

FORGIVING DR. MENGELE

A Film by Bob Hercules & Cheri Pugh

80 Minutes, Color & B/W, Video, 2005



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"FORGIVING DR. MENGELE" DRAMATIZES EXPLOSIVE MORAL DEBATE

**FILM CHRONICLING HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR'S SINGULAR QUEST FOR HEALING
PREMIERES IN NEW YORK MAY 18**

(NY -- February 21, 2006) "Forgiving Dr. Mengele," a bold and thought provoking new feature-length documentary that intimately explores the life and soul of a controversial Auschwitz Holocaust survivor from Terre Haute Indiana, opens in New York at the Two Boots Pioneer, 155 East 3rd Street (at Avenue A), on Thursday May 18. First Run Features, the film's US distributor, plans a multi-city theatrical roll-out for the film, which earned the Slamdance Film Festival's Special Jury Prize in January.

Shot and produced by the Chicago-based filmmakers Bob Hercules and Cheri Pugh, "Forgiving Dr. Mengele" dramatizes the emotional roller-coaster ride of an unlikely social activist who is viewed by turns as misguided and divisive by some and inspirational by others. Thrusting itself into the roiling debate about how Jews in general and Holocaust survivors in particular must view the perpetrators of Nazi atrocities and their German descendants, the film pointedly asks: is it easier to forgive than forget?

When Eva Mozes Kor is introduced to us in the summer of 2001, she does not seem to be cut out for the role of social activist and moral firebrand. A real estate agent with apparently conventional Middle-American aspirations (despite her thick Hungarian accent), Kor is returning to Auschwitz, as many have, in search of answers. However, unlike most survivors, Kor, who with her twin sister was an adolescent guinea pig of the sadistic Josef Mengele, has another objective -- to heal herself by forgiving the Nazis.

Over 4^{1/2} years, this personal agenda morphs into a political crusade, as Kor finds herself challenged -- in the US, Germany and Israel -- by other survivors who view her as nothing short of a traitor. Seemingly undeterred, Kor remains steadfast in her conviction that personal healing through forgiveness is not inconsistent with the need to never forget. Yet Kor's life and views -- and by extension the film itself -- take dramatic, unexpected turns: A meeting in the West Bank with Palestinian teachers yields decidedly mixed results. And, amazingly, we watch as this woman, who in 1995 (before her views of forgiveness were fully formed) built a tiny museum in a Terre Haute strip mall as a tribute of her twin sister Miriam and other children survivors, is forced to witness the destruction of this memorial by neo-Nazi hate-criminals. Will her convictions withstand these terrible tests?

An owner of the Chicago-based television production company Media Process Group, Hercules produced and directed "The Democratic Promise: Saul Alinsky & His Legacy," a Best Documentary winner at the 1999 Philadelphia International Film Festival, and of a Special Jury nod at the USA Film Festival. It was nominated for a Chicago/Midwest Emmy in 2000. His narrative short "The Last Frontier" won Best Dramatic Film at the 2001 IFP Flyover Zone Festival and is currently airing on the Independent Film Channel.

A film archivist at the WPA film library, Pugh has done extensive research on the Third Reich, WW II and the Holocaust, and has provided research and consulting services for numerous documentaries including "The 20th Century Series" for MPI Video, "A Stitch in Time" (a French/U.S. television co-production) and "The History of Newsreels."

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SYNOPSIS

Could you forgive a war criminal? Could you forgive your worst enemy if it released you from your past trauma?

Forgiving Dr. Mengele tells the story of a shocking act of forgiveness by Auschwitz survivor Eva Mozes Kor and the firestorm of criticism it has provoked. Eva and her twin sister, Miriam, were victims of Nazi doctor Josef Mengele's cruel genetic experiments—an experience that would haunt them their entire lives. We follow Eva's metamorphosis from embittered survivor to tireless advocate for reconciliation. This unexpected transformation was sparked when Eva, in an attempt to get information about the experiments, met with another former Auschwitz doctor. Eva's ideas about justice, revenge and the possibility of healing through forgiveness—as well as the passionate opposition from other survivors—become a window to a larger discussion of the many ways people define forgiveness.

Short Synopsis

Forgiving Dr. Mengele tells the remarkable story of Auschwitz survivor and former 'Mengele twin' Eva Mozes Kor and the transformation that led her to forgive the Nazi perpetrators as an act of self-healing.

BOB HERCULES

Producer/Director

Bob Hercules is an independent filmmaker and co-owner of Media Process Group—a Chicago-based television production company. Hercules' work has been seen widely on PBS, the Discovery Channel, the Independent Film Channel (IFC), The Learning Channel and through television syndication nationwide.

