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A Quiet Flame

A Bernie Gunther Mystery

Philip Kerr

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Extract

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ONE

BUENOS AIRES. 1950.

The boat was the SS *Giovanni*, which seemed only appropriate given the fact that at least three of its passengers, including myself, had been in the SS. It was a medium-sized boat with two funnels, a view of the sea, a well-stocked bar, and an Italian restaurant. This was fine if you liked Italian food, but after four weeks at sea at eight knots all the way from Genoa, I didn't like it and I wasn't sad to get off. Either I'm not much of a sailor or there was something wrong with me beyond the company I was keeping these days.

We steamed into the port of Buenos Aires along the grey River Plate and this gave me and my two fellow travellers a chance to reflect upon the proud history of our invincible German navy. Somewhere at the bottom of the river, near Montevideo, lay the wreck of the *Graf Spee*, a pocket battleship that had been invincibly scuttled by its commander in December 1939 to prevent it falling into the hands of the British. As far as I knew this was as near as the war ever came to Argentina.

In the North Basin we docked alongside the Customs House. A modern city of tall concrete buildings lay spread out to the west of us, beyond the miles of rail track and the warehouses and stockyards where Buenos Aires got started – as a place where cattle from all over the Argentine Pampas arrived by train and were slaughtered on an industrial scale. So far, so German. But then the carcases were frozen and shipped all over the world. Exports of Argentine beef had made the

country rich and transformed Buenos Aires into the third largest city in the Americas after New York and Chicago.

The three-million population called themselves *porteños* – the people of the port – which sounds pleasantly romantic. My two friends and I called ourselves refugees, which sounds better than fugitives. But that's what we were. Rightly or wrongly, there was a kind of justice awaiting all of us back in Europe and our Red Cross passports concealed our true identities. I was no more Doctor Carlos Hausner than Adolf Eichmann was Ricardo Klement, or Herbert Kuhlmann was Pedro Geller. This was fine with the Argentines. They didn't care who we were or what we'd done during the war. Even so, on that cool and damp winter morning in July 1950, it seemed there were still certain official proprieties to be observed.

An immigration clerk and a customs officer came aboard the ship and, as each passenger presented their documents, they asked questions. If these two didn't care who we were or what we'd done, they did a good job giving us the opposite impression. The mahogany-faced immigration clerk regarded Eichmann's flimsy-looking passport and then Eichmann himself as if both had arrived from the centre of a cholera epidemic. This wasn't so far from the truth. Europe was only just recovering from an illness called Nazism that had killed more than fifty million people.

'Profession?' the clerk asked Eichmann.

Eichmann's meat cleaver of a face twitched nervously. 'Technician,' he said, and mopped his brow with a handkerchief. It wasn't hot but Eichmann seemed to feel a different kind of heat from anyone else I ever met.

Meanwhile the customs official, who carried the odour of a cigar factory, turned to me. His nostrils flared as if he could smell the money I was carrying in my bag and then he lifted his cracked lip off his bamboo teeth in what passed for a smile in that line of work. I had about thirty thousand Austrian

schillings in that bag, which was a lot of money in Austria but not such a lot when it was converted into real money. I didn't expect him to know that. In my experience, customs officials can do almost anything they want except be generous or forgiving when they catch sight of large quantities of currency.

'What's in the bag?' he asked.

'Clothes. Toiletries. Some money.'

'Would you mind showing me?'

'No,' I said, minding very much. 'I don't mind at all.'

I heaved the bag onto a trestle table and was just about to unbuckle it when a man hurried up the ship's gangway, shouting something in Spanish and then, in German, 'It's all right. I'm sorry I'm late. There's no need for all this formality. There's been a misunderstanding. Your papers are quite in order. I know because I prepared them myself.'

He said something else in Spanish about the three of us being important visitors from Germany, and immediately the attitude of the two officials changed. Both men came to attention. The immigration clerk facing Eichmann handed him back his passport, clicked his heels, and then gave Europe's most wanted man the Hitler salute with a loud 'Heil Hitler' that everyone on deck must have heard.

