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A Puzzle Whose Pieces Do Not Fit Together

The Anquish and the Wonder of Being a Gender Fellow in Argentina

By Martha Farmelo

SEPTEMBER 18, 2002

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina–The other night I dreamed that Argentina was a puzzle whose jagged-edged pieces did not fit together. One obvious interpretation is that my analytical capacities are being stretched by the rapid flow of momentous current events, and indeed, they are. But as I looked down on my hands shifting the thin, ragged, mud-colored pieces—seeing that their union was impossible—I felt a distinct sense of alarm that Argentina's crisis, in its economic, political, social and cultural dimensions, is simply unsolvable.

The wonder of life in Argentina includes a multitude of lovely parks, almost all with playgrounds. Our son Camilo took this picture of Alan and me in Parque Las Heras, two blocks from our apartment.

It is a thought that during the day I actively avoid, partly on principle but also to preserve my mental health.

For daily life in Argentina is a complex clash of joy and anguish. On the one hand there is the wonder of stumbling upon young couples dancing tango in the early evening in a café near home, or of late-night dinners that go on for hours around our rectangular, mesquite table with beloved, opinionated friends.

On the other hand, there is the utter disgust and frustration of witnessing poverty and hunger shoot up around us while the government convulses with political activity but ultimately has no plan for resolving the ever-deepening crisis. It takes a particular set of emotional resources to live with this clash—things like sheer resilience and an appreciation for black humor.

At the same time, for this ICWA fellow, every day is marked by that often

Broadening My Fellowship

Recently, Suzanne and Bob McColl, the sponsors of my fellowship, offered the suggestion that the gender aspect of my work may be too specific. What is happening today in Argentina is so momentous and compelling, they argued, that I should not feel confined to looking at all the events and issues through that lens. While I do not intend to abandon gender issues, I plan to take advantage of this broader opportunity and am grateful to the McColl's for their wisdom and flexibility.

magical experience of discovery. As a result, life is rich, every day, even when what I discover is a mix of the wondrous and the outright horrifying. I am often surprised that this type of life is not tiresome. On the contrary, every day here is fascinating, even if our four-year-old son is sick and my only trip out of the house is to the pharmacy. I would not want to be anywhere else right now but here.

The Wonder of It All

Children's birthday parties tend to be elaborate affairs with an ongoing, hired show for one or two dozen kids and scrumptious finger food and drinks for the parents and other adults. Like multitudes of middle-class Argentines, most everyone we know lives in an apartment and therefore rents a *casa de fiesta,* or party space, for their kid's celebration. One day, Camilo was invited to a party at the home of twin schoolmates whose parents are about to move to Spain. Since they could not afford the *casa de fiesta,* they invited the children only.

After dropping off our charges, a group of mothers and I walked around the quiet, residential streets. We strolled under tall jacaranda trees, past wall-to-wall apartment buildings alternating between aged, elaborate, two- or three-story constructions with French windows and taller, plain, contemporary structures sporting dozens of balconies. Finally we found an old-style, run-down, corner café, pulled two square tables together that were outside on the sidewalk and settled ourselves into white, plastic chairs to pass the time until the party was over.

After we ordered a round of espressos, like dozens of Argentines before her one mother named Mónica asked me out of the blue, "So why do you want to be here instead of the United States?" But rather than hearing my answer, and though she has never lived in the US, she went on to talk generally yet passionately about how great life is *there* and how lousy it is *here* in Argentina.

The four other mothers on the scene became immediately and uniformly angry. Accustomed to questions like Mónica's, I was startled by their outburst.

"If all you care about is consumption, move to the US," Silvia snapped at Mónica.

"There are other, more important things besides a house and a car," said Marita. "If all you're looking for is to spend your life in a shopping mall, fine," she added with scorn.

This exchange gave me an unusual opening for talking about the things I treasure about being in Argentina. The list is long.

I started by mentioning the exceptional quality of preschools, including the superior training pre-school teachers receive. Furthermore, Buenos Aires is by far the most child-friendly city I have ever seen. There are parks everywhere, big or small, *all with playgrounds*. Numerous museums have special activities for young ones. Each weekend there are dozens of inexpensive theater and puppet shows for kids, and many restaurants have play areas.

I explained how in the US our social calendar was always booked up three weeks in advance, and how much I enjoy our more spontaneous social life here. I pointed out that Argentina's café life rivals that of Paris, and that I value how people still spend extended, unrushed time together. I mentioned how enjoyable it is to see tango *in situ* and how nightlife in Buenos Aires —music, food, lectures, movies, theater—while somewhat deteriorated, is still ever a marvel to me. The options for seeing foreign and national films are generally excellent and movie theaters—even subdivided ones—preserve huge screens and sloping, alternating seats that make movie-going an enormous pleasure.

The old and the new are constantly juxtaposed. The building on the left is a retirement home.

The other mothers nodded when I mentioned how I cannot take my eyes off the majestic, old European architecture, and how convenient and enjoyable it is to live with such amazingly extensive and efficient public transportation. "I can take a single bus from anywhere to anywhere in this city!," I blurted out.

