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A study of the Cuban community in Richmond

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A STUDY OF
THE CUBAN COMMUNITY IN RICHMOND

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
University of Richmond

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Mary Earle Tyler
August 1966

Approved.

Spencer D. Albright
Professor of Political Science

I wish to express my deep appreciation to Doctor Humberto I. Cardounel, President of the Cuban Association of Virginia; and to the Cuban people of Richmond without whose help, cooperation, and interest, this paper would have been impossible.

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Foreword

"...I declare to the people of Cuba that those who seek refuge here will find it."¹ And so began a new chapter in the universal story of persons forced to leave their homeland, to seek refuge and live in exile in a strange country, to adjust to new customs and adopt new philosophies.

This nation was founded by immigrants fleeing religious persecution and through the years came many more for political and economic reasons, searching for freedom, happiness, and opportunity. For the 300,000 Cubans who have come to the U.S. since the Communist takeover, it is more than just opposing the political ideology of the present Cuban government, for in Cuba today fear is instilled into the people; and in an atmosphere that breeds suspicion and mistrust among friends and even families, the feeling of humanity becomes lost. When the rule of law is disregarded by a government, individual dignity and human worth have little meaning.

¹Speech by President Lyndon B. Johnson, October 3, 1965.

CHAPTER I

PATH TO EXILE

For Cubans there has been a long, historic exile path to the United States. The Spanish historian Justo Zaragoza noted that 100,000 persons fled the island in 1869² following the start of the Ten Years' War agitating for independence from Spain. Again in 1895 when the War for Independence broke out, Cuban colonies were founded in Southern Florida, Tampa, and other U.S. cities.

Political Activity was very much a part of the exile groups from the time that the great Cuban hero, Jose Marti plotted his revolution in a house in Tampa.³ Revolutionary activity was carried on among exiles in the U.S. during the dictatorships of Gerardo Machado and Fulgencio Batista. "Castro himself was among the Miami plotters of the Batista era. He left his Mexican exile in 1956 and spent ten days in Miami conferring with other exile leaders and raising funds."⁴

For those who have left Cuba since 1959 Miami has been the point of entry for the vast majority. Miami

²The Miami Herald, Special Section, June 26, 1966, p. 4.

³Ibid., p. 4.

⁴Ibid., p. 4.

was not equipped to deal with the problems in language, housing, employment, and schooling presented by such large numbers since by late 1960 50,000 refugees had already come.⁵ The federal government stepped in in 1960 to coordinate existing efforts and solve the most immediate problems.

In December 1960 the Cuban Refugee Emergency center was opened in Miami and in February 1961 the Cuban Refugee Program was effected under the direction of the Social Security Administration of the Department of the Health, Education, and Welfare. Secretary Abraham Ribicoff recommended a program that is still the operational base:

- Aiding private and public agencies already working with the refugees.
- Resettlement and employment.
- Providing essential health services.
- Financial assistance to needy arrivals.
- Federal assistance for public schools in the Miami area.
- Refugee training and educational programs.
- Aid for refugee children arriving without their parents.
- Distribution of surplus food.⁶

Funds for the program for the first two years were provided by the Mutual Security Act of 1954 and the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961. The largest appropriation so far has been \$70,110,000 for the fiscal year,

⁵Ibid., p. 2.

⁶Ibid., p. 2.

1963 made available after the enactment of the Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1962.⁷

The principal aim of the government effort has been to resettle the refugees in other parts of the country. Any resettled refugee may receive assistance when he reaches his destination depending on his need and his status as a Cuban refugee - defined as a person registered with the Cuban Refugee Emergency Center and:

1. Cuban national or resided in Cuba five years prior to departure and living in Florida or resettled.
2. Left on or after January 1, 1959.
3. Bears proper identification from the Department of Immigration and Naturalization as:
 - a. parolee under Sec. 212(d)(5) of the Immigration and Naturalization Act.
 - b. alien granted indefinite voluntary departure.
 - c. alien who is a permanent resident of the United States.⁸

The assistance program is administered by local welfare departments with the funds being reimbursed to the locality by the federal government. Application and payment is similar to the process used by the individ-

⁷Grants-In-Aid and Other Financial Assistance Programs 1964-1965, Office of Program Analysis, Government Printing Office, p. 299.

⁸Policies for Administration by State Agencies of Financial Assistance for Resettled Cuban Refugees, United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare, August, 1962, p. 9.

ual states for the other federal assistance programs - Old Age Assistance, Aid to Dependent Children, etc.