Eichmann turned several shades of red and, like a giant tortoise, shrank a little into the collar of the coat he was wearing, as if he wished he might disappear. Kuhlmann and I laughed out loud, enjoying Eichmann's embarrassment and discomfort as, snatching back his passport, he stormed down the gangway and onto the quay. We were still laughing as we joined him in the back of a big black American car with a sign displayed in the windscreen that read VIANORD.

'I don't think that was in the least bit funny,' said Eichmann.

'Sure you don't,' I said. 'That's what makes it so funny.'

'You should have seen your face, Ricardo,' said Kuhlmann. 'What on earth possessed him to say that, of all things? And

to you, of all people?' Kuhlmann started to laugh again. 'Heil Hitler, indeed.'

'I thought he made a pretty good job of it,' I said. 'For an amateur.'

Our host who had jumped into the driver's seat, now turned around to shake our hands. 'I'm sorry about that,' he told Eichmann. 'Some of these officials are just pig-ignorant. In fact, the word we have for pig and public official are the same. *Chanchos*. We call them both *chanchos*. I wouldn't be at all surprised if that idiot believes Hitler is still the German leader.'

'God, I wish he was,' murmured Eichmann, rolling his eyes into the roof of the car. 'How I wish he was.'

'My name is Horst Fuldner,' said our host. 'But my friends in Argentina call me Carlos.'

'Small world,' I said. 'That's what my friends in Argentina call me. Both of them.'

Some people came down the gangway and peered inquisitively through the passenger window at Eichmann.

'Can we get away from here?' he asked. 'Please.'

'Better do as he says, Carlos,' I said. 'Before someone recognises Ricardo here and telephones David Ben-Gurion.'

'You wouldn't joke about that if you were in my shoes,' said Eichmann. 'The soaps would stop at nothing to kill me.'

Fuldner started the car and Eichmann relaxed visibly as we drove smoothly away.

'Since you mentioned the soaps,' said Fuldner. 'It's worth discussing what to do if any of you is recognised.'

'Nobody's going to recognise me,' Kuhlmann said. 'Besides, it's the Canadians who want me, not the Jews.'

'All the same,' said Fuldner. 'I'll say it anyway. After the Spanish and the Italians, the soaps are the country's largest ethnic group. Only we call them *los Russos*, on account of the fact that most of the ones who are here came to get away from the Russian Czar's pogrom.'

'Which one?' Eichmann asked.

'How do you mean?'

'There were three pogroms,' said Eichmann. 'One in 1821, one between 1881 and 1884, and a third that got started 1903. The Kishinev Pogrom.'

'Ricardo knows everything about Jews,' I said. 'Except how to be nice to them.'

'Oh, I should think the most recent pogrom,' said Fuldner.

'It figures,' said Eichmann, ignoring me. 'The Kishinev was the worst.'

'That's when most of them came to Argentina, I think. There are as many as a quarter of a million Jews here in Buenos Aires. They live in three main neighbourhoods, which I advise you to steer clear of. Villa Crespo along Corrientes, Belgrano, and Once. If you think you are recognised, don't lose your head, don't make a scene. Keep calm. Cops here are heavy-handed and none too bright. Like that *chancho* on the boat. If there's any kind of trouble they're liable to arrest you and the Jew who thinks he's recognised you.'

'So, there's not much chance of a pogrom here, then?' observed Eichmann.

'Lord, no,' said Fuldner.

'Thank goodness,' said Kuhlmann. 'I've had enough of all that nonsense.'

'We haven't had anything like that since what's called Tragic Week. And even that was mostly political. Anarchists, you know. Back in 1919.'

'Anarchists, Bolsheviks, Jews, they're all the same animal,' said Eichmann, who had become unusually talkative.

'Of course, during the war, the government issued an order forbidding all Jewish emigration to Argentina. But more recently things have changed. The Americans have put pressure on Perón to soften our Jewish policy; to let them come and settle here. I wouldn't be surprised if there were more Jews on that boat than anyone else.'

'That's a comforting thought,' said Eichmann.

'It's all right,' insisted Fuldner. 'You're quite safe here. *Porteños* don't give a damn about what happened in Europe, least of all to the Jews. Besides, nobody believes half of what's been in the English language papers and on the newsreels.'

