

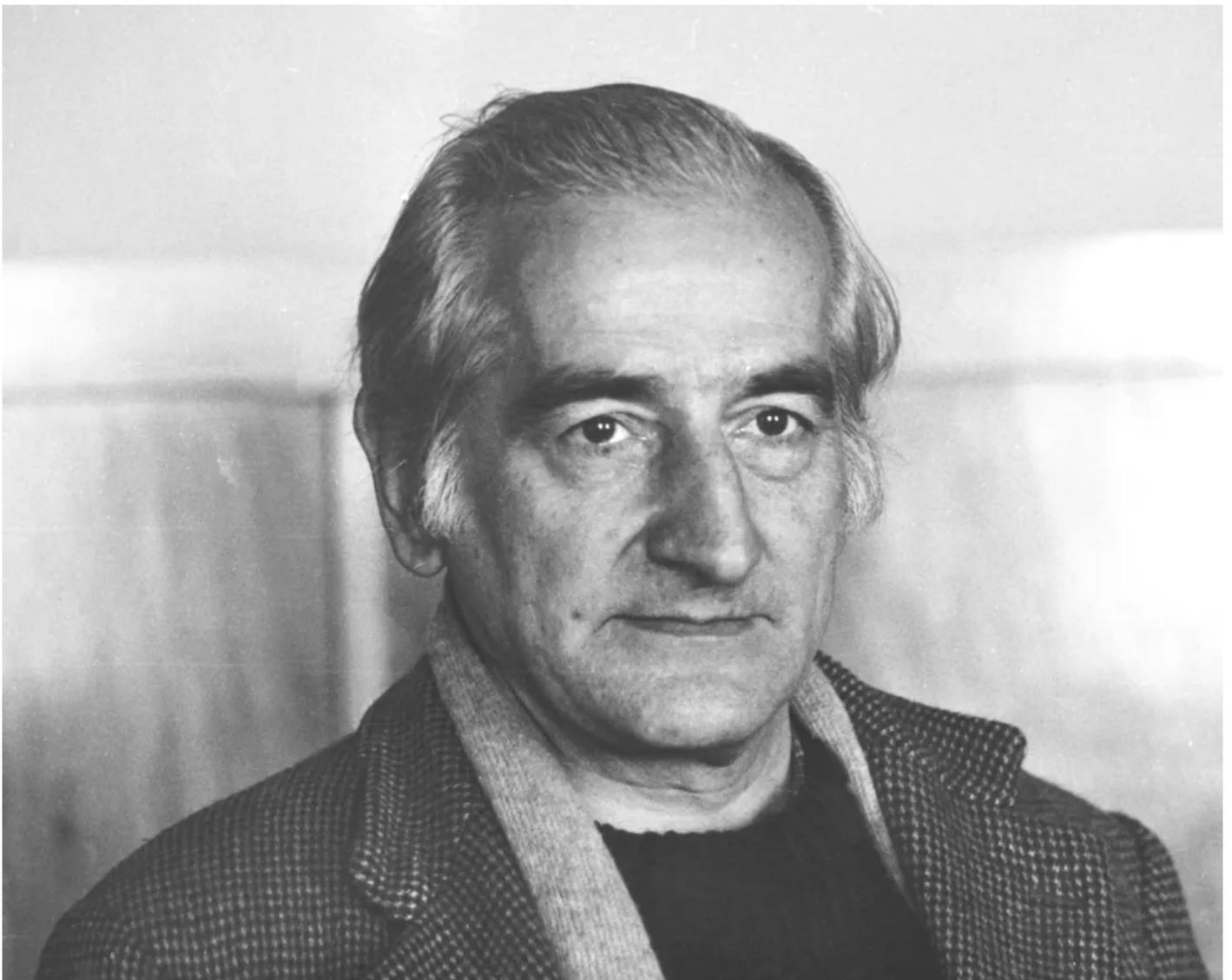
UNDER REVIEW

# THE COMIC-STRIP WRITER WHO BECAME A LEGEND

*Héctor Germán Oesterheld's pulp adventures won him a devoted following—and made him a target of Argentina's junta.*