For many refugees the temptation to remain in the Miami area is great. The Cuban colony there is large, and language is much less a problem for there are stores, theatres, restaurants and radio stations operated by Cubans. At first, too, most thought it would only be a temporary exile. But as time passed and the Castro government stayed in power, better job opportunities could be found outside of southern Florida, so the refugees signed up for resettlement. Almost 70% of those arriving now are immediately dispensed to other areas.⁹ Resettlement is handled by four voluntary agencies - the National Catholic Welfare Conference, Church World Service, the United Hebrew Immigration Aid Society, and the International Rescue Committee. These participating agencies are under contract with the federal government. Funds are provided through the Cuban Refugee Program to cover the administrative expenses of these agencies, transportation costs of refugees to their destination, and a transition allowance for those receiving assistance in Miami.¹⁰

⁹The Miami Herald, Special Section, June 26, 1966, p. 2.

¹⁰Handbook on Programs of the United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1964-1965, United States Printing Office, p. II-286.

The transition allowance pays \$100 for a family and \$60 for a single individual. Experience has shown that it takes from 45-60 days to find housing and employment and to start receiving a paycheck.¹¹ During this period the refugee has expenses for hotels and restaurants and this allowance assures him and his sponsor that he won't be stranded without funds.

¹¹Policies for Administration by State Agencies of Financial Assistance for Resettled Cuban Refugees, p. 3.

CHAPTER II

THE RICHMOND CUBAN COMMUNITY

The first groups to leave Cuba were mainly from the upper classes. After the schools were nationalized in June 1961, many families sent their children out of the country. Later as the situation worsened, all social classes were represented among the refugees. Husbands and wives, parents and children came alone hoping their families would be able to leave also. For the more than 100 Cuban families in the Richmond area having to leave behind relatives and friends was even harder than facing an uncertain and unknown future.

Perhaps the greatest incentive for coming to the United States rather than Spain or another Latin American country was opportunity. Although undoubtedly exile in a Spanish-speaking country would have been less strange and overwhelming, these countries are not as industrially developed as the United States where, even with the language barrier, finding employment would be easier.

Since all transportation costs had to be paid from outside of Cuba, it was both easier and less ex-

pensive to come to the United States. Some who fled to countries other than the United States were businessmen who had funds and other interests outside of Cuba.

Also after seeing communism in Cuba, freedom was the wish of the refugees and they thought they could better find it here than in Latin America where political turmoil is unfortunately a rather frequent occurrence. Besides, other nations of the hemisphere did not offer an open door to those escaping from communism as did the United States.

Cubans have been resettled in Richmond through the efforts of churches, both Protestant and Catholic. A large proportion though came on their own. Generally, those who came in the beginning are in the latter category, while those arriving in the past few years have been sponsored.

The sponsors help the refugees with finding living arrangements and obtaining job interviews. Protestant churches have sponsored Catholic families but they are not pressured to join their sponsoring church, though some have converted. The Catholic church has been especially active in working with children. In the first few years of the Castro regime large numbers of children

were sent out of Cuba and were taken care of by the Church. After staying for a while in camps in Miami, they received scholarships and were dispersed all over the country. The Richmond Diocese was one of the first to accept the children. Not all Dioceses were equipped to handle the situation since special arrangements had to be made to find housing and schools that had the facilities for handling the Spanish-speaking children. Foster homes were found for some while others were sent to Saint Joseph's Villa in Richmond and Saint Vincent's in Roanoke. The first planeload arrived in March 1961 but now all the children except one have been resettled. Four are now in college.

When the parents left Cuba, families were reunited in Richmond which in turn drew other families and individuals who were friends or relatives. The geographical location of Virginia about midway between the large Cuban colonies in New York and Miami has also been favorable in attracting more people.

CHAPTER III

PROBLEMS IN ADJUSTMENT

Communication with others is necessary to live and work and so language has caused the greatest problems for the Cubans. For most people other problems are minor, in comparison. English was compulsory in Cuban schools, but even for those who hadn't been out of school for a long time, academic preparation didn't sufficiently meet the needs of conversational English. Then, too, there is a difference between wanting to learn something and having to learn it to make a living. Many have studied and are studying English in night school and with private tutors, however the majority have found that practice and ordinary conversation provide the fastest way. Television has proven to be one of the best teachers since words are carried out by actions. Children especially learn rapidly from television.

Problems with English are especially difficult for older people. Since Spanish is spoken in the homes, they lose a good opportunity to learn from younger bilingual members of the family who adapt more easily.

Inability to talk with neighbors has caused loneliness for women who don't work.

Unlike the European immigrants who came in the 19th century, the average Cuban, even if he had never traveled to the United States, was familiar to some extent with life here. Television sets were widespread throughout the island and Cuban children in the past enjoyed cowboys like Tom Tyler and Hoppalong Cassidy as much as their American counterparts. Movies and appliances were imported from the states. Cubans are great baseball fans and broadcasts of World Series games were set up in central locations in cities all over the island. Some families had parents or great grandparents who had been in exile in the United States. For others the geographical proximity of Cuba to the United States made vacations and shopping expeditions to Southern Florida relatively inexpensive. Others traveled to Miami and New York for medical conventions, Shriners' Conventions, and other professional association meetings.

