

## Cubans: Special Refugees

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—Alejandro Portes<sup>1</sup>

**D**uring the summer of 1994, thousands of Cubans appeared off the Florida coast in a flotilla of wooden rowboats, makeshift rafts, and automobile tires lashed together with rope. Each day that summer, the U.S. Coast Guard reported astonishing jumps in the number of Cuban *balseros* trying to reach our shores. The exodus quickly overwhelmed Florida's immigration centers, which were already straining to cope with a stream of desperate Haitian boat people, and it fueled a growing national debate over immigration.

President Clinton reacted by doing what no U.S. president had ever done—he ordered a halt to the special treatment of Cuban refugees. For more than thirty years, a succession of presidents had dispensed unprecedented financial aid to those fleeing Cuba. During that time, Congress had financed numerous efforts by the refugees to topple Fidel Castro's Communist regime and the CIA had employed many of them as trusty Cold War foot soldiers. Neither Dominicans fleeing the civil war of 1965, nor Haitians fleeing the terror of Papa Doc Duvalier and a string of Haitian military juntas, got comparable treatment. Washington routinely rejected asylum requests from Haitians picked up at sea while it invariably granted asylum to the far smaller numbers of Cuban *balseros*. Under Clinton, many Haitians were even forcibly returned to their country.

But in 1994 the Cuban red carpet was pulled. By then, American fixation with the Cold War was over. Fear of immigrant hordes was replacing dread of Communist guerrillas. Henceforth, Clinton said, Cubans trying to reach the U.S. illegally would be detained and denied automatic entry just like any other immigrants. By the time he made his announcement, more than 1 million Cubans were living in the United States.

The *balseros* of 1994 were actually the fifth major wave of Cubans to land on our shores since thousands of tobacco workers migrated here during Cuba's independence wars in the nineteenth century. While middle-class Cubans continued to visit the United States throughout the first half of the twentieth century, few took up permanent residence until after the 1959 revolution of Fidel Castro reignited massive emigration. In the forty years since then, four major waves of Cubans have left. Each has been so distinctive in its social composition and political outlook that the Cuban diaspora is perhaps the most complex of all Latino immigrant sagas.

The refugees of the 1960s and 1970s were largely from the upper and middle classes and brought with them enormous technical skills. Those advantages, together with the massive aid the federal government dispensed to them, turned Cubans into this country's most prosperous Hispanic immigrants. Beginning with the Mariel boat wave in 1980, however, the Cubans who came were generally poorer and darker-skinned. *Los marielitos*, as they were called, confronted a nativist backlash among white Americans and burgeoning class and racial conflicts within their own refugee community, making their experience more comparable to that of other Latino immigrants.

Because of the tremendous disparities in class, education, and race among the various waves, there is no typical Cuban refugee, and some observers even question whether the terms "refugees" and "exiles" remain appropriate descriptions for today's Cuban immigrant community. I have chosen to focus on the experience of one Cuban family, the Del Rosarios of Miami, who seem to me representative of a significant but understudied segment of the community. Some of the family members arrived in 1994 with the *balseros*, while others have been in this country much longer. Luis Del Rosario, the family's most articulate spokesman, arrived here in 1979. Quiet, razor-thin, nearly bald, and in his mid-forties, Luis was a former political prisoner in Cuba who, after settling in Miami, became active with Brothers to the Rescue, a militant exile group known for flying small planes over the Florida Straits to assist *balseros*.

I met him in the summer of 1994, while I was reporting on the *balseros*. Luis had just learned that one of his brothers, his sister-in-law, and their children had left Cuba on a raft and were lost somewhere at sea. Over the next few weeks, finding them became his personal obsession. The more we talked during those frantic days, the more I realized that the Del Rosario family could help illuminate aspects of the Cuban diaspora.

## THE EARLY MIGRANTS

The first Cuban migration to the United States is nearly forgotten these days. It occurred during the late nineteenth century, when more than 100,000 people, 10 percent of Cuba's population, fled abroad to escape the upheavals of the independence wars. The majority were unemployed tobacco workers who sought jobs in the new cigar factories that Spanish and Cuban manufacturers were setting up in Key West, Tampa, New Orleans, and New York City.