By Sam Thielman

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Photograph courtesy The Oesterheld Estate / Fantagraphics

One of the few things we know about the end of the comic-strip writer Héctor Germán Oesterheld's life is that he was allowed to smoke a cigarette on Christmas Eve in 1977. Argentina's National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons, or CONADEP, issued a report in 1984 containing that detail. The report quotes Eduardo Arias, a psychologist detained with Oesterheld:

The guards gave us permission to take off our hoods and smoke a cigarette. They also allowed us to talk to each other for five minutes. Then Héctor said that as he was the oldest he wanted to shake hands with all the prisoners present, one by one. I will never forget that handshake. Héctor Oesterheld was sixty years old when this happened. His physical condition was very bad indeed. I don't know what happened to him. I was freed in January 1978. He stayed in that place.

Oesterheld was a prisoner of the Argentine junta at some of its most notorious facilities, among them a detention and torture center situated in a police station in the Villa Insuperable neighborhood in the province of Buenos Aires. It was known mainly by its ironic nickname, the Sheraton. Oesterheld and three of his four daughters were among *los desaparecidos*, "the disappeared," those people who were kidnapped and almost certainly murdered by the regime; the fourth died during a botched abduction.



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For most of his life, Oesterheld was a beloved writer of pulp adventures—Westerns, stories of alien invasion, tales of the battlefield in the Second World War—that often bend or break genre rules. When Oesterheld departed from convention, it was to tweak reigning pieties. His cowboys are villains who oppress courageous Indians. His war stories privilege moral ambiguity over daring exploits. When his aliens invade an imaginary Argentina, feckless governments abandon a persecuted citizenry, who have to resist the invaders as guerrillas. His work reflects a desperate search for heroism, at first in adventure stories and then among real-world figures like Eva Perón and Che Guevara, who star in his comics less as historical figures than as avatars of his passionate leftism.

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In Oesterheld's early stories, his political views are disguised, at least in part

out of necessity. He addresses his country's problems elliptically, and in narrative forms that would have been familiar to young people browsing newsstands stocked with exciting stories, but his outrage at the status quo is unmistakable. His boldness in the face of Argentina's parade of violent and censorious dictators earned him a devoted following, but when, late in life, he became the kind of guerrilla fighter he admired, the government with which he had sparred so effectively in his stories crushed him with no more difficulty than it had thousands of others. In his memory, other writers continued to produce comics about his characters, including fictional versions of himself, granting him a posthumous career not as a pulp comic-book hero come to life but as a real-life guerrilla who became a comic-book hero.

