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# Survival of the Smallest

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## Reviewed:

In Our Hearts We Were Giants: The Remarkable Story of the Lilliput Troupe—A Dwarf Family's Survival of the Holocaust

by Yehuda Koren and Eilat Negev

Carroll and Graf, 305 pp., \$25.00

Between May and July 1944, approximately 437,000 Jews and persons of Jewish descent but of a Christian religious affiliation were deported from Hungary to the concentration camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Most of them were older men, women, and children, because Jewish men between eighteen and forty-eight were being used by the Hungarian army as forced laborers. All were from the countryside since the regent of Hungary forbade deportation of the approximately 200,000 Budapest Jews.

The train ride to Auschwitz, in cattle cars crammed with eighty to a hundred people, lasted two or three days. Those who survived it were divided into separate columns of men and women and were made to pass before a German medical officer. More often than not, this was Dr. Josef Mengele, a tall, handsome, and elegant SS *Hauptsturmführer* (captain), who decided, usually with a flick of his baton, whether the deportee should be gassed immediately or allowed to live and work, at least for a while. At most, Mengele inquired about the deportee's age and

looked into his or her eyes: those under sixteen (later under fourteen) were killed; so was anyone seemingly too old for heavy physical labor.

Depending on the mood of Mengele and his fellow doctors and the availability of space in the barracks and the crematoria, fewer than 20 percent of the Hungarian arrivals were kept alive. The rest were gassed without anyone bothering to register their names. Only in a few cases was an entire family spared or an entire family killed immediately; and these must have been very small families. The book *The Auschwitz Album*—containing photographs by two SS men—portrays the arrival of families originating from northeastern Hungary, the poorest region in that country.

## 1

There are many pictures of children, some barefoot, a few fancily dressed. Within an hour or two, all would suffocate in the gas chambers, dying usually in the arms of their mothers or grandmothers. But their elder sisters and brothers were often spared. A friend of mine, a well-known scholar in Hungary, arrived in Auschwitz when she was a young woman, along with her parents, her grandmother, and five siblings; only she and two of her sisters passed Dr. Mengele's scrutiny. Her eldest sister could have saved herself had she been willing to give up her child.

Within that mass of doomed deportees, a tight-knit group of twenty-two (later twenty-three) survived both the first and all subsequent selections. This was because Dr. Mengele took an interest in twins, dwarfs, hunchbacks, and other human specimens he believed worthy of scientific research, and because the group included seven dwarfs who were brothers and sisters. Although in reality the group was made of three unrelated but closely tied families, the Ovitzes, the Slomowitzes, and the Fischmans, the dwarfs, who belonged to the Ovitz family, pretended that the sixteen others in the group, who were of normal size, were their immediate relatives, and this helped to save them. For simplicity's sake and because this is how the Germans treated them, I refer here to the three families as one.

**F**rom May 1944 until their liberation by Red Army troops in Auschwitz early in January 1945, the twenty-three people wore the outfits that they had worn in

the train to the camp, and not the ragged prison outfits given to the other prisoners. The dwarf women wore fake jewelry, makeup, furs, and silk dresses; their long hair was carefully combed. The family occupied separate quarters in the barracks, and the dwarfs were provided with miniature furniture. For this group there were no shaved heads, no roll calls, no beatings; nor did they have to work. In exchange, the dwarfs were occasionally called upon to entertain the SS and the prisoner aristocracy as singers and musicians, and at least once they were presented, nude, to the assembled SS dignitaries.

More importantly, they all had to provide large amounts of blood, as well as occasional extractions of bone marrow, for Dr. Mengele's pseudoscientific experiments in eugenics and heredity. The blood and bone marrow were callously and painfully collected by other prisoners and nurses. Mengele himself hardly ever touched his human guinea pigs. But as the dwarfs said afterward, none of them fell seriously ill. Under the protection of Mengele, they shared the privileges of the minor prisoner aristocracy. No wonder then that, in an early example of the Stockholm Syndrome, they both feared and looked up to the doctor who was mostly kind to them, saying that the children in the family should address him as "Onkel Mengele."

