

# MARGARITA



**FIG 1** Margarita Pisano  
Fischer. Fuente /  
Source Casa de la Mujer  
Margarita Pisano

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The concept of 'moral referent' speaks of the people whose coherence – the virtuous relationship between discourse and action – turns them into true embodiments of a thought or idea. During her lifetime, the architect Margarita Pisano became the moral referent of feminism in Chile. The changes in her life, permanently linked to actual architectural spaces but always tending towards feminist activism, are brilliantly narrated in this text.

On October 29, 2016, feminists celebrated in Santiago, Chile. It was the inauguration of the Casa de la Mujer Margarita Pisano, a space for women to gather around the urgency of a needed change. The subject of the festivity was Margarita Pisano (FIG. 1), the little-known Chilean architect turned radical feminist leader who the house is named after. Since her passing the year before, this was the first posthumous birthday celebration, and so the gathering was both a political and biographical homage. When the house opened its doors on a sunny spring afternoon, the inner courtyard was criss-crossed by clotheslines where photographs, cards and hand-written notes were hung. These displayed the biography of Margarita Pisano, whose life, from her birth in the southernmost part of Chile to her presence as a public figure both in Chile and Latin America, was nothing but exceptional. Her life journey, however, was not only extreme in geographical terms: accompanying the already troubled second half of twentieth century Chile, her personal conflicts involved extreme transitions in terms of vocation, politics and intimate life. The houses that Margarita inhabited, designed, created and re-made provide insight into her life and practice as these homes both sheltered and were radically altered by her.

### ***Casa de la mujer Margarita Pisano (Salvador Donoso 93, Bellavista, Santiago)***

Although a home by nomenclature and by the kind of things it shelters, the Casa de la Mujer is a public space (FIG. 2). A “space for civilization change,” where women can “organize, think the world autonomously (...), [and] get to know and give continuity to women’s history and knowledge, built originally from outside academia” (Pisano & Franulic, 2009:119). It marks a profound change in terms of the spaces historically associated with women: if women’s most used public places were always transient (markets, shopping centers, waiting rooms in hospitals and schools), men owned those associated with power (public square, church, party, club, stadium, bar, street, universities). From there, men could think the world whereas women, in their all-too-fleeting public appearances, could not. From the Casa de la Mujer, a political public space contained within a safeguarded interior, women could finally allow themselves to critically question the social structures surrounding them, from a space of their own where consciousness could be raised and nurtured.

The house is an outside, and this contradiction is fundamental for understanding Margarita’s radical feminist proposal. She started to develop her own approach in the early eighties, departing from second-



**FIG 2** Casa de la Mujer  
Margarita Pisano  
Fuente / Source  
Fotograma video / Video  
frame Casa de la Mujer  
Margarita Pisano.  
Disponible en /  
Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OThLel7EXco>

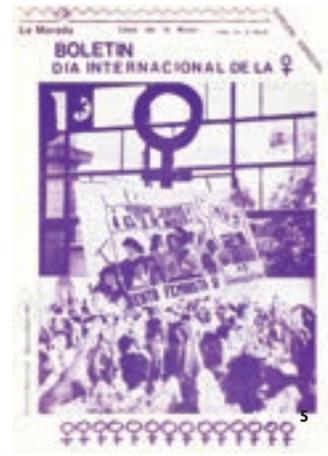


**FIG 3** Casa La Morada  
Fuente / Source Fondo La  
Morada. Archivo Mujeres  
y Géneros, DIBAM

wave difference (or cultural) feminism. The notion of an 'outside' contained inside the Casa de la Mujer, meant challenging not only institutional feminism, but also politics understood as party politics, feminism as part of academia, and the feminist response to oppression as one of resistance (Pisano & Franulic, 2009). Her proposal was for an 'enacted' feminism, rather than a militant one, autonomous instead of institutional, which promoted rebellion instead of opposition. It was also a critique of the models that permeated her personal life: she advocated for getting rid of the 'good trees' of marriage, family and children, which made intimacy unable to be reconciled with complete emancipation. She promoted a 'change of desires' rather than a 'desire for change' (Pisano, 1995), questioning cultural institutions from their onset, as they simply perpetuated the de-humanization of women within the masculine paradigm (Pisano, 2004). The Casa de la Mujer Margarita Pisano is then not only a welcoming place for women, but a challenging one that asks for the most radical act of dispossession. It is also a posthumous iteration of a previous Casa de la Mujer, one that stood only a few blocks away and a mere couple of decades back.