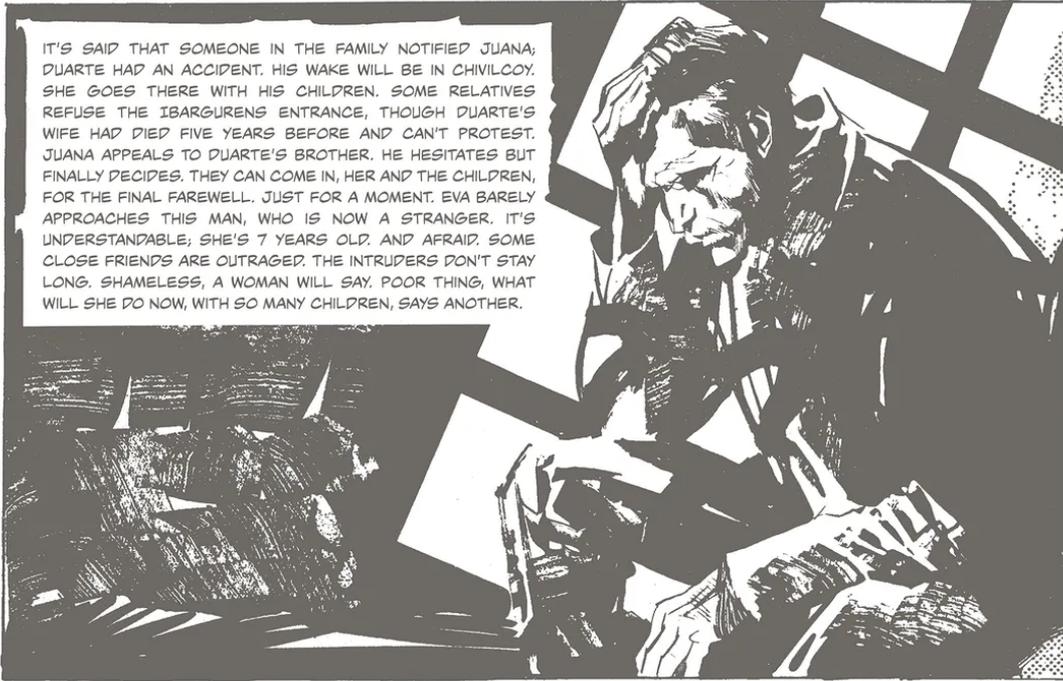
Much of his work, especially his late work, saw publication in forms that were officially suppressed, and the effort to recover his writings has been long and arduous. After the death of the artist Alberto Breccia, Oesterheld's longtime collaborator, an editor named Javier Doeyo found Oesterheld's original script for "Evita: Vida y Obra de Eva Perón," a comic-book biography of Perón drawn by Breccia and his son, Enrique. The job of writing the story had ultimately been given to another writer. A version of the comic book with Oesterheld's script restored was published in Argentina, in 2002. On March 14th of this year, it was published in its first English edition, as "Evita: The Life and Work of Eva Perón," translated by Erica Mena, for Fantagraphics.

During Oesterheld's life, though naked governmental corruption and violence were constant, Argentina enjoyed comparative prosperity among Latin American countries and a robust middle class, of which he was a member. Juan Perón, a charismatic populist who assumed the Presidency in 1946, inflicted and inspired some of that violence, though his supporters were much more often the targets of brutal state repression. He supported the establishment of Eva's broad public charity, the Eva Perón Foundation, while using it to shore up his political power and spread propaganda. Like many Argentines, Oesterheld attached his hopes for a better future to Evita.

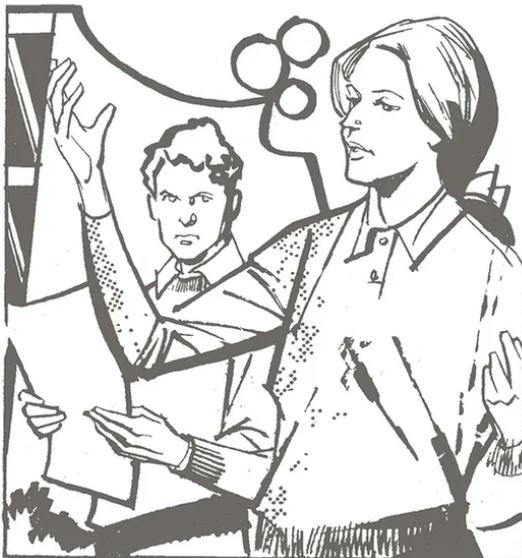
His restored script for “Evita: Vida y Obra” opens with a denunciation of the bourgeoisie and a tribute to *los descamisados*, “the shirtless”—a slur that the Argentine right used against Perón’s supporters among the very poor, and which those supporters reclaimed with Evita’s encouragement. In Oesterheld’s script, she is an almost divine figure, and her role as Perón’s good cop goes unexamined. “Where there is hope, Evita still lives,” the comic concludes.

Oesterheld was born in Buenos Aires on July 23, 1919. He published prose and children’s books, but the bulk of his work is in comics, often called *historietas* in Spanish, literally “little stories.” (The word can also be translated as “anecdotes” or “tales.”) He liked the way that the form transgressed the border between high and low art. Before he started writing comics, Oesterheld worked for Argentina’s Industrial Credit Bank as a precious-metals specialist, in Patagonia. His time surveying the steppe later became useful as a point of reference for the cowboy comics that he wrote in the nineteen-fifties.

