

SURROGACY IN ARGENTINA

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Synopsis – An Argentinean women's magazine has published an interview with the first so-called "surrogate" mother in Argentina. The woman, of German descent and already the mother of three children, worked in a clinic where a physician proposed to her the surrogacy arrangement. She did bear a male child and received a compensation of about US\$2400. This case needs to be seen in the context of the traffic in children, an already serious problem in Argentina. The interview is published in its entirety.

In the May 1987 issue of the monthly magazine *Emanuelle*, a woman's journal of wide circulation in Buenos Aires, Argentina, an article appeared entitled "100 Questions to a Mother who Rented her Uterus." The article contains a long interview with a woman who is allegedly the first so-called "surrogate" mother in Argentina. The magazine claims that the dialogue between the woman and the journalist is "absolutely genuine" and that the real name of the woman is not revealed in order to protect her privacy¹.

The woman is a twenty-eight year old Argentinian of German descent, and is given the name of "Amelia" throughout the interview. She was married when she was 17 years old, came to Buenos Aires from Misiones (a province in the North East of Argentina) and lived with her husband and three children in a poor neighborhood.

Two years before the interview she started to work in a health clinic, cleaning and cooking. One of the physicians at the clinic proposed to her a new kind of business: if she would lend her womb to create a child and give the child to another person, an infertile woman, she could make quite a bit of money. She could get a sum that would solve the most pressing economic needs of her family.

She was also told that the procedure was quite common in other countries. Her

husband was out of work and she accepted the deal. Although the whole arrangement was kept in great secret the magazine learned about it through the sister of one of their staff members who worked at the clinic.

Argentina is a Catholic country, with a strong family tradition and so it is perfectly understandable that the parties involved in this transaction would strongly discourage any publicity about it. The brokers of such a deal would be heavily censored, though it is unclear how Argentine legislation would view such an arrangement. A woman who enters into a surrogacy agreement could easily become the target of all kinds of attacks. Most likely her life and that of her family would be seriously and adversely affected by public knowledge of such a contract. It is not hard to understand that she would rather keep her identity secret.

Surrogacy is the latest addition to the traffic in children which is already a serious problem in Argentina. For racial reasons, Argentina is one of the countries most in demand on the international adoption circuit. There is general consensus that an illegal network of trafficking in children is firmly entrenched. It involves doctors, midwives, legal personnel, and "entrepreneurs" closely allied to the traffic in women and child prostitution.

An article in one of the main newspapers in Buenos Aires, *La Razon*, reports that Dr. Jose Atilio Alvarez at the

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First Argentine Congress on Adoption spoke about the serious problem of illegal adoptions of Argentine children by European and U.S. couples (Marroco, 1986). He quoted European sources as saying that about 4,000 children have been taken out of the country in a clandestine manner. This is not hard to believe. The problems of young girls and women from poor families who become pregnant are overwhelming. Abortion is illegal and the stigma on single mothers indeed encourages women to give up their children.

Another article, “Las niñas-mamás” (Jusid, 1984), estimated that there are about 20 “homes” in Buenos Aires where young girls (ages 12-17) can go to get help when they are pregnant and single. About 1,500-2,000 women use these homes yearly and the national number is probably 10 to 20 times higher. At least 30,000 children would be born every year to young women who, with few resources and education are tracked into domestic work or prostitution.

Argentina, during the years of the military dictatorship (1976-1983) suffered extreme state-sponsored violence and the kidnapping of children who were born into families that the regime classified as “subversives.” The Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, a Human Rights group devoted to the search and restitution of kidnapped children to their legitimate families estimates that there are about 400–500 children missing. The children born in clandestine detention centers were given false birth certificates and considered as “war booty” by the military (see Arditti & Lykes, 1989). Many of these children were given for “adoption” to the torturers and killers of their parents.

It is in the context of this general background that this surrogacy case should be viewed. Renting a woman’s womb and buying her baby is not a hard thing to do given the harsh economic circumstances that surround the lives of poor women in Argentina. A translation of the interview follows.

Acknowledgments – I thank my sister Edith Arditti de Benveniste for pointing out to me the interview in one of my visits to Argentina.

ENDNOTE

1. In a telephone conversation with me on August 28, 1989, the director of the magazine, Oskar Blotta, confirmed the authenticity of the interview.

