

Thirty Years

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As the taxi rushed away from my old home along Avenida del Libertador, I looked through the rear windshield for one last time. My mother barely acknowledged my gesture. She was silent, and most probably did not want to turn around. She hid her eyes behind her sunglasses, trying not to think about what laid ahead of us, in a journey that, a few days later, would take us to Europe.

- Vicente López
- Decisions, Decisions
- Tipping Point
- Takeoff and Landing
- Conundrum
- “Le Bureau des Suisses de Retour de l’Etranger”
- To Make a Long Story Short

It was February 1991. The weather was warm, not hot, and very sunny. The USA were starting a campaign to kick the forces of Irak out of Koweit. Argentina was in a deep economic recession. Again.

As I recall these memories from my childhood, seeing my first home fade away in the distance, I realize that Vicente López was not yet the chaotic, impersonal mess of highrise buildings that it is today. There were still a few safeguards in place, and although there were quite a few very high constructions on the west side of the avenue, they all enjoyed a fantastic view of the Rio de la Plata.

As did my mother’s apartment; a nice one-bedroom flat she had bought in 1968, thereby meeting my father. She was a secretary working in IBM Argentina. He was a young student in the Faculty of Architecture of the Universidad de Buenos Aires, making ends meet by selling real estate in the northern neighborhoods of the Greater Buenos Aires Area.

As fate had it, my mother bought apartment “B” in the seventh floor of the building in Avenida del Libertador 1574 (between Gavito Automotores and the YPF gas station) somewhere in 1968 (that building is clearly visible in the middle of this picture in Wikipedia). She married my dad in 1971. I was born in 1973. They divorced in 1974.

I digress.

Vicente López

Vicente López was a very nice place to live. In summer one could hear the cicadas on top of the Jacarandas. Lots of bitter orange trees would furnish the neighborhood with the smell of fresh marmalade. I rode my bike across the streets, avoiding the few bus lines that crossed it (most notably lines 161 and 21), and enjoying the sights. Avoiding the river, too, because it was too polluted to be approachable at less than 100 meters. Some days the stench was unbearable.

Ours was an area of famed pizzerias, restaurants and cafés. There was “Kaskot’e”, in the corner of Vernet and Libertador, really close from the Centro Asturiano sports club. One of my preferred restaurants was “Carlitos”, in the corner of Vergara and Libertador, whose owner and cook was exactly the same Carlos Ciuffardi from Villa Gesell. Once a month my mum took me to the Pumper Nic in the corner of Yrigoyen and Libertador to have a “Mobur” (a sandwich with ham and a fried egg) with “Frenys” (French fries). I even celebrated my 8th birthday with my schoolmates in that Pumper Nic. And for a relaxing coffee with friends, I can recommend the famous Café de Paris which is still in the corner of Ramón Melgar and Azcuénaga, and is still as charming as it was back then.

It was also a neighborhood of famous sport clubs: the Centro Asturiano (of which my mother and I were members); the Círculo Trovador; the Centro Lucense; the Club Banco Provincia; those were all near my home. A bit further away, along the Zufriategui street, was the Banco Nación Club, with its famed Rugby team. And there were quite a few military clubs along the river as well.

To be honest, as much as I liked the place, I walked those streets with eyes in my back, avoiding to be mugged, or worse. By the end of the 1980s it was no longer safe to live there. Actually, it felt like none of Argentina was safe anymore.

Decisions, Decisions

In August 1990 my mother and I took the decision of leaving the country to go to Switzerland. Well, the decision was years in the making, really; after all, we both had the Swiss passport. She had got it from her father, and I had got it from her.

With that objective in mind I started learning French again in 1988. I say again because when I was a kid my grandmother used to speak to me in French. And then I started primary school at a very expensive multilingual school in the neighborhood of Martínez. I only stayed there for three years, from 1978 to 1980. It was prohibitively expensive.

So I went to public school for the rest of the 1980s. Starting in 1981, I went

to the “Escuela número 8” in the corner of Maipú and San Martín, and in 1987 I started high school in the “Colegio Nacional de Vicente Lopez Juan Pablo Duarte y Diez”, in Agustín Alvarez street.

Going back to study French was a way to recover those memories from when I was a kid. My grandmother had passed away in 1985 after a few years of chronic illnesses and health troubles. I had not spoken French since the early 1980s, and I had forgotten most of it.

Funny anecdote: my French teacher was Eleonora, a lifetime friend of my mother, and incidentally the mother of Beta Suárez, a well known influencer in Argentina nowadays. As a matter of fact, my grandmother helped Eleonora pass the exam in the Alliance Française to become a teacher, and 20 years later, Eleonora taught me French.

Tipping Point

In 1989 a new government came into power in Argentina. My mother was working in a public company of the energy sector, one of the myriad of enterprises to be “privatised” in name of neoliberalism, efficiency, and corruption. She was going to lose her job. She knew it.