IT'S SAID THAT SOMEONE IN THE FAMILY NOTIFIED JUANA; DUARTE HAD AN ACCIDENT. HIS WAKE WILL BE IN CHIVILCOY. SHE GOES THERE WITH HIS CHILDREN. SOME RELATIVES REFUSE THE IBARGURENS ENTRANCE, THOUGH DUARTE'S WIFE HAD DIED FIVE YEARS BEFORE AND CAN'T PROTEST. JUANA APPEALS TO DUARTE'S BROTHER. HE HESITATES BUT FINALLY DECIDES. THEY CAN COME IN, HER AND THE CHILDREN, FOR THE FINAL FAREWELL. JUST FOR A MOMENT. EVA BARELY APPROACHES THIS MAN, WHO IS NOW A STRANGER. IT'S UNDERSTANDABLE; SHE'S 7 YEARS OLD. AND AFRAID. SOME CLOSE FRIENDS ARE OUTRAGED. THE INTRUDERS DON'T STAY LONG. SHAMELESS, A WOMAN WILL SAY. POOR THING, WHAT WILL SHE DO NOW, WITH SO MANY CHILDREN, SAYS ANOTHER.



FOUR YEARS LATER, THE FAMILY MOVES TO JUNÍN. THINGS SEEM TO IMPROVE. DOÑA JUANA RECEIVES THE RECTOR OF THE NATIONAL COLLEGE, JOSÉ ÁLVAREZ RODRÍGUEZ, AT HER HOUSE EVERY DAY. THEY ARE UNITED BY A DEEP FRIENDSHIP. SHORTLY AFTER, HIS BROTHER, JUSTO, WHO HAS JUST OPENED A LAW PRACTICE IN JUNÍN, WILL JOIN THESE LUNCHEONS. EVA GROWS AND SHOWS A BUDDING BENT TOWARD THE THEATER. SHE RECITES POEMS AND PERFORMS MANY ROLES IN SCHOOL PLAYS.



DESPITE WHAT SHE MAINTAINED FOR DECADES, EVITA TRAVELS TO BUENOS AIRES WITH HER MOTHER IN 1934, NOT WITH THE FAMOUS TANGO SINGER AGUSTÍN MAGALDI. THE MUSICIAN HAD ACTUALLY VISITED JUNÍN BUT IN 1929. HE RETURNED IN 1936 AND 1938. EVA BOARDS THE TRAIN, AND THE DUST FROM THAT MACHINE'S TRACKS WILL FOREVER SHROUD HER DARK, PROVINCIAL PAST. SHE THINKS OF WHAT AWAITS HER: THE BIG CITY, THEATER, FAME. SHE DOESN'T KNOW MISERY, TOO, LIVES IN THE CORNERS OF BUENOS AIRES.

Illustration courtesy Fantagraphics

Oesterheld prized accuracy and forthrightness, and he was not a particularly easy man to work with, despite his career in an industry that required collaboration—Oesterheld didn't draw, and many artists didn't write. In an

interview with Spanish newspaper *El País*, his widow, Elsa Sánchez de Oesterheld, who died in 2015, recalled a standoff between the author and one of his artists, the great Italian cartoonist Hugo Pratt. Pratt had “a new hero” to show Oesterheld: “a soldier during the American conquest of the West.” “Héctor told him: ‘That’s good work, but you need to redraw it, he can’t possibly be using that type of weapon, the butt of the gun is wrong,’ ” Elsa recalled. “Hugo sat down, sighed, and cried, ‘I’ll kill him! I’ll kill him!’ ‘Tell me, Héctor Oesterheld, who will be bothered by the butt of the gun?’ ‘I will!’ Héctor answered.”

