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## Spaceship to Argentina: Observations Upon Landing

By Martha Farmelo

SEPTEMBER 3, 2001

**BUENOS AIRES** – The purpose of this first newsletter is to share some initial impressions from my first week in Argentina and to describe some of the contradictions that jumped out at me.

However, my story begins several months earlier, on Sunday, December 4, 2000. When my partner, Alan, handed me the phone, I knew it was ICWA's Executive Director, Peter Martin. His was the only call I was willing to take, as the suspense had me mighty cranky.

"Hello?," said I.

"Congratulations!," said Peter, and I almost dropped the phone. I had just been awarded the chance to spend two years based in Buenos Aires immersing myself in and writing about changing gender roles for men and women in Argentine society.

My crankiness turned abruptly to pirouettes around our living room and yelps

### **About the Author**

In her application for a Suzanne Ecke McColl fellowship in gender issues, Martha Farmelo wrote:

"In addition to exploring the particularities of Argentine gender dynamics, I hope to give even greater contour and clarity to my vision of gender equality. Indeed, I suspect that in Argentina, I will stumble upon some universal 'truths' about the nature of relationships between men and women in rapidly changing societies... I anticipate that this work will be quite difficult -- much harder than looking at traditional 'women's issues' -- but quite exciting as well.

"This is partly because I fully expect this fellowship to rock my world. Somehow I suspect that in Argentina, I may discover that I am not necessarily even asking the right questions. I may also learn that some of my closely held, maybe even favorite, beliefs need to be rethought and perhaps even relinquished. This is especially true given that I come from a Northern, developed society with a particular view of women's equality that may not hold in different cultural contexts such as a third-world, Latin American country."

Martha hopes that readers of her newsletters will respond with their comments and has asked the Institute to include her e-mail address in each one. Here it is: mjf7@georgetown.edu.



*The author on the balcony of her new home in Palermo, a neighborhood in the Capital Federal near the zoo and botanical gardens.*

of joy. I quickly realized the need to give our three-year-old son, Camilo, some information about what was going on, so I kneeled and looked into his bewildered, dark brown eyes. "Mommy is very excited because I just found out that I got a fellowship, and it is something I wanted very, very much, and worked very hard to get."

He paused, and then asked, "Is a fellowship like a spaceship, Mommy?"

Overwhelmed by the aptness of the analogy, I could only say, "Yes, sweetie, more than you could know."

A few months later, Camilo blurted out to Alan, "Mommy is going to drive the fellowship because it's her fellowship. And we need to get her a fellowship hat" (like a pilot's hat). At first blush, I thought this was clever, and true.

Upon greater reflection, I realized how immensely insightful this comment was. This fellowship is unique in its emphasis on the fellow's flexibility to mold his or her study questions throughout. And while Argentina is Alan's native country, it is my project that has brought us here and set the basic parameters for our time here. I was reminded of the day that Camilo and I took a bus to the zoo in Washington, and he expressed surprise that the driver was a woman. It appears children his age can

be quite tuned into who, in their literal minds, is in the driver's seat, and whether or not this violates prevailing gender roles.

I suspect that Camilo's observations will help me explore changing gender roles in Argentine society. Over the years, I've learned many things about empowering women, but have a world to learn about the changing relationships between men and women, what men think about gender equality, and how we socialize our sons. I also hope to learn more about what makes gender dynamics here uniquely Argentine. How do factors like the political legacy of Peronism or memories of four-digit inflation explain the particular contradictions and complexities of Argentine gender dynamics?

On Saturday, August 25, 2001, we took off for Argentina from Washington's National Airport wearing sweaters and lugging winter coats, despite a brutal sun and 90 percent humidity. I carried in my purse a key ring with not a key on it and an electronic address book with not a single entry for Buenos Aires. On the overnight flight from Atlanta I finally had the chance to write in my journal and reflect on the marathon of work that was those last few weeks before leaving.

I felt a thrill as I let it sink in that after years of grueling, non-stop effort and discipline, in one of our six gi-



gantic suitcases was Alan's diploma for his PhD in economics. He received it on Friday morning exactly eight days before we left—the same day I sold our little green Honda Civic, picked up the rental truck, and began to empty our apartment of meticulously stacked boxes and furniture. It was difficult to say goodbye to friends and especially to my parents, but at the same time I felt more than excitement: it just felt right. Although I've visited Argentina before, I have never stayed for long. I have a hunch that these two years in Argentina will make me feel whole in a number of different dimensions.