His most recent documentary, ***The Democratic Promise: Saul Alinsky & His Legacy*** (narrated by Alec Baldwin), won Best Documentary at the 1999 Philadelphia International Film Festival, a Special Jury Prize at the 1999 USA Film Festival and was nominated for a Chicago/Midwest Emmy in 2000. The program was funded by ITVS and aired on PBS in March, 2000.

His recent narrative short, ***The Last Frontier*** (a satire of the commercialization of our culture and shot on HD 24p) won Best Dramatic Film at the 2001 IFP Flyover Zone Film Festival and is currently airing the Independent Film Channel.

Cheri Pugh

Co-Producer/Co-Director

Cheri Pugh is a graduate of Northwestern University with a degree in modern European history. She has done extensive research on the Third Reich, World War II and the Holocaust. Pugh worked for eight years as a film archivist at WPA film library, one of the most extensive film archives in the world. At WPA Pugh catalogued hundreds of hours of historical footage dating from the 1890's to the 1970's. She has also provided research and consulting services for numerous documentaries including "The 20th Century Series" for MPI Video, "A Stitch in Time" (a French/U.S. television co-production) and "The History of Newsreels."

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NBC News, RTL - Holland Media Groep, WTHI (Terre Haute), WTWO (Terre Haute), Eastern Illinois University, Kent State University, WPA Film Films, Olin/Hake Films

ARCHIVAL PHOTOS COURTESY OF

C.A.N.D.L.E.S. Holocaust Museum, Eva Mozes Kor, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Yad Vashem (Israel)

SPECIAL THANKS TO

Cantor Joseph Malovany, Michael Niederman, Gordon Quinn, Jerry Blumenthal, Judy Hoffman, Libi Hake, Ines Somer, Cyndy Moran, Julie Johnson, Paul Asay, Carol, Marin, Marianthi Bumbaris, Mitch Blacher, Mariusz Sikorski, John McCarthy, Helena Kubika, Todd Weinecke

Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum (Oswiecim Poland), Max Planck Gesellschaft (Germany), Peace Research Institute in the Middle East, Talitha Kumi School (Beit Jala - Palestinian Territories), Imperial War Museum (London), Spertus Institute (Chicago), Valparaiso Public Schools, Bucknell University, Freie Universitat (Berlin-Dahlem)

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DEDICATED TO CHUCK OLIN

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INTERVIEW WITH BOB HERCULES

TELL US ABOUT THE GENESIS OF THIS DOCUMENTARY. HOW DID THE IDEA COME ABOUT AND HOW LONG DID IT TAKE TO MAKE?

The idea for the film began in December 2000 when [co-director and co-producer] Cheri Pugh was doing some archival film research on Holocaust footage as part of her job at WPA Film Library in Chicago. She came across a shot of a group of twins marching out of Auschwitz that was filmed by Russian filmmakers at the liberation of the camp in 1945. She was particularly intrigued with this shot since it seemed somewhat unusual for concentration camp inmates. They were children and they were not dressed as inmates. The two little girls at the head of the line were especially captivating.

She did a Google search of twins/Auschwitz/Mengele and came across a Web site that had a still frame of the same footage on its home page. The site was for a museum called C.A.N.D.L.E.S. in Terre Haute, Indiana, run by a woman named Eva Mozes Kor. Cheri called the number on the site and the woman who answered turned out to be Ms. Kor. Very quickly Cheri realized that the woman on the phone was one of the two little girls at the head of the line. She was talking to the girl on her TV screen, now a 69-year-old woman.

Cheri became so interested in Eva's story that she went down to Terre Haute to meet her and decided right away to make a film about her life. She contacted me and we started filming in June 2001, accompanying Eva on a trip to Berlin and then Auschwitz. It has taken over 4-and-a-half years to make the film.

HOW WAS THE FILM PRODUCED?

The film was produced through my production company, Media Process Group, and financed through government and foundation grants, and from Cheri's and my own funds.

WERE THERE ANY PARTICULAR CHALLENGES IN MAKING THE DOCUMENTARY THAT INFLUENCED THE OUTCOME?

Besides the constant fundraising challenges the trip to Israel where Eva meets a group of Palestinian teachers was probably the most daunting -- both logistically and emotionally. During the week we spent in Israel there was a bus bombing in Jerusalem that killed 30 people and then a series of reprisals and counter-reprisals between both sides. It made it very difficult to even get across to the West Bank to meet with the teachers and the week's violence contributed to the awkward meeting that is shown in the film.

