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# History, Historical Fiction, and Historical Myth: 'The German Doctor' by Lucía Puenzo

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# History, Historical Fiction, and Historical Myth: 'The German Doctor' by Lucía Puenzo

## **Abstract**

The escape of thousands of war criminals to Argentina and throughout South America in the aftermath of World War II is a historical subject that has been clouded with mystery and conspiracy. Lucía Puenzo's film, *The German Doctor*, utilizes this historical enigma as a backdrop for historical fiction by imagining a family's encounter with Josef Mengele, the notorious SS doctor from Auschwitz who escaped to South America in 1949 under a false identity. While Puenzo sought to tell a story within a historical context, the film still has important historical commentaries. Ultimately, *The German Doctor* demonstrates the intersections of history, historical fiction, and historical myth as it perpetuates false conceptions and conspiracies and creates a new field of pseudo-history despite its historical fiction label.

## **Keywords**

The German Doctor, Nazi, Argentina

## **Disciplines**

European History | Film and Media Studies | History | Latin American Languages and Societies | Latin American Studies | Military History

## **Comments**

Latin American, Caribbean and Latino Studies Senior Capstone

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Nathan Cody



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## Prologue

In the spring of 2014, I studied abroad in Mendoza, Argentina. While I was abroad, I took a sixteen hour bus ride from Mendoza, south to Bariloche. As I disembarked from the bus, and stretched my legs in the small bus station, I noticed a small book with a large Swastika on the cover page surrounded by postcards and other souvenirs from the town (see below). As a History and Spanish/Latin American, Caribbean, and Latino Studies double major at Gettysburg College, who truly has a love for history, I look for the historical perspective of every new place I visit, and I was able to recognize the historical implications of the swastika. I walked over and casually flipped through the pages as I waited for my fellow traveling companions. Like a traditional guidebook, the book highlighted a number of “historical” spots to visit in Bariloche. However, unlike a traditional guidebook, it focused on Nazi hideouts and meeting places in Bariloche.

That small book is what first got me interested in the idea of exploring the Nazi presence in Argentina. The book, made me acutely aware of the fusion of fiction and history that comprised the popular discourse and knowledge regarding Nazis in South America. It was both fascinating and disturbing. Did Nazis flee Europe and wind up in Bariloche? Yes. Did Adolf Hitler really escape his Berlin bunker to live the remainder of his life in South America? Absolutely not. Then why is it advertised on the cover of this book and why do so many people believe it? That question is much more difficult to answer. The blending of history with a fictional narrative is dangerous. This is where the Lucia Puenzo film, *The German Doctor*, comes into play, as it creates a fiction within a historical setting.



Guidebook by Abel Basti on Nazi sites in Bariloche. Claims to include the places where Hitler lived after his escape of Berlin.

### **Introduction**

The camera pans across the vast Patagonia landscape. It is 1960, and an Argentine family becomes acquainted with a reticent German doctor with a mysterious past. Lilith (Florencia Bado), the youngest daughter of this typical Argentine family suffers from stunted growth, and is tenderly cared for by the doctor. Meanwhile, Israeli agents are pressing desperately to find the doctor. The family is unaware that they are in fact giving refuge to one of the most wanted fugitives on the planet. The doctor is Josef Mengele (Alex Brendemühl). Known as the “Angel of Death”, Mengele was an SS officer and physician who worked at Auschwitz concentration and death camp. The Israeli agents are on the hunt throughout South America to find Mengele, among other Nazi war criminals, some of the most wanted men in the world.

*The German Doctor*, or *Wakolda* (its Spanish title), is a historical fiction film by Argentine author and filmmaker Lucia Puenzo that examines secrecy, complicity and mythology

in Argentina following a dark time in world history: World War II and the Nazi party. Although many Nazi war criminals were brought to justice, countless others escaped to places like Argentina and other countries in South America. The escape of top war criminals like Mengele has created a separate discourse that confuses history and historical examination with mythology and unsubstantiated conspiracy. While the film is fictional, it contains important commentaries into a past that is still shrouded with secrecy and mystery. Still, it walks the fine line between history, historical fiction, and historical myth. This paper is a deconstruction of the film, *The German Doctor*, as a fictional document that is based in historical context. While the film only scratches the surfaces of the complex and surreptitious history of the relationship between Argentina and the Nazis, and tends to proliferate a growing mythology regarding Nazis in South America, the stylistic presentation and construction of the historical fiction narrative succeed in unearthing themes of complicity and secrecy as it relates to Argentina's involvement in harboring Nazi fugitives.

### **Part I: History**

While the film stands on its own as a fictional narrative, there are many presumptions made about the historical understanding of Argentina's relationship with Germany and the Nazi party. The film does not delve deep into the history of Nazis in Argentina. Behind the film, there is a historical context that situates Argentina's position during World War II, their role in harboring war criminals, and Joseph Mengele and his role in the Nazi regime as well as his escape to South America. Although the film takes place around 1960, it is historically rooted in Argentina's relationship with the Allied Powers and the Axis Powers during World War II, as well as their actions that allowed Josef Mengele to enter the country. Furthermore, the film is predicated upon the assumption that the viewer is, at least aware that Mengele is associated with

the Nazis, but it does not probe exceptionally deep into his work and his situation outside of the small window of time in which the film depicts.