In 1885, Vicente Martínez Ybor and Ignacio Haya purchased forty acres of swamp near Tampa, drained the land, and set about building a company town. That town would become known as Ybor City. Martínez Ybor promptly set up a steamship line between Havana, Key West, and Tampa, assuring himself a steady supply of workers and turning his new town into the cigar capital of the country. By 1900, there were 129 cigar factories in the town and fifteen thousand residents.

The steam line and the flourishing cigar industry created flesh-and-blood ties between Cuba and the United States. By the early twentieth century, as many as 50,000 to 100,000 people traveled annually between Havana, Key West, and Tampa—so many that Cubans typically did not have to pass through customs or immigration.<sup>2</sup> While Cuba's millions of poor suffered under the turbulent regimes of Machado and then Batista, the small Cuban elite tied to U.S. companies basked in luxury. Its members invested their money on Wall Street. They sent their children to U.S. colleges. They went for treatment at U.S. hospitals. They vacationed in Saratoga Springs and other society resorts. Many even became U.S. citizens.

The 1959 revolution, however, sparked immediate flight. Some 215,000 left for the United States in the first four years. Thousands more went to Spain and Latin America.<sup>3</sup> That first wave was composed of the most wealthy: managers of U.S. corporations, the officers of dictator Batista's army and police, doctors, lawyers, scientists, and their families.<sup>4</sup> Metropolitan Miami's Hispanic population skyrocketed from a mere 50,000 in 1960 to more than 580,000 in 1980.<sup>5</sup>

"Few immigrant groups have commenced their economic adaptation to American life from a position of such relative advantage," wrote sociologist Alejandro Portes in a study of Cubans and Miami. The U.S. government provided a shelf full of government assistance programs under the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act, programs that Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and other Latinos never received. The refugees became instantly eligible for public assistance, Medicaid, food stamps, free English courses, scholarships, and low-interest college loans. They could secure immedi-

ate business credit and start-up loans. The state of Florida went even further—it provided direct cash allotments for Cuban families. Dade County opened civil service lists to noncitizens. The University of Miami Medical School even started special programs to help Cubans meet licensing requirements.<sup>6</sup>

Many of the refugees found additional assistance from covert programs of the Central Intelligence Agency. In those early days, both President John Kennedy and the exiles were confident Castro's revolution would be quickly overthrown. Their view was not dampened by the defeat of the CIA-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, and the capture of thousands of exiles from the expeditionary force, known as Brigada 2506. By 1962, the CIA station at the University of Miami was the biggest in the world next to the agency's Virginia headquarters. The agency had so many Cubans on payroll that it became one of Miami's largest employers.<sup>7</sup> Those CIA paychecks provided many of the exiles a standard of living far beyond the imagination of any immigrants before them.

The refugees, in addition, brought with them extensive technical skills and perhaps the highest educational levels of any Hispanic immigrant group in U.S. history. At a time when only 4 percent of Cubans on the island had reached the twelfth grade, more than 36 percent of the refugees had college degrees, or at least some college education.<sup>8</sup>

Thanks to the unique combination of their own skills and federal largesse, the early exiles set about creating the Cuban miracle in Miami. Within a few short years, the sleepy resort along Biscayne Bay was transformed into a commercial boomtown and a nexus for international trade. Cuban entrepreneurs who started their new life in this country with a small grocery or jewelry store quickly moved into banking, construction, and garment manufacturing. Some went to work for major U.S. firms and launched those firms into the Latin American market. Others served as real estate or banking agents in the United States for rich South Americans.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, the refugees developed an intensely loyal internal market among their own. More than any other Hispanic immigrants, Cubans hired workers and purchased goods from within their own community.<sup>10</sup> Those who managed to get loan officer positions at small Miami banks made sure to lend start-up funds to fellow refugees who could not secure credit from Anglo lenders. They did so by pioneering the "character loan." An exile who didn't have collateral or credit could get a business loan based on his background or standing in Cuba. The borrowers proved to be impeccable risks and the loan policy turned many Cuban bank officers into millionaires.

Exiles who were barred from joining unions by the racist father-and-son policies of the building trades turned instead to pickup construction jobs among their own people. As the community grew, so did the mom-and-pop building partnerships. By 1979, half of the major construction companies in Dade County were Cuban-owned.

