



# The Twin Children of the Holocaust: Stolen Childhood and the Will to Survive. Photographs from the Twins' 40th Anniversary Reunion at Auschwitz-Birkenau

Nancy L. Segal, Boston, Cherry Orchard Books, 2023, LCCN 2022049349 (ebook), ISBN 979-8887190860 (paperback), 110 pages

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Published online: 13 June 2023

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When I was asked to review this book I hesitated for a moment, fearing that the content would be too gruesome. But I went ahead anyway, thinking that regardless of the emotions it would stir up, reading it was necessary to begin to understand both the depths of depravity to which we humans may sink, and the carnage that can result when research is conducted without a solid grounding in morality and ethics, especially when the researchers believe in an ideology that invents and demonizes outgroups. Yet as I made my way through the book, I felt a surprising sense of uplift and inspiration. The pictures contained therein, which in the author's own words, "convey tragedy and heartbreak, but also courage and strength" (p. 67), made reading the book feel more like the application of a soothing balm than facing a sombre necessity.

In *The Twin Children of the Holocaust: Stolen Childhood and the Will to Survive*, prolific psychologist and twin researcher Nancy Segal provides a collection of annotated photographs she took while attending, in January 1985, the 40th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau deathcamp, where horrendous "experiments" were performed on twins. The commemoration took place at the site of the camp itself and brought together a small number of surviving twins, along with some non-twin survivors, press, and political officials. Estimates suggest that somewhere between 732 pairs of twins (for whom official records were found) and 1500 pairs were imprisoned at the camp, most of

whom were young Jewish children. Only about 200 twins survived the ordeal, which is not surprising given the torturous and often fatal "research" procedures conducted on them. Some days later public hearings on the crimes committed on the twins at Auschwitz-Birkenau were held at Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem, Israel. *The Twin Children of the Holocaust* includes annotated photographs of that event as well, which drew larger numbers of surviving twins, non-twin survivors, and public officials.

A key word in the title of this book, one that should not be forgotten, is "children." As mentioned, most of the twin victims were young children. Those lucky enough to survive the camps typically suffered from permanent physical and emotional trauma. As one survivor put it, "After the war there was no childhood for the children of Auschwitz" (p. 20). Their suffering was made all the more tragic and absurd by the observation that the research conducted at the camps was "devoid of scientific value" (p. 51), a conclusion reached by the Yad Vashem panel and endorsed by Segal. She points out that there is no evidence that the twins were even categorized by type (monozygotic vs. dizygotic), a basic first step in any twin research. Also, the twins were in such poor shape physically and psychologically due to their maltreatment in the camps that they could not be the source of any useful data.

In addition to the annotation provided with the photographs, the book presents a narrative account of the larger context of the Holocaust, focussing on the persecution of the twin children at Auschwitz-Birkenau. At the center of this story is the infamous deathcamp physician and physical anthropologist, Josef Mengele, who was an enthusiastic participant in the medical atrocities that were committed. At the time of the 40th anniversary commemorations and

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the hearings at Yad Vashem, Mengele's whereabouts were unknown to those who wanted to bring him to justice. Indeed, part of the rationale for the activities memorialized in the book was to drum up support for an organized effort to find Mengele. Within a few months of those activities, however, media accounts revealed that he had in fact died some six years earlier in a drowning accident in Brazil, having escaped justice for thirty-four years. The news of his death provided an unsatisfying denouement to the tragic saga.

One appeal of the book is its minimalist written text. Much like the descriptions of paintings or sculptures one sees in an art gallery, the annotation that accompanies each photograph guides but does not trample on the viewer's visual experience. The largely verbally unadorned images bring the victims to life, providing a poignant reminder of their reality and humanity. When Segal took the pictures, she was not an experienced photographer; her main

goal was to document the proceedings rather than provide studio-quality representations. The pictures are not unlike well-taken family snapshots and so have an air of authenticity and familiarity to them. Their informality reduces the psychological distance between the viewer and the persons depicted.

What is the value of this book? It provides a permanent memorial to the victims, who have a right to be known and to have their experiences shared. It also highlights the plight of children in the Holocaust, an issue that, surprisingly, has been understudied by Holocaust scholars. It offers a reminder and a warning that scientific research, especially that pertaining to genes and other biological influences, must always be moored to a profound sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of those affected by it.

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