

A black and white close-up portrait of Isabel Perón. She is looking slightly to the left of the camera with a serious expression. Her hair is styled in a short, dark, wavy bob. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights on her face and deep shadows in the background.

# BLACK MAC

*Isabel Perón's Tango Argentino*

**While she ruled Argentina after the death of her husband, Juan, Isabel Perón turned a sorcerer into her most trusted adviser, ruined the economy, and handed over the country to left-wing insurgents and right-wing death squads. After being forced out of office thirteen years ago, Isabel—the self-styled reincarnation of the general's beloved first wife, Evita—has returned from exile, hoping to be the "mother of all Peronists." But as ELIZABETH HANLY reports, time is not on her side.**

# CWOMAN

Isabel Perón strode into Buenos Aires's Ezeiza Airport last February. She had just come from spending eight years in self-imposed exile in Madrid, years of bitter silence, of devotion to the church and perhaps the black magic for which she was once notorious. Before her exile, there had been her two brief years as president of Argentina, until she was deposed in 1976, and then the long years under house arrest. Now she was back.

Isabel had returned to Argentina, she said, "to smell Argentine flowers and eat Argentine fruit." This slight woman with a lewd mouth had come home to write her memoirs and to be "the mother of all Peronists." When journalists pressed her for further explanations, she stepped away with a little "Behave yourself, boys and girls." Her hands were held in fists.

Isabel was the third wife of the legendary Argentine president Juan Perón, who had died in July 1974 at the age of 79. In her own reign as president, she had never attained the glory of her husband or the mythical status of his second wife, Eva Duarte, the "Spiritual Leader of the Nation." Isabel wanted to try again. Certainly, she returned just as Peronism, the coalition movement that bears her husband's name, was once more sweeping the nation. But she would find that she still could not supplant her long-dead rival, Evita, but could merely exist as a different, less mythic chapter. She still creates electricity, but at present she carries a negative charge, so that she and her name must be packaged gingerly for use by ascendant leaders, although use her they will.

Leaders come and go in Argentina, but the real power in this country is always shifting. Isabel, whose fortunes have risen and fallen but whose essence endures, is a metaphor for the Argentine politician and the country's strange psyche. In Argentina, reality exists in the subtext.

When she returned, the presidential campaign was in high gear. Carlos Menem, the Peronist candidate, was campaigning against the Radical Party, Argentina's centrists. He was leaning on the very themes Juan Perón had used, saying that he was one with the poor and could create a united, independent Argentina.

Inside tango bars people talked, and the city was once more wrapped in the smiles of the late general, three-term president of Argentina. His phrases, his orders were scrawled in

thick, black paint across the filigreed buildings on wide boulevards and on the walls of legions of squat houses, most of them bathed in jasmine.

"Carlos Menem is the second Perón," whispered old men in a tango bar. "The general is coming back."

In this festival of Peronism, Evita, especially, was everywhere. After all, hadn't she promised her people, "I'll return and I'll be millions"? At certain peak moments, as the candidate mixed his language with Perón's, as he waved like Perón,

as his face took on all the suffering of the anointed sun, the cheering became a chant, the chant bounding off those strange, flat Peronist drums: "*Evita, Evita, Evita es presente. Se siente, se siente, Evita es presente.*" At such moments the candidate's wife, Zulema, rumored to have had plastic surgery to resemble Evita, wiped the sweat from her husband's brow.

Isabel, the only living Perón, spent her first few days in Buenos Aires in poor neighborhoods, where she still symbolized the promises made by Juan and Evita to frenzied crowds more than forty years ago. The neighborhood walking tours lasted for hours, with Isabel always "fresh as lettuce" in her trademark couture slutties. Women greeted her with their children—and their embraces, inviting her into their homes for the ubiquitous Argentine coffee.

But then there was silence. She didn't appear at a single political rally throughout the presidential campaign, not even those in arid La Rioja, the province of small towns where both she and Menem were born. No Peronist even mentioned her name.

Officially, Menem explained that Isabel, 58, had "lost her taste" for politics after she was ousted by a military coup in 1976. The truth is that Isabel approached him during the campaign, offering help, and was told that "La Perona loves votes." And no doubt, she does. "Argentina needs to hate Isabel," says a friend. "They believe that way they'd be loving Evita more."

Popular religion is much closer to the heart of Argentina than orthodox Catholicism. This is a country with messianic drive aplenty and no time for tolerance or shades of gray. To the people, Evita was Argentina's eternal flame. "Fanaticism is the wisdom of the spirit," she'd scream into crowds. "Perón or death."

Long, blond, with a wicked sensuality, she had a smile that pardoned anything but betrayal of "*Mi general.*" She even made herself up for appearances from her deathbed, when her body was racked with cancer. As Diana Vreeland says in *Illare*, a friend of hers questioned the thick garish makeup and Evita replied, "I don't give a damn what you

think or what anyone else thinks. Twenty million people on film will think I'm a ravine, tearing beauty. This is for my husband." Always the general's picture was in view. She was the perfect media icon, the perfect suffering saint. She helped Perón create the glory years during his first presidency, from 1946 to 1955, working—sometimes twenty hours in a day—helping the poor. When she died in 1953, a labor union petitioned the Vatican for her canonization.

