Collaborators Smuggling Operations out of Italy

Ratlines and Unholy Trinities: A Review-essay on (Recent) Literature Concerning Nazi and Collaborators Smuggling Operations out of Italy

Dedicated to the memory of my mother, Helen Feuerriegel Helble, who was killed in the Holocaust.

Ratlines were long-distance smuggling networks known to historians since the late 1940s. In fact, many of us often deal with new pieces of evidence (we will see that there are times when we will not even of any novelty about the Nazi flight) and they are also heavily based on prior accounts. These accounts are very interesting because historical reconstructions of Nazi escape routes from Italy are very often based on reportages (later instant books) written by journalists and reports written by diplomats, rather than scholarly research. Moreover, these reconstructions are too often like the ones proposed by novels and movies. As a rule, popularized history is conceived in the same vein as mass literature or popular entertainment, but here we find something more because the authors did not want to be considered to be mere popularizers. They thought they were doing what academic historians did not do, because of the latter's fear of being involved in political issues. At this point, I had to deal with a double and, at least according to me, dangerous issue: popularized history versus academic history, political passion versus scholarly research. I decided the only sensible thing to do was to draw a sketch of debates since 1945 on the Nazi flight through Italy, combining works by trained historians, journalists, novelists and movie-makers. Therefore, I tried to map chronologically the entire literature on the topic and to stress all links to analogous questions, like the one concerning relationships between Catholic Church and Nazism or the Cold War and the recycling of former Nazi spies and soldiers. I hope that I have not given an oversimplified outline, but I think that it was necessary in order to discover how "historical [un]truths" were built up over the decades. Often this was done out of genuine sincerity, because researchers were not trained or did not think carefully about what they were writing. I do not wish to suggest here that historians can reach the TRUTH, but that writers can and should check what they are doing and also state the rules of the game. If they are writing a novel or a screenplay they can state that Hitler is still alive. But they cannot do the same, if they are writing academic or popularized history because they must take documentary evidence into account.

The literature on the the underground routes going from Central and Eastern Europe to Latin America through Italy owes a lot to late 1940s press or diplomatic reports. The first SS and other war criminals arrived in Argentina from Italy in 1947[26], but since 1946 German-speaking and Italian diplomats were complaining about the rebirth of Fascism and Nazism on the American side of the Atlantic[8]. In 1947, Vincent La Vista reported to the U.S. State Department that the Red Cross was granting passports without screening - thus helping the illegal emigration from and through Italy of former Nazists - and that a group of priests was instrumental into it[46]. The State Department decided to not release the report, but in 1949 the U.S. and West German governments thought that too many Nazis had gone over to the USSR and that was time to stop that flow, at least the part of it that was benefiting the Soviet Union. Representatives of both governments leaked this news and the New York Herald Tribune printed an article on the danger of a new Nazi-Soviet alliance that was reprinted by Die Standpunkt (16 December 1949). In that occasion the same newspaper added that the idea of the new Nazi-Soviet alliance was nurtured by a group of German "nationalists" who had immigrated in Buenos Aires, where they were publishing Der Weg[5].

Meanwhile, on 6 December 1949, the German Agency Nord Presse announced that Bishop Alois Hudal, rector of the German College of S. Maria dell'Anima, was a well known pro-Nazi prelate in Rome and that he received from 60 to 100 German daily who were looking for tickets and visas to Latin America. Exactly one week later, the Sunday edition of the Passauer Neue Press reported on two networks of spies smuggling Nazi criminals to Argentina and to the Middle East: the first had been centered in Rome, at the College of S. Maria dell'Anima, but its headquarters were shut down because of Vatican pressure. At the beginning of 1950, the German press charged Hudal with having hidden Otto Skorzeny and others in Rome[6]. Hudal denied the allegations against him, but on 30 April 1950, the weekly Die Strasse printed a report on "Görings Männer in Argentinien" with pictures of German pilots in Argentina. This text mentioned that Hudal wrote articles for Der Weg and that an unnamed German pilot had declared having been helped by the prelate.

In 1951-1952, Simon Wiesenthal followed Adolf Eichmann's tracks to Rome. Here, he discovered that Hudal was the "head of the organization that prepared the illegal emigration of the nazists", as he told an Italian magazine a few years later [7]. Actually (and others' suspicions regarding the help that Eichmann received to escape focused on Anton Weber, a Pallottini Father, and Benedict de Bourg d'if, a Capuchin. However, Wiesenthal was never able to tell the difference between Catholic secular priests and members of various religious orders: for him cardinals, priests, monks and friars were all the same. He was not very informed about the features of the Catholic Church, nor did he care to be, because he was targeting the Holy See as a whole[8]. He was trying to demonstrate that there have been and perhaps still was a strong alliance between the Catholic Church and a powerful Nazi organization called Odesa (= Organisation der Ehemaligen SS Angehörigen), founded just before the end of the war to help former SS.

Eichmann's trial did not confirm Wiesenthal's view, or at least we did not assess the existence of a well organized underground network supported by former Nazis and by the Catholic Church[9]. In any event, the proceedings were covered by every newspaper in the Western world and aroused the curiosity about Nazis in Latin America. If Hannah Arendt wrote a seminal essay on Eichmann[10], Michael Frank authored a book about Nazis in Buenos Aires[11]. Moreover, this trial and subsequent proceedings in West Germany convinced many Germans, in particular the younger ones, that they had to deal with their country's awful past[12]. At the same time, the trials started a historical reappraisal (or, in many cases, the apraisal) of the Holocaust, even in the Jewish communities around the World[13].

