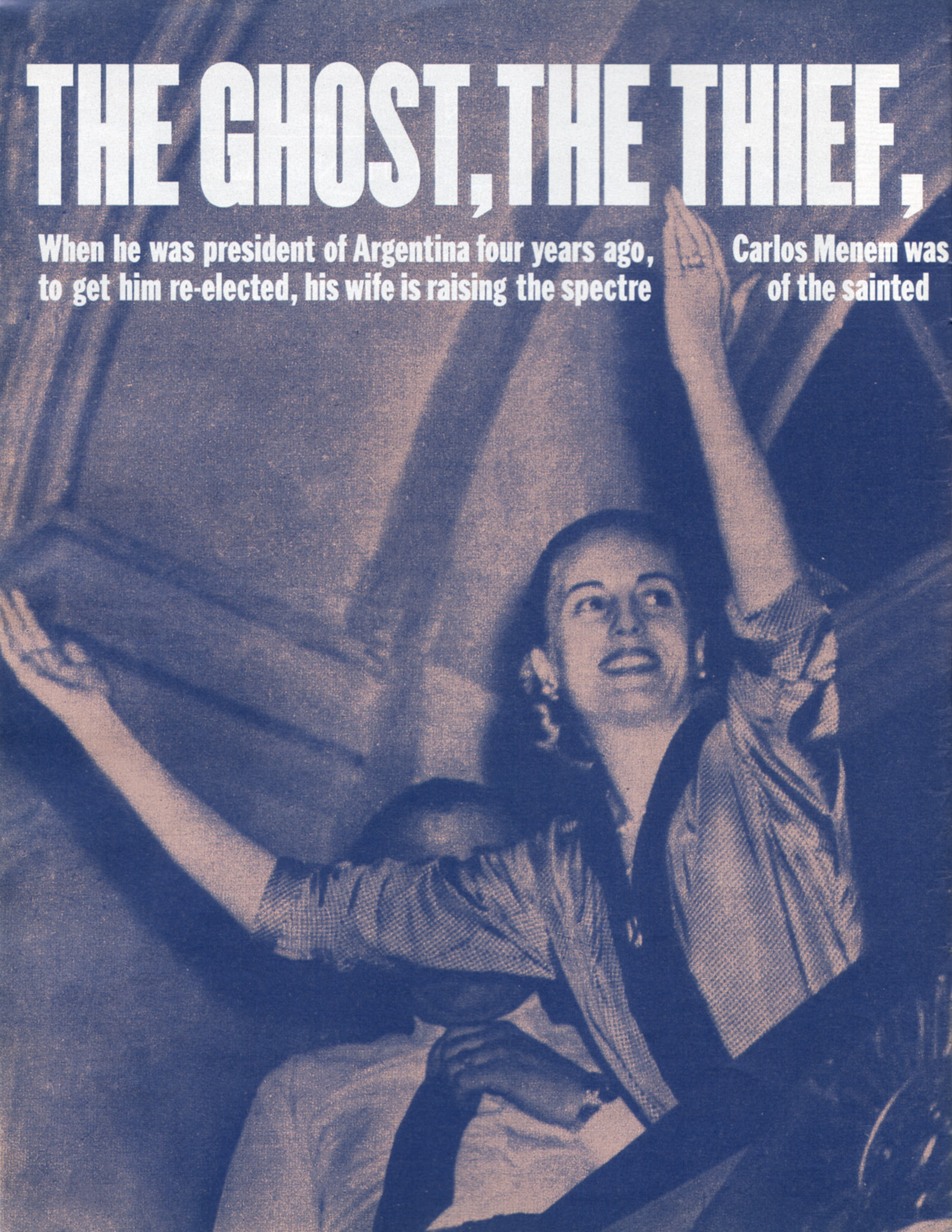


THE GHOST, THE THIEF,

When he was president of Argentina four years ago, to get him re-elected, his wife is raising the spectre

Carlos Menem was of the sainted



HIS WIFE AND HER EGO

accused of plunging his country into turmoil. Now he wants his job back — and Eva Peron. Report by Christine Toomey. Main portrait by Eduardo Longoni





Had her remains not been disturbed so many times that little could shock her spirit, recent events in the country she called her "heart and soul" might make Eva Peron shudder in her grave. After ruthlessly exploiting her memory for their own political ends for months, rival candidates in Argentina's upcoming presidential elections have been banned from making any reference in their campaigns to the woman known by her countrymen simply as *Evita*.

