

**An Intimate Outsider Looks at Forty Years of
Living with Latin American Reality**

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My first foray into Latin America came when, as a young man headed for Mendoza Argentina, I landed in Montevideo, Uruguay after Argentina failed to approve my visa. That bureaucratic bungle led to a series of life-transforming encounters and to an enduring love affair with Latin America. The early overseas experience exposed me to cultures contrasting markedly with anything my Midwestern U.S. upbringing had ever served up, while subsequent experiences as the spouse of a Uruguayan, a Fulbright scholar in Brazil, and a long-time resident director of academic programs in Mexico have continued to bring me into contact with the incredible and sometimes inexplicable realm of Latin American reality, leaving an indelible imprint on my psyche. Let me highlight a few of the more memorable episodes illustrative of the intriguing brushes with reality that I and perhaps other *gringos* encounter as we venture south of the border—perhaps that same reality referred to in literary circles as *magic realism*.

Stranger than Fiction

Early one sunny afternoon while walking along a busy intersection at the corner of Avenida Italia and Camino Propios in Montevideo, my travel companion Anderson and I saw a large floral wreath at the home of Estrella, a friend we had visited two hours earlier. Folks were filing into the home as if going to a wake. Curiosity getting the best of us, we hurried to find out what was happening. Meeting us at the door, Estrella confirmed, to our astonishment, that her grandfather had indeed passed away. My knee-jerk reaction was, "I'm so sorry, Estrella, why didn't you mention it this morning when we were here? When did he die?" Looking at her watch she sadly replied, "About an hour ago." Accustomed as I was to the phenomenon of fast food, I was totally unprepared for fast funerals!

Not many weeks after that, Uruguay was shaken with news of the sudden, unexpected death of popular President Oscar Gestido. Following traditional protocol, his body would lie in state in an upper chamber of the Government Palace on Independence Plaza in downtown Montevideo. Finding ourselves in that vicinity the next evening we noticed vast multitudes filling the plaza and spilling over into the downtown streets closed then to vehicles and open only to pedestrians. Suddenly it dawned on us that these people had come to pay their respects.

Fully aware that we didn't have the credentials to get near enough to get a glimpse of the late president, we continued walking past the Palace. Then, out of nowhere, a voice blared in our direction from a megaphone, "*¿Tienen trajetas diplomáticas?*" (Do you have diplomatic cards?) Seeing our Yankee faces and business suits and apparently supposing us to be U.S. diplomats, palace guards had spotted us in the crowd. With youthful exuberance, Anderson and I flashed our passports high above our heads and pretending to understand little Spanish, we stood there

incredulously while a cadre of armed guards maneuvered its way through the crowd and cleared a pathway, escorting us up the central staircase and into inner sanctum of the government Palace to the presidential bier where we offered our condolences and signed the official register. We later wondered if crashing the wake of a foreign head of state while impersonating U.S. diplomats might be a punishable offense.

Another unlikely episode occurred one Saturday with a phone call from my mother in Indiana informing me of my father's unexpected death the night before and urging me to hurry home. Under normal conditions heeding her plea would have been no insurmountable challenge; but on that day, the only day in more than a decade, planes were neither arriving nor leaving Montevideo because of a 24-hour general strike at Carrasco International. As in the old but classic *Candid Camera* TV episode depicting the State of Rhode Island being closed for a day, the entire nation—roughly the size of Missouri and 500 miles across at its widest point—was closed all day to arrivals and would-be departures.

Then, like a genie from a lamp, Washington Peixoto, billionaire collector of antique automobiles, friend to Yankee expatriates, and owner of a major travel agency appeared on the scene. Previously unknown to me, Peixoto, within an hour, had arranged for my departure from Montevideo-- westbound by bus to the coastal city of Colonia with a ticket to take the *Aliscafo*, a high-speed ferry, across the Río de la Plata to Argentina where a taxi driver would be waiting to whisk me into downtown Buenos Aires where I could retrieve a plane ticket, continue on to Ezeiza International Airport on the southern outskirts of the metropolis, and catch a flight landing me back in the U.S. one day later. He suggested we settle any charges later upon my return to Montevideo. When the time came to pay the debt, he refused a lump sum and insisted I pay in monthly installments, spreading out the cost over two years. His logic was that paying

today's ticket price with tomorrow's highly inflated peso would make the trip infinitely less expensive.

Escape from Punta Carretas

Having enjoyed a unique position as an advanced democracy, by the late sixties Uruguay had fallen on hard times. The economy was suffering, unemployment skyrocketing, corruption mounting, and the bureaucracy was out of control. Those conditions gave rise to a popular urban guerrilla group known as the National Liberation Movement, or more popularly, Tupamaros, a group taking its name from the Inca chief who led an uprising against the Spaniards in 1780 in an effort to restore the Incan empire. The Tupamaros most successful activities were aimed at embarrassing the government by exposing corruption and kidnapping prominent figures and holding them for ransom.