Shortly after dawn on Sunday, we watched the area outside Buenos Aires come into view, and the houses and cars get bigger and bigger. Camilo asked one last time why we were riding on a plane, not a fellowship. For some reason, I finally had the wherewithal to explain that a fellowship is the chance to live in a new place and write stories about it. He said "Hmm," and seemed satisfied. About ten minutes later, just when the wheels hit the runway at Ezeiza airport, he yelled out, "We're in Argentina! Thank goodness we made it!"

My sentiments exactly.

### **The Contradictions of Immigration: Comings and Goings**

As we approached the long lines at immigration, a silent young man in a dark uniform waved us over to the empty line reserved for diplomats, presumably because I was a woman pushing a stroller. At customs, for each traveler passing through, a woman perched on a stool pushes a button attached to a pillar that lights a square above. This light (supposedly) randomly turns green for "just a few questions" or red for "sorry, but we're going to open all your bags." When she saw me pushing Camilo, she skipped the button and waved me directly to a door to the airport interior. Given the surprise on her face after I scooted on by, I deduced that she hadn't seen Alan pushing the huge cart with our enormous bags or realized he was with us.

Among the throng of faces outside customs was Alan's mother, Betty, father, Zeke, brother, Martín, and his girlfriend, Isa. We rode in two cars about 45 minutes to Burzaco, where Alan grew up, a quiet "town" of about 70,000 people, lots of barking dogs, piles of burning leaves, and an occasional crowing rooster. Burzaco is a half hour train ride from the city of Buenos Aires (*Capital Federal*, a federal district like Washington, DC). It forms part of the greater metropolitan area, located in the province of Buenos Aires, on the train line running south out of the capital. To Alan's eyes, Burzaco has changed little in the 17 years he lived in the U.S.

The weather was uncharacteristically warm for late

winter. We sat outside under eucalyptus trees towering higher than a two story building while Alan's father cooked an *asado*, a typical Argentine barbecue of sausages and meats and quintessential social gathering. About half the conversation was in English, since Alan's mother is from a long line of Anglo-Argentines (her maiden name was Elizabeth Shaw) and his father a lover of English and the United States.

It was a bittersweet reunion for the most unlikely reason. While we smelled the meat cooking slowly over the fire, we were joined by Alan's sister, Cristina, who was taking a flight out that very night to Australia, where she is relocating indefinitely. I harbor my own sadness about her leaving. Apart from an Argentine couple that is here for a few months, she was my one friend in Buenos Aires.

Unlike most Argentine émigrés, her motive is love,



*The arriving brother shares a few precious hours with his sister before her emigration to Australia, the very night we arrived.*

not finances. It wasn't until I spoke with her that afternoon that I realized that her leaving is all about gender roles, and how Argentine men and women conduct their intimate relationships—a key element of my fellowship topic. I had often wondered if Cristina would find a man in Argentina who would meet her (very healthy) emotional needs for connection. We talked a bit about her boyfriend's interests in biking and healthy foods. "But," she said, "what really has me in love with this guy is his willingness to work on a relationship."

### **The Contradictions of Language: Inclusion and Exclusion**

Actually, Cristina made that comment to me in Spanish. Most of the afternoon's conversation in Spanish left me exhausted from the effort to understand the ubiquitous Argentine slang. They even have a slang word for slang.

*Lunfardo* is everywhere, and it's rich and expressive.

You don't just sleep (*dormir*), you might *apolillar*. If you feel like lazing around, you have *fiaca*. If you're in a huff, you're *mufado/a*. And one of my favorites: if you are untrustworthy, deceptive, or hypocritical, you're a *chanta*.

It seems like I need to learn another language. There are entire dictionaries of *lunfardo*. And beware if you think it is as simple as memorizing the vocabulary. Like the slang of Colombian street kids, *lunfardo* is often like pig-latin, with syllables reversed or rearranged. For example, you might be invited to have a *feca* (*café*), listen to a *gotan* (tango), or have a tryst in a *telo* (*hotel*), a pay-by-the-hour motel. It is hard to know if a word I don't recognize is new to me, or one I already know with the syllables reordered. *Lunfardo* also changes continually as new generations contribute new terms.

