

In South America, a 'Last Chance' to Hunt Down Nazi War Criminals

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BUENOS AIRES -- Most of them would be in their 90s now, men who have kept their identities hidden for decades to escape punishment for their Nazi pasts.

Concerns that they might succeed, and die without being held accountable, have led officials at the renowned Simon Wiesenthal Center to announce one final drive to locate elderly war criminals hiding in [South America](#): Operation Last Chance.

"The natural tendency is to be sympathetic toward people after they reach a certain age, but these are the last people on Earth who deserve sympathy," said Efraim Zuroff, the center's top Nazi hunter. "I think that in no way does the passage of time lessen their crimes. Their victims deserve that an honest effort be made to find them."

The Wiesenthal Center's Nazi hunters have brought hundreds of war criminals to justice since the end of World War II, and South America has always provided fertile ground: Permissive immigration standards after the war allowed many Nazis to escape prosecution in [Europe](#) and create new identities in South America.

Some of the [Third Reich](#)'s most infamous names ended up in countries such as [Argentina](#), where the government of President Juan Perón aided Nazi war criminals fleeing postwar Europe and the [Nuremberg trials](#).

In 1999, an Argentine government panel reported that at least 180 Nazis facing criminal charges in Europe had relocated to Argentina. That number, which other research groups have said is probably low, does not include rank-and-file Nazis who were not individually charged. No estimates are available for the number of Nazis who fled to other South American countries.

[Adolf Eichmann](#), who oversaw the transport of Jews across Europe to concentration camps, was abducted by Israeli agents in Argentina in 1960 and hanged in 1962. Josef Mengele, known as the "Angel of Death" for his ghoulish experiments at [Auschwitz](#), spent most of his postwar life in Argentina before dying in [Brazil](#) in 1979. Klaus Barbie -- "the Butcher of Lyon" -- was extradited from [Bolivia](#) in 1983 to [France](#), where he died in prison, while Eduard Roschmann -- "the Butcher of [Riga](#)" -- died in [Paraguay](#) in 1977.

In recent decades the rate of such discoveries has slowed, though there are still sporadic sightings. The Wiesenthal Center hopes one of the next to be found will be Aribert Heim, an Austrian-born doctor wanted for killing hundreds of prisoners at the [Mauthausen](#) concentration camp in [Austria](#) by performing lethal operations without anesthesia.

Heim has a daughter in [Chile](#) and is believed by Zuroff and others to be alive in either Chile or Argentina. Although Heim's family has said he is dead, German authorities

have discovered a bank account with more than \$1.5 million that could be claimed by his children if they were to offer proof of his death. They haven't, and now, believing that the account might still be financing Heim, [Germany](#) has created a special task force to track him.

"There's now a prize of 310,000 euros on his head -- 130,000 offered by the German government, another 130,000 offered by us, and this July the Austrians added another 50,000 euros," Zuroff said.

But even if Heim is found, trying him in court could prove difficult, if not impossible. The extradition process can take years. The Wiesenthal Center's leaders met last week with government officials in Argentina, Chile, Brazil and [Uruguay](#) to plead for cooperation if any war criminals are found.

That cooperation has in the past been spotty. In Argentina, investigators and human rights groups have long tried to get the government to release immigration records and files that they believe could detail Perón's efforts to actively aid the relocation of Nazis to Argentina.

The government's Secretariat of State Intelligence, known as SIDE, has not released other documents that researchers believe exist and could shed light on a period that many Argentines consider an embarrassing chapter in the country's history.

"SIDE denies having documents related to the Division of Information that was the office that operated steps from Perón's office," said Sergio Widder, who heads the Wiesenthal Center's [Buenos Aires](#) office. "The truth is that that answer is not credible."

Perón remains an icon in Argentina, and his movement still dominates the country's politics. Uki Goni, a journalist who has written two books about Argentina's links with the Nazis, said some Argentine politicians are uncomfortable addressing the issue.

"The older Peronists have a really hard time dealing with it, but the younger ones, particularly those who grew up during the military dictatorship here, are more willing to accept that Perón wasn't a demigod," Goni said.

In 2005, for example, the Argentine government finally acknowledged and repealed a secret order that prohibited Jews fleeing the Holocaust from entering Argentina. Goni found out about the order through his grandfather, who was one of the Argentine diplomats who enforced "Directive 11" in the 1940s.

"I think there's a chance they might find someone who's still alive," said Goni. "There's a slim last chance."