

G2: The hunt for Doctor Death: As an SS medic, Aribert Heim carried out horrific experiments on concentration camp prisoners. He escaped and is thought to be hiding in Argentina - but the net may finally be closing. Rory Carroll and Uki Goni on the search for the last of the Nazis

Rory Carroll and Uki Goni. **The Guardian** [London (UK)] 08 Jan 2008: 4.

Abstract

"This is the most important manhunt in over 20 years. If we only get [Aribert Heim] it will be a success," says [Efraim Zuroff]. The most sought after Nazi since Josef Mengele has a bounty of \$448,000 (pounds 227,000) on his head and the governments of Argentina, Chile and Germany on his tail. "When three countries are bent on finding somebody, he will be found. Where there's a will, there's a way," says Zuroff.

"We are very serious about capturing Heim," says Hans-Jurgen Schrade, a captain from the State Office of Criminal Police in Stuttgart, which is handling the case. Schrade, who visited Chile and Argentina in April, is convinced that Heim is somewhere near Bariloche and close to his daughter's town: Puerto Montt is only two hours away from the Argentine border. The Simon Wiesenthal Centre had received "potentially very important information" along the same lines, says Zuroff, without elaborating.

"The scheme [in the Baltics] has not been as successful as we hoped in the practical sense of achieving convictions," says Zuroff. But it was not just about justice; it was about "the struggle for historical truth". Six decades after a horrified world watched newsreels of walking skeletons and pits of emaciated flesh, the Simon Wiesenthal Centre was concerned that memory was fading and being distorted. The outright denial of Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was an extreme case. In Europe it took the form of pinning blame for round-ups, massacres and camps solely on the Germans and denying the often enthusiastic local complicity. In much of the Baltics and eastern Europe that complicity remains taboo, says Zuroff. Hunting Nazis, in other words, is not just about bringing them to justice. It is about fashioning them into tools, educative instruments, to turn back the clock and remind a forgetful world about

that sickening feeling in 1945.

Full Text

It was 1945 and Europe was a crime scene. The most destructive war in history had left a miasma of ruined cities, refugees and occupation armies, but there was worse than that. The Nazi extermination camps had been discovered and little-known placenames were becoming sickeningly famous. Auschwitz, Birkenau, Belzec, Buchenwald, Mauthausen, Sobibor, Treblinka. It was time for a reckoning.

The Nuremberg trials sent Hitler's senior henchmen to the gallows or long stretches in prison. But others escaped. Quietly, with barely a ripple, middle- and low-ranking war criminals slipped the Nuremberg net and subsequent efforts to catch them. They obtained false papers, packed their bags and vanished across the Atlantic to a safe haven: South America.

Legends followed them. There were stories of U-boats packed with Nazi gold docking on the coast of Patagonia. Novels and films imagined a shadowy Fourth Reich of mosquitoes, swastikas and eugenic laboratories in the Amazon jungle and Andean foothills. Some fantastical accounts had the Fuhrer himself in a Panama hat somewhere clipping orchids.

The reality was more prosaic but still sinister. Hundreds, possibly thousands, had escaped through the "ratline" and found sanctuary. As the decades slid by, a handful were caught. Adolf Eichmann, an architect of the Holocaust, was kidnapped by Israeli agents in Argentina in 1960. Klaus Barbie, the "Butcher of Lyons", was extradited from Bolivia in 1983. Erich Priebke, a Waffen SS captain, was extradited from Argentina in 1995. The story petered out. The fugitives were no longer just pensioners but octogenarians, nonagenarians and, for the most part, dead. When the 20th century ended so, it seemed, did the hunt for Nazis.

Not quite. The Simon Wiesenthal Centre recently made a bombshell announcement. The hunt was back on. The Jewish human rights group revealed that it was launching one final drive to locate the remaining genocide collaborators hiding in South America: Operation Last Chance. "We don't know how many Nazi war criminals are in those countries but we think it's dozens, if not hundreds," said Efraim Zuroff, the centre's chief Nazi hunter. It was extremely late in the day, he acknowledged, but not too late.

After years of indifference or outright obstruction, the region's governments had decided to help the hunters. Private and public money had been raised to offer rewards for information. And there were leads. Police had names, bank accounts and tip-offs. Wire-taps were yielding tantalising clues. Media campaigns in Chile, Uruguay, Argentina and Brazil were publicising telephone hotlines and the \$10,000 (pounds 5,000) reward for each tip leading to a conviction. Even after six decades the trail seemed warm.

"Given the large number of Nazi war criminals and collaborators who escaped to South America, this has the potential to yield important results," says Zuroff. He is uncompro- mising about his prey. "The natural tendency is to be sympathetic towards people after they reach a certain age, but these are the last people on earth who deserve sympathy. Their victims deserve that an honest effort be made to find them."