Murderous rage aside, Pratt and Oesterheld’s collaboration was long and fruitful. Their most famous creation, “Ernie Pike,” a strip about a war correspondent based on Ernie Pyle, which Oesterheld often used to weigh in indirectly on geopolitics, began in 1957. That same year, Oesterheld and his brother Jorge founded their own publisher, Frontera, according to “Los Oesterheld,” a family biography by Fernanda Nicolini and Alicia Beltrami. One of their first productions was an eerie alien-invasion comic strip titled “El Eternauta” (“The Eternaut”), drawn by Francisco Solano López. The strip captures Argentina’s then increasingly unstable political situation. Perón, who had been claimed by both the left and right, had been deposed and exiled, in 1955. By the time that “El Eternauta” started, General Pedro Aramburu, the autocrat who had helped depose Perón, had made it a criminal offense, punishable with prison time, to make “use of Peronist symbols, signs, meaningful expressions, doctrines, articles and art work,” according to *decreto ley* (decree law) 4161/56. It was even illegal to say Perón’s name.

Oesterheld found a way around the ban by writing in code. “El Eternauta” ran in a weekly magazine called *Suplemento Semanal Hora Cero* (*Zero Hour Weekly*) from 1957 until 1959. A sense of paranoia is palpable on every page. The strip follows Juan Salvo, a man who joins the guerrilla resistance fighting an invasion directed by aliens called only *Ellos*. “El Eternauta,” with its themes of popular resistance to autocratic control, is just the sort of art

work that Aramburu had proscribed, but, in the grand tradition of subversive art the world over, there is nothing straightforwardly objectionable in its text. If the alien invasion bore some striking resemblances to the sudden establishment of Argentina's military dictatorship, any criticism of such resemblances would seem foolish and thin-skinned.

In "The Eternaut," Oesterheld established themes that would come to define—and, eventually, to end—his life. Like Oesterheld himself, the strip's hero, Juan, struggles with the question of whether individual resistance can make a difference against overwhelming odds. *Ellos* attach mind-control devices to human victims and turn them against their fellows. They force inhabitants of worlds that they've already conquered to fight their battles for them, a fate that Juan fears above almost everything else. Though Juan does his duty and joins the ranks of the militants, he is never entirely free from the temptation to abandon the guerrillas and run home to his wife and child.

Juan falls in with a group of soldiers planning a counter-offensive, and one of them is a writer, a pathetic specimen of a journalist named Mosca (Spanish for "fly"), who is always trying to document the momentous battles as they're being fought. This, too, is probably a self-deprecating self-portrait. "How goes the history, Mosca, my friend?" Juan, now a lieutenant, asks his frantically scribbling squad-mate. "Too fast, Lieutenant," Mosca answers. "So many things have happened, I haven't had time to write them."

**I**n the nineteen-sixties, Argentina cycled through a succession of ineffectual and authoritarian regimes—a succession punctuated very occasionally by democratic rule, notably under Arturo Frondizi. As the country did so, Oesterheld's work focussed more and more on the plight of the poor. In the late sixties, he and Alberto Breccia, along with Breccia's son, Enrique, began work on the first in a proposed series of comic-book biographies of notable American leaders. One proposed subject was Che Guevara, the Argentine-born Marxist revolutionary who had become a public enemy of right-wing regimes across Latin America. It was a risky

commission for Oesterheld to accept: Juan Carlos Onganía, who had seized the Presidency of Argentina in 1966, had pledged to send troops into Bolivia if Guevara's movement overthrew that country's right-wing government, according to a 1967 declassified C.I.A. memo.

Rote adventure stories were ubiquitous in Argentine comics, and Oesterheld was good at writing them. In Guevara, Oesterheld found a real person around whom all the trappings of the genre seemed to fall into place: a swashbuckling wartime hero who was gentle when he could afford to be and lethal when duty required. "Vida del Che" went on sale in January, 1969, a year and three months after Guevara's execution, by a Bolivian soldier. In the book, Che shares Oesterheld's preoccupation with the downtrodden. He trains guerrillas to fight colonial oppressors and teaches a doomed peasant to read. According to the book's publication history, the publisher, Jorge Álvarez, offered to remove the names of the authors from the cover in anticipation of trouble. Instead, Oesterheld insisted that his name remain.

