Names | A Journal of Onomastics

Book Review

Always Remember Your Name: The Children of Auschwitz. By Andrea Bucci and Liliana Bucci. London: Manilla Press. 2019. Pp. 161 (Hardback). $16.00. ISBN: 978-786-58121-1.

According to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, approximately 1.5 million Jewish children were murdered during Hitler's reign of National Socialism. This shocking figure does not include newborns, infants, and toddlers whom the Nazis often omitted in their killing rosters. The international campaign to hunt and destroy Jewish children was not only motivated by the Nazi's doctrine of anti-Semitism. It was also considered key to ensuring national security. It was believed that if Jewish youth were left alive, they would become hell-bent on avenging the murder of their family members. To put a stop to this generational retribution, Aryans were repeatedly instructed to show no mercy to anyone with Jewish lineage, no matter their age. The only exception was made for children who were identified as having some special value such as performing labor difficult or impossible for enslaved adults; providing temporary entertainment and/or personal amusement for the Aryan elite; and serving as research subjects for the international network scientists involved in human experimentation.

Thanks to decades of dogged research through millions of de-classified Nazi records, the names of many, but by no means all, of the scientists who were involved in these inhumane experiments have been exposed. There was SS Hauptsturmführer Dr. Sigmund Rascher (1909–1945), whose experiments to test the human limits of hyperthermia and negative pressure resulted in the slow torture and murder of hundreds of people imprisoned in Dachua; Dr. Herta Oberheuser (1911–1978), who, along with her duties as a member of Heinrich Himmler's personal team of physicians, also served in Ravensbrück Concentration Camp where she, without anesthesia, intentionally cut, infected, chemically burned, and permanently mutilated the limbs of

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imprisoned Polish women[1]; Dr. Horst Schumann (1906–1983), a once promising young physician who, under the official pseudonyms *Dr. Klein* and *Dr. Blume*,[2] misused his surgical skills to conduct ghoulish sterilization experiments, resulting in the deaths of some 15,000 people in the killing centers of von Grafeneck and Pirna-Sonnenstein (Nick 2019; Genest 2015; Reitzenstein 2014; Spitz 2005; Klee 2003; Lifton 1986).[3] Although the names and crimes of these and thousands of other Nazi doctors may not be known by the general public, there is one among them who remains infamous: Dr. Josef Mengele.[4]

Born in Bavaria on March 16, 1911, Mengele was one of three sons born to Walburga Mengele (née Hupfauer) and Karl Mengele, a mechanical engineer and well-to-do manufacturer of farming equipment. Thanks to his family's finances and prestige, Mengele was free to circumvent the family business and pursue an academic career. In 1935, just five years starting his university studies, he successfully completed a doctorate in physical anthropology from the University of Munich. It was during that year that the Nazis seized control of the German government and began instituting a blistering series of anti-democratic, anti-Semitic policies to protect the Aryan bloodline. Today, those restrictions are collectively referred to as the Nuremberg Race Laws. Mengele's doctoral research on the anatomical differences between racial groupings was a perfect fit to the Nazis' political ideology. In 1937, he became an official member of the Nazi Party. Three years later, Mengele joined the SS and was assigned to serve as the medical officer for the SS Viking Battalion on the Eastern Front. After surviving a major injury which left him unfit for combat, Mengele was sent home from the front lines and promoted to the rank of SS-Hauptsturmführer or Captain.

In 1943, the SS doctor took on another assignment for the Reich. He was to join the medical staff designated to serve at one of the Nazis' largest clandestine projects, a monolithic collection and extermination facility in the Polish town of Osciwecim. The name of that camp was Auschwitz. As one of the leading camp physicians, one of Mengele's primary duties involved conducting inspections of the prison arrivals to determine who, amongst the tens of thousands, was still strong enough to work. Those whom Mengele deemed unfit for labor were immediately sent to the gas chambers, earning him the nickname *der Todesengel* 'the Angel of Death'. It was during such camp selections that potential subjects for scientific experimentation were also identified. Driven by the desire to achieve a German post-doctoral degree, the "Habilitation", and a full professorship, Mengele's appetite for research subjects became legendary. As Seidelman (1988) describes:

> Mengele studied, performed experiments on, and collected human-specimen material from the Auschwitz inmates [. . .] These specimens included human eyes, human heads, and blood samples. People were maimed and killed solely for the purpose of these experiments and studies (226).

As Seidelman's disturbing description alludes, the breadth of Mengele's grisly experimentations was extraordinarily large. However, today, he is primarily remembered for his infamous experimentation with twins and triplets.[5] It was this obsession which led to his meeting the authors of the book under review.