At the same time, New York factory owners who felt their profits being squeezed by that city's garment unions jumped at the opportunity in the 1960s to abandon the North and set up production in Miami. In the decade before 1973, those relocations tripled the number of garment jobs in South Florida to 24,000. The new factories provided work for Cuban refugee women, many of whom ended up as contractors to the owners.<sup>11</sup> By 1987, there were 61,000 Hispanic-owned firms in Miami with gross receipts of \$3.8 billion, the largest by far of any city in the United States.<sup>12</sup>

The Cuban refugees were warmly welcomed during the 1960s and 1970s by a nation caught up in the fever of the Cold War. But that welcome changed almost overnight in 1980, as television news started to broadcast pictures of the Mariel boat people. More than 125,000 Cubans entered the country during the four months of the Mariel flight. The new refugees, America realized, were no longer from the island's elite. They were largely poor, black, unskilled, and in some cases mentally ill or dangerous felons. Fidel Castro, according to some reports, took the opportunity to rid himself not just of dissidents but of criminals as well.

For the first time, Cuban arrivals found a hostile reception and were dispersed to more than a dozen army bases scattered about the country. Racial attitudes combined with economic fears—the sight of so many new refugees entering the country at a time of high unemployment angered many Americans. That anger grew when the refugees, frustrated with the cold treatment they were receiving, mounted noisy protests at several detention centers.

I recall visiting one refugee-processing center as a newspaper reporter that year and finding my own image of Cubans radically challenged. That image had been shaped by years of interaction on the streets of New York with the 1960s wave of refugees. Because of that experience, I had grown up believing that Cubans were usually white, well educated, and somewhat arrogant toward Puerto Ricans. Over the years, a certain enmity had developed between the two communities. We Puerto Ricans were resentful that many *barrio* businesses and the better-paying jobs in Spanish-language media had been gobbled up by the new Cuban arrivals both here and in our homeland—more than sixty thousand Cubans settled in Puerto Rico during the 1960s. So you can imagine my surprise when I encountered, behind the barbed wire of Fort Indiantown Gap,

Pennsylvania, several thousand Cubans, almost all of them black, all speaking in the same rapid-fire colloquial Spanish and with the same unaffected humility I had known among Puerto Ricans in East Harlem.

Mariel had repercussions far beyond the Cuban or Puerto Rican community. It came only months before a national election in which Republican candidate Ronald Reagan made an election issue out of President Carter's failure to control immigration, an issue that helped Reagan capture the White House. Similarly, the little-known governor of Arkansas at the time, Bill Clinton, attributed his defeat in a reelection effort that year to the voters' anger over his accepting so many Mariel refugees into Arkansas's Fort Chaffee. As we shall see later, Mariel marked the beginning of a major shift in how Americans regarded immigration (see chapter 11).

### THE DEL ROSARIOS AND LIFE UNDER THE REVOLUTION

Luis Del Rosario arrived in this country in the summer of 1979, a year before Mariel, as a pardoned political prisoner. His family is originally from a rice-growing area in Camagüey Province in the center of the island. His grandparents migrated there from the Canary Islands in the 1890s, when Spain, desperate to counter the growing independence sentiment among *criollos*, encouraged *peninsulares* to settle on the island. His parents were poor farmers—they rented land from a more prosperous relative—so they did not suffer the extreme misery that dogged Cuba's masses: the plantation workers, sharecroppers, and urban poor who formed the base of support for Castro's revolution.

Several Del Rosarios, in fact, had minor jobs with the Batista government. Luis's uncle, Chilo, served as a railroad policeman in Havana. Another uncle, Antolin, was a cop in Matanzas. The immediate family was a big one, seven boys and three girls. In the years before the revolution triumphed, Luis recalls, guerrilla leader Camilo Cienfuegos commanded a detachment of fighters from Fidel's Twenty-sixth of July Movement in their province. Cienfuegos's band arrived at their farm one day and asked permission to camp on the land, and Luis's father, though he was a Batista supporter, dared not refuse.

Luis was only ten when Castro's guerrilla army marched into Havana in January 1959. His parents sought at first to live in peace with the new regime. They even prospered from some of its early reforms. The government, for instance, built new houses for everyone in the region. All of the houses had cement floors, plywood walls, and zinc roofs—a step up

from the dirt-floor hovels that were commonplace.<sup>13</sup> The new Del Rosario house had three bedrooms. The seven boys slept in one room, the girls in the second, and their parents in the third.