Zuroff does not fit Hollywood's image of a dashing investigator. In his three-piece suit, big spectacles and shiny black shoes, he looks every inch the 59-year-old academic that he is. A New York-born Israeli historian specialising in Holocaust studies, he is the successor to Simon Wiesenthal, a Viennese Jew who survived the camps, moved to the US and tracked Nazis until his death in 2005. Zuroff's tools are reports, databases, tip-offs and publicity. Hardly James Bond, but for a small organisation on a tight budget there are limited ways to scour haystacks for tell-tale glints.

South America is big, a continent almost twice the size of Europe stretching from the Caribbean through the Andes, the Amazon and the pampas and tailing at the icy tip of Tierra del Fuego. Thirteen countries, thousands of cities, 370

million people. If you were a Nazi, where would you lay your hat? Skim the Lonely Planet guidebook and one town leaps off the pages. It resembles a Tyrolean ski resort, the plaza has an "Alpine design", the restaurants serve fondue, venison and chocolate cake, and there is a cable car soaring up "Gothic spires of rock". Welcome to San Carlos de Bariloche.

It appears so perfect as to be a cliché, but this holiday capital in Argentine Patagonia is the suspected bolthole of the most wanted Nazi in South America. Investigators have a hunch that somewhere among the skiers and student revellers who throng the picturesque streets is a 93-year-old Austrian by the name of Aribert Heim - otherwise known as Doctor Death, or, in Spanish, Doctor Muerte.

"This is the most important manhunt in over 20 years. If we only get Heim it will be a success," says Zuroff. The most sought after Nazi since Josef Mengele has a bounty of \$448,000 (pounds 227,000) on his head and the governments of Argentina, Chile and Germany on his tail. "When three countries are bent on finding somebody, he will be found. Where there's a will, there's a way," says Zuroff.

The reason Heim tops the most wanted list makes for grim reading. As an SS doctor at Mauthausen, a concentration camp near the Austrian city of Linz, he earned a reputation for exceptional cruelty. Camp survivors said he injected prisoners in the heart with petrol and poison and timed the deaths. He allegedly performed amputations without anaesthetic, removed the tattooed flesh of a prisoner to make seat coverings for the camp commandant's flat and boiled the flesh off a head to use the skull as an exhibit.

After the war, the young physician was overlooked by Nuremberg investigators and moved to a spa town near Frankfurt where he found work as a gynaecologist, married and played in the ice hockey team. However, by 1962 Austrian investigators were closing in and Heim fled. Over the years there were alleged sightings in Egypt, Uruguay, Chile and Spain. But now all attention is on Bariloche. Heim has a 64-year-old daughter, Waltraud, who lives just across the border in the Chilean town of Puerto Montt. His one-time lover and Waltraud's mother, Gertrud Boser, visited Chile 18 times between 1979 and 1992. Gertrud is dead and Waltraud declines to discuss her father. Heim's other family, a wife and two sons in Baden-Baden, Germany, say he died of cancer in Argentina in 1993.

If so, that would repeat the anti-climax of the hunt for the other notorious doctor, Mengele. Investigators discovered his bones in a cemetery near Sao Paulo in 1985. Auschwitz's "Angel of Death", memorably played by Gregory Peck in the film *The Boys from Brazil*, apparently had a stroke while swimming six years earlier. Might the hunters also be too late for Heim?

A retired Israeli air force colonel, Danny Baz, has published a book claiming he was part of a squad that tracked down and killed him in California in 1982 and dumped the body in the Pacific. Zuroff dismisses that as fantasy and says the evidence strongly indicates that Heim was alive. In 2001, his lawyer sought a refund from German tax authorities on the grounds that his client was living abroad. Heim's wife and sons were secretive and uncommunicative and had not tried to claim a Berlin bank account in his name containing euros 1m (pounds 750,000). Surveillance records showed that the mother phoned her sons on his birthday to remind them of the date.

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If Doctor Death is captured in the resort town, it will suggest a certain Nazi herd mentality. It was here that Erich Priebke, an SS officer who participated in the massacre of 335 prisoners on the outskirts of Rome in 1944, was confronted by a US television network in 1994 and from here that he was subsequently extradited to Italy. Currently serving a life sentence under house arrest in Rome, the 94-year-old is a poster-boy for master-race

longevity. He scoots to court on the back of his lawyer's Vespa, takes calls on his cell phone and flogs his autobiography on his own internet page.

There is believed to be a smattering of fugitives in Bolivia, Brazil and Paraguay, but by far the most popular destination was Argentina. A government panel reported in 1999 that at least 180 Nazis facing criminal charges in Europe had moved to Argentina. That excluded rank-and-file Nazis not facing individual charges. There is no mystery about why so many ended up here: they were invited. The government of Juan Peron established "ratlines" to spirit war criminals and collaborators into Argentina. With the cold war breaking out, America, Britain and the Soviet Union poached Nazi scientists, so this is a subject without moral high ground, but Peron's welcome extended to men with few talents beyond mass murder.