### **Casa de la mujer La Morada (Bellavista 0457, Santiago)**

During the eighties, in times of the Pinochet dictatorship, women gathered in La Morada, which initially was the headquarters of the *Círculo de Estudios de la Mujer* (Circle for Women Studies), a group primarily composed of academics, very few of which actually called themselves feminists at the time (FIG. 3). Julieta Kirkwood, the most notable Chilean feminist intellectual of the second half of the twentieth century, invited Margarita here,<sup>1</sup> although she came from a totally different background: "coming from the world of art, especially architecture, was difficult: I didn't know how to make sociological research, nor historical, even less anthropological. The Circle was on a second floor of a house in Bellavista (FIG. 4). I got there and went up and had the feeling that I was falling down. At the same time,



I felt there was something for me there so, stubbornly, I climbed upstairs every day” (Pisano & Franulic, 2009:35). Even if she felt the house rejected her, Margarita’s transformative drive did not allow her to quit.

After a 1982 conference in Santiago,<sup>2</sup> it was clear to Pisano that the lukewarm approach of academy was not enough: she felt that women needed much more than studies or theories. When asked ‘what would you do then?’ Margarita proposed a ‘espacio de pasos perdidos’ (space of lost steps), a concourse, a place where women from popular backgrounds could be welcomed in preparation for a new direction (Pisano & Franulic, 2009:38). If that response was already architectural, the way in which it was realized was even more so: this gathering space took the form of ‘Open Mondays,’ regular evening meetings that were called ‘taller.’ Used in architectural schools and practices, the word denotes not only the studio, but also the workshop: the ‘taller’ is a place for thinking ‘and’ doing (FIG. 5).

Action-based feminism developed as the core of Margarita’s proposal for a radical feminism. Conducting the workshops forced her to read and investigate, but also to speak and write: it taught her how to be a leader.<sup>3</sup> Struggling with dyslexia, she had always felt that words were not for her – and that is why architecture tools, such as drawing and mathematics, seemed to come naturally to her. Her condition as an outsider from sociological studies brought something else to feminist thinking. Her first activity in these Open Mondays was to help women realize that they not only had a place in history, but also in space: “these old ladies [attending] didn’t know that they lived in a city, didn’t know what a country was, least of all, a culture” (Pisano & Franulic, 2009:114); their knowledge started in the home and ended in their immediate neighborhood. In the workshop, on the contrary, they talked about the city, space, and moving about, they drew maps of Santiago and they walked, gauging their presence in them. For Margarita, knowing the present was the only way of triggering a thirst for the future. This brought conflict into the Circle. The ‘*políticas*’ (‘politicals’)<sup>4</sup> wanted to

**FIG 4** Casa La Morada  
Fuente / Source La Morada – Corporación de Desarrollo de la Mujer

**FIG 5** Boletín La Morada, marzo-abril 1987 / La Morada bulletin, march-april 1987  
Fuente / Source La Morada – Corporación de Desarrollo de la Mujer



**FIG 6** Margarita en calle Los Navegantes, Providencia, Santiago, c. 1983. / *Margarita at Los Navegantes St., Providencia, Santiago, c. 1983.* Fuente / Source cortesía Camila Gaggero Pisano

stay within the realm of academic studies, whereas for Margarita the only possibility was popular education and political action. Separation ensued. When the *políticas* and the feminists ‘divorced,’ the latter got to keep the house, and they re-named it “Casa de la Mujer La Morada.” As such, it would become a beacon of resistance and change.

