



Back In Time

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The Pocitos School

“You Can’t Go Home Again” — Thomas Wolfe (1940)

When my alma mater was founded in 1908 it was called The British School. But since, at that time, it was in fact two schools—one for Girls and one for Boys—it was generally, though not always, referred to in the plural as The British Schools. The institution was originally established at Juan Manuel Blanes 112 in Montevideo but soon outgrew the premises. There were a couple of temporary moves and then, in 1925 the governing body bought about two thousand square meters of land at José Benito Lamas 2835/45 and built what became known as The Pocitos School.

I was enrolled in kindergarten there in 1950, and remember it as a large building on a quiet residential street, with high-ceilinged classrooms on two floors. There was a gymnasium-cum-assembly hall on the ground floor, and an open-air, paved playground around the back with a high, red brick wall surrounding the perimeter and another, lower one that separated the boys from the girls. In my memory, the playground was huge.

In 2011, when I returned to Montevideo for the fiftieth anniversary reunion of my graduating class, I was excited to catch up with old friends but I also really wanted to visit the Pocitos School. I had spent a significant portion of my childhood there and longed to see it again. But times had changed. It was now a Jewish School (Escuela Integral Hebreo Uruguay) and security was extremely tight. In recent years several friends had dropped by and had been turned away by armed guards. One afternoon, however, thanks to some skilful diplomatic moves by a well-connected classmate, a handful of us were granted permission to visit. We were warmly greeted by school authorities and given an escorted tour that began with a photo op, posing on the front steps just as we used to do at the end of every term. Once inside, we were taken straight down the corridor to the back door and shown the playground where we used to play *bolitas* and *payanas*, among other things, many years ago.

As I stepped out onto that paved surface my mind was awash with memories that, needless to say, didn’t quite match what I was looking at. The dividing wall has been removed and the whole space felt tiny, far too small for all the marching we did in the mornings and the wild soccer games that overwhelmed the boys’ area during breaks. The tree I loved best was still

standing beside the back wall, but did not look nearly as mighty as I remember it. Apartment buildings have been constructed in close proximity to the property, so that the playground now felt boxed in and there was no longer a sense of wide-open sky framed by a few leafy green trees. Another floor has been added to the rear of the main building, jutting out over the playground and supported by concrete columns, creating a bunker-like feeling on the ground level. The bicycle shed is gone, as is that whole open strip on the side of the building where classes sometimes used to spill out onto the steps for some *al fresco* learning.

Inside the building I was sad to see that the assembly hall—where I sang, did calisthenics, and learned to box on Friday afternoons—exists now only in memory. It has been replaced by a sunken library that no doubt inspires the same affection today that students at “El British” felt for that space in our time. The corridors on either side of the new library and on the upper floor are perhaps the most unchanged feature of the building. The floor tiles are the same, and the stairs have been carefully restored using identical materials. The railings are as lovely as ever, with their well-worn wooden balustrades looking just as they did in my day. I had difficulty locating the laboratory, which may say something about my lacklustre science grades. But my heart leapt when I saw the wall radiator outside the upstairs corner office where I remember—vividly—standing in detention, humiliated and contrite in my short grey flannel pants.

We wandered around the school for an hour, peering into classrooms that transported us to a distant time and place. When we emerged I remembered the candy vendors with their barrows parked outside the gates at ten past four, and thought about the mouth-watering *refuerzos de mortadela* at the shop across the road that is also but a memory. We all have different recollections, of course, based on our own unique perspective of events that we experienced in our childhood. But what happens to our emotional links to the past when they are exposed to the bright light of the present? This visit did nothing to corrupt or diminish mine. If anything, it brought me closer to those misty memories of long ago. In spite of the inevitable changes, it felt good to see the old place again and I’m glad I went back. In my opinion, it’s not so much that we can’t go home again. It’s that we shouldn’t expect it to be exactly as it was when we left.