



## *A Milestone in Medical History*

# German Medical Association Finally Apologizes For Atrocities Committed by German Physicians Under the Nazis

by Arthur Gale, MD

Almost seven decades after the end of World War II, the German Medical Association has made a long overdue apology for its participation in human rights violations and atrocities under the Nazi regime. In a stunning admission the Declaration states that German doctors from all strata of the profession enthusiastically supported Nazi ideology and were not coerced to support Hitler.

The Declaration of May 12, 2012, which was unanimously adopted by the delegates of the Physician's Congress declared: "In contrast to still widely accepted view, the initiative for the most serious human rights violations did not originate from the political authorities at the time, but rather from the physicians themselves... German doctors "were guilty of scores of human rights violations"... "The crimes were simply not the acts of individual doctors, but rather took place with the substantial involvement of leading representatives of the medical association and medical specialist bodies as well as considerable representatives of university medicine and renowned biomedical research facilities."

2012 also marked the 65th anniversary of the Nuremberg Doctors' Trial. Most people are aware of the famous trial in Nuremberg, Germany at the end of World War II, where leading Nazis were tried as war criminals.

There were a number of subsequent lesser known trials at Nuremberg. One of these lesser known trials was the Doctors' trial. Twenty physicians were put on trial; sixteen were convicted, four of whom were executed by hanging.

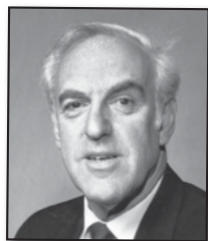
The crimes committed by German physicians in their human experimentation have been amply documented. The victims were mainly Jews, Poles, Russians, and other prisoners. They suffered horribly from the gruesome experiments; many died.

A few examples of these experiments include subjecting prisoners to a low pressure chamber to determine the maximum altitude from which crews of damaged aircraft could parachute to safety, freezing experiments using prisoners to find an effective treatment for hypothermia, Other experiments subjected prisoners to phosgene and mustard gas, infecting inmates with malaria, typhus, tuberculosis, typhoid fever, infectious hepatitis and other diseases. The infamous Dr. Joseph Mengele performed twin experiments at Auschwitz to test his racial theories.

And finally German doctors led the euthanasia program where over 200,000 German citizens whose "lives were deemed not worthy of living, those mentally ill and also disabled persons, were put to death, and over 360,000 classified with "heredity illness" were forcibly sterilized.

The prime legacy of the Nuremberg Doctor's Trial is the Nuremberg Code, which established rules for human experimentation. Of the ten points in the Nuremberg Code Point, the first one which states "the voluntary consent of the human subject is absolutely essential" is the most important.

It should be pointed out that at the time of the Nuremberg Doctors' Trial the Allies including the United States also performed experiments on human subjects without their consent. The defense used this argument



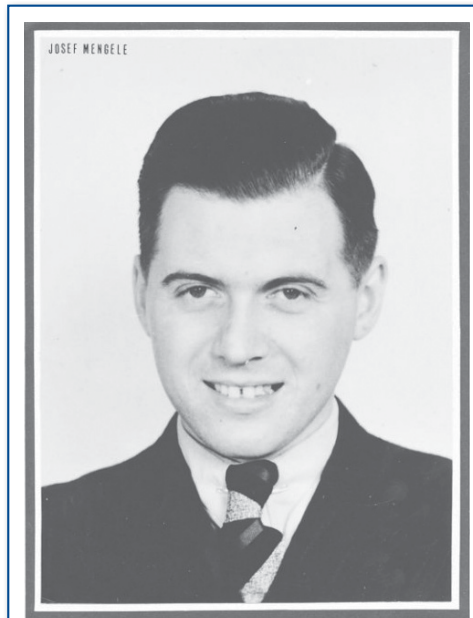
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during the trial. However, the American experiments were not considered brutal and this legal strategy failed to convince the judges. Today, the Nuremberg Code forms the basis of all human research guidelines throughout the world. It is historically fitting that the apology from the German Medical Association for crimes committed by physicians under the Nazis took place at a meeting held in Nuremberg.

There is another legacy of the Nuremberg Doctors Trial which was not positive. It let the leading members of the German Medical profession off the hook for their participation in Nazi atrocities and human rights violations. Andrew Ivy, MD, one of the two American medical consultants at the Doctors' Trial thought there were no more than two hundred criminals although "several hundred more knew what was going on." This conclusion made it appear that there were a small number of aberrant German physicians who committed atrocities. It allowed the rest of the German medical profession to evade their involvement in Nazi crimes.

As one scholar wrote: "Absent from the dock were the leaders of the medical profession of the Third Reich, in particular the academic and scientific elite. It was this elite who legitimized the devaluation of human life and set the stage for medical crimes—crimes in which leading academics and scientists were either principals or accomplices." The annals of the downfall of German medicine are replete with the names of internationally renowned scientists who conducted experiments on human specimens from uninformed subjects not at death camps but at respected universities. The German academic and medical community over the years attempted to suppress the overwhelming evidence of German physicians' participation in Nazi atrocities and even to intimidate the investigators.