No picture of her can be shown at campaign rallies. No mention can be made of her name. Neither *Evita* nor her husband, General Juan Domingo Peron, can be invoked in any way in the final run-up to elections, scheduled for April 27, the Argentine courts ruled in late February. The ruling came after months of infighting between competing candidates of the Peronist Justicialist party, each claiming to be the true heir to the populist party founded by Juan Peron nearly 60 years ago.

Among them are the two men held most responsible for the country's worst-ever economic and political crisis. They are the former president Carlos Menem, known to many by the nickname *El Chorro* – the Thief – and Adolfo Rodriguez Saa, who, in his brief term as president in December 2001, defaulted on the biggest sovereign debt in history, turning Argentina into an economic pariah state. "Without boasting," Saa said at the time, "I can tell you that nobody has done so much in so little time." After just a week in office, he promptly resigned, complaining that his fellow Peronists had turned against him.

As the country descended into chaos in the months that followed, Argentina's political class became so discredited that they rarely appeared in public for fear of physical abuse. After a revolving-door presidency of six incumbents in six months, elections were called. It was then that Menem and Saa, together with local Peronist party bosses, turned to *Evita* for their political salvation. Both men took to placing her face rather than their own on campaign material – almost as if she, not they, were running for president.

When Menem eventually demanded that the courts grant him sole privilege of using Justicialist symbols – after primary elections designating one official candidate for the party were cancelled – an electoral judge ruled against him. To resolve the conflict, both he and Saa and a third Peronist candidate, Nestor Kirchner, were ordered to form their own parties, with new names and symbols, none of them alluding to the name Peron.

For many the ban came not a moment too soon. Family and friends of Eva Peron despair at the way her image has been manipulated by those now seeking power. "Many are trying to squeeze

what they can out of *Evita*. She is still regarded as a vote winner 50 years after her death," says Cristina Alvarez Rodriguez, *Evita*'s great-niece. "It is good to remember history, not to parody it."

But *Evita* and Juan Peron still hang over these elections like phantoms at a gruesome feast. As candidates jockey for position in the race for power, millions of their countrymen struggle to survive. More than half of the country's 37m people have slipped below the poverty line. Entire families scavenge for food on the streets of the jacaranda- and palm-lined capital. In the poorest northern regions of this country, once known as "the bread basket of Latin America", growing numbers of children are dying of preventable diseases and malnutrition.

Graffiti on a wall near the central Plaza de Mayo reads "*Evita esta enojada*" – *Evita* is angry. The woman who won the hearts of millions through public works, and froze the blood of others with her populist demagoguery, is not the only one.

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Parallels between the fate of Argentina and that of its most famous daughter have always been striking. The country's transformation from a poor, remote backwater to – at one time – seventh-richest country in the world was once reflected in the rise of Eva Peron from struggling provincial actress to one of history's most powerful, glamorous, loved, and loathed women.

Even after her premature death from cancer at the age of 33, the abuse of *Evita*'s corpse mirrored the way successive military dictators and civilian rulers took what they wanted from Argentina and left it ruined.

Buried standing "like a man" at first, as a mark of respect for her courage, *Evita*'s embalmed body was exhumed three years after her death in 1952 by opponents of her husband, who was forced to



Above: Eva Peron, who died in 1952. Right: Carlos Menem, nicknamed *El Chorro* (the Thief), says he is the most genuinely Peronist presidential candidate



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flee the country in a military coup. Fearing her grave would become a rallying point for fanatical followers, they transferred her corpse to a wooden crate marked "radio equipment", and hid it in the home of a military officer. When the officer was denounced as mentally ill for becoming obsessed with it, Evita's body was smuggled out of the country and flown to Italy. There it was reburied in a Milan cemetery under a false name.