But clearly this adventure deepened the moral conflict significantly.

DID YOU KNOW THAT THE MORAL DILEMMA CENTRAL TO THE FILM WOULD BE SO COMPLICATED AND DRAMATIC? HOW DID YOUR FEELINGS ABOUT THE CENTRAL ISSUE OF FORGIVENESS CHANGE IN THE COURSE OF MAKING THE FILM?

We knew right away that Eva's concept of forgiveness was highly controversial and had the potential to be misunderstood. It was important for us as filmmakers to show both sides (or many sides) of the argument instead of just her side. It has proved to be a highly charged topic. What we may not have realized is how universal this moral dilemma is. It resonates not only with survivors, but also with people caught in many of the conflicts embroiling the world today. Actually Eva's philosophy has the potential to resonate (positively or negatively) with anyone who has been severely victimized.

Our initial reaction when she detailed to us her forgiveness of the Nazi perpetrators was shock, skepticism and confusion. But our feelings evolved over the nearly five years of production as we witnessed how forgiveness had allowed Eva to make peace with her past (and how other survivors had remained locked in their role as victims of their past, which can be unfortunate, even if understandable).

DID YOU MAKE THE SAME DOCUMENTARY YOU SET OUT TO MAKE IN THE BEGINNING?
WHAT HAPPENED THAT MIGHT HAVE CHANGED THE OUTCOME?

You never know what course a documentary will take once you start (that's both the beauty and frustration of the form). We didn't realize the extent of the opposition Eva would face when we started. We also didn't originally plan on going to Israel and taking Eva's concept out into the larger world, but it sort of took that course on its own. The other huge unplanned event was the firebombing of Eva's C.A.N.D.L.E.S Holocaust Museum in November 2003. That was a shocking, tragic event that became a major focus of the final third of the film.

WHAT ARE YOUR FEELINGS ABOUT THE FILM'S PROTAGONIST EVA MOZES KOR? DID SHE HELP OR COMPLICATE HER MISSION IN THE TIME YOU HAVE KNOWN HER AND WHEN YOU WERE FILMING HER?

We feel that Eva Kor is a very complicated person. We greatly admire the courage it took to survive the ghastly ordeal at Auschwitz and the persistence she brings in trying to spread her message of healing through forgiveness. We also admire her tremendous sense of humor (even in the face of so much adversity). She can occasionally act without thinking and that is where she sometimes gets into situations that are challenging to her. Overall though, most people we met respect her and her mission and they know she is the real thing and has great passion for what she is trying to accomplish.

IS SHE AN IDEALIST ON A QUIXOTIC MISSION OR DO YOU SEE HER OPINIONS GAINING CURRENCY?

Eva Kor is an idealist who has taken a path few are willing to take. Yet her ideas about forgiveness and reconciliation have found lots of currency in the many events and speeches she attends. As we see in the film, schoolchildren learn tremendous lessons from Eva, and, for adults, she really makes you think about your own position vis à vis forgiveness. It's obviously an important position since she is in constant demand as a speaker.

WITHOUT ASKING YOU TO BETRAY YOUR PROTAGONIST, DO YOU ON ANY LEVEL AGREE WITH THE PEOPLE WHO INSIST THAT FORGIVING IS MORALLY IMPOSSIBLE AND TANTAMOUNT TO DISHONORING THOSE WHO PERISHED AT THE HANDS OF THE NAZIS?

We do not agree with the people who insist that forgiving the Nazis is morally impossible, since Eva is forgiving in her name alone, and she is forgiving but not forgetting. Her focus is on the victim, not on the perpetrator and by forgiving she regains some power over that experience. We feel we have no moral authority to question her own personal choice. It's interesting, though, that sometimes people infer that forgiveness is somehow our idea, but we explain we are filmmakers documenting someone who has chosen to forgive.

WHAT MAKES THE MORAL ISSUES IN YOUR FILM SO EMOTIONALLY CHARGED?

The reasons that forgiveness is such a morally charged issue is that the word itself is interpreted in different ways and some associate it with 'letting the perpetrator off the hook.' It is also complicated by the tremendous symbolism of Nazism. Yet, as I just said, it is an individual choice, not one stated in the name of all survivors.

For other viewers it touches an emotional core. Who hasn't been asked for forgiveness or hasn't contemplated forgiving someone else who has wronged them? This is why the subject itself can be uncomfortable yet one that needs to be raised.