Isabel is another interpretation of Juan Perón. It was she who watched over the movement when it shattered into pieces. She is the shadow Argentines would like to forget. Tired and tiny, Isabel never laughed. Called "the little white and who devoured all those closest to Perón" by one of Perón's inner circle, she took up with the general during his darkest days after he was deposed in 1955 and eventually ruled over him with the help of her son-in-law, José López Rega. When he returned to the presidency in 1973, she scrambled her way into the vice presidency and succeeded him after his death, presiding "in the plenitude of my power" over a country verging on chaos. Hardly a shrewd judge of character, committed to no political or ethical stance, she let herself be dazzled by whatever scheme played into her ambition. She considered herself forever the innocent, forever betrayed.

Those who know her best explain it's because of Evita that Isabel's come home. Evita was the good wife, Isabel the bad one. With the Peronists coming into their own again in Argentina, she wants to make a trade with the memory of the other wife. Even as that old rivalry spurs her on, she seems ever more alone and estranged from her people and the Peronist movement. Yet she comes back hoping to regain her place and feast again on the power that was once hers as president from 1974 to 1976. La Señora has been both witness to and protagonist of a strange and volatile history.

It has become part of the vast Argentine psyche that Perón had more than one wife, Peronism more than one face, and that Isabel will forever shadow-hunt with the spirit of Evita. Still, she had other reasons to return.

Those who delight in deprecating Isabel are sure the Radicals engineered by return as a way to defeat Menem, who nonetheless was elected in May 1989. Inflation had reached astronomical level. Consumer prices rose 1,400 percent from June 1988 to June 1989, prices earlier in 1989 were changing hourly. Perón himself had set the stage for this debacle, creating a system where the state subsidized nearly everything, both public and private. The Radical Party hoped the general's widow would splinter the Peronist coalition, divide the left from the right. Early in the campaign, a Radical Party government official, Enrique Noviglia, went to see Isabel in Spain.

La Perona had been lonely in Madrid. The man who had been at her side, a ex-Gestapo collaborator, Miko Bojitch had died a year before. The rounds of golf, of Mass, the visits to the Carmelites, the occasional state dinner, assemblies in Marbella on the Costa del Sol and Mallorca were no longer enough.

Besides, La Señora had financial troubles she could no longer ignore. Evita had died intestate and Evita's mother, allegedly under duress, had signed over to Juan Perón her rights to Evita's jewels and property, estimated to be worth \$1 million. She brought a lawsuit to retrieve a portion of the estate.

By the time the supreme court in Argentina ruled in 1986 that Perón had defrauded the family of the "Spiritual Leader of the Nation," the estate was in Isabel's hands. She still owes Evita's sisters some \$3 million. Upset by the public spectacle, the sisters have gone into seclusion, refusing to admit even their connection.

La Perona pleads poverty. San Vicente, her *quinta* in the country; Gaspar Campos, her house in Buenos Aires; and her home in Puerto de Hierros, on the outskirts of Madrid, have all been confiscated by the courts in partial payment of her debts. But pity is proudly unnecessary. A Peronist who has known her since she met the general estimates her fortune at between \$10 million and \$12 million. He adds that the Argentine government some years ago awarded her approximately the amount she owes Evita's sisters as reparation for her five years as a political prisoner.

Isabel claims that her former attorney, Julio Arriolo—young, burly, and charmingly mustached—stole the jewels. He says that La Perona is trying to create the illusion of poverty “and I don’t relish being the fall guy.” Still, he says, “Yes, I’d work again for her. I’m fascinated by power.” Not even he can dismiss the Perón name.

Isabel craves that sort of adulation. But she sent most of her friends and supporters packing, including Jorge Antonio, a multimillionaire who gave the general money during his exile from 1955 to 1973. Another intimate, Amelia Alvarez, now says she would be grateful “never to hear of La Perona again.” And Nelida de Marco, once perhaps Isabel’s closest confidante, now makes a business out of selling her reminiscences of Isabel and the general.

“Power makes its own demands,” explains one who remains loyal. “I will be here when La Señora sees fit to see me.”

Worse than the alienation of her friends, Isabel has provoked the animosity of the populace. Many have not forgotten that when she was president her sorcerer stood behind her, mouthing the words just ahead of her. Or that during her brief administration, leftist guerrillas and right-wing death squads took over Argentina with their shoot-outs, bombings, and kidnappings.

“She destroyed the social fabric of Argentina as we had known it,” insists a Peronist militant. “The mother of all Peronists? She would discredit even an evil stepmother.”

The middle class, playing on her shrill and fast-forwarded voice, calls her “Mickey Mouse,” to guard against the horror. They forget that this is Perón’s legacy. “It is in the midst of confusion that I handle myself best,” he once said. “If none exists one must create it.”

