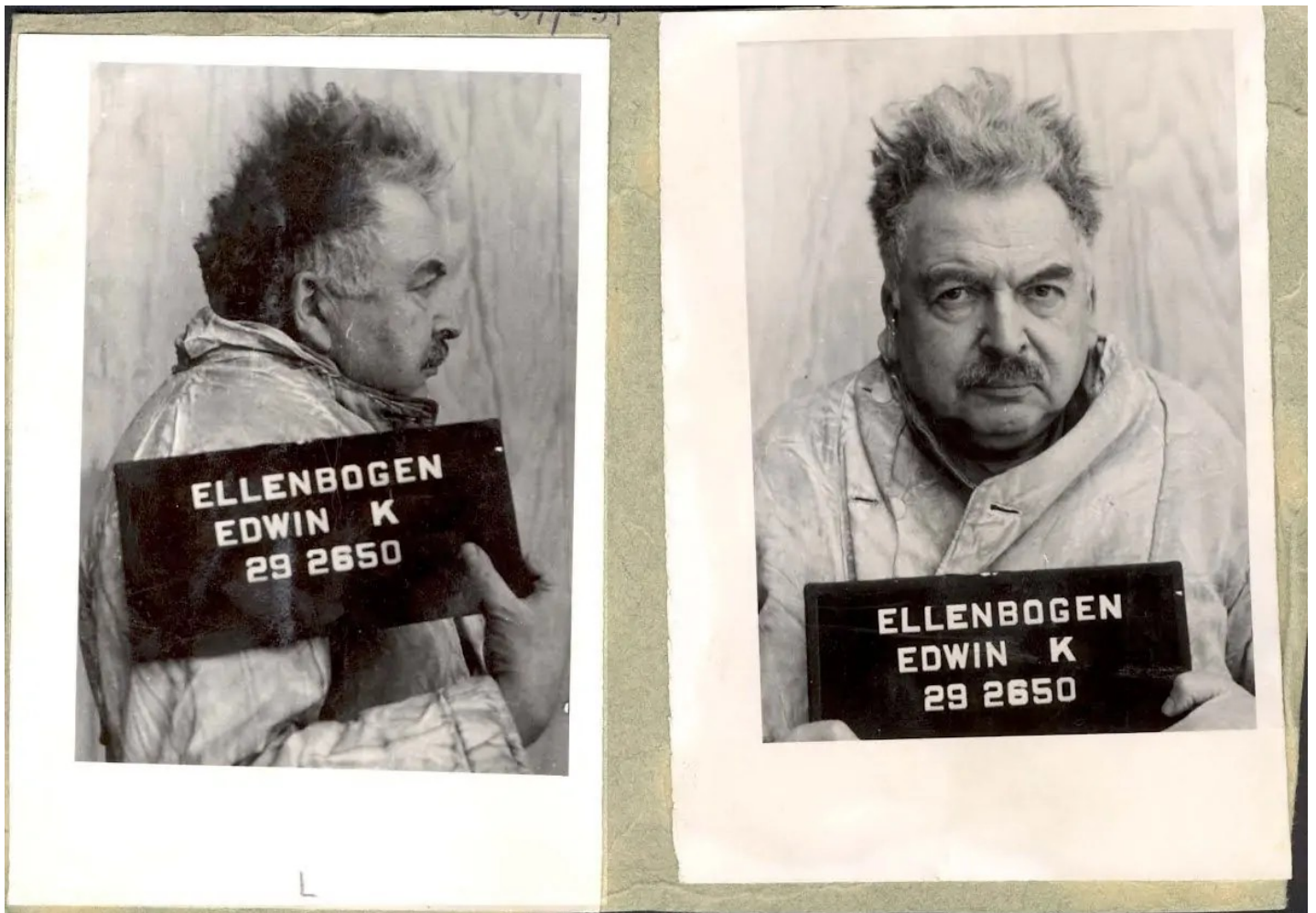


DR. EVIL

Michael Nevins



I first learned about EDWIN KATZEN-ELLENBOGEN about sixteen years ago when I read a book titled *War Against the Weak* that was written in 2005 by investigative journalist Edwin Black. It described how early in the 20th century the eugenics movement was embraced by many intellectuals and how what was done in this country influenced Hitler's theory of building a "master race" by controlled breeding. However, upon reading this huge book I was shocked when I came across these few sentences:

In 1911 [when] Woodrow Wilson became governor of New Jersey...[Dr.] Katzen-Ellenbogen was asked to become scientific director of the State Village for Epileptics at Skillman, New Jersey...As the state's leading expert on epilepsy, he was asked by Wilson to draft New Jersey's law to sterilize epileptics and defectives. (pg. 322)

That seemed authoritative, but I'd never heard of this doctor nor about any such law in my home state and because it seemed improbable, I decided to explore further. As a result of my research, I wrote a book in 2009 about the history of eugenics in New Jersey that was called *A Tale of Two 'Villages': Vineland and Skillman, NJ* and included in it the bizarre story of Edwin Katzen-Ellenbogen whom I dubbed "Doctor Evil."

