

Summary: Children as Victims of Medical Experiments in Concentration Camps

Astrid Ley's article from *In memory of the children* (Berlin 2011),
Summarised by Jani Patrakka

From a modern man's point of view, the atrocities committed during Second World War often seem unimaginable. Especially the incomprehensible cruelty on Jewish children in concentration camps disturbs researchers and history enthusiasts alike. Professor Astrid Ley introduces some examples of these dreadful deeds done in the name of scientific advancement in her article "Children as victims of medical experiments in concentration camps." In her 10-page article, she delves into the question of why these doctors could experiment on children at pleasure by analysing the historical context to some detail, and then proceeds to introduce three incidents in which children were subjected to brutal medical experiments which, in most cases, resulted in the victims' deaths in the early 40s, and elaborates the outcome of the experiments.

Throughout the existence of concentration camps, numerous scientists seized the opportunity to utilize ethically dubious methods of research on captured Jews, Sinti and Roma, Polish women or other groups of prisoners in the name of scientific progress, often with calamitous consequences to the test persons. Although at first most of the experiments were conducted on grown men, as the war progressed more workforce was needed to manufacture weapons for the Nazi army and thus the researchers turned their eyes to the least productive prisoners, in other words, children. Furthermore, after the 'Final Solution' was implemented and Jews were deported to the extermination camps in unprecedented numbers, the amount of disposable Jewish children grew exponentially. The suitable children were chosen from their ranks and dispatched to concentration camps for research purposes. As professor Ley stated in her article:

"Therefore, after the start of the mass deportations associated with the 'Final Solution' and due to the increased use of the labour of adult prisoners as of 1942, children became potential objects for medical experiments in the concentration camp."¹

¹ Astrid Ley, *Children as Victims*, p.47.

Sachsenhausen, Neuengamme and Auschwitz – curiosity and its inhumane consequences

The first of the aforementioned incidents took place in the Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp in 1944. Doctor Arnold Dohmen had chosen 11 Jewish boys in Auschwitz, aged 8 to 23, to participate in an experiment to determine whether (the still unresearched) hepatitis was infectious or not, and possibly to discover its cure. The children were experimented on for several months until the course of the war forced doctor Dohmen to suspend his work. Fortunately, all of the eleven boys lived through the horrors of the concentration camp and were eventually rescued by Allied forces.

The second incident is a more tragic story of twenty Jewish children held in captivity in Neuengamme Concentration Camp. Doctor Kurt Heißmeyer, a Nazi scientist specialised on lungs, extensively researched tuberculosis with complete disregard to the ethical dimensions of experimenting on living test persons. A few months before doctor Dohmen began his experiments, doctor Heißmeyer picked ten girls and ten boys amidst the prisoners, inflicted tuberculosis upon them and took their lymph nodes. His aim was to study a potential way of healing TB patients, of course, his procedure was by present day standards ethically unacceptable. Similarly to Dohmen's experiment, Heißmeyer's work was interrupted by Allied forces, and in order to remove all traces, the 20 children used for the experiment were hanged.

The last incident was the work of one doctor Josef Mengele, a man notorious for his atrocious work in Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp. Also known as the Angel of Death, Mengele carried out numerous key tasks in the extermination camp. He worked as a physician, as well as selected victims for slaughter and conducted highly unmoral experiments. This article, however, deals with his research on twin children in Auschwitz. Without virtually any ethical limitations to his work, Mengele's experiments were often excessively cruel, as Ley illustrates in her article:

“Mengele’s experiments had two phases. The first phase encompassed research ‘on the living object.’ [...] Furthermore, he conducted cruel experiments, such as experimental operations without anaesthesia, in order to compare the sensitivity of twins to pain. [...] The second investigatory phase consisted of autopsies. In order to be able to compare the internal organs of twins, Mengele killed the children at the same time by injecting chloroform into their hearts.”²

Doctor Mengele had done extensive research on genetics before his engagement with the Nazis and sought to further his studies with the new, ethically unhindered potential that concentration camps and the Nazi philosophy brought with them. For Mengele,

² Astrid Ley, children as victims, p.52.

Auschwitz provided ideal circumstances for genetics research; for it was the largest concentration camp in Nazi Germany. Its nearly 1.3 million deportees included copious twins whom were considered important for heredity research in those days. Few of Mengele's victims survived long enough to be rescued by Allied forces.

Discussing the discussion: Ley's article and its aspects

To summarise the article's overall appearance, the content of Astrid Ley's article is informative and well-exemplified with several quotes from the contemporaries' statements. Her way of writing is coherent and reader-friendly with regard to language, though a chronological order of the introduced events could have made the experience one notch smoother. Furthermore, the way Ley deals with potentially too graphic details regarding the horrors the children in these experiments endured is praiseworthy. Without excessive gore the article feels pleasantly academic and argumentative to read. However, the article lacks a conclusive section to summarise the aforesaid assertions which should be characteristic to any article of this length. The historical context could be further explained in the introduction section of the article, although without reading the entire tome one cannot say whether a more extensive historical synopsis was provided somewhere earlier in the book.

Overall, when it comes to articles concerning children as victims of medical experiments in concentration camps, Astrid Ley has produced an outstanding text with various brilliant observations and only a few deficiencies. Ley's perspective to the atrocities committed on concentration camps is a thought-provoking one forasmuch as there were plenty of scientists willing to tap into the potential of otherwise inconceivable human experiments which in itself is at least as dreadful a notion as the genocide of Jewry. To treat fellow human beings as cattle and subjugate them in horrific conditions to carry out seemingly justified medical experiments for negligible benefit represents all the appalling aspects of the holocaust that we must never forget in order to never repeat. Scientific advancement is a respectable ambition for any academic scholar but the end can never justify the means when it comes to violating basic human rights. Although the children described in the article suffered tremendously, countless others from all over Europe experienced no less gruesome fate, which makes both the research and the remembrance of these events crucial for the prevention of similar violations in the future. There are myriad articles concerning concentration camp atrocities, and yet Ley's article provides a unique perspective to the ethics of science with regard to deported Jewish children. As the text is very interesting by content, easy to read by language and thought-provoking by nature, Professor Astrid Ley's article is quite worth the read.

Source: Astrid Ley: Children as victims of medical experiments in concentration camps, in: Thomas Beddies (ed.): In memory of the children. Pediatricians and crimes against children in the Nazi period, Berlin 2011.