### German Argentines

Before the outbreak of war in 1939, Argentina had a growing German population centered in Buenos Aires. German immigration in the 1920s increased the German population within Argentina from 100,000 prior to World War I in 1914, to 250,000 in the late 1930s. Furthermore, attendance of German schools in Argentina rose from 3,300 in 1905 to 12,900 in 1933 (one such school is depicted in the film). Within this population developed a well-to-do business elite that was connected with Argentine government officials and military officers.<sup>1</sup>

Nazism came to Argentina in 1931 when fifty-nine associates formed of the Argentine Country-Group (*Landesgruppe*). The party grew within the next five years, and reached its peak membership in 1936, with 2,110 members. Based solely on numbers, it was the fourth largest Nazi organization outside of Germany, behind Austria, Holland, and Brazil. However, in terms of ratio between Germans in Argentina and party members, it was much lower.<sup>2</sup>

### Argentina and World War II

As the title of the book *Argentina between the Great Powers, 1939-46*, edited by scholars Guido di Tella and D. Cameron Watts suggests, Argentina was politically situated between the major world powers from 1939 to 1946.<sup>3</sup> When war broke out in 1939, Argentina was in a precarious position on the international political stage. Argentina was hesitant to enter the conflict in favor of the Allies for a number of reasons, including its respect for German military

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Newton, *The Nazi Menace in Argentina* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1992), 13-36.

<sup>2</sup> Newton, *The Nazi Menace*, 68.

<sup>3</sup> Guido di Tella and D. Cameron Watt, eds., *Argentina Between the Great Powers, 1939-46* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990).

tradition, Argentina's tradition of neutrality, the reluctance of the Argentine military to join a foreign affair, nationalism, and its historical rivalry with Great Britain; still very few military leaders within Argentina actually supported Hitler.<sup>4</sup>

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States insisted that every Latin American country declare war against the Axis Powers. Although Argentina remained closer to the Allied Powers, they did not declare war against the Axis. Because of Argentina's refusal to declare war, the United States enacted an economic embargo and the political situation became destabilized.<sup>5</sup> Argentina was led by a military government that included Juan Perón, who would become president in 1946 and was instrumental in aiding the escape of war criminals. Finally, as the Allies neared victory, Argentina declared war in March of 1945 on Germany and Japan.

### Exodus of Evil

As it became clear that the Nazi cause was lost, many Nazis began planning evacuation routes to escape being brought to justice by the Allied powers. The International Red Cross, the Christian churches, Western intelligence agencies, and the Argentine government, as well as a number of other governments and international organizations were instrumental in aiding war criminals from all over Europe in escaping to a number of countries, including Argentina. In all, it is suspected that in between 40,000 and 50,000 war criminals from all over Europe escaped to Argentina.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Norberto Galasso, *Perón: Formación, Ascenso y Caída (1893-1955)* (Buenos Aires: Colihue, 2006), 118.

<sup>5</sup> Carlos Escudé, "U.S. Political Destabilisation and Economic Boycott of Argentina during the 1940s," in *Argentina Between the Great Powers, 1939-46*, eds. Guido di Tella and D. Cameron Watt ((Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Gerald Steinacher, "'The Cape of Last Hope': The Postwar Flight of Nazi War Criminals through South Tyrol/Italy to South America," *University of Nebraska Faculty Publications, Department of History* (2006): 217.



The historiography regarding the fleeing of war criminals after World War II is rather new, as access to previously classified documents from various governments and commissioned reports have been released. In 1999, the Commission of Enquiry into the Activities of Nazism in Argentina released the most succinct report on Nazi activities in Argentina before and after the war. Since then, two authors have provided extensive analysis regarding the escape of Nazis and other war criminals. Uki Goñi's 2002 work, which focuses on Argentina's role in accepting war criminals, was one of the first extensive investigations utilizing the newly released documents.<sup>7</sup> Gerald Steinacher's work goes further to dispel the myths and present the facts regarding the escape of Nazis.<sup>8</sup> While a thorough account could not even be covered in an entirely separate thesis, it is important to establish the basis for Argentina's relationship with Nazis and other war criminals, and understanding the question, as Steinacher put it, "How was the flight of Nazi war criminals from Europe possible in practical terms?"<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Uki Goñi, *The Real Odessa: Smuggling the Nazi's to Perón's Argentina* (London: Granta Books, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Gerald Steinacher, *Nazis on the Run: How Hitler's Henchmen Fled Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Gerald Steinacher, "'The Cape of Last Hope': The Postwar Flight of Nazi War Criminals through South Tyrol/Italy to South America," *University of Nebraska Faculty Publications, Department of History* (2006): 204.

While the flight of the thousands of war criminals did not take place at once, and was not uniform in the routes taken, most common. As Steinacher America led first of all over to Italy and then, for the most to Argentina.”<sup>10</sup> South Tyrol of war criminals. Situated in with Austria, South Tyrol was territorially, but also there was one path that was noted, “The path to South the Brenner Pass from Austria part, from the port of Genoa was a key area in the escape northern Italy on the border a “sort of no ‘man’s land’ politically.”<sup>11</sup> South Tyrol was a German-speaking territory that became incorporated into the Italian state after the collapse of Austria-Hungary at the end of World War I.