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A HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR'S PATH TO PEACE**Forgiving Josef Mengele**

By *Roman Heflik*

Eva Kor and her twin sister both miraculously survived Auschwitz and the infamous SS doctor Josef Mengele. But despite almost being murdered, Eva forgave the Nazis. The documentary of her life has now been shown for the first time in Germany.

A quick look at the medical charts was enough. "You have just two weeks to live," the doctor said. That was it; he then left the sick bay -- without giving his patient, the 10-year-old Eva, any medication. Why should he when he wanted the young Romanian girl to die. The doctor, Josef Mengele, had himself injected her with a lethal cocktail of bacteria.

It was the spring of 1944 when Eva Kor, along with her twin sister Miriam and her mother, arrived in the concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. When the family climbed down from the train, an agitated SS guard ran up to them yelling "Twins! Twins!" A few moments later, Eva and Miriam were torn away from their mother. They never saw her again.

Fast forward more than 60 years, and the young girl Eva is now an old woman of 71. She has curly white hair and is, on this Tuesday evening, sporting a blue outfit with short sleeves and a silk shawl. On her left forearm, her tattoo from Auschwitz is still easily visible: A-7063. Yet while the fact that Eva is still alive may be astounding enough, it is her presence in Hamburg at the invitation of the Körber Foundation this week -- and the German debut of a documentary film about her life -- that really takes one's breath away. The film -- made by filmmaker Bob Hercules and historian Cheri Pugh, both American -- is called "Forgiving Dr. Mengele." Because that is exactly what Eva Mozes Kor did.

Her story, though, came close to ending prematurely -- as did so many in the death camps of World War II. After being selected from among the new arrivals, the sisters were brought to the now-infamous camp doctor Josef Mengele. Mengele had a standing order for twins; he needed them for his "medical experiments." Most of the time, he injected one of the twins with poison or with a bacteria or virus and then documented the development of the disease and the onset of death. As soon as the test patient died, he and his assistants would then immediately murder the twin sibling -- usually with an injection in the heart -- before performing simultaneous autopsies. Some 1,400 pairs of twins fell victim to Mengele's barbaric experiments.

Forgiveness and healing

And it was exactly this that he intended to do with the Kor twins. "But he had another thing coming," Eva says defiantly. Thanks to an iron will -- and a strong immune system -- Eva survived the disease Mengele had injected into her veins. "I just kept thinking, 'If I die, then Miriam will be murdered as well.'"

On Jan. 27, 1945, the Soviet Red Army liberated the survivors of Auschwitz-Birkenau and brought their nightmare to an end. Not too much later, the Kor twins emigrated to Israel. Eva then moved on to the United States, started her own family and became a real estate broker. But the suffering stayed with them. Miriam, too, had apparently received an injection from Mengele, but nobody could figure out what she was suffering from. Her kidneys, though, were failing. Once again, Eva did what she could to save her sister's life and donated one of her own kidneys. But the disease could not be stopped and, in 1993, Miriam died in Israel.

Since then, however, Eva's story has become one of forgiveness and personal healing. It has also become one of controversy. After all, the film, shown at the Körber Foundation on Tuesday night, does not focus on annihilation and guilt, as do so many Holocaust films that came before it. Rather, it is about a woman who made peace with those who exterminated her family and who tried to exterminate her.

Kor's path to peace began with a trip to the country of her would-be murderers from her current hometown of Terre Haute, Indiana. Only a few weeks after the death of her sister, Eva flew to Germany to meet with a German doctor. Hans Münch was his name, and he had worked alongside Mengele in Auschwitz. After World War II ended, the SS-medic faced war crimes charges, but was found not guilty. In contrast to his colleagues, it was found that Münch had not carried out any experiments on his patients.

A former Nazi with a shy smile

She was incredibly nervous when she finally found herself standing in front of Münch's door, Kor says. But then, an elderly gentleman with snow-white hair, a carefully trimmed beard and a shy smile opened the door. Yes, he admitted, he had been there during the gassings. "And that's my problem," he went on. He still suffers from depression and nightmares as a result. Kor had gone looking for a monster, but found a human being instead. "I then decided that I would write Münch a letter in which I forgave him," Kor says.

But the resolute Auschwitz survivor went even further than that. When, in January 1995, the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz was celebrated, Kor brought Münch along. On the snow-covered site of the former extermination camp, she read a confession of guilt from Münch to the gathered press. She saw it as an important statement from an eye-witness that could be used to contradict those who would deny the Holocaust. But then, she said, "In my own name, I forgive all Nazis."

