



Back In Time

by Tony Beckwith
tony@tonybeckwith.com

The Plaza Independencia

In the black-and-white photograph hanging over my desk, my parents are standing in front of the equestrian statue of Artigas in the Plaza Independencia in Montevideo. They look young, and relaxed, and happy. The photo was taken in 1948, just after they arrived from Buenos Aires, leaving their families and the only life they had ever known, to come to Uruguay and make a future of their own. If they had any misgivings about their prospects they certainly kept them well hidden as they posed for a photographer in the plaza. I was three years old at the time and must have been parked elsewhere because neither my brother nor I are in the photo.

Artigas and his horse face east, toward Avenida 18 de Julio, the main thoroughfare through the centre of town. The bronze statue of the father of Uruguayan independence, by the Italian sculptor Angelo Zanello, was erected in 1923. Five years later the Palacio Salvo was built just across the road at the corner of 18 de Julio and the Plaza, and Artigas has been looking at it ever since. This was a significant spot in terms of Uruguay's history and sense of national pride: at 95 meters tall (100 meters when you counted the antenna on top) the iconic Palacio Salvo—designed by the Italian architect Mario Palanti—was for many years the tallest building in Latin America! It was built on the site of the old Confitería La Giralda where, it was said, the famous tango La Cumparsita was first performed in 1916. Originally intended as a hotel, the Palacio Salvo was developed into a modern tower with offices and private apartments.

When I was in my late teens and working downtown, my father and I used to meet for a midmorning coffee at the café on the ground floor of the Palacio. On milder days we sat at outside tables and from there we could look across at the plaza and, of course, José Gervasio Artigas (June 19, 1764 – September 23, 1850). Beyond him, on the western side of the plaza, was the Puerta de la Ciudadela, the entrance to the old part of town, which was all that remained of the original walled city of Montevideo. A public market sprang up there on what, by 1843, was known as the Plaza Independencia.

“When we look at this view we are seeing a lot of history,” my father used to say. “This was where Montevideo started.” I knew what he would say next.

“Our family history threads through here, too. This is where your mother and I had our photograph taken just after we arrived from BA.” Though for different reasons, my parents essentially did just what their parents had done at about the same age when they left their homes and families in England and set sail for Buenos Aires to seek their fortune. Not that things were so bad for them in the UK, but opportunity was beckoning from the Río de la Plata region where ambitious young Britishers were in demand to run railways, build gas and electricity grids, open banks, and refrigerate beef for shipment back to Europe. It was the dawn of the twentieth century and British capital was deeply invested in Argentina. But by the 1940s the tide had turned. The Argentine government was pro-Nazi during World War II, and feelings toward the British community were mixed after that. Juan Domingo Perón was elected president in 1946 and soon began shaking up the status quo by nationalizing the railways, among other radical moves. The signs were clear: as far as the new regime was concerned, the ingleses were no longer as welcome as they had once been. So my father accepted an offer from an export firm on the other side of the river and we moved to Montevideo. I don't think any of us ever regretted it.

Those morning coffee breaks with my Dad were very special. He talked about our family, describing the twists and turns that had brought us to Montevideo, telling stories that helped me understand who I was. “We are British at heart,” he said, “but our British experience is second-hand. We are cultural hybrids, very fortunate to be enjoying the best of both worlds in a place like Uruguay.” He was a sentimental man, a true Romantic, and one day when we'd finished our coffee he said, “Come on, I have an idea.” We went across the road to the Plaza and he spoke to one of the photographers who stood around waiting for tourists. After giving it some thought, my father picked a particular spot and asked the photographer to take our picture with the statue of Artigas behind us. “This is exactly where your mother and I stood for our picture all those years ago” he said, smiling broadly. “It will make a marvellous souvenir.” To my dismay, that photograph disappeared during the many moves I made later in life. The earlier one, however, still hangs on my wall. In those days I had no idea how precious those little sheets of cardboard were. But I do now.