Political slang is so common that clearly, for the average Argentine, politics are important—as are puns, too. For example, someone who is bald is not just *calvo*, but in slang is *pelado* (peeled). Radio announcers often comment indirectly on *el dolape* (*pelado* with the syllables mixed up)—the reference being to Domingo Cavallo, Argentina's controversial finance minister. (When he served from 1991-1996 under Carlos Menem, he was credited for stabilizing the economy, though at the cost of profound social dislocation and high unemployment. Today he is making a desperate attempt to halt a three-year recession by securing massive bailouts from abroad and attempting to reduce the federal deficit to zero via significant cuts in social programs, social-security benefits, and government wages.) And a sticker on a car announced "*Nenem a Bordo*," a play on "*nene a bordo*" (baby on board) that reversed the letters in Menem's name.

While I can appreciate its humor and cleverness, *lunfardo* sometimes feels like a secret language designed only to exclude non-Argentines. Alan, naturally, is delighted to be surrounded by a whole society of people who, quite literally, speak his language.

Trying to show off, I cursed by reversing the syllables

in *puta*, which literally means whore, but is used like "damn!" Thank goodness only Alan was around. It turns out that not any old word can be inverted, only certain ones, and you need to be part of the secret club to know which they are. However, I was later entirely redeemed by making a great pun in Spanish. While talking with Alan's brother Martín about how magnificent it is to sleep soundly on an overnight flight, I said, "but of course, *se pasa volando*"—it flies by!

### The Contradictions of Economic Crisis: Hardship and Plenty

My sister-in-law, Cristina, is only one of thousands of Argentines who are leaving the country, or trying to. Almost all of them are economic refugees. Before our departure, we had seen articles in the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* describing the desperate plight of middle class families living in shelters when their breadwinners lost their jobs and their extended families and friends could no longer sustain them.

We also saw articles that profiled a few of the hundreds of Argentines who line up to spend the night outside the Italian, Spanish, or U.S. embassies in the hope of getting a number that will let them in to solicit a visa. And a friend of ours who is a pediatrician for Arlington County, Virginia, reported seeing a small stream of recently arrived Argentine kids. Who would have thought the Spanish she learned to assist Central Americans and Mexicans would be used with families fleeing Argentina?

In this context, we've had mixed reactions to our move from Washington to Buenos Aires. The Anglo-Argentine woman in Washington who translated our documents for our visas wished us luck with a terrified look as if we were about to move to the South Pole. On the other hand, a lawyer who has refused to return to Argentina since her exile more than 20 years ago was delighted for us, and assured us that we would love it here. The gentle, 40-something man who sold us our refrigerator here could not understand why anyone would want to come to Argentina right now, even with a fellowship. As we drank coffee in her cluttered office, the



The bearded character says, "Now, boys!" And the mariachis sing, "Oh, doctoor, please do not leeave..." And in the last frame: "I don't know what else to do so that my therapist won't move to another country." (Pagina/12, August 30, 2001)



*This taxi stand around the corner from where we stayed in Burzaco advertised that it, too, accepts patacones, the bonds issued by the province of Buenos Aires. Patacones operate as a parallel currency to the Argentine peso, which is pegged to the dollar.*

director of one pre-school we visited seemed excited about our arrival. "Sometimes you get the feeling there aren't going to be many of us left, and we're going to be all alone," she said smiling, then looking down.

Inside Argentina, *Economía* is often the first and longest section of the newspaper. Topics include the recent increase in official unemployment to over 16 percent (up from 14.7 percent a year ago), assessments of the prevailing policy of pegging the Argentine peso to the dollar, daily analysis of the IMF and its plans for Argentina, and the country's risk index for foreign investors. From the conversations I've had and overheard, my impression is that even poorly educated Argentines have a far better handle on economic concepts and terminology than most North Americans who at some time studied economics at a university.

There are many signs of the crisis I came prepared to see — but haven't in my short stay so far: lines for soup kitchens, inordinate numbers of people begging, a generalized feeling of gloom. On the other hand, there are signs you can't miss. I've seen long lines of people that wind around the block that I deduce to be for a job opening. The reason: they are always all men or all women. I am surprised to see so many female security guards and waiters in cafés, two jobs I believed went only to men in Argentina. One day at lunchtime I asked a young, female waiter about her job. She told me that cafés are hiring more and more women because they accept lower pay, male waiters can no longer sustain a family, and that, in general there are more jobs for women than for men.