For some reason, I held off men-

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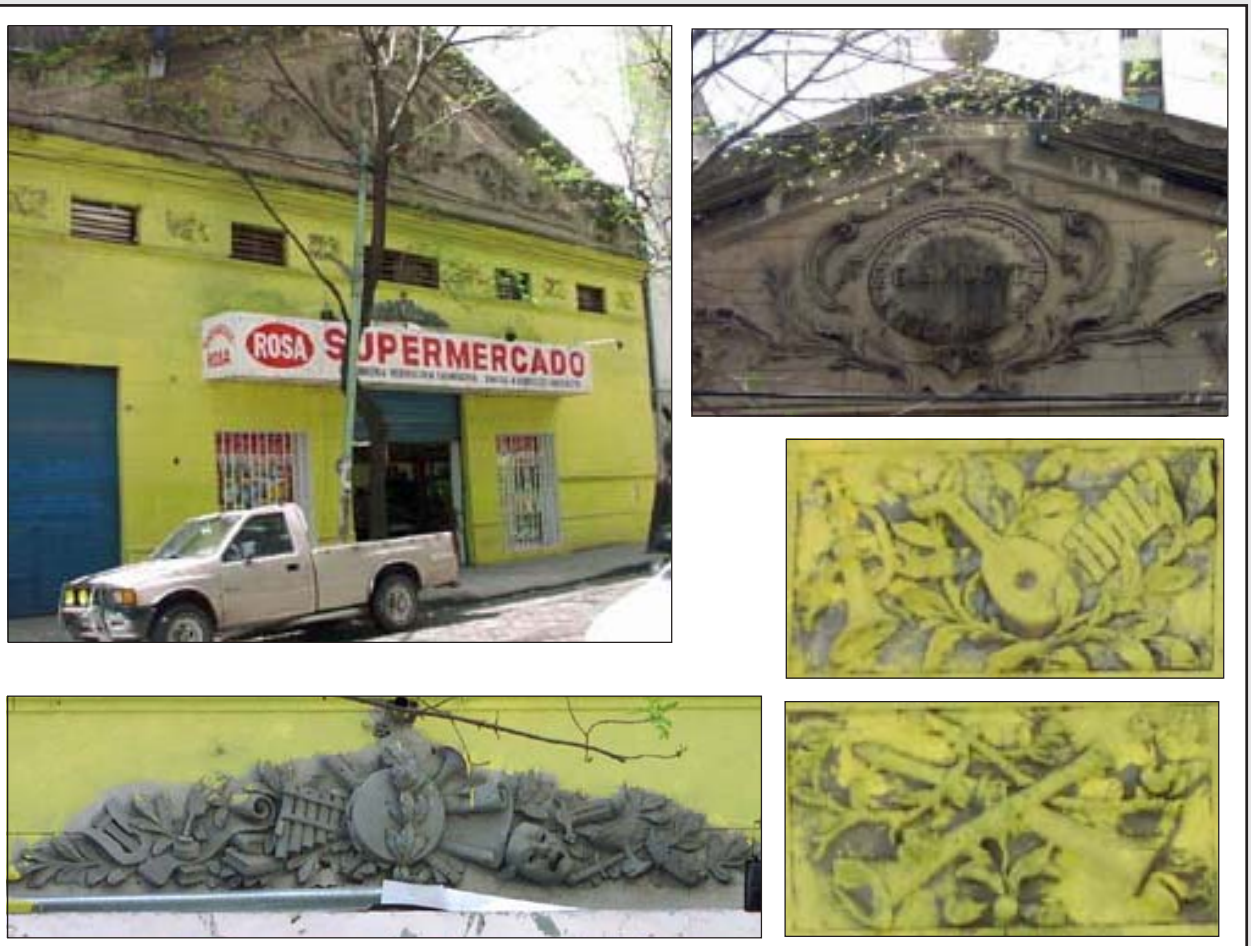


The Societá Italiana di Mutuo Soccorso, founded in 1889. My partner Alan remembers that when he was young, a schoolteacher told him that "E Pur Si Muove," (top right) *Italian for "And Yet It Moves," is what Galileo said after the Inquisition pulled out his eyes because he had asserted that the earth was not the center of the universe.*

Savoring Buenos Aires Neighborhoods

The other afternoon I had to run out to buy bread at the bakery and lettuce at the green grocer's. After days of cold and rain the weather had turned mercifully spring-like. Though the temperature was still only in the 50s, I felt a rush of internal warmth when the acne-faced adolescent who waits tables at the Café Quijote across the street from home smiled shyly and said a timid "Good day" from his work-place doorway. A few minutes later I exchanged waves with Camilo's 30-something barber, Daniel, as he escorted an elderly client to his home, arm-in-arm, the two of them chatting away. As she often does, Alejandra at the bakery gave me an extra little bag with a couple ofcroissants called *medias lunas* for Camilo. "For the *gordito* ("the little chubby one," a term of endearment)," she said, grinning. That 15-minute outing made my day.

Another afternoon, headed for a meeting with Ernesto Goncalves Da'Rocha, a male dance therapist and ballet dancer, I took the number 92 bus a half-block from home and got off about four blocks from the Italian Hospital, founded by the Italian Mutual Benefit Society, which dates back to 1852. As I headed toward the corner café in front of the hospital, I was thrilled to find myself in what I took to be an historically Italian neighborhood: I passed the Associazione Corigliano Calabro, a current-day social club for immigrants from the southern Italian province of Cosenza, and a few blocks away, a supermarket housed in what used to be an Italian Mutual Aid Society. If nothing else, I could walk the various neighborhoods of Buenos Aires for two years and never grow tired of their variety.

tioning that I value a political spectrum that is much wider than in the US—Argentina has a generally well-respected range of leftist activists, organizations and commentators and even a well-read leftist daily newspaper. I also desisted from pointing out how I fancy the fluidity with which so many Argentines curse, since I imagine few would concur that this raises the quality of life.

I did tell Mónica how much I love the pace and feel of life in our middle-class Buenos Aires neighborhood. Directly across the street we have a bakery, a café and a 24-hour pharmacy. Within a three-block radius of our apartment we have a shoe repair, an optical store, Camilo and Alan's barber shop, my hair and waxing salons, an ice-cream parlor, a dry cleaner, a fruit and vegetable store, a key-maker, a sizable grocery store, a cyber-café, even a button store.

As I said all this, Mónica looked at me as if I were from Mars, not the US. I wrapped up my speech by explaining that it is important to me that Camilo know his Argentine Granny, Granddad, Aunt Cristina and Uncle Martín here in Buenos Aires. Last but not least I enjoy most Argentines' warmth, helpfulness and biting sense of humor.

There is no doubt that because I am foreign I see and celebrate things that many Argentines take for granted—like practically all of the above. I learned this for the first time last November while chatting in his office with Rolando Julián Bompadre, a congressional aide to a Peronist senator from the province of La Pampa (see MJF-3).

