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On the Trail of Mengele

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By Art Harris
Washington Post Staff Writer

Tales of the Angel of Death, told over and over: they come from Auschwitz, from the jungles of South America, from CIA files, from fevered Nazi-struck imaginations, from hucksters of hellish relics. Somehow, they are all different, but all the same.

Take the woman in the jewelry store in Asunción, Paraguay. She told an Israeli official about the day in 1965 when a customer asked about some merchandise. She came around the counter. She saw Josef Mengele. Two decades before, trim and elegant in his sleek black SS uniform, he had personally dispatched 400,000 other Jews to the ovens with a flick of his black-gloved wrist. But not her. She'd survived. And now he was browsing in her jewelry store, just one of 40,000 Germans living in Paraguay.

She could not speak, she would say later. She watched

him leave and then she told her husband: "It was him. It was Mengele."

For 40 years, one of the monsters of history has wandered the globe untouched, a free man: the most notorious Nazi war criminal believed alive today, the Auschwitz doctor whose mass murders and grisly experiments evoke Evil Incarnate.

How can this be?

West Germany has had a warrant out for his arrest for 26 years and has added a \$350,000 reward. Israeli Nazi hunters spirited Adolf Eichmann out of Argentina, but others have missed Mengele, they say, by minutes at a Paraguayan hotel, by little more at the Rome airport. CIA informants put him in Brazil, in Chile, in the drug trade or working as an auto mechanic. German prosecutors believe he may have been in Paraguay as late as 1982, if a jailed drug suspect can be be-

lieved: He is said to have been Mengele's roommate outside Asunción, where they shared a passion for beekeeping.

What's more, the sightings began as soon as the Third Reich fell: American GIs say they saw him in an Army prison; a German professor claims he interviewed Mengele at a British prison camp in 1947. After that Mengele lived in his home town in Bavaria, where his family had made its fortune in the farm machinery business. His name arose at the Nuremberg war-crime trials, and he fled to Rome, where he is said to have gotten papers under the name of Gregorio Gregori.

In either 1949 or 1951, according to conflicting reports, he sailed from Italy to Argentina, where he lived under his own name in Buenos Aires, hawking heavy equipment for the family firm. Neighbors say he was "quiet, distinguished and courteous."

As Dr. Helmut Gregor, one of the dozen aliases he adopted

over the years, he became an Argentine citizen in 1954 and performed abortions, says Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal. (At one point, he was "detained" by police when a patient died.) His first wife divorced him that year, and in 1958 he married his older brother's widow. They were divorced three years later, and she left for Switzerland and Italy. After the West German warrant was issued in 1959 he became a Paraguayan citizen; he is said to have attended his father's funeral in Germany that year.

He has lived his life. He has had friends, patients, family. Now bounty hunters, revenge seekers, glory hounds and die-hard believers in earthly justice descend on South America in such numbers that they have fostered a trade in relics of this saint of Hell—photographs, an ID card, whatever souvenir of evil you want, except the man himself.

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If alive, he would be 74 this month.

Now America wants him. Its top Nazi hunter, Neal Sher, a Justice Department lawyer who heads the Office of Special Investigations, flew to Europe last week to seek leads from German prosecutors and Nazi trackers like Wiesenthal, 76, who suspect Mengele is still in Paraguay, protected by President Alfredo Stroessner; but after all these years, they still don't really know.

On his SS application, he said he stood 5 feet 9, with brown hair and blue eyes. But others remember a shorter, darker-looking man in a country that worshipped blue-eyed blonds. Mengele's hang-up was that he "looked like a Gypsy," says Wiesenthal.

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Intelligence tips put Mengele in Chile 18 months ago; in Paraguay's German-speaking Mennonite villages on the Bolivian border as recently as last year; in Uruguay six months ago.

South American governments, rubbed raw by complaints that they're sheltering the fled legions of the Nazis, deny it all.

Says the Chilean Embassy press officer: "We had one Nazi war criminal, and that was plenty." That would have been the late Walter Rauff, the

SS general who conceived and operated mobile gas chambers used to exterminate Jews. He recently died in his sleep after running a fishing boat for years, under his own name, out of Puerto Provenir. Chile's supreme court denied his extradition request on a technicality. Another extradition request was denied in 1959 by Argentina, on grounds that it was written in German, not Spanish. And not till 1970 did Paraguay concede Mengele had been naturalized years before.

"The last photograph is 1963 in Asunción," says Wiesenthal by phone from Vienna. "We don't know his [new] alias."

What of rumors he may have undergone plastic surgery? Wiesenthal doubts it; no Nazi war criminal he caught ever went under the knife. What about the report of postcards sent to friends from Portugal? Does Wiesenthal say this is a Nazi disinformation trick to blur the trail?

Or CIA files portraying Mengele as a cocaine warlord, dealing under the name Dr. Henrique Woliman? "A stupid story," Wiesenthal scoffs. "He doesn't need the money."

It would certainly seem that way, if he can rely on rich Nazi friends and the family conglomerate, Karl Mengele & Sons, with offices in Paraguay, Argentina and the United States.

