

LETTER FROM BUENOS AIRES BY MADELEINE POULIN



On the road into Buenos Aires from the airport, wisps of fog trail along the ground. True to Sunday tradition, residents of the capital, *porteños*, dot the semi-rural scenery preparing *parillada*, the gaucho's barbecue, next to their locally assembled Renaults and Fiats....

Nostalgia for the pampas persists in this city which faces the Atlantic, a city that is simultaneously reminiscent of Paris, Madrid and Italy, and is home to one-third of all Argentines.

"A city that consumes what the rest of the country produces," observes a woman who knows what she is talking about. Amalia Delacroze Fortabat owns huge estates in the hinterlands, and lives in sumptuous style in Buenos Aires. "Amalita is Peronist," our driver announces before dropping us at her prestigious address.

"But," he adds, "she was a radical with the radicals, and a militarist under the military." Our cynical driver, like eighty percent of Argentines, is of Italian descent.

Male servants, with the bearing of a head-of-state's security guards, take us in tow and lead us to a sitting room where a white-gloved butler offers us coffee. As soon as she enters the room, and without waiting for questions, Mrs. Fortabat launches into a tirade on the foreign debt, the dollar's rise against the *austral*, and the resulting runaway inflation. She is not suffering personally of course, since the products she exports earn dollars, but she knows that others, outside the privileged dollar economy, must cope with prices that rise by the day or even by the hour. Crisis reigns.

"In times of crisis," she explains, "the people need someone who speaks their language." This heiress to an "old money" Argentine fortune, who generations later still clings to her French passport, then proceeds to sing the praises of the provincial *caciques* (political bosses), especially Peronist Carlos Menem. He is a product of

the other Argentina – the fertile hinterland – which does not look to Europe, like Buenos Aires, but toward the South American continent. "I know Carlos Menem personally, and I'm not afraid," she says. A country boy, the son of Syrian immigrants, "Peron's heir" has the blessing of the Argentine oligarchy.

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"Of course, these people fear nothing!" explodes an Argentine friend, less well off, but just as Europeanized as Mrs. Fortabat. He gives me to understand that thirty or forty of "these people" with their enormous reserves of dollars can easily sow economic chaos, discredit one government, and have another elected that better serves their interests.

Paranoia? Perhaps, but there are many who fear Peronism and Menem, and they certainly form the majority of Argentines that visitors from the North are likely to meet. They work in the universities, the press and the publishing houses. Their view of Peronism differs little from that of many diplomats posted to Buenos Aires: "Democracy under siege."

"But what democracy?" A European-educated businessman who has opted for Peronism notes with irony: "The problem with Argentines, the ones who live in Buenos Aires, is that we think we're Europeans. And we hide from the fact that behind a demo-

cratic facade, an old system of domestic colonialism persists." "Belgium in Ethiopia," he adds by way of illustration. So much for the democracy regained six years ago under Raul Alfonsin – a period that ended in economic disaster.

What will democracy be like under the Peronist Menem? "We are entering into a social contract that will reconcile the interests of the various groups," says the businessman. The state as referee. The Peronists have an initial advantage in this role, since they have traditionally enjoyed the support of the unions. It is certainly not a revolution; it is even insurance against revolution. But it evokes the cor-

poratism so dear to Franco and Mussolini, and practised to some extent by Peron from 1946 to 1955, and yet again briefly in the mid-1970s. On both occasions, Peron had been democratically elected. And each time, the experience ended in a military coup.

General Lanusse lives in a small apartment strewn with mementoes of his glorious career. Before retiring on a modest pension, he was President of the Republic. In 1973, he headed the transition between a military regime and the election of Peron. His entire career has been haunted by Peronism, an ideology he abhors and for which he still has "no clear definition." What he now fears, given the past record, is abuse of power and disorder. He is not alone in predicting chaos, but unlike others, he does not believe the army will want to seize power again: "A military coup is not the answer. It does not produce the desired results and it seriously harms the army." He does admit, however, that some elements of the military might be tempted. After all, how can one overlook the chronic militarism that afflicts Argentina?

Escorting us back to the elevator, he recalls with sadness the Argentina of the 1930s; it was just as prosperous as Canada and Australia. "But we are unstable. There is no consensus in this country, only narrow self-interest."

Appropriately enough, it was in the countryside where we met the person who claims to reconcile all of these interests – first, in the midst of a frenzied crowd in a village, then at home, in the Governor of Rioja's residence, and finally, in the hamlet of his birth, in the same poor, remote province where his family still tends a vineyard. Behind the facade of provincial playboy, tennis ace and bush pilot, I found a rather diminutive, introverted and fairly reasonable man. Is he the Andean demagogue portrayed by his critics? Andean, definitely. Carlos Menem has no nostalgia for Europe. His loyalty is to South America and his goal is Latin-American unity to counter the North American and European economic blocs. "We live in a world committed to universalism, but first we must create continental unity."

But isn't the real first job to create today's Argentina; letting the nostalgia for Europe and for the golden years of the pampas fade away so that the Argentine people can start referring to "our" country, rather than "this" country – *este pais* – as they do now? And does today's answer lie in the wizardry of a Peronist-style contract?

I watch Carlos Menem's Cessna take off from the country road improvised as a landing strip. As it weaves against the backdrop of mountains, the small plane looks very fragile, and I wonder how the man behind the controls will be able to put his country back on the road to progress, and keep it there. □

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