

ISRAEL

The Relieving Melancholy of Old Time

In 1973, I held the position of Secretary of State of Public Health under the third Presidency of Juan Domingo Perón and I was his personal physician.

I am the author of the law 20748 for the National System of Public Health in Argentina (1974).

I can confess now that doing cardiac surgery at the Italian Hospital in the morning, attending the State Secretariat in the afternoon and taking care of the health of the President, late in the evening or at night, turned into a really unimaginable and very heavy burden.

However, I must admit today that it was an extraordinary learning process, a fairly whole theory of life (*in the fields of deeply shaded, spurious politics, really strange to a man of science*), working, side by side, with an extraordinary statesman of the consistent talent of President Perón.

In the inner circle of any government machinery, where you need to deal with political duties, you will quite often find catastrophic people that naturally oppose to every noble idea. In my own time as Secretary of Public Health there was an influential man, directly related to the President, Mr. José Lopez Rega, called *the sorcerer*, keen on astrological signs.

José Lopez Rega didn't believe in science, even less in medical diagnosis and procedures; certainly he was naturally opposed to the National Health System and to a greater extent to the medical treatment that I ordered to the President. He only was convinced of and consistent with astrological powers, showing panegyric solemnity.

However, the plain fact was that, due to the particular virtues of the President and my closeness to him, our work advanced rapidly without much difficulty and any potential attempts of destruction from this strange man could be, fortunately, obstructed one after another.

We embraced with such avidity. the study of the National Health System that it was accomplished in record time.

Now I recognize, and it was absolutely true, that gathering specialist views from physicians coming from all political parties of Argentina was the most appropriate decision, above all from the political perspective, inasmuch as by that time it was a master decision. It avoided hard confrontations at the Parliament.

I myself was in charge of the selection of the specialists –Dr. Aldo Neri, Dr. Canitrot, and Dr. Prieto, who belonged to the powerful Radical Party, and I submitted the list to the President.

He paused for a moment, he turned away from the window, looked at me, and nodding in assent, he said with a smile: “*you are learning very fast, Dr. Liotta.*”

Certainly, President Perón was cautiously referring to the political issue.

The advocacy of the following steps by him remarked and confirmed his political convictions.

Before sending the Law of the National System of Public Health to the Parliament, the President asked me to carry out two previous steps, which, I insist, were a clear expression of his higher technical and political skill.

Firstly, the Political test.

Perón advised me to take the documents to Dr. Ricardo Balbin (*chief of the Radical Party, who was the visible head of Perón's powerful political opposition*).

No doubt, strictly at the root of the whole matter, the President was making ingenious guesses to the Radical Part to avoid—*for all practical purposes in a highly conflictive field, such as the one of public health--* a bloody confrontation in the Parliament.

I twice visited Dr. Ricardo Balbin, a highly prestigious politician, in his attorney office (c. March, 1974). In my last visit, Dr. Balbin emphatically expressed, “*please, let the President*

know that the Radical Party will support this project in the Argentine Parliament."

Then, I returned in a hurry to the President's Office. I approached the half-opened door and cautiously peered in to see if the President was alone.

"Sir, we are fortunately ready, and deliberately I would like to propose that you immediately send the document to the Parliament," I said.

He paused for a moment, "right, but not yet" Perón told me.

Unquestionably, he surprised me. I was really struck and sitting down in a sofa, I leaned back casually.

Secondly, the International test.

"I have already made arrangements with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs so that in a few weeks you may submit the Argentine Health System at a plenary session of the World Health Organization (WHO) in Geneva (May 1974)," the President said.

And he added, "after Geneva I have already made other plans too. You will continue your trip to Israel; I scheduled two conferences there, at the Tel Aviv University and at the University of Jerusalem."



From left to right, Dr. Domingo Liotta; Dr. Francisco Loyudice, Director of the Italian Hospital in Buenos Aires at that time; Juan D. Perón; Dr. Salvador Liotta; Dr. Héctor Cámpora, elected President of Argentina (1973) who resigned the Office very early. -Madrid 1972-

Certainly, the political vision of the President left no room for discussion. I think that in Geneva I made an honorable presentation of the Project at the Plenary Session of the WHO, which extended through numerous questions on the part of its members, personally and in writing by means of the Argentine Consulate in Geneva.