This then is the amazing story sympathetically and eloquently told by the Israeli journalists Yehuda Koren and Eilat Negev. Hearing about the family and wondering why no one had written about them, they interviewed the family members and acquaintances who were still alive in the 1990s. The last Ovitz dwarf recently died in Israel, and the members of the other families still alive had been very young when they were in Auschwitz. This leaves the authors, and the readers, with many unanswered questions, as is often the case in dealing with the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question." Nevertheless there is irrefutable evidence to prove the basic truth of the story, including a photograph in a Hungarian newspaper, published in April 1944, which showed the dwarfs in a hastily created ghetto, from which everyone would be deported to Auschwitz. Several SS documents list the names of the family members and the kinds of the experiments in which they were used, regardless of whether they were dwarfs or of normal size. Some of the documents bear Dr. Mengele's signature. Finally, a postwar photograph shows the seven Ovitz dwarfs arriving, elegant as ever, in Haifa harbor

in 1949.

The story of the Ovitz dwarfs begins in Rozavlea, in Hungarian Rozália, a small village in the county of Maramuresău (Máramaros), in northern Transylvania, which before 1918 was part of Hungary. It later became part of Romania, reverted to Hungary between 1940 and 1944, and became Romania again at the end of the war. Maramuresău is a land of mountains, forests, of nearly unchanged folktales and folkloric art. Rozavlea was traditionally inhabited by poor Romanian peasants and somewhat less poor Jews; it is not far from the town of Sighet, where the Nobel Prize winner Elie Wiesel was born and from where he was deported to Auschwitz at the age of sixteen.

Shimshon Eizik Ovitz was born in Rozavlea in 1868. He proved to be a dwarf, barely three feet tall. Shimshon was gently tolerated by his deeply pious Orthodox family because even though Jewish tales portrayed dwarfism as a punishment for wrongdoings, Jewish tradition also taught that deformed persons demonstrated the Lord's diverse powers of creation. At the age of eighteen, through a matchmaker, Shimshon married a woman of normal size. He became a professional entertainer, especially at weddings, and later a professional wise man, a sort of rabbi, a spiritualist, and a healer, all of which allowed him to earn an excellent living.

When his first wife died young, Shimshon took a second spouse who, too, was of normal size, but seven of the ten children the two wives gave birth to were not. Born between 1886 and 1921, Rozika, Franziska, Avram (Ábrahám), Frieda, Micki, Elizabeth (Erzsébet), and Perla (Piroska) never grew taller than three feet. They had normal-size heads but their torsos were small and their legs extremely short and weak. This meant that they had difficulties walking, needed help for many of their activities, and when old were often confined to a wheelchair. But as long as they were fairly young, the seven demonstrated their remarkable talent for singing, playing musical instruments, and acting.

As the Lilliput Troupe they performed in the Maramuresău region and in neighboring counties with such success that not only did they own the best house in the village but they bought a big car capable of transporting them and their

equipment. Their helpers came from the neighboring Slomowitz family. Five of the seven dwarfs married; their spouses were all of normal size but only Avram fathered a child who turned out not to be a dwarf. None of the dwarf women conceived, probably on the advice of doctors who warned that their pelvises were too narrow. The youngest, Perla Ovitz, never married despite having one of the loveliest faces and the kindest personalities in the family.

The Ovitzes, like most Jews of the region, spoke Yiddish at home but were also fluent in Hungarian, Romanian, and German. They felt attached to Hungarian culture, and when Hungary reannexed northern Transylvania in 1940 they became part of the theatrical scene in that country. Few Transylvanian Jews expected that liberation from anti-Semitic Romanian rule would mean a return not to the liberal and tolerant pre-World War I Habsburg Hungary but to life under a nationalist and anti-Semitic regime. A new series of anti-Semitic laws vastly reduced the percentage of Jews permitted to perform on the stage. But contrary to what the authors write, the laws did not, at least until 1944, completely exclude the Jews from theatrical life.

Perla, the last survivor of the ten brothers and sisters, was telling a tall tale, readily accepted by the authors, when she claimed that the only reason why they could go on performing after 1940 was because the authorities had inadvertently omitted to enter their religion in their identity cards. This allegedly permitted them to pass everywhere as Christians. But the Hungarian authorities, trained in the Habsburg bureaucratic tradition, would never have made such a mistake; nor would it have been possible—in a country where everybody knew who was a Jew—for a group of performers with such Semitic features and first names as those of the Ovitzes to be accepted as “Aryans.” It is much more likely that the Hungarian theatrical directors, as was common in the artistic world, were quietly sabotaging the law.