REFERENCES

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INTERVIEW

Reporter: First of all it must be said that you are a courageous woman to have agreed to answer these questions.

Amelia: I have been assured that my name will not appear in public. Imagine what scandal would follow if the story would be known with my name and all the details.

R: There is no problem on that count. You know, up until now very few people knew that in our country an event of this kind had taken place. How long is it since you had your child? ... Is it O.K. if I say “your child?”

A: I don’t know, I don’t know if it is O.K. Emiliano was born four months and a few days ago . . .

R: The first question that comes to my mind is why did you accept to have a child if you were going to give it to another woman.

A: Well, because my husband Carlos and I were having many financial problems. We learned that they were going to do this and that they were looking for a woman who wanted to do it. They were paying very well. R: But why you, Amelia?

A: I have been working for two years in a private clinic, in the Barrio Norte (a posh section of town, translator’s note). I do a little of everything, cleaning, sometimes I

have to prepare the meals, take care of people. I don't know, a little of everything. One day, a doctor called me in and asked me if I would accept a job that would give me a lot of money. I asked him what it was all about and he told me that there was a lady, a lady with means, who wanted to have a child but she couldn't – I don't know why. The doctor was going to be in charge of all the expenses. The only thing I had to do was to become pregnant and give the child to him after the birth.

R: The only thing you had to do? Put like that it looks easy. Why do you think he chose you, Amelia?

A: They told me that it was because all my children are quite beautiful . . . and besides my husband and myself are blondes, well, him more than me, we are grandchildren of Germans. The doctor introduced me to a gentleman who said that he agreed that it would be me, that he thought the child would come out very beautiful.

R: That must have been one of the reasons, but there must be others, don't you think? A: Well, I was already working in the clinic, I knew all the doctors and the nurses. And they knew me, they know that we are decent people. Modest, yes, but very honest, do you understand?

R: What happened from the moment that you accepted this "business" that they proposed?

A: The next day they started with the tests and the analyses. They did everything. Blood tests, and I don't know what other ones, ones that have complicated names. After that a week went by and when the results were in the director of the clinic called me and told me that everything was fine and that we could get going. That's what he told me.

R: You are married and have children, how many children?

A: We have three children. Ramon, who is eight years old, Marisa who is going to be six and Juan Jose who is four and a half.

R: All your children are very healthy . . .

A: Yes, all quite healthy. We are a very

healthy family, we never get sick luckily and I hope it will continue that way.

R: What happened the day that you told your husband what was going to happen, the business that had been proposed to you?

A: At the beginning, Carlos did not say anything. But after dinner, he remained looking at his dish and said that we needed to change the water pump and strengthen the roof of the house and buy some good clothes for everybody. We live in an neighborhood of makeshift houses. I know that many people get the wrong idea when they hear about those neighborhoods but there are many modest and honest people there. Well, he said that the money was going to come in handy. That if I wanted to do it I should do it.

R: Did you know then who was going to be the future mother, let's say, "theoretically?" I am referring to the lady who was going to get your son.

A: No, not in the least. They told me that it was not necessary to know for the moment, because I asked. That doctor and another two that work with him told me that the less I knew about the lady the less difficult it would be for me at the birth, to give away my son. At that moment I thought they were afraid of something else. I did not think that I was going to suffer because that lady was going to take the baby.

R: Let's try to follow this step by step, Amelia. Tell us then what happened once that they told you that you were ready.

A: One afternoon they took me to a room in the clinic, where there was a stretcher and a nurse sitting on a chair. In a little while the physicians came in and one of them was carrying a box like those of plastic foam. Inside there was a lot of ice and a test-tube with something white. They told me that that was the way I was going to get pregnant, not to worry about anything. I knew the name of this . . . but I have forgotten it.

R: It's called artificial insemination, Amelia.

A: Yes, right, insemination. Well, but at no moment did anything hurt, or anything strange happen.

R: Maybe when you say that nothing strange happened you are exaggerating a bit, because you are not going to tell me that this happened every day. I imagine that you were nervous, that you had some strange feelings . . .

A: Well, the truth is that everything was quite strange to me, I was very nervous, but they helped me a lot in that moment, both the nurse and one of the physicians, the one that had spoken to me the first time.

R: So, there was nervousness, there were tensions. And how were they resolved?

