

Reading 11B

LEGAL BRIEF: LIFE UNWORTHY OF LIFE

The man with the whip who stood calmly on the platform directing human traffic in “Arrival at Auschwitz” was the infamous Dr. Mengele. He and several other doctors were in charge of the selection process when prisoners arrived. They also supervised the selections that were carried out regularly at the roll calls and in the barracks. The purpose was to weed out “excess” or “unnecessary” people who were “non-productive.” The term used by the Nazi doctors for these people was “life unworthy of life.” It was borrowed from a medical book written in 1920 and became the phrase that allowed physicians to conduct horrible experiments on human beings and decide who would live and who would die. “Life unworthy of life” also best captures the heart of the Nazi philosophy toward the Jews and other unfortunate groups who became the victims of the Third *Reich*.

As early as 1933, respected physicians were involved in a program of sterilization—making people incapable of reproducing. The victims of this program were people whom the doctors decided were mentally deficient. The doctors’ endorsement of this program then led to their support of the Nazi proposal for the killing of mentally and/or physically handicapped children, and then mentally and/or physically handicapped adults in the so-called “euthanasia” program. “Euthanasia” is usually defined as “mercy killing.” In Germany, in 1933, the term was applied to people who were considered “unworthy of life.” The doctors believed that mental illness, drunkenness, other mental and physical disabilities could be passed on genetically. What mattered most to them was the so-called health of the “Aryan race.” Consequently they saw it as their duty to remove those who would, according to their theories, “weaken the race” through reproduction. Over 450,000 people were sterilized or killed in special institutes and through and hospitals before the program was ended. These places were often equipped with gas chambers.

After 1941, a state policy of “euthanasia” and forced sterilization easily changed into a state policy for mass murder. This policy was carried out in death camps like Treblinka and Auschwitz. Those subjected to gassing in the “euthanasia” program during the 1930s were said to have received “special treatment,” *Sonderbehandlung*. The same phrase would be used as a euphemism, a substitute word to hide the real meaning, to refer to gassing of Jews in death camps. The doctors who had formerly worked in the special hospitals of the “euthanasia” and sterilization programs now appeared at the death camps. The first step for them was to assist the SS commandants of camps to reduce the “excess population” of their camps. But soon, doctors like Dr. Mengele, his superior, Dr. Wirths, or the internationally known Dr. Clauberg were selecting people as guinea pigs for horrible experiments.

- Mengele tried to discover what determined eye color in twins by killing them and then dissecting the eyes.
- Wirths conducted experiments on women by unnecessarily removing portions of the uterus to examine what he called “pre-cancerous growths.”
- Clauberg injected poisonous substances into the wombs of women and subjected men and women to radiation of their genitals, presumably for cancer research.

- A German pharmaceutical company sponsored a program in which German doctors injected people with typhus. The doctors later killed the victims by injecting a poisonous drug into their hearts. The bodies were then dissected for experimental research.

None of these experiments furthered medical research—yet, even if they had, the inhuman treatment of the prisoners was unjustifiable.

How did thousands of medical doctors become involved with the murder of the Jews? Were they forced? Were they threatened? Or did they truly believe the racial theories of the Nazis?

German doctors were not forced to participate in the sterilization, the “euthanasia” or the mass murder programs. They were not threatened if they refused (as some did). Some seemed to have believed in the Nazi genetic theories. Many tried to impress their superiors or gain favor with politically powerful Nazis by doing research about breeding a “super-race” (biological engineering). Rarely had doctors had such opportunities for human experimentation. To experiment with animals and write or lecture about it was one thing, but to experiment directly on humans was quite another—a shortcut to acclaim and a more “glamorous” type of research. All hoped to advance their careers; a few were fanatical Nazis.

Despite this career building, each of those thousands of doctors had taken the Hippocratic Oath and had pledged to “heal the sick” and protect life: “I will follow that method of treatment which...I consider for the benefit of my patients and abstain from whatever is deleterious and mischievous. I will give no deadly medicine to anyone if asked, nor suggest any such counsel...I will...benefit the sick and abstain from every voluntary act of mischief and corruption.”

Having solemnly taken that ancient oath, how was it possible that those physicians participated in the selections at Auschwitz and the other camps? Was that participation “deleterious” and against the benefit of human life? And was participating in medical experiments literally giving “deadly medicine”?

Historians have suggested some partial explanation for the behavior of the Nazi doctors. *The first of these explanations comes from understanding the nature of “Planet Auschwitz.”* It was, in almost every sense, another world. In such an environment, all established codes of right and wrong were abandoned. Accepted moral values and ethical rules—standards of behavior--were not applicable. Personalities seemed to change to match the environment. At Auschwitz, anything was possible.

Dr. Mengele was the most infamous of those doctors at Auschwitz. Before the Holocaust, he was involved with scientific research and saw himself as a scientist. He was described by other doctors as “cold and heartless,” “completely dependable,” “equal to any task” and “honest and trustworthy.”

At Auschwitz, some prisoners described him as kind to children—yet, they knew he was responsible for the torturous experiments performed mainly on children. One survivor noted that the Gypsy children often called him “Uncle Mengele.” She then recalled how after bringing

candy to some children he would take them away to be killed and dissected. He committed open and deliberate murder.

The second explanation concerning the behavior of the doctors is related to the concept of the Volksgemeinschaft or racial community, the “Aryan race.” The Volksgemeinschaft was defined as a single body, and parasites or infections like Gypsies, Jews and other were said to weaken it. The doctors described the Volksgemeinschaft as their most important “patient.” The removal of “undesirables” from that “patient” was the primary method used to guarantee its health. The doctors of the Third Reich claimed that mental illness, drunkenness, ugliness, body disfigurement and other mental and physical disorders were hereditary. They also claimed that forms of behavior could be inherited. According to the definitions of Jews in laws passed in 1933, 1934 and 1935, Jewishness was also hereditary. All these genetic theories allowed medical murder to proceed.

Reichsfuehrer SS Himmler was convinced of the “moral necessity” of experiments on humans and the murder of “non-productive” or “undesirable” groups. He said: “all who still reject human experiments are committing high treason.” He agreed to support the medical experiments and to accept full responsibility for them in the name of the Fuehrer and the Third Reich.

Advancing careers, abandoning all previous standards of behavior, belief in racial theories, total support from the authorities and no opposition from any leading scientific or medical institution all contributed to the doctors’ participation in the “Final Solution.” These same elements made it easier for those in other professions to participate, too. Such behavior, by civilized and educated people, could not occur because of their failure to recognize the value of life for all human beings.

The key to the medical involvement in mass murder seems to have been the phrase “life unworthy of life.” These men (and women) perceived their victims as less than human or as objects—dead matter. “Life unworthy of life” may summarize Auschwitz, the death camps, the Holocaust.