
A Native Son Reports from Argentina

by Herold Weiss

When I left Buenos Aires in January of 1954, it never crossed my mind that it would be 30 years before I would step on Argentinian soil again. Much happened after I reached the United States. I graduated from Southern Missionary College, received a doctorate in biblical studies at Duke, pastored for several years in New York City where I also met and married my wife, taught at Andrews University including several years in the New Testament Department of the SDA Theological Seminary, and then joined the faculty of St. Mary's College next to Notre Dame University. Now I was going back to Argentina with my wife and two sons, just as my homeland was trying to put aside 40 years of Peronista history. Although my family and I were preoccupied with getting acquainted with the large number of uncles, cousins, nephews, and nieces I had left behind, I also wanted to see how life was progressing in the Spanish-speaking Adventist church I had left behind.

I was particularly interested in Adventist higher education. Arriving at my old *alma mater*, River Plate College, was a homecoming. The countryside not far from there

was the home of my grandparents when they came to Argentina in the 1890's. But the joy of arriving at my college was spoiled by two things. First I was greeted by an eight foot fence, topped by two rows of barbed wire that somehow spoiled for me the enjoyment of all the new facilities the college had been able to build. My nephew, a student at the college, assured me that he and his friends could, and regularly did, jump the fence in two seconds flat. I pondered how a faculty could liberate their students to the wonders of truth on a campus that looked like a penitentiary. Also, to my dismay, I discovered that the college president, a former union departmental director with no university training, was facing a veritable faculty rebellion that only served to confirm my worst fears about the shortsightedness of the internal politics of the Austral Union.

At River Plate there are students taking the five-year standard secondary curriculum for all students in the nation, students taking the four-year college curriculum in theology accredited by the General Conference Department of Education, plus students working for degrees as secondary teachers, a degree which is accredited by Argentinian educational authorities.

The federal department of education in Argentina has an office that supervises all private educational institutions. The teach-

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ers at all such institutions get paid by the government for every course that has at least 10 students. At River Plate, all teachers teaching courses accredited by the department of education sign forms acknowledging receipt of their salary from the state. The state's salary scale is higher than that contracted by the teachers with the college; in this way the school is able to pay all teachers and take care of some administrative costs with the monies received each month from the state.

So far, the inspectors from the state have been very congenial, and even commendatory of the school's educational program. They do not object that the school adds theology courses to the secondary curriculum, or has its own admissions policy. Defenders of the arrangement argue that it makes possible to keep non-Adventist enrollment down to about 10 to 15 percent of the student body. On the other hand, if the school were to become dependent on tuition monies to pay faculty salaries, the non-Adventist contingent in the student body would have to increase to 40 percent. Under such conditions, it is feared, it would be more difficult to keep an Adventist atmosphere on campus. Thus, it is argued, the state's money is what keeps the college Adventist.

Theological ferment at the college centers around righteousness by faith, understood in an individualistic, asocial way. Third world theologies of liberation are ignored. An individual who shows some interest in them is immediately labeled "tercermundista," a designation meant to indicate that the person is in grave danger of losing his way.

All the leaders of Argentinian Adventism since the church came under a national hierarchy in the late 1940s were trained at River Plate College by a still-revered pioneer. Elder John D. Livingstone, a firm believer in the eternal significance of the law, was respected and almost feared by students, who were traumatized by the number of memory verses they were required to learn by exam time. Even though Livingstone left in the early 1940s, his influence is still strong in the naturally conservative setting of a latin society. Today it is not uncommon to hear old-timers in the church confess that they are just beginning to understand what righteousness by faith is about. Unfortunately, this legalistic attitude has moved beyond Argentina to the rest of Latin America. For example, the Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly is pre-

Growth in South America

Under the blessing of God, 68,452 members were added to the church during 1983 alone. Last year, ministers in the division baptized approximately 188 people per day. This brought the baptized membership to 608,830 by Dec. 31, 1983, which represents a net increase of 43,886 over the membership Dec. 31, 1982.

All unions are involved in aggressive plans for metropolitan and rural evangelistic campaigns. One, South Brazil Union (with headquarters in Sao Paulo, Brazil, where we have a large Adventist population), has planned in its field alone to conduct 2000 evangelistic efforts by laymen and ministers during 1984.