'Half would be quite bad enough,' I murmured. It was enough to push a stick through the spokes of a conversation I was starting to dislike. But mostly it was just Eichmann I disliked. I much preferred the other Eichmann. The one who had spent the last four weeks saying almost nothing, and keeping his loathsome opinions to himself. It was too soon to have much of an opinion about Carlos Fuldner.

From the back of his well-oiled head I judged Fuldner to be around forty. His German was fluent but with a little soft colour on the edges of the tones. To speak the language of Goethe and Schiller, you have to stick your vowels in a pencil sharpener. He liked to talk, that much was evident. He wasn't tall and he wasn't good-looking, but then he wasn't short or ugly either, just ordinary, in a good suit with good manners and a nice manicure. I got another look at him when he pulled up at a level crossing and turned around to offer us some cigarettes. His mouth was wide and sensuous, his eyes were lazy but intelligent and his forehead was as high as a church cupola. If you'd been casting a movie you'd have picked him to play a priest, or a lawyer, or maybe a hotel manager. He snapped his thumb on a Dunhill, lit his cigarette, then began telling us about himself. That was fine by me. Now that we were no longer talking about Jews Eichmann stared out of the window and looked bored. But I'm the kind who listens politely to stories about my redeemer. After all, that's why my mother sent me to Sunday School.

'I was born here, in Buenos Aires, to German immigrants,' said Fuldner. 'But, for a while, we went back to live in Germany, in Kassel, where I went to school. After school I worked in Hamburg. Then, in 1932, I joined the SS and was

a captain before being seconded to the SD to run an intelligence operation back here in Argentina. Since the war I and a few others have been running Vianord, a travel agency dedicated to helping our old comrades to escape from Europe. Of course, none of it would be possible without the help of the President and his wife, Eva. It was during Evita's trip to Rome to meet the Pope, in 1947, that she began to see the necessity of giving men such as you a fresh start in life.'

'So there's still some anti-Semitism in the country, after all,' I remarked.

Kuhlmann laughed and so did Fuldner. But Eichmann remained silent.

'It's good to be with Germans again,' said Fuldner. 'Humour is not a national characteristic of the Argentines. They're much too concerned with their dignity to laugh at very much, least of all themselves.'

'They sound a lot like fascists,' I said.

'That's another thing. Fascism here is only skin deep. The Argentines don't have the will or the inclination to be proper fascists.'

'Maybe I'm going to like it here more than I thought,' I said.

'Really,' exclaimed Eichmann.

'Don't mind me, Herr Fuldner,' I said. 'I'm not quite as rabid as our friend here wearing the bow-tie and glasses, that's all. He's still in denial. To do with all kinds of things. For all I know he still holds fast to the idea that the Third Reich is going to last for a thousand years.'

'You mean it isn't?'

Kuhlmann chuckled.

'Must you make a joke about everything, Hausner?' Eichmann's tone was testy and impatient.

'I only make jokes about the things that strike me as funny,' I said. 'I wouldn't dream of making a joke about something really important. Not at the risk of upsetting you, Ricardo.'

I felt Eichmann's eyes burning into my cheek and when I

turned to face him his mouth went thin and puritanical. For a moment he continued staring at me with the air of one who wished it was down the sights of a rifle.

'What *are* you doing here, Herr Doctor Hausner?'

'The same thing as you, Ricardo. I'm getting away from it all.'

'Yes, but why? Why? You don't seem like much of a Nazi.'

'I'm the beefsteak kind. Brown on the outside only. Inside I'm really quite red.'

Eichmann stared out the window as if he couldn't bear to look at me for a minute longer.

'I could use a good steak,' murmured Kuhlmann.

'Then you've come to the right place,' said Fuldner. 'In Germany a steak is a steak, but here it's a patriotic duty.'

We were still driving through the dockyards. Most of the names on the bonded warehouses and oil tanks were British or American: Oakley & Watling, Glasgow Wire, Wainwright Brothers, Ingham Clark, English Electric, Crompton Parkinson, and Western Telegraph. In front of a big open warehouse, a dozen rolls of newsprint the size of hayricks were turning to pulp in the early morning rain. Laughing, Fuldner pointed them out.

