

2009 11 (21)
Subject: "Conversation with Peron on arrival in Buenos Aires and before his inauguration".

During the conversation which I had with President Truman and Secretary of State Byrnes before leaving for the Argentine and to which reference has been made in another memorandum, I expressed the opinion that it would be highly desirable that on my arrival in the Argentine as soon as possible thereafter I have a conversation with Peron which would be off the record. The President and Mr. Byrnes were very anxious that I should reach the Argentine before the inauguration and they thought that this idea was a good one. I was hoping for such a conversation not so much because I could get President Peron to say anything in his inauguration speech before the Congress, which would be helpful, but because I thought it would be possible to keep him from saying some things which would be unhelpful in the matters we had in mind.

Before leaving Mexico City by air for Buenos Aires with my wife, I received a long telegram from an old friend of mine in Rio; Sam de Souza Leao Gracie and I were old friends, the families were good friends. We had been together in Vienna when he was there as Brazilian minister. He was back in Brazil as head of the Foreign Office directly under the Foreign Minister then, Dr. Raul Fernández. The substance of the telegram was to the effect that they wanted me very much to stop in Rio for a day or two at least on my way to Buenos Aires. In view of the relations between Brazil and Argentina for many years, and in view of the circumstance that the Brazilian government was not too happy about Peron, and knowing the sensitiveness of our Latin friends with regard to matters of this kind, I did not know whether I should agree to stop or not, but after thinking it over very carefully I decided that I should do so.

We spent several days in Rio; it was a very pleasant stay as

I saw many old friends among the Brazilians. I saw the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Raul Fernández, several times and he gave a dinner for us in the Hotel Copacabana the second evening we were there. I had told my friend Sam Gracie on arriving, that I thought it would be better for us to keep our conversation on generalities as what we were all interested in was seeing things go well in the Argentine and make possible the meeting in Rio, which had been so often postponed, to implement the Acts of Chapultepec. The Brazilians are always very understanding about matters of this kind, and the conversation which I had with Dr. Fernández and with Gracie and other Brazilian friends while I was there was interesting but they did not try to push forward any of their views. The invitation to stop over for a few days had been really a friendly gesture and nothing more.

We arrived in Buenos Aires I believe early in May. I will have to verify these dates, but we arrived at least eight or ten days before the inauguration. This was as we had planned. When the plane arrived at the airport in Buenos Aires, we found a very large number of people there to meet us. We had been there, of course, years before when I was Consul General, and had many Argentine friends, but very few of these, if any, were at the plane. There were many of our American friends and there were many Argentines of the new government.

There was a sort of informal reception at the airport. During the course of this brief reception an officer took me aside and said that he was a personal aide of the President elect. The President wanted him to convey to me how much he was pleased that I was coming to the Argentine and how much he was looking forward to seeing me. He asked whether I saw any inconvenience in my having a talk with President Peron before he actually took office. The President's thought was that we

might meet in the house of a friend of his, an American friend, Bill Arnold. In this way no one would know anything about the meeting and the President and I could have a good chat. He repeated that if I saw no inconvenience, the President elect would appreciate this very much. He emphasized, however, that if I thought it was not convenient that the President elect would understand. I told this aide of the President to say to him that I would be only too happy to have this opportunity of meeting him informally during the very first days of my stay.. His answer was that in that case we could have the conversation the following evening in the house of Arnold and that Mrs. Messersmith should accompany me and that Mrs. Peron would come with the President elect.

The following evening we met at the home of Bill Arnold. He had an apartment at that time in the center of the city. After some general conversation during which the President elect and Mrs. Peron and Bill Arnold and his charming wife, Jean, and my wife and I were present, Peron and I soon found ourselves alone in a comfortable corner of the apartment.

Peron appeared to be in excellent health and spirits. He seemed to be much younger even than I had thought him to be. His complexion was rather florid; his manner was easy and gracious and most kind from the outset. I know that he had had letters from several friends of mine in other countries of Latin America whom he knew and from others whom he did not know, and that these letters had expressed their satisfaction that I was going to the Argentine and that they were sure that we would be able to find the solution to the problems at issue. I did not know about these letters until later. I mention them now only because it was, I think, these letters which made quite an impression on Peron and gave him at least a preliminary feeling that I was someone with whom

he could talk with complete frankness and confidence.

