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## Book Review

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# ‘Acres of Skin’ or human beings? Human rights at stake in America

by Marianna Wertz

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### **Acres of Skin—Human Experiments at Holmesburg Prison: A True Story of Abuse and Exploitation in the Name of Medical Science**

by Allen M. Hornblum  
New York: Routledge, 1998  
297 pages, paperbound, \$16

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The title, “Acres of Skin,” is drawn from the statement by University of Pennsylvania researcher and dermatologist Dr. Albert M. Kligman, the architect of the two decades of experiments on human subjects at Holmesburg Prison in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (which was closed in December 1995). In an interview with author Allen M. Hornblum, Kligman recalled his awe when he first visited the prison: “All I saw before me were acres of skin. It was like a farmer seeing a fertile field for the first time.”

The main subject of *Acres of Skin* is the violation of the Nuremberg Code—the code of medical ethics drafted in 1947 by American jurists to address the Nazi medical experiments in Hitler’s Germany—*by the United States itself*. While none of the abuses of prisoners and mental patients as test subjects for experiments with dangerous and deadly substances, which this book exposes, are going on today, the survivors of one of the centers of experimentation, Holmesburg Prison, are still trying to get justice for what was done to them. In a lawsuit now in the drafting stage, they plan to raise the issue of American violation of the Nuremberg Code, a subject which the LaRouche political movement has raised repeatedly over the years, with respect to the growing use and advocacy of Nazi-style euthanasia—called “the right to die” in politically correct circles—both in and outside the medical profession.

*Acres of Skin* is also a valuable contribution to the growing body of evidence that the “American prison gulag” (see *EIR*, July 23, 1999) is implementing practices that fundamentally

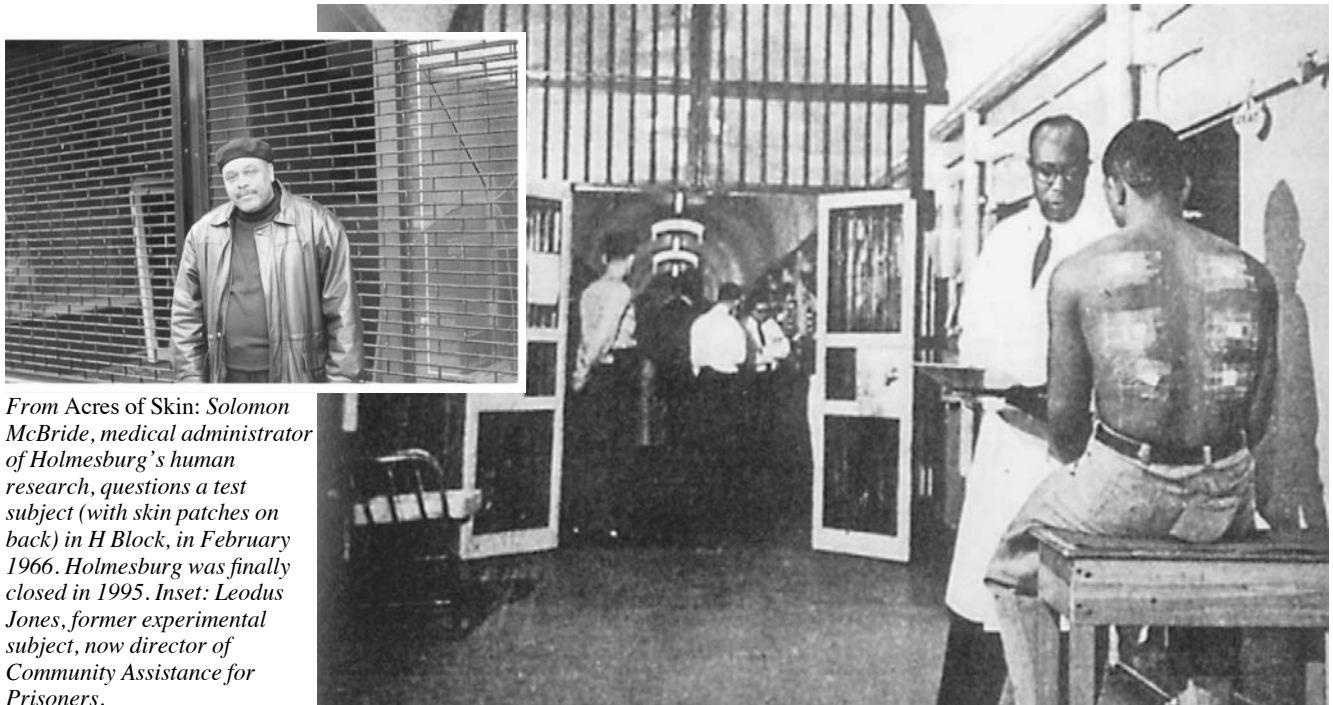
violate international norms for human rights. The nation which most prides itself on its human rights record, and which also preaches loudest to others, has been exposed, in *Acres of Skin*, with a record that reeks like that of the worst human rights violators in modern history.