The South American Division now ranks as the third largest in the Adventist church after Inter-America and North America. This represents a growth rate of 7.8 percent for the year 1983. The growth rate for the world field as of Dec. 31, 1982 was 6.3 percent.

Our educational work also receives strong support in the South American Division, where we have six senior colleges, 43 secondary schools, and various primary schools. During 1983, River Plate College, our oldest secondary institution in South America, celebrated its 85th anniversary.

Our health-care work is also well-developed with 19 hospitals and larger clinics, and 12 smaller clinics and dispensaries. Through a carefully developed program, the South American Division has given attention to the training of medical and para-medical personnel, and they are able to provide for all their personnel needs in this area. Statistics on schools and hospitals are for Dec. 31, 1982. Galloping inflation in many of the South American countries makes for unfavorable comparisons of giving trends when compared with US dollars, but in local currency the figures indicate the faithful tithing and giving patterns of our people.

Literature sales in the South American Division during 1983 were greatly encouraging. When all reports are in, it will probably be the best year they have experienced. Church members studied *Colporteur Ministry* by Ellen G. White as the book of the year.

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The editors of Spectrum invited Roy Williams, associate secretary of the General Conference, to provide a brief overview of growth in the South American Division.

—Editors note.

pared in Spanish at our publishing house in one of the suburbs of Buenos Aires. In the original English the lesson for Sabbath August 27, 1983, was entitled "There is no Justification by Law." In the Spanish quarterly, which is used by Spanish-speaking churches through South and Central America, Europe, and the United States, that lesson was entitled "No Hay Justificación sin Ley" (There is no justification without law). I am sure the problem is not due to a faulty knowledge of the languages on the part of the translator.

At River Plate, I heard several times about plans for the establishment of a federated theological faculty, chosen from the several colleges in South America, which would offer a doctoral program in theology. The faculty members who will be directly involved in teaching remain in the dark as to what is being planned. They wonder how they will keep doing all they are already accomplishing and still take responsibility for the new program (their present load includes about 18 to 20 hours a week of teaching, plus all kinds of other expected commitments). Apparently all the planning for the program is going on far away at the offices in Brasilia.

In some ways, though, the church is losing its inferiority complex vis-a-vis the surrounding culture. When I had been a student at River Plate we had been forbidden to play "La Cucaracha" at a men's reception because, even as played by our puny band, the piece had too much rhythm. I was therefore very happy to attend the celebration of the 75th anniversary of the Adventist sanitarium next door to the college. The highlight of the festivities was an excellent performance of the *Misa Criolla*, a version of the Catholic mass set to Argentinian folk music. The performers were the college's band, the sanitarium choir, and two non-Adventist guests: Ariel Ramirez, the composer of the *Misa*, at the piano, and Zamba Quipildor, one of the best known

folk singers in the country, as the tenor soloist. The fine national reputation of the sanitarium had made the appearance of these distinguished guests possible, of course. I found most appropriate that the long and well-established mission of mercy of the sanitarium could be celebrated with a performance of the most exquisite expression of Argentinian piety.

The church certainly has a wide-open door in Argentina. Unfortunately, byzantine politics within the hierarchy seem to be as healthy today as when I left 30 years ago. Although a new, more open era in Argentinian politics seems to be starting, the traditional conservatism of the culture continue to pervade the church. Ordination still is regarded as a ritual that empowers men to make decisions in all aspects of the church life. Lay involvement in conference, union, and division administration remains minimal, too often allowing promotions to be determined by a "buddy system." This discourages young people, and some of those who have entered the Argentinian work seem to be anxious to come to the United States to work in the expanding Spanish work, or even to leave the ministry for other lines of endeavor.

Still I was delighted to find studious, sincere pastors committed to their ministry, with a strong sense of responsibility for the people they serve. I will vividly remember the young man in his next to last year of medical school at the University of Buenos Aires. Between exams he was taking time to assist a young pastor friend in conducting a 5-day Plan to stop smoking. The friends were working on one of the poorest suburbs of the city because the laypeople in the pastor's congregation wanted to start a new church in that run-down neighborhood.

Now, more than ever, Argentina is open to voices of moral responsibility and conviction. It would be a marvellous development if a new generation of ministers and laypeople could break the ecclesiastical patterns of the past and open up the church to a wider vision of its mission in society.