This image marks South Tyrol in northern Italy in red.

From places like South Tyrol in Italy, Sweden, Denmark, and Switzerland the Vatican network, the International Red Cross, the Argentine government, and Western intelligence

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<sup>10</sup> Gerald Steinacher, “The Cape of Last Hope’: The Postwar Flight of Nazi War Criminals through South Tyrol/Italy to South America,” *University of Nebraska Faculty Publications, Department of History* (2006): 204.

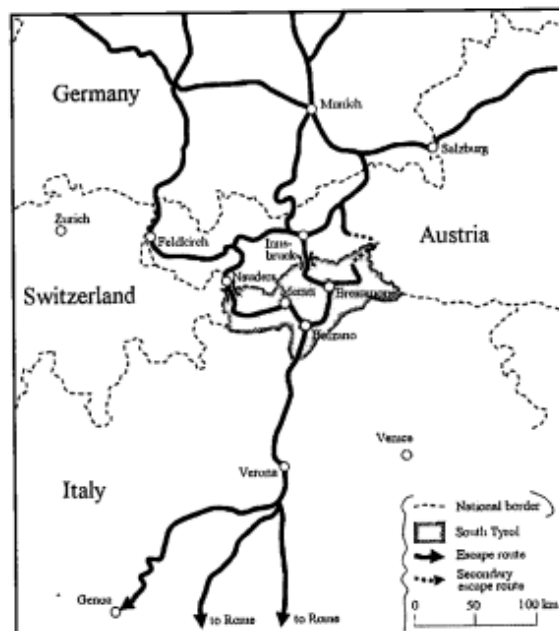
<sup>11</sup> Gerald Steinacher, “The Cape of Last Hope’: The Postwar Flight of Nazi War Criminals through South Tyrol/Italy to South America,” *University of Nebraska Faculty Publications, Department of History* (2006): 204.

services, including United States intelligence became instrumental in allowing the war criminals to escape Europe into South America.<sup>12</sup> It took international collaboration of planning and processing to make the escape of war criminals possible, but the role of the Catholic Church was vital. As Goñi explained, “Thousands of former Nazi, Rexist, Vichy, and Ustasha officials...had to be clandestinely provided with aliases, travel documents, money, lodging, and a ticket to South America. It was only the Catholic Church that was able to braid the strands of such a gargantuan endeavor.”<sup>13</sup> This claim is supported by a statement made by a senior official of the with the U.S. embassy in Rome, who explained in 1947:

The Vatican of course is the largest single organization involved in the illegal movement of emigrants [...] The justification of the Vatican for its participation in this illegal traffic is simply the propagation of the Faith. It is the Vatican’s desire to assist any person, regardless of nationality or political beliefs, as long as that person can prove himself to be a Catholic. This of course from the practical point of view is a dangerous practice. The Vatican further justifies its participation by its desire to infiltrate not only European countries but Latin-American countries as well, with people of all political beliefs as long as they are anti-Communist and pro-Catholic Church.<sup>14</sup>

Although the role of the Catholic Church as a uniform organization supporting the escape of Nazi war criminals as a clandestine policy is hyperbolized, it is undeniable that top-Catholic officials were active in providing shelter, securing documents, and aiding in the travel of war criminals.

providing shelter,  
and aiding in the travel



<sup>12</sup> Gerald Steinacher, *Nazis on the Run* (Oxford University Press, 2011).  
<sup>13</sup> Uki Goñi, *The Real Odessa: How the Nazis Escaped to South America* (Da Capo Books, 2002).  
<sup>14</sup> Vicent La Vista to Herbert J. Goldhamer, *Nazis on the Run: How*

Oxford University Press, 2011).  
 Da Capo Books, 2002).  
 . *Nazis on the Run: How*

This Map displays the common escape routes used by Nazi criminals through Austria and into Italy before they made their way to South America.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, the role of the International Red Cross cannot be overlooked nor condoned. The International Red Cross issued thousands of travel papers without a strong vetting process, and the process was easy to manipulate. For example, for ethnic Germans who lost their homes and lands during the war, the International Red Cross issued a vast amount of travel papers. Nazi war criminals were able to obtain documents, by using false names and presenting themselves as ethnic Germans. Journalist Heiner Lichtenstein succinctly summarized the responsibility of the International Red Cross at the end of the war and in its aftermath, as he stated,

While those responsible for the Holocaust were being sought everywhere in Europe, the Red Cross and Vatican staff were helping murderers to escape, and for this the ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] and Vatican staff were helping murderers to escape, and for this the ICRC is guilty of gross negligence at the very least.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, it was a combination of factors that enabled thousands of criminals to enter Argentina.

While a number of top Nazis were unable to flee, other notable criminals such as Adolf

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<sup>15</sup> Gerald Steinacher, *Nazis on the Run: How Hitler's Henchmen Fled Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Heiner Lichtenstein, *Angepaßt und true ergeben. Das Rote Kreuz im 'Dritten Reich'* (Cologne: Bund, 1988), 148, quoted in Gerald Steinacher, *Nazis on the Run: How Hitler's Henchmen Fled Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 100.