A \$1 million bounty was offered last week by unnamed donors in Los Angeles after lesser amounts did no good.

He remains at bay, a fugitive with all the glamor of an emissary from hell, merely yapped at by the hounds of justice, and mythologized by Hollywood in two movies, "Marathon Man" and "The Boys From Brazil."

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"This here's the bastard who sterilized 3,000 women at Auschwitz," said one, as a man fitting Mengele's description huffed and puffed. Kempthorne was 19, a private at the Idar-Oberstein detention camp in occupied Germany, where Nazis were interrogated after the war.

Guards sometimes trotted them outside for fun and games, including a charade called "Luftwaffe": Prisoners were ordered to run around in circles "spitting like a plane," says Richard Schwarz, 59, a retired government labor lawyer in Washington, D.C. As a young private, he put a Nazi he now believes was Mengele through the drill, "pats on the fanny" and all.

"Presumably, it was Mengele," recalls Schwarz, who never heard the man's name, but has war correspondence indicating he wrote friends about just such a doctor. And the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, which hunts data on Nazi war criminals and supports Holocaust studies, turned up the two soldiers, along with a U.S. Army dispatch from an intelligence officer who refers to an account of Mengele's arrest in 1947.

"We're searching our records of that camp," says Lt. Col. Craig McNab, an Army spokesman. "You've got to understand, Mengele wasn't on top of anyone's list back then. In 1945, he was a doctor way off in the wilds of Poland."

And by the 1950s, he was long gone. In South America, the chase began, a slow and frustrating pursuit. Diplomatic channels yielded nothing. Everything grew vague.

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Agents kept up their search in Asunción and the interior, then lost Mengele across the border in Brazil, according to heavily edited CIA files released last week. Accounts also surfaced of assorted avengers on the loose, and someone apparently mistook a man for Mengele. He was found beaten to death, but it turned out to be an ex-Nazi soldier.

Diplomacy offered another route for frustration. When West Germany's envoy protested in 1965 that Mengele's citizenship was invalid, Stroessner is said to have exploded in rage. "Once a Paraguayan, always a Paraguayan!" he shouted, pounding the table.

Especially when the citizenship papers are signed by old Stroessner friends like Alejandro von Eckstein, a Russian émigré who fought alongside Stroessner in the Chaco War with Bolivia, and who still advises Paraguayan intelligence services.

At the American Embassy at Asunción, there were frequent rumors of Martin Bormann alive and well, but never Mengele, recalls A. Dane Bowen, political officer until 1964. Besides: "Hunting Nazi war criminals wasn't our big preoccupation."

In those days, Mengele lived openly, sunning at a villa a half-mile from the embassy and scouting for land in Alta Parana, just across the Argentine border, reportedly working as an auto mechanic northeast of Asunción near the Brazilian border. "Recurring rumors" said that Mengele was at a "well-guarded ranch, either near Encarnación, in eastern Paraguay, or in Chaco, and that he is protected by Stroessner," said a 1972 CIA report.

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Later, in 1978, the U.S. Embassy heard he frequented the Caballo Blanco, or White Horse, a favorite German restaurant downtown. And a BBC crew with a hidden mike captured a Nazi boasting of playing cards with the doctor.

"Mengele? Oh, yes, he's around, but we don't know quite where. He comes and goes," officials would reply whenever Ambassador Robert White brought it up.

So, why wasn't he arrested—or something? "Because he wasn't wanted all that much," says White, who filed his Mengele tales with the State Department and got no reply. "We did report on it, but there was never much interest expressed by Washington in any way."

Still, such accounts irritated officials in the remote haven for right-wing refugees. "Bob, how can we polish up our image?" he was often asked.

"A good place to start would be to cancel Mengele's citizenship," he replied. Then, one day, out of the blue, the foreign minister said, "Bob, that's a wonderful idea. I'll bring it up with the president." And, in 1979, Mengele was stripped of his citizenship for being "out of the country for more than two years."

"We knew he was in Paraguay, but it's not something we pursued," says Alan Ryan, the top Nazi hunter for the Justice Department until 1983. There was no jurisdiction, and Ryan was too busy chasing Nazi war criminals hiding in America to go "smoke him out of the jungle."

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Now Mengele is hot, everyone's favorite villain. It's only taken 40 years. In South America, there are those who can look on it as a trend, not unlike other trends, a sort of nostalgia craze.

"There are people out there willing to sell you Bormann's bones and Mengele's hacienda," says New York lawyer Gerald Posner, whose research forays draw Nazi brokers like flies. "The minute they hear an American is hunting Nazis, their ears perk up and their wallets get itchy."

He's spurned diaries, rings and memorabilia. How about Mengele's original fingerprint card? asked a Brazilian cop. Only \$500. Or recent photos, whispered an ex-Nazi officer over mint tea at the Hotel Mansour in Casablanca—*after plastic surgery*. A mere five grand. Or, maybe you like Mengele's SS ring, very cheap: \$1,000, said the Argentine lawyer.

The flea market sells such rings by the trayful, swastika and all, \$3 apiece.