Trying to explain how exciting it was to have arrived in Buenos Aires, I said to him, "Look out the window. See the building on the corner? Those long windows and elegant balconies are incredible to me. I never tire of looking at them."

"Look at the building just next to it," he said. "It's horrible." And he was right. It was a dark, ugly, modern thing.

"I didn't even *see* that building," I told him.

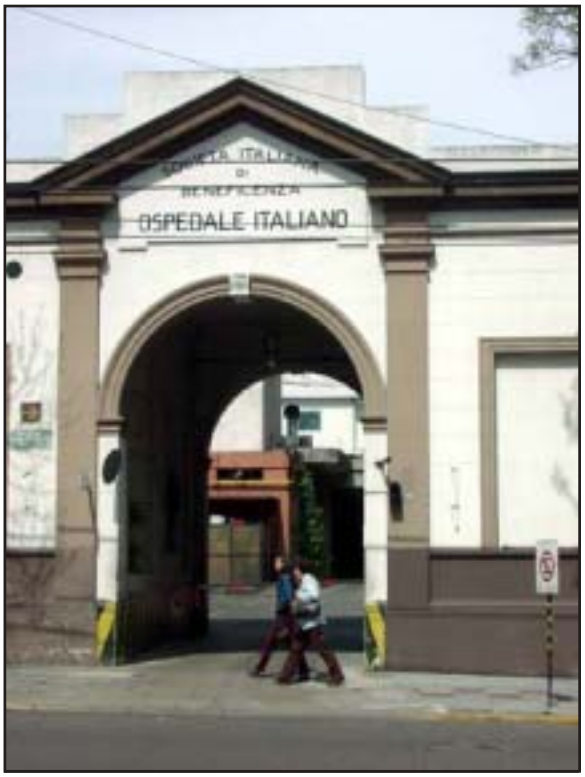
"I don't see the one on the corner," he replied. He went on to complain about all the broken sidewalks and the deplorable state of bus stops. I listened carefully but I could not relate.

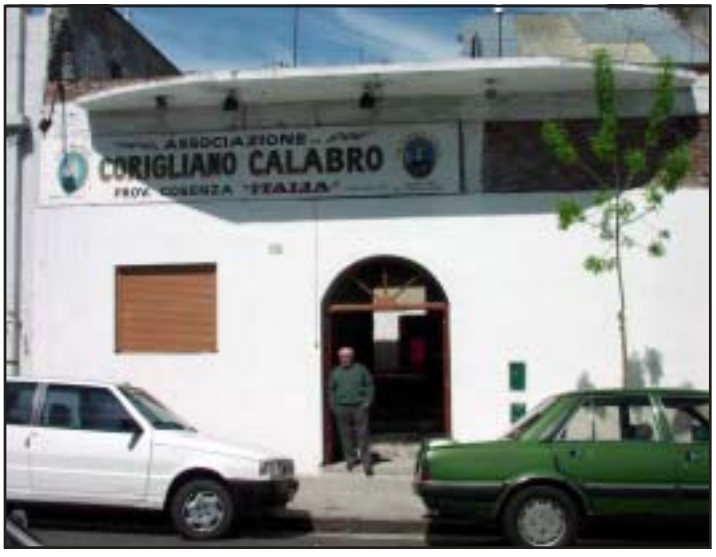
Julián Bompadre, Senate aide from the province of La Pampa.

When I first arrived in Argentina, given the economic crisis, I felt almost guilty about being pleased to be here. Then, after listening to so many Argentines complain about their country, I decided it was a good thing that people like us arrive, are excited to be here, and say so. Lately, these matters have become far more complex.

The Horror of It All

Quite simply, though I welcome the economic stability provided by my fellowship, it is hard to enjoy being here when for most Argentines daily life is so precarious. Some chronically unemployed men and women I met with in La Matanza in the province of Buenos Aires





The Italian Hospital and, a few blocks away, the Associazione Corigliano Calabro, a social-club for immigrants from the Southern Italian province of Cosenza.

told me that so many pregnant women give up food so their (already-born) kids can eat that the incidence of undernourished newborns is rising rapidly. "Our children are starving before they are even born," one woman said.

And I will never forget the night an anxious mother was cradling her feverish young child at the crowded barter club down the street from us where people trade everything from used clothing to manicures for barter currency called *créditos.* This woman was waiting to spend 30 credits to see a pediatrician who was examining kids behind a stained, white curtain.

