

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

The City Hotel
Córdoba, Argentina
August 12, 1942

Dear Mr. Rogers:

This letter, it might be said, is my Adiós to Córdoba, for I am leaving here in a day or two. The last four months or more I have been a resident of this provincial, traditional Argentine city. As I prepare to leave and analyze myself, I find I have not become a Cordobese in the true sense of the word. There is but really one way to become a Cordobese and that is to grow up in this ancient city. By coming here and living here I have learned to appreciate the influence of environment and the effect which a society has upon an individual more than I could have learned by reading a hundred books. The differences between societies is much more than that which meets the eye. The great difference is in the minds of the people. When I recognize in the reasoning, or behind the reasoning, of Cordobese an assumption which they believe to be a truth, I invariably find opposed to it in my North American mind an assumption which I, too, feel to be a truth. I know now that there is nothing, or scarcely nothing, which can change some of my fundamental beliefs or assumptions; and I know, too, that there is nothing, or hardly nothing, which can change the beliefs of a Cordobese. The best that we can do is to understand the reasons behind those assumptions, what has given them birth and realize the respect and tolerance which should be accorded to the beliefs of every man and every nation. Nevertheless, although great fundamental differences have been made clearer to me, there is much which I have in common with Cordobese. Within my limitations I have tried to be as much a Cordobese as possible, to live my daily life with them, and to accept their customs and really to try to do more than conform--for conforming is not done with too much willingness nor with a zestful spirit. From my point of view the experience has been pleasant. It has resulted in genuine friendships which I prize and memories which I shall long remember. This, my farewell to Córdoba, consists merely of impressions and opinions which, for one reason or another, arise quickly to mind. Perhaps reciting them will explain Córdoba a bit better to you; perhaps they will indicate something of the kind of people who were in my circle of acquaintances and perhaps they will tell you something of the life I have lived these past months.

She always seemed to arrive at classes 10 minutes late, entering with a great to-do. The door would suddenly burst open and she would interrupt the professor's lecture with a crisply spoken apology: "Permiso!" A flash of annoyance would appear in the professor's eye, but it would disappear immediately and with a pleasant smile and a "Cómo no, nena," he would accept her apology. She was the darling of the School, being one of less than 10 co-eds which this branch of the University boasted. I would judge her to be five foot and an inch. Her hair was black as night. Her eyes were dark. She had a Spanish name, but one could see at a glance that the name came from Spain in the Colonial days for she had distinct criolla characteristics. She was pretty. Outside of class young men would give their mustaches a twirl and affirm that she was "churrasca," that she was the Argentine equivalent of Rita Hayworth. "It is certain," they would say to me "that Dora is churrasca?" "It is certain," I would reply.

One of the professors had ideas as fixed as the stars. Practically all the students possessed copies of his lectures which a student had taken down in shorthand several years before and which he supplied the students for a consideration. Hence the students knew what the lecture would be about before they went to class. They did their best to think up embarrassing questions, so that they might start a discussion. If one has not seen Latins discuss, he has not seen argument. These people are sharp and keen and the barbs which they throw at one another are well-directed. A classroom discussion starts with a courteous question, asked without

apparent guile. Then comes the clash. In a split second excitement reaches to the heights and many want to speak at once. "Allow me! Allow me!" Someone, somehow takes command and the "permitames" subside. The speaker does not pause for breath. His thoughts race along on a thousand vowels; his hands make proper, profound gestures. When one least expects, the speaker turns an effective phrase and finishes. And the contention begins all over again. Only the professor has certain prerogatives, which he does not fail to use. When students strike hard at his theories, he becomes so excited he can stand it no longer. He then "sssstttts" them to silence. The professor of which I speak has some curious ideas about the United States which he expounded from time to time. I did not make it a point ordinarily to set him right, because it would have meant endless correction. And I knew that he felt he knew more about the States than I did anyhow. Now and then he would ask me to bear him out on some point, and a beautiful discussion would arise, for I could not in honesty sustain his ideas. He thought for example that the farmers in the States first started feeding corn to hogs on a big scale during the last depression. He thought that most United States wheat was grown near the Canadian border, somewhere around Manitoba. He did not think my explanation plausible that little pigs have been eating dent corn for forty, for fifty years, or que sé yo. Nor did he believe the assertion that one could follow the wheat harvest for about three months, starting in Texas and finishing in the prairie provinces of Canada. This professor, and many others, looked at economic and agricultural problems as a problem of law, first and above all a government concern. "Laws, laws, laws and more laws!" I often wondered if law could be given greater distinction in the Law School. Professors of economics, of sociology, of most of the cultural studies are lawyers, and it is not therefore unusual, I suppose, that law should be considered more important to them than anything else.