A few years later, Wiesenthal reinforced his own view in The Murderers Among Us[14] and his thesis was backed up by Werner Brockdorff, formerly Alfred Jarchel[15]. Jarchel, a leader in the Hitler Youth, described how Catholic priests had helped former SS members, taking them to Rome, often disguising them as members of the Catholic clergy, and finally giving them passports and money to reach Latin America. Although his book is more a novel than a well documented essay, many readers took Jarchel's tale at face value.

In the following decade, Gitta Sereny tried to verify this issue writing her astounding book about Franz Stangl, former commandant of the Treblinka lager[16]. Sereny did not share Wiesenthal's obsession about a nazi-catholic conspiracy. Overall, she thought that if there were networks helping the Nazis' flight, they were simply informal. Finally, she believed that Stangl just walked away from prison and, using a forged ID, went to Florence, where he caught the train to Rome. Stangl told Sereny he went looking for Hudal, because he had heard that the bishop was helping the Germans. Eventually, Hudal gave him a Red Cross passport and Stangl left for Syria, where, according to him, the bishop had found him a job in a textile factory. After a while Stangl's family was reunited in Damascus and in 1951 they left for Brazil, but they were never helped by underground German associations and they had to live the hard life of emigrants.

Reading Sereny, we detect that Stangl's recollection of Rome is fuzzy. Stangl is unable to spell Hudal's family name, calling him "Hulda"; he never remembers too well places and personalities in Rome. Only the fear of being caught by the Italian police is what is the former Treblinka commandant recalls of Rome. Interestingly enough, he often talks about his dread of being sent to Camp "Frascati": i.e. Camp Fraschette (close to Atlan in the province of Frosinone, in the southern part of Latium, not close to Rome, as Sereny erroneously assumed in calling it "Frascati"), where illegal immigrants were sent. Maybe, he was trying to cover up his helpers' tracks. Nevertheless, his tale is very reminiscent of the stories told by other refugees, who were not Nazis, looking for job opportunities or for visas and tickets to the Americas. Thousands of documents at the "Archivio Centrale di Stato" (Italian Central National Archives) in Rome confirm Stangl's (and Sereny's) description of the life and fears of illegal German immigrants in Italy. I will deal with this documentary evidence in another paper, but let me just say that at the end of 1947, there was quite a tight screening of German immigrants (not because of their past, but because the Italian government was fed up with any kind of immigrant). In November 1947, there were 698 German illegal immigrants at Camp Fraschette and during the month of December those and others were sent back to Germany[17].

In any event, Sereny guessed that Wiesenthal simplified the issue. In her view, he had fictionalized the flight from Germany of many Nazis, this was understandable, she thought, because Wiesenthal was a Nazi hunter and not an historian. But it was a mistake. History, according to Sereny, does not need thrilling explications and historical data simply did not back up any conspiracy theory. She also felt that Brockdorff had given a much too romanticized account of his own experience, if for different reasons: in fact, Sereny was one of the first to point out that historians should not accept Flucht vor Nürnberg as a testimony. Finally, she stressed that the position of the Catholic Church needed to be fairly and soundly assessed. It seemed to her that Pius XII's position after the war should be related to his position during the war, which showed how the pope was paralyzed by a double set of fears.
Later Argentines, into governments. For the who were only obeying produced an enormous uproar and a number of books investigation for this kind Yugoslavia, Romania, Hungary and Austria after the war and went through Italy, but also other countries (Australia, South Africa, etc.) and to other countries (Argentina through Italy, moving later to the Americas and Australia. At the end of the 1970s, Forsyth's thriller is still well received by specialists, because it is very entertaining, a nice blend of fiction and reality. The protagonist, reporter Peter Miller, is a fictional character, but he is hunting down SS captain Eduard Roschmann, who really did sneak past tribunals and other judicial bodies that sprung up after the war. Moreover, Miller interviews Simon Wiesenthal, who told him (and Forsyth's audience) that the SS went under cover at the end of the war and were helped by Odessa. The SS runaways embarked at Italian ports and their destination was the Middle East or Argentina. According to Forsyth and Wiesenthal, the gold footed during the war by the SS was deposited in the secret vaults of Swiss banks and was later used to buy 7,000 passports from Perón. Moreover, the Catholic Church helped the fugitives while they were in Italy. Many cardinals, according to Wiesenthal, were pro-Nazi and among them Alois Hudal, the German apostolic nuncio. Thus, the SS found shelter in the big Franciscan convent of Rome and received Red Cross IDs, just what they needed to embark in Genoa.

Forsyth is often inaccurate, or better his sources (i.e. Wiesenthal) were not accurate in retelling their experience. For example, Hudal was not a cardinal, nor a German apostolic nuncio. Moreover, it is impossible to locate the "big"Franciscan convent in Rome mentioned in the novel. Finally, Odessa seems a good inspiration for a thriller, but many historians doubt that it ever existed. In fact, a couple of not very important German underground networks called themselves "Odessa" in 1946, but later the only proof of their existence is ... Wiesenthal. Reading Forsyth, another question arises: why the former SS going to Argentina need Red Cross IDs, if they had bought passports from Perón?

We cannot blame Forsyth for being inaccurate. He was writing a thriller, not an historical essay. The role of Wiesenthal in the genesis of the novel is more interesting. Later, the Nazi hunter confessed that he wanted to influence the writer. In fact, Wiesenthal was using the thriller to force Roschmann out into the open, which is what actually happened. En passant, Wiesenthal's confession is very useful, because it shows that historians should not accept at face value Wiesenthal's writings and interviews, but should interpret them as baits and devices to deceive Nazis still on the run.