Twenty years later, members of the Peronist Youth movement traced the grave. The body was once again exhumed and transported – part of the way in a bakery truck – to Spain, where General Peron was exiled. On opening her casket, Peron discovered the throat of Evita's corpse had been cut. There were mutilations, too, on her breast and forehead. After elaborate restoration, Peron kept his dead wife's mummy in the attic of his villa, where his new wife, Isabel, was said to have conducted ceremonies in an attempt to transfer the spirit of Evita into her own body.

Peron eventually returned to Argentina for a brief third term as president. After his death, Isabel assumed the presidency. Amid great ceremony designed to win her popular support, she had Evita's remains repatriated, and the body of the woman known as "the saint of the poor" was buried in its final resting place: among the tombs of the country's richest families in a central Buenos Aires cemetery. But Isabel's ploy failed. She was deposed by the military shortly afterwards.

Just as they once tampered with Evita's remains, they have continued to tamper with her memory. None more so, some argue, than the second wife of 72-year-old Carlos Menem, the 38-year-old former beauty queen Cecilia Bolocco.

When Bolocco appeared on the front cover of a women's magazine wearing nothing but a rabbit-fur stole – dyed pale blue and white like the Argentine flag and draped across her chest like a presidential sash – there was a public outcry. The young Chilean, who was about to marry Menem, had her blonde hair tied back in a tight chignon – the style favoured by Evita. The pose was considered an insult to both the former first lady's memory and Argentine national dignity.

After legal proceedings were instigated, alleging that Bolocco had insulted the national flag, she made a tearful apology for being "naïve". She had not meant to offend, but had wanted the picture to look as if she were "embracing Argentina", she said. "What I did was done with great respect and love."

Within days of her marriage to Menem in May 2001, the former president was placed under house arrest and charged with sanctioning illegal arms deals involving 6,500 tons of weapons in the 1990s. He and his bride then spent five months under armed guard in a luxury villa on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, where Menem complained he was unable to play golf.

Relaxing in the presidential suite of the Hotel Presidente in Buenos Aires one evening late last December, Bolocco confesses that she was more worried about the charges against her new husband than Menem himself was. ➤➤➤

"While I was worrying about the trial, he was worrying about his beloved Argentina," she says. In an adjoining room, Menem is huddled with a group of advisers, discussing his strategy to regain the presidency. Time is running out. He is too busy plotting to receive me. Instead, Menem leaves his wife, who once studied engineering, and worked as a newsreader for CNN, to field questions.

So what of the fears many harbour that Argentina will descend into further civil unrest if the man who is widely held responsible for the country's problems returns to power? Bolocco unfurls a patient smile and delivers a well-rehearsed response. "If there is anyone who can unite this country it is my husband," says the former Miss Universe with striking features and large hazel eyes. "When the craziness Argentina is going through right now dies down, I believe people will see what he really did for his country. He might have made some mistakes. But what he did, he did for his country. I am moved by his commitment. Argentina is not an easy country to govern. But he has the strength and courage to do it. If he is elected he will have the chance to solve this country's problems."

Just hours before, Bolocco had stood on stage in the sweltering heat of a southern summer to address a crowd of Menem's supporters packed into a sports hall in La Matanza, one of



Menem's wife, Cecilia. Could the couple end the political unrest (right) and economic crises (opposite, bottom) that have plagued Argentina?

she then confides that Evita is her inspiration: "Evita has been dead longer than she was alive. But she inspires me in the way that she never stopped working for others."