The aristocracy classifies Isabel as one of Perón’s grade B *artistas* and their hate is simple: Her husband unionized workers, raised wages, created jobs, and weakened the agricultural oligarchy.

Only the very poor in Argentina, Perón’s *descamisados* (the shirtless ones), some of them at least, have never stopped loving Isabel. Only for them, Isabel is Evita. One old woman prays every night that Isabel will stay in Argen-

tina. “She cared about us as Evita did. She wanted to help us as Evita did. Evil men wouldn’t allow it.”

But the prayers of the poor aren’t always enough to sustain Isabel. At times, an estranged but stalwart friend recalls, “Isabel would sit with me and cry, ‘I can’t go on. Argentina wants too much from me.’” Occasionally she dreamed of leaving her name behind and opening a beauty salon.

Even La Señora’s faith in the spirits is at times scant comfort. A few weeks after Isabel’s return to Buenos Aires, she was hospitalized. Press releases described a minor cardiac problem. Everyone with access to her doctors or her advisers called it deep, even suicidal, depression. Even with the human-hair necklace she allegedly wore, she had lost strength. This wasn’t the first time there was talk of Isabel and suicide. She was encouraged to return to Spain. But there were her political commitments. Her responsibilities. She said she couldn’t leave.

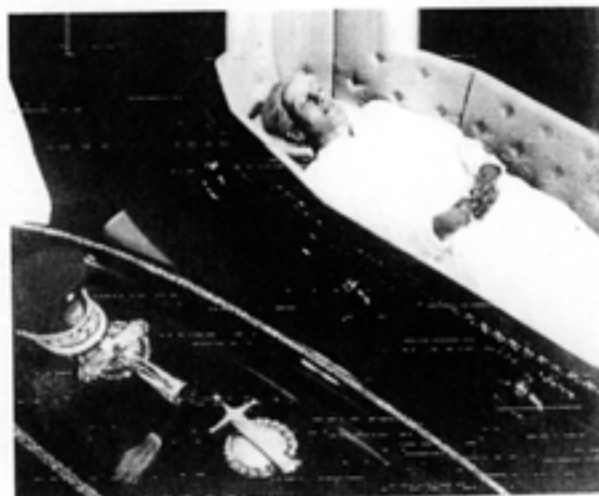
**W**hen she met General Juan Perón in 1955, Isabel was a skinny young dancer, a member of a dance troupe winding its way through Latin American backwaters.

The big man was living in exile in Panama. Soon even his name would be illegal in Argentina. Perón had swept into power in 1945 after the poor he had organized—hundreds of thousands—streamed through the streets in spontaneous outcry. Argentina had never seen anything like it. Ten years later, in 1955, the military ousted “the Number One Worker” in a coup supported by the old Argentine status quo. Under Perón, life had become nearly impossible for all but loyal Peronists. He had impeached the supreme court, taken over the press, burned churches. Acclaimed writer Jorge Luis Borges, critical of Perón, had been made a chicken inspector.

Perón had no crowds to play to in Panama City. He was living a quiet life, writing his latest apologia and pursuing his pleasure. Isabel was appearing at a nightclub called Happy Land. Many Argentines believe Roberto Galan intro-



Above: A 1973 Peronist rally in Buenos Aires. Below: The open casket of Evita Perón next to Juan Perón’s closed coffin, in 1974



duced the pair. (A tango-tough Pat Sajak who once worked the seemier side of the nightclub scene, Galan now has a weekly TV show entitled *I Want To Marry, and You?* He customarily gives the winning couples a split-level in Los Angeles.)

Evita had burned her way into Perón’s life, whispering as they met, “My general, thank you for existing.” Isabel had a quieter way. Aware that Perón had been warned against poison, she asked if she might taste his food.

Evita had been seen on the arms of myriad captains and colonels—Onassis, among many, had claimed she had been a





**You're No Evita:** Above, Juan Perón, Argentina's president, with Isabel, his vice president and wife, in 1973. Below, President Isabel Perón with her minister of social welfare and personal sorcerer, José López Rega, in 1974. During cabinet meetings, López Rega talked of "primordial fluids," while Isabel kept a stack of fashion magazines by her side



call girl. But Isabel, according to Galán and others, did not have the slightest sex appeal. She took her entertaining seriously and had studied for years at certain sincere if not excellent dance studios in Buenos Aires. Vulnerable, she needed protection, and Perón needed someone to make him feel strong again.

When the troupe moved on, Isabel stayed behind. The universe blessed the decision, or so it seemed after the plane carrying the rest of the performers crashed, killing everyone on board. Isabel had become the general's private secretary. "It wasn't love," she told an

intimate many years later. "It was more than love." "She called it magic," he said, "something like walking into the magical center of the world."

She smoothly disposed of Perón's existing flame, an American teenager from Chicago. She attended to the thousand tiny comforts that would make her indispensable. There were always caramels in his pockets. One of his entourage called her "a full-service woman."