Forsyth had a huge success, his thriller was adapted to the screen, and Roschmann died of a heart attack. In 1974, William Goldman published another successful novel, Marathon Man, on the same issue, and that too became a universally acclaimed movie. Goldman's novel and screenplay, still popular today, are about a former Nazi war criminal who is smuggling diamonds in the United States and is ready to kill to protect himself. Together with the Forsyth thriller and Neame's movie, Goldman's writing convinced other authors that undercover Nazis were good entertainment. Thus, Ira Levin wrote The Boys from Brazil about doctor Mengele coming to the U.S. Levin's novel too was adapted to the screen, and the three novels plus the three movies told their audiences that Nazis were still ready to rob and to kill.

These works had a wide impact and started a sub-genre in the mass culture that did not stop. Moreover, a few books by reporters or by former intelligence men added chapters to the ongoing saga of Nazi hunting. At that point, attention focused on Martin Bormann, who was the leader of Odessa according to Wiesenthal. The books on Bormann's flight to Argentina through Italy were even more unrealistic than the ones by Forsyth or Goldman. Moreover, it is now known that Argentinean spies and policemen cheated one author, Hungarian journalist Farago, and sold him forged documents and fake information.

Still, those books were taken seriously in the second half of the 1970s. People and governments started to pay attention to the presence of former SS members in the Americas and other countries (Argentina, Australia, South Africa, etc.), and to the fate of East-European collaborators and war criminals. Sereny remembered in her book that not only former SS members went through Italy, but also members of the Russian Army of general Vlasov, who fought along the Germans and disbanded thousands of Ukrainian collaborators in Italy, and the soldiers of Polish general Anders, who fought against the Nazis and enroled war prisoners in his army. Moreover, according to Sereny, thousands of Nazis and collaborators fled from Yugoslavia, Romania, Hungary and Austria after the war and went to Italy, moving later to the Americas and Australia. At the end of the 1970s, this issue acquired new relevance because many former nazists and collaborators, who were living in the U.S. and other English-speaking countries, were reported. In 1979, the U.S. created a special bureau of investigation for this kind of criminals and in the following years the U.S., Canada, Australia and the U.K. tried a number of post-war immigrants.

Anthony Lerman states that those initiatives were unsuccessful. Even when the committees of inquiry discovered former Nazis, they were unable to prosecute them or the latter were acquitted, when tried. Nevertheless, the committees published reports and other materials. Thus, a large quantity of documents came to light, but it was not enough for the reading public and for publishers, who wanted something like the novels that had captured them in the 1970s. In any case, the decision to set up committees of inquiry taken by the U.S., Australian, British and Canadian governments drove reporters and free-lance writers to start their own parallel investigations. These free-lance inquiries were supplemented by two scandals. In 1983, Bolivia expelled war criminal Klaus Barbie, who was tried in France. The proceedings showed the protection that U.S. intelligence had given him. This produced an enormous uproar and a number of books on Barbie's career went published. The second scandal was in Austria, where in 1987 a campaign began against its president, Kurt Waldheim, because of his past in the German army. In this case too, books were written and their authors debunked the myth of "good"German or Austrian soldiers, who were only obeying orders.

During that decade, essays replaced the novels of the 1970s, but they were mostly made of the same stuff: few documents, a lot of interviews and a lot of imagination sold as detective skill. A few authors tried to understand why the Nazis were not prosecuted after the war and they pointed to the recruitment of former SS members by U.S. intelligence. But many others just looked for sensational stories. Some preferred to describe the activities of Wiesenthal and other Nazi hunters or to write about Nazi hunting by governments. For the latter argument, a case in point is Allan A. Ryan, Jr., who authored Klaus Barbie and the United States government: exhibits to the report to the Attorney General of the United States and Quiet Neighbours. Prosecuting Nazi war criminals in America. These writings show clearly how many attorneys transformed themselves into reporters and writers, partly because they thought that people had to know, partly because of the high sales of those kinds of books.

At this point, many reporters started paying attention to the role of Swiss banks and also to the smuggling of Nazi gold to Latin America. In fact, they were looking for gold and goods stolen by Nazis and asking where they were hidden. Unfortunately for them, they had not read the debunking article by Ronald C. Newton "The United States, the German-Argentines, and the myth of the Fourth Reich, 1943-1947." Newton demonstrates that tales about Nazi gold were the result of an operation of disinformation by the British intelligence at the end of World War II. The British were trying to convince the Germans to desert and thus they let leak mesmerizing news about Nazi leaders running away with enormous amount of gold.

Later Newton also demonstrates that the (dis)information about Hitler leaving Germany and reaching Argentina, or sending his gold there had the same origin. Finally, Mario.
Aaron's and Loftus do not at all like conspiracy theories, but in their way they contribute to enflate the sensationalistic side of Nazi hunting stories. For example, they state that at the end of the war there were 150,000 war criminals, and that only 5,000 were apprehended. Thus, according to them, 100,000 criminals just ran off away in the post-war period: still according to them, the Vatican sent 30,000 Germans and 30,000 ustash criminal to Argentina (even if they concede that those criminals did not stay there, but used this nation only as a stopover); others went to Australia, Canada, the Middle East, Africa, U.K. and the U.S.. Moreover, Loftus and Aaron's involve British and U.S. intelligence as well as the Vatican and the Swiss banks in the smuggling of Nazis. Some of them (the banks) were just trying to gain as much as possible, others (the Vatican and the intelligence) were preparing, if not already fighting the cold war. They were trying to use former German spies against the USSR, but they were unable to understand that a lot of them were already controlled by Soviet intelligence. In any case, the Vatican, the intelligence services and the banks formed the "unholy trinity" that spirited away collaborators and former SS members.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, Aaron's and Loftus' thesis has caused a sensation. It is well conceived, and the authors were apt to link together a large set of documentation from European and U.S. archives. Nevertheless, their data are exaggerated. Concerning numbers, we know that no more than 40,000 German-speaking emigrants went to Argentina from 1945 to 1955 [60]. Therefore, the estimate of 30,000 German war criminals coming to Argentina in that period seems to be quite ludicrous. Argentinian historian Ignacio Klitch gives more reasonable numbers: "hasta 800 de ellos [the German-speaking immigrants] ... estaban seriamente comprometidos por su actuación en favor del nazismo, y 50 de éstos eran candidatos seguros a la clasificación como criminales de guerra" [61]. German historian Holger M. Meding adds that his team found documents in German archives about only 5 war criminals, 7 whose arrest had been ordered for alleged crimes but without legal proceedings being initiated, 6 whose proceedings for alleged crimes resulted in dismissal or acquittal, 10 high level persons with a nazi past not subject to accusation, arrest warrants or sentences, 8 Nazi propagandists, 5 who helped illegal migrants, and 4 scientists/businessmen. On the other hand, if, at the end of the war as many as 300,000 German soldiers went under arrest, after the war only 5,000 former Nazis were tried in what would become West Germany [62].

