

# The tragic story of the 20 Children of Bullenhuser Damm and the pseudoscientific experiments on tuberculosis

**Maria Pia Bernicchia**

*Children are the future of the world*

## **To the children a hug**

*for all the stolen childhoods  
for the broken bonds  
for the cut flowers  
for the journeys with no return  
for all the "human-projects" ever realized  
for all the wounds of abandonment  
for all the cold  
for all the fear  
for all the hatred  
for all the hunger  
for all the non-love...*

The Holocaust of the children.

This is the greatest tragedy of mankind.

For decades now I have been carrying out painstaking historical research, studying the tragedy of the Holocaust. It is difficult to do. It often takes my breath away. Truly, a lump forms in my throat and I find it hard to breathe. Some might ask the question: Why "remember"?

I have learned the value of "remembering" from Jewish culture. For me, too, it has become an imperative, something I simply cannot evade.

I try to put back together lives shattered by Evil, to piece together scraps of information – the thousands of tiny fragments of a puzzle. I give back names, restore dignity, confirm the existence of ones who are no more, and acknowledge their membership of the human race. In short, I keep alive the memory of the children of the Holocaust.

My role is the exact opposite their persecutor's; I try to defeat the "Banality of Evil" with an "Immense Good", whose ingredients are care, research, passion, patience, dedication, solidarity and gentleness.

It is said that "*children are the future of the world*" and the Nazis realised the truth of this. This is precisely why the extermination plan envisaged that the children would be the first to be killed.

And yet, at the end of 1944, there were over 300 children interned in Hut 11 at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Why? What were those poor children doing in that hell hole? This is the starting point for the very sad story that I am about to tell you, a horrible true story.

It was 27 November, 1944, when Mengele, the Nazi

doctor also known as the "angel of death", appeared on the threshold of Hut 11 at Auschwitz-Birkenau and said: "*If you want to see your mummy, step forward*".

*... and some children did step forward. They dreamed of the love denied; they hoped to find again the warmth of their mothers' embraces; they confided in the sweet promise of those words; they trusted the dream. They already tasted the kisses; they were consumed by desire; they had a foretaste of the joy of that flight, that dive into those arms so dreamed of. For an instant they found the stolen joys again; they trusted and... fell into the blackest hell. What awaited them was not the arms of their mothers to rock them, not the kisses to comfort them, not the lullaby to warm them and the hugs... but months of torments, of fever, of abandonment, of surgery on the lymph nodes. **10 males and 10 females were taken from Hut 11** with the promise of their "mothers' arms". **The 20 children** aged between 5 and 12 were loaded onto a truck that took them from Birkenau to Auschwitz railway station. They were sent from Auschwitz to Neuengamme, a small concentration camp in the Northern Germany, near to Hamburg.*

The 20 children were of different nationalities:

14 were Polish,  
2 were French,  
2 were Dutch,  
1 is thought to have been from the former Yugoslavia,  
1 was Italian.

The thing they had in common was their religion: **these 20 children were all Jewish.**

They arrived at the Birkenau *Vernichtungslager* (extermination camp) at different times, and the first of our group of children to reach the unloading ramp at Auschwitz-Birkenau was the Italian child.

His name was **Sergio de Simone** and he was born in Naples on 29 November, 1937. The Italian Racial Laws of 1938, Italy's entry into the war, and a series of other events had prompted his mother, Gisella, to leave Naples and seek safety in her native home in Fiume, near Trieste.

Summer 1943 was the last happy summer little Sergio was to know, and he spent it by the sea, playing with his cousins Andra, aged four, and Tati, who was six, like him (Figure 1). That summer, Sergio, his childhood innocence still intact, was able to smile, laugh and collect the happy memories, of kisses and caresses, that he was going to need later on, when he would receive a different kind of treatment altogether.

The ugliness of racial persecution would spread as far as via Milano 15 in Fiume.

