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Nazi-Hunters Pick New Top Targets

By RALPH BLUMENTHAL

With Josef Mengele now widely acknowledged to be dead, leading Nazi-hunters have been reassessing their priorities while primarily blaming West Germany for the failure to capture and try the death camp doctor.

They named Alois Brunner, a former deputy of Adolf Eichmann reported living in Syria, and Walter Kutschmann, a former Gestapo leader recently seen in Argentina, as among their top new targets.

Others hesitated to rank the wanted. "Jewish blood doesn't go from 1 to 10," said Elliot Welles, director of the Anti-Defamation League's task force on Nazi war criminals.

Some admitted embarrassment at having placed Dr. Mengele for so long in Paraguay when, it now appears, he lived almost constantly in Brazil from 1961 until his drowning in 1979. The Brazilian police and foreign experts announced last Friday that a skeleton exhumed near São Paulo this month was unquestionably that of Dr. Mengele.

Governments Are Blamed

But others maintained it was not a failure of the private Nazi-hunters but of governments, particularly West Germany's. And they claimed that their growing pressure may have helped bring the long-open case to its sudden end.

"Because we pushed this case, there was a conclusion," said Serge Klarsfeld, a Paris lawyer whose wife, Beate, charged in Asunción last month that President Alfredo Stroessner of Paraguay was protecting Dr. Mengele.

"Not every shot can be a good shot," said Simon Wiesenthal, whose Vienna-based documentation center collects information on war criminals and who had tracked Dr. Mengele for more than 20 years.

Mr. Wiesenthal — who last month announced a reported sighting of Dr. Mengele in Capitán Miranda, Paraguay, in 1984 — said in a telephone interview that he may have been supplied with deliberately false "disinformation" on some occasions.

'One of Many Cases'

In another instance, in which he stated — incorrectly — that one of the families that sheltered Dr. Mengele in Brazil was Jewish, Mr. Wiesenthal said the information had come from a rabbi

in São Paulo who later claimed he had been misunderstood.

"The Mengele case is only one of many cases," he said. "For the people who followed only one case, they should be embarrassed."

He said he had helped find two other major war criminals around São Paulo: Franz Stangl, the former commandant of the Treblinka death camp who was extradited to West Germany in 1967 and died three years later while serving a life sentence; and Gustav Franz Wagner, former deputy commandant of the Sobibor death camp, who died amid extradition proceedings in 1980. With Dr. Mengele, he said, the three found in São Paulo accounted for the deaths of nearly 1.7 million people, or nearly one-third of the victims of the Holocaust.

Mr. Wiesenthal also said that as far back as 1963 he had learned of contacts between Dr. Mengele in South America and Hans Sedlmeier, a manager of the Mengele family farm machinery factory in Günzburg, West Germany, and had passed the information and subsequent tips to the Frankfurt prosecutor's office.

"When the prosecutor is not observing Sedlmeier, it's not my guilt," he said.

Letters Found in House

West German officials said it was while searching Mr. Sedlmeier's house on May 31 that they found letters of Dr. Mengele and other documents that led them to São Paulo.

Rabbi Marvin Hier, dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies in Los Angeles, acknowledged some embarrassment over the outcome of the Mengele case. But he said "it just shows you that without resources of major intelligence agencies and governments involved, that's what happens."

"West Germany's effort was just public relations," he said, "and America and Israel just weren't interested."

Officials of the Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations, which joined the Mengele hunt this year, were out of the office and unreachable yesterday.

A spokesman for the West German Embassy in Washington, Peter Mende, said that his Government over the years had contacted Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Paraguay, Bolivia, Ecuador,

Colombia, Peru, Venezuela, Panama and the United States in efforts to find Dr. Mengele. But he said he had no direct answer to the question of why the authorities had not searched the Sedlmeier house long ago or monitored mail of the Mengele family in Günzburg.

'Right Under Their Noses'

"Why blame the Israelis?" said Mr. Welles of the Anti-Defamation League. "It was the task of the West Germans — it was right under their noses." In fact, he said, the Israelis had closely missed capturing Dr. Mengele along with Eichmann in Buenos Aires in 1960.

Mr. Klarsfeld in Paris said of the West Germans, "They were never serious." He commended the sincerity of the Frankfurt prosecutor, Hans-Eberhard Klein, but said, "He couldn't do much; he didn't want to take the responsibility to go into houses and make surprise investigations."

He said that some time ago he provided the prosecutor with the American Express card number of Rolf Mengele, Dr. Mengele's son, in an effort to study his travels but that he never knew what, if anything, had been done with the information.

Mr. Klarsfeld said he felt no embarrassment over his and his wife's long focus on Paraguay as Dr. Mengele's likely sanctuary. "It's obvious they protected him completely," he said of the Stroessner regime. "It's natural to believe he was there."

Mr. Klarsfeld said he believed that the cancellation of President Stroessner's visit to West Germany last month had something to do with the disclosure of Dr. Mengele's death. The lawyer said he thought the Paraguayan leader had known of the Nazi doctor's death and urged the family to have it made public to spare him further bad publicity.

Judicial sources in Paraguay, meanwhile, said Mrs. Klarsfeld would face charges of slandering President Stroessner.