



Uruguayans Down Under

In 1971 the Australian government conducted a Census of Population and Housing that was far more exhaustive and complex than the previous one in 1966. Many questions on the new forms were designed to learn more about residents who were from other countries. Among this cohort was a small number of Uruguayan migrants, and that's where I came in.

I had been living in Australia for about eighteen months at that point, employed at an advertising agency in Sydney. Through a connection at the Uruguayan Consulate, I was asked if I would be willing to serve as a census taker with a specific mission: to visit the homes of Uruguayans living in Sydney's suburbs, who might not be particularly fluent in English, and help them fill out the copious forms. The Bureau of Census and Statistics was keen to harvest clear and accurate data, and the Consulate wanted to support Uruguayan residents as they did their civic duty. My qualifications for the task were that I was bilingual and had grown up in Uruguay.

I agreed to take the assignment and attended multiple training sessions where I learned how to navigate the extremely detailed census forms and, hopefully, answer any questions anyone might have. Since I, and presumably most of the people I'd be interviewing, had day jobs, it was understood that I would do my rounds in the evening. I was told that each interview should take no longer than an hour and I should try to visit three homes every weekday evening for about a month or so. I soon learned that this schedule did not allow for Uruguayan conviviality or generosity and was therefore wildly ambitious and woefully unrealistic.

The first home I visited set the pattern for all my other interviews. A man answered the door and regarded me warily as I launched into my prepared speech in Spanish. I explained that the government was especially interested in him and his family and had sent me to ask him a few questions. I added that I had grown up in Uruguay and was there to help him complete the forms I was pulling out of

my briefcase. He blinked, then asked: “¿Sos uruguayo?” I said yes, I am Uruguayan. His face lit up; he shook my hand and said: “Well then, come in, come in!” He called out to his wife to say that the government had sent a Uruguayan to help them fill out the census forms. His wife appeared and shook my hand. “¿Es uruguayo?” she asked. Her husband said, “Of course he's Uruguayan, just listen to him. And bring the *mate*!”

An hour flew by while we drank *mate* and told stories about Uruguay and how we had ended up in Australia. Their English was quite good, but they were more comfortable speaking Spanish. They had come a few years ago in search of a better life, the classic migrant's story. He was an electrical engineer; she was a nutritionist. They had jobs and their three kids were in school. They missed their homeland but loved living in Sydney. They wanted to know about me, where I was from, what I did, and whether I was a fan of Peñarol or Nacional, the top soccer teams back home. I dodged the question by saying that I had been in London for the 1966 World Cup final as an interpreter for Heber Pinto, the most famous sports commentator in Uruguay, who broadcast the game live from Wembley Stadium. They wanted to hear all about that, and it took some time to get us back to completing the forms.

The wife served snacks while we talked and then brought out a bowl of delicious ravioli, followed by cheese and *membrillo* (quince jelly), a typical Uruguayan dessert. I spent the whole evening with them, and we got all the forms filled out correctly. On top of that, I had a marvellous time with some people whose warm hospitality made me nostalgic for a life I had once known. I tried hard to complete my subsequent interviews in the allotted time, but rarely managed to see more than one family per evening. Dinner would appear out of the blue, you see, and there was so much to talk about.