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POLITICS AND INSTITUTIONS

The Case of Eva Perón

Marysa Navarro

In 1946, when Doña María Eva Duarte de Perón began to take an active part in Argentine politics, First Ladies were expected to remain in the background, running a few charities and attending an occasional ceremonial function. Voting in national elections was restricted to male adults, which remained true until 1951. Except for a small number of activists engaged in the Socialist and Communist parties, women generally showed little concern for politics. However, three years later, she had become both Eva Perón, Argentina's widely known First Lady, and "Evita," the charismatic *abanderada de los descamisados*, the standard-bearer of the shirtless ones.¹ By the time she died, on July 26, 1952, she was undoubtedly the second most powerful political figure in Argentina, though she held neither an elected post nor an official position in Perón's government. In the following pages, I will attempt to examine what personal and structural factors allowed her to acquire that power, what was its nature, and, finally, what were its limits.

Evita was born on May 7, 1919, in Los Toldos, a hamlet of Buenos Aires province. (Throughout the paper, I will use the name "Evita," by which she was known politically.) Like her three sisters and her brother, she was the illegitimate child of Juan Duarte, a local *estanciero* ("landowner") who abandoned their mother when Evita was three years old. She attended school first in Los Toldos, then in Junín, a railroad town

1. The term *descamisado* first appeared on October 17, 1945. It was used pejoratively to describe Perón's supporters as they gathered in the Plaza de Mayo, the central square of Buenos Aires, demanding his freedom. The *Peronistas* adopted it to identify themselves by December 1945.

also in Buenos Aires province, where the family moved in 1930. She was a below-average student, uninterested in school work, and in 1935, after completing her primary education, at the age of fifteen she went to Buenos Aires to become an actress. Living in cheap and dirty *pensiones*, hungry and cold in winter, she made the theater rounds, never playing a better role than a maid or a silent character that disappeared too soon from the stage. In the meantime, she tried to break into films and here again only got small parts. Success did come at last, not from the stage or films but through the radio. In 1939, she headed her own soap-opera company, and when she gave up acting in October 1945, she was under contract with the top radio station in Buenos Aires and had two daily prime-time shows.²

Evita may have had an exceptional goal in mind when she left Junín, but her background of poverty and her first years in Buenos Aires were not very different from those of thousands of men and women who also moved to Argentina's capital throughout the 1930s. According to Gino Germani, "during the 1935–1947 decade, the proportion of Argentines born in the provinces that settled in Buenos Aires' metropolitan area was equivalent to almost 40% of the total population growth of these provinces."³ Unable to earn a living in the countryside because of the crisis that crippled agriculture since the world depression, they went to the city hoping to find work in its numerous factories. Argentine industry, forced to produce substitutes for European manufactured goods, was expanding at a rapid pace. Throughout the thirties, factories mushroomed and increased their output, reaching new peaks after World War II.⁴ While Argentina was undergoing such profound changes, the government was in the hands of a conservative landed oligarchy that managed to remain in power by rigging elections. Working and living conditions for the new urban masses were therefore understandably poor, and despite the efforts of a small, divided, weak, and bureaucratic labor movement they continued unchanged until June 4, 1943, when a bloodless military coup put an end to the landed oligarchy's rule.

Colonel Juan Domingo Perón began to emerge as a controversial figure among the group of officers that came to power on June 4 shortly

2. There is no reliable biography of Evita. The various works that have been written about her are diatribes or eulogies based on gossip, rumors, or ideological prejudices. See, for example, María Flores, *The Woman with the Whip: Eva Perón* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1952); Fleur Cowles, *Bloody Precedent* (New York: Random House, 1952); Américo Ghioldi, *El mito de Eva Perón* (Montevideo, 1952); Francisco A. Costanzo, *Evita alma inspiradora de la justicia social en América* (Buenos Aires, 1948); and Erminda Duarte, *Mi hermana Evita* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones "Centro de Estudios Eva Perón," 1972).