The date was 27 March, 1944. The militia man who entered the Perlows' home spoke Italian, and he was accompanied a German "in a long black coat" who barked at them to get ready, hurry up, dress the children... Granny Rosa begged; she cried and pleaded with him to at least spare the children. But it was to no avail. They were all rounded up and taken to the Risiera di San Sabba, a sorting camp in Trieste. Here, cruelly crammed together, they were locked up in a tiny cell to await deportation: eventually they were loaded onto a cattle truck and sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Sergio arrived, on the night of 4 April 1944, with his mother, grandmother, aunts and cousins Andra and Tati. What followed was an appalling "selection". Sergio's grandmother and Aunt Sonia, together with others, were put on a lorry and immediately sent to the gas chambers, while Sergio, his mother, Aunt Mira, and cousins Andra and Tati, having been in the line on the right, were temporarily spared. Then came the first great trauma for Sergio: that cruel wrench from his mother's grip. He may have struggled, he undoubtedly cried and implored, but there was no stopping the persecutor's wrath and Sergio found himself, together with the men, bound for the rite of "initiation". A number was tattooed on his left arm and from that moment on, this lovely little boy was merely number **179614**. He was then sent to Hut 11 where he rejoined his cousins and lots of other children he didn't know.

After that terrible 4 April, the months went by. Summer followed spring. It was hot and humid at Auschwitz-Birkenau. How different from the previous summer! What must have been going through the mind of that six-year-old boy? What must he have made of the fact that all of a sudden he no longer had his grandmother to cuddle him, his mother to cover him in kisses, or his aunts around him; the fact that all the adults in his life had disappeared and he was surrounded by dead bodies and mud, and never got to wash properly or eat properly any more. Why had everything changed? Why?



Figure 1 - Sergio with his cousins Andra and Tati just before their capture by the Nazis.

These are the questions that I ask myself, and that I also put to you, the reader, in the hope that you will never tire of reading what I have to write. I urge you to ask yourselves the same thing, to try and get right inside the heart and mind of this six-year-old boy! **Inside the hearts and minds of the million and a half children of the Holocaust** – children who undoubtedly still believed in fairytales. They must have thought that it was all a bad dream and their mothers would be back, that soon it would all come to an end...

Let us try to imagine in our hearts, the disconsolate tears of those poor abandoned children.

More time passed and summer made way for autumn.

"Our" children numbered 20 in all.

So far I have introduced only Sergio.

But the others need introducing, too. I have a small photograph album, in which are collected the photographs I have been able to recover. Where a photo could not be found, the child is still remembered and the space is filled with a small white rose. These children were called Georges-André, Jacqueline, Edo, Lexje, Marek, Blumele, Lea, Sergio, W., Roman, Lelka, Surcis, Ruchla, H., Eduard, Marek, Riwka, Eleonora, Mania, and Roman, and they all departed this world without anyone there to give them a last caress.

What I ask of you, the reader, is to pause for a moment and look into their faces, read their birthdates and note that they all died on the same day. You will be surprised, too, to realise that they died after the War was over and despite that fact that the British had already arrived. How can that be possible? It is a painful realisation, I know. Shocked, you catch your breath. It is heartbreaking to look into the eyes of those innocent children, but what choice do we have? We can hardly allow them to be forgotten.

This is what I do: as an alternative to the madness, I have chosen to keep the memory alive, by forming bonds with families, sharing Holocaust Memorial Day with them, showing them heartfelt affection, planning teaching initiatives with specific educational goals, taking "care" to write, telephone, remain supportive...