The government also built new schools and it launched extensive baseball and soccer programs for the region's youth. "The baseball uniforms were really important to us," Luis recalls. "We had gloves and bats and competed against other towns. I played for years, both in school and in the Little Leagues. Because of that kind of thing, I'd say ninety percent of the people supported Fidel at first." Numerous foreign studies of Cuban attitudes in the early days of the revolution confirm that view.<sup>14</sup>

But by the mid-1960s, euphoria for the revolution had waned. Young people started to quit their government-assigned jobs and move to Havana in search of better work. Luis heard the first real antigovernment sentiment around that time. After the death of his father in 1964, he moved to the capital and joined his brothers in a house in upper Havana, and together they started a small foundry in the back of the house. They would take old motors and discarded metal parts, then melt and recycle them into copper, bronze, or iron for the government. Nearly all of the dozen or so employees were family members. Luis tended the single antiquated oven and his brother Wenceslao served as the plant's main molder. Family foundries like theirs became critical to Cuba's survival after the U.S. embargo cut off access to spare parts for the many American-made cars and industrial machines in the country.

"It was a rustic operation," Luis recalls. "We had no technology and we used to burn ourselves a lot. Molten metal would spill pretty often and set off explosions. But we worked hard and the foundry made us a good living. If we had been allowed to grow, the country would be free today."

That never happened. In 1968, the government began nationalizing even small enterprises. "Some officials came and told us our foundry would become the property of the people," Luis recalled. "I got so angry I busted up our machines before we left."

Despite the bitter experience with the foundry, Luis still dreamed of prospering under socialism. He went to work as a postal clerk and later as a truck driver transporting food to the state-owned stores that dispensed all consumer goods under the country's system of rationing. It was during his daily trips around the Cuban countryside that Luis began to see firsthand how conditions were unraveling.

"Everything was going backward. If I tried to defend the revolution, others would tell me, 'How can you say that? Fidel only throws dirt at us.'" One day, a notice arrived from the government ordering him to report for military service, but he simply moved and decided to dodge the

draft. Things were so disorganized in Cuba by then the government never prosecuted him. Two of his other brothers did enlist, however, and one, Augusto, earned a rapid promotion to sergeant.

Luis passed the next few years managing several state stores in Havana. The stores were routinely bedeviled by long lines and shortages of goods and they invariably turned into centers for both public discontent and private corruption. Since some products always remained in abundance after ration cards were redeemed, store managers took to bartering or selling their surplus—five pounds of rice, say, for five pounds of meat.

"Many of us lived practically from robbing the government," Luis said. "The rationing system just didn't work."

By the early 1970s, Luis had come to hate the revolution. He and several brothers joined a clandestine group, the National Liberation Movement of October 10th. They were just amateur conspirators, he admitted, who would meet to plan grandiose sabotage operations but never carry them out. Eventually, an informant alerted the army, and soldiers arrested two of Luis's brothers, Gustavo and Wenceslao, outside an airport in Camagüey Province, as they were preparing to hijack a plane to the United States. A few months later, police arrested Luis for subversion. Convicted in a quick trial, he was sentenced to twelve years in jail but ended up serving only six and a half.

Unknown to Luis, a new group of anti-Castro Cuban Americans who were intent on normalizing U.S.-Cuba relations had traveled to Havana to meet with Fidel Castro. The group called itself the Committee of Seventy-five. It was immediately condemned by old-line anti-Castro groups in Miami as a front for Communist sympathizers. But the committee managed to convince Castro to pardon more than a thousand political prisoners on condition that all the prisoners left Cuba immediately.<sup>15</sup> Among those freed was Luis Del Rosario. On June 6, 1979, more than twenty years after Fidel marched out of the Sierra Maestra, Del Rosario, his wife, and two children boarded a Boeing 727 at José Martí Airport in Havana and flew to Miami. The rest of their relatives remained behind.

Luis quickly found work in a construction firm owned by another refugee, availed himself of all the federal programs, put a down payment on a house, and enrolled his children in Catholic schools. Several years later, after allowing his son Ismael to join the civil air patrol, he developed an interest in flying, obtained his own pilot's license, and started flying air charters out of the Miami area. Meanwhile, he kept finding ways to get the rest of his family out of Cuba.