She sold her apartment, today worth at least 90'000 USD, for what was the market price at that time, a mere 15'000 USD (around 30'000 USD in 2021, adjusted by inflation). She actually got 5'000 more for it because she had subscribed to the “Megatel Project”, which had provided a phone to our home. Another anecdote: in 1989, a phone rang in our apartment for the first time, ever. An orange phone, with a dial, as analog as it gets. Having a phone was so rare, it could increase the value of your home.

That means, yes, she had lived for almost 20 years without a telephone at home. Can you believe it?

We went to the Swiss embassy in downtown Buenos Aires, in the Avenida Santa Fé, and asked for information. They were polite but did not provide much data. A few tourist guides about Geneva, a list of hotels, but not much more.

We were on our own.

Takeoff and Landing

On Tuesday, February 19th, 1991, around 9 AM local time, our KLM flight took off from EZE. The next day, after a few hours layoff in AMS, we landed in GVA.

It was Wednesday, February 20th, around 3 PM local time.

That had been my first transatlantic flight ever.

Nobody was waiting for us in the airport. Nobody from my mother’s family knew we were there. Actually, to the exception of one cousin, nobody even

dared have a coffee with her. I do not know what happened in her family, but for some reason they hated her brother intensely, and by transitive property, her as well, and I suppose me too.

Upon arrival, we left our bags in lockers at the Geneva Airport, and took a train to downtown Geneva. The only thing we knew is that there was a tourist office in Cornavin, Geneva's main train station. The lady in the counter booked a hotel for us, we took a cab, and dropped our handbags at what would be our new home for the foreseeable future.

That hotel no longer exists, and thankfully so. It was called Hotel Adris, in the Rue Abraham Gevray, not far from the lake, in the neighborhood of Pâquis. Quite crappy but cheap. No need to say more.

We went back to the airport, grabbed our bags, got back to the hotel, and then left for a small walk, to get to know the neighborhood a bit. We ate a pizza in a small restaurant in the Rue des Pâquis, between the Rue de Monthoux and the Rue de Zurich. That was our first dinner in Switzerland, around 18:00 CET, on Wednesday, February 20th, 1991.

We were exhausted.

Conundrum

That hotel, as crappy as it was, was costing us 120 CHF per night, and the only economies we had were the Traveller's Cheques my mum had bought after selling the apartment. That was the first time I experienced that startup-like "cash burn rate" feeling. We needed to find an apartment to live, a job, you know, a life, and fast.

The following Thursday morning we started visiting real estate offices in Geneva, looking to rent an apartment.

But it turns out my mother could not rent an apartment, because she did not have a job.

And she could not get a job, because she had no fixed address.

See the problem? Oops.

That first weekend in Geneva was dire. My mother broke down in tears from Saturday to Sunday. Even though we had a Swiss passport in our hands, we were stuck in an infinite loop of impossibility.

The following Monday we went to another real estate agency (I think it was Pilet & Renaud but I am not sure), and my mother broke down in front of the person who received us. She explained our broken situation in her broken French.

But this time was different. She looked at us, and said, "please stay here, I have to make a phone call."

Five minutes later she came back with a paper in her hand. She told us “call this man, his name is Huguenin. He is in charge of the office for Swiss people returning from abroad. I have told him about you, he will be waiting your call.”

Sometimes things happen in the weirdest ways. I do not remember the name of this lady.

Maybe there is something to say about faith here, but I do not know.

“Le Bureau des Suisses de Retour de l’Etranger”

We called right away from a phone booth outside the real estate office. Indeed that Monsieur Huguenin told us to come see him. It turns out there is an office of the Canton of Geneva for Swiss people coming from abroad.

To this day, I do not understand why the Embassy of Buenos Aires did not provide us this phone number to begin with.

Monsieur Huguenin received us that very afternoon. He gave my mother a warranty certificate, and lots of information about where, when, and how to find a job. He told me where and who to ask about my studies (I had to finish high school.)

In less than half an hour, Monsieur Huguenin kicked off our life in Switzerland.

To Make a Long Story Short

The following Wednesday, February 27th, we moved into a small apartment in Rue Charles-Cusin 10, in the same neighborhood of Pâquis. That evening we celebrated having dinner at a Swiss restaurant in Rue des Pâquis, “L’Auberge de Savièse”, close to our new place. Only a week after landing in Geneva, we had a place we could call home.

The following Saturday, March 2nd, Serge Gainsbourg passed away. That is the first public news I remember during those first days in Switzerland. It is weird how memory works sometimes.

By May, my mother had found a job, as a cashier in a local Coop supermarket. I spent my summer at the same Coop, too, working from mid-June to end of August in the warehouses of Satigny. That brought a major boost to my knowledge of French, and some pocket money, too.

By Monday, September 2nd, I started school again. I would graduate from high school with a Swiss “Maturité” in June 1993 in the Collège Sismondi, not far from the United Nations building.

A new life started, exactly 30 years ago.