

Perón Is Dead, but Not Resting: Paternity Suit Is Pending

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BUENOS AIRES, Oct. 7 — Argentines simply will not let Gen. Juan Domingo Perón rest in peace. He died in 1974 and is buried at a family crypt here, but a battle over his remains has broken out between his ideological heirs, who want to move his body to a mausoleum, and a woman who claims to be his daughter and wants a DNA test conducted first.

The leaders of the Peronist movement and the labor unions affiliated with it have announced two days of ceremonies to transfer the general's remains, ending Oct. 17, the anniversary of the populist uprising that carried him to power in 1945. Some have even threatened to defy the court should they be stymied there, where the struggle now rages.

In 2004, Peronist leaders began building the \$1.3 million mausoleum for their leader at San Vicente, a 47-acre retreat in suburban Buenos Aires Province that the general and his second wife, Evita, acquired in 1946. A museum honoring the couple now occupies the property, which Perón always said was the site of some of his happiest memories.

"I was with him in 1953 when he said he wanted to be buried in the soil of Buenos Aires Province," said Antonio Francisco Cafiero, 84, the elder statesman of the Peronist movement and a member of the commission overseeing construction of the mausoleum. "The current situation is one of decay and neglect, and neither complies with his wishes nor is appropriate for a figure of such great historical significance."

But Martha Holgado, 72, has been trying for more than a decade to establish her claim to be Perón's only child, the fruit of a brief affair. When she got wind of the plan to move the remains, she was immediately suspicious. She fears that the re-embalming of Perón's body that is to precede the transfer will cause chemical changes that will skew the DNA test she has long been fighting for.

"This is all a maneuver, and it comes just as all the legal impediments to my demand for a test have been exhausted," Ms. Holgado said at her apartment here, decorated with photographs of the man who ruled [Argentina](#) from 1945 to 1955 and again in 1973 and 1974. "They want to win votes and use my father's body as a trophy, but this is a matter for the family to decide."

Members of the Perón family, however, reject Ms. Holgado's claim.

"This woman is an imposter and a fortune hunter," said Alejandro Rodríguez Perón, a 45-year-old grandnephew of the general, who administers the family's tomb. "She is not a Perón and cannot possibly be a Perón, but aspires to be one so she can put her hands on what does not belong to her."

For years, to undermine the swaggering macho aura Perón had as a dictator, his enemies spread rumors that he was impotent. Mr. Rodríguez Perón tried to modify such claims by saying Perón was sterile because of an accident in 1913, when he was an 18-year-old cadet in the military, that crushed his testicles.

"He was exercising on gymnastics equipment and slipped and took a bad fall," said Mr. Rodríguez Perón, a truck driver. "It was impossible for him to have children. He acknowledged that in letters to close friends, but you can imagine how difficult it would have been in those days to make such an admission in public, especially for someone of his prominence."

But Ms. Holgado has countered with depositions from other associates of Perón and a caretaker of his mother. Those statements, some made during Perón's long exile after he was driven from power in a military coup in 1955, recall incidents in which he spoke wistfully of a daughter whose existence was being kept secret.

According to Ms. Holgado, a birth certificate naming Perón as her father was also filed many years ago. But, she says, a pro-Perón right-wing death squad removed the document from public records and destroyed it during the 1970's, which frightened her from pressing her claim and helped drive her into exile for a time in the United States.

On Oct. 4, Ms. Holgado won a restraining order reaffirming rulings from 1993 and 1994 that Perón's remains were not to be moved or even touched. But lawyers for the Justicialist Party, as the Peronist movement is formally known, and the family have appealed the order and are also trying to negotiate a compromise.

[A tentative agreement reached late Wednesday calls for a DNA sample to be taken on Friday, to be followed by Ms. Holgado's asking that the restraining order be revoked.]

Perón's widow and successor as president, María Estela Martínez de Perón, known as Isabelita, has remained silent throughout the controversy. She lives quietly in Spain, where she sought exile after being overthrown and jailed in a military coup in 1976. Through her lawyers, she has approved the plan to move the remains while opposing any exhumation to have a DNA test done.

“She knows that Perón is my father, because she saw me with him in Panama in 1956, when she was still dancing, with very little clothes on,” in a cabaret, Ms. Holgado said. “For that matter, half of Buenos Aires knows that I am Perón's daughter.”

Ms. Holgado said the main objective of her quest was to establish her parentage, but did not deny that she was also interested in the general's estate. “Why wouldn't I want what is mine?” she asked.

Perón left no will, and was originally buried at the presidential residence in the suburbs here alongside Evita, who died in 1952. After a military junta seized power in 1976, though, it ordered both bodies removed from the site, and Perón's body was reinterred at La Chacarita Cemetery, on the outskirts of the capital.

But the Perón family crypt there is small and almost anonymous, just one of many along a narrow passageway. His name is not engraved on the tomb, and his followers have tried to remedy that by putting up plaques that honor him and Evita, who is buried at the upscale Recoleta Cemetery.

Moreover, in 1987 the tomb was vandalized and Peron's hands were cut off and stolen. The hands have still not been recovered — “and are not likely to be unless someone repents on their deathbed,” Mr. Cafiero said.

But opening the tomb allowed air into the coffin, and since then, the body has been deteriorating. Family members and followers have wanted to arrest that process, but the various court orders Ms. Holgado has obtained in her favor specifically prohibit any “innovation” involving the remains.

“What can you do?” Mr. Cafiero asked with a shrug. “It seems to be the destiny of the Peróns neither to live nor to die in tranquillity.”