitz died in Block 10 – the hospital, where they had phenol injected intravenously or into the heart. It was an exact reversal of medical ethics: the purpose of such hospital visits was not to cure, but to kill the patient.

When the selection system of new arrivals was introduced in Auschwitz in 1942, Nazi doctors played an important role in the

process of mass slaughter. Doctors were the ones who made the key decision in the camp's operations: which of the new prisoners were to live, and which of them were to die.

Prisoners from Auschwitz were even "retailed" to Bayer, a branch of the I.G. Farben business, to serve as guinea-pigs for testing new drugs. One of Bayer's letters to the management of Auschwitz reported that they had received a delivery of 150 women in good condition. However, since the women had died in the course of the tests, they could not draw any reliable conclusions and asked the camp authorities to send them another batch, the same number of women at the same price. Each of the women who died while having an anaesthetic tested on her set Bayer back 170 reichsmarks.

Rudolf Höss reported back to the authorities in Berlin that apart from carrying out their normal medical duties (mainly for the SS garrison and their families), the SS doctors in Auschwitz were performing the following tasks:

1. In compliance with the Chief SS Physician, from the Jewish dispatches arriving at the camp they had to select men and women capable of work.

2. They had to be in attendance by the gas chambers during operations to supervise the proper administration of Cyclone B poison gas by the disinfectors and orderlies. Their duties also comprised checking, after the doors to the gas chambers were opened, that all the inmates were dead.

3. Dentists were to carry out random tests to check that dentally qualified prisoners had extracted all the gold teeth from the gassed persons and put them in the secured receptacles provided. They also had to supervise the smelting down of the gold teeth and safely store the metal obtained until its dispatch.

4. They had to select those Jews who were not capable of work or not expected to recover the ability to work within 4 weeks, and to send them to their deaths. They had to dispose of Jews suspected of carrying infectious diseases. Bedridden persons were to be killed by the administration of lethal injections, and others were to be eliminated in crematoria or gas bunkers. Phenol, evipan, and Prussic acid were used for the injections.

5. Doctors had to carry out "covert operations" concerning Polish prisoners whose execution had been ordered by the Nazi authorities of the Generalgouvernement but could not be made public for political or security reasons. In such cases the officially given cause of death had to comply with the regulations stipulated in the camp. Healthy prisoners sentenced to death in such proceedings were sent by the Political Department to Block 11 and disposed of by one of the doctors through the administration of an injection. Sick prisoners were disposed of in the sick bay with the use of injections, in a discreet manner. Thereafter the doctor writing out the death certificate was to enter a disease which brings about death rapidly as the cause of death.



„Eksperymenty medyczne” przeprowadzone na młodych kobietach
 "Medical experiments" carried out on young women

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6. SS doctors were obliged to attend the execution of prisoners sentenced to death by summary courts, and executions ordered by the SS Reichsführer or by the authorities of the Generalgouvernement, to confirm death.

7. In applications for punitive whipping doctors were to examine the prisoners due to be whipped for any counter-indications against that form of punishment, and they were to attend its administration.

In his book *Nieludzka medycyna – lekarze w służbie nazizmu* (Inhuman Medicine: Doctors in the Service of Nazism) Stanisław Sterkowicz writes:

The transformation of medical ethics into the professional killing of helpless victims reveals the darkest aspect of humanity. The perpetrators were neither primitive troglodytes nor psychopath butchers, but the social elite – university professors, doctors of medicine, well-educated physicians, biologists, chemists, pharmacists. They turned out to be surprisingly easy to transform into sophisticated henchmen, capable of the cruellest bestiality. Hitler's physicians cast ignominy on the loftiest ideals of medicine. These crimes were perpetrated by doctors on behalf of a false, inhuman ideology.

The aim of the terror was to exterminate the Jews living in Europe, who were declared a degenerate race; and to turn the peoples of the conquered countries into slaves. Individuals with physical or psychiatric disabilities, and permanently incapable of work, were declared “unworthy of life” and were also to be eliminated.