While the Lilliput Troupe performed in a state theater deep in Hungary, the German army marched into that country on March 19, 1944. Hitler invaded because Hungary was secretly attempting to secede from the war and refusing to deliver to Germany its 800,000-odd Jews. At the orders of the Nazis, Regent Miklós Horthy now appointed an unconditionally pro-German government which

attempted, vainly, to mobilize the nation for a last-ditch effort to stop the Soviet Red Army, which was by then rapidly approaching Hungary. More successful and more popular was Adolf Eichmann's plan to deport the Hungarian Jews, a plan that landed the Ovitz family in a deportation train arriving in Auschwitz on May 18, 1944.

The seven Ovitzes, who formed the largest dwarf family to have arrived in Auschwitz, were immediately identified on the ramp, whereupon they distributed their autographed card to the SS men. (The card is reproduced in the book and is inscribed, in Romanian, "Souvenir from the Lilliput Troupe.") When learning of their arrival, Mengele was "beside himself with joy," according to an eyewitness account.

## 2

Every single member of the family insisted to the authors that well after the other arrivals had been gassed, perhaps because of some misunderstanding, the entire family was taken to the gas chambers. They were, they said, locked into the chamber all by themselves; the gas vents were opened, and they began to choke. Suddenly, they heard Mengele's voice from the outside, crying, "Where is my dwarf family?!" and ordering that the doors be opened and the family be quickly revived. Koren and Negev reject this story, arguing that the gas chambers accommodated between five hundred and two thousand victims; that they would never had been used for such a small number; that once the gas started flowing, there was no way to stop it, and SS officers in the crematorium could have shot the group. The authors then speculate that the family must have mistaken the disinfection room, with its strong smell, for a gas chamber. More likely, in my view, the family simply dramatized what happened to them. Still, such a story makes one wonder about the veracity of some of the other tales they told. The book lacks footnotes.

Why, moreover, do other survivors of the Mengele experiments report so little, or often nothing, about the seven dwarfs, who must have been the sensation

of the clinics and the morgue run by Mengele? Dr. Miklós Nyiszli, a Hungarian Jew, also from Transylvania, who acted as Mengele's dissecting physician, and whose controversial memoirs, first published in Hungarian in 1946, were translated into many languages, says nothing about the dwarfs, although he has much to say about the twins assembled by Mengele, some of whom were killed specifically so that he would be able to dissect them at Mengele's request.

### 3

The question remains how important the dwarfs were for Mengele's "scientific" experiments. It seems clear that his main interest was in the twins, whom he used to study the respective influences of heredity and environment on human beings. Many twins were tortured and killed, while others survived, to be photographed and filmed by the Soviet liberators. Mengele may have kept a dozen or so dwarfs alive so as to be able to demonstrate the degeneracy of the Jewish race as well as for his own amusement. The Ovitzes were his court jesters.

### 4

Koren and Negev devote considerable attention to the state of scientific understanding of dwarfism as well as the history of dwarfs, explaining that Mengele's research on dwarfism was overshadowed by that of Dr. Hans Grebe, a colleague in the SS, who in 1952 published a well-received paper in Germany on a rare form of short-limb dwarfism, the type that characterized the seven Ovitzes. A few years later, two French physicians named the Ovitzes' type of dwarfism pseudoachandroplasia or pseudoachandroplastic dysplasia, which is marked by extremely short, almost useless legs, but also by "normal," often attractive, faces and heads. It appears that this type of dwarfism occurs only once in every 60,000 live births.

As the substantial literature on dwarfs shows, they were alternately admired and persecuted in history. In ancient Egypt, dwarfs were often venerated like gods. In

Greek and Roman societies, which emphasized the perfection of the body and of “*mens sana in corpore sano*,” dwarfs were often ridiculed or mistreated. In Sparta dwarfs were killed. The Christians advocated pity for the infirm, which did not prevent individual Christians from mistreating dwarfs. At all times, dwarfs also served as a source of amusement. They were treated like children and were assigned to entertain children. Augustus Caesar had his favorite dwarf and so did many medieval kings. A few dwarfs exercised considerable political influence at court; others were court fools. Velázquez painted them many times, and so did other artists.

## 5

The Ovitzes themselves once performed for King Carol II of Romania, who, according to Perla, “fondled us, as if deciding if we were real people or mechanical dolls.”

In modern times, dwarfs became a regular presence at freak shows, being usually displayed as “the smallest person on earth,” called, for example, “Princess Elisabeth” or “General Tom Thumb.” Whereas they were often badly abused by medical doctors and freak-show directors, circus work as well as acting on the stage and in films provided thousands with a dignified way of earning a living that otherwise may have been unavailable.