3. Gino Germani, *Política y sociedad en una época en transición* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1962), p. 230.

4. See Carlos F. Díaz Alejandro, *An Interpretation of Argentine Economic Growth since 1930* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1967); Guido Di Tella and Manuel Zymelman, *Las etapas del desarrollo argentino* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 1967).

after he took over the department of Labor. Defining the role of the state as an arbiter between labor and management, he directed his office to terminate previous antilabor practices and to implement existing legislation. He then transformed the department into a secretariat with ministerial rank and proceeded to draft new laws, create labor boards, improve working conditions for rural and urban workers, expand the social security system, and in general pursue a policy that raised the standard of living of workers and employees. A good listener, energetic and efficient, he gradually gained the trust of some important labor leaders. However, since his policies also found strong resistance among certain unions led by Communists and Socialists, he did not achieve his objectives without some degree of violence.⁵

Evita met Perón in February 1944 during a fund-raising festival for the victims of an earthquake. He was a forty-eight-year-old widower. She was twenty-four, dark haired, and, despite her large brown eyes, not particularly beautiful. Two months after their first meeting, they were living together—a situation socially unacceptable for an Argentine woman at that time, especially if the man was a public figure and did not treat her like a mistress. Indeed, as Perón introduced Evita to his friends, went out with her, and actually behaved as if she were his wife, “the colonel’s mistress” became a favorite topic of conversation in Buenos Aires salons.

Moreover, he included her in his political life. His heavy schedule generally ended with a round of daily meetings with politicians and fellow officers in his apartment. Contrary to what women were expected to do in such circumstances, Evita was usually present.⁶ She did not leave after serving coffee but sat and listened. It is not possible to ascertain whether she remained because she wanted to or because Perón urged her to do so. In these meetings as well as through her conversations with Perón, Evita discovered a very different world from her own. She found herself sharing and defending his ideas. In June 1944, she began to do a daily radio program of political propaganda in which she extolled the benefits that the Secretariat of Labor had brought to the workers.

Evita’s transformation paralleled the changes taking place in Perón during this same period. Both his support among the rural and urban working-class and middle-class sectors and his influence in the military government were growing steadily. On February 26, 1944, when General Edelmiro J. Farrell became president, Perón took over the Ministry

5. See George I. Blanksten, *Perón’s Argentina* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953); Juan José Real, *30 años de historia Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Actualidad, 1962); Samuel I. Bailey, *Labor, Nationalism and Politics in Argentina* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1967); and Ruben Rotondaro, *Realidad y cambio en el sindicalismo* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Pleamar, 1971).

6. Statement by Arturo Jauretche, quoted in Otelo Borroni and Roberto Vacca, *La vida de Eva Perón* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Galerna, 1970), p. 85.

of War, and that same year he rose to the vice-presidency. However, his labor secretariat policies had continued to provoke very strong resistance, and by early 1945 he had succeeded in uniting all political parties against him.⁷ From the extreme Left to the conservative Right, they denounced him as a Nazi and a dangerous demagogue. As the months went by, the opposition mounted a campaign against Farrell and redoubled its attacks on "the colonel." Perón sought to strengthen his gains by pronouncing increasingly radical speeches, but to no avail. In October 1945, a group of military officers forced a confrontation with him. He finally agreed to resign from his three government posts on October 9, but not without making a speech in front of the Secretariat of Labor that angered his opponents and eventually led to his arrest and confinement on the island of Martín García. While Farrell tried to rebuild his cabinet, which had resigned en masse, and while the opposition celebrated Perón's political demise, his supporters saw his jailing as a threat to the benefits they had obtained since 1943. With the help of some of Perón's collaborators in the secretariat, they began to organize demonstrations. On October 15, the sugar workers of Tucumán declared a general strike. The following day, as the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) debated whether or not to follow suit, groups of workers in several cities took to the streets. On October 17 in Buenos Aires, men and women marched from the outskirts of town to the Plaza de Mayo, stayed all day long to demand Perón's release, and did not leave until he spoke to them from the balcony of the Casa Rosada close to midnight.⁸

