Revolutionary Spirit in the Wake of Argentina's Economic Meltdown, Jessica Mosby, *The WIP*, 8 mars 2008

- March 8th - Today we celebrate International Women's Day with our sisters and mothers, aunts and grandmothers, cousins and daughters, and most of all, with our writers, who have become family. On this important day, we find it appropriate that Jessica's review is of a film about a group of remarkable women in Argentina who found their voices and by doing so transformed themselves from victims into successful entrepreneurs. The women of Brukman are yet further proof that women who empower themselves cannot be stopped. - Ed.

Christmas should be a happy time for families to congregate over lengthy meals while watching little kids open presents, but in 2001 Argentina's economy collapsed a week before the holiday. Almost immediately factories shut down, business owners fled the country, and low-paid workers were out of their jobs just when everyone needed a little extra money. Yuletide joy was harder to find than a job. However the amazing women featured in the documentary film The Women of Brukman didn't let the crumbling economy destroy their livelihoods, their spirit, or their Christmas.

The ninety minute documentary film, which is currently being screened at film festivals, follows a group of working class women who were employed at the Brukman garment factory in Buenos Aires as they fought for three years to operate the factory as a cooperative. Unwittingly, they started a movement in Argentina that has led to over 20,000 workers forming cooperatives to run over 200 formerly abandoned businesses. Director Isaac Isitan, who is Turkish by way of Canada, met the women while filming another movie in Argentina. He was so captivated by their spirit that he started filming. As he said during the Q&A at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival, "They are inspiring people!"

One day in late 2001, the workers of the Brukman garment factory arrived for their shifts, only to find that the factory's owners had fled the country – neglecting to pay anyone! The predominately female workforce decided to go about their jobs just like it was any other day; no one had any extra money and, with the recent economic collapse, few employment opportunities elsewhere. Everyone assumed that the

Brukman family would eventually return to Buenos Aires and want the factory back.

Having taken over the factory's operations, the workers then found documents proving that the Brukman family had evaded taxes and cheated the workers – which could have explained their flight. They also learned that while the factory was profitable, the workers were paid only a pathetic pittance (two to five pesos a week). Before long the workers realized that the bosses weren't really needed; running the factory was easier than it had seemed. So they kept making men's dress clothes, while stores kept coming by the showroom and placing orders. The workers, who were only accepting cash, then divided each week's profits evenly.

Celia, a curly-haired mother of grown children, found her political voice speaking on behalf of the factory during the long struggle for cooperative ownership; she summed up the situation in her traditionally out-spoken way: "We have proven that workers are capable of running a factory without an owner, without any bosses."

Unfortunately, their utopian system was too good to be true – at least in the eyes of the Argentine government. In March of 2002 the Brukmans' lawyers had the police evict everyone. The workers protested the eviction and, with the help of a changing political climate, were eventually allowed to re-enter the factory and continue working. But that victory was short-lived. In November the police closed the factory again, this time arresting a number of employees.

In April of 2003 the situation took a fateful turn when police barricaded the factory, shot protestors with rubber bullets, and used water trucks to hose everyone down. Isitan captured the dramatic events with harrowing footage that captivated and saddened me during the screening. The police used the law to justify their violence and only confirmed the reality that the factory workers didn't have anything but their will to prevail as defense.

But the protestors were not easily silenced. For eight months and eleven days, the women of Brukman protested non-stop. They set up a camp (appropriately named "resistance square") in front of the factory, and started sewing children's clothes to donate to recent

flood victims. The long months of living in tents with no proper bathrooms took a toll on the mothers and grandmothers who dominated the workforce, but their relentless commitment to the factory and their futures kept everyone going. Most people would not stand up to police once, much less three times; the women's courage and persistence is nothing short of astonishing.

The workers' protest chant embodied their attitude: "*Brukman belongs to the workers, whoever doesn't like it can go to hell!*"

Eventually everyone was allowed to re-enter the factory and the cooperative was granted legal control of the business' operations and ownership of all the equipment. Today, the factory is a profitable cooperative despite an ongoing struggle over the building. Under the agreement between the factory and the Argentine government, the government owns the building and the factory must make monthly payments to eventually buy the building back. Valued at close to a million dollars, it may take the factory over twenty years of payments to the buy the building. Many of the workers thought the government should have given the building to the cooperative.