The couple traveled from one country to another looking for sanctuary. They were caught in a shoot-out in 1958, during Venezuela's revolution. They next went to Santo Domingo, where Perón had time to teach Isabel how to ride a motor scooter, before Rafael Trujillo's demise. Finally, in 1960, they settled in Franco's Madrid. There, amid plots and counterplots, plans for the general's return began in earnest.

Isabel, it is estimated, served some 150,000 cups of coffee to the gentlemen who visited Perón in Madrid. Not only Peronists but several of the great men of a generation stopped by: de Gaulle, Adenauer, Nasser. A young Arab cadet training nearby, Mu'ammarr Qaddafi, came, too. Peronists claim it was Perón who first spoke of the Third World. It was he who invented petrodollars.

Isabel made herself invisible at these gatherings. But Perón called her "a very good student indeed." The general had a microphone hidden in a lamp switch. When he was having a private meeting and wanted Peronists in another room to hear, or perhaps Isabel—in the kitchen frying crullers with the generalissimo's sister, her friend Pilar Franco—the switch would go on. Isabel was learning something of the master juggler's ways.

She frequented the theater and the ballet, and walked in Madrid's Plaza Evita wearing big Audrey Hepburn hats and dark glasses. By some accounts, she was quite an autograph hound. Occasionally Isabel would make Perón macrobiotic food, which he hated, and he would tell her how pretty it was, how much more colorful than an Argentine steak.

But she wasn't yet his wife. The general often spoke of Evita in the present tense, oblivious to the tears on Isabel's face. "Evita wouldn't have thought that way," he chided her when they quar-

reled. Their home was rich with her photos. And to make everything worse, his enemies had Evita's embalmed corpse.

One of Perón's immediate successors, General Pedro Aramburu, had stolen her body so there would be no Peronist rallying ground; no Peronist saints. For years the generals kept the body in transit around Argentina and Italy as if it were a top secret military prize. At one point Evita's body was left overnight in a truck in Buenos Aires; in the morning the vehicle was ringed in candles and flowers.

In spite of Evita's undying spectre, Isabel pleaded with one of Perón's friends to talk the general into marrying her. Finally, after six years of unsanctified union, Franco persuaded Perón. According to Pilar Franco, the generalissimo through a representative told the general in 1961, "You don't live with your secretary in my Spain."

Still lonely, Isabel returned to her spiritualist past. Much of Argentina dabbles in mysticism, but she is more fervent than most. She directed her passion toward a spiritualist, José Cresto, whom she had adopted when as a girl things were difficult at home. Although Don Cresto didn't believe in bathing and had a well-ripened odor, Isabel welcomed him in Madrid. Sometimes the pair would wander up and down the stairs of Isabel's home, carrying candelabras, seeking communion with Don Cresto's wife, the deceased Doña Isabel.

Isabel's glittering hopes for herself were fed—if not awakened—when Perón sent Isabel to Argentina in 1965 to remind Argentines that Perón was still Perón. She came back muttering about "the force." She had encountered José López Rega, a former policeman and crooner, a bulky little man with no neck and pale lizard eyes. He looked at her hard, then whispered, "I am the messenger of God." Eventually he would publicly state, "Isabel didn't exist. I created Isabel." He described himself as a Mason, a Theosophist, a Rosicrucian, an expert in alchemy and the cabala. He claimed he had coauthored a book with the archangel Gabriel. Now he promised Isabel that he would make her Evita and better. She took him home to Spain.

"I'll see better than a president. I'll see

like an empress," Isabel told a friend.

López Rega began teaching her the correspondence between scents, musical notes, colors, stones, signs of the zodiac, and certain syllables. At first he was court jester to Perón. After a time he was sleeping at the foot of his bed. He said he was digesting Perón's food for him. He claimed Perón had died—and that he had resurrected him. Perón was a pharaoh, he said. Eventually López Rega had absolute control over the information and persons the general received.

Pilar Franco recalls that López Rega and Isabel would manipulate Perón, refusing to speak with him meal after meal, or worse, leaving him alone to the solitude Perón feared most. According to Argentina's *Somos* magazine, López Rega even gave Perón herbs that made his body swell with fluid until the big man would agree to their proposals. But still the general would embrace them. "You're my family," he'd say of Isabel and López Rega.