### **Casa Los Navegantes (Los Navegantes 1983)**

If La Morada was the place where Margarita divorced from academic feminists (a painful yet amicable separation), this was only her second divorce. Much more difficult was the separation from her family. Before becoming a feminist leader, Margarita had been a practicing architect, a wife, a mother. This previous life took place in the wealthy neighborhood of Pedro de Valdivia Norte, a bourgeois urban area, close to the city center and the animated life of Providencia. There, Margarita’s family house stood, a custom-made house designed in conjunction with Hugo Gaggero, her then

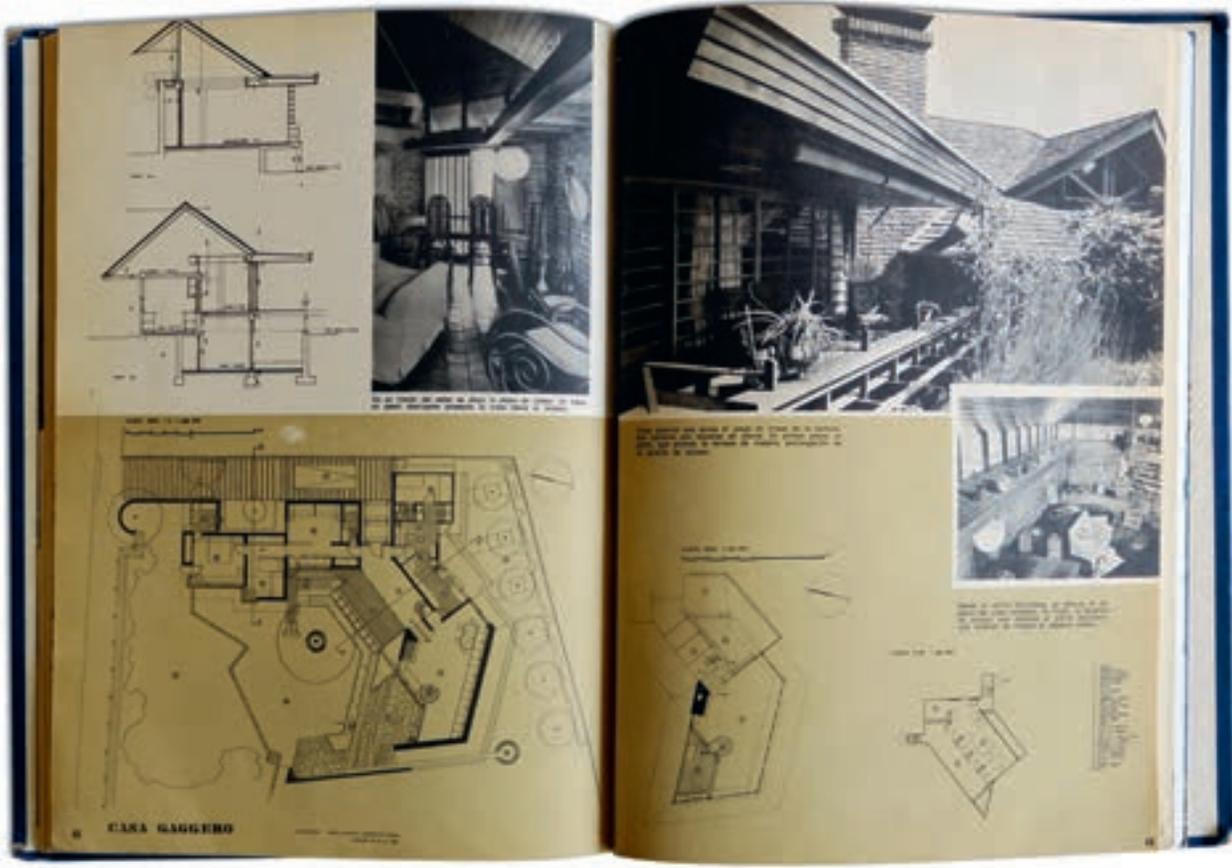
husband, with whom she had kept a successful and well-known practice since graduation (FIG. 6).

The site had been bought in 1958 in a common effort made between the Universidad Católica and a few individuals, when the University decided to relocate their architecture school. Among the buyers were the upcoming dean of the school, and leading figure of Chilean modernism, Sergio Larraín, Ernesto Pisano (Margarita's father), and Hugo and Margarita. Thanks to their organized operation they managed to control and acquire the whole block (Gaggero, 2015:118), resulting in a scheme that mixed a powerful institution with the private life of some of its members. While the University acquired the old colonial *casa patronal* (main house), which was to be occupied by the school in 1960, Larraín kept the *inquilino's* house (the servant's lodging). The rest of the land was subdivided in smaller plots. Margarita and Hugo then designed and built not only their own family house, but also one for Margarita's parents in the plot next to theirs.

