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SPECIAL REPORT

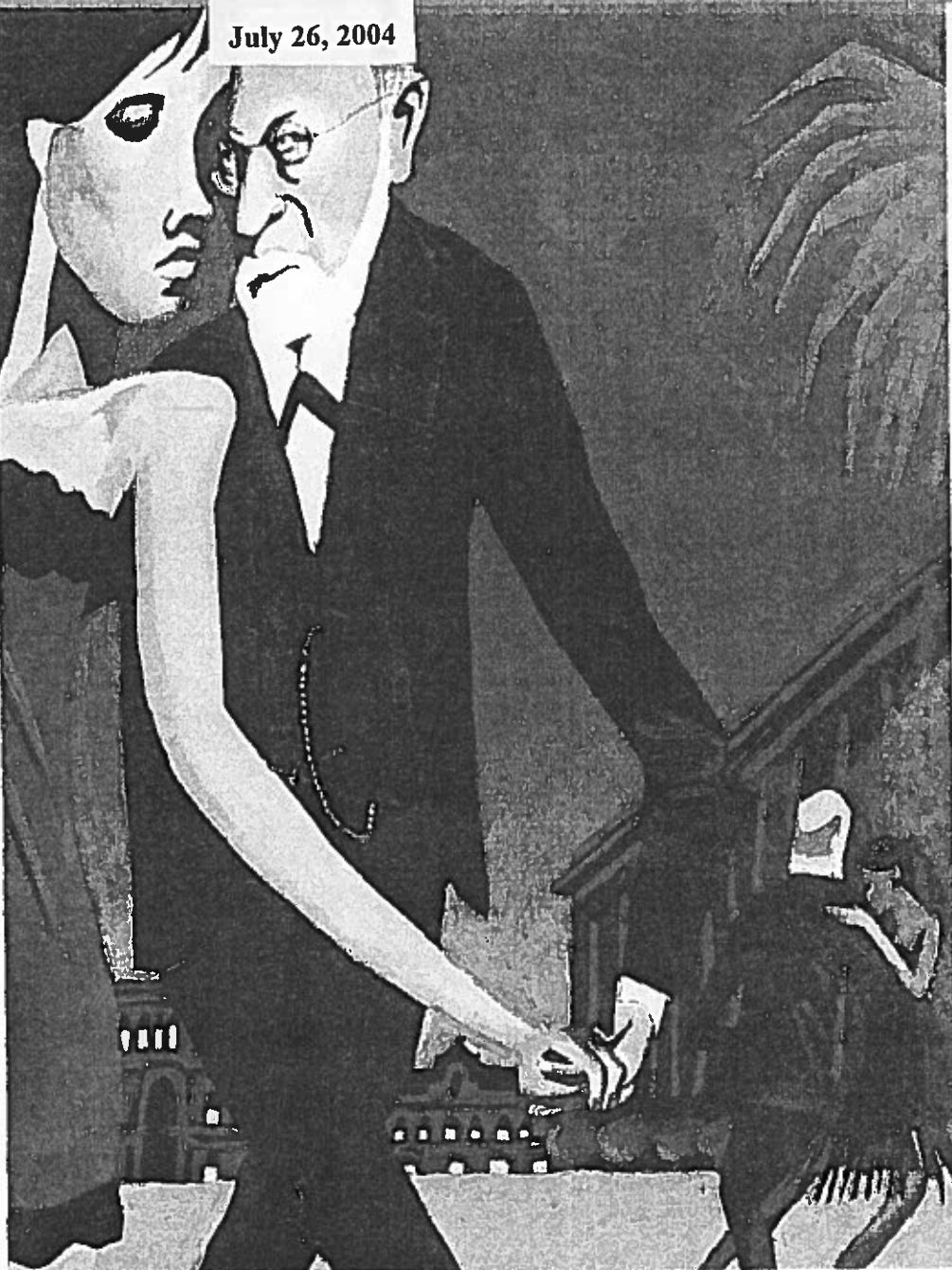
ARGENTINA

EASING
THE
MISERYA small army of
therapists soothes
a troubled nation

LIFE GOT YOU DOWN? In recent times, as an economic depression wiped out bank savings and millions of jobs, all too many Argentines would have said yes. That helps explain why the South American giant is said to have more psychoanalysts per capita than any place in the world—some 15,000 in the capital of Buenos Aires alone. Global psychoanalytic associations count one third more members there than in New York City. There's even a popular TV drama in the country called "Vulnerables," which tracks the lives of several youths through their group-therapy sessions.

The wealthy in Argentina have seldom been averse to seeing a shrink—many are descendants of European immigrants who were themselves traumatized by World War II, and are conversant with Freud and Jung. Private rates these days are cheap: about \$24 for an hour of talk, or one sixth the price in the 1990s, before the economy collapsed. Just before the crash, the government passed a law making mental-health care a universal right. (Similar laws exist in Italy, France, Spain and Britain.) And since then, public-awareness campaigns have championed the benefits of therapy for those traumatized by the economic turmoil.

Poor Argentines have taken advantage, flocking to free government-owned or low-cost community-service health clinics even though some patients barely have enough money for the 25 cent bus fare to get there. Clinics, over-



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whelmed by the demand for help, have scrambled to find qualified therapists or volunteers. The Liherman Center, a public clinic that charges \$9 a hour and is run by one of two prominent psychoanalyst associations in the capital, says demand this year has tripled.

Does all the counseling make a difference? Roger Montenegro, a Buenos Aires-based psychiatrist and secretary of education at the World Psychiatric Institute, says that therapy "helps resolve family and work conflicts, gives people the strength and confidence to look for work and makes them realize they are not alone." And an argument

can be made that the therapy has helped to ease tension in a country where angry protests and violence are common. "Social unrest feeds on misery," says Jorge Blidner, head of the mental-health-care unit at Children's Hospital in Buenos Aires. "We help diffuse family tension by treating children so that they go back to school, and their parents go back to work."

Now that the economy is showing signs of life, people are going back to work. And with help from therapists, the sense of despair that hung like a shroud over the country has been at least partially lifted.

—CAROLYN WHELAN