Meanwhile, the federal government is broke, which directly affects services, and peoples' lives. Like airports,

many highways and the mail, the issuing of passports is privatized. When I saw a headline declaring that their issuance had been suspended, I assumed this was about politics, not economics. So I read on, only to learn that the government owes millions to the company that provides the raw materials for passports (coincidentally, a former U.S. ambassador to Argentina owns a significant share of the company in question). The province of Buenos Aires is also broke, and made international news by issuing bonds called *patacones* to cover its expenses — essentially printing its own money.

All over the city signs announce, "We accept *patacones*," some elaborately produced, some sketched out by hand on a thin sheet of paper. McDonalds gets a prize not just for being among the first to accept *patacones*, but for their marketing of it: if you pay with bonds, you can get a bargain Patacombo: two

cheeseburgers, fries and a medium coke.

And in case the *patacones* didn't make the crisis evident, there were the two Spanish women clutching large, brightly striped, nylon bags who joined me in the elevator of a Buenos Aires apartment building. They said hello to each other, kissed on the cheek, and one asked the other, "How are you?" "Fine," was the reply, then, head shaking, "but what can I say? If I tell you the truth, it's too long a story. We're all hanging in there, just doing the best we can." They were both going shopping, and began to talk about all the places they don't go anymore. "I just can't stand it. There's no one there. No one has any money to spend."

I was flabbergasted, then, when I got my first glimpse inside the brightly lit Jumbo in Lomas de Zamora (another suburb on the southern side), one of the many mega-stores that have appeared in Buenos Aires in recent years. Jumbo contains both an enormous grocery store and a massive Target- or Walmart-like selection of clothes and household goods. Just down a short hallway is the entrance to Easy, another mega-store very similar to Home Depot, which can also be found in Buenos Aires. In both, prices are quite reasonable, particularly for Argentine goods.

More than at any other moment since we arrived, I experienced a perverse culture shock. Simply put, I felt I had been transported back to the United States. Furthermore, the place was jammed to the gills. It seemed that people were elbowing each other to get through the aisles, and had trouble navigating their shopping carts through the throngs of people. In the adjoining shopping mall, the wide hallways were filled with people as well. These

scenes seemed to belie any possible loss of buying power.

Later, we realized that it was the first weekend of the month, so most families had just received their monthly paychecks. We also noticed surprise at the checkout counter when we paid for our iron and computer supplies in a single payment, without financing.

Granted, the levels of poverty are considerably worse in the "interior," outside of Buenos Aires. But even in the city, the most human side of the crisis I've seen so far is the street children. Alan was astonished to see children coming into a café or restaurant begging for money at our table. We've also seen kids asking for money or food in the subways and trains, and on the street. We saw a child not more than six or seven in a tattered red sweater, sitting on a piece of cardboard, breathing the fumes from the buses just a few blocks from the Casa Rosada,



*The Jumbo mega-store in Lomas de Zamora, a southern suburb of Buenos Aires, has more than 40 check out counters. On the weekends, it is jammed to the gills.*

the Executive offices. This child was slowly squeezing a small *bandoneón*, the accordion-like instrument whose swooning, melancholic melodies are the hallmark of the tango.

Meanwhile, "los niños de la calle" (street children) are a new household word. People are debating the wisdom and constitutionality of an order issued by the police chief to all officers of the province of Buenos Aires to organize a continuous operation to detain any child they see loitering or asking for money. And new programs are being announced to help street children. I read in the major daily *Clarín* on August 30 that, according to the government, 42 percent of children in Argentina under age 14 live in poverty. In the Buenos Aires metropolitan area, that's four million children living in poverty, one million of whom are indigent.

## **The Contradictions of Appearance: Images of Women and Men**

Like other newspapers, that *Clarín* was pricey. At about \$1.20 a pop on a weekday, for people struggling to make ends meet, they are simply inaccessible. For those who do buy them, right after the section on *Economía* they'll find *Política*, much of which is dedicated to the politics of the economic crisis and to the upcoming mid-term elections in October.