Eugenicists argued that procreation was inadvisable for "citizens of the wrong type" — meaning "idiots, imbeciles, morons, rapists, criminals and other defectives" (including epileptics.) In April 1911, New Jersey legislators did pass a law that permitted asylum directors to sterilize certain patients in order to eliminate their "bad seeds." It was enthusiastically signed by the newly elected Governor Woodrow Wilson and the law remained on the books for nearly two years until the state's Supreme Court ruled that it was unconstitutional. The good news was that no one was ever sterilized without their consent in New Jersey but during the 20th century more than 65,000 Americans in other states (especially in California) were.

While it's true that Katzen-Ellenbogen (K-E) worked as a "psychopathologist" for about a year at Skillman Village, near Princeton, it's extremely unlikely that he was New Jersey's "leading expert" on epilepsy and probably he had nothing to do with the state's short-lived sterilization law which passed before he'd even arrived in The Garden State. That may have been a fable concocted by K-E many years later in order to impress an American military tribunal at Dachau that convicted him as a *Nazi collaborator for a life sentence*. What a story!

Edwin Katzen-Ellenbogen was born in Austro-Hungary in 1882; his parents were assimilated Jews, possibly descended from a long line of Galician rabbis and Talmudists, and the odd surname was derived from an ancient town in the Rhineland where his family once lived. K-E studied psychology and medicine in Leipzig under the tutelage of Wilhelm Wundt who was the father of experimental psychology and the first person to call himself a “psychologist.” In 1905 K-E received a PhD in Leipzig, but although he later claimed also to have earned a medical degree, I’ve been unable to confirm this.)

While studying in Leipzig K-E met an American girl, Marie Pierce, the daughter of a Massachusetts Supreme Court justice followed her to Boston where he officially converted to Catholicism and they married. He took a job at a state mental institution in Danvers, published several articles in scientific journals and sometimes lectured at Harvard Medical School about psychopathology. When Sigmund Freud spoke at a conference at Clark University in Worcester in 1909, a group photograph of attendees showed the young man standing just behind Freud, Jung and their host, Clark’s president G. Stanley Hall. The next year K-E was listed in the prestigious book *American Men of Science* and he clearly was a young scholar on the rise.

Edwin Katzen-Ellenbogen was an avid eugenicist and became a charter member of the fledgling American Eugenics Research Association in Cold Spring Harbor on Long Island that became the epicenter of research trying to prove a direct correlation between physical and mental ailments. Eugenacists asserted that bad behavior was passed by the genes and proposed that “better” classes should be fruitful and multiply while unfit “lower” classes should have their “bad seeds” cut off — in some cases literally. Who were these dangerous people? Criminals yes, but epileptics were considered criminal until proven otherwise. Harry Laughlin, who headed the Eugenics Records Office, estimated that more than 10% of the American population were “unfit” to breed.

New Jersey was the sixth state to pass sterilization legislation that permitted courts and committees to decide what was in the best interest of certain persons. That same year, 1911, K-E accepted a position at Skillman Village for Epileptics near Princeton as a clinical psychologist for a one year probationary period at a salary of \$1,000. He performed IQ testing on patients and published some of his findings, but was considered unreliable and didn't get along with his superiors. Also he was alcoholic and addicted to opiates, gambled and owed money. After little over a year K-E was fired by Skillman's superintendent, Dr. David Weeks who wrote in the young man's record: "shirked and neglected duties. Disorganizing spirit. Capable of doing first class work but lacked application."

Dr. Katzen-Ellenbogen took a similar position as a research assistant at a state hospital in nearby Trenton until in January 1915, with his wife and infant son, he travelled to Kiev to visit relatives. As suspicious foreigners they were arrested and jailed for several months before returning to America. However, K-E soon returned to Europe and never returned to America again. That's the conventional story but soon it got much worse. He was arrested again, this time in Holland, accused of forgery and fraud, drug peddling and smuggling. and before long there were accusations of seduction of wealthy women, illegally running a medical practice, kidnapping, forgery and theft. the unsavory list goes on and on: swindler, bigamist, extortionist.

Edwin Katzen-Ellenbogen drifted from country to country, seemingly one step ahead of the law, but twice was arrested. Although he'd earned a PhD degree in psychology from Leipzig University, his behavior was so outrageous that in 1937 that venerable institution revoked his degree and I presume that K-E never mentioned that unpleasant detail in public. When Germany came to power, K-E was arrested by the Gestapo in Paris but because of his language skill and bogus credentials, he was pressed into medical service for the Nazis. Then in September 1943, perhaps because of his Jewish roots, he was sent to Buchenwald which was considered to be one of the worst of the slave labor camps.