In carrying out its leader's ideological plans, German medicine was gradually becoming more and more criminal. Under the totalitarian rule of National Socialism medicine, which owed its origins to a response of mercy and sympathy in the face of human suffering, was becoming more and more brutal and inhuman. Ruthless men in power started to use it to dispose of the weak and incurably ill – both of other nations as well as their own countrymen. Surely it could never have happened if German doctors had come out in opposition to Hitler's criminal intentions. Alas, the German medical community did not protest against the blatant atrocities, which met with general acceptance, and even with approval. Under the Third Reich Germany's hitherto splendid medicine was gradually turning into a barbaric and inhuman business.

The crimes of German medicine started when the National Socialists came to power. With time the German medical community became more and more involved in the activities – first criminal and later genocidal. German doctors gave their full acceptance, and even extended the range by contributing their own criminal initiatives. Nazi German medicine bred physicians who were criminals. Every medical faculty in the Third Reich founded chairs

and departments of human genetics and racial hygiene. Students were educated to treat Jews as people belonging to a degenerate race, unworthy of life. Doctors very readily turned into heartless, merciless criminals. German doctors employed in concentration camps lost all traces of humanity. It took them very little time to turn into monsters.

The first kommandant of the Treblinka death camp was SS Hauptsturmführer Dr. Irmfried Eberl, a psychiatrist. Earlier in Germany he had been putting German psychiatric patients to death in a gas chamber. The cruelty of the medical experiments carried out on human beings exceeded even the cruelty of experimentation on animals. The entire medical community in the Third Reich was

informed at diverse meetings and conferences of the many medical crimes that were being committed. Yet there were no voices of protest against this public lawlessness.

The range of activities pursued within the framework of inhuman medicine was very broad. From compulsory sterilisation of the mentally disabled, through the abduction of foreign children to turn them into servile breeding material for the production of a “higher race”, to the mass annihilation of anybody at all, even Germans, if declared unworthy of life. Doctors had no scruples about carrying out horrific vivisections on prisoners for

the sake of utopian scientific purposes. Hundreds of doctors took part in these activities and only a very few tried to resist these crimes, unsuccessfully though and with tragic consequences for themselves.

Many celebrities from the world of German medicine took part in various ways in these blatant crimes. Many German academic tutors not only collaborated with the medical torturers in the concentration camps, but also took the initiative and put forward suggestions to the leaders of the Third Reich for the cruellest possible experiments. In February 1942 Professor August Hirt, who held the Chair of Anatomy, Histology, and Phylogenetics at Strasburg University suggested the idea to SS Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler of the creation of a collection of Jewish-Bolshevik skulls taken from political prisoners of war to demonstrate the superiority of the Nordic race over the Semitic race.

The German criminal physicians did not restrict their activities to foreigners. They killed Germans as well, both adults and children. From January 1940 to August 1941 in Germany 70 thousand Germans declared unworthy of life by doctors were put to death. They included psychiatric patients, the blind, the deaf, tuberculosis patients, persons requiring care, the elderly, and the disabled. Many of the doctors who took part in this mass murder were never called to account after the war, either in criminal proceedings or in an enquiry into professional misconduct.

The doctors who selected children to be put to death or even murdered them in their own hospital wards (by starving them to



Lekarze niemieccy podczas eksperymentów zamrażania więźnia w lodowatej wodzie

German doctors during experiments involving freezing a prisoner in ice-cold water

Ze zbiorów autora • Author's collection

death or overdosing them with sleeping pills) evaded punishment after the war and many continued to practise in their professions or teach in medical schools. It would be hard to expect justice, if even the postwar court in Frankfurt ruled that death in the gas chambers was one of the most humane ways of killing.