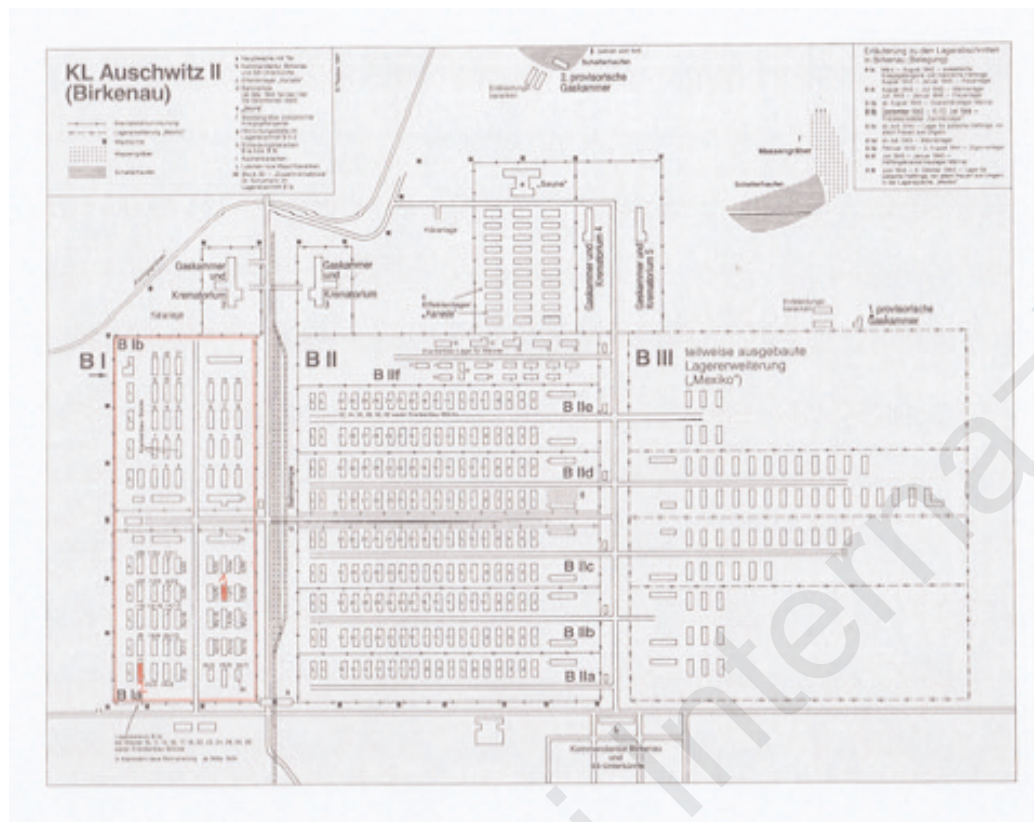


Figure 2 - Map of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp.

The 20 children were all in Hut 11. It can be picked out on the map in Figure 2, not far from the entrance. It is important to know exactly where it was, in order to appreciate that it was a real building that stood on the ground, in other words that it was not part of "some indeterminate other place", but was right there, in that hell hole built by the hands of men.

It was a cold November day when the bogeyman, the dreaded executioner, made his appearance. Mengele came brandishing a promise that sounded unbelievable...

This terrible story is told by two little girls who survived. They are Sergio's cousins, Tati and Andra Bucci who, at the time, were six and four years old. They knew that Mengele would come; they knew he would make promises, talking about "Mummy". But they also knew it was a trick, because they had been warned about it by the cabin warder, a wicked *blokowa*, who, for some reason, had taken to these two little girls. They told Sergio. Tati did her best to convince him... At this point in the story, Tati's voice cracks and she is unable to go on. The memory is too painful.

Sergio and 19 other children were "chosen" to make their last journey.

They differed in age: the oldest was 12 and the youngest 5. The group comprised 10 boys and 10 girls, and there is no doubt that they were all healthy.

Indeed, Mengele, over the previous months, had tested them. He had put them through medical checks and a range of different tests. There is just one clinical record remaining to confirm this (Figure 3), the only one that escaped the fire that the SS, before evacuating the camp, deliberately started in the hope of erasing the evidence of the extermination that had taken place there. Signed with a flourish by Mengele the executioner, it is a chilling document and an indictment against those who would deny the Holocaust.

It was 14 May 1944 when Mengele subjected "inmate" number **179614** to a nose-throat swab. As we know, that "inmate" was Sergio. There can be no doubt that Mengele had already set his evil eyes on that beautiful child. There can be no doubt that he had already picked out his little guinea pigs.

The 20 children were all lovely looking and certainly all healthy. They were deceived and used mercilessly for purposes that had nothing to do with true medicine and scientific research.

The 20 chosen children had to be healthy to satisfy the request of Mengele's colleague, Dr Kurt Heissmeyer, a specialist in pseudoscientific medical experiments on human guinea pigs. Research on tuberculosis was this bogeyman's particular fixation. Heissmeyer wanted to develop a TB vaccine and he used humans to this end, making them ill and then observing them, in order to study the progression of the

Hyg.-bakt. Unters.-Stelle  
der Waffen-SS, Südost

16. Mai. 1944

Auschwitz OS am 14. V 1944. 5

Anliegend wird übersandt: 2/10/140/V/2510 N7.5

Material: *Rachen-Histologie* entnommen am 14. V 1944

zu untersuchen auf *Diphtherie*

Name, Vorname: *Heissmeyer Sergio*

Dienstgrad, Einheit: *Gefängnis Nr. 479614 138. H.*

Klinische Diagnose:

Anschrift der einsendenden Dienststelle: *H. H. B. 16 P. a*

Bemerkungen:

(Stempel, Unterschrift)

Figure 3 - The Auschwitz clinical record of Sergio de Simone bearing the signature of Dr. Mengele.

disease. There are no words to express the horror of what he did, which was a complete betrayal of the Hippocratic Oath.