Contrary to what has been stated repeatedly both in Peronist and anti-Peronist works, Evita did not play a major role in the events of October 17.⁹ After Perón was arrested, afraid for his life and her own, she left their apartment and slept at friends' homes. In the daytime, she tried desperately but unsuccessfully to get a writ of habeas corpus for his release. They were reunited on the night of October 17, after he addressed the delirious crowds in the Plaza de Mayo. Six days later, in a quiet civil ceremony, Perón married Evita.

After she married Perón, Evita became even more of a fascinating fixation for the Argentinian upper classes. According to most sources, her lower-class origin, illegitimacy, supposedly stormy love life before 1944, and notorious affair with Perón created an unsurmountable barrier between her and them once he was elected president in February

7. See Félix Luna, *El 45. Crónica de un año decisivo* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1972); Alberto Ciria, *Partidos y poder en la Argentina moderna (1930-1946)* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Jorge Alvarez, 1968).

8. For the best account of the October 17 events, see Luna.

9. See Bailey, p. 89; Robert J. Alexander, *The Perón Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), p. 104; Arthur P. Whitaker, *Argentina* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), p. 118. For an opposing view, see Luna, p. 340, and Cipriano Ryes, *Yo hice el 17 de octubre* (Buenos Aires, 1973), p. 246.

1946. Resentful and ambitious, the sources say, since the oligarchy refused to forget her past and snubbed her, she decided to get enough power to avenge herself. The only proof generally offered for this theory is her purported attempt to be named honorary president of the Sociedad de Beneficencia de la Capital, a position traditionally reserved for the First Lady. When the matrons of the Sociedad ignored her overtures, Evita's spite was so great that she demanded the takeover of the institution by the government and then proceeded to set up her own charitable foundation, the Fundación Eva Perón.¹⁰

In her memoirs, Evita ridicules such an interpretation. She explains that she had the choice of being like any other Argentine First Lady or of doing something entirely different.

As for the hostility of the oligarchy, I can only smile.

And I wonder: why would the oligarchy have been able to reject me?

Because of my humble origin? Because of my artistic career?

But has that class of person ever bothered about these things here—or in any part of the world—when it was a case of the wife of a President?

The oligarchy has never been hostile to anyone who could be useful to it. Power and money were never bad antecedents to a genuine oligarch.

The truth is different. I, who had learned from Perón to choose unusual paths, did not wish to follow the old pattern of wife of the President.¹¹

Evita's decision was by no means as simple or as unilateral as she would like us to think, and it is hard to believe that upper-class opposition to her, particularly strong after the presidential campaign, would have disappeared easily had she chosen a less irritating path. On the whole, her statement might be questioned as a rationalization a posteriori. Yet certain facts tend to indicate that, in essence, it is more credible than most traditional interpretations of her behavior. In the case of the Sociedad de Beneficencia, for example, there is little doubt that it was taken over for reasons other than her anger, that is, poor working conditions for its employees and low salaries. As a state-financed institution, it had already undergone some degree of reorganization in 1943, before Evita met Perón. Denunciations of bad working conditions had been presented in Congress since 1939.¹² Finally, the request for the government investiga-

10. See Flores, and Cowles (n. 2 above).

11. Eva Perón, *My Mission in Life*, trans. Ethel Cherry (New York: Vantage Press, 1953), p. 60.

12. Congreso Nacional, *Diario de Sesiones de la Cámara de Diputados* (Buenos Aires: Imprenta del Congreso Nacional, 1939), p. 444.

tion that led to the intervention began in the Senate in July 1946, at a time when she lacked the means to influence such a move.