At first glance, I was impressed by the number of women in positions of power. I saw a huge tribute to Ernestina Herrera de Noble, the director of *Clarín*. Photos and caricatures of Patricia Bullrich, the Labor Minister, are all over the papers due to her conflicts with both unions and the *piqueteros*, large groups of mostly working-class, now unemployed Argentines who have become political players through their well-organized protests. This section is also dominated by reporting on Elisa Carrió, dubbed "the hurricane." Carrió is a lawyer and dissident Radical party congresswoman from the province of Chaco who is courageously and effectively investigating a web of government corruption cases. These cases involve money-laundering by high-level officials of the Menem administration, and are related in part to bribes of government officials by foreign and domestic businesses. A prominent federal judge investigating both corruption and a number of prominent human-rights cases is also a woman, María Servini de Cubría.

Carrió has also made news by creating a new party, *Alternativa para una República de Iguales* (Alternative for a Republic of Equals, ARI). She repeatedly appears in photos next to candidates she has attracted from each of the major parties, many of whom are women. Common wisdom says her group will get many votes from former supporters of the governing coalition called *La Alianza*, a tattered alliance of the centrist Radical party and the progressive FREPASO coalition. Carrió has prohibited ARI candidates from receiving funds from businesses, which are, as in the U.S., a major source of campaign funding. Whatever one's opinion of her, she comes across as one of the most influential political forces in Argentine politics right now.

In contrast to such images, a photo of Soledad Silveyra, one of several television actresses running for Congress in October, showed her with a huge, silly smile, wearing a very short, hot-pink miniskirt and tight, skimpy lavender top. Although a law requiring that women comprise 30 percent of electable candidates will apply to the Senate for the first time in



*Along every other block Camilo points out, "Look Mommy, a buttski!"  
Those are clothespins clutching her skin. The ad reads:  
"Cellulitis: Are you ready for results in just one month?"*

October (it has applied to the lower house since 1993), I've seen it mentioned only once in passing in a supplement for women. And in a weekly supplement to one of the major dailies on "women and men in history," the ratio of men to women was 30 to four.

When one looks up from the newspaper, most of the

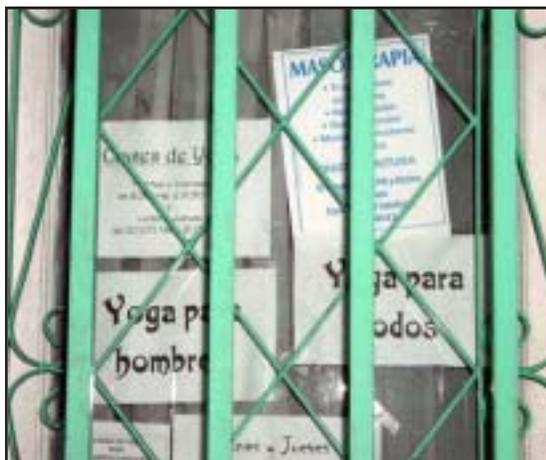
specialize in healthy products such as natural foods, yoga classes and massage.

Several years ago, I realized that reading magazines like *Cosmopolitan* caused me to feel ugly and that I should take immediate action to improve my body, face and hair—things I don't feel when I don't read such maga-

images of women are anything but empowering. After one short week of riding the subway, I am entirely sick of the huge pictures of Susana Giménez, a fairly attractive actress with super-dyed long, blonde hair and serious cleavage. She looks about 30 or 40, but someone whose mother went to school with her told me she was at least 60. And an ad asking, "Who said that a beautiful woman can't be intelligent?" markets permanent hair removal, laser anti-wrinkle treatments and chemical skin peeling.

Even worse are the ubiquitous ads for products to eliminate cellulite. All over the city's bus stops, pharmacies and newspapers are pictures of perfect naked women's butts. It's strange, since a remarkable number of places

*This spot in Burzaco offers massage therapy and yoga classes "For Men," "For All."*



zines. As a result, I've boycotted them ever since. Being in Buenos Aires, though, is a bit like reading *Cosmo*. I notice this especially about hair. The vast majority of women under 50 or so wear their hair well down their backs, often one length, sometimes dyed. In a week of seeing hundreds if not thousands of women, I've seen only a few dozen with hair above their shoulders. It makes me want to yank on my just-below-ear-length bob until it at least reaches my shoulders. I mistakenly jumped to the conclusion that singer María Martha Serra Lima, who has very short white hair and just lost 30 pounds, must have cancer.