A: To tell you the truth I feel a bit ashamed to talk about all this . . .

R: But it is something scientific, don't think about it in any other way, remember that nobody really knows what it is.

A: Look, at the beginning it was like when a woman goes to the doctor, when one is pregnant, they visit her and they put on her that apparatus to open up the vagina. But it looks like I was very nervous, very tense, like the physician said and so they left me alone with that nurse and that physician. The nurse told me to relax and began to caress my head, explaining to me that in order for things to go well it was necessary that I behaved almost like when I was with my husband, that I shouldn't think about anything, to loosen up, she said. Meanwhile, the physician explained that he had to put vaseline so that the apparatus would enter easily, that I should continue talking to the nurse, that he would try not to hurt me so that I could relax.

R: And did that help? Could you relax?

A: To tell you the truth, it did help ... too much. I did not tell it to the doctor, but I think he realized it, because little by little I began to feel a bit weird, do I make myself clear? It was as if I liked what was going on . . . and it happened.

R: What happened, did you have an orgasm?

A: I don't know, I think so, but because I felt very ashamed I stayed for quite a while with my eyes closed. I think they realized it, because the nurse told me that that was better, that now everything was

going to be OK, not to worry. When everything was over I stayed alone with the nurse and began to feel more relaxed. Afterwards they had me for two days in observation, resting and the third day they said that I could start doing things as usual.

R: What kind of recommendation did they make to you?

A: Uf! A lot. First they made me sign some papers that said that I promised not to have sexual relations with my husband during the whole pregnancy. I did not understand very well why, but they told me that it had to be done that way. Afterwards they gave me some pills and a nurse told me that they were to hold well the fetus. They also recommended that I don't do any strenuous movements and that if I had any bleeding to call them by phone right away. I told them that I did not have a phone but that a neighbor of mine had one, and do you know what they did? They got me a doctor that came to see me every other day, during the first five months.

R: Were you bothered by that?

A: No, of course not. Besides they gave us almost half of the money that we had spoken about. Carlos and myself never saw so much money together.

R: Can you tell, Amelia, how much money did they pay you?

A: Look . . . they told me not to tell. The truth is, you know, if word gets out, something can happen to me ...

R: Something like what?

A: Something, I don't know, something . . . that is what they told me.

R: No problem then. Let's go on. You are beginning to "show a little belly," as they say in these cases.

A: Yes, I remembered when I had my children, the ones that are truly mine, and I said . . .

R: Excuse me, excuse me, you said "the ones that are truly mine" . . . does this mean that the child that you gave birth to and whose name is Emiliano is not truly your son?

A: Well, yes. Or no, it depends. The truth is that for me he is my son, but Carlos

says no, that we have to forget all this and that we don't have to talk more about this.

R: Was it hard for him this pregnancy?

A: When it started no, he was as usual. Afterwards he got upset. He did not pay attention to me, he was indifferent. Sometimes he would come at night, drunk and did not even talk to me. He never said it but I knew that it was because I was pregnant.

R: Was he bothered that you were pregnant by another man?

A: Maybe yes. But I told him what the doctors told me. That I was not pregnant by another man. I did not go to bed with any other man than Carlos, never. Do you understand?

R: Of course. What about your children? They saw that any moment the baby could be born. Did they call him "my little brother?" A: No, No, not that. There was a lady that helped me a lot. She was some sort of assistant. She would come to the house now and then and had conversations with us. Carlos did not want to be involved but she would come over and speak with me and the children. She would say that we have to take things calmly and that we had to think that the baby that was going to be born did not belong to our family. That is why she would tell the children that he was not their little brother. Well, that yes he was, but he was not going to live with us, because it was a favor that we were doing to a lady who suffered a lot because she could not have babies.

R: And the children? How did they react? What did they say?

A: The older one did not have any problem, but the little one would cry when they would tell him that the one that would be born was not his brother.

R: Up until now we have been speaking about what was going on with the rest of the family, but what was going on with you, Amelia?

A: What do you mean?

R: I mean at any moment did you feel bad about what was going on?

A: Yes, to tell you the truth. I had some very bad days, I felt very sad, I did not

feel like doing anything. Sometimes I did not even feel like eating. Let's say that when the young physician that they assigned me to would come over, he sort of forced me, in a good way, yes. But I think that when I saw my belly all the time growing I felt very sad.