Checking Aaron's and Loftus' numbers, I can add that we have a fair idea of how many refugees legally went through Italy between 1947 and 1951: there were no more than 210,000. 66,640 were resettled refugees from all over Europe and only 9,648 of them went to Argentina [63]. Those figures are too far from the ones given by Aarons and Loftus and it therefore seems very difficult to believe their statistics about war criminals.

I have the same problem with regard to other ideas of these two authors. They heavily stress the responsibility of the Vatican as an institution and opposed to Vatican officials as individuals; moreover, they back their thesis by recalling Vatican politics before and during the war. Actually, the literature about the Vatican and Nazism is quite huge, and we have a lot of good books on this topic. When Sereny wrote her plea for a fair assessment, it was already at her disposal The Silence of Pius XII by Carlo Falconi [64]; Later, Ennio Di Nolfo and Owen Chadwick dealt with the contacts between the Allies and the Holy See [65], while many books focused on the relationship between Pius XII and Hitler. From the Vatican side, the edition of the Actes et documents du Saint-Siège relatifs à la Seconde Guerre mondiale, recently summarized by Pierre Blet, was meant to show that the pope acted beyond suspicion [66]. Recently John Cornwell gave exactly the opposite interpretation, but his work is flawed [67]. Giovanni Miccoli capped 35 years of research by explaining that the Holy See still believed that it would be of no considerable help to go to Argentina. This was a fault partly due to Vatican self-representation as a superior, spiritual force, answering more to God's demands than to human beings, partly to an out-of-date evaluation of European politics [68].

Incidentally, Miccoli, who wrote the best book on the issue to date, also shows that historians do not need to check Vatican files anymore, because we have enough testimonies from other archives and from the memoirs of the principal political and religious actors of World War II. Unfortunately, the discussion about the need for opening the Vatican archives is still raging as the preliminary report submitted to the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews and to the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations by the International Catholic-Jewish Historical Commission [69].

In the last years, new essays have condemned what the pope did [70]. Moreover, Wistrich has emphasized Pius XII's fear of communism in an interview with an Italian left-wing newspaper [71]. This idea is not unknown to Catholic historians, even if they exploited it by pulling the stress elsewhere. The already mentioned Robert A. Graham says that it is correct to see "the Holy See's attitude as conditioned by the presence of forces of evil in the venture of belligerent states. In World War II there were two such forces, the Soviet Union and the National Socialist Reich" [72].

To coming back to Aarons and Loftus, they transform Pius XII's dread of communism into the central pillar of their interpretation, but what Miccoli writes about the pope confirms what Sereny stated in 1974. The same doubt about Aaron's and Loftus' analysis could be raised when analyzing the issue of Swiss and Vatican banks. In the last 5 years, the CEANA and the U.S. government tried to follow the movement of those amounts of gold and goods [73]. The effort made by the Argentinian and U.S. commissions was huge, but they were unable to say the last word on the issue. In 2000, George Zlovocich et alii's legal suit again raised the question [74]; nevertheless, it is too early to obtain an answer and it is possible that in this case too, we are dealing with the consequences of the disinformation started by British intelligence at the end of the war.

Moreover, the Ustashas's passage through Rome and the Vatican involvement with them is well known according to Aaron's and Loftus and to Marco Aurelio Rivelli [75], but in their own reconstructions of the subject there are lots of gaps to be filled [76]. For example, we know that Croatians built the so-called Ratline (see my comments on Meding's writings below) and that they helped U.S. intelligence smuggle a few Germans. But we also know that U.S. and British military police did not always protect Croatians: in April 1947, the Italian police and the British military police tried to get hold of many Croatians in Rome, looking for smugglers and war criminals [72]. We know that Hudal and Krunoslav Dragancovic, the Croatian priest who seems to have been in charge of the ratline, cooperated for a while, but we also know that they were in competition with each other and that they did not trust the Vatican, because they thought that the pope and the cardinals were listening too closely to the syrens of U.S. protestant capitalism and of Soviet communism [78].

The documents relating to Hudal and Draganovic show that many of their "friends" went to Argentina. Therefore, the study of smuggling operations in Italy is linked to the analysis of Nazi and Croatian immigration into Argentina. The essays and novels we have already quoted dedicate quite a few pages to the latter country, but we should take into account the research done by Argentinians. Already in the 1950s, Perón's opponents denounced the presence of former Nazis [79]. Thus the issue was linked to Perón's faults and their evaluation was influenced by judgements on the general and his regime. Consequently, it was very difficult to raise this issue. Only after 1983, did international debate involve Argentinian witnesses, historians, and novelists [80]. At the same time, a few Nazis felt free to publish their memoirs, in which they thanked the Catholic Church for its help [81].