Among those kidnapped were the Brazilian Consul Dias Gomide and Dan Mitrione, a CIA agent training Uruguayan police in the tactics of torture and repression. Eventually the Consul was freed on a million dollar ransom, but Mitrione was assassinated. Prior to working with the CIA, Mitrione was chief of police in Richmond, Indiana, where several members of his family lived and where his brother ran a local sporting goods store.

I, too, was living in Richmond, Indiana with my Uruguayan wife and our small children, working as a Spanish teacher. Labor Day always signaled the beginning of the school year, and a great time for a family retreat before summer ended. Facing the inevitability of a more structured schedule, we sped down the highway passing miles of Midwestern cornfields. In the back seat our young brood contented themselves with books and games while Silvia and I conversed and contemplated the rural landscape, paying scant attention to the radio which

alternately served up music and sports punctuated by headlines rehashing the now stale events of the long weekend. The trip to the river had seemed the perfect getaway.

Meanwhile, a continent away in Montevideo, an abrupt knock at the door of a home in Punta Carretas interrupted the plans of another family, a mother and son enjoying a quiet Sunday evening watching TV. Forcing their way inside, two armed men announced they were Tupamaros coming to occupy the house. Commencing during the wee hours that Monday morning in an operation lasting more than ten hours, 106 Tupamaros and five additional prisoners emerged through a hole in the tiled dining room floor and ran through the house while changing clothes and folding their prison garb neatly at the back door. The escapees fled through a perforated garden wall into a neighbor's yard where two trucks and a bus were waiting to help them make a perfect getaway.

Back in Indiana, within sixty miles of our home, breaking news reported a spectacular jailbreak in Montevideo from a prison centrally located in a residential area. Having grown up in Punta Carretas, my wife was intimately acquainted with the area and immediately concerned for her family's welfare. We could scarcely wait to phone her mother. In those days long distance phone calls through an overseas operator, could take hours. Anxiously we made several unsuccessful attempts to reach Montevideo, finally opting for a night's rest before trying again in the morning.

Scanning the daily *Palladium-Item* the next morning, I was taken aback when the photo of my Uruguayan brother-in-law appeared on the front page! My heart pounded as my eyes raced through the article. The Tupamaro's prison break had violated my in-law's home, where as unwilling witnesses, my wife's mother and brother had spent the long night seated in the dark,

held at gunpoint and forced to watch the incredible spectacle unfold before their eyes. The intruders kept tabs on their hostages while communicating with peers inside the prison via radio. As zero hour approached, they applied stethoscopes to the dining room floor detecting sounds from below. Then they began removing tiles exposing a tunnel which allowed for the escape of 111 prisoners. Incredible as it seemed, those events foreshadowed more fantastic reality yet to unfold.

Back in Indiana, another citizen did a double take as he, too, read the story in the same hometown paper. A year earlier, his brother Dan Mitrione, had been murdered by Tupamaros in Uruguay. Folks in Richmond were puzzled as to how activities of a guerrilla group so far away could profoundly touch two different families in their quiet community. Few knew that the actions of the Indiana brother would ultimately result in the political imprisonment of the innocent Uruguayan whose home had been violated by the escaping fugitives. Uruguayans, on the other hand, were left wondering how such a spectacular escape could occur from a maximum security prison. Few knew that a generation earlier a lone fugitive had escaped from Punta Carretas prison through a tunnel leading to what was then a vacant field. Workers repairing the prison floor neglected filling in the rest of the 40-yard long tunnel which silently lay beneath.

Some years later while reading the daily paper in a café in San José, Costa Rica, our group of primarily U.S. professors caught the news of nine tragic deaths, six decapitated and ten more injured in a fight between rival factions in the Santa Ana, El Salvador prison. A judge brought in to establish the identities of the dead was unable to do so since the decapitated heads were entirely unrecognizable after being used as soccer balls by rival prisoners.

More recently our family was taking a tour through Paraguay, southern Brazil, and northern Argentina. One of the scheduled attractions was the gigantic Itaipú dam and hydroelectric plant on the Paraná River. Construction had required enough concrete, iron, and steel to build 210 soccer fields and 380 Eiffel Towers. The immense facility supplies nearly 90% of the electrical energy consumed by Paraguay and some 20% consumed by Brazil. The impressive view crossing the dam intensified our eagerness to visit the large visitors' center where the history of the construction is told. Yet, incredible as it may seem, we were turned away by officials at the visitors center because—they were experiencing a power failure and had no lights!

Not to worry, however, we still were going to stop in Ciudad del Este, Paraguay's second largest city and the third largest tax-free commerce zone in the world, and a shoppers' paradise. Many in the group were excited about shopping. You can imagine our surprise as we entered the city mid-day on a weekday only to find it totally deserted. Absolutely no one on the streets and the stores were shuttered tight. Even the shopping centers were dark. Bewildered, our bus driver explored the problem. He ventured down an alley where a lone soul explained the anomaly. The *World Cup* in soccer was in full swing and everybody was home watching the match on TV. The city remained shut down for the rest of the day.