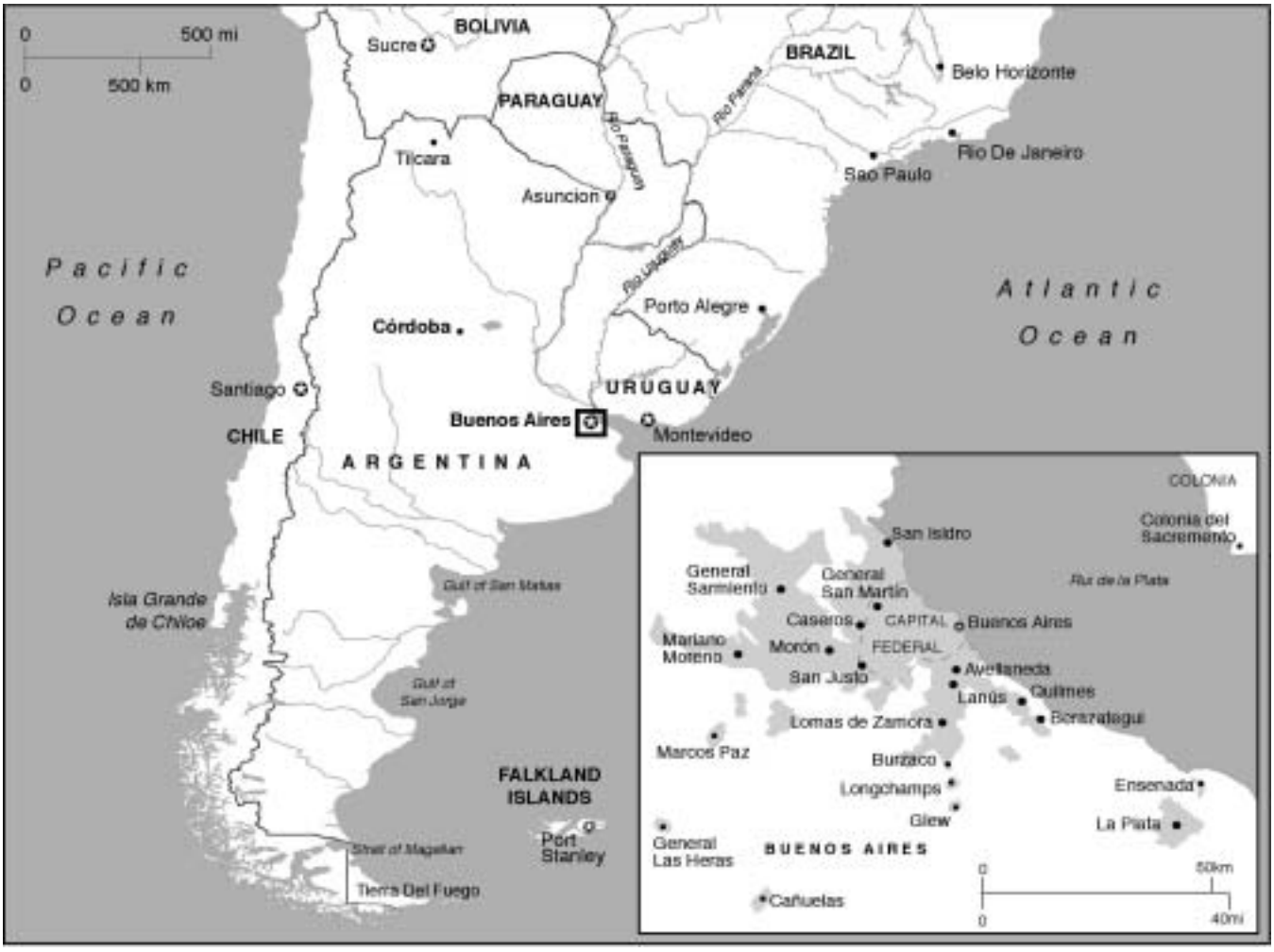
I simply cannot imagine relying on barter clubs for health care if Camilo were running a high fever. How did she even know which barter sites have pediatricians on which nights? How far did she and her little one have to travel to come to this site, and did they have to come by bus? Did her child take sick that day, or did she have to wait for a day or days to see a pediatrician? I confess that in that particular moment, I did not have the emotional fortitude to ask her those questions.

Even for once solidly middle-class Argentines, daily life is often frighteningly uncertain. One of my best friends' husbands free-lances with digital photography and websites. He has tons of work but does not often get paid, and wife Marisa had already told me that neither they nor their two kids have health insurance. However, I was absolutely taken aback one afternoon as we sat on a broken wooden bench in the botanical garden while our kids hung over the concrete edge of a shallow, long, rectangular pool, peering under the lily pads at the huge, orange goldfish.

Marisa mentioned in passing—just slipped it into the conversation—that they do not always know if they will have food to eat the next day. I tried to act as nonchalant as she, which was a strain. Truth is, Marisa is unflappably optimistic. She certainly bucks the tide of Argentines desperately seeking low-cost therapies for panic attacks, phobias and depression.

Another day I found myself in a real heart-to-heart about marriage and parenting while stuck in traffic with another female friend. Francesca is a psychologist who has been working overtime since her husband Fabio, an architect, lost his job more than a year ago. They are comfortable economically and even have a maid, but Francesca is frustrated that Fabio does so little to help out with their two-year-old daughter and their home. Almost every time they try to discuss this, they fight. In fact, more than frustrated, she is furious, depleted and overwhelmed.

"I've lived through a lot of crises, even the dictator-



ship," she said. "But I've never before felt so strongly that rather than external, it's internal. It's invading my home."

The downward economic spiral is often chilling to observe. One of the first things I noticed when I arrived here was the shocking number of empty billboards on Avenida 9 de Julio, billed as the world's widest avenue. Just recently a kitchen store, bank branch, ice cream parlor and clothing shop within a couple of blocks of our apartment all closed. I wished I had had my camera in hand to capture the heartbreaking image of a man carefully spray-painting his shoe-store window on Avenida Santa Fe to announce "Final Clearance—We're Closing For Good."

Looking down Avenida 9 de Julio (below). *The crisis is inescapable. As I took this picture, the guy with the backpack* (above) *pointed to the obelisk and called out, "It's the only good thing we have left!"*

We never assume that anyone is employed, even if they were employed last week. I learned this lesson with Zulma, the mother of Camilo's school-mate, Francisco, whose birthday is just three days after Camilo's. In April, Zulma invited me to go half-ies on a 250-peso birthday party for the two of them at Burger King, then the basic equivalent of a 250-dollar party in the US. In spite of all my objections to fast-food multinationals, I agreed since Burger King is the cheapest option in town.

As we sat with a Burger King manager at one of those immovable tables, I was almost embarrassed at the extravagance of paying my share in pesos while Zulma paid hers in restaurant coupons (a work benefit) and LECOP. (LECOP are national bonds, not to be confused with *patacones*, the provincial bonds described in MJF-1.)

Then one morning about four months ago, as we chatted in front of the school after dropping off our little boys, Zulma told me that she had just lost her job at American Express, very unexpectedly. I felt as if I were confronted with a sort-of death.

"I'm so sorry to hear that," I said. "How difficult."

Zulma said, "No…it's just that it was a surprise. I knew they were going to let people go, but I had no idea whatsoever that I was among them."

I am unsure of the specifics and did not feel comfortable asking, but my impression is that her husband is working far less than full-time. I find it almost impossible to ask how her job search is going, since I can only imagine that it is going nowhere. Yet it is also awkward *not* to ask, to know that she is unemployed and act like nothing has changed.