The cover of the book features a haunting sepia-colored family photo of three small children. There is Sergio, age 6, who looks confidently into the camera with an unusually dashing smile for one so young. To his left and right are his cousins: six-year-old Liliana and her four-year-old sister, Andra. The girls' facial expressions are somewhere between bashful and curious. Despite their age differences, the similarity between the children is unmistakable. They look so much alike in fact that people who did not know them often mistook them for twins or triplets. As luck would have it, it was precisely this strong family resemblance that would result in the children being selected for "special treatment" upon their arrival in Auschwitz in the spring of 1944. *Always Remember Your Name: The Children of Auschwitz* is the heartwrenching account of the what happened to Sergio, Andra, and Liliana in Auschwitz-Birkenau. While Sergio was ultimately murdered after being subjected to a sadistic series of tuberculosis experiments conducted by Nazi physician Dr. Kurt Heißmeyer (Schwaberg 2016), Andra and Liliana narrowly managed to survive the horrors which Mengele and his team devised. In a recent interview with the *Jerusalem Times*, Paul Weindling, a professor of the history of medicine at Oxford Brookes University, indicated that Mengele experimented on 732 different sets of twins during his time in Auschwitz (Heller 2025) Although the exact fatality rate is still not known, it is generally agreed that the percentage was exceedingly high. Andra and Liliana were among those few survivors.

While the sisters' account provides chilling details about the crimes they both witnessed and endured, the majority of the biography focuses on the girls' life after Auschwitz. In a dual narrative voice, the sisters recount how their love, faith, and family helped them not only survive their harrowing experiences, but also encouraged them to share their story of survival with others. Since their liberation just a little over forty years ago, the Bucci sisters have devoted their lives to ensuring that the lessons of the Holocaust are never forgotten, and that the memories of those lost are always remembered. Sadly, as the siblings observe, the necessity of remaining vigilant to fascist forces has not lessened over time.

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> It hurts us to see in the world today the return of right-wing, even pro-Nazi parties and movements on the right; to see swastikas on city walls, on flags flying in parades. [. . .] The attitudes of politicians, those who tell you that 'that one who is different' [. . .] will take away your job, put social peace at risk, and with it, the tranquility of you and your loved ones. These are 'agents of fear' who set off certain impulses in people. That's how it was in the thirties and how it is again today (138–139).

Always Remember Your Name: The Children of Auschwitz is therefore not only a first-hand testimonial of the past, but also a warning for the present and future.

Originally, this moving double biography was published in Italian under the title *Noi, Bambine ad Auschwitz: La Nostra Storia di Sopravvissute alla Shoah*. The English edition under review was translated by Ann Goldstein, the former editor of *The New Yorker* and the editor of the *Complete Works of Primo Levi*. Goldstein, unlike many translators of Shoah biographies, had the unusual fortune of working directly with the authors. With the generous assistance of the Bucci sisters, Goldstein has done a wonderful job in maintaining the siblings' original voice and spirit. Throughout the work, the reader can feel the uncommon unity, resilience, and heartbreaking innocence of the girls, now grandmothers. As Goldstein herself observes in the Translator's Note (x–xvii): "Liliana and Andra Bucci are not professional writers; their account is unadorned, and perhaps for that very reason especially powerful" (xvii). There is a great deal of truth to this observation. Indeed, a major reason why this firsthand account is so compelling is the stark contrast between the children's true innocence; and the pure evil exhibited by the Nazi adults who tormented them. Without doubt, this work is a significant contribution to Holocaust Studies, Genocide Research, and Children's Literature.. At the same time, it is also a fascinating resource for a wide range of scholars working within name studies.

For onomasticians interested in anthroponymy, the vital role which personal names played in the children's biography will no doubt be of considerable interest. As the sisters explain, the first indication that something in their lives was changing came when their family was forced to change their last name from *Bucich* to *Bucci*.[6] The Italianization mandate was introduced by the Fascists after the Nazis took over the Adriatic Coastline and established the Operationszone Adriatisches Küstenland (OAK) [Operational Zone of the Adriatic Littoral] in 1943. Although the girls' father Giovanni bristled at the thought of giving up his family's proud Istrian surname, he, like other members of the local Jewish community, ultimately capitulated for the sake of his family's safety. With a little luck, the elders reasoned, this latest wave of anti-Semitism would eventually blow over and everything would go back to normal. Tragically, as the Bucci sisters explain, this compulsory name change "was the sign of no return".[12] Less than five years later, it was announced that all Italian Jews residing in the OAK would be deported to one of the growing number of concentration camps. On March 29, 1944, the Bucci sisters found themselves on a train destined for Auschwitz. Along with them were their grandmother, Nonna Rosa; their Uncle Jossi; their two aunts, Gisella and Sonia; their cousin, Sergio; and their mother. At some point during the deportation, the girls' mother managed to write a note containing all their family members' names and throw it out the window. Miraculously, that note was actually found and sent on to the girls' father, who managed to escape his family's deportation only because he was being held captive in South Africa. Many months later, that note filled with his loved ones' names became the tiny breadcrumb Giovanni needed to help track his family's deportation to Auschwitz.