Heissmeyer used these 20 children. Injecting them with live tuberculosis bacteria, he desecrated their innocent flesh (Figure 4).



Figure 4 - The children being forced to show the scar showing where their axillary lymph nodes had been removed.

The experiment did not produce the desired result. All the children, by this time at Kz-Neuengamme (a concentration camp just outside Hamburg), became ill with TB; the war had come to an end and the British were already close. Hence the peremptory order from Berlin: "the children must be got rid of".

Thus, at the very end, the perpetrators of Evil added yet another chapter to this tragic and horrible tale. Callously, they once again used the promise of a mother's embrace to urge the children out of their beds and into their clothes before loading them on a postal truck and taking them to the cellar of the former Bullenhuser Damm school in Hamburg. Here, in a school of all places, their tormentors dared to hang them.

The date was 20 April, 1945.

Subsequently, during the trial, came the question:

How? How did you do this?

The answer: "Wie Bilder an die Wand" (Just like pictures on the wall)...

Andra Bucci recalls that the 20 children, convinced they were being taken to their mothers, had smiled and seemed happy when taking leave of the others. They had been put on a vehicle that took them from Birkenau to the station at Auschwitz. Sergio waved goodbye...

The 20 children travelled by train from Auschwitz to the Neuengamme concentration camp. It was a comfortable ride. Accompanied by a single female SS officer were given milk, white bread and chocolate.

They reached the Neuengamme concentration camp on 29 November 1944. By bitter coincidence, it was Sergio's 7th birthday.

#### **Brief curriculum vitae**

**Maria Pia Bernicchia** was born in Albaredo d'Adige (Verona) on May 10, 1946. A foreign languages and literature graduate, she has taught German language, culture and civilisation for over 30 years. For over 40 years she has had a particular interest in "collective memory". This interest dates back to a visit, in 1966, to the Dachau concentration camp. The focus of her study and research has been the history of the Third Reich. She has attended numerous courses in the Hebrew language and Jewish culture and history. During her teaching years, Maria Pia Bernicchia, together with her colleagues, set up various educational projects mainly linked to the activity envisaged by the Ministerial Circular "Il 900. I giovani e la Memoria" (The 1900s. Youth and Memory), and her students have received prestigious feedback, including congratulations from the Nobel prize winner Elie Wiesel. Since retiring, Maria Pia Bernicchia has devoted herself wholeheartedly to researching the dramatic topic of the children of the Holocaust.

The Holocaust is also the hellish setting for another work by Bernicchia: **Chi vuole vedere la mamma faccia un passo avanti... I 20 bambini di Bullenhuser Damm. Una carezza per la memoria**. (If You Want to See Your Mummy, Step Forward... The 20 Children of Bullenhuser Damm. A caress in their memory) (Proedi Editore - [www.proedieditore.it](http://www.proedieditore.it)). The tragic story of the 20 children of Bullenhuser Damm is also told through photographs: mounted on 30 lightweight boards these form an itinerant exhibition that, on request, visits schools, libraries and associations.

Maria Pia Bernicchia also edited the Italian edition of the book **The Memoirs of Inge and of her sons Rolf and Nico Kamp** (Proedi Editore), which recounts the experiences of Inge, who was deported to Auschwitz together with Anne Frank, and of her sons who lived clandestinely in Nazi-occupied Holland. Complementing the text, this book also contains detailed historical notes on the concentration camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau and Gross-Rosen.



Another focus of Maria Pia Bernicchia's ongoing research is "women in the concentration camps", a delicate and painful topic that has never been explored in sufficient depth. It is the women-only camp Liebau, a subcamp of Gross-Rosen, and an examination of the *Transportlisten* that Maria Pia Bernicchia takes as her starting point as she attempts to reconstruct this particular piece of history.