Eichmann and Josef Mengele, perhaps two of the highest profile cases, found refuge in Argentina and South America.

While Eichmann does not make an appearance in *The German Doctor*, his name is mentioned numerous times throughout the film without providing an in-depth context, and therefore his case garners consideration. Eichmann was a high-ranking SS official who was charged with organizing and managing the mass deportations of Jews to ghettos, concentration camps and death camps. As the leader of the Central Office for the Jewish Emigration and Lieutenant Colonel in the Reich Security Main Office, Eichmann orchestrated the deportation of over 1.5 million Jews from all over Europe to the camps.<sup>17</sup> After Germany was defeated in 1945, Eichmann was able to evade capture and fled to Austria. In 1950, Eichmann moved to Argentina under the false name, Ricardo Klement. Ten years later, Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency, which receives brief mention in the film captured Eichmann in Argentina, and he was transported to Israel to stand trial for war crimes and other crimes against humanity. Eichmann was found guilty, and he was hanged on June 1, 1962.<sup>18</sup>



<sup>17</sup> "Adolf Eichmann," *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, last modified January 29, 2016, accessed April 1, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Neal Bascomb, *Hunting Eichmann: How a Band of Survivors and a Young Spy Agency Chased Down the World's Most Notorious Nazi* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009).; The literature regarding Eichmann, his capture, and his trial is immense due to the in-depth media coverage of the trial. For further reading on Eichmann see Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 1994).

Adolf Eichmann's false identification papers in Argentina. Courtesy of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

### Josef Mengele



Joseph Mengele. Courtesy of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum



Portrayal of Mengele in the film.

In the first scene of *The German Doctor*, the audience is introduced to Josef Mengele. Although, his true identity is not revealed until one of the final climactic scenes, Mengele's identity can be inferred from the outset. However, the film is about the family that Mengele encounters more so than it is about Mengele himself. Therefore, the film leaves it to the viewer to get a true understanding of who Mengele was.<sup>19</sup> It is important to examine Mengele and where he came from, as it shapes his actions throughout the film. As one of the most infamous people from one of history's most infamous time periods, Mengele's inclusion as a central character in the film fuses the historical narrative within the film's historical fiction narrative.

Josef Mengele was born, the eldest of three sons, on March 16, 1911 to Karl and Walburga Mengele in Günzburg Bavaria. The Mengele family was well-off, as Karl owned his

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<sup>19</sup> There are a number of biographies and studies of Mengele's psychology and character. One of the most thorough biographies is *Mengele: The Complete Story* by Gerald L. Posner and John Ware.

own business. Josef was raised in a devoutly Catholic household. Josef thrived in school, and went on to Munich University to study philosophy and medicine. Munich was a hotbed for National Socialism, and Mengele, with his national conservative background became attracted to the ideas of Nazism. Still, Mengele would not join the Nazi party until 1937.

While it is impossible to pinpoint the exact pathway that lead Mengele down the evil road to the heinous experiments he would commit as a doctor at Auschwitz, Gerald Posner and John Ware noted that Mengele’s interest in genetics and evolution came at a time when the doctrines of Nazi racial ideology were predicated upon the belief that the Aryan race was superior, and Mengele was able to interact and study under leading proponents of these social Darwinist theories.<sup>20</sup>

A year after Mengele joined the Nazi party, he became a member of the elite SS. After being called into the Wehrmacht (German Army) in 1940, Mengele volunteered for medical service in the Waffen-SS, which was the battle unit of the SS. Mengele garnered numerous awards for his service, but was transferred to the Race and Resettlement Office after he was severely injured in battle. After a promotion to captain, Mengele was persuaded to take a post at the concentration camp at Auschwitz in May of 1943.

At Auschwitz, Mengele served under Eduard Wirths as the chief physician. At the sub-camp of Birkenau, Mengele earned the nickname, “The Angel of Death”, as he was known for his calm, diabolical demeanor during selections, when it was decided which inmates would live and which inmates would be sent to the gas chambers. Furthermore, as Posner and Ware noted about Mengele, “So obsessed was he with finding

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<sup>20</sup> Gerald Posner and John Ware, *Me*



vast numbers of twins that he attended railhead selections even when it was not his turn; he could be seen bargaining with the SS doctors on duty to set the twins aside for him.”<sup>21</sup> For Mengele, the multitude of experiments he performed focused on the idea of perfecting the Aryan race. One survivor described Mengele’s eerie temperament toward children: There are a number of allusions to Mengele’s perverse ideology and experimentation on twins throughout the film.