In his book *Auschwitz, die NS Medizin und ihre Opfer* Ernst Klee writes that according to witnesses the doctor whose sadism surpassed the cruelty of most of the other physicians in the camp was Dr. Aribert Heim. Dr. Heim read Medicine in Graz, and joined the Nazi Party and the SA in 1935. On 1 October 1938 he became a member of the SS. In January 1940 he became a medical practitioner. In April 1940 he joined the Waffen SS.

Dr. Aribert Heim murdered hundreds of Jews with intracardiac injections. He treated his victims politely, held conversations with them when they were on his operating table. He asked them about their relatives who were not in the camp. For exercise or training, out of boredom or sadism he would extract prisoners' livers, intestines, spleens, or hearts. He is said to have explained to a Jewish boy lying on his operating table why he had to die. The Jews were to blame for the war, he told him. To another Jewish boy he said, "Look at your nose. The Führer doesn't need noses like that."

Heim conversed with another Jew about his perfect set of teeth. Then he slit his stomach open and killed him. The head was removed from the body, boiled and preserved for the sake of the teeth.

In his book *Refleksje oświęcimskie* (Reflections on Auschwitz) the psychiatrist Professor Antoni Kepiński wrote:

One of the scenes in the camp which will stay for a long time in the memory of mankind alongside the chimneys of the crematoria and the heaps of naked, emaciated human bodies is selection on the ramp. A crowd of men, women, young and old, rich and poor, beautiful and ugly, marching past the SS doctor, who stood there in the pose of prince and judge. A slight gesture of his hand determined whether the person in front of him would in a minute or two be sent to the gas chamber, or be given the chance to survive for a few more days or months. There was something of the Last Judgement about it: a gesture of the hand sent another human into the fire or gave him the opportunity for salvation. Most of those in the queue for sentencing did not know what was in store for them. All they knew was that the hand gesture was an important sign in their lives, that it meant something, but what – remained a mystery until the moment when in the opening of the ceiling of their apparent bath-house a head appeared in a gas-mask. Prisoners marching to selection who knew that they were going to the gas

chambers exerted the last scraps of their energy to straighten their backs, march in a sprightly gait and make a good enough impression on the SS doctor to find themselves on his right hand.

Medicine under National Socialism meant selection first and foremost. The biologically impaired were eliminated from the body of the nation, always with the promise of a better biological future for the nation. The individual was irrelevant, he or she was mercilessly sterilised, killed, slaughtered on behalf of medicine. Auschwitz was no accident, it was the peak of a medicine

governed by selection. Its outcome was the fact that there were doctors standing on the ramp. Men over 50 and women over 45 were sent to the gas chamber. No doctor was seen so often on the ramp as Mengele, who became symbolic of German selective medicine. "He always had one hand on the jacket of his uniform; with the other hand he pointed either in one or the other direction, the ultimate decision-maker on life and death", said an eyewitness. When people were brought up to the ramp, they passed by the SS henchmen and turned



Niemiecy oficerowie przygotowują się starannie do egzekucji „podludzi niegodnych życia”; wschodnia Małopolska, 1943 r.

German officers carefully preparing for the execution of “sub-humans not worthy of life,” Eastern Lesser Poland, 1943

their attention to Mengele, who looked trustworthy on account of his appearance and demeanour. Mengele performed the selection like a good music conductor. In his first selection he picked about a hundred individuals out of a total of two thousand – a mere 5 percent – for provisional survival.

A French prisoner and medical practitioner, Dr. Claude Lehman, remembered him as a slim, elegantly dressed man, playing with a little riding-whip in his hand during the selection and whistling airs from Dvořák.