'There,' he said, almost triumphantly. 'That's Perónism in action. Perón doesn't close down opposition newspapers or arrest their editors. He doesn't even stop them from having newsprint. He just makes sure that by the time it reaches them the newsprint isn't fit to use. You see, Perón has all the major labour unions in his pocket. That's your Argentine brand of fascism, right there.'

TWO

BUENOS AIRES. 1950.

Buenos Aires looked and smelled like any European capital city before the war. As we drove through the busy streets, I wound down the window and took a deep, euphoric breath of exhaust fumes, cigar smoke, coffee, expensive cologne, cooked meat, fresh fruit, flowers, and money. It was like returning to earth after a journey into space. Germany, with its rationing and war damage and guilt and Allied tribunals, seemed a million miles away. In Buenos Aires there was lots of traffic because there was lots of petrol. The carefree people were well dressed and well fed because the shops were full of clothes and food. Far from being a remote backwater, Buenos Aires was almost a *belle époque* throwback. Almost.

The safe house was at 1429 Monasterio Street in the Florida district. Fuldner said Florida was the smartest part of Buenos Aires but you wouldn't have known it from the inside of the safe house. The outside was shielded by a carapace of overgrown pine trees and it was probably called a safe house because, from the street, you wouldn't have known it was there at all. Inside, you knew it was there but wished it wasn't. The kitchen was rustic, the ceiling fans just rusty. The wallpaper in all the rooms was yellow, although not by design, and the furniture looked as if it was trying to return to nature. Poisonous, half-decayed, vaguely fungal, it was the kind of house that belonged in a bottle of formaldehyde.

I was shown to a bedroom with a broken shutter, a threadbare rug, and a brass bed with a mattress as thin as a slice of

rye bread and about as comfortable. Through the grimy, cobwebbed window I looked out onto a little garden overgrown with jasmine, ferns, and vines. There was a small fountain that hadn't worked in a while: a cat had littered several kittens in it right underneath a copper waterspout that was as green as its eyes. But it wasn't all bad news. At least I had my own bathroom. The bath itself was full of old books but that didn't mean I couldn't take a bath in it. I like to read when I'm in the bath.

Another German was already staying there. His face was red and puffy and there were bags under his eyes like a naval cook's hammock. His hair was the colour of straw and about as tidy, and his body was thin and scarred with what looked like bullet holes. These were easy to see because he wore his malodorous remnant of a dressing gown off one shoulder, like a toga. On his legs were varicose veins as big as fossilised lizards. He seemed a stoic sort who probably slept in a barrel, but for the pint of liquor in his dressing gown pocket and the monocle in his eye, which added a jaunty, polished touch.

Fuldner introduced him as Fernando Eifler but I didn't suppose that was his real name. The three of us smiled politely but we were all possessed of the same thought: that if we stayed in the safe house long enough, we would end up like Fernando Eifler.

'I say, do any of you chaps have a cigarette?' asked Eifler. 'I seem to have run out.'

Kuhlmann handed one over and helped him get it alight. Meanwhile Fuldner apologised for the poor quarters, saying it was only for a few days and explaining that the only reason Eifler was still there was because he had turned down every job offered to him by the DAIE, which was the organisation that had brought us to Argentina. He said this quite matter-of-factly, but our new housemate bristled noticeably.

'I didn't come half way around the world to work,' Eifler

said sourly. 'What do you take me for? I'm a German officer and a gentleman, not a bloody bank clerk. Really, Fuldner, it's too much to expect. There was no talk of working for a living when we were back in Genoa. I'd never have come if I'd known you people expected me to earn my bread and butter. I mean, it's bad enough that one has to leave one's family home in Germany without obliging one to accept the added humiliation of reporting regularly to an employer.'

'Perhaps you'd have preferred it if the Allies had hanged you, Herr Eifler?' said Eichmann.