Without a shadow of a doubt, the System was an appeal for *social solidarity* of the nations regarding health issues.

And at that very moment, during the Cold War (1974) between the Western countries and the Central bloc of the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China, the original Health System of

a Western country had a very strong political connotation by putting special emphasis on Social Justice.

Again, on the speculative side, as a result of the excellent Geneva Conference- the Canadian Delegation paid special attention during the whole session- after few years a System of Health, notably similar to the Argentine one, was set up in Canada.

As it can be remembered, Mrs. Hillary Clinton, wife of the President of the United States, tried unsuccessfully to introduce some modifications to the extremely costly American Health System, based on the Canadian System.

It was a very heavy burden imposed to a kind lady who apparently depended on his advisors, quite often implicated in the ruling system, anyway.

Really, my mission in Geneva had come to an end, but before leaving to Israel (May 1974), I asked the Argentine Consul, Ambassador Berazategui, to organize a visit to Lyon. Olga and I wanted to remember old times during the happy years of my Medical Residency, but the condition was that the trip had to be by train.

And we did so. I vividly remember when we were going through the valleys and the wooded hills of the Jura Mountains until we arrived at the *gare de Perrache* (*Perrache station*) in Lyon.

From my several visits to Israel, this one had, undoubtedly, a significant political meaning. I was the first High Officer, State Secretary, of the Argentine Government who visited Israel after the Declaration of its Independence (1948).

Olga accompanied me and we arrived at the Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv, on Friday 10th May 1974.

The Minister of Public Health of Israel, Victor Shemtov, a man with a long curved mustache, which almost touched his eyes and a permanent smile on his face, was waiting for us at the steps of the plane. The Minister was accompanied by the Argentine Ambassador, Mr. Jorge E. Casal, Dr. Marcos Vodovotz and some Israeli ladies and important figures.

Dr. Vodovotz, an Argentine physician, had emigrated to Israel some years ago, and he was our guide concerning the official visits in Tel

Aviv and during the most thrilling experience on our visit to the Sea of Galilee¹.

The Kupat-Holim is the National Organization of the Health Care System in Israel.

Certainly, it was in Tel-Aviv where I had the first important contact with its authorities. Dr. H. Doron was, at those times, in charge of the Head Office of Kupat-Holim.

Dr. Doron, the main architect of the *Physician Integration* in the Israeli Health System (*H. Doron, General Federation of Labour in Eretz-Israel, Kupat Holim Year Book 1972, volume 2: 9- 28 and Kupat-Holim Year Book 1971, 1: 9-24*), was very interested in the fundamentals of the Argentine Project.

In a sunny morning, I arrived at the main building of Kupat-Holim in Tel-Aviv in good time before my conference. Dr. Doron was waiting for me in his office together with the members of the Histadrut, the powerful Federation of Labour in Israel, formed by cooperative and collective agricultural settlements and industrial workers. The Histadrut engages in educational and cultural activities and is also responsible for a health care service.

In good English, I greeted them and transmitted, in advance, my recognition of the perfect official organization of my visit. I kept on talking... and shortly informed Dr. Doron about my conference of the previous day in the prestigious Tel-Aviv University, where its Rector, Professor Simonschon, organized a meeting having the highest scientific rank.

I made a long pause, but Dr. Doron, half smiling, remained in inscrutable silence and I could even notice a certain cunning smile.

Suddenly I felt embarrassed as he was narrowly looking upon me. Dr. Doron continued without saying a single word; he only smiled faintly and kept his enigmatic gaze.

¹ To a certain extent, I have based the narration of this visit to Israel on the confidential document (May 31st 1974) submitted by Ambassador Jorge E. Casal to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Argentina (Documentation Head Office, 1/350-71 June 19th 1974).

