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The haunted house of eugenics - An interview with Edwin Black

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Few people knew that the United States helped to fund Nazi eugenics. In his new book, "The War Against the Weak," the award-winning author Edwin Black documents the collaboration of American corporate philanthropic organizations with Nazi Germany researchers to create a white, Nordic master race. Black has also documented the forceful sterilization of 60,000 Americans in

genetic-control campaigns taking place as recently as 1900. The journalist, who is also author of the best-selling book "IBM and the Holocaust," will speak at 5:30 p.m. Thursday, Dec. 11, in the Gold Room of the MSU Union. Sponsored by the Center for Global Culture/Great Lakes World Affairs Council, the event will be followed by a discussion with the author at Barnes & Noble in East Lansing. Daniel Sturm interviewed Black.

Nazi doctor Joseph Mengele, who did inhumane experiments with twins in Auschwitz, is a well-known horror figure. Now you tell us in "War Against the Weak" that Mengele was financed by the Rockefeller Foundation.

Rockefeller spent a great deal of money financing Nazi scientists and eugenic institutions in Germany, among them Otmar Freiherr von Vershuer. Vershuer was particularly interested in twins. With twins you could unlock the mysteries of defective reproduction, they thought, and also with twins you could discover the secret to multiplication of the master race. Vershuer sent his assistant, whose name was Joseph Mengele, into Auschwitz to finish the

program originally financed by Rockefeller. But of course, Mengele went there after the war began.

Did the Rockefeller Foundation know that they were funding Nazis?

They knew it from the very beginning, because Rockefeller was funding the Nazi eugenicists throughout the entire pre-war period. Rockefeller was receiving constant letters of protest because of its open involvement with Nazi medicine.

In the first 65 years of the 20th century more than 60,000 Americans were sterilized. What was the mindset behind this?

Clearly, it is the urge to create a master race. But this urge attached itself to so many other societal movements □ the women's movement, the labor movement, the educational movement, and medical movements. Eugenics and the life science behind it infected so many other social welfare movements that it was easy to say, "we were trying to make a better society, we were trying to use our educational dollars better, we were trying to wipe out tuberculosis." While what they really wanted to do was make the "problem people" disappear.

This was the time when agronomists became capable of breeding better strains of corn, and doctors similarly bent on breeding a eugenically superior race. But weren't doctors and supporters of eugenics aware of the inhumane effects of their acts?

It was originally mainly a non-medical movement. It was a movement of animal breeders, agronomists, anthropologists, and these types of people, who were trying to engineer a society. In the beginning there was very little medical backing for it, unless you want to include psychology and psychiatry. Obviously, there were great surgeons who later supported eugenics, including sterilization.

You write that many people who were sterilized never discovered the truth until decades later.

Black: That's right. Of the 60,000 Americans who were forcibly sterilized, many underwent the procedure without knowing what was happening. Typically, they would ask a young hillbilly girl: Do you like the movies? And she'd say yes. Do you like the funnies? And she'd say yes. Would you mind if we did something to help out your health? And she'd say yes. She wouldn't know what was happening. The incision would be very small, the operation would take just a couple of minutes, and she would be sterilized.

Why did it take so long to uncover the relationship between Rockefeller/Carnegie and Nazi Germany?

To a large degree, it takes the mindset of an investigative reporter who thinks like a criminal and acts like a cop. The historian will ask for permission, while people like me start when we're told "no." When lawyers and other entities tried to stop me from seeing the records, they even claimed doctor-patient confidentiality for Joseph Mengele! That's when we get going. I have a large team of reporters, researchers, historians, and writers. People are welcome to volunteer at "researchers needed" on my Web site, at www.edwinblack.com.

In the 1930s and 40s, the University of Michigan Medical School in Ann Arbor was an outspoken proponent of eugenics. Can you tell us more about Michigan's role in the eugenics movement?

Michigan was one of 27 states with eugenic sterilization laws. Doctors in Michigan forcibly sterilized more than 2,388 people by 1943, and 3,786 by 1964. In Indiana, where sterilization began, there were 1,231 cases.

For many the Nazi movement seems like a dark age that's long gone. But you say there's a new eugenics movement on the horizon, as great as its precursor. Companies fear that insuring people predisposed to "certain genetic effects" would increase their costs.

Yes. It's no longer based upon racist dogma and national flags, it is more based upon the economic worth of an individual, globalization, and the profit margin an individual can offer the corporate world. It will come in the form of insurance exclusions and employment denials. This is why the anti-genetic discrimination act has just passed in the Senate and is waiting for approval in the House.

So that's a good thing, isn't it?

It's a good start. But human engineering is so globalized and high-velocity a science that it is preceding far faster than any local jurisdiction can keep up with it.

You give the example of a Quebec man who died in an automobile crash, but his life insurance payout was canceled when the company learned that he was born in a region with a high rate of a degenerative disease that causes a debilitating relaxation of the muscles. How far away are we from this scenario?

This was a test case, but the insurance company told me they intend to implement it. This company even said that they would cancel death benefits in automobile collisions because of smoking. We are not far away from it at all. This approach is now being advocated and implemented on an ever-increasing rate. The insurance world says very clearly that they cannot survive unless they rewrite the rules. They originally were redlining, then they were green lining, and now they are gene lining.

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