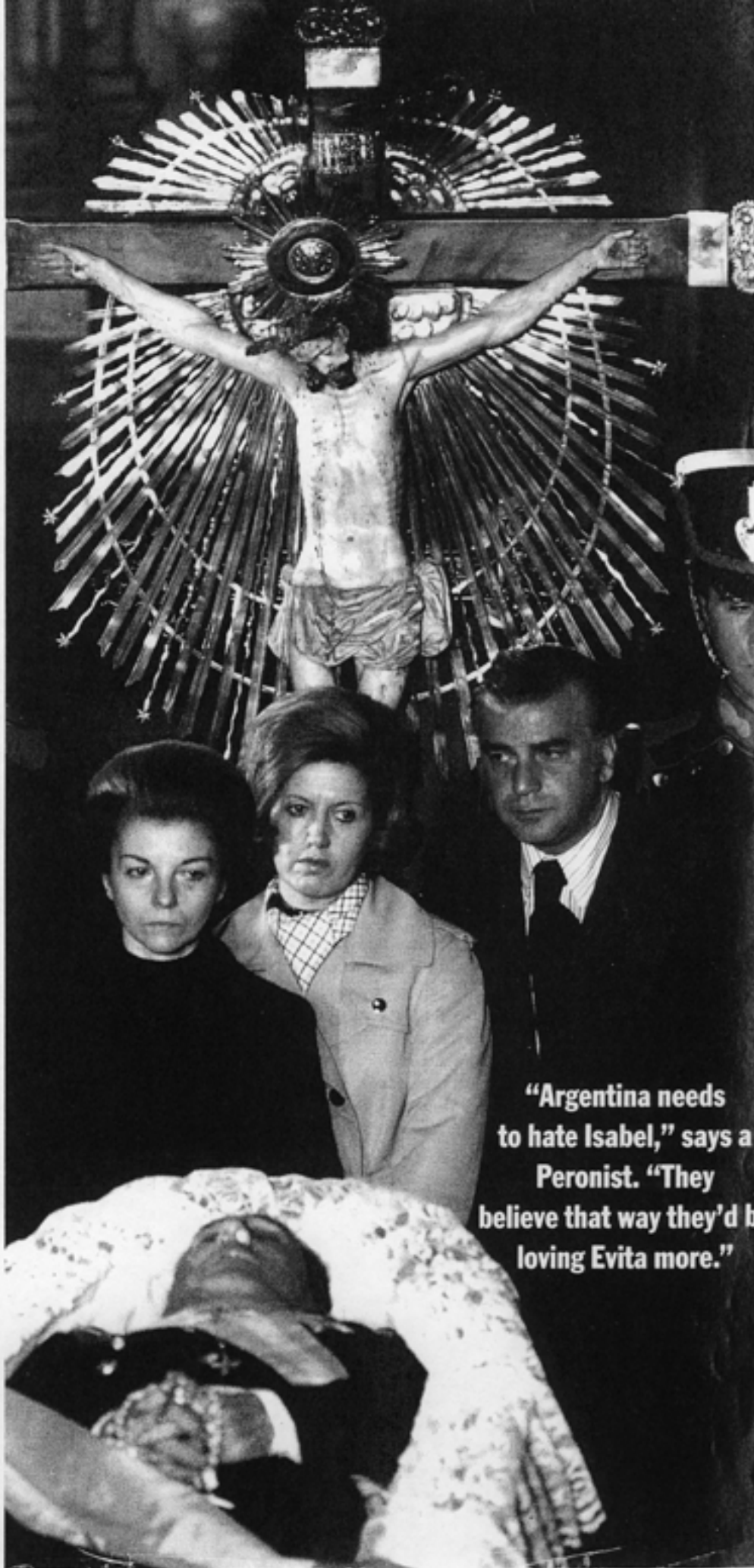
In 1971 the duo saw a way to help the general get Evita's body. She had been dead nearly twenty years. On a trip to Rome, they met a whisper of a man with the voice of a woman: Licio Gelli, a banker who was also the head of P2, a right-wing mafia group with messianic ambitions to destroy Communism and create power bases in the Third World, especially in Latin America.

Soon Gelli, whose power ties included links to the Vatican, was talking directly with Perón. "I'll have Evita at Puerto de Hierro in two days," he promised. Historian Pavon Pereyra, also present at the meeting, muttered that Gelli would never be able to get the body across borders—even if he could find it. "A man has power when borders don't exist for him," was Perón's reply.

The corpse arrived in Madrid on time. (The Argentine government had by now expressed a willingness to return the body.) Evita was broken—not only her nose, as press reports had indicated, but the whole body. Large slices of her breasts had been removed by her enemies, who wanted to verify that her flesh was human.

The Peróns called in Dr. Pedro Ara. He had preserved

Isabel, left, at Perón's funeral in July 1974. She succeeded to the presidency soon after



**"Argentina needs to hate Isabel," says a Peronist. "They believe that way they'd be loving Evita more."**

Perón and worked on Evita's corpse after her death. He stayed in Madrid for months. When finally Evita was restored, López Rega dressed Isabel and Evita in white. Then he began the commingling—of the hair, the feet, the hands of Isabel and Evita. Evita's sisters bore witness. Stunned, they left immediately.

Isabel created a sanctuary for Evita on an upper floor of the house, where she and López Rega spent endless hours trying to raise her spirit. On occasion, Isabel slept atop Evita, rising to attend Mass in the morning. Perón may not have been aware of the extent of the relationship between the two wives, but almost daily he went with Isabel and López Rega to pray by Evita's body. Sometimes he sat alone with her and cried.

By the time Isabel and the general returned to Buenos Aires in June 1973, she probably believed "the force" was with her. After years of proscription, a Peronist, Hector Campora, had become president and was waiting for the general before resigning. In no other country, at least in modern history, has a dictator-savior returned after so many years of exile. Perhaps Isabel had been right about Perón's magic. Except the general was old. He was sick. He had only a handful of lucid hours each day. He was never more in the hands of López Rega the sorcerer.

