

■ ravelings

Knitting in Argentina

Caren Weiner Campbell

Everyone—even nonknitters—understands the metaphoric power of yarn. A storyteller, for example, “spins a yarn.” If she’s careful, her listeners will be able to follow the “thread” of her narrative. She may even reminisce about her “ties” to a distant homeland.

The strands of my own history bind me to a small town in the Andes, thousands of miles from my New York City apartment. Back in 1981, as a 17-year-old exchange student, I was sent to the Andean mountain hamlet of San Carlos de Bariloche, Argentina. Bariloche had been settled around the turn of the last century by Swiss and German immigrants, and it looked like a transplanted Alpine village, complete with woodsy half-timbered cottages and snowy surrounding peaks. Not surprisingly, given its heritage and setting, Bariloche was famous for its handknits. One particular design was considered a regional hallmark: a crewneck pullover with Fair Isle bands at mid-sleeve and abdomen. I bought five, as souvenirs for my family back home.

Meanwhile, during my three-month stay, I wanted to befriend my host sister Bea, a shy college student. As I watched her expertly knitting a sweater, I decided to capitalize on our common interest (though I hadn’t knitted since the garter-stitch scarves of my childhood). Bea enthusiastically escorted me to a yarn store to pick out a kilo of woolen yarn and then set me working on a garment, two off-white squares of (unintentionally) twisted stockinette stitch sewn together into a boat-neck vest. That clumsy vest is long gone now, but I still have the long 3-mm single-points Bea helped me buy, the satisfying memory of a bond finally forged, and the love of knitting she helped rekindle in me.

Suddenly last summer, in a fit of yearning, I decided to rewind the thread of my life. I followed it back, halfway around the world, to Bariloche—where I refreshed my recollections for two nostalgic weeks. Bea now lives in Portugal (perhaps her knitting now reminds her of Bariloche, too), but her mother and brother, Pilar and Ivan, were there to welcome me warmly and introduce me to the next gen-

eration: Ivan now has five children of his own.

One day Pilar went into a back closet and pulled out some rustic sweaters made from coarse white yarn. The slick strands were goat hair, she explained, and their natural oils make the sweaters water-repellent. She reminisced about how her mother used to dye the goat-hair yarn blue or black and then knit gloves and hats for Pilar, her sister Elvira, and especially their father, a park ranger who daily faced the mountain chill. Both Pilar’s parents are long dead now, but the memory of her childhood is woven through each stitch of those sweaters.

In fact, many of the sweaters you see around Bariloche elicit musings about the past—but not, unfortunately, in a good way. The few pullovers you see sporting those Fair Isle bands are no longer the carefully created woolen masterpieces of decades ago; nowadays they’re acrylic, machine-made, and imported from China. In part that’s because handknitting is no longer a viable way for local women to make a living: Amid Argentina’s infamous economic turmoil, that investment of time and money is a luxury reserved for family gifts.

There are, correspondingly, fewer yarn stores in town. Even so, after making inquiries, I did find one shop that looked stubbornly familiar. Was it yearning or true memory that persuaded me that this nameless store was the one where Bea and I bought yarn all those years ago? I will never know—because throughout my visit the store was always locked. Bulky cabled cardigans and lusciously thick socks beckoned from the display window, hanks of yarn filled the shelves, an enormous trunk in the middle of the room overflowed with unspun roving—but there were never any people inside. Every day I would stop by and press my nose against the glass, but I never got to go in. It remained off-limits, a life-size diorama in the museum of my own personal history—and, like the past, ultimately unrecoverable.

Recalling times and places long gone, and recapturing their echoes, seems to be part of all Bariloche knitting (or perhaps all knitting everywhere). The Mapuche, a tribe in-

igenous to this region of the Andes, use the timeless methods of their ancestors to shear, spin, weave, and knit the wool from their flocks. Never dyed, the yarn comes in natural tans, browns, and whites; the sweaters and blankets made from it bear diamond and wave motifs representing the eternal mountains and lakes. No fools, the Mapuche also live in the present: They have formed a cooperative to sell yarn, sweaters, afghans, and much more out of a storefront on one of the town’s main streets.

Bariloche’s knitters of European descent also show off their traditional designs, most notably at the town’s annual celebration of itself, the nationally famous Snow Festival. Every year the festival includes a Sweater Parade and Contest, where teenage girls (all candidates for the title of Queen of the Snow) model sweaters for a ballroomful of spectators.

The day I was to leave Bariloche for the second time, I bought a kilo of llama yarn in natural colors—mocha brown and tan—and a hank of hand-dyed Lincoln wool in a bittersweet red. I went to the town square, where I spent a couple of hours gazing out at the lake to imprint it on my memory as I wound the yarn into balls. An older woman happened by and offered to hold the hank as I wound. She turned out to be a lonely divorcée whose children were grown and gone. Before long, something about our task seemed to open her up and she began reminiscing about her choices in life. As we parted, she told me she would pray for me. I’m sure it couldn’t hurt.

And now, six months after that day, I have just finished a turtleneck made out of that llama yarn, with a red Fair Isle band around the torso. It keeps me warm, inside and out, up here in the Northern Hemisphere, because every stitch and every strand tethers me to memories that I love. If only all yarns could come to such a satisfactory conclusion.

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