I had been in Córdoba less than a week when a waiter, who was apprised of my nationality, told me: "Somos más listos que ustedes. Our native intelligence is greater than that of your race." I think I know now why many Argentines believe that statement. It must be said that Argentines are very sharp and keen. They continually play an interesting game of the mind, one which I should like to master although I am certain that it is impossible to do so. The Argentine, even when he is young, begins to develop a keen edge to his reasoning. He does not do this by making an exhaustive, thorough study of some of the branches of knowledge. He is not pragmatical like a North American. And the sharpness of his mind, from our point of view, does not often have the base of knowledge which we think to be so important. From the very start the Argentine learns to match wits. He knows that he will be judged by the quick response which his mind makes, by the apt expressions which his mind commands. There are many elements to this sharpness of mind--there is the machana, the indirect, the cachada, the sly dig, the play of words which is a more refined way of expression than punning. It is, in a word, the science of being adept at words and being able to distinguish and make fine and super-fine meanings. It is a great game and the sporting quality of it grows upon one. It is hard to define this sharp, mental quality of Argentines and the appreciation which they have for it. One North American who writes to me has expressed himself as "intrigued" by Argentine reasoning. If I remember correctly, he wrote that it was great fun to start an Argentine group off on a heated discussion on some theoretical, unimportant subject and when the discussion had reached its highest pitch to throw in the bombshell of "So what?" or "What difference does it make anyhow?" It seems to me that that is the natural North American reaction. When I become involved in a discussion which seems important enough for me to insist upon a point, I do not hesitate to use the "bombshell." But also when there is a discussion being held merely for the love of argument, for the purpose of seeing who can be the keenest, for the sport and the game of it, I try my best to reason like the Argentine, to play a sideline game and sally forth with a thought when I think it has some merit. Argentines, I find, really appreciate the effort one makes along that line and they come to realize that you are not really of such a dull turn of mind and that, after all, they are playing a game the rules of which a foreigner does not know and which he can, perhaps, learn to play.

Now for a few words about my friends. There is Prof. Yocca with whom I always eat dinner. We take turns on Sundays inviting one another to the criollo dramas at a nearby theatre. He delights to pass by a certain confiteria when we have the time to have a coffee and to tease me about the flaca (the thin one) who sings tangos and milongas and for whose singing I have expressed a liking. Yocca has an interesting history. He was born in Santiago del Estero more than fifty years ago of poor immigrant Italian parents. He had a will to achieve and an aptitude for mathematics. He went to Buenos Aires as a young man and worked his way through the University, earning his living doing stevedore tasks at the Port. Thirty years ago it was a rare feat for a poor man to go through an Argentine University. As the head of the Statistics Institute of the School of Economic Sciences he is the hardest taskmaster that this School of the University has. An unusually hard worker himself, the students appreciate that he has a right to demand that they, too, apply themselves. He speaks a beautiful castizo Spanish, but can revert to criollo speech with telling effect. He is an excellent mathematician and has the knack of applying his logical mind to problems with excellent results. I have a great regard for his judgments. He has friendly qualities which many of the students do not appreciate because his exterior is so gruff. I shan't forget the time when a student and I accompanied him as far as Santiago del Estero on our trip to Tucumán. It happened to be the Fourth of July and Dr. Yocca was bound that we should strike a blow or two for liberty. Before we got halfway to Santiago del Estero, Yocca was calling the student Vos, which is the familiar form address and meant that the student was an intimate friend, an amigo de confianza. Because of this incident, which was told to other students, most everyone is now aware that Dr. Yocca has friendly and simpatico qualities which can now be added to his many other good ones.

García is always the student. He has guided me in my studies. Although his specialty is not mathematics, he is Dr. Yocca's protege. He is the only student I know who is, in my view, becoming a first-class economist. Every spare peso or two he gets, he buys another book. He studies sociology, geology, philosophy, a bit of everything. The other students think García will never become an expert in anything because his mind is not one-track. They, on the other hand, are conforming to Argentine ideas of education and think they will be first-class economists just as soon as they get their Doctor's degree--even though they know little about necessary correlative studies. How I would like to take García back to the States with me. Dr. Carl Taylor was much impressed with García's liberal and broad intellectual horizons; he told García that he would some day contribute much to the development of agricultural economics as a study in the Argentine. Of the students, Reynaldi is the one whom I liked the most and whom I thought to be the sincerest of all. He always inquired my health. And when I told him that it was excellent, he never failed to smile and say: "I am glad." Macario is the visionary, the typical Latin, an amazing fellow in many ways. Once while I was visiting at his house in the late afternoon, he suggested that we go out upon the roof and admire the sunset. I found out that it is a daily rite of Macario's to watch the sunset. The best way to enjoy a sunset, as I discovered, is to say nothing. Macario, who has the sharpest mind of all the students, is in love with his neighborhood, his barrio, the sunset and his little world--and there is nothing that can change him.

The Santafecinos were the most friendly group of all. Especially big, likeable, mustachioed Pepe who nicknamed me Pancho. Pepe is always doing me a favor. He found two Alpargatas almanacs for me, illustrated with the etchings of Molina Campos. He was so delighted at my pleasure of obtaining them that he has promised to send me the new almanac when it is issued next November. One of the co-eds, not Dora, has asked me time and again if she could go to the States with me when I went. As she is quite small, I told her that I had enough room in my valija (luggage) to accommodate her. Yesterday I found out that she was serious about wanting to go to the States. She and a girl friend stated that they wanted to volunteer their services in the United States army nursing corps. I explained to them the difficulties involved, the transportation problem, the probable fact that

many North American young women had the same idea, etc. I told them how difficult it would be for them to learn a new language and, above all, new customs. They said that they had the courage to make a big try, that they did not accept certain Argentine customs which restricted women's freedom. They said they were not the only girls who felt that way. How strange! I am certain that Cordobese young men do not have the adventurous spirit which these two girls have.

In any event, this phase of my Argentine experience is drawing to a close. Tonight the students have invited me to a goodbye homenaje. It will be a dinner held in some typical restaurant on a side street. There will be a speech or two, and I shall respond, for that is the custom. Then, too, there may be a parchment which will be signed by all and which may be presented to me. Perhaps tomorrow I shall board the train, and there will be a number of friends at the station to wish me Godspeed. They won't say "Adiós." That is too formal a way to say goodbye. I am an "amigo de confianza." As the train pulls out of the station, they will all speak the Argentine "Adiós," which is "Chau!" As all North Americans invariably do, I shall raise my right hand in a so-long salute. But I shall not say "so long." I, too, shall be saying "Chau!"

Sincerely,

Francis Herron