Casa Los Navegantes was like one big piece of furniture (Gaggero y Pisano, 1966). Designed mostly according to Gaggero's measure and taste, there were no internal walls except for those of the couple's room (FIG. 7-8). Controlled natural light created a secluded interior that was made fluid and open within the enclosure, resulting in a domestic space that escaped convention. Margarita's role in the design of this house (and that of her parents' next door) was one of administration and coordination. Hugo was the architect, the genius artist. Margarita had an entrepreneurial role, dealing with clients, constructors and finance. The couple lived in this house from 1963 onwards, and here they saw the family grow. After several miscarriages two children were born. The family lived in close proximity to their maternal grandparents occupying the house next door and, soon after, Margarita's mother-in-law moved in to live with the family until the end of her days. In 1982, the couple designed and constructed a second dwelling by the sea in Cachagua, another elite spot for the Chilean aristocracy. Here, Margarita met a group of intellectual women and artists, among them Roser Bru and Lea Kleiner, with which she would become increasingly involved. They introduced Margarita to Julieta Kirkwood at the beginning of the eighties. Female friendship evolved into regular, organized meetings in Los Navegantes. By the pool, she and Julieta wrote the Feminist Manifesto (Pisano & Franulic, 2009:52), and in the lower ground floor, the female friends painted signs and boards denouncing Pinochet's repression.<sup>5</sup> From architecture studio to meeting point for activists, the basement must have witnessed Margarita's growing internal conflicts, as she could no longer reconcile the wife and the architect with the increasingly conscious feminist. She had to navigate away to construct her new self. In 1983, she left her husband, her children and her house. Behind stood Pedro de Valdivia Norte, with its narrow passages of residential houses following the



**FIGS 7-8** Publicación casa Gaggero /  
*Gaggero house publishing*  
 Fuente / Source revista *AUCA* N° 2. Santiago:  
 enero - febrero 1966, p. 46 - 50





**FIG 9** Pisano + Gaggero.  
Torre 11, Remodelación  
San Borja, Santiago, Chile.  
Fuente / Source Alejandra  
Celedón

'garden city' model. One house, one garden, one family, but not for Margarita. She had to go outside.

### **35 square meters**

Margarita had not been completely 'in' the architectural scene either. Her presence in their practice's published *oeuvre* is scarce; the administrative role she fulfilled in the office might explain why she has been somewhat overlooked.<sup>6</sup> One of the few witnesses of her participation is the surviving lettering that credits the architects of Tower 11 of the Remodelación San Borja. A housing complex of twenty-one high-rises, Gaggero and Pisano's 1969 tower was part of one of the most important projects of urban regeneration built in Chile and Latin America (Pérez de Arce, 2016). Next to the entrance only her name is visible, as Gaggero's ended up inside the recently refurbished access hall, behind a glazed door. Margarita's name, however, didn't escape patriarchal handling: what the lettering says is 'Margarita Pisano de G,' the last part literally meaning 'of G[aggero]' (FIG. 9). In what was the common way of writing the names of married females, she appears simultaneously as author and possession.

Margarita's practice during her years at the familial office seems pragmatic and anonymous, much in contrast to the radicalism and oppositional attitude of her later public life. Gaggero and Pisano's office had had important commissions, the most notable in scale and program was the UNCTAD III, a conference building designed during Salvador Allende's socialist Unidad Popular government (Maulén, 2016). After Pinochet's 1973 *coup d'état*, however, the office was blacklisted

from public commissions for a time, and only in 1979 they got a chance to work on social housing again. This time the office faced the stark contrast in the approach to social dwellings under Pinochet's dictatorship. The construction of atomized minimal dwellings in the outskirts of the city was part of the regime's public policy – one that cleansed the city center by making poverty invisible:

[w]e start[ed] designing 35 m<sup>2</sup> houses for eight people, an inhuman proposal as a housing solution. When drawing the plans and making the beds fit, I was consciously making them as niches. This made me think that it was a thousand times preferable to leave the people for whom these miniatures were destined to continue living in their informal settlements (Pisano & Franulic, 2009:30).

At exactly the same time, the office was designing a mansion for a wealthy family in one of the most exclusive areas of Santiago:

[o]ne day I arrived to the office and found a message from the client saying he had forgotten he needed to add a space in the garage for his motor boat (there were already considered three spaces for cars). The missing space had the same 35 m<sup>2</sup> of the other houses I was designing (Pisano & Franulic, 2009:31).