Author Hornblum risked his career and income in deciding to write this book, as he told *EIR* in a recent interview. Asked what motivated him, Hornblum bluntly responded, “Stupidity! It was not a very smart move economically, and I’m still paying for it, quite frankly. But it was something that I thought was a phenomenal story, that I witnessed. . . . When I first started working in prisons in 1971, I saw the experiments and I couldn’t get over them. I knew that it was a recipe for abuse and, possibly, disaster.”

“I always expected that there would be some sort of historian or investigative journalist who would write the final word on it, but it never happened,” Hornblum continued. “So, out of boredom or something, in the Sheriff’s office many years later, I decided to look into it, initially tracking down former prisoner test subjects, many of whom are still locked up and going to the doctors, who were around then; and the inmates, who were willing to talk but didn’t know anything; and the



Author Alan Hornblum



*From Acres of Skin: Solomon McBride, medical administrator of Holmesburg's human research, questions a test subject (with skin patches on back) in H Block, in February 1966. Holmesburg was finally closed in 1995. Inset: Leodus Jones, former experimental subject, now director of Community Assistance for Prisoners.*

doctors, who knew a lot but weren't willing to talk. So, it fostered increasing interest, and I finally was spending more time doing that than anything else."

### Unwitting human guinea pigs

As *Acres of Skin* recounts, in American prisons in the mid-20th century, and especially at Holmesburg Prison in Pennsylvania, thousands of imprisoned Americans were unwittingly exposed to polio, tuberculosis, and cancer; had burn and radiation studies performed on them; were subjected to powerful hallucinogenic and psychotropic drugs; and were smeared with everything from powerful solvents and acids to deadly dioxin. This was done under the aegis of "academic" centers, such as the University of Pennsylvania; by profit-seeking pharmaceutical companies; and by departments of the U.S. government, including the U.S. Army, which tested prisoners with drugs they hoped to use on enemy prisoners of war.

The prisoners "freely" consented to these experiments for only one reason, as former prisoner Leodus Jones, head of Community Assistance for Prisoners in Philadelphia and a principal in the planned lawsuit, told *EIR*: "I was in prison with a low bail. I couldn't afford the monies to pay for bail. I knew that I wasn't guilty of what I was being held for. I was being coerced to plea bargain. So, I thought, if I can get out of this, get me enough money to get a lawyer, I can beat this. That was my first thought."

The experiments provided needed cash to post bail or buy needed items from the commissary. Many of these prisoners

had not even been tried—they were pre-trial detainees and were only in jail because they didn't have enough money to post bail. Although many were eventually found "not guilty," they had already been unjustly punished by their experience at Holmesburg.

### The experiments

*EIR* asked Jones to describe the experiment with the toxic agent dioxin in which he participated. "They put a liquid solution on my skin after taking the top-skin off with adhesive or scotch tape. They would stick it to my arm and keep pulling, stick it and pull it. When they had exposed the layer beneath the top, they dropped a liquid solution on it and then they put a gall on it. I did ask the doctor, who at the time was Dr. Singh; he was from India. He told me it was some sort of foreign germ. I said, 'Foreign germ? I don't want you putting a foreign germ on me.' He said, 'It's just part of the study.' He was really evasive. I went back about a week later and he took the gall off and I had developed a cyst, maybe about a quarter of an inch big. They offered me an additional \$5 if I would allow them to cut it off. I told them yes, I would want them to cut it off for nothing, but he wanted to give me \$5, to pacify me.

"I had no idea what they were doing to me. If I had known that they were experimenting on me with some germ warfare chemicals, there's no way in the world—I was under the impression that these people were doing things to us like trying to find out about ringworms, nothing that would be detrimental to us. Everybody else felt the same way. This is how naive

we were back in that time. If we had known that those things were going to cause the complications later on in life that they have caused, a lot of us—we would have never gotten involved, I'm sure of that."