As the Soviets closed in on Germany, Mengele was on the run. Although Mengele was captured by American troops, he was released before they realized who they had captured. After living in Germany for a few years, Mengele fled to Argentina under the name Helmut Gregor in 1949. Mengele lived in Buenos Aires for a number of years, and worked as a salesman. He made numerous trips to Paraguay during this time, and he even returned to Switzerland to visit his son. Eventually, Mossad agents were able to trace Mengele to Buenos Aires, and an arrest warrant was procured in 1960. However, by this point, Mengele had already fled and was living in a farm in Paraguay. Mengele eventually made his way to Brazil, where he drowned after suffering a stroke while

The image shows two Italian government forms. The left form is a 'RICHIESTA DI TITOLO DI VIAGGIO' (Travel Document Request) from the 'COMITATO INTERNAZIONALE DELLA CROCE ROSSA' (International Red Cross Committee). It is filled out for 'GREGOR' with a date of birth of 6 agosto 1911 and a date of issue of 16 maggio 1949. The right form is a 'TESTIMONIANZA FORNITA' (Testimonial Provided) from the 'Comune di Ternero-Prile'. It certifies the identity of 'Gregor Helmut' as a person who fled Germany in 1949 and migrated to Argentina in 1949. Both forms include fields for name, date of birth, place of birth, parents, and migration details.

<sup>21</sup> Gerald Posner and John Ware, *Mengele: The Complete Story* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1986), 30.



swimming on February 7, 1979.<sup>22</sup>

This document displays the travel paper used by Josef Mengele to travel to Argentina. The signature at the bottom of the left page says Gergor Helmut, the false name used by Mengele, which he uses in the film.<sup>23</sup>

### **Historical Fiction**

For six weeks in the fall of 1960, there were no entries in Josef Mengele's diary. Around this time, Eichmann had been captured, and Mengele had decided that he had to leave the farm he was living on in Paraguay. When the diary entries resumed, Mengele was in Brazil.<sup>24</sup> It was during this six week period that Lucía Puenzo places Mengele in Bariloche to creating a haunting

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<sup>22</sup> Gerald Posner and John Ware, *Mengele: The Complete Story* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1986), 288.

<sup>23</sup> Gerald Steinacher, *Nazis on the Run: How Hitler's Henchmen Fleed Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> Gerald Posner and John Ware, *Mengele: The Complete Story* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1986), 158.; Mengele's diary, which contains a vast collection of entries and letters from Mengele surfaced in the police archives in São Paulo, Brazil.

historical fiction drama about a family whose brief encounter with Mengele turns into a dangerous relationship that threatens the family's well-being.

While historical fiction films tell fictional stories, the contextualization of the story through a historical setting, time period, or event, the sub-plots and themes shed light on important historical implications. In the most simplistic terms, the historical fiction genre “is a structured work of fiction set in a historical era, often one that predates the author's [director's] lifetime.”<sup>25</sup> The family's narrative is fiction, but the narrative clearly comments on the complicity of Argentine society as war criminals flooded into the country. Director Lucía Puenzo described the interplay between historical research and fictional imagination. As she stated in an interview, “In general, even if I am dealing with a historical subject, I begin with invention rather than investigation, because I need to understand what is going to be the voice or the tone of the story.”<sup>26</sup> Still, the undertones of history are palpable within the fictional narrative. As film studies scholar Leger Grindon expounded, “Whether explicit or implicit, each historical fiction film contains assumptions about the causal forces operating in history.”<sup>27</sup> Although none of the history regarding Josef Mengele or the escape of Nazi war criminals to South America (as is presented above) is implicitly stated, there are various clues and themes that allude to the dark history. Louis Mink expands upon the connection between a fictional narrative and historical context. He explained, “The features which enable a story to flow and for us follow, then, are the clues to the nature of historical understanding. An historical narrative does not demonstrate the necessity of events but makes them intelligible by unfolding the story which connects their

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<sup>25</sup> Meredith Eliassen, “Historical Novel,” *Salem Press Encyclopedia of Literature* (January 2016), accessed March 31, 2016.

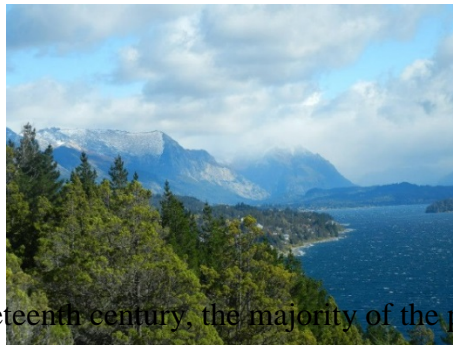
<sup>26</sup> Carlos Aguilar, “Deceiving Monsters: Lucía Puenzo on *The German Doctor*,” *SydneysBuzz*, April 25, 2014, accessed March 14, 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Leger Grindon, “Drama and Spectacle as Historical Explanation in the Historical Fiction Film,” *Film and History* 17, no. 4 (December 1987): 74.

significance.”<sup>28</sup> While the narrative in *The German Doctor* is fictional, the telling of the story makes a number of statements on Argentine history and society.