On the other hand, I feel fine in my clothes. Before arriving, I was told over and over that Argentine men and women dress to the nines, and was prepared to feel dowdy on a daily basis. However, the flip side of Argentine style is the prevalence of informality. While Argentines dressed for business or to go out at night may be picture-perfect, the vast majority of people I've seen in and out of the city are dressed casually and even sloppily in jeans, sweaters and shoes or sneakers. This seems due in part to the economic crisis, since most Argentines can no longer afford to be brand conscious.

This is also partly, though not entirely, an issue of class. And speaking of class, I confess that before arriving, I harbored some fear that I would dislike the majority of *porteños*, (residents of Buenos Aires, a port). Argentines have a fierce reputation for being arrogant and annoying, and many that I have seen in the U.S. have been snobby and irritating—especially the women. Fortunately, after one short week here, I've concluded that it is only upper-crust Argentines that tend to fulfill the stereotype, and, of course, not all do.

And the images of men? So far, they seem pretty unremarkable—except for a picture of actor Hugh Grant that caught Alan's eye. In the life-sized ad for Miramax's *Diary of Bridget Jones* at a theater downtown, actress Renée Zellweger is standing with her back to the camera flanked by Grant and Colin Firth, and Grant is squeezing her butt with his palm. This is unlike ads in Washington that simply show the three of their faces facing forward, with any innuendo implicit in their expressions. Is it really still appealing to women to see a movie about a woman who's getting pinched in the rear end? This ad says yes, at least if the pincher is Hugh Grant. Or perhaps the presumption is that more men than women go to the movies, or decide what movie to see.

On the other hand, a couple of books I've seen at kiosks inside the subway stations would indicate that Argentines are thinking about, and maybe even re-thinking, gender issues. One of them is *Busco al hombre de mi vida, marido ya tuve* (Looking for the Man of My Life: I've Already Had a Husband), which is billed as conveying what women are looking for in their intimate relationships with men. Others address the changing experiences of men today, and are billed as guides for

women who want to understand the "opposite" sex.

### **The Contradictions of Personal Security: Danger and Safety**

As a woman, I am usually keenly aware of my personal security on the streets. In Buenos Aires, both women and men pay careful attention to security. Alan and I were cautioned not to take a laptop to a café for fear of it being stolen upon leaving. We have been told not to take regular taxis but only radio-taxis, the kind you can request by phone. When we left Cristina's apartment after picking up some things, Alan's mother confused me by talking nonsense about how soon she'll be back, until I realized that it was for the benefit of the guys painting her hallway. A group of 53 professors offer continuing-education courses on how to behave if kidnapped by delinquents. As we looked at apartments, we found that most of the intercoms from the front entrance no longer buzz people in—you have to go all the way downstairs to open the door.

On the other hand, women and men seem to walk with their purses and backpacks well exposed with little fear of theft. And Alan's mother's stories of children being kidnapped or the guy that tried to insinuate his way into her home by claiming to owe a debt to her son were not new. So, I thought, how bad can it be?

It was in this context of mixed messages that one day Alan rather casually cautioned me to keep a special eye on Camilo at a playground along 9 de Julio, billed as the world's widest avenue, because people might hear him speaking English. To my surprise, I responded with low-grade panic. It's one thing to clutch your purse. It is impossible to clutch a playing child. In the space of about a minute, my mind raced bizarrely: if someone snatched him, I would die. And if I couldn't find him, I thought, I'd rather know he were dead. I couldn't bear the uncertainty of where he might be or what he might be suffering. Immediately I thought of friends whose loved ones had disappeared here and in Guatemala, and their agony of never learning their whereabouts or even having the closure of confirming their deaths.