### **Worse than the Nazis**

Author Hornblum told *EIR* that he believes what was done to the men in Holmesburg Prison was actually worse than what the Nazis did to slave laborers in their concentration camps. "Frankly, I think it pales in comparison to what the men went through here. They were really used as guinea pigs. They were brought out of a cage, they were dosed up with all sorts of things, that were either placed on them, or that they were made to swallow or injected with. They rarely or ever knew what it was, or what the ramifications would be. So, I think it's actually worse than the use of slave laborers."

The book opens with the ten points of the Nuremberg Code. The Code is clear, and its relevance for experiments on men and women who are imprisoned and destitute is also crystal clear: "[T]he person involved should have legal capacity to give consent; should be so situated as to be able to exercise free power of choice, without the intervention of any element of force, fraud, deceit, duress, overreaching, or other ulterior form of constraint or coercion; and should have sufficient knowledge and comprehension of the elements of the subject matter involved as to enable him to make an understanding and enlightened decision."

The Holmesburg prisoners were never told the nature of the materials that they swallowed, or were smeared or injected with. Their "informed consent" was the result of desperation for money; many Nazi gas chamber victims walked in thinking they were finally getting a shower.

Gloria Gilman, one of the attorneys preparing the former prisoners' lawsuit, told *EIR*, "I just think it's unbelievable that American doctors were instrumental in writing the Nuremberg Code, and yet the United States thinks that it's above international law and we never signed on. We also don't sign on to international treaties of various types. But we immediately began engaging in exactly the kind of research that was considered impermissible in the Nuremberg Code, under the guise that we're so benevolent that we would never hurt anybody. But, of course, there was total disdain for the rights of these people. Just look at the quote, 'acres of skin.' It shows how Dr. Kligman didn't even consider these people, people; he considered them guinea pigs, really. I just think that that's amazing, that we could think that."

### **State hearing**

The Holmesburg prisoners—at least those who still survive—would never have known that they had legal recourse for the many ongoing side-effects of these experiments, were it not for Hornblum's book. They would never have had an

opportunity to seek legal and political redress, were it not for a hearing in February of this year organized at the behest of Pennsylvania State Rep. Harold James (D-Dist. 186).

Representative James told *EIR*, "I wanted to be able to have the hearing conducted by the Judiciary Committee so that we, as policymakers, would be able to see some of the tragic and outrageous incidents that happened to people in our prison system and how now they are trying to talk about private prisons coming on, as that there's a possibility that these kind of things may occur again, dealing with already, now, the slave labor that they are using some of the prisoners for."

"I wanted us to have a hearing," Representative James continued, "to make sure that this could not or was not occurring in Pennsylvania, and could not occur again in Pennsylvania. At the same time, the people who were the victims of this had seemingly been whistling in a vacuum, because nobody was listening to them. They were being treated individually and not getting the kind of compensation that they likely deserve. Hopefully, as a result of that hearing, we have everything documented from the people who testified, so that maybe we can help the victims in terms of being able to express their problems and their concerns and making sure that these kinds of things don't occur again."

### **The evils of pragmatism**

Another value of Hornblum's book is that he locates the root of the evil in the reduction of science to a "pragmatic and utilitarian course." As he put it, "Domestically, the well-being of research subjects was viewed as important, but, in the eyes of medical practitioners, not as important as scientific advancement. . . . The result was a marginalization of the [Nuremberg] Code and the creation of an ethical loophole that allowed physicians to pursue a pragmatic and utilitarian course while de-emphasizing the Code's critical provisions of informed consent by autonomous subjects. Since research was seen to have social importance, doctors could easily avoid the Nuremberg Code's prescriptive safeguards and aggressively pursue their individual goals."

Hornblum told *EIR* that such medical experimentation should not be happening today, "and it probably isn't, but I really wouldn't bet the mortgage on it." He said that progress toward gaining justice for the former test subjects is only happening "at a glacial pace," despite demonstrations they have held at the University of Pennsylvania, which refused to settle out of court. Meanwhile, Dr. Kligman is living a rich man's life, with a big spread on the Jersey Shore, travelling the world extensively, Hornblum said.

Americans drafted the Nuremberg Code, and Americans should make sure that it is implemented here, and that those who suffered from its violation are given justice. We say that we would not stand for less from others—what about America itself?