### Setting

In *The German Doctor*, the setting is a vital element in the establishment of a historical context within the fictional narrative. The choice of Bariloche as the setting for the film is not founded upon historical fact, as Mengele’s location was unknown during this period, yet it is intentional and explicit. Located in the mountainous province of Río Negro, in northern Patagonia, Bariloche, a small tourist city, is often described as having the appearance of a Swiss skiing village.<sup>29</sup>



By the end of the nineteenth century, the majority of the population of Bariloche was comprised of German-speaking immigrants, but the town would become forever linked to the stain of Nazism when a former Nazi war criminal was discovered to be living there in 1994. As one report described the town, “For decades Argentines have quietly referred to Bariloche as a haven for Nazis who fled Germany after World War II... Swastikas are regularly scrawled on walls and even appear in some public artwork.”<sup>30</sup>

One such location within the film that is tainted by the stain of Nazism is the German school in which Lilith and her siblings attend in Bariloche. For Lilith, the school is a place where

<sup>28</sup> Louis O. Mink, “History and Fiction,” *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 9, no. 3 (Spring 1975): 545.

<sup>29</sup> José Daniel Benclowicz, “Migración y turismo en Bariloche, Argentina,” *Revista de Historia*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1998): 1-10.

<sup>30</sup> Calvin Sims, “In Nazi’s Hiding Place,” *Proquest Historical*, March 9, 2016, accessed [March 9, 2016](#).



*story* 1, no. 3 (Spring 1970):  
d Turística: Notas Sobre San  
, October 30, 1995, accessed

she is picked on and bullied by the other students for her size. The historical underpinnings of the school are rooted in the historical context of the Nazi influence in the town. The connection between the school and its Nazi past is out in the open in the film. In one particular scene, Eva, Lilith's mother, is showing the family old photographs of her time spent in Bariloche during her childhood (most likely in the late 1930s). One of the photographs is of the children and students in front of the school, where there is clearly a Nazi flag visible in the background. It is not something that Eva is ashamed of or tries to hide.

This photograph is an actual picture of the German school in Bariloche.

### Themes

As the basic structure of the historical fiction narrative suggests, the themes of the film combine elements of the historical background context with the fictional plot. One of the most prevalent themes that perpetuates throughout the entirety of the film are the notions of Nazi racial ideology. Mengele's obsession with ideas of race and perfecting the human race through Aryanization is what drives him to Lilith, as he sees her as a perfect laboratory for human experimentation. Furthermore, Eva is pregnant with twins, which had been a fixation of Mengele since his days at Auschwitz. The lab in which, Mengele and the family live becomes an isolated laboratory in which Mengele can continue his experimentation to preserve the legacy of Nazi

racial ideology. Mengele alludes to ideas of racial purification throughout the film. For example, when talking about his work with cattle, Mengele talks about the impurity of mixed blood. In another case, Mengele writes the word *Sonnenmenschen* on Lilith's hand, and leaves it for Lilith to discover. Lilith finds in the library that the word represents a type of superman that can be equated to Mengele's notion of Aryan superiority.

One of the primary motifs of Mengele's perversion comes in the form of a doll. Lilith's father, Enzo, makes dolls by individually constructing each one in order to emphasize each doll's unique factors. Mengele is intrigued by the dolls, and he convinces Enzo to mass produce the perfect doll through a mechanized process that makes each doll the same, rather than handcrafting the uniqueness of each doll. Mengele's obsession with the perfection of the dolls is also related to his interest with Lilith. Like perfecting the dolls, Mengele utilizes Lilith as an experiment to work toward perfecting the human body within the confines of Mengele's Nazi racial perception of Aryan superiority. Mengele begins to inject Lilith with growth hormones to combat her growth deficiency and work toward perfecting her physical appearance.



Still of Enzo holding one of the “perfect” dolls during production as Mengele looks on.

The dolls and Mengele’s experimentation on Lilith are representative of Mengele’s all-to-real racial ideologies and desires. As Puenzo explained, “This idea [racial purification] was not on the outskirts of Nazi ideology, it was the heart of the movement, that’s what intrigued me. Mengele is the most extreme expression of this idea.”<sup>31</sup> The doll motif is the most extreme symbol of Mengele’s pursuit to preserve the Nazi racial ideology. Puenzo is able to weave these historical underpinnings into the fictional narrative. Along with Mengele’s racial ideology and experimentation, Puenzo and actor Alex Brendemühl strive to capture the haunting personality of Mengele that comes from a number of people who witnessed his actions at Auschwitz. For example, one such survivor stated

He was so capable of being so kind to children to have them become so fond of him to bring them sugar, to think of small details in their daily lives, and to do things we would generally admire... And the, next to that... the crematoria smoke, and these children tomorrow or in a half-hour, he is going to send them there.<sup>32</sup>

This statement is perfectly captured by Mengele’s charming interactions with Lilith, who becomes enchanted by his allure. Even Eva is enchanted by Mengele and allows him to inject Lilith with a growth hormone and aid in her pregnancy.

Another critical theme that serves as a criticism of society is complicity. According to Grindon, “The historical fiction film strives to incorporate and supersede personal experience in its account of the evolution of society by portraying the personal and extra-personal forces

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<sup>31</sup> Carlos Aguilar, “Deceiving Monsters: Lucía Puenzo on *The German Doctor*,” *SydneysBuzz*, April 25, 2014, accessed March 14, 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Jay Lifton. *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide*. (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 337.

propelling historical change.”<sup>33</sup> Puenzo utilizes the personal story of the family in order to expound a larger examination on Argentine society as a whole. In a sense, *The German Doctor* is a bystander narrative. From the beginning, the family is suspicious of Mengele’s identity. Yet, like the society in Bariloche, and extending throughout Argentina, South America, and internationally, the escape of war criminals was met with silence and complicity. In one of the final scenes, when Eva has her twins prematurely and Enzo does not want Mengele to aid her, Eva states that she does not care who he is. This exchange is a microcosm for the general apathy toward finding these killers outside of select groups like Mossad.