Considering his embarrassing silence, I had only one option: to go on speaking; so I told them about my pleasant surprise when I met at Tel-Aviv University my former professor of Urology at Córdoba University, Dr. Mauricio Firstater, who had been an advanced disciple of my Professor Pablo Mirizzi, a master of General Surgery.

Dr. Firstater had emigrated from Argentina to Israel in around 1954 and he held some posts at the Rectorship of the Tel-Aviv University, besides being the Head of the Urology Department at the Ichilov Hospital in Tel-Aviv.

At that stage of the interview, I frankly confess that my loquacity throughout the long introductory presentation was over.

Then, Dr. Doron, who was standing, approached me quickly with a broad smile and shook my right hand with both hands. At the same time as he emphatically told me, in a loud voice, in a perfect Spanish and with a well-defined accent, typical of the inhabitants of the City of Buenos Aires (*porteños*), “*come on... Dr. Liotta, we are very happy for your visit.*” I was astonished, or rather, thunderstruck, without being able to pronounce a single word.

Dr. Doron was an Argentine physician who had emigrated to Israel during the first years following the Declaration of the Independence.

The following morning, I arrived very early at the Beilinson Hospital in Petah-Tikva, a town in the vicinity of Tel-Aviv.

Dr. Morris Levy, my old and dear friend, was the Surgeon-in-chief of the Department of Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery.

At Beilinson Hospital, I talked about my experience in the surgery of cardiac valves and particularly, in the surgery of the thoracic aorta, resulting from my long work as the head of the Service of Cardiovascular Surgery at the Italian Hospital of Buenos Aires.

In the evening, Dr. Levy organized a reception in my honor at his distinguished house in Tel-Aviv, and on that occasion I met, among other outstanding figures, the famous politician Shimon Peres, who was at that moment Minister of Information and after a short time, he became

Minister of Defence, and, later, the Head of the State of Israel.

The following day, we visited the Holy Places. In Nazareth, we entered the Church of the Annunciation; in the central atrium there is a mural covering a big wall, painted by the Argentine artist Raúl Soldi. On our way to Galilee, going through small Arab villages, we saw, from time to time, a farmworker riding a donkey and wearing a white turban.

On the Western shore of the Sea of Galilee, we entered Tiberias, which is located on the basin of volcanic origin and lies 207 meters below sea level. Tiberias was founded in A.D. 21 by Herod Antipas, who named it after Tiberius, the Roman Emperor.

I had vivid memories of the picture painted by David Roberts in April 1839, featuring the Sea of Galilee in a beautiful pale blue and the hills containing the sky over Capernaum in the background.

In the foreground, there appeared some Arab peasants, resting on a rocky mass, and looking towards Tiberias in the distance, with its walled white barracks.

Distant is the city of Tiberias nowadays, plunged into the noise of the engines resulting from the heavy traffic. The monument to Maimonides was erected on the main avenue².

We had some fish from the Sea of Galilee for lunch, at a small hotel on the coast, and later we continued our trip to the north.

We went past the dearest sites of Jesus Christ's ministry, *Magdala, Tell Oreime, Tabgha, Capernaum*. The road went through rocky hills with alternating green sown plots of land. Before arriving at Wady Jamus there was a fork; we took the road that went along the shore, a sandy path, and we, almost immediately, saw the tall eucalyptus trees from Tabgha.

The Christian tradition in the Tales from the Gospel points out that it was exactly in Tabgha where three important events took place: *the Risen Jesus Christ appeared to the Apostles and Saint*

² Maimonides (1135-1204), a Jewish philosopher, physician and master of Rabbinic literature, was born in Córdoba (Spain) and died in Egypt or, perhaps, in Tiberias.

Peter was given the Primacy of the new Church, the first multiplication of loaves and the Sermon of the Mount

There can be seen the Primacy Rock (the table) upon which Jesus Christ sat down. The exact place is shown by the Church of the Beatitudes, located on the Mount having the same name, on the first hills surrounding like an amphitheater this very small place of the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

We went along the sandy path on the northeastern shore and, in a short time, we arrived at Capernaum (its ruins are known as Tell Hüm).