The strengthening of democracy in Argentina, tighter links with the U.S., and international pressure gave way to the necessity for a deeper analysis. Argentinian historians rethought the relationship between Argentina and Perón, on the one hand, and Hitler's Germany, on the other, as well as the relation between Argentina and the United States [82]. Argentinian historians studied the arrival of immigrants from Germany and Eastern Europe in the 1940s [83].

In the 1990s, the question of the immigration of Nazis and war criminals was covered in Argentina not only the people who already studied it [84], but also by a number of reporters. Jorge Camara wrote a first, scandalmongering book in 1992 [85], then rewrote and softened it as Odessa al Sur [86]. Camara accepts as true every myth (or almost) about Odessa, the nazi gold and Borman's flight to Argentina: the chapters on these arguments are so sensationalistic, even in the softened version, that the Italian translator added a
disclaimer stressing that Bormann died in 1945. Regarding to Italy, Camaras writes that the Catholic Church helped 5,000 war criminals from 1945 to 1949 and that Walter Rauff, former chief of the German Nazi intelligence in Northern Italy and Bormann's right-hand man, had an illegal bureau in Genoa helping German illegal emigration. Camaras depicts a nightmarish Italian landscape, were Nazi priests dealt with easily corrupted civil servants. Nevertheless, his description of Latin America is even more dreadful. In fact, his book deals mostly with what happened after the flight from Germany and the Italian stopover. The real problem for him are Nazis' activities in Argentina and other Latin American countries, and his book deals a lot more with this issue than with the escape from Europe.

In Argentina and Italy, Camaras's seemed a good, even if sensational, introduction to understanding the Priebeck affair. The literature about the latter is quite considerable. Wladimiro Settemelli, a reporter for Unité, then owned by the former communist party, wrote Herbert Kappler and edited Priebeck e il massacro delle Ardeatine, in which he gathered testimonies on the massacre as well as a few papers by historians. Cinzia Del Mazo and Simona Michelli authored a book on the trial and published other documents. Walter Leszi, professor of Ancient history at the University of Florence, tried to show that not only was Priebeck guilty, but that he should have been tried by a civil court, because his act of murder was a political and not a war action.

In hindsight, Leszl seems to be absolutely right about the trial, but it was a very polemical stance to take at that time. In Italy a fierce debate raged about the massacre of the "Fosse Ardeatine" and the previous attack to the German army. Many wrote that without that attack, the Germans would have not killed their prisoners. A group of old-time right-wingers falsely stated that if the partisans had surrendered, the Germans would have freed their hostages. In Italy and in Europe there was a violent neo-fascist and neonazi protest in favor of Priebeck: many openly showed their solidarity with Priebeck, while others declared that the trials were a Jewish trick to blackmail Swiss banks and European governments.

At the same time, neonazis were active in the streets and in the web, where they posted comments on Priebeck's "heroism".

Neofascists and neonazis did not study Priebeck's flight from Italy, but even books by left-wing authors did not expand on this issue. It is possible to find something on this only browsing the net or reading the books by Robert Katz, and Elena Llorente and Martino Rigacci.

Many years ago, Robert Katz wrote a famous book about the "Fosse Ardeatine", which was even adapted to the screen. In 1994, Harry Phillips, free-lance writer-producer for the ABC's Prime Time Live, discovered that Priebeck was living at San Carlos de Bariloche and asked Katz for advice. Although Katz did not do anything relevant, the broadcast (which aired on 5 May 1994) brought about Priebeck's extradition. Therefore, it was natural that Katz covered the Italian proceedings and then wrote Dossier Priebeck.

In his new book, Katz reconstructed the history of the massacre, Priebeck's flight, his discovery in Argentina and the first trial. Katz stressed that many knew Priebeck's whereabouts. Already in 1989 Serge and Arno Klarsfeld told the Italian Foreign Ministry about Priebeck. The Italian honorary vice-consul in Bariloche knew Priebeck's past, but decided that the latter had repented and thus that it was useless to denounce him. According to Katz, something similar happened at the end of the war. At that time, Priebeck went from Brescia to Vipiteno (Bolzano). Later, the British captured him and he was interned at the military prison of the Italian army in the village of Vipiteno. He was finally extradited to Rome. At that time, it was natural that Katz covered the Italian proceedings and then wrote Dossier Priebeck.

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Katz reports that in 1994 Priebeck told an Argentinean reporter that he was helped by the Catholic Church and thanked Hudal, who had told him how to reach Buenos Aires. But in 1996, a journalist, Priebeck stated that an Italian friend, a fascist from Brescia, helped him to get a visa for Argentina. After a while, according to Katz, the friend from Brescia also fled to Buenos Aires (this is interesting because nobody is studying the links among Italian fascists and German Nazis during their escape). In any case, Priebeck had a Red Cross passport and travel documents. Katz claims, however, that there is no proof of Odessa's involvement in the escape, nor in Priebeck's later life or in the trial. According to Katz, someone paid for the services of the businessman, but Priebeck was clearly broke during the trial and no one was giving him financial aid.

In conclusion, the book Katz mentioned other German fugitives, for example Juan Maler (alias Reinhard Koppes), in relation to the Ratline and the help by the Vatican and the British and U.S. intelligence. But this part is not original, and it is very short.