I started the conversation by saying that I was very happy that I had this opportunity of spending some time in the Argentine as chief of our mission. I was very happy that we had this opportunity of getting together so early during my stay. I said that for many years I had had a close interest in the affairs of the Argentine and her people as I had in other countries of Latin America and their peoples. It was a great source of concern to me that the relations between our two countries, which should be so friendly, and so understanding and so close, as we had so many things in common, should be as they were. It was not in the interest of either country and not in the interest of all the Americas. I had come to Buenos Aires with a very definite mission and that was to endeavor to see what could be done in order to bring our relationships on the basis that we considered they ought to be and which we hoped he felt they should be. The President must not think that our attitudes were arbitrary. We had gone through two great wars in Europe. In the first one the Argentine had not played a very friendly role towards the allies. In the second World War we had made the most tremendous effort that any country had ever made in history for certain principles. We had made tremendous sacrifices in blood and money. The President must understand that our people had strong feelings and they had very definite feelings with regard to the part which the Argentine had played during the last World War. There were certain positions which we could not change after having made all these sacrifices, not only for ourselves but for others as well. We were not going to compromise with any of our principles for any reason whatever. I said I was saying this at the outset of our conversation because I wanted him to know that there were certain things on which we could not and would not compromise.

The President ~~said~~ then went into a long story of the positions which the Argentine took during the first World War. It was not a very convincing story but I think it was the way he honestly saw it. He then went into a very long story of the Argentine's position in the second World War. What he said was not too convincing; much, however, of what he said was correct. He ended by saying that the attitudes of the Argentine had been very much misunderstood, particularly in the United States, and had led there to the formation of prejudices and a bad press, and he realized that it would be very difficult to correct this situation and that it would take time, and that there were some things which should be done without loss of time. He had sought this conversation early with me and before he assumed the presidency because he wanted me to know from the outset of my mission that he wanted to clear up all these situations and place the relations of the Argentine with the United States on a sound and proper and cooperative basis.

Parenthetically I may say at this point in this memorandum that as this conversation with Peron was so important and so decisive in many ways in the future relations between the Argentine and the United States, that I will re-dictate the memorandum after I've had the opportunity of consulting my notes on this conversation, which are not now available to me as they are packed away among my many papers. This account of the conversation with Peron, therefore, will be very sketchy. I then spoke about the fact that it would be highly desirable if in the very near future certain acts could be undertaken by the Argentine government which would at least make possible the meeting of the American states at Rio de Janeiro, which had been so long postponed. I said that the Acts of Chapultepec had not yet been ratified by the Congress in the Argentine and that until this was done it was, of course, impossible for the

Argentine to assist or attend a meeting of the American states to discuss the implementation of the Acts of Chapultepec and military collaboration. I said that certain undertakings had been made by the American states with regard to their treatment of enemy property and that so far as the United States was concerned, we were of the opinion that very inadequate action had been taken in this respect in Argentina. I said that one of the principal points also was this question of enemy aliens who had sought refuge in the Argentine or who had come there as agents and worked against the interests of the allies. Some of these were still in the Argentine and the government had done nothing with respect to them; they not only had complete freedom of action and movement but some of them were enjoying a good deal of favor. I was not speaking about what the newspapers abroad might say about this matter but I was speaking from knowledge which we had. I said that in my opinion if the Acts of Chapultepec were ratified by the Argentine Congress, if adequate action was taken with respect to enemy property in accord with the obligations which the Argentine government had undertaken, and if appropriate action was taken with regard to enemy aliens, great steps would have been taken towards the normalization of relationships and laying the basis for better relationships which, I believed, he desired as we did, and certainly the meeting at Rio could take place to the advantage of all of us.

The President said that on every one of these points he was in complete agreement with me, and that I could have the absolute assurance that the appropriate actions would be taken in all three of these matters. We would have to discuss certain details but he could, from the very outset, assure me that the appropriate action would be taken by the Argentine government.