At López Rega's urging, Perón allowed Gelli to oversee his cabinet appointments. Perón decorated Gelli and opened Argentina to the mafioso's business. López Rega is also held responsible for sliding Isabel into the vice presidency. Some, however, defend the decision, explaining that Perón shrewdly chose Isabel to avoid favoring either the left or the right, which he always kept precariously balanced.

Perón probably never intended to leave the presidency to Isabel. A few months before his death in 1974, he tried unsuccessfully to find a constitutional way for his grand old Radical adversary, Ricardo Balbín, to finish his term, according to Enrique Vanoli, the late Balbín's former aide.

Not long afterwards the skinny dancer with prying eyebrows was wearing a long black cape and a presi-

dential sash. She was crying while she stood there, a grand inquisitor facing her people. El Greco might have painted it. Isabel Perón becoming the first woman president in the New World.

Loyalists say Isabel never wanted the presidency, but understood "the weight that went with the grandeur of the name Perón." Perón's friends say she was drunk with power. Certainly, Isabel loved the pomp, the reviewing of troops, the receptions. She loved Her Custodial Guard, pledged to defend La Presidenta to the death, warning her in a whisper that she had a run in her stocking.

And Isabel loved the opportunity to outdo Evita, who had never been more than Perón's first lady. But she abdicated her power to López Rega's blue magic. Chaos reigned. In her early speeches in 1975 Isabel talked of holding Perón in one arm, Evita in the other. But there were thirty-six changes in her cabinet during her twenty-one months of office. During cabinet meetings, her minister of social welfare, López Rega, talked of primordial universal fluids. He would walk to the window, then return to the group and discuss the suggestions the fluids had given him. Sometimes Isabel would have a stack of Spanish fashion magazines at her side.

Isabel's ministers created mini-fiefdoms. She tried to command their respect, asking, "You think I have this head only to hold up my curls?" Her queries made their way to the street.

Civil war had taken hold of Argentina. The armed left flourished. To break the insurgents, Isabel established the most extensive network of concentration camps in Argentina's history. But she didn't stop the violence. Nor could Isabel squelch the Triple A, Argentina's network of death squads. A key adviser insists Isabel couldn't pinpoint their source. In fact, López Rega was the source—God's messenger against the Communist threat.

He kept a private arsenal in the basement of his Ministry of Social Welfare. His paranoia grew with every provocation. When a group of handicapped Peronists came to the Casa Rosada—the "Rose House," Argentina's presidential

manseion—López Rega almost destroyed their wheelchairs and false limbs looking for weapons.

Some say López Rega beat La Señora. Some say he was the only person she ever trusted. When she'd had enough, when she was distressed, she'd close down. Only López Rega could reach her then.

The Peronist unions gave her the harshest time they had given any Peronist. Strikes were epidemic. (No one, it seemed, had the imagination to foresee how much worse the economy would get, post Isabel.)

Finally in 1975 the military forced López Rega out. Afterward, during cabinet meetings Isabel would stand in corners trying to reverse guidance from his spirit. On an occasional evening, she would relax with her friend, Carlos Menem, then governor of La Rioja, at Club Kim, where entertainers were only teachers. Menem was one of those who spoke of reflecting La Señora after she served the balance of Perón's term.

But her depressions grew worse. One newspaper even ran a suicide story. A journalist recalls "the sensation that there was no government at all." And then she was out.

The night of the coup, March 24, 1976, her guards didn't fire a single shot in her defense. Isabel, upon capture, whimpered that she had no clothes to wear. Yet she promised her captors: "The people will rise up to free me. Rivers of blood will flow." A handful of women did protest, and then nothing.

Isabel's defenders claim that the military would have freed her at once had she resigned. She refused to surrender her moral authority. But Isabel did resign. It's in a letter that she wrote within days of her arrest. The military kept her anyway, on charges of misappropriating funds. La Peróna had taken money, but returned it just a few days later, realizing she had been set up.

"She felt abandoned by everybody," says someone intimate with the situation. The commander who organized the first phase of her detention remembers a letter. "Again and again she had written, 'God has not abandoned me' in a demented hand. There was a whole page of it." (López Rega, meanwhile,



was on the run in Europe.)

Isabel's captivity was just as bizarre, as idiosyncratic as her presidency. At a dinner party during her confinement the prosecution and the defense were guests. A young officer in charge of Isabel was there, too. Later he would be court-martialed for being her lover. "Our conversation consisted mostly of who knew whom; who has been with whom at what party," according to an attorney. "La Señora presided over us all. She might have been Amalita Fortabat."

"Evita wouldn't have given her captors a moment's peace," a Peronist leader stated. "She would have sat on a stool and refused to eat. She would have made them kill her."

But Isabel spent most of her detention knitting scarves for her captors. According to that stalwart friend, "She was willing to take whatever Argentina would exact of her." Occasionally, when she was low, the guards would allow in the poodles that had been the general's pride and joy.

