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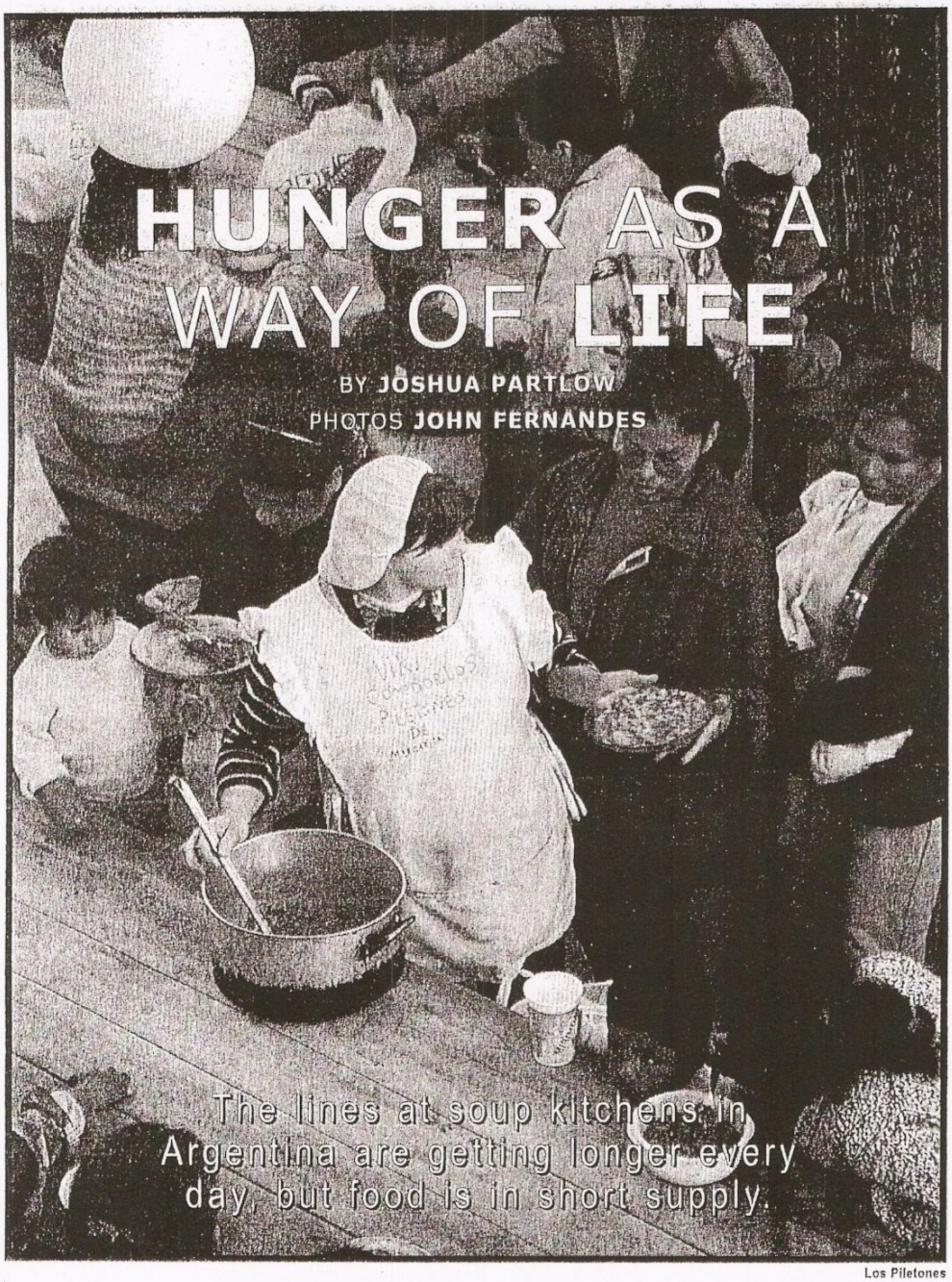
HUNGER AS A WAY OF LIFE

BY **JOSHUA PARTLOW**

PHOTOS **JOHN FERNANDES**



The lines at soup kitchens in Argentina are getting longer every day, but food is in short supply.

Los Piletones

I stood where the road ended on the map, where the pavement became mud and the concrete houses turned to tin-roof shacks, and looked into Villa Soldati, a shanty-town in southern Buenos Aires. Somewhere in there a soup kitchen was serving food to over 1,500 people a day, but the approach was daunting. At first, only snatches of the disarray registered: the narrowing road, an emaciated horse tethered to a fence, two copulating feral dogs, the smell of smoke, the beat of *cumbia*, a backyard pile of metal, wood, and glass scraps, some shrine to all things broken.