Following in the footsteps of the former first lady, who set up hospitals and homes for the poor and took train rides through the country



MENEM BROUGHT HYPERINFLATION UNDER CONTROL, BUT THEN

the poorest neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires. Flanked by a giant poster of Evita and a smaller colour photograph of the former first lady, Bolocco spoke with arms outstretched of the "deep wounds of hunger and violence" stalking Argentina. "I want to help construct a new Argentina," she had thundered, before the roar of the crowd drowned out her words. She was left kissing babies, shaking hands and receiving bouquets of flowers from women in the crowd wearing lapel badges bearing not pictures of Menem or the local Peronist party boss, but the face of Eva Peron.

After fighting her way through the crowd to return to her air-conditioned hotel suite, Bolocco says that such political posturing comes naturally to her after 15 years in the "communications business". In her homeland she is a high-profile television personality, famous for celebrity chat shows, charity telethons and big political interviews. It was when she interviewed the former Argentine president that Menem became besotted with her, besieging her with faxed poetry and serenading her with tango classics.

"I always knew there was a magic between myself and the people," says Bolocco. "In Chile, every show I did had the highest rating... But I am not here to receive applause. I am here to serve. That is why I fell so madly in love with Carlos. He sees his life the same way... My drive is to give meaning to my life." Still drenched with sweat from her stage appearance,

dispensing food, clothing and children's toys, Bolocco has recently set up a foundation in Menem's home province of La Rioja to help poor children and distribute milk to struggling families.

"What brought me to Argentina was love," Bolocco repeats several times. "My first steps in this country were in prison [under house arrest]. If my next steps are to be in the Casa Rosada [the presidential palace], I hope God gives me the same strength that he has given me since the beginning of this relationship," she says, scooping up the small dog at her ankles. "But I want you to understand I am not looking for the Casa Rosada," she concludes earnestly. "If it does not happen, I will still be working in La Rioja and will continue to give everything I have to the people."

It is a virtuoso performance by a seasoned television star. There are those who predict that, if Menem fails in his bid for the presidency, Bolocco will not stick around too long. Her husband's marital track record might prove more sobering without the trappings of influence and power.

The man known as "the playboy of the pampas", who stormed onto the country's political scene sporting large white sideburns and a poncho, threw his first wife, Zulema, out onto the street with the help of an army assault team shortly after being elected president for the first time. In the lead-up to the couple's acrimonious divorce, he was accused of slipping a crocodile into the pool where his wife took her morning dip. Menem was then accused by his ex-wife of

complicity in the death of the couple's only son, Carlitos, who died in a helicopter crash in 1995. Zulema claimed the aircraft was shot down in revenge when one of her husband's shady deals turned sour. Amid such scandal, Menem's political career started to slide. Oblivious to criticism, he continued to indulge his passion for fast cars, beautiful women and champagne, while his daughter Zulemita took on the role of first lady, accompanying him around the world on Tango One, his publicly funded jet.

Although Menem was credited during his first presidential term in the early 1990s with bringing hyperinflation under control by pegging the peso to the dollar and introducing much-needed free-market reforms, during his second term he is accused of bringing the country to its knees. External debt spiralled. Social spending was savagely cut. A flood of foreign imports destroyed domestic industry, and unemployment soared. By the time he left office in 1999 amid allegations of arms deals, drug-trafficking and money-laundering, the country was simmering with violent discontent.

During the next two years, mass demonstrations eventually culminated in a crowd of hundreds of thousands gathering outside the presidential palace. As the furious mob bayed for blood, the then president, Fernando de la Rúa, was whisked from the roof by helicopter, suffering, it is said, from a nervous breakdown and inquiring whether he had soap in his bathroom.



Menem's fortunes only started to revive when he married Bolocco and investigations into the arms-smuggling charges were suspended. But the Syrian-born former leader has since been charged with taking a \$10m bribe to cover up Iran's role in a terrorist bombing that killed 85 people in a Jewish community centre in 1994. After he denied that he had any foreign bank accounts, two were discovered in Switzerland and their assets frozen.