One such character who embodies the fusion of history and narrative in the film, and who does not represent the complicit nature of society is the character of Nora Eldoc (Elena Roger). In the film, Eldoc works at the school as the librarian and photographer. She is the only character who concernedly suspicious of Mengele’s identity, even though she is surrounded by people who are either aiding Mengele or who fail to ask questions. As the film progresses, Eldoc grows more suspicious until she is convinced that it is Mengele. She is clearly in contact with other people regarding Mengele’s whereabouts. At the end of the film, before Mengele hastily departing with Mossad hot on his trails, Mengele confronts Eldoc with a veiled death threat. In the closing of the film, it is presented on screen that Eldoc was found dead a few days later in the woods.

As the closing credits explain, Nora Eldoc was a real-life volunteer agent working for Mossad. There is little historical mention of Eldoc, aside from an announcement of her death by a Jewish reporting agency. As the report read, “Rio Negro provincial authorities were disclosed today to have opened an investigation into reports that a woman whose body was found in a

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<sup>33</sup> Leger Grindon, “Drama and Spectacle as Historical Explanation in the Historical Fiction Film,” *Film and History* 17, no. 4 (December 1987): 74.

mountain cave a year ago was an Israeli agent seeking to track down Dr. Josef Mengele...”<sup>34</sup>

The inclusion of Eldoc serves a nod to a figure little known in history. While her role is not vital in the progression of the narrative (Mossad could have found Mengele’s location by other means in the film) it serves the purpose of representing a woman who dedicated her life to exposing the truth while so many others stood silent.

*The German Doctor* blends historical elements within the fictional narrative in order to create an intimate story about an idyllic Argentine family, while making explicit and implicit gestures toward historical examination. Its thematic elements that demonstrate its historical underpinnings include the setting of Bariloche and the symbolism of the dolls as a manifestation of Mengele’s and the Nazis’ perverse racial ideology. At the same time however, *The German Doctor* also perpetuates myths that confuse the fictional narrative with historical reality.

## **Historical Myth**

The short plot summary for the film in the International Movie Database states, “The true story of an Argentine family who lived with Josef Mengele without knowing his true identity...”<sup>35</sup> As Puenzo acknowledged, the film is about invention of a fictional narrative; it’s an imagining of an encounter between a family and Mengele, but it is not based on facts.<sup>36</sup> As an

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<sup>34</sup> “Israeli Woman Killed by Nazis in Argentina; Sought Nazi War Criminal,” *Jewish Telegraph Agency*, March 21, 1961, accessed March 2, 2016.

<sup>35</sup> “The German Doctor,” IMDb, accessed February 24, 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Carlos Aguilar, “Deceiving Monsters: Lucía Puenzo on *The German Doctor*,” *SydneysBuzz*, April 25, 2014, accessed March 14, 2016.



author and filmmaker, of fictional works, Puenzo is not bound by the ethical practices of historians to provide viable historical interpretations based on intensive research. In fact, in the story, Puenzo plays on these myths in film. Furthermore, the IMDb description that claims that the film is based on real events demonstrates the manner in which a work of historical fiction becomes a historical myth, as it is accepted as a historical truth. Donald Chipman and Robert Weddle attempt to explain the development of historical myths, as they stated, “When one of these historical errors arises, it takes on a life of its own, though not without a healthy boost from us historians.”<sup>37</sup>

Because of the secrecy and covert nature of the Nazi escapes into South America, historical work the subject has often times turned into imaginative fiction. As Steinacher noted, “Rarely have representations of the Nazi escape routes actually followed the strict standards of the scholarly approach. Efforts toward objectivity and distanced impartiality have commonly been lacking.”<sup>38</sup> Fantastical reports have come from the likes of historians, conspiracy theorists, and common individuals. For example, Abel Basti has written numerous works (see prologue for one example) claiming that Hitler escaped Berlin and lived out his days in Argentina, a claim that has no historical basis, but still, the idea has taken on a life of its own. In the winter of 2015, the History Channel began a series entitled *Hunting Hitler*, in which they claim that new classified documents are the cause for a reexamination of the Hitler case. Puenzo plays on this myth in her film, as one of Mengele’s assistants at what is said to be a Nazi bunker in Bariloche tells him that he has heard the rumors that Hitler escaped and is in Argentina.

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<sup>37</sup> Donald Chipman and Robert Weddle, “How Historical Myths are born... And Why They Seldom Die,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* no. 3 (2013): 226.

<sup>38</sup> Gerald Steinacher, “‘The Cape of Last Hope’: The Postwar Flight of Nazi War Criminals through South Tyrol/Italy to South America,” *University of Nebraska Faculty Publications, Department of History* (2006): 203.