In this context, with rare exception, I never propose to friends a social activity that costs money. Rather than go to the movies, I might suggest seeing a video at home. Even the zoo costs 7.90 pesos per adult (up from 4.90 a couple of months ago), so that's out. Better to look at the fish at the botanical garden or think creatively about how to entertain kids in other public spaces. Even bottom-of-the-line McDonalds can be prohibitively expensive, so if we get hungry, I suggest heading to our place as if I am suddenly quite excited about cooking.

And I am always prepared to take buses, even if the kids are going nuts because we have stayed out way past their bed-time. One can insist on springing for a cab only so often before it becomes uncomfortable for our friends, even those with whom we talk candidly about such matters. In terms of crime, buses are much safer than taxis anyway, so sometimes I don't mind.

Meanwhile, reading the paper is always risky for one's emotional health. In addition to one disturbing story

after another, readers are bombarded by a stream of appalling statistics. On July 26, 2002 we learned that 49 percent of Argentines were living under the poverty line. A mere four weeks later, we woke up to headlines announcing that that proportion has crept up to 53 percent and is likely to rise by as much as ten points before the year ends.

No less than seven of every ten kids in this country are poor (that is, their family cannot afford a basic "basket" of food, other goods and services). *Four of them are indigent* (*i.e.* they cannot afford even the most minimal caloric and protein requirements)—a euphemism for the fact that they are *hungry.*

Even those who work are at risk. In May, 2002, *La Nación* reported that half of private sector employees—that is 3.3 million workers—are unable to purchase basic foodstuffs for the average family of five. Readers may remember Ester Velázquez, the wife of José Luis Mendoza, who was featured in MJF-7 (*Proving the World Bank's Gender Division Wrong: A Working-Class, Argentine House-Husband Bucks All the Stereotypes*). Ester works overtime Monday through Friday and often on Saturdays. Discounting bus fare, she earns about 500 pesos per month, while Jos Luis brings home 150 LECOP from his 20-hour-per-week workfare position.

"I don't know what we're going to do," she told me recently. Her principal employer is chronically late in paying her.

"Sometimes I don't have the money to pay the bus fare. I just paid the electric bill for us and for my parents, 138 pesos. Sometimes we don't eat…sometimes for two days at a time. I don't care if I don't eat, but my kids…"

Her normally luminous eyes filled with tears. I spent the next few days imagining—for the first time, really—just exactly how I would feel if my son Camilo, or myself and his father, were to go hungry. I spent many hours feeling tense, tearful and exhausted.

Meanwhile, on August 13, *Página/12* reported that the distribution of income in Argentina has never been more skewed. All sectors of the population saw their income decrease, but the lowest ten percent lost 30 percent of their incomes while the highest ten percent lost only 15 percent. Overall, Argentines' buying power dropped 40 percent between May 2001 and May 2002.

This cartoon came out in Página/12 *during the two weeks of winter vacation in July. It reads, "I've already scheduled all the activities for this vacation: On Monday, I have to explain to the kids why I can't take them to the zoo…on Tuesday I have to find an excuse for not going to the movies…on Wednesday…"*

Please take a moment to imagine this 40 percent loss happening to you.

As if that were not enough, according to *La Nación,* a mere 3.4 percent of Argentine families are able to save any part of their income—forget home-buying or a dignified retirement, let alone a cushion for a (very) rainy day. In the majority of public universities, only six percent of engineering students graduate, prompting predictions that the country will soon experience a shortage of engineers. More than a million Argentines age 15 to 24 are neither studying nor working, but are categorized as being in *inactividad absoluta*. In the last ten years the life expectancy for women in the suburbs surrounding Buenos Aires dropped more than seven percent. And so on.

Numerous friends of mine say they are careful to measure how much they look at the television news or read the paper. Yet the crisis is simply inescapable. A few weeks ago, upon returning from a few days in the city of Córdoba, I caught one of the black and yellow cabs in the long airport taxi line to Camilo's pre-school, about three miles away.

When I told the haggard-looking, middle-aged driver my destination, he was strangely silent. He did not even nod. A few blocks later he suddenly began pounding the steering wheel with his two fists. I was terrified. I made sure my door was unlocked and I prepared to jump out and run if necessary.

Finally he confirmed my suspicion: "This is a short trip! This is lousy business! I've made no money all day!"

Afraid that he might detect my US accent and become even more angry or violent, I did not want to speak. "Hmmm," was all I could say, feeling helpless.

Countless advertisements for everything from DHL Worldwide Express to cough medicines make tongue-in-cheek references to the crisis. The notes that come home from Camilo's school mention all the things that the kids accomplish "in spite of these hard times." And even those children's theater performances I love so much tend to poke fun at corruption, economic hardship and discredited politicians. At a performance of the classic fairy tale *Puss in Boots*, Camilo had the audacity to yell out to the puss that his low-cut hiking shoes were not really boots.

"Hey, there's no money! I did the best I can do," the actor yelled back.

Another way the crisis has penetrated our lives is via our garbage.

Every evening, men, women and children called

cirujas rummage carefully through the large bags of garbage on the curbside in front of the city's countless apartment buildings in search of recyclable materials and food. The increase in the price of imports resulting from the devaluation of the peso has inflated the demand for recyclable goods. Last month Britain's *The Economist* quoted an estimate that 300,000 Argentine families survive in this way.

A couple of weeks ago I was sitting on a folding chair munching round, frosted cookies in my friend Adriana's tiny, toy-strewn living room. Adriana is the mother of Camilo's classmate Lucía and her little sister, Anita. At that moment the kids were off raising hell in the girls' bedroom.

Adriana told me that she has found a new use for the small, plastic trays that come with the take-out food she orders from time-to-time. Using plastic wrap, she tries to sort out the edible food from the rest of her garbage. It

Adults and children called cirujas *live off the income from recyclable garbage.* Photo by Jorge Larrosa.

is not a bad idea, but horrific to implement. That night at home as I threw out our dinner scraps, I had a hard time defining "edible." I wondered: is this piece of grisly beef worth preserving? Will the *cirujas* want to eat this totally wilted lettuce? How about this tangerine that is half-OK but half-putrid?