R: Did you begin to think that that child that you were carrying inside did not belong to you, is that right?

A: I don't know. I think that before the birth, while Emiliano was still inside me, I was quite calm. But afterwards it was terrible. As soon as I delivered him they took him away. And the first thing I did was to tell Carlos to do something so that they would not take him away. I ... wanted to have him, I wanted to keep him.

R: But the child was with you for a while, right?

A: Almost three weeks, until they stopped the breast feeding and began to give him the bottle. Those were terrible days, terrible ...

R: What were you thinking Amelia?

A: That what I had done was not right, I was thinking about God and that I would be punished for that.

R: Are you very Catholic?

A: Yes, we all are in the family. But I was remembering a night that my mother came home. I had to tell her everything, because you can imagine, she saw me pregnant, but afterwards she would find out that I was not going to keep the baby. She got very angry, she told me that what I had done was not something Christians do, she asked if I was crazy or what.

R: And you felt guilty.

A: Yes, I felt very bad. Besides, Carlos was acting like he did not have anything to do with this. We had several fights because of this. He took the money that they gave us and did not ever again want to talk about the child. I had to endure everything alone.

R: But you had the assistant and the doctor that was checking on you.

A: They were very good with me, but how could they understand what I was going through?

R: Did you try to keep the child?

A: A friend at the clinic, who was with me at the birth and saw me crying, told me that maybe I could refuse giving it away. I told her that I had signed some papers. She suggested that I say that I had had intercourse with Carlos during the pregnancy and that maybe with that they would decide to leave it with me.

R: Did you do as she suggested?

A: I spoke with the doctor and I told him that. He got very angry and started screaming, he said that they would take the money back and in top of that, they would leave me without work, that they were going to fire me. I started to cry and afterwards he told me that the thing could be fixed. That just the same the child was beautiful and all that, that if I was not stubborn they would let me keep the money and they would raise a bit my salary in the clinic.

R: And did he do it?

A: Yes, of course. But he made me sign a paper that says that I cannot work in another place than in the clinic, for 4 years. He said that because that was . . .

R: An exclusive?

A: An Exclusive, yes that it will get me more money. Now I am getting almost twice what I used to earn before.

R: How much is twice?

A: Well, I will be earning 300 Australes (about \$120, translator's note), more or less. R: During your pregnancy, did you see any of your work colleagues? And if yes, what did they say?

A: I have two very good friends there. They supported me, but once we had a talk at home and they told me that they did not think what I was doing was right and that they would never do it, even if they were forced. I told them that nobody had forced me into it.

R: Did you know that in other countries they do this kind of thing?

A: Yes, they told me that in the United States there are many mothers like this and that it is normal. And I believe them, why would they lie to me?

R: That is true. Now I have to ask you this question, Amelia: did you do it for the money?

A: No, not for the money. The money never interested me. But realize that we are very modest people, and sometimes the children don't even have a good pair of shoes to wear even though Carlos and myself, we both work. But I did it because I put myself in the place of that lady that could not be a mother. I can imagine how much she suffered because she could not get pregnant. And on top of that, I get pregnant with great ease ... It is not fair, don't you think? But the money plays some role, I think. Now, thanks to it maybe we can get out of this neighborhood and move to some small house, some other place, without so many people around us.

R: During those weeks after the birth, what happened?

A: One day they took Emiliano away. . . . Well, we called him Emiliano, but the doctor had forbidden calling him that. He said that they would give him another name, a name that the mother would like. I could not restrain myself and I told him: "I am the mother." I thought he would get mad at me, but he laughed and left with the baby. Then that other lady who was coming to my house before appeared again and talked to me for several days. She told me that I had to accept things as they were, that that was life. And that what I had done was very important. First of all because it was an act of charity, and afterwards because maybe I was helping science move a big step forward, and all those things, right?

R: And when you went back home without the baby?

A: The children are the ones that became a bit sad. You know how children are, but afterwards it was all over. They do not understand much. The best that happened is that Carlos is now like he was before. I know that all that bothered him, and what can I do? The only thing I want is that the baby be healthy and that the mother be very happy. I did it with great love, with great love . . .

R: Do you know if in that clinic where you work they asked some other woman to do the same?