It was a half hour to noon but a block-long line had already formed outside the door of the Los Piletones. The day the soup kitchen opened in October of 1996, 15 people were served. Over the last 10 months, the daily attendance has grown by 40 percent to over 1,500 people, almost 1,000 of whom are children.

"All you have to do is look at the line outside our soup kitchen to get an idea about hunger in Argentina. Why would they stand here for hours if they didn't have to? No one likes that there are soup kitchens, no one wants them to exist. These people don't eat what they want, they eat what we can give them. Today we are out of bread, tomorrow there will be no milk. These people just want to work," said Isidro Antunez, who with his wife Margarita Barrientos and their 10 children, run Los Piletones out of their home.

The line says a lot. There are adults and children, in some cases entire families, waiting for their portion of rice, carrots, and onions. There is a line for the elderly that eat in a special room. There is a line for the clinic and pharmacy that Los Piletones has added across the street: a sign outside announces today's services: pediatry, gynecology, deniistry.

There is Felix Britez, a 43-old man who wore his navy blue baseball cap low over his eyes and stared at the ground while he talked. He lives alone in a shack down the street, and started coming to Los Piletones in April when he lost his job as a contruction worker. Now he scavenges for cardboard to sell.

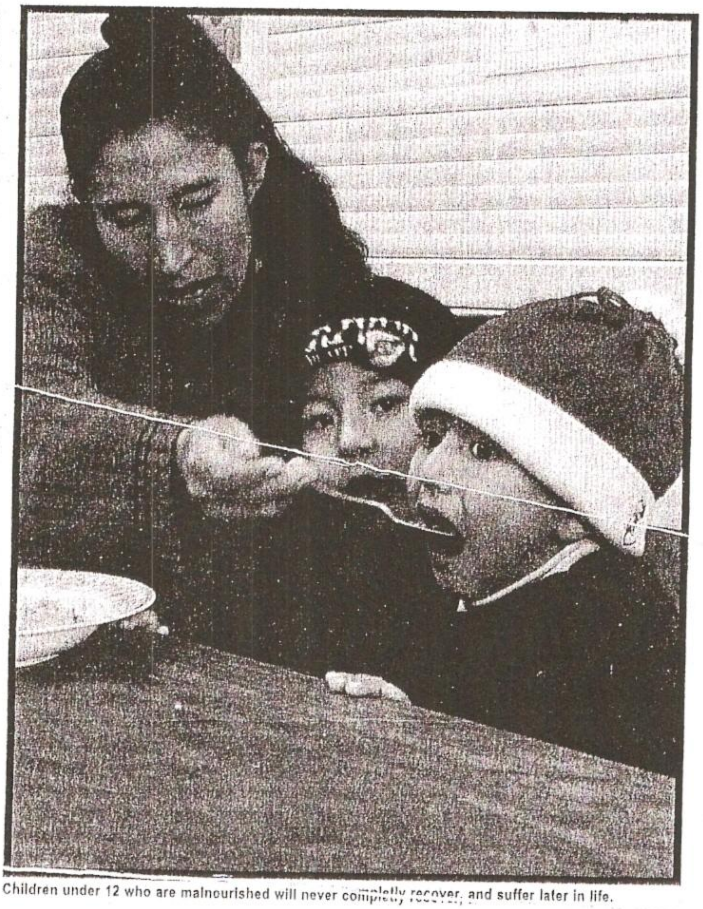
"Sometimes I find food in the street, but usually, this is the only meal I eat each day," he mumbled.

There is Beatriz Navarro, 30, in black rimmed glasses and a dark sweater that was hiked up to allow her baby girl to breast feed. A year and a half ago she lost her job at a lingerie store in Buenos Aires, and since then has fed her three children at the soup kitchen. Her husband receives a monthly 150 peso subsidy from the federal government, their only income. "When we get near the end of the month, when my husband's subsidy runs out, there is nothing for my children or me to eat at night," she said. "The people from around here were hardworking, never rich, but they had some things. Now what?"