Within a few moments I recognized my thoughts as irrational, and I worked to calm myself down. Just then, I heard a series of explosions, first in the distance, then suddenly loud and close. Camilo was terrified and I was confused, but I took my cue from the smiling old guy pushing his little granddaughter on the swing. Finally I asked. "It's just the strikers," he said, and I remembered that the two, huge Peronist labor confederations were joining forces for a massive protest against the government's policy of prioritizing fiscal austerity for the payment of foreign debt. I told Camilo that they were workers who were trying to get attention so that people would listen to something they had to say. A taxi driver told him that they were just stupid people that scare away the birds and pollute the



*Camilo and Zeke met for the first time the day we arrived. They got acquainted as Granddad taught his grandson how to use the tools to make an asado.*

environment. He liked the latter explanation better.

In the end, Alan's brother Martín won me over with his common sense. "Look," he told me on the phone one night, "things can happen anywhere. You should be alert at all times. I am careful, but I have not changed my over-all life style."

Finally, I remembered a story told by a friend from London when she told her friends she was moving to Washington, DC. "Are you crazy?" they asked. "You're moving to the murder capital of the world."

### **And finally, the Contradictions of Relationships to Family**

Before leaving Washington, Alan and I imagined we would spend only a day or two in Burzaco, and then stay in Cristina's apartment "in town" until moving into one of our own. I was vaguely worried about how we'd get everything done with Camilo around, but mostly concerned about offending Alan's parents by not staying with them.

Ha! We could never have gotten through this week without them, and plan to stay on at least another. Camilo is delighted to spend time with his Granny and Granddad, and on our second day here, practically pushed us out the door when we went off to apartment-hunt. On top of providing much needed child care, Alan's mother has fed us, done our laundry, and otherwise freed up our time each day so that we could find a place to live, look for a pre-school, and take care of a host of other details that needed attending. In addition, Betty and Zeke

are veritable history books, *lunfardo* dictionaries, converters of temperature from Celsius to Fahrenheit and almanacs of other useful information.

I think it was important for Camilo to get to know his grandparents. I got to know them better, too, especially Alan's father, whom I had not seen for more than six years. One night as we had tea he told us stories of his father's childhood. He recounted that his father was left alone as young as six to cook stew for dinner over a wood fire and wait up all hours for his stepfather. He struggled to contain the emotion while describing his father as a youngster sitting alone at the table staring at a candle, and his later religious conversion as a young man. I admired his courage and his willingness to let me witness his feelings. And I appreciated the depth of his faith as I had not before.

Earlier, over supper, while Camilo was still with us at their round, mesquite wood table, out of the blue he said, "Hey, you guys!" And then quietly, "I like it here."

In fact, once again, my sentiments exactly.

**September 17, 2001**

### **Post script:**

On September 11, the 28<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Pinochet's coup in Chile, Alan and I had a succulent ham and olive pizza for lunch in a *café-pizzeria* in Palermo, our new neighborhood. Next to our table, Camilo was building a tower of legos in the play area (a take-off on McDonalds),



*Part of the Buenos Aires skyline as seen from the Río de la Plata.*

supervised by a young woman training to be a kindergarten teacher. Florencia asked me if I had heard any more news about what had happened in the U.S. When she realized I had no knowledge of the events, she was reluctant to have me hear the news from a stranger, but I begged her to clue me in. When she did, for a few seconds, I thought, "It's possible." But, unprepared to accept that her news was fact, I finished my lunch thinking, "Aw, come on. Argentines are really gullible."

We didn't rush home. When we did arrive, I turned on the radio and heard a commentator wonder something like, "How much longer did the U.S. government think it could operate in the world the way it does without serious repercussions?" Later that afternoon, our cable TV was hooked up, and we saw the gruesome images. The young guy that climbed out our tenth floor windows to hook up the cable told me, "We may have a lot of serious problems in Argentina, but I prefer to live here than there. Just look. At least here we're alive." I agreed, though later I asked myself: had he forgotten that 30,000 Argentines were systematically tortured, killed, and disappeared just 25 years ago?

Argentines are following the events closely. From

conversations I've overheard, many can't help feeling that the U.S., "the bully who always gets his way," is now "getting a taste of his own medicine." At the same time, to me personally, people have continuously expressed horror, sympathy, and worry about the future. The coverage in the press expresses similar sentiments, though the range of opinions is much wider than in the U.S. Here the political spectrum includes a generally well-respected range of leftist parties, activists, and commentators. There is even a well-read leftist daily newspaper, *Página/12*, whose founder, Jorge Lanata, is a household word. Reaction to the attacks has been consistent: pure condemnation. However, the opinions about why they occurred and what type of U.S. and Argentine response is appropriate vary widely.