Whenever authors evaluate Evita's background as a barrier she could not overcome, and present it, together with her resentment and her ambition as an explanation of her extraordinary political career, they make several assumptions. (1) She had remained untouched by the politicization and polarization that had divided Argentines since 1943. (2) She had lived with Perón for two years, at a time when his personality underwent a profound transformation, but somehow she had not been affected by that relationship. (3) She wished nothing better than to forget her past. (4) Her main goal was to become what the oligarchy had said a First Lady should be. (5) Driven either by her resentments, her hatreds, or her "insatiable ambition," her actions after 1946 were the direct result of her willpower and Perón's acquiescence.¹³

It is true that after 1946, Evita never mentioned her premarital relationship with Perón and concealed her illegitimacy. Indeed, before she married Perón, she obtained a false birth certificate stating the name of her father. But even as an actress, Evita did not hide the facts that she came from a poor family and that she had started to work very young.¹⁴ There is no indication that she desired to forget all of her past. Moreover, it would have been difficult for her to become a ceremonial figurehead and be involved in old-fashioned charitable work at a time when Perón's election was acclaimed by his supporters as the end of an era dominated by the oligarchy and his inauguration as the beginning of a new society in which social justice would reign; poverty would be wiped out; and to be a worker, a *descamisado*, would become honorable.

In this atmosphere, Evita could hardly have sought to identify herself with the ladies of the Sociedad de Beneficencia. She may not have had a precise idea of her own role as First Lady, but it could not be what Argentines were accustomed to. She had indicated that much by her actions during the presidential campaign—she accompanied her husband in all his trips through the provinces, listened to his speeches, and even addressed a women's rally in the Luna Park stadium. In fact, a few days after Perón's inauguration, she had already begun to define a new model of First Lady by meeting with labor leaders three times a week in an office of the Post Office building, visiting factories and labor unions on her own, and by standing beside Perón every time he presided at a public gathering.

Furthermore, by that time Evita had realized that she was bound to Perón's supporters with ties she could not possibly break. As a result of the workers' massive demonstrations, in October 1945, "the colonel's mistress," "that woman" so despised and criticized, had become overnight the respectable wife of the most important political figure in

13. Flores (n. 2 above).

14. Interview with Evita published in a trade magazine, *Radiolandia* (April 7, 1945).

Argentina. Like a movie heroine or a character in her soap operas, she found herself metamorphosed by her marriage. Whatever her past may have been, she was now Perón's wife. As she would explain on countless occasions in her inimitable style, once again love had triumphed, and in this case, it had overcome the worst obstacles thanks to the men and women, the *descamisados*, who demanded Perón's release. When she had lost all hope of seeing the man she loved, the *descamisados* brought him back to her. On October 17, she therefore contracted with them an immense "debt of gratitude" which could only be repaid by loving them as they had loved Perón and dedicating her life to them.¹⁵

By themselves, Evita's personal reasons for wanting to "pay her debt" to the *descamisados* and to Perón or wishing to be a different First Lady do not explain how she gained access to the political structure or the role she eventually performed in Perón's government. Neither is it sufficient to recognize that she ultimately could do so because he did not put a stop to her activities in the initial stage and later on legitimized them. Considering his relationship with Evita prior to 1946, his behavior is not really surprising. The question, therefore, is not why he did it but rather what were the structural factors that permitted Evita to play her political role.

At this point we must return once again to October 17, 1945, a date that shaped the following thirty years of Argentine history. The consequences were felt immediately insofar as the workers' mobilization ended a twelve-day-long crisis, allowed Perón to become a presidential candidate, and changed Farrell's regime into a caretaker government. But perhaps more important, it also brought forth a new type of political relationship. Built gradually by Perón after he took over the Secretariat of Labor, the charismatic relationship between "the leader" and the *descamisados* that revealed itself on October 17 neither destroyed existing institutions nor replaced them partially but superimposed itself upon them once he became president. His election was the culmination of the bid for power begun in 1943 and the ratification of the mandate of October 17.