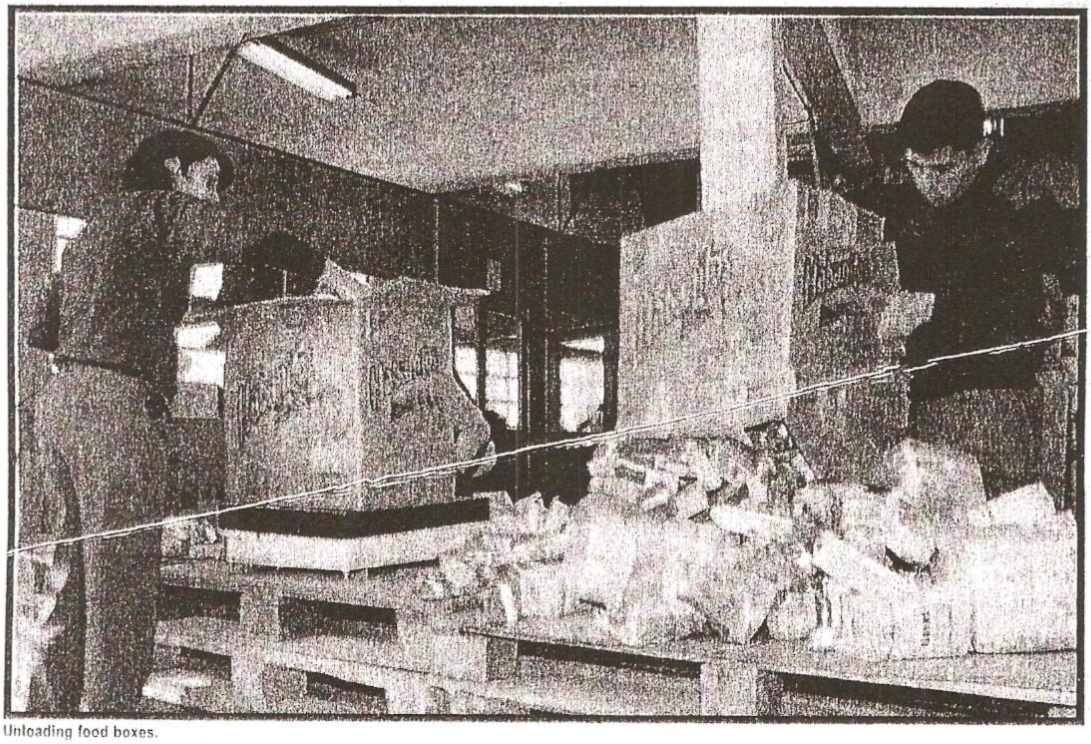
There is Marcela Avila, 29, her brown eyes set in a hard, flat stare. It is her first month at the soup kitchen. She was a maid, her husband a mason, her sister a high school teacher. All lost their jobs in the last year, and live together, along with their father, and her three children. She said her eldest boy, who is six, throws tantrums when hungry, and can't concentrate at school.

"If there were no *comedores* (soup kitchens), I don't know what I would do. What can I say? My children have to eat. They don't understand economic problems, you can't tell them there isn't anything."

With each day that passes in the economic crisis that started four years ago and intensified dramatically with the devaluation of the peso in January, these stories become more common in Buenos Aires and throughout the country. Every day 11,200 people in Argentina drop below the poverty line, earning less than three dollars a day. The national poverty rate stands at 51 percent, or over 18 million people, according to the federal gov-



Children under 12 who are malnourished will never completely recover, and suffer later in life.



Unloading food boxes.

Steve Camilli and Mercedes Schilling of the Food Bank of Argentina.

ernment statistics institute, INDEC. In the Buenos Aires metropolitan area alone, over half the population, roughly 6 million people, cannot afford basic goods and services, and a third of these people became impoverished in the last year.

The rapid rise in unemployment, now at a record high of 24.2 percent in greater Buenos Aires, has placed an unprecedented burden on charitable organizations. Neighborhood soup kitchens, like Los Piletones, have sprung up everywhere to satisfy the poor's most basic need. At a time when a debt-ridden government does not have the necessesary funds to fight hunger, non-governmental organizations, often started by families with no previous service. experience, have become the primary means of sustenance for thousands.

"The role of soup kitchens is so important. They are the wall against extreme hunger, which we've had in some provinces but never as badly as in the last two years," said Maria Rosa de Martini, the president of the Social Sector Forum, an umbrella organization of NGO's. "The advantage of these grass-roots civil society organizations is

that they're so flexible, so quick in organizing, and much cheaper to upgrade than government programs."

Precise estimates of the number of soup kitchens in the city do not exist, because many are informal operations without proper documentation. But according to Red Solidaria (Solidarity Network), a social needs information network, every five to seven days a new soup kitchen opens in greater Buenos Aires. The Food Bank of Argentina, which opened in April 2001, has distributed over 700,000 kilos of food to 240 soup kitchens and children's homes in the area.

"We have 800 organizations on our waiting list. We stopped putting people on our waiting list four months ago, and we get five to ten calls a day from institutions that want to become part of the food bank. There's got to be easily 2,000 institutions in greater Buenos Aires," said Steve Camilli, who helped found the food bank.