'An American noose or an Argentinian halter,' said Eifler. 'It's not much of a choice for a man of my background. Frankly, I would prefer to have been shot by the Popovs than face a clerk's desk at nine o'clock every morning. It's uncivilised.' He smiled thinly at Kuhlmann. 'Thank you for the cigarette. And, by the way, welcome to Argentina. Now, if you'll excuse me, gentlemen.' He bowed stiffly, limped into his room, and closed the door behind him.

Fuldner shrugged and said, 'Some find it harder to adjust than others. Especially aristocrats like Eifler.'

'I might have known,' sniffed Eichmann.

'I'll leave you and Herr Geller to settle in,' he told Eichmann. Then he looked at me. 'Herr Hausner. You have an appointment this morning.'

'Me?'

'Yes. We're going to the police station at Moreno,' he said. 'To the Registry of Foreign Persons. All new arrivals have to report there in order to obtain a *cedula di identidad*. I can assure you it's only a matter of routine, Herr Doctor Hausner. Photographs and fingerprints, that kind of thing. You'll all need to have one to work, of course, but for appearance's sake it's best you don't all go at the same time.'

But outside the safe house Fuldner confessed that while it was true that all of us would require a *cedula* from the local police station, this was not in fact where we were now going.

'Only I had to say something,' he said. 'I could hardly tell them where we're really going without hurting their feelings.'

'We certainly wouldn't want that to happen, no,' I said, climbing into the car.

'And please, when we come back, don't for Christ's sake say where you've been. Thanks to Eifler, there's already enough resentment in that house without you adding to the store of it.'

'Of course. It'll be our little secret.'

'You're making a joke,' he said, starting the engine and driving us away, 'but I'm the one who's going to be laughing when you find out where you're going.'

'Don't tell me I'm being deported already.'

'No, nothing like that. We're going to see the President.'

'Juan Perón wants to see *me*?'

Fuldner laughed just like he'd said he would. I guess my face did look kind of silly at that.

'What did I do? Win an important award? Most promising Nazi newcomer to Argentina?'

'Believe it or not, Perón likes to greet a lot of German officers who arrive here in Argentina, personally. He's very fond of Germany and the Germans.'

'It's not everyone you can say that about.'

'He is a military man, after all.'

'I imagine that's why they made him a general.'

'He likes to meet medical men most of all. Perón's grandfather was a doctor. He himself wanted to be a doctor but instead he went to the National Military Academy.'

'It's an easy mistake to make,' I said. 'Killing people instead of healing them.'

Dropping a couple of ice cubes into my voice, I said, 'Don't think I'm not well aware of the great honour, Carlos. But you know, it's been quite a few years since I plugged my ears with a stethoscope. I hope he's not looking to me to come up with a cure for cancer or give him the gossip from the latest

German medical journal. After all, I've been hiding out in the coal shed for the last five years.'

'Relax,' said Fuldner. 'You're not the first Nazi doctor I've had to introduce to the President. And I don't suppose you'll be the last. Your being a medical man is merely confirmation of the fact that you are an educated man, and a gentleman.'

'When the occasion demands, I can pass for a gentleman,' I said. I buttoned my shirt collar, straightened my tie and checked my watch. 'Does he always receive visitors with his boiled eggs and his newspaper?'

'Perón is usually in his office by seven,' said Fuldner. 'In there. The Casa Rosada.' He nodded at a pink-coloured building that stood at the far side of a plaza lined with palm trees and statuary. It looked like an Indian maharajah's palace I'd once seen in a magazine.

'Pink,' I said. 'My favourite colour for a government building. Who knows? Maybe Hitler might still have been in power if he'd had the Reich Chancellery painted a nicer colour than grey.'

'There's a story why it's pink,' said Fuldner.

'Don't tell me. It'll help me to relax if I can think of Perón as the kind of president who prefers pink. Believe me, Carlos, this is all very reassuring.'

'That reminds me. You *were* joking about being a Red, weren't you?'

'I was in a Soviet prison camp for almost two years, Carlos. What do you think?'