Finally, on July 6, 1981, with the junta's strength waning, Isabel was released. Seventy-two hours later a party of several friends she no longer receives were toasting her on a plane to Madrid. In the following days she bought several dozen pairs of shoes.

**N**ow eight years later, Isabel has come home to a new Peronist chaos. Carlos Menem, her old friend, won the election last May. Like Perón, he has a reputation for talking from both sides of his mouth. During the campaign he spoke of taking back the Falklands with blood. A few days later it was with love. He is rumored to have a cocaine habit, yet promises the death penalty to drug dealers. He voted against a law that would permit divorce although he once filed a formal separation agreement himself.

During the general's first term, Argentina had the world's fifth largest GNP; there was so much gold bullion Perón talked of tripping over it. Today, Carlos Menem faces an economy based almost entirely on currency speculation, one that has been compared to the "wheelbarrow economy" of Germany after the First World War. He also faces a

military so divided that Argentina again may be on the brink of civil war. Yet he talks of that old Peronist dream, a united Latin America.

Menem has said, "I don't have a political career; I have a political destiny." Like the Peróns, the new president has fallen back on a messianic presence, as if that will be enough to cure Argentina's ills. He has asked his people to be half-human, half-tiger, as he implemented a painful austerity program to put the economy on a viable course. Menem inspires such confidence that his men talk proudly of sharing their women with him.

There are rumors spreading through the vast interior of Argentina, far from European Buenos Aires: Carlos Menem can heal. A blind woman sees now because of him. His hands are sacred. Children are lifted up for him to bless. All of which he calls "a grand responsibility." Could Menem himself believe any of this? He believes it enough that a man trained by López Rega stands by his side. (López Rega gave himself up to Argentine authorities in 1985 and died in prison in June 1989.) And Menem wears curious mutton chops that stretch almost to his lips—allegedly in exchange for the strength of the caudillo who wore similar sideburns when he governed La Rioja two hundred years ago.

Menem's wife, Zulema, reportedly more ambitious and intelligent than her husband, is also playing out the mythic dimension. She has assured Argentina that she will carry on Evita's good works. Just as Evita had forced the industrialists to support her work with the poor, last Christmas, during the campaign, Zulema visited factory owners of La Rioja, demanding toys to distribute. (Of course, Zulema's work, like Evita's, continues to leave the poor dependent on a cult of personality rather than on viable social services.)

Zulema wants to be the only La Perona. When Isabel wanted to attend the Peronist congress last February, Zulema's was the loudest no.

Menem and his men have learned the wisdom of acquiescence to Zulema. "Nobody can control her," several of his press people said. "When anybody tries, she brings out the black book on

## MESAS DE TRABAJO ORGANIZADAS DE ZULEMA ISABEL es PERÓN



Above: A rally for Isabel in Buenos Aires, November 1974. Below: A lone supporter of Isabel after she was deposed in 1976



Carlos." (The couple has had some lurid scenes. A few years back Zulema went to the press claiming her husband was trying to commit her to a mental hospital, that one of his men was putting vipers in her bedroom to drive her mad. This was before the Papal nuncio had several talks with the couple, and the Vatican had sent on its special appeal. The Menems' reconciliation was celebrated last year in traditional Peronist style with a gnocchi dinner for thousands.)

Despite Zulema's objections, Menem may find Isabel, the ever-willing pawn, useful. Menem has his connections to





**Saving Face:** Above, Zulema Menem, it is rumored, had plastic surgery to make herself look more like Evita. Below: Isabel with Zulema Menem, right, the current president's wife, last May



the Arab world; the PLO gave some \$33 million to his campaign. Yet Isabel's links could strengthen the cards he holds on his own. For instance, she's had ties to Mu'ammar Qaddafi for decades, even before she and López Rega had lucrative business dealings with him. (During Isabel's presidency López Rega authorized Argentina to buy Libyan oil but charged the treasury more than the market rate; Isabel allegedly pocketed the difference, between \$3 million and \$5 million.) When Isabel participated, at the colonel's invitation, in his 1988 Anti-Imperialist Tribunal, she left with his

pledge to support the Peronists however he could. Now Qaddafi's little green books are appearing in the offices of certain Menem advisers.

Isabel's connections to the Vatican may also be alluring to the new president. Menem hopes the Pope will promote inter-Latin trade, as well as his concept of a united Latin America. He knows that the Vatican would be happy to do business with La Señora. She is a persuasive spokesperson for the church's increasingly conservative stance on a continent soaked in liberation theology. The church has already put one of its men, Hugo Franco, at Isabel's side. And it is said that Pio Laghi, one of Isabel's confessors during her detention, a monsignor who allegedly blessed torturers, may be appointed the Vatican's new secretary of state.

To bring Isabel into the fold, Menem offered her the ambassadorship to the Vatican. Her aide, Franco, one hand on the ample crucifix around his neck, speaks for La Señora. "She is most interested in bringing her connections to bear for Argentina," he says. "She regards it as an obligation." (But at press time La Señora had not yet accepted the post.)