We then started a general conversation. He expressed great admiration for the United States and our achievements in the economic field. He expressed great admiration for the performance of our Army and our Navy and our Air Force during the war. He spoke of his period of service in Italy, where he had been a military attaché in the Argentine Embassy. He spoke of the visits which he had made to various parts of Europe and spoke frankly of the stays which he had made in Germany. He said that he had recognized what Germany was doing in the way of building up military power and one could not but admire what they had achieved in the way of military preparation but that he could not in any way sympathize with the purposes for which the Nazi regime had built up its power. He knew that it would be misused. He said that the appropriate steps must be undertaken in the Americas so that the military strength of the American countries could be built up and, in case there should be any future conflict of any kind, the Americas should not only be united but that the American states should be in a position to collaborate closely with the United States and in an adequate way as it was the contribution which they ^{sh} could make, and this ^{up to now} was only in raw materials and their contribution should be a greater one.

He then spoke about the communist threat at great length. He spoke of the communist activities in Argentina. He saw Communism as the great threat to these countries as well as to us. As long as these miserable conditions existed ~~in~~ among so many people in the Latin countries of America, their position would be weak and they would be a drag on the United States rather than a help. He hoped that the United States and the Argentine would be able to work together very closely in the putting down of communism everywhere in the Hemisphere, and this was one of the things on which he hoped to talk with me at length. Con-

cerning the sincerity of the statements which he was making with regard to communism, there was, I believe, no doubt. The only part of this conversation which gave me a bit to pause and think was his rather insistent reference to collaboration between the United States and the Argentine in this matter on the basis that they were the only two states in the Americas that could really do something effective about it. It was up to our two countries to take this leadership in this matter. I told him that I would be very glad to discuss this matter with him at any time.

He then spoke at some length about the situation in the Argentine. He said that he realized that his task would not be easy, there was so much to be done in the country. Unfortunately he did not have the able collaborators in some respects that he should have; political feelings had run so high in the Argentine in the last few years and, as I knew the Latins took politics in a very personal way, that some of the very competent people of the opposition whom he had asked to collaborate with him in his Cabinet had refused to have anything whatever to do with him or with his administration. He said that this was too bad as he really needed the collaboration of these people and he had made every effort to secure it, and he wanted me to know that he had made every such effort and that I would find, after I'd been in the Argentine for a little while, that he had really done so. This circumstance would make his task more difficult for it took adequate people to deal with the problems which lay before them. He said, therefore, that I would have to understand that he could not do everything in a day, it would take some time to get accomplished the things which he was agreed should be done, but he said, however, that he wanted to assure me again that they would be done and knew that I had the understanding to appreciate

that things could not be done in a day.

There were other important aspects of this conversation which escape my memory at the moment but which I will cover when I re-dictate the memorandum after consulting my notes made at the time of the conversation.

The net result of the conversation was that I had the impression that Peron had as one of his principal desires on entering the Presidency to establish better relations with the United States. I was also convinced that he knew that certain things would have to be done and that some of them would not be easy, because some of these situation he himself had assisted in creating. I had the feeling that whatever his attitudes towards Italy and Germany at one time may have been, that he had changed his mind. If he had in his ^{own} mind and by some of his own acts backed the loser, he was now sincerely ready to play with the winner.

He spoke briefly about the inauguration; he spoke briefly about my visit to President O'Farrell. He said that the days until the inauguration would be much too full of ceremonies, etc. and we would not have much chance for real conversation, but that as soon as these inaugural ceremonies were over we would have concrete talks about things to be done.

The conversation had lasted several hours. When it was over Mrs. Peron, we rejoined the Arnolds and my wife and shortly thereafter separated. I do not think that the fact that this conversation took place was known to more than a few people outside of those who were present. It proved to be difficult, as Peron had foreseen, to carry through all of these undertakings but he did carry through loyally and, in my opinion, fully on every one. The only thing which marred the performance, so far as the substance of our conversation was concerned, was the attitude taken against the press in the Argentine, and particularly with reference to La Prensa.