Elena Llorente and Martino Rigacci went over the same story. According to them, the Priebeck proceedings (1996 and 1997) gave us the opportunity to reconsider past history, i.e. U.S. and Vatican responsibilities in the flight of so many Nazis. The authors are convinced that the Red Cross documents that Priebeck and his family used to enter Argentina on 14 November 1948 were given to him by Hudal and that the latter was in some way protected by the Church. Moreover, they think that U.S. intelligence was involved in the ratline, but they do not pay a lot of attention to this question being primarily interested in the details of the arrest and in the reasons why Priebeck was extradited. The book is written like a movie: long chapters about today's situation and flashbacks to the past. Thus the authors deal quite a lot with the proceedings and the political situation in Italy and in Argentina in the 1990s and they write a lot about the escape of the Ardeatine, who was executed on 31 December 1946. Moreover, they do not say anything about 1947. While they take into account Priebeck's travels to Buenos Aires, they only say that they do not believe that Priebeck was helped by an Italian friend to get his Italian visa, and that they are sure that he had a Red Cross passport thanks to a franciscan friar who requested it from the Vatican. They also add, as an afterthought, that, because Priebeck fled from Genoa, his departure could be linked to the already mentioned Rauff, who was in Genoa and was a friend of Hudal. Finally, although they mention Maler/Koppes, they do not realize that Maler was linked to Hudal, and hold forth about Odessa, Nazi gold and the Vatican Archives.

In conclusion, while the Priebeck trials were an opportunity to discuss the past, this opportunity was missed. Nobody dug out the truth, nobody looked for new documents. All reporters wrote about ratlines, but they did not explain what they were and how they were operated. All reporters wrote about unproven theories, but at a certain point it seems that they did not accept that many just escaped without heavy protection and that in other case it was only because of the beginning of Cold War that they were not apprehended. Conspiracy has still a powerful appeal for reporters and would-be Nazi hunters. Odessa has to exist, because we need it for the sake of mystery.

Franco Fracassi wrote a very good, even if journalistic, book on that question. He was able to link the flight of former SS members and ustashis to the creation of anti-Communist networks by the U.S. intelligence and to show how neo-Nazi movements were able to exploit U.S. undue influence in their favor. Unhappily for us, Fracassi does not deal in depth with ratlines and Argentina; in any case, again, he gives us a good bibliography, even if mainly composed of press reports. Even more unfortunately, many reporters did and do not like this kind of explanation and continue to look for unproven theories, stressing moreover the importance of Nazi gold and of Swiss and Vatican banks. Sometimes, their literary production is very bad. For example, I read Giorgio Cavalleri, Evita Peron e lo re dei nazisti many times, but I was quite unable to review it, because the author is too inaccurate about his data and too willing to stress sensational elements.

After reading this book, we could well ask if the job of reporters is simply to look for sensationalism. Luckily, it is not so, and we can point out to others who have written more sober accounts. Ugo Gori authored calmer pages on the Italian ratline, while Giovanni Maria Pace summed things up on Nazis and Croatians, Hudal and Dragomanovic, new research in Italy and Argentina. It is a good reporting and provides information, without abounding in lurid details. Till now, I have discussed U.S., Argentinian, British and Italian works on the Nazi's flight through Italy, but I should stress that we can find the same contrast in other historiographies. In Germany, we can read accurate, even if journalistic, research by Hans-Jacob Stehle and scandalmongering and undocumented writings by Rena and Thomas Gieler. In France, Jean-Pierre Blancpain is somewhere in the middle: although hard worker, he accepts as truth some very bad books.

At this point, I should say that we need to proceed to a thoughtful reflection on the issue, as Ignacio Klitch recently invited all historians to do. On one hand, it is necessary to ascertain how and how many war criminals fled to Argentina. On the other, we should film this flight into the larger German-speaking and Eastern European post-war migration to Argentina. About the latter, I have already quoted many contributions by Leonardo Senkman in my footnotes, but I should also mention the work done by other historians. Ronald C. Newton devoted the last chapter of his The Nazi Menace in Argentina, 1931-1947 to German post-war migration, while Argentinean scholars tried to evaluate Argentinean immigration policy in those same years. According to Fernando Devoto, the policy and modalities of post-war immigration could partly explain the arrival of former SS members. In fact, many of them arrived together with technicians and experts for the Army and for industry. This is a well known question. Nevertheless, we should pay attention to the fact that this migration was not only made up of German-speaking, but also of a large proportion of German Jews.
In relation to Nazi migration alone, Holger M. Meding has made and is still making outstanding contributions. His Master's thesis, published in 1997, studied the already quoted Der Weg [115]. In the meantime, he wrote and published his Doctoral thesis, that elucidated the question that interest us here [117]. Flucht vor Nürnberg? can be divided into three parts. The first one describes the prerequisites: birth and development of Nazism, previous presence of Germans in Argentina, Perón. The second as the one that actually interests us most, is about how Nazis arrived in Argentina. The third one is about Nazi settlement in the New World. Meding analyzes the latter as a normal type of immigration. Thus, he studies how Nazis tried to adapt themselves to Argentina and how they tried to adapt Argentina to themselves. Finally, he pays attention to the German press and its activity vis-à-vis Argentinian society and the German community.

Meding's book is a really good example of migration studies and it offers an excellent approach to the Nazi migration to Latin America. Moreover, Meding pays a lot of attention to Nazi's escape routes. Not only the Italian, but also the Scandinavian, Spanish, and Swiss routes. Moreover, he tries to ascertain if organization like Odessa really existed and he answers in the negative. About the Italian escape route he states that there was two. The real "Ratline", which was run by U.S. Intelligence with the help of Draganovic in Genoa, and a second one, the Monastery line, organized by Hudal and other German priests, together with members of the Pontificia Commissione Assistenza. This second line was not the product of the Church pro-Nazi position, but the action of single members of the Catholic clergy. Usually the latter helped people from their own motherland to flee from countries ruined by the war or falling into the hands of the Communists. The Americans and the British both closed their eyes to that route because they were running simultaneously the real Ratline to move former Nazis or collaborators who were now becoming or pretending to become Western secret agents. These two lines ultimately crossed as former spies lived among normal immigrants, while many immigrants had a dubious past. But from the historical point of view Nazi flight from Germany should be studied as another kind of migration.