The Mystery of the Blue Box

Arriving at the Palace Hotel in Mexico City one Saturday night where we would spend the weekend sightseeing before our flight home to Indianapolis, I hurried off the bus and made my way into the lobby, leaving instructions for thirty students and five teachers to remain on the bus until I checked in and returned with keys and room assignments. Minutes later I returned to

see a nearly empty bus and a group of insubordinate students and instructors sitting on their luggage, impatiently waiting on the sidewalk in front of the hotel. Waving goodbye, the bus driver was already pulling away from the curb.

But, wait. My luggage! Did anyone remove my things from the bus? Where were my bags? Luckily the thoughtful group had collected my things and inspected the empty bus to be sure everything was removed. What about the blue metal strongbox with a combination lock and contents known only to me? A high-speed chase on foot to catch the bus at the next stoplight yielded a fruitless search and an apologetic driver. Nowhere was the blue box containing four passports, thirty-five airline tickets for our return trip, and several hundred dollars in cash.

Our hands were tied. Little could be accomplished without money or documentation. We waited until Monday morning, taking our places in line along with everyone else, for a visit to the U.S. Embassy. Furthermore, we were required to visit the American Airlines office which, fortunately, was directly across the street. One of the most unforgettable experiences of that day was watching the American Airlines representative at the counter solve the problem of our stolen tickets. Unlike today's e-tickets, all airline tickets were handwritten. Alternating phone calls between U.S. travel agents and Mexican airport authorities, Lupita Meyers exhibited a perfect bilingual command of English and Spanish and also of U.S. and Mexican cultures. Her phone conversations with *anglos* were direct, business-like, and to the point, while her communications with Mexican counterparts contained the obligatory prelude of personal questions to the individual about his or her family. Several hours later, after the 35 tickets were re-written by hand, we returned to the counter where Lupita smilingly announced that we need only pay a mere \$700.00 service charge for having the tickets re-issued. "*Pero, ¿de dónde, señorita?*" (But how, Miss?) was my response as I reminded her that our cash had been stolen too! And

precisely on that day the Mexican government had declared a bank holiday and had frozen all accounts in U.S. dollars to forestall a run on the banking system anticipated because of a sudden devaluation of the Mexican peso. We simply couldn't afford the \$700.00 fee. After consulting with the *máxima autoridad posible* she replaced our tickets free of charge and we went gratefully on our way to arrange delivery of a gift for Señorita Myers.

The remainder of the trip was uneventful. The interesting epilogue occurred stateside several weeks later, however, with a phone call from San Luis Potosí. Meche, our Mexican program coordinator, called with the surprising news that somehow, out of nowhere, the blue box had turned up. A message from the bus company to the family in whose home we had spent the summer indicated that there was a parcel waiting for them. Perhaps anticipating a gift of appreciation, instead they encountered a blue box with a handwritten note attached saying, "found on a bus from Mexico City". Recognizing the box, they contacted our Mexican coordinator, Meche, about the reappearance of the strongbox. I read the combination over the phone so Meche could open the box and verify its contents. What she found were four passports, thirty-five plane tickets and no cash! The crook must have felt a twinge of conscience inspiring him to make partial restitution.

Some years ago Professor Emilio García observed that on the day Gabriel García Márquez won the Nobel Prize:

"The President of the Republic, phoned the winning novelist-in-exile to offer him the heart of Colombia. ...the mother of the exiled novelist indicated that now that her son had the attention of the whole world, she hoped that her phone--which

hadn't worked in a year--would be repaired. The president of the Colombian Academy of the Spanish Language announced the appointment of the novelist as an honorary member of the Academy. And the former president of the Republic proposed that the nation hold a referendum requesting the Nobel Prize winner return to Colombia from whence he had escaped with his life a year earlier persecuted by the Ministry of Defense. . .

“Meanwhile, in the novelist’s hometown, the mayor declared three days of rejoicing as tumultuous throngs took to the streets singing hymns of jubilee amid music of liberation and fireworks of joy and tolling bells of glory announcing to the world the good news concerning the Nobel Prize. And around the world readers and critics alike were exclaiming, ‘What an incredible imagination!’ And members of the Swedish Academy, in their rush to acknowledge him, were astonished that in his prose appeared both the real and the factual alongside the imaginary and the absurd. And their only error was in not recognizing that in the land of García Márquez fact and fantasy, history and hyperbole go hand in hand. For García Márquez was not the inventor, but the discoverer of a reality that was already there. . .”

Work Cited

García, Emilio F. (1983) Cuando García Márquez ganó el Premio Nobel. *Entre Nosotros*, 11, pp. 1-2.