Many ex-prisoners have left recollections of Dr. Mengele's schizophrenic character, as it came to light in Auschwitz. When he appeared in front of prisoners, dressed in his spotlessly clean SS uniform, he was capable of coming out with a smile and being absolutely charming – or alternatively he could turn monstrously cruel. Witnesses saw him shoot a woman and child on the ramp only because they did not carry out his orders fast enough; while others remember only the kind words they heard from him. Vera Alexander, a Czechoslovak prisoner, had the opportunity to take a closer look at his double nature when she was kapo in a block for Polish and Roma children. "Mengele would come into the camp every day, bringing chocolate", she recalled. "Whenever I shouted at the children and told them off, they would usually say, 'We'll tell Uncle you were bad.' Mengele was the children's kind uncle. But of course he had reasons to behave in that way. The children were nothing more for him than guinea-pigs for his research. Vera Alexander often saw the children return to the block howling with pain after a visit to their "kind Uncle."

Witnesses' accounts describe the fundamental nature of Mengele's presence in Auschwitz – he could do anything he liked with human beings. His “medical experiments” were not subject to any kind of restriction. He had an infinite capacity for inflicting torture and killing people to satisfy his sadistic curiosity. He experimented not only on twins but also on dwarves and patients suffering from a type of facial gangrene called noma, which was prevalent in the population of the Roma camp at Birkenau because of the dreadful conditions.

Before his arrival in Auschwitz he did not show any signs of sadism. There are stories that he proved exceptionally brave on the eastern front, when he rescued two soldiers from a tank that had caught fire. Before the war, after having graduated from Frankfurt University, he had been just an ordinary young doctor. It was only in Auschwitz that the Mengele known to the whole world today was revealed as someone who in exceptional circumstances can turn into a monster.

Josef Mengele arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau in March 1943 and was appointed medical doctor in the Roma camp at Birkenau. In the twenty months of his work there he took part in over 80 selections on the ramp at Auschwitz and sent over 400 thousand Jews to their deaths. He performed an autopsy in the post-mortem manner on a set of anaesthetised triplets. He conducted various experiments on twin children. Later, when they were no longer of any use to him, he killed them or had them killed by other people. He was capable of taking twins for a ride in his car, treating them to sweets, and then, as they left his car near the crematorium, he would shoot them in the back of the head. Apart from twins he was also interested in individuals of stunted stature. He would pick them out from the trainloads of new arrivals. Then he would photograph them, take a variety of anthropological measurements, and kill them. When they were dead he would order their skeletons to be preserved as museum exhibits. Sick people he simply sent straight to the gas chambers and had the



Stojących w szeregu Żydów selekcjonuje „do życia” lub „na śmierć” niemiecki lekarz

A German doctor conducting a selection of a line of Jews “for life or death”

huts in which they had lived disinfected. By this method of epidemic prevention alone he killed 1,500 prisoners.

huts in which they had lived disinfected. By this method of epidemic prevention alone he killed 1,500 prisoners.

His “scientific” enthusiasm allowed of no mercy for his victims. He was ruthless and bestial. For instance he tried to change the colour of children’s eyes by injecting various pigments into them. Then he killed the children, took out their eyes and had them mounted as exhibits. His victims’ eyes were pinned up on the walls of his office in the camp like a butterfly collection. He was a human monster that explo-

ited its medical qualifications for its own brutal purposes. The German scholar Ernst Klee writes in *Auschwitz, die NS Medizin und ihre Opfer* that these crimes committed on behalf

of medicine were not just the work of a couple of perverts. They were done or contributed to by “quite normal” doctors, and most of the medical community knew about it. The medical community was well aware of the identity of the “guinea pigs”, “objects” or “material” as the victims were called. Yet in spite of this it gave its approval to experiments on human beings, even the cruellest ones where it was taken for granted that they would end in the “object’s” death. Many distinguished scientists, not necessarily members of the SS, asked Himmler for permission to conduct experiments on prisoners. Research institutes associated with the Wehrmacht and Luftwaffe and the most renowned centres of scholarship conducted their own, large-scale research programmes on human subjects.

The crimes committed by Nazi medicine during the Second World War cast shame on the entire medical world.

Doctors, whose calling is to save human lives, killed humans on a mass scale and in a fully premeditated way. Even though it is now all in the past, part of the history of the brown reign of terror in Europe, it may never be forgotten.

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