She was shocked. The contradictions nestled inside her erupted at the sight of these two projects over her drawing table, the cruel class clash denouncing her connivance in its construction. To explain her disappointment with the profession, she would compare the work of the architect to that of a piano player that follows an already written music sheet: just as musicians, architects could only be good executers or interpreters.

**FIG 10** Estancia Los Retamos, Tierra del Fuego, Chile.  
Fuente / Source cortesía Camila Gaggero Pisano



She stood up and left the office. The moment she arrived home, her body reacted: she had a violent *cuerpazo*, a body-struck that made her feel as if her head was cut-off. She later found out she had suffered from encephalitis. Her disenchantment with architecture would be final: she had to break away from this hopeless non-sense, and perhaps attempt to change the music scores from another standpoint.

### ***Estancia in Tierra del Fuego and project for an estancia***

Not always conflicted, at some point in Margarita's life architecture had meant freedom. She was born and grew up in a small *estancia*, the product of the activism of her father's generation to achieve agrarian reform (Pisano & Franulic, 2009:72). *Estancias* were the architectural typology that carried out the economic colonization of Tierra del Fuego, the southernmost tip of the continent. Exploitation of Magallanes took the form of either oil extraction or sheep breeding by private foreign companies. The latter were the means through which the wild expansions of this southern *pampa* were controlled and made productive. Large sheep-breeding *estancias* were composed of a series of buildings: enclosures, shearing sheds, ancillary buildings, lodgings for *estancieros*, small ports, roads and a main house were the typical configuration (Garcés, 2013). Built in wood and clad in galvanized iron of English origin, the *estancias* meant not only a colonization of the territory on behalf of the Chilean state, but the imposition of a European mindset over the cosmology of its aboriginal people. Systematic extermination of the latter, up until the beginning of the twentieth century, meant that the territory held this contradiction: over landscapes of savage beauty the most pragmatic relation of use and abuse was the norm.

Margarita's home, the *estancia* Los Retamos, stood seven kilometers apart from the Strait of Magellan (FIG. 10). Aware of the brutal meanings that supported her presence in the island, her relation with the land was one of constant awe and profound respect. The connection between the two oceans was her backyard, only a gallop away. From there, Margarita saw a "horizontal sky, in front of her eyes" (Pisano & Franulic, 2009:70). She felt she could perceive the curvature of the earth from this flat, tree-less land. Constant wind blew and in the rare moments when it stopped, a beautiful stillness covered everything. During school months she lived in the regional capital, Punta Arenas,<sup>7</sup> but on summers she could enjoy the long, never completely dark, polar nights. Margarita's constitution was double as the territory: her mother instilled on her the habits of a good woman, while her father taught her to fly airplanes. Although an outdoor athlete, a consummated skier that would later become national champion, she would always have a natural inclination to tend her home, a reminiscence of her mother's teaching.<sup>8</sup> Yet, however attached she was to Magallanes, however fond of the harsh and beautiful landscapes of the extreme south,

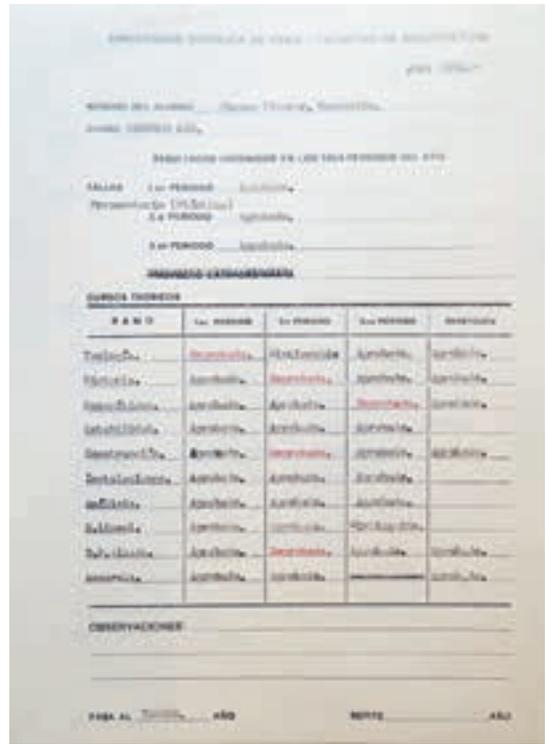
she grew up always knowing that she had to leave. She couldn't just be the wife of an *estanciero* or a military man (Pisano & Franulic, 2009:120). Against her father's wishes, she flew to Santiago to study architecture; her mother's influence, beyond the vocalized teachings, was that she had to pursue her dreams.<sup>9</sup>