Upon reaching their final destination on April 4, 1944, the Buccis, like hundreds of thousands before and after them, were forced to run past the camp medical staff, who blithely sent the newest contingent of terrified passengers to either the left or the right. The girls' Nonna Rosa and Aunt Sonia were immediately sent to a waiting caravan of trucks.[7,8] The rest of the family was herded into the camp interior, where they were systematically shorn, showered, disinfected, and tattooed. Their mother standing protectively before her two daughters was the first to feel the sting of the needle as the number 76482 was etched into her skin. Andra was given the next number in the series: 76483, followed by Liliana, who received 76484. Their Aunt Gisella, who emerged a bit later from the disinfection station, was given the number 76516. The procedure for the male Buccis was the same but the numerical series was different, reflecting the higher number of male inmates. The girls' Uncle Jossi was tattooed with the number 179603 and their beloved cousin Sergio was marked with the number 179614. Soon after the family was forced to separate once again. While the adults were sent to the male and female barracks, the Bucci children were sent to the "Kinderblock", the children's unit reserved for Mengele's medical experiments.

In the midst of all the horrors that followed, the girls also describe the joy and wonder they felt when their mother somehow managed to sneak away from the women's barracks to visit them. As the sisters' recount:

> Those evening encounters are a precious memory. Thinking back on them today, we feel a sea of emotions tossing inside. She would arrive, hug us, kiss us, and the first thing she did was repeat our name to us. She said: 'Remember, your name is Liliana Bucci. 'Remember, your name is Andra Bucci.' She did it with a precise purpose [. . .] Mamma wanted to keep us attached to our real life, the one outside the camp. (46–47)[9]

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Although the sisters were too young to realize it then, by impressing upon the girls the importance of remembering their birth names, their mother had presciently created another vital breadcrumb for the Bucci family. On January 27, 1945, Auschwitz was liberated. After receiving medical treatment by the International Red Cross, the girls were transferred to Lingfield House in Surrey, England. Established by a network of charitable Jewish organizations in Great Britain, Lingfield provided a home for nearly 800 Jewish children who had survived the Holocaust. At the same time that the organizers did everything possible to provide a secure and loving home environment, they also worked tirelessly to reunite the children with their birth families (Marrone 2024). Given the millions of people who were deceased, missing, or displaced, this humanitarian effort was no easy task. The difficulty of identifying surviving relatives was exponentially increased in cases where their underage wards were either too young and/or too traumatized to remember anything about their lives before the war. But the Bucci girls were different. Despite their young age and the horrors they had experienced, the two kept their promise to their mother and remembered their full names.

In the Fall of 1946, the director of Lingfield, Alice Goldberger, called the sisters into her office to give them the good news. Both of their parents had been found, alive. As the girls would later learn, using the onomastic clues left by their mother, their parents had first been able to locate one another, and then joined forces to find their lost daughters. Along the way, they also were able to find Aunt Gisella. Once together, the surviving members of the family used the list of personal names collected by large-scale humanitarian organizations such as the International Tracing Services to determine the whereabouts of their other family members. Like so many families that fell prey to the Nazis, the postwar search for relatives often proved devastating, thanks either to the certainty of a loved ones' painful death, or the torture of never knowing what happened to them. Even today, nearly eight decades later, the search for missing family members continues. To be sure, this search has been significantly facilitated by the truly astounding advances which have taken place in AI-assisted data processing as well as the revolutionary developments in the DNA analysis of forensic evidence. However, as the number of eyewitnesses continues to decline, one of the most powerful keys to determining the fate of the last set of Holocaust victims remains personal names. The book serves as an excellent reminder of the critical role that personal names can play in times of significant social upheaval.