Capernaum, in existence from the 2nd century BC to the 7th century AD, was an important town at the times of Jesus Christ. It is uninhabited today, there only exist ruins, a synagogue and the house of the Apostle Peter. The area is cared by the Franciscans, Custody of the Holy Land.

The priests Virgil Corbo and Stanislau Lofreda have conducted remarkable archaeological research.

Excavations have revealed several strata corresponding to the paving of churches belonging to different historical periods.

The recent archaeological works carried out by Father Corbo have shown graffiti dating from the 2nd century (fishing hooks, inscriptions with the name of Peter and Christ, and drawings of boats) and a 4th century house and a church built above it.

In the 5th century, a large octagonal Byzantine Basilica was erected there, together with a baptistery. The first Jewish Christians venerated Saint Peter's house.

Octagonal basilicas in Israel (Bethlehem and Capernaum) date from the times of Emperor Constantine.

Strangely, the Maltese Cross, heraldic symbol of the Hospitallers of St. John of Jerusalem (1050), who were known as Knights of Rhodes (1309-1522), and, later, called Knights of Malta (1530), is also eight-pointed. This geometric shape seems to be related to the eight Beatitudes of Jesus Christ.

This fascinating hypothesis, with a high spiritual meaning, has become part of some research I would like to do some day.

Peter's house in Capernaum appears early in the Gospels; that is the place where Jesus Christ healed Peter's mother-in-law, the servant of the centurion and a large number of sick people, and taught his apostles the first lessons.

Next to this site can be seen the ruins of a synagogue; while teaching there, Jesus Christ was confronted by the devil (Mark 1:21-27). It was in this synagogue where Jesus gave the sermon *the bread of life* (John 6:35-59).

The dating of the synagogue is debated, but it is clearly later than the first century. Excavations there revealed the existence of an earlier synagogue from the time of Jesus Christ with walls made of worked stone and 1.2 meter (4 feet) thick. These earlier walls were preserved up to 0.9 meter (3 feet) high and the entire western wall still exists and was used as the foundation for the later synagogue.

In our encounter at Capernaum, we didn't stop visiting the holy sites and reliving its old history. In Roman times Capernaum was an obligatory customs post on the route to Damascus.

Without any intention, the emotional visit was extended and it started getting dark. On our way to Haifa, we were obliged to spend the night at a small hotel in the town of Safad, to the northwest of Tiberias.

Haifa, the chief port of Israel, lies at the foot of Mt. Carmel. The United Nations Avenue, a marvelous road through the main shopping, administrative and residential quarter and the Hadar Hacarmel (*the Grace of Carmel*) are in the lower slopes of Carmel. At the higher parts of Carmel are new residential quarters, a domed shrine and buildings in classical Greek style.

From the top of Mt. Carmel we enjoyed fine views of the town and the Bay of Acre. Late at night we returned to Tel Aviv, 85 kilometers (55 miles) to the south of Haifa.

We could not make a stopover in Tel-Aviv, we had to go on, and on Monday 13th May at midday we traveled to Jerusalem. The Israeli Government had booked for us the King David Hotel, where the British Officers had stayed during the years of the occupation of Palestine.

From the large windows we could see the gate of Haifa, in the west of the Holy Land, and the ancient walls covering the Mount Sion in the south.

In the lobby of the hotel I almost bumped into Henry Kissinger, who was also in a mission in Israel.

In the crowded Main Auditorium of Hadassah University in Jerusalem I lectured on the Argentine Health System. Once the conference was over, Olga and I visited the Chapel located at the main entrance of the University where we could admire the well-known Chagall's stained-glass windows, designed by the artist, with representations of the Old Testament.

I went on my official visit to Knesset, seat of the Parliament of Israel, where I was honored with a gift from its President, Mr. Israel Yehaiahua, and later, we visited the Holocaust Museum where I paid tribute on behalf of the Argentine Government.

Looking towards Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, walking along its narrow streets on retracing the path of the Passion of Jesus Christ, is the experience of a lifetime. In the following trips, Olga and I went along the same path, but, today, the same holy sites are crammed with Jewish young people, possibly students, who patrol the streets carrying a rifle on their shoulders.