It is hard enough to sort out recyclable materials like glass, paper and plastic. The business of sorting food in this way feels entirely perverse.

The Horror is Political

Many times I have the feeling that ultimately, almost everything that happens in Argentina can be explained by the dynamics of politics, power and money. Take the *cirujas*: there are bitter turf wars over which groups get to scavenge the most lucrative parts of the city. Violent crime can even rise because of politics.

Numerous analysts assert that the recent surge in murder and kidnapping for ransom in the province of Buenos Aires—there are now seven killings a day—is the result of two factors. The first is an unannounced work slow-down by police to tarnish the image of Juan Pablo Cafiero, the new provincial Security Minister. Cafiero was appointed after the killing of two unemployed protestors described in MJF-11 and has taken a relatively strong public stance against police corruption.

On August 20, 2002, Buenos Aires provincial Police Chief Oscar Sobrado was summoned to appear before the provincial legislature to address this very issue. "There is no plot [against him]. All police answer to Minister Cafiero," he said.

Second, it appears that police are either ordering more crimes by delinquents with whom they are in cahoots or are simply turning a blind eye to crime to reduce the reelection chances of current governor Felipe Solá. On August 28, Security Minister Cafiero and Governor Solá made public statements accusing "mafioso groups" of being responsible for the current crime wave as part of a plot against the two of them. Recent reports by the press of all political suasions have offered intricate explanations of the ties between corrupt politicians, police, thugs and electoral politics, and how these ties lead to a concrete rise in violent crime.

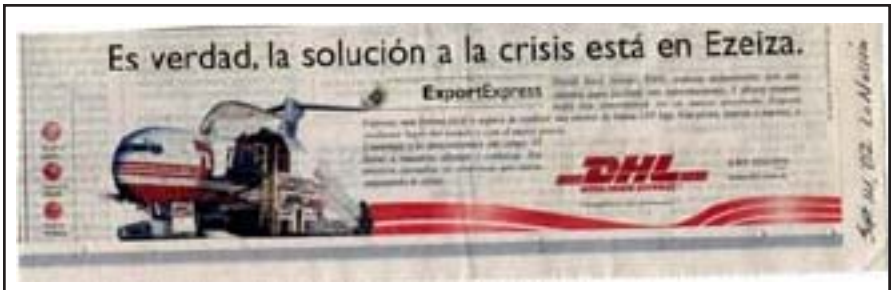
These dynamics are all part of what is known as the "*interna Peronista*," a term that refers to both the upcoming Peronist primary and the internal power struggles within the Peronist party. Mind you, innocent crime victims are *dying* as a result of this power struggle. In short, the police fund the Peronist political machine (and perhaps subsidize other parties as well) with revenues generated from activities such as theft, extortion, drug trafficking, prostitution and gambling.

(The Peronist party is the largest and most powerful in Argentina. It still has a potent presence in most of the provinces, characterized by patronage and other political favors. In contrast, former President Fernando de la Rúa's Unión Civical Radical party appears to be rapidly on its way to extinction).

But that is not all. Take President Duhalde's entirely outlandish search for a Peronist candidate to support as his successor. What at times has seemed like a cheesy soap opera is also stomach-turning political maneuvering.

First, despite apparently desperate efforts, Duhalde failed to recruit Carlos Reutemann, governor of the province of Santa Fe—who was doing well in the polls—to be his candidate. Reutemann claims to have "seen things" inside the Peronist party he cannot disclose that made him refuse to run.

Duhalde then threw his weight behind José de la Sota, governor of Córdoba, until he dive-bombed in the polls. Based on the solid polling performance by December's seven-day President Adolfo Rodríguez Saá, Duhalde then tried to woo him to be the candidate, but the short-term former President has said nothing doing. Rumor now has it that President Duhalde and his arch-rival, former Peronist President Carlos Menem,



This DHL ad reads, "It's true, the solution to the crisis is in Ezeiza," (the international airport). This refers to the increased demand for Argentine exports since the mega-devaluation of the peso. However, it also appears to invoke a well-known economist who, when asked for ways out of the crisis, made a joking reference to the airport as if emigration were the best answer.

may actually make a deal designed to destroy Rodríguez Saá's candidacy.

So why does President Duhalde care so much who wins the election? Argentines I have spoken with believe that his main motive—his only motive, really—is to stay linked to power and its privileges. No wonder so many Argentines are under the impression that few politicians are truly concerned about the moral and ethical imperative of solving the country's ever-deepening crisis.

The electoral panorama is mind-boggling in other ways as well. First, President Duhalde decreed that parties should hold primary elections this November—for the first time—in preparation for elections next March. Later, apparently fearing that he stood to lose power under such an arrangement, Duhalde changed his mind and hinted at his intention of canceling the primaries. Meanwhile, it appears that each candidate or potential candidate is fighting to impose the electoral system that they feel serves them best, including the unpopular, traditional list system (see MJF-3).

Right now, the only national positions up for electoral turnover are President and Vice-President. However, in mid-August the daily *Clarín* published a poll showing 85 percent support for the literal implementation of the slogan that emerged during the *cacerolazos* and turmoil last December, "*Qué se vayan todos"* (roughly "Out with all of them," meaning all politicians).

Together with the *Central de los Trabajadores Argentinos* (a progressive labor federation), center-left Elisa Carrió (who until recently led all the polls) and leftist Luis Zamora (also doing well in the polls) have launched a popular initiative to force the government to comply with *Qué se vayan todos*. To this end, Carrió has suspended her presidential campaign though not her candidacy, and Zamora has held off from announcing his candidacy at all. On August 30, tens of thousands of demonstrators in downtown Buenos Aires expressed their loud and palpable support for this initiative.