Once again, K-E ingratiated himself with his captors and received special favors. He was permitted to wear civilian attire, received extra food provisions, lived in a semi-private heated room and didn't have to participate in roll calls. He was placed in medical charge of Buchenwald's notorious "Little Camp" but seemed to be a man without a conscience, indifferent to the well-being of others. He participated in experiments on prisoners and used his skill as a hypnotist to extract "confessions" from inmates. He was especially cruel to French and Italian prisoners whom he considered to be racially unfit. Sometimes he refused them medical treatment sneering that they were in Buchenwald to "die like dogs — not to be cured." Conversely Nordics were helped and even saved. Former prisoners described how K-E accepted bribes and controlled which sick patients could be relieved from work or were sent to the hospital; literally he had the power of life or death and wielded it regularly.

At a postwar American military trial held at Dachau in 1947, K-E testified that he'd been unfairly accused of mistreating prisoners and allegedly killing 1000 of them injections of phenol — their were no surviving witnesses. He disingenuously said that if he'd really been guilty of the heinous crimes of which he'd been accused, that he should be executed. He compared himself to Socrates and even claimed that French officers had conspired against him like they once had against Alfred Dreyfus.

During the Dachau trial K-E appeared aloof and unrepentant. To the military lawyers he was an enigma — erudite, self-assured, highly intelligent. They didn't know what to make of this naturalized American citizen of Jewish origin who'd lectured at Harvard. But the evidence against him was so compelling that they gave him a life sentence. Three years later it was reduced to 15 years and later, because of his serious heart condition, it was shortened again. There have been conflicting versions about his life's final chapter — some said that K-E died in prison, others that he was released and moved to a suburb of Munich where he died of heart failure in 1956.

According to Wikipedia, “He was released from prison on September 26, 1953.... returned to the U.S. and resumed practice as a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst until at least the end of 1955. He died some time after that.” Regardless of alternate versions about where or when he died, K-E’s posturing at Dachau was the fabrication of a desperate man. Moreover, the tragedy of one flawed individual pales in comparison with the effect his actions had on helpless victims at first in American asylums or some three decades later at Buchenwald.

The same year that Edwin Black published his book about the American eugenics movement, another investigative reporter, Joshua Greene, published a biography of William Denson, the young lawyer who had served as the army’s chief prosecutor at Dachau. According to this account, at the end of the proceedings on August 12, 1947, the military tribunal had concluded: “It is clear that the accused, although an inmate, cooperated with the SS personnel managing the camp and participated in the common design.” Apparently playing for effect, in his final statement K-E declared: “I am not afraid of death, but I am afraid of life with Cain’s stigma on my forehead. I was described here as a Gestapo helper. Therefore, I ask you for one grace. Apply to me the highest penalty, which is in your hands.” The next day Edwin Katzen-Ellenbogen was sentenced to life imprisonment.

Immediately afterward, Prosecutor Denson asked members of the tribunal to explain why K-E’s life had been spared? They replied, “He wanted to be hanged and we didn’t want to accede to his wishes.” Denson fumed, “That old goat didn’t want to be hanged any more than you or I do. He used his knowledge of psychology to get you to give him a life sentence.” But the old goat wasn’t finished. In March 1950 from prison he wrote a letter to William Denson, who by then was an attorney for the Atomic Energy Commission based in Washington DC. K-E’s tone was ingratiating, even collegial:

Being 68 years old and lying for weeks in bed with critical heart failure, I have lots of leisure time to think matters over. Retrospectively, I ponder over the Buchenwald trial in which we were adversaries.....You stole the show. I often objectively admired you and having had a vast experience as court expert with District Attorneys I must hand it to you that you were the ablest one. I much enjoyed our duel while I was on the witness stand and you must admit that I scored many points over you. I think we both enjoyed it. But you had a free show while I was in danger to lose my liberty,

Katzen-Ellenbogen went on to justify his past behavior, apparently hoping that Denson would support his request for clemency, as was granted to other war criminals, but the former prosecutor was not impressed. In fact, Denson considered K-E to be more culpable than the others, most of whom were uneducated. He was a villain who always was aware of exactly what he was doing.

Katzen-Ellenbogen was manipulative, charming, exploitative, refused to accept responsibility for his actions — in effect the psychopathologist was a classic psychopath. But, in addition, the narrative of this flawed individual underscores the danger that can ensue when misguided science transforms into social policy; how in the hands of amoral individuals, politicized ideology can lead to monstrous things. Concerning eugenics, perhaps Katzen-Ellenbogen inadvertently said it best when in the first paragraph of an article he'd published in 1911, that began with these words:

It is a dangerous enterprise to prematurely apply theoretical findings of any science to practical use, as the frequent failures which result there from not only discourage the workers, but also cast discredit upon the work itself.

In fact, K-E was referring to the field of experimental psychology, but what could be a more appropriate epitaph for the eugenics movement itself? The more things change, the more they stay the same. Even today.

Michael Nevins

May, 2024



Dr. Evil and prosecutor Denson at the Dachau hearing in 1947.