A public-opinion poll in the city and province of Buenos Aires published in *Página/12* on September 15 revealed that 85 percent of Argentines agree that the attacks represent a great catastrophe for which there is no justification. I was intrigued that the remaining 15 percent disagree. Sixty-one percent of those polled believe the attacks were a consequence of U.S. foreign policy, and 57 percent agree that the attacks were predictable given the world's current economic configuration. Furthermore,

75 percent of Argentines reject President de la Rúa's pledge to participate in whatever U.S. military response takes place. Apparently Argentines are loath to take on another military intervention like Argentina's participation alongside the U.S. in the Gulf War. (I confessed I wondered: where would they get the funds?)

Finances aside, this rejection is likely related to the fact that 65 percent of those polled feel that it is likely or very likely that there will be another terrorist attack within Argentina. In 1992, 29 people were killed and at least 250 injured when the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires was destroyed by a car bomb. Then in 1994, a suicide bomber destroyed the AMIA (*Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina*), Buenos Aires' Jewish Community Center, leaving 86 dead and 300 injured. No one has been brought to justice for these attacks, though Buenos Aires policemen accused of collaboration in the AMIA bombing are

scheduled to stand trial beginning next Monday.

My Argentine friend Marcela told me she feels concern for people in the U.S. because of our tendency to feel that we are safe, and immune from such events. "People in countries like Argentina, we're used to chaos and uncertainty, and to feeling that anything can happen at anytime. But in the U.S., people don't have that awareness. It must make things even worse. It is a terrible shock for you all."

Frankly, it has been a relief to be far from Washington, though we long to be face to face with friends and family as we all try to process what has happened. Meanwhile, I appreciate the sympathy expressed by people I'm getting to know, and by perfect strangers. The warmth and concern of these individuals has been a welcome balm in the last six days. □

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS FELLOWS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

### **Shelly Renae Browning** (March 2001- 2003) • **AUSTRALIA**

A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology.

### **Wendy Call** (May 2000 - 2002) • **MEXICO**

A "Healthy Societies" Fellow, Wendy is spending two years in Mexico's Isthmus of Tehuantepec, immersed in contradictory trends: an attempt to industrialize and "develop" land along a proposed Caribbean-to-Pacific containerized railway, and the desire of indigenous peoples to preserve their way of life and some of Mexico's last remaining old-growth forests. With a B.A. in Biology from Oberlin, Wendy has worked as communications coordinator for Grassroots International and national campaign director for Infact, a corporate accountability organization.

### **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.

### **Gregory Feifer** (January 2000 - 2002) • **RUSSIA**

With fluent Russian and a Master's from Harvard, Gregory worked in Moscow as political editor for *Agence France-Presse* and the weekly *Russia Journal* in 1998-9. He sees Russia's latest failures at economic and political reform as a continuation of failed attempts at Westernization that began with Peter the Great — failures that a long succession of behind-the-scenes elites have used to run Russia behind a mythic facade of "strong rulers" for centuries. He plans to assess the continuation of these cultural underpinnings of Russian governance in the wake of the Gorbachev/Yeltsin succession.

### **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-American agricultural town of Watsonville, California.

### **Peter Keller** (March 2000 - 2002) • **CHILE**

Public affairs officer at Redwood National Park and a park planner at Yosemite National Park before his fellowship, Peter holds a B.S. in Recreation Resource Management from the University of Montana and a Masters in Environmental Law from the Vermont Law School. As a John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, he is spending two years in Chile and Argentina comparing the operations of parks and forest reserves controlled by the Chilean and Argentine governments to those controlled by private persons and non-governmental organizations.

### **Leena Khan** (April 2001-2003) • **PAKISTAN**

A U.S. lawyer previously focused on immigration law, Leena is looking at the wide-ranging strategies adopted by the women's movement in Pakistan, starting from the earliest days in the nationalist struggle for independence, to present. She is exploring the myths and realities of women living under Muslim laws in Pakistan through women's experiences of identity, religion, law and customs, and the implications on activism. Born in Pakistan and immersed in Persian and Urdu literature by her grandfather, she was raised in the States and holds a B.A. from North Carolina State University and a J.D. from the University of San Diego.

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