And then there is the peculiar question of former President Menem. A recent survey showed 70 percent of Argentines rate his job performance as "very bad," and he is running consistently at the bottom of the polls. Moreover, after years of denying that he held funds outside of Argentina, he told CNN in July that he has a bank account in Switzerland (that he hid from Argentine authorities). As a result, over the last several months he has been forced to appear in court to make statements related to a series of corruption cases in which he is implicated. Still, several friends of mine have argued that he is likely to win the Presidential election.

Over a succulent lunch of Armenian food in her home-town of Córdoba, former Senate aide Adriana Spila told me she predicts that when it comes time to vote, people will remember zero inflation and their relative buying power when, under Menem, one peso equaled one dollar. She believes they will forget the hikes in public debt, unemployment and social disintegration that were the side effects of that policy. A self-employed friend told me he would vote for Menem, and gladly.

"Under Menem, there was credit. You could run a business. You could buy things. Look at us now," he said.

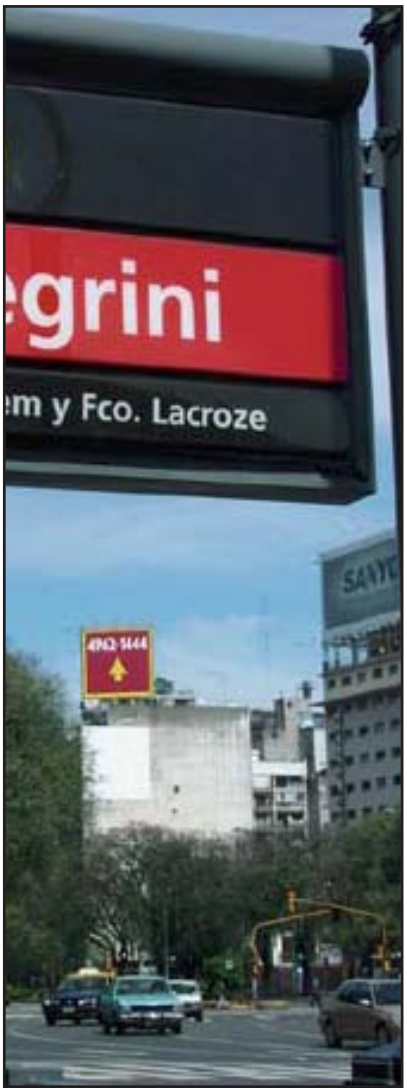
In July we visited a lawyer-friend named Julio who gave up his intensely stressful life in Buenos Aires to live on a small farm in Bragado, way out in the province of Buenos Aires. While sitting around his kitchen table sipping red wine and savoring freshly grilled chicken, he lifted his elbow high in the air and pinched his nose as told me he is planning on voting for Menem because he is the most effective candidate out there.

The same nose-pinching gesture was made by our building manager as he handed me at arms-length a video documentary on Evita Perón that I had ordered. Later one of the night-doormen in our building shyly confessed to me his love for Evita and asked if I would lend him the video. I never know quite what to expect in terms of Argentine politics, especially Peronist politics.

The Horror is Economic, Too

On the economic front, since President Duhalde assumed office in January, 2002 it appears his government's only plan for reactivating the economy is to wait endlessly for a new loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). There is no plan for increased public spending, no plan to create new jobs—on the contrary, the IMF has imposed decreased public spending as a precondition for further loans.

However, over the course of this year it has seemed that the IMF keeps "moving the goalposts." Each time



Empty billboards along Avenida 9 de Julio. The building on the far right (above) *is the world-famous Colón Opera House.*

Argentina appears to have complied with the IMF's preconditions for a loan, the Fund raises new issues and demands. Most Argentines I know have concluded that the IMF has no intention of signing an agreement with the Duhalde administration other than a possible deferment of interest payments. Even Economy Minister Roberto Lavagna has stated that he does not expect any fresh money from the Fund.

Indeed, the only possible agreement on the table appears to include either a simple deferment of interest payments or money that would never leave Washington but rather be used for payments coming due to the IMF and other multilateral institutions—not funds to address the crisis. Still, the government has stated explicitly that it has no "Plan B," and, bizarrely, Lavagna continues to make buoyant public statements to the effect that an agreement with the IMF is just around the corner.

A few economic indicators have actually improved recently. The dollar has stabilized at about 3.6 pesos, and as a result, at 3.2 percent, inflation for the month of July was a bit lower than expected. And just today, one of the headlines on the front page of *La Nación* announced "Improvement in the Indexes of Industrial Activity."

However, it turns out that the improvement is simply that some indicators sank more slowly than predicted. In particular, the principal industrial indicator for August dropped "only" 6.3 percent compared to last August, and therefore fell relatively less in August than in July, again compared to last year. It can be a confusing statistic for some, but no matter how you cut it, it is simply crazy to find oneself celebrating a six percent deterioration in industrial output.

Meanwhile, as described above, numerous social indicators continue to plummet. Argentina continues to be trapped in a frightening, downward spiral.

Life in Argentina Is Not Easy

In sum, life in Argentina is difficult.

Still, there have been times I have thought, "It was all worth it just for *this* moment." It suddenly does not matter that we dismantled our lives in the US, gave up our fabulous apartment, abandoned job security, left be-

hind friends and family and wore ourselves out with the effort to set up myself, my partner and our child in this strange and foreign land.

I had one of those moments one cold Sunday afternoon, sitting on a soft, worn, burgundy carpet with Camilo on my lap watching a marvelous puppet show for children in a spectacular old theater downtown. As I snuggled Camilo close and enjoyed the performance, I thought to myself, "It was all worth it for *this* moment."

I had a similar moment while riding home in a taxi from a dinner party with Alan and Camilo at 2:00 a.m., reviewing all the gender-rich material that came out of an evening of jokes and conversation, knowing full well that the entire next day I would feel like death warmed over. "It was all worth it for *this* moment," I thought again.

Early one evening my heart pounded with excitement while a handful of 10- and 12-year-olds danced some skillful tango during their weekly lesson in a small, public-school classroom. After the music had stopped, we sat on tiny wooden chairs while they told me in solemn, earnest tones why they dedicate themselves to this classic Argentine dance. After, as I walked the ten blocks home under a dusky, midnight-blue sky and realizing I was smiling, I felt absolutely convinced: "It was all worth it for *this* moment."