The film's strong political message is conveyed by footage and interviews revealing how the Argentine government favored the wealthy and corrupt business owners over the workers, who were only trying to do their jobs. Despite their documentation that the Brukman family had evaded taxes, neglected to pay its workers, and fled the country, the government was still willing to take the lawyers' word that the workers had stolen sewing machines and illegally assumed control of the factory's operations.

"Right before my very eyes, I witnessed a change in power structure: neighborhood and inter-neighborhood assemblies replaced corrupt and fallen governments... When governments lose their legitimacy, mutiny becomes necessary. Argentineans exercised that right by reinventing their local economy and by occupying abandoned factories… As did the Brukman women," says Isitan in his official director's statement.

The women of Brukman not only managed to run a large business successfully with no experience or education, but somehow they also

summoned up the will to unite against a government that rewarded corruption and the ruthless exploitation of workers. In this context, their struggle and eventual triumph seems even more extraordinary.

But the heart of the film rests in how the workers completely changed the factory's operations and attitudes; happier workers led to increased profit margins. For instance, the Brukmans had never allowed music or talking in the workroom. Juan Carlos, a young, attractive, pony-tailed technician who maintains the factory's equipment said that the Brukmans' policies "stripped him of [his] dignity." This quickly changed under the cooperative's management and the workroom atmosphere transformed from morgue-like to lively and fun almost overnight.

The cooperative attitude extended to training: instead of each person only knowing how to do their own job, workers began training each other in an effort to expand everyone's skills. This meant that the workers and daily tasks became interchangeable – and profits increased accordingly, with workers making 150 to 250 pesos a week. Many found hidden talents. Matilde, a cute and petite maternal type, took over the sales office and showroom and found what she was born to do: sales. She clearly enjoyed her new responsibilities, and relished her successful negotiations with male-dominated clothing stores. Matilde's newfound confidence proved contagious.

Even though the government did not support the Brukman factory when it was cooperatively run, many Argentina clothing stores patronized Brukman as a way to support local cooperative businesses. The factory in turn hired more workers to meet increasing demands, making a small contribution to help lower the country's soaring unemployment rate. In one touching scene, the huge presses break while the factory was under a tight deadline to complete an order of 500 pants. Chaos and panic briefly ensued, but then everyone banded together to frantically finish sewing and then ironing the pants.

The film is a true testament to the triumph of the human spirit in the face of adversity. The workers, some of whom commuted two hours each way on public transportation, never doubted their ability to operate the factory or the validity of their claim. Even though none of

the workers had ever had a voice before, once in control of the factory, the women found their revolutionary spirit. Grandmothers who had spent their lives raising a family started reading Karl Marx and putting up posters of Leon Trotsky in the workroom; I half-expected the women to start donning Che Guevera style berets.

Of course, especially during the stressful standoffs with police, conflicts amongst the workers were inevitable: some were ideological disagreements (Marx vs. Trotsky) while others were logistical (should tardy workers be docked pay), but ultimately everyone united. As Delicia, a statuesque woman with a personality to match, says, “What we want now is to be able to work and earn our salaries.”

My only real criticism of the film is that the intricacies of Argentinean political and economic policies were never fully explained; the film seemed to presume that everyone in the audience was already familiar with the government’s policies and terminology. Still, this is a small quibble. The Women of Brukman truly is a spirit-lifting piece of documentary film making.

Watching these women find their talents and their political voices in the middle of their country’s economic meltdown is truly moving. They were among the displaced and cheated workers suffering all over Argentina, but instead of giving up and going home, they took matters into their own hands. Who would have ever thought that a group of underpaid and unhappy workers could start a cooperative revolution that is still going strong today?

About the Author Jessica Mosby is a writer and critic living in Berkeley, California. In the rare moments when she's not traveling across the United States for work, Jessica enjoys listening to public radio, buying organic food at local farmers markets, trolling junk stores, and collecting owl-themed tchotchke.