Ramos believes that if Menem succeeds in his bid for the presidency, the latter will re-establish the close alliance he once forged with the United States. Following the election of Luiz Inacio (Lula) da Silva in neighbouring Brazil and violent demonstrations against the leadership of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, Menem would, he thinks, play on fears in Washington of the dangers of a wave of populism sweeping South America, in order to secure generous support from the US and international financial institutions.

simultaneously warning that the country would likely suffer even worse inflation and wage decreases following the elections. For many months the polls bore out Ramos's confidence in Menem. But more recently, Nestor Kirchner, a 53-year-old lawyer and governor of the oil-rich state of Santa Cruz, and his newly formed Victory Front party, has edged slightly ahead in the polls, with 16.9% of the vote. Kirchner has the backing of the interim president, Eduardo Duhalde, a centre-left Peronist and arch rival of Menem, who is to the far right of the party.

Some analysts believe that Carrio could win if pro-Peronist votes are so divided among rival candidates that none makes it through to the second round of voting, or if there is a high voter turnout – unlikely, given voter apathy. Few hold out any real hopes that this election will solve the country's crisis. Still, Carrio remains optimistic. "The only thing certain in this country is uncertainty," says the former university professor as she sits in her

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After Evita secured suffrage for women in 1947, Gil dedicated herself to touring the country registering women voters. Her husband divorced her on the grounds of unreasonable behaviour and left her to fend for their young child alone.

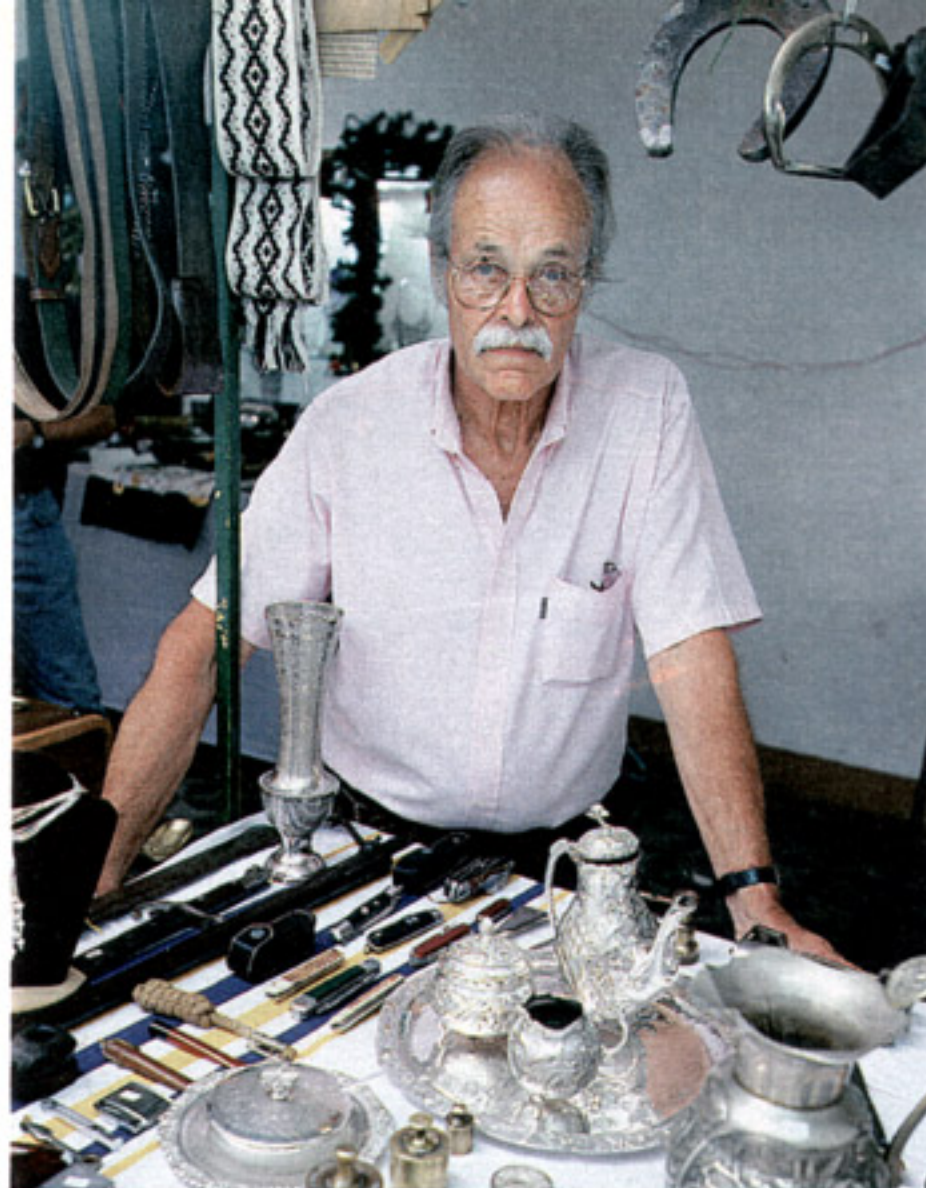
Another who paid a high price for her loyalty to the party in its early days and who now despairs at its fate and, in particular, the manipulation of Evita's memory, is Ana Macri. The diminutive 86-year-old was once director of a halfway house that the former first lady founded for single mothers in a smart district of the capital. When Evita died and General Peron was deposed in a military coup in 1955, Macri was imprisoned for two years as a "dangerous fanatic". She risked an extra five years in jail for keeping a picture of Evita on her cell wall. "Nobody will ever be able to imitate or replicate the extraordinary achievements ➤➤➤→