Meding's proposal was followed by the CEANA's team in two monographic issues of academic journals edited by Klich [118]. In particular Meding and others studied German and Italian migration to Argentina in the years 1945-1955, while Diana Quattrocchi Woision reconstructed the experience of French and Belgian collaborators who migrated to Argentina [119]. These papers should be contrasted to the papers by Mónica Quijada and Victor Peralta on "Spains as a Place of Transit for Goods and People from Nazi Germany to Argentina During World War II and in the Post-War Years" (CEANA, Final Report), Beatriz Gurevich on "Government Agencies and Other Parties Involved in the Immigration of War Criminals and Collaborators in the Aftermath of World War II". The Argentine Case" (CEANA, Second Progress Report), and Christian Bucherkuhn on "The Nostalgists of the European 'New Order' and Their Connections with Argentine Political Culture" (CEANA, Final Report).

The research by CEANA raised a lot of protest. French reporter Michel Faure wrote that "[j]en prétendant faire toute la lumière sur la présence des nazis dans le pays et sur les biens qu'ils auraient pu voler à leurs victimes, elle [i.e. CEANA] répond à une volonté officielle de souder un passé entaché d'embarrassantes connivences et de coupables complicités" [120]. But he also admitted that CEANA's findings were interesting: Alejandra Rey and Jorge Camarasa complained instead that CEANA's members located only 19 war criminals [121]. Actually, CEANA's reports do not try to conceal facts about Nazis from the public, but they are working to accumulate data, in the same way as the projects by the Delegation of Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas and the Buenos Aires Centro de Estudios Sociales [122]. Something similar is being organized by public and private U.S. institutions, see the National Archives Collection of World War II War Crimes Records (RG 238) or the web-pages on war crimes by the Holocaust Survivors and Friends Education Center [123] and the Wiesenthal Center [124]. In the U.S. the dossier on the "Implementation of the Nazi war Crimes Disclosure Act An Interim Report to Congress" which contains the story of all U.S. initiatives since 1978 is very important [125].

CEANA and the U.S. committees want to find out if there are still war criminals, but also if it is possible to reconstruct what happened in the past. This goal is also shared by Canadian scholars, who raised the question of post-war screening of former Nazis [126]. But in this case, the most recent studies try to demonstrate that even when war criminals were accepted Canadian authorities were just doing what they had to do [127]. This issue is openly discussed by Howard Margolian's Unauthorized Entry. The Truth About Nazi War Criminals in Canada, 1946-1956 [128]. Margolian, who was already interested in war crimes [129], does not accept Alti Rodal's conclusion [130] about the inefficiency of Canadian screening. He tries to demonstrate that it was not Canada's fault if a number of criminals entered the country [131]. He reconstructs the details of the screening process and stresses not surprisingly that war criminals had lied to gain entrance. Moreover, he adds that little by little hard lobbying by specific ethnic groups helped some categories, like the Ukrainian SS veterans, who were considered for admission after 1950.

Margolian did his research in a peculiar way. He worked quite a lot in archives, but did not bother to check the bibliography on his subject. He used Aarons and Loftus while criticizing Rodal and Matas, but he did not seem to be aware of the enormous literature reviewed here. Moreover, he seemed more concerned with spies (i.e. British and American intelligence protecting their new agents from Germany and Yugoslavia) than with migrants. Thus, he is still on the same side as thriller fiction on killers and spies secretly sailing from Italy. Nevertheless, he found a lot of interesting documents in European and North American archives, for example about Byelorussians in Anders' Army and how they were able to leave Italy for Argentina and Canada.

In conclusion, Margolian shows us that working only in the archives is inadequate, if the author does not know the historiography. But the other books mentioned here show us that it is also useless always to read the same books and always to recount the same old story. We should try to ask new questions and to find new answers, reading all the literature on the ratline and working in old and new archives. If we do not try to do this, we will still remain in the domain of fiction.

In fact, during the 1990s, we had new (and brilliant) chapters of the ongoing saga of the hunt for Nazis on the screen and in thriller novels. In the movie Music Box (1989, directed by Constantin Costa-Gavras) a young lawyer counsels her father, a former Hungarian emigrant, who is accused of being a war criminal. At the end, the woman discovers that her father is a criminal. In Jack Higgins's Thunder Point, the action starts with the retrieval of Bomman's U-boat in the Caribbean [132]. In The Shadow Man by John Katzenbach a retired Miami cop tracks down a Nazi killer [133]. To complicate the psychological dimension of the plot, the latter is a Jew who worked for the Gestapo in Berlin. Now, he is hunting down Holocaust survivors, who knew him as "Der Schattenmann". In Atlantic Found Clive Cussler describes how a German U-Boat brought Hitler's gold to the shores of the Rio Plata and how this gold was used to found a neo-nazi commercial empire in Chile [134]. Following his usual technique, Cussler soon starts losing touch with reality and those neo-nazis try to kill all human beings fleeing into the five continents. The plot is very complicated and involves nuclear explosions under the polar caps and the discovery of Atlantis. In Italy, Carlo Lucarelli wrote a more realistic short tale about a Nazi officer returning from Brazil [135]. Finally, on the web we can find quite a number of pages following an Aarons and Loftus approach [136]. But the only moving work of the decade is the French movie Un specialist. Portrait d'un criminel moderne [137], two hours of docufiction from the Eichmann chart.

In some cases, reality is better than fiction. In some cases, we need serious research better than sensational reportage. Moreover, historians and writers should pay attention to the stereotypes and the idées reçues that could bias their works. New research and a new attention to the roots of old errors and old tales could better historical and even fictional writings.