Yet Perón's position in February 1946 was far from secure. Although he had obtained 52 percent of the votes and could count on a favorable Congress, he faced a number of problems. The already acute polarization that had characterized the political process since 1943 was accentuated even more by the bitterly fought presidential campaign in which almost all political parties joined in an anti-Perón front, the Unión Democrática. He entered the campaign without a solid organization. His supporters were divided into two major groups, united mainly by Perón: the Unión Cívica Radical (Junta Reorganizadora), a small offshoot of the old Unión Cívica Radical, and the Partido Laborista, a party organized

15. See, for example, *Democracia* (January 12, 1947), and Evita's last October 17 speech, also in *Democracia* (October 18, 1951).

by labor leaders right after October 17. Of the two, the Partido Laborista was undoubtedly the more important and the more dangerous for Perón because he did not control it. The October crisis had proved that labor was the social basis of his power and his leadership. Therefore, if he was to retain them, he could not allow his charismatic relationship with the *descamisados* to deteriorate. On the other hand, as president, Perón could no longer play the role of social agitator he had performed as secretary of labor, nor could he continue to receive workers' delegations, listen patiently to their complaints, and help them to solve their internal conflicts or their confrontations with management. The limitations imposed by Perón's new presidential functions threatened his leadership of the *descamisados*.

His situation was particularly troublesome because, among other reasons, the labor movement was undergoing a vast process of expansion. In 1941, the CGT had a membership of 441,412; in 1945 it rose to 528,538; in 1948 1,532,925, reaching 2,256,580 by 1954.¹⁶ Furthermore, there were growing signs of dissatisfaction among labor. Workers continued to strike for higher wages and better working conditions, even in the openly Peronist unions such as the one that declared the general strike on October 15. The composition of the labor movement was also changing rapidly. In 1941, only 33 percent of the CGT membership belonged to the industrial sector, while in 1948 the number had gone up to 52 percent.¹⁷ Perón's control of the CGT was shaky. Its performance during the October crisis had not been entirely satisfactory: after a heated debate, the central committee voted to strike on the 18th, without mentioning his name.¹⁸ Finally, in May 1946, when he decided to dissolve the Partido Laborista to form a more pliable organization, the Partido Peronista, some labor leaders openly resisted his orders. Others obeyed them but continued to oppose the growing identification of their movement with him.

If Perón was to maintain and strengthen his labor support, he needed a strong minister of labor, especially at a time when the ministry was unprepared to meet the demands of an expanding and aggressive labor movement. He could not appoint to the ministry a person who could use it to build his own political power—as he had done under Farrell. That is probably why he bypassed all the officers who had worked with him in the secretariat from 1943 to 1945 and named instead José María Freire, an obscure labor leader. But the workers continued to flock to Perón, looking for his advice or his help as they had

16. Louise Doyon, "El crecimiento sindical bajo el peronismo," *Desarrollo Económico* 15 (April–June 1975): 158.

17. Louise Doyon, unpublished manuscript, based on research for a Ph.D. dissertation on the Argentine labor movement.

18. See the minutes of the CGT meeting in *Pasado y Presente*, nos. 2 and 3 (July and December 1973).

done while he was only secretary of labor. They were turned back until Evita began to meet with them in her office of the Post Office building.

In September 1946, Evita abandoned her Post Office headquarters and moved to the ministry of labor itself. Her presence in the old secretariat confirmed what had gradually evolved in the previous months and what the *descamisados* already knew: all contact with Perón was to be channeled through his wife, his personal representative in the ministry. Perón never announced officially that Evita was his liaison with labor. In another example of his pragmatism, he let it be known by her move, after she had worked long enough for him to see positive results: workers accepted dealing with her and she proved to be quite efficient.