of Eva Peron. They don't even seem to understand what she stood for," says Macri, with a passion and energy that belie her years.

Evita's niece agrees. "Evita was a very complex person," says Cristina Alvarez Rodriguez, the director of a new museum honouring her aunt on the site of the former halfway house. Many accused Evita of double standards for indulging a passion for fine clothes and jewels and courting acceptance by high society – she was ostracised as a child for being illegitimate – while at the same time painting herself as the champion of the poor. "There were many who hated her. But her driving force was social justice. She did not want others to suffer as she had as a child," says Rodriguez, 34, who is regularly approached to endorse political candidates. "I am not convinced by any of them. Argentina needs new blood in its political veins. Fresh faces. New people."

Marcos Aguinis, the former culture secretary and the author of a book entitled *The Atrocious Enchantment of Being Argentine*, believes the roots of the country's current crisis run deep – to its colonial past. "Spain's autocratic and corrupt rule left a legacy of total disrespect for the law." This country has been ruled by one exploitative clique after another, says Aguinis. "Argentina is a very contradictory country, a country full of paradoxes. It is a country of enormous potential, and yet we are our own worst enemy."



Carlos Amesgil Allende, a former advertising agency director, is reduced to selling heirlooms

each other for help rather than expect assistance from any formal authority. The streets of Argentina's capital, once referred to as "the Paris of the South", now teem with beggars, the homeless and a new breed of desperate entrepreneurs named *cartoneros* – literally "paper people". Just before midnight, the platforms of two train stations in the most affluent suburbs of Buenos Aires – Belgrano and Palermo

bank clerk and setting herself alight. Another was watched by millions on television, when a man walked into a broadcasting station saying he wanted to make a protest about his inability to pay his debts. The father of two then put a gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

So great are the numbers now wishing to leave the country, it is almost impossible for a would-be emigrant to get an appointment at the consular section of the embassy of either Spain or Italy, where the majority of their forefathers originated, before spring 2005.

"It is very painful and frustrating to think that so many young people have lost hope in this country," says Carlos Amesgil, the 64-year-old former director of one of the country's most successful advertising agencies. These days, Amesgil is reduced to selling his family's heirlooms at a Sunday market in the 16th-century San Ramon Nonato convent, where Eva Peron established her first office dispensing social aid to the poor in 1946. Two of Amesgil's six children already live abroad and two more now want to emigrate.