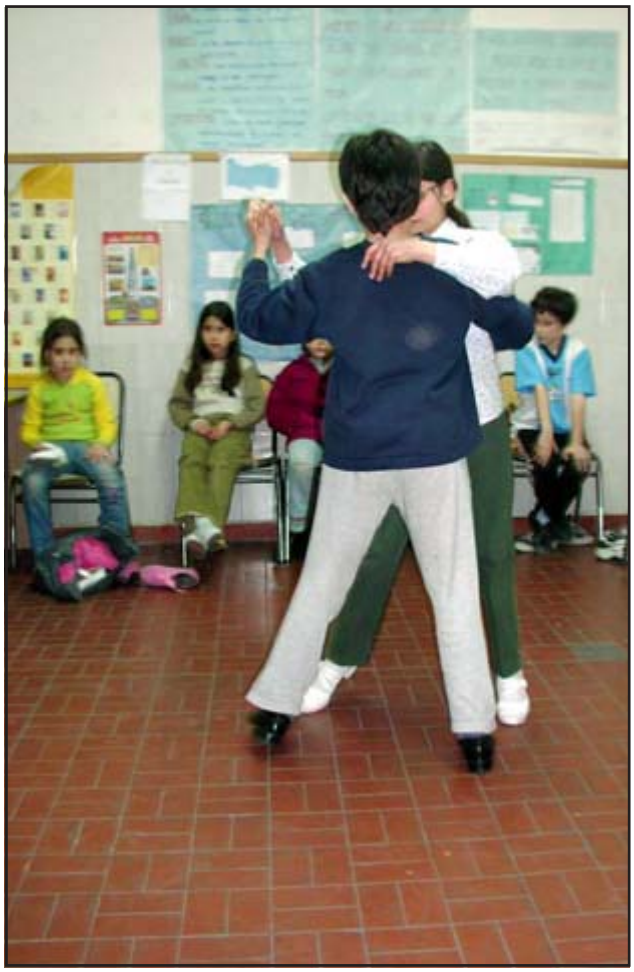
Call me Pollyanna. Point out that these experiences are the unique result of the uncanny reality of being an ICWA fellow. The latter is certainly true.

I must say I had a similar moment around midnight on December 19, 2002, just after Alan and I had been sitting on our balcony analyzing the massive *cacerolazo* a few hours before in response to then-President Fernando de la Rúa's declaration of a state of siege. Suddenly, a five-block-long crowd of thousands of pot-banging Argentines marched by our apartment cursing Domingo Cavallo, the Economy Minister, who ended up resigning hours later. As we watched them fade out of sight, I thought to myself, "My God, it was all worth it to have witnessed *this* moment." I felt the same way the next day even as protestors were being killed and I felt absolutely sick to my stomach.

Under these circumstances, it is not always easy to remain an observer, to refrain from action, from participating in some collective effort to make change. Yet I consider it a privilege to witness these events, sort them out and write about them for a distant, US audience.

Thinking back to my dream about the puzzle, intellectually: I reject the notion that Argentina's problems are unsolvable. Emotionally, though, life here is rough, for me and for most Argentines. Obviously, the country is experiencing a severe crisis in leadership and sometimes I see too few concrete signs of hope.

And in the middle of all this, I am overjoyed to be here. Maybe I am the puzzle whose pieces do not seem to fit together. ❑



Pablo and Irupé dance skillfully during their Thursday evening tango class.

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Fellows and their Activities

Martha Farmelo (April 2001- 2003) • **ARGENTINA**
A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecke McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine economist and mother of a small son, she will be focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of Italo/Latino machismo. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

Curt Gabrielson (December 2000 - 2002) • **EAST TIMOR**
With a Missouri farm background and an MIT degree in physics, Curt is spending two years in East Timor, watching the new nation create an education system of its own out of the ashes of the Indonesian system. Since finishing MIT in 1993, Curt has focused on delivering inexpensive and culturally relevant hands-on science education to minority and low-income students. Based at the Teacher Institute of the Exploratorium in San Francisco, he has worked with youth and teachers in Beijing, Tibet, and the Mexican agricultural town of Watsonville, California.

Andrew Rice (May 2002 - 2004) • **UGANDA**
A former staff writer for the *New York Observer* and a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the Washington Bureau of *Newsday*, Andrew will be spending two years in Uganda, watching, waiting and reporting the possibility that the much-anticipated "African Renaissance" might begin with the administration of President Yoweri Museveni. Andrew won a B.A. in Government from Georgetown (minor: Theology) in 1997 after having spent a semester at Charles University in Prague, where he served as an intern for *Velvet* magazine and later traveled, experienced and wrote about the conflict in the Balkans.

Matthew Z. Wheeler (October 2002-2004) • **SOUTHEAST ASIA**
A former research assistant for the Rand Corporation specializing in South and Southeast Asia, Matt will spend two years looking into proposals, plans and realities of regional integration (and disintegration) along the Mekong River, from China to the sea at Vietnam. With a B.A. in liberal arts from Sarah Lawrence and an M.A. from Harvard in East Asian studies (as well as a year-long Blakemore Fellowship in Thai language studies) Matt will have to take long- and short-term conflicts in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia into account as he lives, writes and learns about the region.

James G. Workman (January 2002 - 2004) • **SOUTHERN AFRICA**
A policy strategist on national restoration initiatives for Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt from 1998 to 2000, Jamie is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at southern African nations (South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia and, maybe, Zimbabwe) through their utilization and conservation of fresh-water supplies. A Yale graduate (History; 1990) who spent his junior year at Oxford, Jamie won a journalism fellowship at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies and wrote for the *New Republic* and *Washington Business Journal* before his years with Babbitt. Since then he has served as a Senior Advisor for the World Commission on Dams in Cape Town, South Africa.

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