Nevertheless, it is imperative to caution that this publication is not without its weak points. Like all personal accounts, the Bucci sisters' recollections are subject to distortions, omissions, and factual error. For example, early on in the book, the authors assert that before the Nazis took over, the governing powers that oversaw the Austro-Hungarian Empire were remarkably tolerant of the multicultural, multilingual, multidenominational populace. According to the sisters, it [the Empire]:

> didn't change your surname, it didn't oblige you to marry a faith, all were free to profess their own creed. Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Orthodox, and Protestants grow up together. The resentments and barriers or discrimination that always exist between people [. . .] were never sanctioned by the authorities (4–5).

As pleasant as this description may be, the historical facts tell a completely different story. For example, on July 23, 1787, the Austro-Hungarian Emperor Franz Josef II declared that all Jewish residents of the Empire must adopt a last name from an approved list of German surnames (Himes 2016).[10] According to Stessel (1995), the penalty for failing or refusing to comply with this ordinance was to face imprisonment.[11] Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, similar discriminatory edicts were issued (Reill 2020). Thus, the onomastic prescriptions introduced by the Fascists in the 21st century were certainly not the first of their kind to affect the Jewish communities of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

In view of the authors' extremely young age when the Nazis took control of their region, it is easy to understand why they may not have been privy to such facts. However, given the importance of the historical events addressed in this work, it is truly regrettable that more time was not taken to fact-check the sisters' accounts. This oversight is particularly frustrating in light of the disconcerting increase of misinformation and disinformation about the Holocaust. Considering the power and prominence of Holocaust deniers, it is imperative that publications released on the subject are as factually accurate as possible. More careful editing would have also helped to spot many obvious typographical errors such as the unfortunate misspelling of *Auschwitz* as **Aucshwitz* which appears in large bold lettering above the map of the concentration camp (xxvi). Finally, there are numerous instances in which supplementary information would have been appreciated. Along with the discussion points added at the end of the book for guiding reading groups, it would have been outstanding if the work had been fully annotated with an accompanying list of historical resources and references. This additional information would have been highly beneficial for readers interested in learning more about the events and places described in the book.

Just one of the most significant historical places mentioned in the book that would have warranted such annotation is Risiera di San Sabba, or the San Sabba Rice Mill.[12] As described in the book, before reaching their final destination of Auschwitz in Poland, the Buccis and the other deportees from their region, made a temporary stop at the Mill in Trieste. What the book does not explain, however, is the critical history of

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Risiera di San Sabba. Originally built at the end of the 19th century, the Mill was initially used as a rice husking factory. After the factory closed, it remained entirely abandoned until the Nazis requisitioned it for use a police detention center (Andreanelli 2021). Eventually, the property was transformed into a detention camp operated by theSS . Initially, it was commonly thought that San Sabba was primarily used as a processing and transit center where detainees were temporarily held before being sent on to larger concentration/extermination sites throughout Europe (e.g., Ravensbrück and Bergen-Belsen in Germany; Auschwitz in Poland). However, based on evidence provided by eye-witnesses and historians, it has been determined that San Sabba also functioned as a concentration camp in its own right. In fact, it is believed to have been the only concentration camp in Italy that had its own crematory. According to historians, the oven was in active use from 1944 till 1945. Jewish Italian survivors who saw San Sabba firsthand have testified that mass executions were a regular occurrence at the Rice Mill. Based on eye-witness reports, Poprzeczny (2004) indicates that "the SS killed as many as 10 prisoners every day by means of individual execution" (344). It is still unclear precisely how many victims were murdered at San Sabba. However, some historians estimate that the number may be in the thousands (Wetzel 2015). Unfortunately, readers who would have benefitted from learning (more) about this important aspect of Holocaust history are provided little or no factual information.[13]

Do this and the other aforementioned shortcomings ultimately undermine the value of the publication? In a word, "No". As Parvikko 2004 reminds, one should never forget that "a witness never remembers and tells everything: an eyewitness testimony is not the whole truth. It is often full of mistakes and errors [. . .] witnesses do not always fully understand the context they try to describe" (189). The fact that the sisters' autobiographical account contains certain historical inaccuracies is perfectly natural and to be expected. At the end of the day, this fact does not undermine the overall validity or historical significance of this reference. Instead, it underscores just how important it is for readers to take the time to cross-check all of the information they consume, particularly when the events described are so important and the subject-matter is so emotionally compelling. Provided one keeps this caution and the above criticisms in mind, *Always Remember Your Name: The Children of Auschwitz* is an outstanding publication which has the potential to inspire as much as it can inform.[14]

Notes

[1] For an excellent documentary account of this aspect of Ravenbrück's history, see Genest 2015. This reference provides not only detailed information about the experiments conducted in the camp, but also illuminating post-war biographies of many of the imprisoned Polish women who survived these experiments.