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[1] CEANA (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de las Actividades del Nazismo en la Argentina) is born in 1997. In the following three years, the Committe developed many researches. The results are presented in two Progress Reports and one Final Report, now at http://www.ceana.org.ar. I was enroled to look for Italian documents on former Nazi reaching Argentina after sailing from Italy. A debit of gratitude is owed to Roberto Perin and Ignacio Klich, who kindly read an earlier version of this paper and made helpful suggestions.


[3] Holger M. Meding, "El camino transalpino. Austria como país de tránsito para la emigración germanohablante de la posguerra a la Argentina", paper presented at the 9th Congress of the Federación de Estudios de América Latina y el Caribe, Tel Aviv, 14.4.1999; Matteo Sanfilippo, "Archival Evidence on Postwar Italy as a Place of Transit for Goods and People from Nazi Germany to Argentina During World War II and in the Post-War Years" (CEANA, Final Report), Beatriz Gurevich on "Government Agencies and Other Parties Involved in the Immigration of War Criminals and Collaborators in the Aftermath of World War II". The Argentine Case" (CEANA, Second Progress Report), and Christian Bucherkuhn on "The Nostalgists of the European 'New Order' and Their Connections with Argentine Political Culture" (CEANA, Final Report).

1984; Magnus Linklater, Isabel Linton, and Neal Ascherson, Shocking Story of How...
Recover and Restore Gold and other Assets Stolen during World War II by the late Father Graham

Hitler's and Reinhard Gehlen: For CEANA, see his already quoted


60 See Ignacio Klich, "El ingreso a la Argentina de nazis y colaboracionistas", in Klich and Rapoport, eds., Discriminación y racismo en América Latina, p. 401-428.

62 CEANA, Final report.


68 Giovanni Miccoli, i dilemma e i silenzi di Pio XII. Vaticano, Seconda guerra mondiale e Shoah, Milano, Rizzoli, 2000.


73 For CEANA, see his already quoted website. For the U.S. government, see US and Allied Efforts to Recover and Restore Gold and other Assets Stolen or Hidden by Germany during World War II, Washington, D.C., Department of State, 1997; and US and Allied Wartime and Postwar Relations and Negotiations with Argentina, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and Turkey on Looted Gold and German External Assets and US Concerns about the Fate of the Wartime Ustasha Treasury: Supplement to Preliminary Study on US and Allied Efforts to Recover and Restore Gold and other Assets Stolen or Hidden by Germany during World War II, Washington, D.C., Department of State, 1998: both at http://www.state.gov/wwww/regions/eurr/; see also related links and documents at http://www.ushmm.org/assets/nazigold.htm.
only briefly with Italy, see Mundo y la inmigración alemana a la Argentina”, Repubblica, 1981, and Aires, Grupo Editor Latinoamericano, 1994.


Thomás Eloy Martinez, Las memorias del General, Buenos Aires, Planeta, 1996.

Jorge Camaras, Los nazis en la Argentina Buenos Aires, Legasa.

Jorge Camaras, Odessa al Sur, already quoted.

See Jorge Camaras, Organizzazione Odessa, Milano, Mursia, 1998, p. 211.


Cinzia Del Mazo and Simona Micheli, Processo Priebke, Milano, Il Mondo, 1997.


See testimony by Mary Pace, Dietro Priebke, Casale Monferrato, Piemonte, 1997.


This and other ideas by Katz are confirmed by Priebke interviews for the Italian newspaper La Repubblica, see now the articles on Priebke in the CD-rom Gli anni della Repubblica, ’94, Roma, Groupo Editoriale L’Espresso, 2001.


M. Sanfilippo, “Los papeles de Hudal”, p. 201-204.


Fluchtwegen der Nazis nach 1945, broadcasted by WDR on 30.10.1990.


[118] Inmigrantes, refugiados y criminales de guerra en la Argentina de la segunda posguerra (Estudios migratorios latinoamericanos, 43, 1999) and Los nazis en la Argentina: política y economia (Ciclos, 19, 2000).


[121] Alejandra Rey and Jorge Camarasa, “Aseguran que 19 criminales ingresaron en el país con su verdadera identidad” (La Nación, 10.03.1998; for other articles in the same vein and in the same newspaper, see the website http://www.lanacion.com.ar/.


[130] See Ati Rodel, Nazi War Criminals in Canada, already quoted.

[131] According to him, 2,000 war criminals arrived in Canada among the 150,000 refugees coming from Europe in 1947-1951.


First published in Britain under the title Ratlines in 1991, and in the United States the following year under the title Unholy Trinity: the Vatican, the Nazis and Soviet Intelligence, the current revised edition of the book replaces “Soviet Intelligence” in the subtitle with the Swiss Banks.” This latest title change reflects the recent direction of the international investigations into the Vatican’s role in WWII. The bulk of the book (Chapters 1-12) remains unchanged from earlier editions. The second half of the book recounts how the church’s smuggling operation was infiltrated and turned against the West by the Soviet Union. And in the end, the scheme to use the Ratline escape routes to smuggle Nazis and their loot out of Allied-occupied Europe was all for nought. Why? Senior German Nazi criminals escaped prosecution after World War II by the use of different “ratlines” spread over Europe, which were operated via a network of Vatican contacts. The Catholic Church believed this effort would contribute to the Christianization of Europe and feared the threat to Europe of paganism and communism. In the pursuit of its political and spiritual interests, it was quick to forgive Nazi war criminals. Ratlines and Unholy Trinities The Vatican Files Foundation for Social History. YouTube Video: Ratlines (Pacovski Kanali), 1991., English subtitles Vatican in Smuggling Nazi Ustashas. YouTube Video: Operation Ratline (Part 1 of 3). Tweet. Share.