A: Look, to know, really for sure, no, but that nurse, the one that took care of me when they did the insemination told me that yes, that I had been the first, but not the only one. She told me that since my case this is what the clinic really does now. And she said that they are doing very well, especially the directors, but that it is forbidden to talk about this.

R: And you never realized it?

A: Well, the only thing I see is that now only very rich people come and the doctors have imported cars. I think that what she told me is true, but I cannot be sure of it.

R: Did you think about having a child of your own, after what happened?

A: Yes, I thought a lot about it, but I don't know if I would do it, it is very hard to decide.

R: And does your husband want another child?

A: I Don't know, it could be ... maybe later, I don't know.

R: Did you have sexual relations again with your husband after the birth?

A: We get along very well, we have always been good partners, with all the problems we had when we came from Misiones . . .

R: Amelia, what I am asking you is if you and your husband had sexual relations again . . .

A: Well ... the truth is that that was one of the biggest problems. The whole thing did not go well for my husband, specially at the time to go to bed. He did not even touch me for a long while and if I would reach for him he would reject me. Afterwards he started to drink more than usual, and then he would not get angry, but he was weird, different from how he had always been . . . and I did not like that, that scared me a lot . . .

R: I don't understand, do you mean he was beating you?

A: No, beating me no, but, I don't know how to explain it ... he wanted to do things that we never had done, he wanted to enter me from behind ...

R: But that is something .that many couples do, I don't think that is too

strange, like you say.

A: Yes, in the clinic they told me the same, but between us it had never happened and I felt that he was doing it because he thought I had betrayed him, as if it was a punishment. At the end I did let him do it, because I did not want him to get angry, but what worried me is that he did not want to do it any other way.

R: And you never again made love the way you had been doing it before?

A: I don't know what to tell you, the truth is that yes, we did it, but it was because I looked for him some times that he was drunk and I don't know if he realized it.

R: I imagine that he realized it, Amelia, maybe he did not say anything because probably he also wanted to do it that way.

A: It could be but I am not sure. And I prefer not to ask.

R: And with your mother, how did it end?

A: Not very well. When we get together it looks like she is upset. Of course she does not tell me anything, but I don't think she likes what happened.

R: Are you angry with the doctor who proposed this business?

A: No, it is not his fault. As he said once, he asked me and I said yes. It wasn't like they forced me to do it. No, and furthermore the doctor was very correct. He paid all the expenses, he put those other people to take care of me. He never let me be in need of anything. He is a gentleman . . . and he is a physician. Physicians are people that do a lot of good, always.

R: There is something I don't quite get. What happened with your neighbors? They saw that you were pregnant. What did you tell them?

A: We had to lie. A little "white" lie. We decided, Carlos and I not to tell them anything and that when they took me to the clinic, we were going to say that things went wrong and that the baby had died.

R: But that is quite difficult to keep up, isn't it true that your children know that the baby is alive, but in another home?

A: Yes, they know. But my children are very obedient, they always listen to us.

We sat down with the three of them and we told them that they never had to speak with anybody in the neighborhood about their little brother . . . sorry, about the baby.

R: So, during a few days you and your family had to keep up a kind of comedy ... I mean, you had to keep on the lie.

A: It's wrong, right? But what could I do? What could I tell them? They came to the house, they came to console me because they thought that really the child had died. And I cried, but I did not cry about that. I cried because they took him away. Then my friends thought that I was crying for the death of the baby. Some brought me little presents . . . people in the neighborhood are very good. They are long-suffering people, they know what it is like to go through a bad moment.

R: Do you feel guilty about that, of having lied to them?

A: To tell you the truth, yes. They did not deserve that because they are very good. But there was no other solution.

R: Nobody has come to interview you, Amelia, from the newspapers or magazines or TV?

A: No, never. Well, once they said that some journalists came to the clinic, but it was a big mess and afterwards things got fixed. Rosa told me, she is one of the nurses. She says that the director had to pay some money so that they would not publish something. I don't know and I don't care. I keep my word and that's all. The rest is somebody else's problem.

R: Amelia, do you realize that if you open your mouth this will probably end in a big scandal, a scandal that would help you to recover your son?

A: No, I don't want that! I gave my word, I signed the papers. Neither me nor my family want to play that role. If they find out it is not thanks to me. Because you swore to me that you were not going to put the names, right?