## 6

There was an entire “Midget Village” at the 1933 Chicago World’s Fair, and 124 dwarfs were hired to act in the 1939 Hollywood production of *The Wizard of Oz* both as the kind Munchkins and as the evil flying monkeys of the Wicked Witch of the West.

From all that has been written about Nazi doctors and their experiments in Auschwitz, it becomes fairly clear that the experiments were generally useless, even though the Nazi doctors were in the unique position of having live patients on whom every new idea and method could be freely tried. Few of these doctors were



punished after the war; most went on to hold academic positions and be awarded official decorations in the West German Republic. Dr. Mengele became a scapegoat for the others, not because he was less guilty than is generally assumed

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but because he was one of the handful who chose exile rather than staying at home for a few difficult years.

Mengele fled Germany in the summer of 1948 with the assistance of fellow Nazis, Italian Fascists, Catholic clergy, and employees of the International Red Cross. He landed in Perón's Argentina, which offered him, and other Nazi war criminals, absolute protection. Not that anyone was seriously looking for him at that time: he was able to return for a visit to Switzerland in 1956, where he met with his son. He even took out a passport in his own name at the German embassy in Buenos Aires and was listed in the city telephone directory. When the German authorities finally decided to look for him, he moved, in 1960, first to Paraguay and then to a comfortable life in Brazil.

Later, his fortunes began to decline as his family became tired of providing him with money and wary of the damage that he was doing to the reputation of the family business, Mengele and Co., which manufactured agricultural equipment. His first wife divorced him and his second wife eventually moved back to Europe. His son all but repudiated him, and when Joseph Mengele died, either a suicide or by accident, in 1979, at the age of sixty-eight, he seems to have been a bitter and disappointed man as well as a poor one. He had killed and tortured in Auschwitz mainly in order to achieve the prestigious position of *ordentlicher Universitätsprofessor* (full professor). He had provided his colleagues in Frankfurt and Berlin with all the nonmatching eyes, deformed skulls, abnormal hearts, skeletons of twins, and whatever else the various official institutes for the study of racial hygiene required. He consoled himself with the thought that he had done his duty and that he had participated in the struggle of the German people against the Jews. As he wrote in a letter in 1969, Jews are the ones “who create the pernicious ideology [*Ungeist*] of this bad age [*Unzeit*]; who are controlling the mass media, and who are thus able to manipulate the rest of humanity.”

The question remains why Mengele and other Nazi doctors so callously betrayed the Hippocratic oath. A brief but convincing answer is provided by Dennis B. Klein:

The medical establishment in Nazi Germany cast the “Jewish question” as a public health problem, a “disease” that contaminated the body politic. Physicians presided over genetic health courts, administered genetic counseling centers, planned and carried out the “euthanasia” operations, and justified “selections” and experiments on inmates in the camps as progressive medical practice.

In January 1945 Dr. Mengele left Auschwitz for Germany, leaving behind many of his research papers. There also remained some 50,000 inmates in Auschwitz I, which housed mainly Polish and other political prisoners, and in Birkenau, the camp for most Jews. Gassings had ceased two months earlier, and now the survivors were driven on foot, in death marches, toward Germany. Only a few thousand of the weakest and the sickest were allowed to stay put, as well as many of Mengele’s guinea pigs, among them the twenty-three of the Ovitz-Slomowitz-Fischman family. Liberated by the Russians on January 27, they were sent from one camp to another until they were finally allowed to return home to Transylvania. There they learned that many of their relatives had perished and that their houses had been plundered by the neighbors, as happened nearly everywhere. But they were able to unearth some modest savings and precious objects hidden before deportation, and this allowed them to reconstitute the Lilliput Troupe. In 1946, the family left for Belgium and in 1949 they emigrated to Israel. There they performed again until retiring from the stage to run two movie houses in Haifa.

When the two authors paid a visit to Perla Ovitz, she was living alone, almost completely immobilized, but as dignified, charming, and talkative as ever. Neither

she nor the other dwarfs ever complained about being victims of an evil fate; they did not bemoan their growing physical suffering as it became more and more painful for them to move about. Smiling, laughing, joking, singing, and acting, they made the most of their difficult condition. And, in truth, being dwarfs enabled the seven to earn a living, to travel, to practice their favorite profession, to survive hell, and to help others to survive it too. Theirs was a life worth living and a story very worth telling. ●

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## István Deák

István Deák (1926–2023) was Seth Low Professor Emeritus at Columbia. He was the author, with Jan Gross and Tony Judt, of *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and Its Aftermath*.

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