

WORLD

# Argentina, a Haven for Nazis, Balks at Opening Its Files

By LARRY ROHTER MARCH 9, 2003

Under fire because of a new book that documents for the first time how Juan Perón clandestinely maneuvered to bring Nazi and other war criminals to Argentina after World War II, the Peronist government here is resisting calls to release long-secret official records about the collaboration.

According to the Simon Wiesenthal Center here, both the Foreign Relations Ministry and the Interior Ministries have failed to respond to letters, sent to them shortly after the book was published here late last year, asking that the records be made public.

In addition, seven members of Congress have now called for an investigation into how crucial immigration records were apparently destroyed six years ago in defiance of existing laws.

The book that ignited the controversy, published in the United States as "The Real Odessa: Smuggling the Nazis to Perón's Argentina" (Granta Books: 2002), has become a best seller here. Its author, Uki Goñi, is an Argentine journalist who had to do much of his research in European archives after encountering closed doors here.

"This is an issue of credibility and transparency," Mr. Goñi said in an interview.

But he also said he recognized the political explosiveness of the documents since they demonstrated "just how closely linked Argentina and the Third Reich were and prove the existence of a secret postwar organization that involved Perón and provided

a safe haven to Nazis."

According to records Mr. Goñi has uncovered here and abroad, Perón's government, which was in power from 1946 to 1955, shepherded nearly 300 war criminals into the country.

Besides such notorious figures as Adolf Eichmann, Josef Mengele and Klaus Barbie, dozens of French, Belgian, Italian, Croatian and Slovak fascists, many of them Nazi collaborators sought in their home nations, were also admitted, some under aliases, others under their real names.

The documents indicate that the covert network was run directly from the presidential palace here by Rodolfo Freude, a German-Argentine who was one of Perón's closest advisers. At the same time, Mr. Freude was both running Perón's propaganda apparatus and serving as director of the newly founded state intelligence service.

During his research in Europe, Mr. Goñi also discovered a confidential Foreign Ministry circular from 1938 whose effect was to close Argentina to Jewish refugees seeking to flee Germany.

It ordered Argentine embassies to turn down visa requests from all applicants who "have abandoned their country as undesirables or expellsees, regardless of the motive of their expulsion."

In 1992, the president at the time, Carlos Saúl Menem, also a Peronist, ordered that all documents relating to the Argentine government's dealings with the Nazis be made public. But that decree, like the findings of a Foreign Ministry commission set up in 1997 to examine similar links, appears to have produced little of use to historians or victims of the war criminals who settled here.

"It's an embarrassment," said Sergio Widder, who as the Latin American representative of the Simon Weisenthal Center sent the letters requesting that the documents mentioned in Mr. Goñi's book be made available. "They are simply newspaper clippings."

Argentina also has a law that makes official documents more than 30 years old

the property of its National Archives. As a result, destroying such records without the express authorization of the Archives, as the immigration department is said to have done in 1996, is technically a criminal act, one that the congressmen, all Socialists, want investigated and accounted for.

"We believe that a lid was put on this during the Menem administration and that if archives about criminals of war still exist, they need to be made available to the public," said Rubén Giustiniani, sponsor of the resolution. "Nazism-Fascism was one of the worst plagues ever to affect mankind, and a recognition of what happened here is essential, not just for history but for the present and the future."

Of the three government agencies that Mr. Widder has contacted with requests for documents mentioned in the book, only the state intelligence service has responded, albeit ambiguously.

In a one-paragraph letter, Secretary of Intelligence Miguel Ángel Toma said simply that his agency "does not possess the information solicited," without mentioning whether an archive even exists.

"We have reason to doubt this response, since it seems highly unlikely that the police would have a file on someone like Mengele, who was in the country under his real name, and the intelligence service would not," Mr. Widder said. "Either they are lying or they are inept."

According to the documents Mr. Goñi uncovered, the Roman Catholic Church was also deeply involved in the secret network. The Perón government authorized the arrival of the first Nazi collaborators here, he said, as a result of a meeting in March 1946 between Antonio Caggiano, an Argentine cardinal, and Eugene Tisserant, a French cardinal attached to the Vatican.

Because of that connection, Mr. Widder has also written to the Argentine Conference of Roman Catholic Bishops, asking that it make public all documents relating to the Argentine church's involvement in the smuggling network. The bishops' group, however, replied that it was unable to do so because "it did not yet exist" in 1946 and that "the persons to whom we have turned have no recollection whatsoever" of the two cardinals having met.

"The documentation I have seen shows that the church was the guarantor to the Red Cross for these criminals to get permission to emigrate to Argentina, and many of the applications are signed by priests or by the Pontifical Commission of Assistance, the pope's own entity for refugees," Mr. Goñi said. "This couldn't and wouldn't have happened without the church."

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