The other former concentration camp prisoners were horrified. "We have no right to forgive the perpetrators in the names of the victims," was the formulation often used. Kor's private amnesty was shocking, said one woman who had also been a victim of Mengele's experiments on twins. And ever since Kor's personal clemency, a number of Auschwitz survivors have done their best to avoid her. The pain and anger is just too deep. Can one really forgive pure evil? By doing so, does one not exonerate the murderers and torturers who ran the camps?

The American real estate agent today, though, is certain that she did the right thing. "I felt as though an incredibly heavy weight of suffering had been lifted," she says. "I never thought I could be so strong." She says that because she was able to forgive her worst enemies, she was finally able to free herself from her victim status. But, she is quick to add, forgiveness does not mean forgetting. "What the victims do does not change what happened," she says. But every victim has the right to heal themselves as well as they can. "And the best thing about the remedy of forgiveness," she says, "is that there are no side effects. And everybody can afford it."

First Run nabs 'Mengele,' 'Aristide'

Tue Nov 15, 2005 5:46 AM ET

By Gregg Goldstein

NEW YORK (Hollywood Reporter) - First Run Features has acquired all North American rights to two politically charged documentaries, "Forgiving Dr. Mengele" and "Aristide and the Endless Revolution."

Bob Hercules and Cheri Pugh's "Mengele" follows twin sisters who survived genetic experiments at the hands of notorious Nazi doctor Josef Mengele in their quest to reconcile with perpetrators of similar crimes.

Nicolas Rossier's "Aristide" features an extensive interview with the exiled Haitian president, along with commentary from his supporters and critics.

First Run plans a spring theatrical release for "Mengele" and a DVD release in fall 2006. "Aristide" opens Thursday in New York, with tentative plans for releases in other cities before an anticipated summer home video bow.

First Run's current releases include "The Goebbels Experiment" and "One Bright Shining Moment," a portrait of 1972 presidential candidate George McGovern.



'I was a guinea pig for Mengele'

By CNN's Dr. Sanjay Gupta

ATLANTA, Georgia (CNN) -- As she recounts her story 60 years later, 70-year-old Eva Kor says it's as if she's back at Auschwitz with her twin sister, Miriam. The pain and horror are still very real.

"An SS was running up and down, yelling in German, 'Twins?'

"He approached us and demanded to know if we were twins," Kor says.

"Another SS came and pulled my mother in one direction. We were pulled in the opposite direction. We were crying, she was crying.

"I remember looking back and seeing my mother's arms stretched out in despair as she was pulled away. I never even got to say goodbye to her because this was the last time we saw her."

As a routine, Dr. Josef Mengele -- called the "angel of death" -- decided with the flick of his hand to either send people to prison camp or to death in the gas chambers.

And by mere virtue of being twins, Eva and Miriam's lives would be saved.

"They said, 'Well, you might have noticed that we are all twins, and we are used in experiments conducted by Dr. Mengele.'

"As long as Dr. Mengele wanted us alive, no one dared harm us. We were Mengele's kids."

Mengele and fellow doctors performed gruesome genetic experiments on thousands of twins

"Our clothes would be removed and we would sit naked on benches for six to eight hours, most of the day. Every part of my body was measured, compared to charts, and compared between each twin.

"The other experiments were much more dangerous ... They would tie both of my arms, take a lot of blood from my left arm, on occasion enough blood until I fainted. And that was, they wanted to know how much blood a person could lose and still live," she says.

"At the same time I was given a minimum of five injections into my right arm. We don't know what the substances were, but the rumors were that they were germs and chemicals."

Under Mengele's watch, she says, other twins were sterilized, had limbs amputated and were castrated without anesthesia.

"Mengele wanted to play God. We have to understand he didn't just do these experiments because he was crazy. He wanted to create blue-eyed blondes in multiple numbers," Kor says.

The experiments did not contribute to greater scientific progress. Most historians regard his treatment of the twins merely as an exercise in cruelty.

Decades after Auschwitz's liberation, Eva Kor is still healing -- in part by erecting a museum called CANDLES, which stands for Children of Auschwitz Nazi Deadly Lab Experiments Survivors.

Kor says she was forced to rebuild it after anti-Semites burned it down in 2003.

Remarkably, Kor says she has forgiven the arsonists -- and forgiven Mengele for the experiments and a lifetime of ill health.

She also forgives Mengele for her sister's death by a rare form of cancer, which she believes is the result of the experiments.

"Here I was, that nobody, that guinea pig that had no value in Mengele's eyes, and yet I had the power to forgive the God of Auschwitz," Kor says.

"Forgiveness is nothing more, nothing less than an act of self-healing, an act of reclaiming your life."