The following day, Dr. Abba Eban, Minister of Foreign Affairs, accompanied me to the Government House for an interview with the President of the State of Israel, Professor Ephraim Katzir, a distinguished physician and researcher.

It was an unusually long interview; Dr. Katzir was fascinated by the breakthroughs in heart surgery. We spent enough time on effective strategies and even on simple technical aspects such as the medical experience of total replacement of the heart with clinical implantation of the first mechanical heart with Dr. Denton Cooley, in Houston, in 1969.



Professor Ephraim Katzir, MD, President of the State of Israel: Mrs. Olga Liotta ; Dr Liotta. -Jerusalem, 1974-

Professor Katzir gave me the Holy Scriptures as a present, which I accepted with great emotion; the Jewish Bible according to the Masoretic Text, in Hebrew and English.

The Book of Genesis starts: *in the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth.*

The Jewish Bible, which I keep in my bookcase, has its covers made of heavy metal inlaid with four big emeralds and an endless number of small precious stones. And, due to its weight, I remember now the famous anecdote of Dr. Abba Eban, which I have already written about³.

Minister Eban was waiting for Olga and me, as we came out of the President Katzir's office, in order to take us to the Ministry. I put the Bible on the upper part of the backseat of his car, where the Minister, Olga and I were traveling. Suddenly the driver braked sharply, and the heavy Bible slid and hit Dr. Eban's head.

I did not know how to apologize, but Dr. Eban, smiling, uttered a sentence I have never forgotten: *don't worry, Dr. Liotta; of the several blows I have received in my life, this is the best one, since it is a culture blow.*

In the following evening, Ambassador Casal paid me an unexpected and hasty visit in my room at the King David Hotel; he gave a document at once. It was an encoded communication coming directly from the President's wife, Mrs. Isabel Perón, where she let me know about the worsening of General Perón's health, and she asked me to return to Argentina as soon as possible.

Before leaving Geneva and Israel, I stated precise and strict medical orders: the President had to remain in complete rest. Against all my preventions, he traveled to Asunción in Paraguay for a military parade in honor of the country that had granted political asylum to him immediately after his overthrow in September 1955.

It was a political strategy which benefited the President of Paraguay, General Stroessner and some ignorant Argentine figures close to the circle of the President of Argentina, who, I would dare assert, had illegitimate economic interests with some people close to the Government of Paraguay.

³ Abba Eban is one of the best-known contemporary Jewish writers. In his modest office at the Ministry, Eban, who had been educated in Cambridge, told me the events of the Great Jewish War and gave me his famous book called *My People: A History of the Jews* as a present.

Far from the worries about the delicate health of the President of Argentina, they organized the act to make amends to the Republic of Paraguay, by returning the flags that had been snatched out of their hands by Argentine troops during the War of the Triple Alliance around the middle of the nineteenth century.

In a cold morning, with light downpours, Perón attended for long hours the military parade on the deck of a Paraguayan gunboat. The serious bronchopulmonary condition, which immediately followed, caused the President to suffer a quick cardiocirculatory decompensation with consecutive renal failure.

On arriving from Israel, I stayed at the President's Residence in Olivos in order to be very near the patient, and I asked the cardiologist Dr. Pedro Cossio to do the same. Perón died on July 1st 1974 at 1:25 PM.

When I read Mrs. Perón's communication, I ordered my immediate return to Argentina on the first international flight from Israel. I could only leave the following evening. Ambassador Casal informed Mrs. Perón about my decision.

During a short break in the middle of our activity in Jerusalem, we had visited the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem (it means *house of bread*), 8 kilometers (5 miles) to the south of Jerusalem. The birth of Christ took place there in a cave (*The Grotto of Nativity*). We descended to the deep cave to pray at Christ's birthplace⁴.

In truth, however, Olga did not want to leave the Holy Land without reaching the Dead Sea. Ambassador Casal arranged the trip so that we were in Tel-Aviv in time for our departure.

We left Jerusalem towards the East at 4 AM, and after a short time, the sun shone before my eyes. The color of the earth of the Desert of Judea was dark red, without a single tree as far as the eye could see.