He drove around to a side entrance and waved a security pass at the guard on the barrier before carrying on through to a central courtyard. In front of an ornate marble stairway stood two grenadiers. With tall hats and drawn sabres they looked like an illustration from an old fairy tale. I glanced up at the loggia-style upper gallery that overlooked the courtyard, half expecting to see Zorro show up for a fencing lesson. Instead, I caught sight of a neat little blonde eyeing us with

interest. She was wearing more diamonds than seemed decent at breakfast time and an elaborate baker's loaf of a hairstyle. I thought I might borrow a sabre and cut myself a slice of it if I got a bit peckish.

'That's her,' said Fuldner. 'Evita. The President's wife.'

'Somehow I didn't think she was the cleaning lady. Not with all the mints she's wearing.'

We walked up the stairway into a richly furnished hall where several women were milling about. Despite the fact Perón's was a military dictatorship nobody up here was wearing a uniform. When I remarked on this, Fuldner told me that Perón didn't care for uniforms, preferring a degree of informality that people sometimes found surprising. I might also have remarked that the women in the hall were very beautiful and that perhaps he preferred them to uglier ones, in which case he was a dictator after my own heart. The kind of dictator I would have been myself if a highly developed sense of social justice and democracy had not hindered my own will to power and autocracy.

Contrary to what Fuldner had told me, it seemed that the President was not yet at his desk. And while we awaited his much anticipated arrival, one of the secretaries fetched us coffee on a little silver tray. Then we smoked. The secretaries smoked, too. Everyone in Buenos Aires smoked. For all I knew even the cats and dogs had a twenty a day habit. Then, outside the high windows I heard a noise like a lawnmower. I put down my coffee cup and went to take a look. I was just in time to see a tall man climbing off a motor scooter. It was the President, although I would hardly have known that from his modest means of transport or his casual appearance. I kept comparing Perón with Hitler and trying to imagine the Führer dressed for golf and riding a lime green scooter down the Wilhelmstrasse.

The President parked the scooter and came up the stairs two at a time, his thick English brogues hitting the marble steps

with a sound like someone working the heavy bag in the gym. He may have looked more like a golfer in his flat cap, tan-coloured, zip-up cardigan, brown plus-fours and thick woollen socks, but he had a boxer's grace and build. Not quite six feet tall, with dark hair brushed back on his head and a nose more Roman than the Coliseum, he reminded me of Primo Carnera, the Italian heavyweight. They would have been about the same age, too. I figured Perón for someone in his early fifties. The dark hair looked like it got blacked and polished every day when the Grenadiers cleaned their riding boots.

One of the secretaries handed him some papers while another threw open the double doors of his office. In there the look was more conventionally autocratic. There were lots of equestrian bronzes, oak panelling, portraits that were still wet, expensive rugs, and Corinthian columns. He waved us to a couple of leather armchairs, tossed the papers onto a desk the size of a trebuchet, and flung his cap and jacket to another secretary, who hugged them to her not insubstantial bosom in a way that made me think she wished he was still wearing them.

Someone else brought him a demitasse of coffee, a glass of water, a gold pen, and a gold holder with a cigarette that was already lit. He took a loud sip of coffee, put the holder in his mouth, picked up the pen and started adding his signature to the documents presented earlier. I was close enough to pay attention to his signature style: the flourishing egoistic capital 'J', the aggressive, showy, final downward stroke of the 'n' of Perón. Based on his handwriting, I made a quick psychological evaluation of the man and concluded that he was the neurotic, anally retentive type, who preferred people to be able to read what he had actually written. Not like a doctor at all, I told myself with relief.

Apologising in almost fluent German for keeping us waiting, Perón carried a silver cigarette box to our fingers. Then we shook hands and I felt the heavy knob of bone at the

base of his thumb that again made me think of him as a boxer. That, and the broken veins under the thin skin that covered his high cheekbones, and the dental plate that was revealed by his easy smile. In a country where no one has a sense of humour the smiling man is king. I smiled back, thanked him for his hospitality and then complimented the President on his German, in Spanish.