There were several reasons. When posted as a military attache to Italy in 1939-41, the ambitious Argentine developed a taste for Mussolini's firebrand fascism. He forged a relationship with SS agents who gave him intelligence on South American countries in return for Argentine cover. They cooked up an aborted plan to install a puppet regime in Bolivia. The professional soldier in Peron considered the Nuremberg trials an insult to military honour. As a nationalist president he wanted scientists, jet-plane designers and nuclear experts for his arms industry. On his immigration papers, Eichmann stated his profession as "technician". Mengele claimed to be a "mechanic".

Declassified documents in Argentina, America and Europe show how Buenos Aires teamed up with Vatican officials, notably the Argentine cardinal Antonio Caggiano and the French cardinal Eugene Tisserant, to rescue beleaguered Nazis and collaborators from post-war Europe. Imagining itself to be fighting communism, the network issued false documents to slip Hitler's helpers to Italy and on to passenger ships departing from Genoa.

One of the first to arrive in Buenos Aires was Pierre Daye, a Belgian collaborator who had been sentenced to death. Unusually, he flew, but the sentiments in his memoirs were doubtless shared by others: "It was with a sense of deliverance, of escape, a veritable joy in the heart, that I boarded the plane that would carry me to South America." As the four-engine Douglas neared sanctuary, he grew giddy. "They may be looking for me in that troubled Europe. But they cannot reach me. I fly far from a world gone mad, towards peace. It's all over. I have escaped. I fly through the blue."

At the same time that Evita was wowing crowds outside the Casa Rosada, the presidential palace, her husband was importing Nazis in bulk. Peron authorised Daye to set up the Society in Argentina for the Reception of Europeans in a grand church-owned building. An Argentine-German SS captain, Carlos Fuldner, established a company called Capri that did contract work for Argentina's state water utility and offered a sinecure for the likes of Eichmann.

There may not have been submarines laden with gold nor jungle laboratories making blue-eyed Indians but there was indeed a shadowy network of genocidal murderers in Argentina. It is a stain on the revered founder of Peronism that has been belatedly and grudgingly recognised. In 2005 the government repealed "directive 11", a secret order that prohibited Jews fleeing the Holocaust from entering Argentina in the 1940s. Younger Argentines have been willing to explore this dark side of their history, but for many older Argentines it is too painful. Denial and obstruction endure. Though more helpful to Nazi hunters than before, the government is widely believed to be withholding immigration records that could expose details of the ratline.

That reluctance and the mindset it betrays appears to impel Zuroff's hunt more than the prospect of putting Nazis behind bars. Operation Last Chance was first launched in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in 2002. Five years later, the results seem paltry: three arrest warrants, two extradition requests and five cases that may or may not lead to trials. Now that it has moved to South America and been renamed Operacion Ultima Oportunidad, what are its chances?

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decades after a horrified world watched newsreels of walking skeletons and pits of emaciated flesh, the Simon Wiesenthal Centre was concerned that memory was fading and being distorted. The outright denial of Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was an extreme case. In Europe it took the form of pinning blame for round-ups, massacres and camps solely on the Germans and denying the often enthusiastic local complicity. In much of the Baltics and eastern Europe that complicity remains taboo, says Zuroff. Hunting Nazis, in other words, is not just about bringing them to justice. It is about fashioning them into tools, educative instruments, to turn back the clock and remind a forgetful world about that sickening feeling in 1945.

That may seem an excessive load to pile on to Aribert Heim, a 93-year-old who has been running for most of his life and apparently wants to spend his twilight years near his daughter. In Mauthausen, he was a 27-year-old junior doctor surrounded by moral chaos. Now he could be a great-grandfather. The wanted poster showing him as he may appear today is hardly sympathetic, but it cannot mask the pathos of somebody so old being prey. If Heim is caught taking fondue at the Alpine plaza overlooking the lake, he will not finish his meal. He will be taken away in handcuffs and almost certainly die in an Argentine or German jail cell.

"The passage of time in no way diminishes the guilt of the perpetrators," says Zuroff. "Killers don't become righteous gentiles when they reach a certain age." For the hunter, those images from Mauthausen, the poison injections, the stopwatch to time the deaths, the tattoo seat covers, the skull - they tumble into the present. They are always present.

Uki Goni is a Guardian journalist based in Buenos Aires and the author of *The Real Odessa: Smuggling the Nazis to Peron's Argentina* (Granta).

Rory Carroll is the Guardian's Latin America correspondent.

Illustration

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