Like in the geological relics at the bottom of disappeared seas, the scenery from the Desert of Judea brought me back the memories of the moon surface as it had been shown by modern technology.

From our road, we could see, from time to time, some Bedouin tents covered with leather of the same color as the desert earth; only some

⁴ Emperor Constantine the Great began (356) to erect a church over the Grotto. An excavation made by the British Administration (1934) showed the Church of Constantine of a basilica form with an octagonal sanctuary surrounding it.

human or camel movements in the surroundings revealed their existence.

From the top we saw in a large basin the Dead Sea in a wonderful emerald green; we reached its banks and put our hands under the water. The heat was suffocating and we were 400 meters below sea level. To the left towards the north, there was a sign that read *Kirbet Qumran*, the site where the Dead Sea Scrolls (written on papyrus) were found; we had seen a replica of them at the Museum in Jerusalem.

Just in front of us, there appeared the Granitic Rock of Masada; on its plateau for over two years (70-72 AC) the final drama of the Jewish Revolt (67-72 AC) came to an end. After having fought against the legions under Vespasian first and under Titus later, 960 defenders commanded by Eleazar ben Shimon preferred committing suicide to surrendering to the Roman legions.

In the summer of AC 70, Jerusalem had fallen into the hands of the legions under Titus and the Temple burnt for the second time.

In Rome, on my incessant walk inside the Roman Forum, throughout the years, I have so often stopped under the Arch of Titus, in front of the Colosseum, to see the sculptures in marble depicting Titus' triumphant entry into Rome (AC 72), with chained Jews and the seven-branched candelabra, which is the symbol of Israel, in its vault.

The city of Jericho as it appears in the Biblical tales of the Old Testament has fully disappeared under the action of the time.

No positive trace could be found, and some reports made by the archaeological expedition (1952-58) under the leadership of Kathleen M. Kenyon, Director of the British School of Archeology in Jerusalem, have proved to be erroneous.

Moreover, the Herodian Jericho –founded by Herodes Antipas, c. 20 AC– has been identified one mile south of the Old Testament Jericho (excavation 1950-51). The Herodes palace, with its Italian style, illustrates Herodes' devotion to Rome.

The foundation from the time of the crusades is the third Jericho site, 1 mile east from the Old Testament Jericho, and grew up into the modern town.

The city of Jericho of our age is located 275 meters below sea level, on the west side of Jordan Valley and four kilometers to the north of the Dead Sea.

At a distance, we could see on the top its dark green vegetation. In the middle of the scorched reddish earth from the Desert of Judea, we had a strange and unforgettable view, as if it had belonged to another world. In an involuntary reaction, we raised our eyes to heaven and we exclaimed the phrase from the Scriptures, *the heavens are telling of the Glory of God- aeli enarrant gloriant Dei, Psalm 19,2.*

In the distance at that small oasis in Jericho we really felt what we had never felt before.

Peace upon Israel, these words appearing on the mosaic floor of the Synagogue of Jericho, the oldest one which dates from the 6th and 7th century AC, were resistant to the passage of Christians and Muslims for almost fourteen centuries.

The artist, at that time, surrounded the meaningful imperative phrase *Peace upon Israel* with a circle of mosaics, each one having the imprint of a heart figure.

Every human passage left its mark on the floor of the old Synagogue, but the small hearts have lasted despite the fury of men.

On our way to Jerusalem, leaving Jericho, the town was on the left of the road, and as in a marvelous dream, throughout the centuries, we could see *the red flowers of Jericho* hanging on an old wall⁵.

Israel. The Relieving Melancholy of Old Time has been extracted from the forthcoming book "Amazing Adventures of a Heart Surgeon. Liotta's International Thesaurus, Chapter 24 -Critic and Estimate- The Archives of the Memory-

⁵ *The red flowers of Jericho*, Reminiscences. This expression has been taken from the book by Emilio Villarino, "*Liotta, the life of a cardiac surgeon*", Prometeo Publishers, Buenos Aires, 1982.