Meanwhile, Menem follows a conservative agenda that Isabel herself might be proud of. In September Menem said he would announce a pardon for the handful of commanders serving sentences for the "Dirty War," the repression that led to the disappearance of up to 30,000 Argentines.

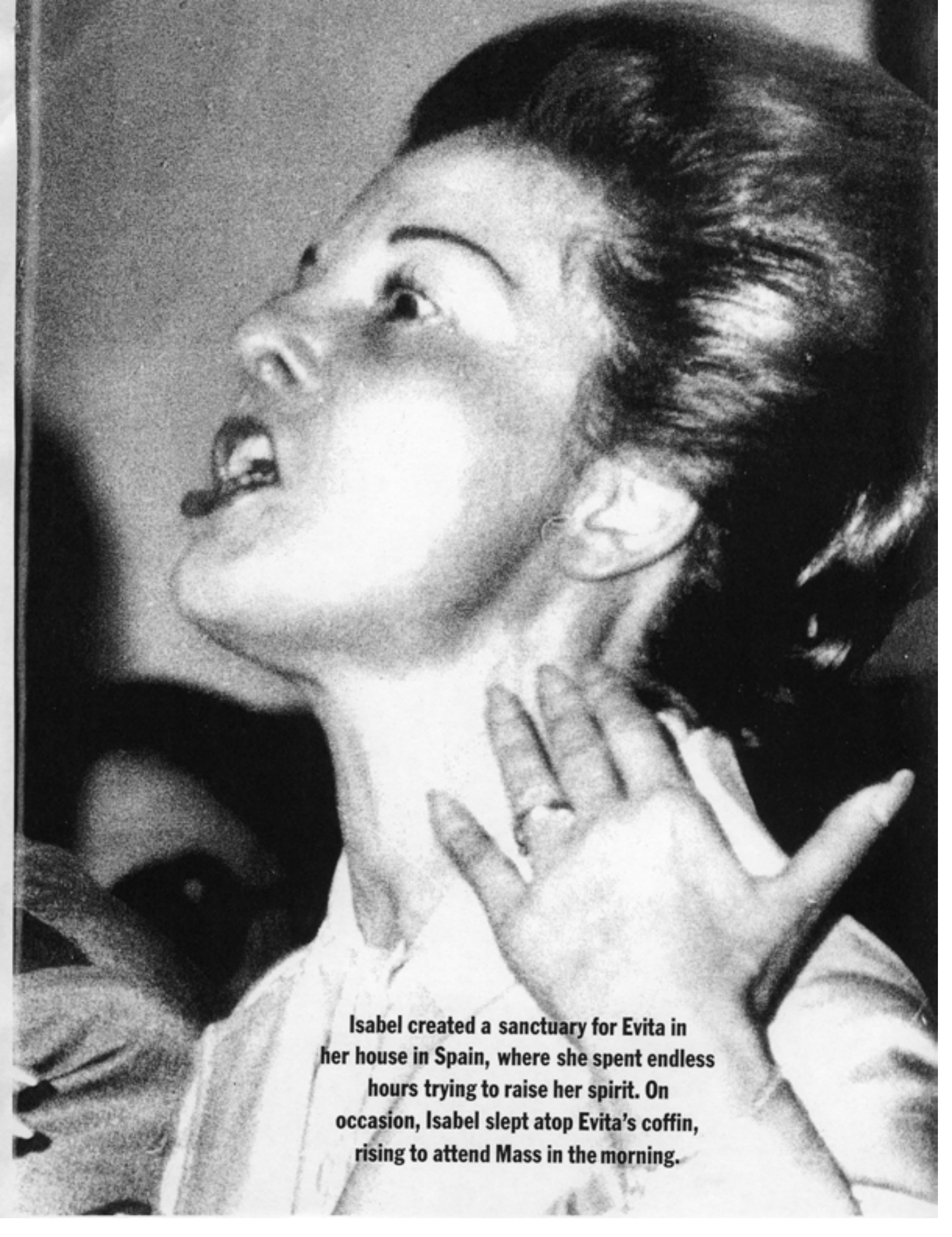
Several of these military commanders were close both to Isabel and her old friend, Licio Gelli, who has always dreamed of making Argentina the center of his arms, drugs, and financial scams. As a Menem adviser had stated, "The dignity of our military has been deeply offended [by those who questioned the 'Dirty War']. Still, [the military] had the graciousness to allow us the election."

"It's Halloween these days," observes Hector Ruiz Nuñez, the head of Argentina's only center for investigative reporting. "The monsters and freaks are coming out of the woodwork."

The loneliest of all is the one with the magic name, La Perona. ★

**During Isabel's brief administration, one journalist recalls having "the sensation that there was no government at all"**





**Isabel created a sanctuary for Evita in her house in Spain, where she spent endless hours trying to raise her spirit. On occasion, Isabel slept atop Evita's coffin, rising to attend Mass in the morning.**