In 1933 when the Hitler regime assumed power a unanimous declaration from the Prussian Chamber of



Born in 1911, Josef Mengele was a German SS officer and a physician in the Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz. He qualified for scientific doctorates in Anthropology from Munich University and in Medicine from Frankfurt University. He became one of the more notorious characters to emerge from the Third Reich in World War II as an SS medical officer who supervised the selection of victims of the Holocaust, determining who was to be killed and who was to temporarily become a forced laborer, and for performing bizarre and murderous human experiments on prisoners. Surviving the war, after a period of living incognito in Germany he fled to South America, where he evaded capture for the rest of his life, despite being hunted as a Nazi war criminal. He drowned in 1979.

Physicians declared "its readiness to place all its energies and experience at the service of the Government of National Resurrection (the Nazis), which it salutes with joy and gratitude... none of us is likely to shed a single tear for the democratic government (the Weimar Republic) that has now passed into history." Dr. Alfons Stauber, president of the German Medical Association, wrote to Hitler that the Association "welcomes with the greatest joy the determination of the Reich government... with the promise faithfully to fulfill our duty as servants of the people's health." Nazi doctrine called for physicians to shift from the doctor of the individual to the doctor of the nation.

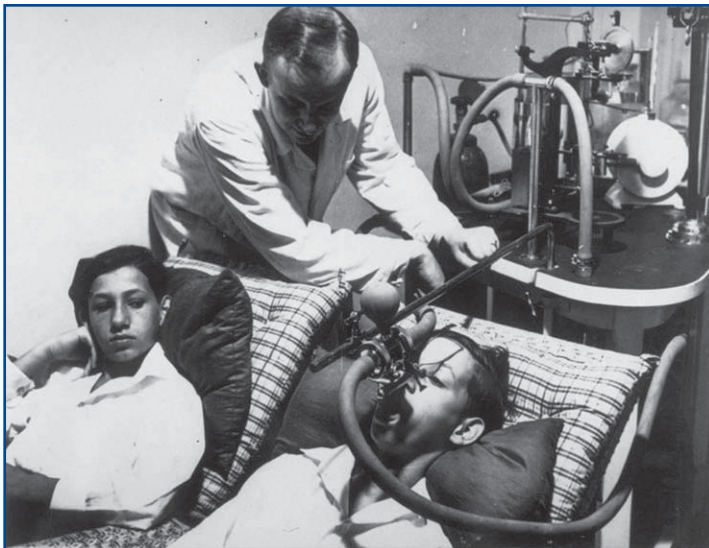
Almost 50% of the medical profession became members of the Nazi party—the highest of any profession. German doctors had no ethical compunctions about taking over the practices of their Jewish colleagues who suddenly lost their licenses because of Nazi racial policies. It is estimated that 17% of all medical doctors in

Germany were Jewish and from 40 to 50% of the physicians in Berlin were Jewish. Taking over the practices of Jewish doctors was a huge financial windfall for German doctors.

After World War II German physicians with direct ties to the Nazis were elected to leadership positions in the World Medical Association. One such physician, Dr. Ernst Fromm was a member of the SA and SS terror organizations was elected president of the WMA in 1973-74. Another physician, Dr. Hans Joachim Sewering, president elect of the WMA, was a member of the Nazi party. Review of hospital records showed that he was linked to the euthanasia of a 14-year-old girl. Pressure from within and without Germany forced him to resign.

Until now the German medical profession never officially expressed remorse for its actions during the Hitler era. The final words of the Declaration of the German Medical Association are memorable:

## PERSPECTIVE



Mengele used Auschwitz as an opportunity to continue his research on heredity, using inmates for human experimentation. He was particularly interested in identical twins; Mengele's experiments also included attempts to change eye color by injecting chemicals into children's eyes, various amputations of limbs, and other surgeries such as kidney removal, without anaesthesia.



The words "Arbeit Macht Frei" were above the main entrance gate at Auschwitz I gate meaning, "Work will set you free." The Auschwitz concentration camp was a network of concentration and extermination camps built and operated by the Third Reich in Polish areas annexed by Nazi Germany during World War II. It consisted of Auschwitz I (the base camp); Auschwitz II-Birkenau (the extermination camp); Auschwitz III-Monowitz (a labor camp to staff a factory), and 45 satellite camps.

"We acknowledge the responsibility for the medical crimes committed under the Nazi regime and regard these events as a warning for the present and the future..." "We pay our respects to all the victims, those still alive today and those who have already died, as well as their descendants and ask for their forgiveness."

It is important to recognize that the apology from the German Medical Association comes not from the actual perpetrators of the crimes and atrocities but from their descendants who did not have a role in establishing or implementing Nazi policies. In my estimation this makes their apology both appropriate and acceptable. The current members of the German Medical Association have joined with physicians in other Western democracies in supporting human rights and have publicly condemned the actions of their predecessors during the Nazi period.

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Photos from German Medical Association and Wikipedia.