Perón's decision to rely on Evita for maintaining his personal contact with labor legitimized the activities she had been carrying out since his inauguration and altered their political value significantly. From then on she began to act as the extension of Perón, his substitute, his "shadow," as she described herself in her autobiography.¹⁹ Evita's presence in the ministry indicated to the workers that, despite his presidential functions, Perón had not ceased to be secretary of labor. His wife, the person who was closest to him, would perform some of his duties and also keep him informed of the needs and problems that the *descamisados* might have. She therefore could summon ministry of labor functionaries to give advice to a delegation on how to organize a union, help workers to force the compliance of a labor law, or back their requests for additional funds to build a clinic. She also began to represent Perón at union rallies. She would arrive accompanied by the presidential military aide, but while he remained silent, she spoke to the workers in the name of Perón. She acted as his delegate in ceremonies marking the signing of new labor contracts and once again made speeches in his name. Indeed, as early as 1946, one of Evita's main activities was to address the *descamisados*. The content of her speeches in this period indicates that her task was to impress upon them the continuity between 1943–45 and the present. Perón was always "the colonel," not the president. She also reminded her audiences how badly Argentine workers had lived before 1943, what "the colonel" had accomplished for them through the secretariat, and how his enemies had wanted to destroy him but how the *descamisados* had saved him on October 17.

Evita's experience as an actress proved to be an enormous asset in her work. Although unsure of herself at first, she showed none of the inhibitions and self-consciousness that might have paralyzed another woman in her place. In fact, she plunged into her life as First Lady as if it were a role, like the ones she had performed on the stage and in films.²⁰ Her keen eye for theatrical effects was particularly useful in molding her

19. Perón, p. 43.

20. *Ibid.*

public image, and she was most careful of her hair, by then bleached blonde; her jewels; extravagant hats; and elegant clothes. Although she knew that the oligarchy criticized that image, she sensed that the *descamisados* approved of it, and indeed they looked at her with a strong feeling of self-satisfaction and pride. Furthermore, at a time when the radio first became a powerful means of communication in Argentina, Evita found herself in possession of a very special talent. Having worked for so long in soap operas, she was comfortable in front of a microphone.

Because of that talent and the wildly enthusiastic responses it elicited, from 1946 to 1952 Evita acted as an indefatigable one-woman ministry of propaganda for Perón. The style of her public speeches reflected unmistakably the political role she played in Perón's government. Whereas he was "the leader" who elaborated the doctrine, explained it, and led the road toward social justice, she was the rabble-rouser who whipped up emotions; urged the *descamisados* to "offer their lives to Perón" as they had done on October 17; professed an undying love for Perón, the workers, and the poor; and lashed out violent diatribes against the oligarchy and other enemies of "the people." She never passed up the opportunity to make a speech, even when she had to interrupt most of her activities because of her illness. Too weak to carry on her heavy load in the ministry of labor, she still had the strength to do broadcasts from the presidential residence.²¹ Her highly emotional style may have been an expression of her passionate temperament, but it also reflected to a large extent the years she had played women who proclaimed their love or suffered because of it in her soap operas. The adaptation of her radio style and vocabulary to politics was facilitated by her year-long program of political propaganda, "Hacia un futuro mejor." The scripts of this program were written by the authors of her radio shows, and at least one of these persons continued to write speeches for Evita throughout 1947.

Her social origin, which created so much resistance among the upper class, turned out to be another asset. When she spoke at CGT rallies or in her meetings with workers, she never failed to remind them that she was born poor, a *descamisada* too, and that she could therefore understand their problems and their concerns.

