

Eva Peron's Corpse Continues to Haunt Argentina

By CALVIN SIMS
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A new novel about Eva Duarte de Peron, which deals with the struggle over her remains after she died more than 40 years ago, has added to the fascination about her in a country with a long history of preoccupation with the dead.

Wife of the strongman Juan Domingo Peron, she was a champion of the poor until her death from cancer in 1952 at the age of 33. Her life was celebrated in the Broadway musical "Evita."

"No other corpse has meant so much to a nation than Eva Peron's to Argentina," said Tomas Eloy Martinez, whose novel, "Santa Evita," chronicles the unusual story of her embalmed body and how it was transported within Argentina and to Italy and then back to Argentina in a bizarre two-decade-long battle for possession between political forces.

Mr. Martinez, an Argentine who is chairman of Latin American studies department at Rutgers University, received much of the information about the fight for Eva Peron's body from military informants who made contact with him several years ago after reading a novel he wrote about Mr. Peron.

The informants, who included officers in the Argentine intelligence service as well as an Argentine Ambassador to Spain, took part in the military's confiscation and eventual return of the body.

Explaining his reason for telling the story in a novel, which was published this month and was at the top of the best-seller list here this week, Mr. Martinez said what he learned about the fight for Eva Peron's body from the informants and from his own research was "so incredible, so unbelievable that it had to be written in the novel style."

"The novel is the most effective way of telling the truth, especially about a person like Eva Peron, whose character has taken on mythical qualities in Argentina," said Mr. Martinez, who is one of Argentina's most prominent authors. While some names, places, and events have been altered, the novel is a reconstruction of the truth, he said.

So far, no one is disputing the basic facts in the book: Military leaders who overthrew Mr. Peron in 1955 confiscated Eva Peron's corpse because they were afraid that the opposition would use the body to rally the populace.

But wherever they hid the body, even in the most secure military buildings, there were problems keeping it from admirers, who would repeatedly place flowers and candles nearby, Mr. Martinez said. So the military eventually sent the body to a secret burial site in Italy, and after 16 years, her husband, exiled to Spain, recovered it and returned it to Buenos Aires.

"Her body was such a powerful symbol that everybody tried to control it," Mr. Martinez said. "I believe that this points to this country's tendency toward necrophilia."

Indeed, Argentina has a long history of preoccupation with the dead and of using the deceased for political purposes. In the 16th and 17th centuries, Spanish settlers often smeared the blood of their victims on their own wounds and paraded the bodies of the conquered around town.

In 1987, vandals broke into the tomb holding the body of Mr. Peron, who died here in 1974, and sawed off his hands. When the mutilation was discovered, labor unions and the Peronist party organized a protest that was attended by an estimated 50,000 people.

In 1989, before pardoning military officers for rebellion and political crimes, President Carlos Saul Menem brought back the remains of Juan Manuel de Rosas, the most infamous of Argentina's 19th-century provincial warlords, from England as an example of the futility of continuing to nurture old hostilities.

But none of these cases comes close to matching Argentina's obsession with Eva Peron's body.

Mr. Martinez sees Eva Peron's body as symbolic for Argentina.

"It's the embalmed body of a beautiful woman who has not yet been resuscitated," Mr. Martinez said. "In the same way Argentina is a country of hope and promise that has never been fulfilled. This is the melancholy nature of Argentina."

From the start, Eva Peron's life after death was unorthodox. Her embalmer, Pedro Ara, wanted her embalment to equal that of Lenin. Mr. Ara was so meticulous that he preserved the body with all its internal organs, which are normally removed, Mr. Martinez said.

Mr. Ara also made several wax and vinyl replicas of Eva Peron's body that were indistinguishable from the original, according to the book by Mr. Martinez. The military later used these body doubles, and others it commissioned, to deceive those who sought the real corpse.

After her death in 1952, the corpse was put on display at the headquarters of the General Confederation of Labor, where admirers came by the tens of thousands with candles and flowers and held vigils.

When Mr. Peron was toppled in 1955, military leaders determined that they had to keep Eva Peron's body from opposing political forces but they did not know how best to accomplish that.

"Evita was a symbol of the 'shirtless ones,' " Mr. Martinez said, referring to what she called the poor, who worshiped her. "And if the Peronists got hold of the body they would lead the masses, but the anti-Peronists were trying to destroy it and that would also mean trouble for the military."

After being moved to a number of military installations in Buenos Aires, the book says Eva Peron's body ended up in the house of an army major who stored it in his attic under old papers. But the body had to be moved again after the major mysteriously shot his wife.

Finally, in April 1957, the military put the body on a ship bound for Italy where it was buried under a false name. Then in 1971, Gen. Alejandro A. Lanusse overthrew Gen. Juan Carlos Onganía, the Argentine military leader. In exchange for Juan Peron's blessing from exile, General Lanusse agreed to hold elections, restore Mr. Peron's citizenship, provide presidential back pay of \$50,000 and give him the body of Eva.

The body was exhumed from a small cemetery near Rome and transported in a silver coffin to Juan Peron's villa in Madrid. Italian and Spanish police officers accompanied the hearse. Mr. Peron kept the body in an open casket on the dining room table of his villa, where he later built a shrine for it in the attic. His third wife, Isabel, combed the corpse's hair in a daily devotion, Mr. Martinez said.

In 1974, after Mr. Peron was elected President again, the Montoneros, the guerrilla organization that emerged from the leftist Peronist youth group, stole the coffin of Gen. Pedro Eugenio Aramburu, one of the military leaders who toppled Mr. Peron, and demanded Eva Peron's in exchange. They were unsuccessful and returned the general's coffin to its tomb.

In November 1974, after the death of Mr. Peron, Eva Peron's body was brought back to Argentina by Isabel, who succeeded him as President. It lay in state in the presidential residence until Mrs. Peron was overthrown in 1976, when the new military rulers had the body buried in the Duarte family tomb under three plates of steel in the Recoleta Cemetery in Buenos Aires.

So today, Eva Peron rests not among the "shirtless ones" she sought to care for but among the patrician families she despised and down the way from the tomb of General Aramburu, who had been instrumental in banishing her remains.

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