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By WALTER H. CAPPS

Memories of the Nazi era and the atrocities of the death camps have been made vivid again.

For the past two weeks attention has been focused on a cemetery in the town of Embu—south of Sao Paulo, Brazil—where investigators exhumed the body of a man believed to be Josef Mengele, the despised Nazi death-camp doctor. Mengele sent 300,000 to 400,000 Jews to the gas chambers. He also performed ghoulish medical experiments on women and children at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

By last week there seemed to be a growing possibility that the bones that had been lifted from the grave were indeed those of the hated "Angel of Death." Rolf Mengele, Josef's son, said in Munich that he had "no doubt" that it was his father who was buried in 1979. Simon Wiesenthal, the noted Nazi hunter, expressed suspicion at first, but was willing to believe that the search that generated close to \$4 million in reward money for Mengele's capture had come to its culmination.

If the body does indeed turn out to be Josef Mengele's, the discovery of a dead rather than a living fugitive from

justice forces distinctions between moral, juridical and historical aspects of the case. Mengele will never be brought to trial. The crimes of which he is accused will never be heard within a court of law. Those who have been driven by the compulsion to bring the Nazi war criminal to justice will be cruelly disappointed. And vengeance will not find an appropriate target.

Yet, given the enormity of the crime, the score could never be settled. A perpetrator of an absolute atrocity can never be brought to full justice. In this sense Josef Mengele went to his death under a verdict that the world had already rendered. The discovery of his body simply offers an end to the mystery of his whereabouts.

Historically it is another matter. It is important that all the facts of the case be assembled and interpreted. It is necessary that we learn as much as we can about how the fugitive traveled, how he was sheltered, with whom he remained in contact, what he talked and wrote about, and how he lived. Did the Vatican really play a role in his escape? How was the situation handled by the United

States? Investigative work on these and other questions must be brought to completion, in the little time that remains, before the World War II generation of witnesses passes from the scene.

The fact is that the story about Josef Mengele is only partly about him. It is also a mnemonic device to safeguard the deeper truths about Auschwitz.

The world cannot and shall not forget what happened there. Auschwitz explains that human life is forever cast within the tension between the desire to destroy and the aspiration to triumph over this annihilating impulse. The moral lessons and challenges that became shatteringly explicit 40 years ago are as acutely compelling today. This is why the Mengele story, as reprehensible as it is, owns an indelible place in the larger drama concerning the odyssey of the human spirit.

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