'No, please,' Perón answered, in German. 'I very much enjoy speaking German. It's good practise for me. When I was a young cadet at our military school, all of our instructors were Germans. This was before the Great War, in 1911. You had to learn German because our weapons were German and all of our technical manuals were in German. We even learned to goose-step. Every day at six p.m. my Grenadiers goose-step onto the Plaza de Mayo to take the flag down from the pole. The next time you visit, you must make sure it's at that time so that you can see for yourself.'

'I will, sir.' I let him light my cigarette. 'But I think my own goose-stepping days are over. These days it's as much as I can do to climb a set of stairs without running out of breath.'

'Me, too.' Perón grinned. 'But I try to keep fit. I like to ride and to ski when I have the chance. In 1939, I went skiing in the Alps, in Austria and Germany. Germany was wonderful then, a well-oiled machine. It was like being inside one of those great big Mercedes-Benz motorcars. Smooth and powerful and exciting. Yes, it was an important time in my life.'

'Yes sir.' I kept on smiling at him, like I agreed with every word he said. The fact was I hated the sight of goose-stepping soldiers. To me it was one of the most unpleasant sights in the world; something both terrifying and ridiculous that defied you to laugh at it. And as for 1939, it had been an important time in everyone's life. Especially if you happened to be Polish, or French, or British, or even German. Who in Europe would ever forget 1939?

'How are things in Germany right now?' he asked.

'For the ordinary fellow, they're pretty tough,' I said. 'But it really depends on whose zone you're in. Worst of all is the Soviet zone of occupation. Things are hardest of all where the Ivans are in charge. Even for the Ivans. Most people just want to put the war behind them and get on with the reconstruction.'

'It's amazing what has been achieved in such a short period of time,' said Perón.

'Oh, I don't just mean reconstruction of our cities, sir. Although of course that is important. No, I mean the reconstruction of our most fundamental beliefs and institutions. Freedom, justice, democracy. A parliament. A fair-minded police force. An independent judiciary. Eventually, when all of that has been recovered, we might regain some self-respect.'

Perón's eyes narrowed. 'I must say you don't sound very much like a Nazi,' he said.

'It has been five years, sir, since we lost the war,' I replied. There's no point in thinking about what's gone. Germany needs to look to the future.'

'That's what we need in Argentina,' said Perón. 'Some forward thinking. A bit of the German can-do, eh Fuldner?'

'Absolutely, sir.'

'If you don't mind me saying so, sir,' I said, 'but from what I've seen so far, there's nothing Germany can teach Argentina.'

'This is a very Catholic country, Doctor Hausner,' he told me. 'It's very set in its ways. We need modern thinking. We need scientists. Good managers. Technicians. Doctors like yourself.' He clapped me on the shoulder.

Two little poodles ambled in, accompanied by a strong smell of expensive perfume, and out of the corner of my eye I saw that the blonde with the Kudamm hairdo and the diamonds had entered the room. With her were two men. One was medium height with fair hair and a moustache and a quiet unassuming way about him. The other was about forty, grey-haired with thick-framed, tinted glasses and a small beard and

moustache, but physically more powerful. There was something about him that made me think he might be a cop.

'Will you practise medicine again?' Perón asked me, adding, 'I'm sure we can make that possible. Rodolfo?'

The younger man by the door unfolded his arms and pushed himself off the wall. He glanced at the man with the beard for a moment. 'If the police have no objection?' His German was every bit as fluent as his master's.

The man with the beard shook his head.

'I'll ask Ramon Carillo to look into it, shall I, sir?' said Rodolfo. From the pocket of his beautifully tailored, pinstripe suit he took out a small leather notebook and made a note with a silver propelling pencil.

Perón nodded. 'Please do,' he said, clapping me on the shoulder a second time.

In spite of his declared admiration for goose-stepping, I found myself liking the President. I liked him for his motor scooter and his ridiculous plus-fours. I liked him for his slugger's paw and his stupid little dogs. I liked him for his warm welcome and the easy way he had about him. And – who knows? – maybe I liked him because I badly needed to like someone. Maybe that's why he was president, I don't know. But there was something about Juan Perón that made me want to take a gamble on him. Which is why, after months of pretending to be someone else who was pretending to be Doctor Carlos Hausner, I decided to level with him about who and what I really was.