Despite the growing numbers, many soup kitchens are struggling against rising food prices and falling donations. The value of the Argentine peso has dropped 70 percent since December, and prices of subsistence foods are up 33 percent.

"Many of the soup kitchens are in danger of closing," Camilli said. "They have declining resources, the government's not paying them, food prices have gone up and at the same time there are more people asking to eat at soup kitchens."

At Los Piletones, the increase in attendance has coincided with a 50 percent drop in donations since January. Like most soup kitchens, Los Piletones relies on private companies, such as Disco supermarkets and Johnson & Johnson, as well as individual donors, to stay afloat.

Closer to the heart of the city, in the neighborhood of Los Flores, the Sol Naciente soup kitchen, specifically for children, is having similar problems meeting its demand. In February of 1999, nine children were abandoned by their mother near the house of Lidia Hernández, who took them in and began to feed and tutor them. As more children came, Hernández, 29, began an after-school study program, but "the kids would fall asleep on the table from hunger, they couldn't study. So I decided to start a soup kitchen," she said. Now 30 volunteers from the neighborhood help run the organization, whose attendance has grown in the past month from 350 to 500 children.

"The people continue donating but in smaller quantities. For example, the person that would give us 20 packets of noodles last year, today will give us six. We can't keep this going," said Hernandez. "The prices have increased tremendously since the devaluation. A 50-kilo bag of flour was 15 pesos, now it costs 68 pesos. A can of milk was 4 pesos, now it is 8. A bag of potatoes that cost 3 or 4 pesos in the market, is now 26 pesos. It's incredible."

To compound the organization's financial troubles, in May, thieves broke into the soup kitchen at night and stole flour, milk, bread-making equipment and ovens. Much of the equipment has not been replaced. Shortly afterwards, the only meat freezer broke.

"We don't serve meat anymore," Hernandez said bluntly.

What Sol Naciente now serves is standard fare for soup kitchens: noodle stew, *polenta* (corn meal), rice, potatoes—a high carbohydrate, low-protein diet. To bolster protein levels, the cooks from Sol Naciente are taking a course to learn how to prepare soy dishes, a trend throughout the city's soup kitchens.

"The food we give doesn't have the protein or vitamins the children need, we can't get the necessary meat or vegetables," Hernández said. "And it's not like these kids know what sugar is, or what a dessert is, or a glass of juice, unless they've seen them on television."

Argentina is the only country in Latin America without a national nutrition survey, and the most reliable information on child malnutrition comes from the Child Nutrition Study Center (CESNI), whose data collecting missions are funded by international institutions like the World Health Organization and UNICEF. Dr. Alejandro O'Donnell, the director of CESNI, acknowledged that soup kitchens are a temporary necessity, but warned that the diet they serve could lead to widespread stunted growth, and largely forgotten vitamin deficiency diseases like pellagra or beriberi.

"Soup kitchens are a solution for hunger, not a solution for malnutrition," he said. "Malnutrition is going to affect all children born in the last two years, for sure."

Dr. O'Donnell also cautioned against relying heavily on soy. "Protein is not a problem in Argentina, the problem is the quantity of calories and sufficient vitamins. Soy is being marketed like it's a panacea. It's ridiculous. It has no calcium, no iron, little zinc. You can't replace milk for small children."

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In greater Buenos Aires, 61 percent of children under two years old have Vitamin C deficiency, and 49 percent lack calcium and are anemic, according to CESNI's most recent statistics compiled from 1996 to 1999.

"If a child 12 years old gets very hungry and loses three kilos, he will be drowsy, will do poorly in school and not learn. But once he begins to receive food, he will regain the weight, without negative side effects. The problem is the small children. If small children do not receive food their lifelong development will be affected," Dr. O'Donnell said.

"In Jujuy, in northwest Argentina, our survey showed adolescents are seven centimeters shorter than in the city of Buenos Aires. It means those children are raised in awful conditions." Dr. O'Donnell said shantytowns around Buenos Aires had comparable nutritional levels to the poor rural provinces.

Beyond the dearth of funds, a major obstacle to improving nutrition and overall quality at soup kitchens is the lack of operational oversight. No governmental body regulates or maintains the standards of soup kitchens or other humanitarian NGO's. The Food Bank of

Argentina, the only food bank in the city, found early on that companies were wary of contributing to soup kitchens for fear the product would be squandered.