In the initial stage of Evita's political career, being a woman and being married to Perón proved to be crucial factors. She did not represent a threat to him or to his relationship with the *descamisados* precisely because she was a woman. Furthermore, as his wife, she was part of him, an extension of him, and since all her actions appeared endorsed by him, from the very first moment, she had a substantial latitude to exert her influence. She strengthened her position by asserting her power to

21. Evita recorded her last 1951 presidential campaign speech just before being taken to the hospital to be operated on for cancer.

influence decisions and by contributing to the Peronization of labor unions. Her activities in the ministry of labor were the basis of the political power she accumulated from 1948 onward. In so doing she defined a new identity for herself. She gradually made herself into the indispensable link between Perón and the *descamisados*, the only means to reach him outside normal channels, or, as she would call herself, the intermediary between the leader and the *descamisados*, “the bridge between Perón and the people.” While he remained “the undisputed Leader,” by 1950 she had become “the standard-bearer” and even “the plenipotentiary” of the *descamisados*. Her titles reflected her own relationship with labor, as charismatic as his own, but subservient to his. She was Perón’s complement, but to the workers she was also their leader.

By 1948, having gotten rid of the old, independent-minded labor leaders, Perón had also tightened his control of the CGT; the Partido Peronista was firmly in his hands, and he no longer had to worry about dissidents in Congress. The following year, he even managed to reform the Constitution so as to allow his reelection in 1951. As Perón pursued his policy of income redistribution and consolidated his power, Evita’s position also became stronger.

Her power became visible after 1948 when she ruled over the Fundación Eva Perón (1950). She organized her own party, the Partido Peronista Femenino (1949), whose officials she named personally and whose candidates in 1951 she designated herself. Among additional sources of her power and influence was her ability to name people to jobs of all ranks. The nature of Evita’s power is perhaps best explained by the Fundación Eva Perón, her own private social aid foundation, whose funds she controlled exclusively and whose explicit objectives were to complement the social goals of Perón’s government. Though part of the political structure in an informal way and consequently outside institutional limitations, in order to implement its objectives, which in certain areas such as health, education, and welfare overlapped with the policies of various ministries, Evita very frequently interfered with the plans designed by government officials.

There are no indications that Evita ever attempted to undermine Perón’s power for her own purposes. Even at the height of her influence, there were no signs of rivalry or competition between them. She understood very clearly that she had become “Evita” because of him. As she explains in the preface of her autobiography, when she met Perón she was a humble sparrow and he was a mighty condor.

If it weren’t for him who lowered himself to me and taught me how to fly in a different way, I would have never known what is a condor and I would have never contemplated the marvelous and magnificent immensity of my people.

That is why neither my life nor my heart belong to me and

nothing of what I am or have is mine. Everything I am, everything I have, everything I think and everything I feel belongs to Perón.

But I do not forget and will never forget that I was a sparrow and that I am still one. If I fly high it is because of him. If I walk among the mountain tops, it is because of him. If I sometimes almost touch the sky with my wings, it is because of him. If I see clearly what my people are and I love my people and I feel the love of my people caressing my name, it is because of him.²²

Her power and her leadership depended on his. Her influence, though far reaching, was not unlimited, because she was accountable to him. Perón rarely used his prerogative to restrict her, because he consistently benefited from Evita's power. Therefore, within the limits that only he could establish, she was free and did as she pleased—as long as Perón's own power was enhanced. Perhaps the best example of the relationship between his ultimate authority and her freedom of action was the issue of her candidacy to the vice-presidency. Although she wanted it and allowed the Partido Peronista Femenino and the CGT to stage a massive demonstration for the proclamation of the Perón-Perón ticket, when he opposed it, she retreated and refused to accept the nomination.

Evita died on July 26, 1952, at the height of her power, but when Argentina was entering a period of serious economic difficulties. As Perón's economic troubles increased, his policy of income redistribution slowed down and his isolation from the *descamisados* deepened. Though he tried for a time to substitute for her in all her activities—her social work, the presidency of the Partido Peronista Femenino, and her daily meetings with workers' delegations and the CGT—he had neither the time, the patience, nor the energy to do it. Though in 1946 he could transfer power to her, her power was not transferable to anyone, least of all him.

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22. Perón (n. 11 above).