Once in Santiago, she felt dislocated (FIG. 11). Her passage through architecture school, in the Catholic University, was far from perfect: she had to repeat first year after failing hand drawing, and barely passed the other courses. From then on she would have an irregular performance: almost always failing theology and passing her other subjects with only occasional distinctions (FIG. 12). Her final project for architecture school was an *estancia* in Magallanes. Submitted in 1960, this now lost project stands at odds with what was her path as a student. School records show that the research she had to complete prior to the final project was of another kind. In 1957, she participated in a course led by Emilio Duhart that had for aim the redesign of the city center of Santiago and its circulation. In 1958, she submitted her end-of-studies research to the school on the "Theory and *oeuvre* of Le Corbusier, Architect," assessed by Sergio Larraín García-Moreno among others. That same year, she underwent her professional internship at Hugo Gaggero's office.

Her final project for an *estancia* does not have a modernist tone to it; instead, it appears simply as an iteration of the existent typology. After a *detour* amid urban studies and modernism, her final project must have been a confrontation with her origins: not only with the geography of Magallanes, but also with its uses; not only



**FIG 11** Curso de primer año de Arquitectura, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 1952. Margarita Pisano está ausente, entre otros se encuentran: Christian De Groote (centro) y Montserrat Palmer (derecha). / *Architecture first-year class, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 1952. Margarita Pisano is absent, among others in the picture are: Christian De Groote (center) and Montserrat Palmer (right).* Fuente / Source Archivo de Originales. FADEU. Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. Fondo Documental Montserrat Palmer Trías.



**FIG 12** Ficha estudiantil de Margarita Pisano / *Margarita Pisano's academic transcript*  
Fuente / Source Archivo de Originales. FADEU. Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. Fondo Documental Monserrat Palmer Triás.

with her feelings of belonging, but also with the urge to leave. Architecture would not be her final destination, nor would any of the architectures that she inhabited, designed or re-made, yet a little bit of her is still imbued in all of them. As the intellectual head replaced the athletic body, and as the body evolved from mother to rebellious woman, her spaces of transformation continued sheltering her. While she picked up more and more curious objects for her ever-growing collection, she founded several homes, yet perhaps always stood outside. **ARQ**

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## Notas / Notes

- 1 Julieta Kirkwood, sociologist and researcher at FLACSO (Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences), authored *Feminarios* (Santiago: Documentas, 1987), *Feminismo y participación política en Chile* (Santiago: FLACSO, 1982), *Ser política en Chile* (Santiago: LOM, 1982, 1986, 2002), among others.
- 2 *Jornadas de la Mujer* took place in 1982 in the then Centro Cultural Mapocho, located in Lastarria with Rosal, Santiago, and it was organized by the CEM.
- 3 A form of leadership that has been criticized by many. Interview with Verónica Matus in Largo, 2004 (195). According to some, Margarita has been written off the history of Chilean feminism following the fulfillment of her own wishes. See Pisano & Franulic (2009:16).
- 4 'Political's' was the name for women who militated in a political party, opposed to 'feminists', who were only part of the activist movement.
- 5 Their motto "Democracy in the country and at home" and "Democracy in the country, at home and in bed". (Pisano & Franulic, 2009:46). See spanish original in note 5.
- 6 The official history of the Gaggero-Pisano office does not even credit her participation in projects she was involved with (Gaggero, 2015).
- 7 As referred by one of Margarita Pisano's relative (who asked to keep his/her name confidential), in conversation on November 2, 2016.
- 8 As told by one of Margarita Pisano's relatives in May 2016.
- 9 Margarita's mother had refused a scholarship to study art in Santiago (organized by poet laureate Gabriela Mistral and sculptor Laura Rodig) in order to become a wife. This self-denial shocked Margarita and pushed her to escape.

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