



BACK IN TIME

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The Colimba

In those days, men born in Argentina were required to do their *colimba* (military service) between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one, no matter how much or how little time they'd spent there. I was born there but three years later was moved to Uruguay where I lived until I turned twenty. I visited Buenos Aires off and on, but never lived there.

My brother, Christopher, was also born in Argentina. He was older, so his turn came first. In those days your name was entered in a lottery and, if you drew a very low number, you'd be exempt from doing your *colimba*. If your number was in the middle range, you'd do a year in the army. A high number would get you two years in the navy. But there was another option: you could volunteer to serve in the police force for a year once you turned eighteen. Christopher (pictured here) was living in Uruguay when he came of age; he chose that option and spent about fifteen months just across the river in the Buenos Aires metropolitan police force.

By the time it was my turn I had moved to London, where I received my callup papers instructing me to report to the Argentine Embassy right away. The receptionist ushered me through a pair of very official-looking doors and into the office of the Consul. He was a man of about my father's age and received me with old school Argentine courtesy. He dispensed with the pleasantries fairly quickly, though, and proceeded to inform me that I must return to Argentina immediately so that I could register for the lottery.

Me: "I'm sorry, I can't do that. I don't have the money for the fare."

Consul: "Then you will travel on the next Argentine cargo ship bound for Buenos Aires. You will work as a deck hand and will be provided with a berth, regular meals, and a minimum wage."

Me: "Why can't I stay here until we get the results of the lottery? There may be no need for all this."

Consul: "You must be present to register."

I sat very still in that comfortable office, contemplating the prospect of spending a year or two in the Argentine military. I had just spent over a year traveling through the Americas to London, all under my own steam. I'd

had my first taste of living by my wits and found that I enjoyed it immensely. I had many plans, none of which involved Argentina. My grandparents were all British, so I was a British citizen through my paternal grandfather and already had a passport. I didn't consider myself an Argentine. Was it reasonable to put my life on hold and go back, given the circumstances of my birth? If I'd been born at sea, I asked the Consul, would that make me a fish? He was not amused.

Consul: "Look, it's very simple. You can do your duty, or you'll forfeit your citizenship, which means you will be arrested and sent back to Argentina should you ever set foot on official Argentine property."

Me: "I'm not going back."

We shook hands and the Consul said, firmly but with no malice, "You had better leave now. You are on official Argentine property."

That night I called my parents in Montevideo and told them what had happened. My mother, who was born in Buenos Aires and identified very strongly with the country of her birth, said, "You'd be mad to go back. What a waste! Besides, you're not *really* an Argentine!"

My father was a stickler for ethics who believed that an unprincipled life was not worth living. His stock response to any kind of dubious behaviour was "What if everyone did it?" But he also worshiped at the altar of reason, and said, "Argentina has no legitimate claim on you if you're prepared to

gamble with your citizenship."

Some years later an amnesty was granted to people like me who'd been banished from Argentina for one reason or another. I was in Mexico City at the time, so I went to the Argentine consulate to reclaim my citizenship. When the Vice-Consul looked at my papers he stiffened and shot me a hostile look. "You never did your *colimba*!" He probably resented people like me, who had turned their backs on his country and were now being forgiven and welcomed back into the fold. I can understand that, but in the end it all came down to a point of view. Gambles don't always pay off, of course, but this one did, and I don't regret the choice I made.