Álvarez's fears were well founded. "Che" was denounced almost as soon as it was published. "It has been drawn in the darkest and crudest shades, typical of passé revolutionary positions," an editorial published on January 10th of that year in *La Nación* read. According to Enrique Breccia, the S.I.E., Argentina's Army intelligence service, raided Álvarez's company, breaking the printing plates and destroying copies of the book. The original pages vanished; for years, Enrique has claimed to have heard that an image from the book's final scene—in which Che orders his executioner to kill him—hung, framed, at the house of President Onganía's Minister of the Interior.

**B**y the beginning of the nineteen-seventies, Juan Perón had been officially absent from Argentina's national politics for fifteen years. But, from his exile, which was mostly spent in Spain, he cultivated relationships with labor organizers and militant groups. Oesterheld's four daughters were active in leftist politics, and eventually they all joined a leftist group called the

Montoneros, which claimed responsibility for several bombings and assassinations and funded itself in part with ransoms extorted by kidnapping executives of multinational companies.

As Oesterheld's daughters grew more involved with the Montoneros, his stories became increasingly militant. An attempted revival of "El Eternauta," in the pages of *Gente*, a class-conscious gossip magazine, was hurriedly cancelled. Undaunted, Oesterheld began working on a leftist alien-invasion strip, "La Guerra de los Antartes," in the magazine *2001*. In his longest-running strip, "Ernie Pike," he now abandoned the Second World War and wrote passionately about the pointless horrors of the American war in Vietnam. "This new stage of my journalistic career is entirely dedicated to the war that, today, in this same moment you're reading me, reader, is tearing up the body, so full of life, of a boy like you," he wrote, in 1971.

Perón emerged from exile, in 1973, buoyed by a fragile alliance between the left and right flanks of the movement that he had founded. The day that he was scheduled to land in Buenos Aires, right-wing Perónists—organized in part by José López Rega, an official who would go on to join Perón's new Administration—opened fire on the leftist Perónists in the crowds assembled to welcome Perón back into the country. Some targeted the Montoneros with sawed-off shotguns from a dais, while the attackers' allies flanked them from sniper positions in trees at the edge of the crowd. Hundreds were injured and at least a dozen people were killed. That same year, López Rega helped found the Argentine Anticommunist Alliance (A.A.A.), a secret police force that travelled in green Ford Falcons to carry out kidnappings and killings.

Oesterheld began contributing to a leftist newspaper aligned with the Montoneros, *Las Noticias*. There, one of his colleagues recruited him to join the organization itself. It was a very dangerous thing to do. But Oesterheld was tiring of allegory: in his latest comic, a new version of "La Guerra de los Antartes," there were no aliens, only state oppression. The strip lasted six

months, until Perón's third wife, Isabel, who had assumed the Presidency following her husband's death, of a heart attack, had the newspaper shut down and its offices raided, in 1974, as part of a crackdown on Perónism's left flank. By then, Oesterheld was at work on a new serial that abandoned metaphor altogether. For the Montoneros' propaganda outlet, *El Descamisado*, he began a grand leftist history of Argentina called "450 Años de Guerra al Imperialismo"—"450 Years of Imperialist War."

Agents of imperialist war were not far from Oesterheld. His family's biographers, Fernanda Nicolini and Alicia Beltrami, write that, on January 22, 1974, an A.A.A. squad locked those working in the *El Descamisado* newsroom in the office of an editor who was on vacation and held mock executions while they interrogated the journalists; the staffers were only saved, ironically, by the federal police, who intervened when they were told that the office was under attack. Oesterheld's artist Leopoldo Durañona said later he was grateful Oesterheld had taken too long writing his latest script. The inconvenience meant Durañona missed his own deadline, and thus hadn't finished drawing the new chapter in their history of imperialist oppression in time to get to the office and be brutalized by the A.A.A.