"Evita and Juan Peron incited much class hatred in this country and became dangerous demagogues. But they did a lot of good too," says Amesgil, who helps run a foundation aimed at educating young people about the history and politics of Argentina. "They were

MANY ARE SO SADDLED WITH DEBT, THEY SEE NO ESCAPE

Others blame the country's last brutal military dictatorship for the current troubles. During this 1976–83 "dirty war", 30,000 political activists, union leaders and university students "disappeared" – many of them tossed alive from planes into the River Plate that forms Argentina's natural border with Uruguay. "They were the brightest of their generation," says Dardo Tumas, a Buenos Aires psychoanalyst who argues that Argentina has never faced up to its past. "The very people who could have provided new leadership in this country were systematically killed."

"We are ruled by a geriatric political class," says Graciela Romer, a leading political analyst. "Traditionally we have had a bipartisan system of Peronists versus radicals. Neither allow in new blood. Both are busy eating their own. We are in a process of change, which will eventually produce a new political system. But if the change does not come soon, we will confront an even more grave situation than we face now."

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Such political infighting is far removed from the everyday reality of most Argentines battling to make ends meet. So disillusioned are most with the country's ruling elite that thousands of local people's assemblies have sprung up around the country under the unifying motto "*Que se vayan todos*" – "Get rid of them all."

Crime has soared. Kidnapping and carjacking are now endemic. Those who can, turn to

– become magnets for these *cartoneros*.

Struggling up the cobbled streets towards each station, hundreds of men, women and children haul their giant trolleys loaded with paper, cardboard, tins and bottles they have scavenged from the rubbish bins of the wealthy. Huddled in rags, the miserable crowd waits for the arrival of a train that has been emptied of seats, and from which others waiting on the platform avert their gaze. This train is laid on by the city each night to take the *cartoneros* to a recycling plant in a distant suburb. It is called *el tren blanco* – the blank train – and, in the eyes of many in society, its passengers have ceased to exist.

It was once the size of its middle class that distinguished Argentina from other countries in Latin America, where a yawning gap between the wealthy few and the struggling masses is the norm. But the imposition of a freeze on personal bank savings, followed by 70% devaluation, which prompted the first spontaneous mass demonstrations leading to the fall of Fernando de la Rúa's government in December 2001, has left the country's cultured, once-prosperous middle class struggling to keep their heads above water. Average monthly salaries have now dropped from £300 to £100 – less than half those in Mexico, Uruguay and Chile. Many are now so saddled with debt they see no escape.

Two very public suicides in the past 12 months have left the nation shocked. One involved a woman dousing herself with alcohol in front of a

not ashamed to be nationalists. Now, if you say that you're a nationalist, people think you are a fascist. We must not be afraid to build a new sense of national pride."

Those looking for a more temporary form of escape find some solace in the country's most traditional diversion – tango. While many restaurants and theatres have closed as a result of the crisis, the number of *milongas*, or dance salons, in Buenos Aires has continued to grow. This is partly in response to a growing demand from tourists. But aficionados say the price of a weekly ticket to a night of tango is the last luxury many will willingly give up.

But there are plenty of reminders here, too, of the country's grinding reality. In addition to the traditional songs reflecting a national psyche steeped in nostalgia for good times past, the haunting sound of the *bandoneon* now accompanies lyrics about the trials of modern Argentina. "The future lies in the way our graves look," one laments. "Once ringed with roses, they are now carpets of cardboard."

One of Argentina's most revered novelists, Tomas Eloy Martinez, once described his fellow countrymen as "cadaver cultists". But amid the tumbledown tombs of Recoleta cemetery, where Eva Peron's remains were finally laid to rest, even her ornate mausoleum now stands largely neglected by all but a few curious tourists who take a snapshot of themselves beside its heavy bronze gates and quickly leave ■