"Donors have been burned lots of times by people having stolen food, having not used food, people getting sick from the food. It was not the fault of the donor, but of a fraudulent or not clean soup kitchen," Steve Camilli said. "Lots of soup kitchens, especially here in Argentina, are by their nature informal organizations... and so what we're trying to do is convince donors that the food won't be wasted, that donors can feel comfortable."

To achieve this the food bank regularly makes site visits to the soup kitchens on its distribution list, will only donate to legally-constituted organizations that have been in existence for over six months, and, with the help of Second Harvest, the largest network of food banks in the United States, audit those organizations' operations.

Juan Carr, the founder of Red Solidaria, a prominent organization that offers publicity and referrals for individuals and organizations needing funding, agreed that soup kitchens should maintain certain health and transparency standards. But he rejected the suggestion that misuse of donations is common, or that governmental regulation is feasible at the moment.

"There is not a lot of corruption among the hungry in this country, the corruption is among those who are not hungry," Carr said. "When Argentina improves there should be more regulation, but during this social catastrophe there isn't time to regulate."

"In the future, hunger, health, education, and labour organizations should form relationships with the government," he added. "But now the government is totally out of control. The government doesn't exist."

At first glance, the economic crisis seems far from Juramento Street in Belgrano, the northern Buenos Aires neighborhood whose cinemas, outdoor cafes, and retail outlets bustle with activity. But inside the El Pobre de Asis soup kitchen, it is evident that all is not well, even in this upscale neighborhood.

Unlike most soup kitchens, El Pobre de Asis is specifically for adults, many of whom were formerly prosperous members of the middle class, who lost their jobs due to widespread privitization of state-run companies during the 1990's, or during the economic meltdown of the last four years.

"Not very long ago, these people were working professionals, renting houses, expecting to own," said Victor Russo, 44, who co-founded the soup kitchen in 1998. "They lost their jobs, their places to live, their pensions, later there weren't even manual labor jobs, and they were left totally in the street. Psychologically it is very destructive."

Russo tries to provide a welcoming atmosphere at the soup kitchen by offering more than a plate of food. The 450 people that pass through El Pobre de Asis on a daily basis have access to clothes, showers, legal and medical consultations, and unlike in other soup kitchens that operate at conveyer-belt speed, a place to relax. But like most soup kitchens, El Pobre de Asis's resources are strained to the breaking point, as a 70 percent decrease in donations from private companies has been accompanied a 30 percent increase in attendance since January. Despite the difficulties, Russo believes citizens and non-governmental organizations should take inspiration from the crisis to do more.

"The work of NGO's now is very critical, but we still haven't discovered how to be an important arm in the reconstruction of the country. We need to do more than provide necessities," he said.

"Citizens respect NGO's, and volunteerism continues to rise. The most important thing is that the people get involved, make a commitment to solidarity, not just because they want to be good, but because they want to be part of social justice."

Outside in the courtyard, Guillermo Williams seemed to be enjoying his afternoon. He chatted with a friend while waiting for a space to open up at a table in the cafeteria. A tall man with white hair and glasses, he wore a cardigan sweater, slacks and a brown blazer. When I approached he smiled broadly and rattled on about the soup kitchen, his favorite foods they served, the accommodating staff, the community atmosphere. When I asked about his own story, he sighed and said, "I was in a pretty good position once. Not much is left from those days."

It was a slow process of disintegration for Williams, a 54-year old homeless man who worked at a bank in downtown Buenos Aires for 25 years until 1994, when it was purchased by foreigners. Without a pension, he used his savings to start a taxi service, but he didn't have entrepreneurial experience, and the operation folded. He sold his house in 1997, rented an apartment, and found temporary work as a security guard. Williams, who is unmarried and without family in Buenos Aires, lost his last job two years ago, and now sleeps in plazas and train stations in Belgrano. His clothes were given to him by the soup kitchen.

Guillermo Williams: "It's disheartening. A part of you can't believe where you are. You used to have money and didn't think twice about spending it. Now you have nothing, it's a strange sensation.

"It's disheartening. A part of you can't believe where you are. You used to have money and didn't think twice about spending it. Now you have nothing, it's a strange sensation. I wasn't accustomed to begging. When I hit the bottom, it hurt me a lot. I feel like I've lived two lives," he said. "Most often I miss things like going out to see music or to the movies. I used to love to go to the movies. It probably sounds like a little thing to miss."

There were empty spaces now on the cafeteria benches, and Williams edged toward the door. "If you had asked me 25 years ago if the country would be where it is now, or I if would be where I am now, I would have said you were crazy," he said.

Then he laughed. "I'm sorry I don't have anything more positive to say." ■

Joshua Partlow recently completed an internship at the Herald.