**I**n 1976, the Argentine armed forces mounted a successful coup d'état, deposing Isabel Perón. Under the direction of the military dictator Jorge Videla, and with the encouragement of the U.S. government, the police and the military formally assumed the role that A.A.A., now dissolved, had played. Official death squads began a campaign of kidnapping and murdering dissenters. Oesterheld registered the escalating terror and violence in "El Eternauta II," a sequel to the original series that ran in the comics magazine *Skorpio*. Oesterheld's new "Eternauta" was not merely political—it was personal. He wrote himself into the adventures as the main character, fighting *Ellos* alongside his narrator and hero, Juan Salvo. If "El Eternauta II" was more directly a chronicle of guerrilla life than its predecessor, it was more fantastical, too. In one episode, the characters travel to a landscape that

looks like Hell itself, where they must strap on mechanical bat wings to escape their tormentors. It was as if its author had stepped out of the real world and onto the page.

On June 19, 1976, after having tea with Elsa, Oesterheld's nineteen-year-old daughter, Beatriz, was kidnapped. On August 7th, her sister Diana, twenty-three years old and pregnant, disappeared. Oesterheld himself managed to avoid capture for eight more months. When he saw his friends, they said he changed his appearance. He grew a long beard. The last time that he saw his "Eternauta" collaborator Francisco Solano López, in early 1977, the pair were in a subway car in Buenos Aires, and Oesterheld was wearing sunglasses to avoid being recognized. Solano wanted to introduce Oesterheld to a friend on the train who worked for the Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores—the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—and Oesterheld asked him not to.

On April 27, 1977, Oesterheld was arrested. His two remaining daughters also fell victim to the junta: Marina, who was thought to be pregnant, vanished. Estela died during a failed kidnapping attempt. In prison, Oesterheld did the only thing that he really knew how to do. "At the moment, 'El Viejo' ['The Old Man'] is with us: he's the author of 'El Eternauta' and 'Sergeant [Kirk],' " Ana María Caruso de Carri, a fellow detainee, wrote, in a letter to her daughters. "Do you remember them? The poor old fellow spends his days writing comic strips, which until now no one has any intention of publishing." That same year, another inmate remembers giving Oesterheld an orange on his fifty-eighth birthday. His final "El Eternauta II" strip was published in *Skorpio* in April, 1978.

When Oesterheld disappeared, he became the kind of global symbol he had helped make of Che Guevara and Evita Perón. In Belgium, Amnesty International published a comics anthology entitled "Pétition—À la Recherche d'Oesterheld et de Tant d'Autres!" ("Petition—In Search of Oesterheld and So Many Others!") The drawing on the cover, by the Belgian

spy-comics star William Vance, showed Oesterheld being taken away at gunpoint. At the 1980 Salone Internazionale dei Comics, a prestigious festival in Lucca, Italy, Oesterheld was given the festival's highest award, the Yellow Kid, named for Richard Outcault's pioneering newspaper comic strip. No one could say for sure whether the award was posthumous.

"El Eternauta" can be spotted on face coverings in photos of Argentines shielding themselves and their neighbors from COVID-19. The image of a face staring out from the diving-mask visor of a makeshift spacesuit, from the original run of "El Eternauta," remains a logo for leftist resistance in Argentina: an affectionately vandalized version of the character could be seen in placards and stencils depicting Néstor Kirchner, the center-left President of Argentina from 2003 to 2007, as "El Nestornauta."

The fictional journalist Ernie Pike, too, survived the junta's brutality. In a 1984-85 serial by the comic-book writer Ricardo Barreiro, the character covers Argentina's war against the British occupation of the Falkland Islands, which Argentines call Las Malvinas. "I have a friend in Buenos Aires who I have not been able to locate," Ernie says to one of his local sources. "A certain Héctor Oesterheld. Do you know him?"

"Shh," the source replies. "It is better not to pronounce some names." ♦

*An earlier version of this article misstated where Eduardo Arias was detained.*