[2] For more on the official aliases used by Nazi doctors, see Nick 2019.

[3] Readers interested in learning more about medical research during National Socialism are encouraged to consult Vivien Spitz's 2005 reference. In this work, Spitz provides a detailed yet sensitive survey of the human experiments conducted, divided by research question (e.g., the effect of bone transplantation, high-altitude exposure, poisoning, malaria infection, injury by incendiary bombs).

[4] Readers interested in learning more about the life and crimes of Josef Mengele are encouraged to consult Lifton 1986; Marwell 2021; LEMO n.d.

[5] In May 1944, the Jewish Hungarian pathologist, Dr. Mikłos Nyiszli, became a prisoner of Auschwitz. One month later, he was selected by Mengele to serve as his personal assistant. Nyiszli was ordered to dissect, inspect, catalog, and ship the remains of Mengele's victims to various research facilities throughout the Reich (Nyiszli 2011). Many of the cadavers Nyiszli attended were the underage victims of Mengele's twin experiments. According to the pathologist, Mengele's interest in twin research was to discover the secret behind multiple births in hopes of helping the Reich produce the desired "race of superior beings destined to rule" (Meyer 2022, 232). Mengele's work was financed and supported by his former doctoral supervisor, Professor Dr. Otmar Freiherr von Verschuer, a faculty member of the Institute of Hereditary Biology and Racial Hygiene at Frankfurt University (Lifton 1986). Importantly, von Verschuer not only energetically supported Mengele's twin studies, but also actively conducted them as well. Their joint work was formally supported by prestigious grant from the German Research Foundation (Hildebrandt 2017; Weiss 2012) After the war, von Verschuer was investigated by the Allies and required to pay a fine of 600 marks for his criminal activities. In 1951, he received an appointment to chair the genetics department at the University of Münster, and was awarded a full professorship a year later. In 1956, the scientific journal *Acta Geneticae* released a special issue on twins research in honor of von Verschuer's 60th birthday (Seidelman 1988).

[6] At this time, the Bucci family was located in the Croatian port city of Rijeka. However, at the time of their sisters' birth, this area of the Adriatic Coast was officially part of Fiume and was considered to be a part of Italy. For more on the fate of Jewish Italians who resided in Trieste and Fiume during the Holocaust, see

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Zimmerman 2005.

[7] Once filled, the trucks transported the unsuspecting deportees directly the camp crematoria. It has been estimated that during the time the Bucci family was deported to Auschwitz, "around 80 per cent of the arrivals, and on occasion entire transports, were arbitrarily deemed by the German SS to be unfit for work" and were immediately murdered (Meyer 2022, 114).

[8] According to the brief historical notes provided in the foreword (i–xxv), of the people who were transported along with the Buccis to Auschwitz, only 29 male prisoners and 53 female were selected to be used as either slave laborers or medical subjects. The remaining 103 people in the transport were immediately sent to their death. Among them were the sisters' Nonna Rosa and Aunt Sonia.

[9] The poignancy of this story takes on particular relevance in light of the untold number of Ukrainian children who have been forcibly separated from their families during the Russian invasion.

[10] This edict followed an earlier decree which had commanded all Jewish residents of the empire to take an official first name from an approved list of 123 male and 31 female names (Himes 2016).

[11] According to Stessel (1995), this law was also followed by a proclamation that all Jews in the Empire must "shave their beards, cut off their earlocks, and abandon the use of tzitzit (ritual fringes) on their garments". (48). Thanks to widespread protest, this particular ordinance was eventually rescinded. However, the policies requiring onomastic assimilation remained in place.

[12] The official website for this national memorial can be found here: https://risierasansabba.it/san-sabba-rice-mill-national-monument-and-museum/

[13] For information about the fate of Jewish Italians during WWII readers may be interested in (Klein 2018; Wetzel 2015; Villiani 2005; Zimmerman 2005).

[14] Another autobiographical account by survivors of Mengele's twin studies is Kor and Buccieri's 2011 memoir, *Surviving the Angel of Death: The True Story of a Mengele Twin in Auschwitz*. Slightly older, but equally compelling is the 1991 account provided by Matalon Lagnado and Dekkel, *Children of the Flames: Dr. Josef Mengele and the Untold Story of the Twins of Auschwitz*. Finally, an outstanding reference for academics interested in this subject is Alwin Meyer's 530-page investigation *Never Forget Your Name: The Children of Auschwitz* (2022).

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