Another myth that Puenzo exploits in her film is through the use of the dolls, which served as an allegory for Mengele's pursuit of racial purity, but also propagate a historical myth.

As Puenzo explained:

That was one of those facts that emerged while I was doing my research [that Mengele made dolls]. I was reading books about the Nazi presence not only in Argentina, but all over Latin America, and time and after time this information would come up. Mengele had something to do with these types of dolls, the stories say that he made them and gave them away to his friends as symbols of Nazism in exile. They also say this maybe was because he worked at a toy store. There were many of these stories. When I would ask different historians about these, all of them said that it is all part of a myth. There was a myth circulating among many historians that assured them this really happened. However, this is just a myth, no one will ever know for certain, no one ever saw those dolls with certainty, and there are no photographs. For me, just the fact that this story exists is such a vicious and poisonous idea. To think he kept on trying to manipulate other bodies is disturbing, so much that I included in the novel and then in the film.<sup>39</sup>

As a film of fiction, which Puenzo openly admits that *The German Doctor* is, Puenzo has the artistic liberty use historical contexts in order to create a fictional narrative. However, the film also demonstrates the manner in which fictional narratives can be construed as facts, and thus new historical myths are born. While as Chipman and Weddle explained that historians have in some instances fueled the fire of these historical myths, a number of the myths regarding Nazis escaping to Argentina have been politically motivated. Anti-Semites and Neo-Nazis have latched onto the myths of Hitler's survival or the symbolism of the dolls as a way in which to preserve Hitler's legacy.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, Puenzo's propagation of these myths without refutation is problematic.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>39</sup> Carlos Aguilar, "Deceiving Monsters: Lucía Puenzo on *The German Doctor*," *SydneysBuzz*, April 25, 2014, accessed March 14, 2016.

<sup>40</sup> Ron Rosenbaum, *Explaining Hitler: The Search for the Origins of His Evil* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1998), 233.

As a historical fiction narrative, *The German Doctor*, a film by Lucía Puenzo, works on a number of levels as it utilizes a historical context in order to create a fictional narrative. As Christopher Bartel explained regarding the nature of truth in historical fiction, “Truth in fiction is not dependent on truth in the actual world; works of fiction are not constrained to present as true within the fiction only those propositions that are also true within the actual world.”<sup>41</sup> Still, as the IMDb plot summary as a story based on true events, Puenzo’s film has been wrongly interpreted as a true story rather than the fictional narrative that it is.

Josef Mengele was a real Nazi physician of incredible infamy, who was able to evade capture by the Mossad for years in Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil. Bariloche, a quaint Swiss-style town was known locally and abroad as a Nazi location, with a number of Nazi sympathizers. Still, Mengele’s interactions with Eva, Enzo and their family is an invention of a fiction writer, who wanted to imagine a story of a family’s encounter with the infamous Nazi. The result is a masterful work of fiction that ominously builds tension throughout. However, an unintended consequence may be the acceptance of these fictional events as fact. *The German Doctor* is an ideal example of the manner in which works of historical fiction fuse history with fantasy to create a pseudo-historical interpretation that becomes accepted as fact.

## **Epilogue**

In 1994, Erich Priebke, an eighty year-old man spoke with ABC World News reporter Sam Donaldson in Bariloche.<sup>42</sup> Fifty years prior to the interview, Priebke led a massacre in Italy that resulted in the deaths of 335 Italian civilians. Until the interview, Priebke had been leading a

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<sup>41</sup> Christopher Bartel, “The Puzzle of Historical Criticism,” *Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism* 70, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 215.

<sup>42</sup> For full story, visit <http://abcnews.go.com/International/video/nazi-captain-erich-priebke-found-abc-news-20575216>. Accessed February 13, 2016.

quiet life in Bariloche. Since 1954, when Priebke moved from Buenos Aires to Bariloche, his identity and actions were no secret. As Goñi wrote, “His [Priebke’s] role in the Ardeatine Caves massacre was public knowledge. Priebke himself openly admitted it to anyone who cared to ask, always sticking to the story that he had only shot two men.”<sup>43</sup>

Following the interview, which caused worldwide tumult, was extradited to Italy a year later, even though Italy had known for years that Priebke was living in Argentina. In 1998, Priebke was sentenced to life in prison. After he was extradited to Italy, Priebke acknowledged in an interview, “I always lived under my real name without hiding from anyone. If they had wished to arrest me they could have done so all along.”<sup>44</sup> Nobody challenged Priebke until ABC News confronted him. Priebke’s story, is one that Puenzo is highlighting through her film. While the story of Josef Mengele in *The German Doctor* may be fictionalized, it tells the story of a haunting shadow of secrecy and complicity that hangs over, not only Argentina, but the world, decades after they opened their doors to thousands of criminals. And unlike Josef Mengele, Priebke was unable to hide from justice forever.

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<sup>43</sup> Uki Goñi. *The Real Odessa: Smuggling the Nazi’s to Perón’s Argentina*. (London: Granta Books, 2002), 263.

<sup>44</sup> “Reuter news agency, 26 August 1996, quoted in Uki Goñi. *The Real Odessa: Smuggling the Nazi’s to Perón’s Argentina*. (London: Granta Books, 2002), 265.

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