R: Yes, of course, relax. Tell me, Amelia, imagine that a few years go by and you run into a child that looks like Emiliano, do you think you would recognize him?

A: Do you mean if he walks by me. . . . If

the mother takes him to a place where I am, that kind of thing?

R: Exactly.

A: I would imagine yes ... no, I am sure. I am sure that I would recognize him. Maybe it happens and it does not turn out that way, but I think that I could recognize him.

R: And the other children, do they keep asking about the brother?

A: Sometimes, yes.

R: And what do you tell them?

A: I tell them that he is alright, that I saw him, that he is a very pretty baby, like them, and that one day maybe they can see him. They are happy with that answer and they do not ask more questions.

R: Amelia, do you feel that you have been used?

A: No, why do you say that?

R: But you don't feel either that you have done something useful.

A: Useful for somebody that I don't even know. Yes, it was useful but I don't know how useful.

R: What work does your husband do?

A: He does whatever he finds to do. He does small jobs, he was working in construction, as an electrician. Afterwards he worked in a bakery, but they got rid of him because there was not enough work.

R: I imagine that the money you were paid helped to pay more than just fixing the roof and buying clothes, right?

A: Yes, now we are a bit more comfortable. Carlos can look for work with less pressure and it does not matter if he does not find something right away.

R: Do you know that for a contract like yours, abroad, they pay between US\$20,000 and US\$30,000. That would be, more or less, about 50,000 Australes, maybe a little less. A: So much money?

R: Are you surprised? Do you mean to say that they paid you less than that?

A: Yes . . . much less . . .

R: Don't be afraid to say it. How much did they pay to you, Amelia?

A: Well, six thousand. They gave to us six thousand Australes (about \$US2,400).

R: What have you done with that money up to now?

A: We paid some debts we had. We are planning to run a small business in a stand. They told me that there is one which has a low rent. We could work on it the two of us, Carlos and myself, so we wouldn't have to worry about getting a job.

R: Did you ever dream about the baby, Amelia?

A: I dream awake, which is worse. But yes, Carlos woke me up many times because I was speaking and crying in my sleep, I had very ugly nightmares. Emiliano and I were running in the dark and we fell into a black hole that was bottomless, that never ended.

R: Do you have any idea of who is now Emi-liano's mother, or where is your son living? A: One of the girls told me that the family lived in the area of Acasusso, in a very luxurious house. But the following day I was working in the kitchen and the director called me. He said that he wanted to tell me that the child was alright and that the family had left, that they had gone to Europe.

R: And did you believe it?

A: Yes. Well, at the beginning I thought that maybe he was lying. Maybe they thought that I was going to try to find out where they lived. But, as Carlos said, those things happen in the soap operas. If they told me that they went to Europe, it means they went to Europe.

R: Did your husband ever tell you if he would have liked to see the baby?

A: We don't talk about that too much. He was very jealous and maybe because of that he does not want to say anything. I believe that he would have liked to see it, even though he was not the father, that's what I think.

R: Wouldn't it be that deep down you

wanted to mother again?

A: It was never hard for me to be a mother. I like children very much. But I did it because it was giving a helping hand. And well, once I got into it I couldn't get out.

R: But, you never thought of aborting, during the pregnancy. Or did you?

A: No, I am a Catholic. I have been taught that abortion is a crime and I am not a criminal. I never thought "If I cannot have it for me it is better to abort," never.

R: So, for you this is a finished story that is better to forget . . .

A: Well, I don't know, because sometimes things happen that one does not even imagine . . .

R: What do you mean, what things happen? A: It is that in the clinic, last week, the same doctor that did the insemination, approached me again.

R: Did he approach you to propose the same business, again?

A: Yes, but I have not decided yet, I am afraid to get into too much trouble, specially with my husband.

R: He does not want to?

A: No, on the contrary, he thinks it is a good idea, he says that with the money that we could get we could live in some other place, to a house where we can put the stand in.

R: So, what is going on?

A: I don't know, the money is good, they are talking about 20,000 Australes, I can't complain about that. And now that I am talking with you the idea does not look like such a bad one. I don't know, maybe I'll do it. I am thinking about it, and my husband says that if I take my time to answer I could maybe get some more money. I don't know, I have to think about it . . .