However this was confined mainly to the middle and upper classes. There was a very wide social divergence in Cuba and the guajiro or peasant could not afford these luxuries. The majority of the Cubans

in Richmond came from the cities and urban areas and were professional people, businessmen, or skilled workers. The lower socio-economic groups have tended to remain in Miami or resettle in cities like New York or Chicago where there is a very large contingent of Cubans and other Latin people.

There are several differences in customs and ideas which, while not exactly causing disapproval, necessitate some adjustments. Many find that everything here is done in a rush--that there is less time for talking. Women in Cuba rarely worked after marriage, though now they work to help out financially. Cuban families are much closer than American families and also stricter with the children. Dating, as known here, didn't exist in Cuba since couples were always chaperoned. Some girls who came alone had problems because of their parents' strict ideas when the family was reunited. It will take a while for parents to grow accustomed to new ways but they want their children to become Americanized and the young people generally approve of the American way of dating.

Many Cubans have had to accept jobs inferior to their skills and knowledge. Doctors and veterinarians in order to practice have to pass extensive exams.

Those who don't take the exams go into medical research or become lab technicians and specialists. Lawyers enter the insurance business or teach. There are special courses offered in Miami to train former lawyers as teachers.

It would seem only natural to feel resentment at being unable to work in your profession but the majority of Cubans accept the situation uncomplainingly and feel resentment more at being forced to leave their homeland.

Few people have found any real problems with food or climate. Meats eaten in Cuba were the same as in this country. Cooking was done with more spices. However for the women who work now it is faster and easier to open a can than cook involved Cuban dishes. Winter in Cuba required only closing the front door. There was no worrying with furnaces and heaters. Most saw snow for the first time when they came to Richmond to live. Colds and other hardships of winter affect Cubans but no more severely than other Richmonders. Probably the heat has been noticed more than the cold. Being an island there were always breezes in Cuba even when the temperature was high and humidity didn't cause discomfort as it does in Richmond.

CHAPTER IV

THE CUBAN ASSOCIATION

The loneliness and unfamiliarity of resettlement are easier now for Cuban families moving to Richmond since others have preceded them. Newcomers become a part of the local Cuban community through the Cuban Association of Virginia. The Association was organized two years ago with the purpose of preserving Cuban traditions and heritage and contributing culture and music of Cuba to the community.

Meetings which are held every two weeks in the Cuban House at 305 West Grace Street are conducted in Spanish. Special programs are held to commemorate Cuban holidays. During the summer picnics are held frequently and the group takes excursions to the beaches and places of historic interest.

About 70% of the Cubans living in Richmond are members of the organization, however, the activities are open to participation by all Cubans. One of the difficulties in unifying the people is transportation for those who live outside the area and finding time for those who work.

Elections of officers are held annually. Dr.

Humberto I. Cardounel is president of the Association. Other officers are Dr. Pedro Almazan, vice president; Mr. Carlos Sotorrio, secretary; and Miguel Tarabay, Treasurer. The Association is not an agency and so does not give economic help. However, individual members aid new families by helping with job interviews and talking with influential people. Through the leadership of the organization assistance is rendered in reuniting families. Several new Cuban families come to Richmond every month and they are welcomed by members of the Association.

One of the main purposes of the Cuban Association is to teach the younger people the history and geography of Cuba and instill in them the love of fatherland which even if they become citizens of the United States, will make them better citizens.¹² Some of the younger adults complain that the meetings continuously end in political discussions with the older people always talking about going back to Cuba. This, however, is a matter of difference between generations and also of assimilation which has progressed more rapidly for younger Cubans.

¹²Interview with Dr. Humberto I. Cardounel, July 6, 1966.

CHAPTER V

THE PROCESS OF ASSIMILATION

The process of assimilation for Cubans in the Richmond area has been rapid; this has been influenced by several factors. The Cuban community here is small and the people live in various sections of the city rather than in one neighborhood. This has facilitated the learning of English, unlike Miami where it is possible to live, work, and play without ever speaking a word of English. Adjustment has been just as hard for those spending several years in Miami as for those coming directly from Cuba.

The majority are Roman Catholics and are in different parishes so this has had a tendency to assimilate them whereas other groups like the Armenians retain their unity in large measure through the national church. Several years ago the Catholic church offered a mass in Spanish with a dinner and music afterwards but this was discontinued because the need no longer existed. The Cuban people have a very deep spiritual faith which allows them to accept suffering and adversity and to trust in the future.¹³

¹³Interview with Reverend John J. McMahon, July 27, 1966.

Those who have settled here have taken classes in English, subscribe to English language magazines and newspapers, and enjoy the cultural activities of the city. They are motivated by a desire to do well and not be a burden on the community. The State Highway Department and Sears Roebuck and Company both employ quite a few Cubans whom they have found to be both qualified and able, and tending also to put out more effort to prove themselves.

The degree of assimilation differs from individual to individual but in general terms it has been most easy and complete for children and young adults and becomes progressively harder for those older persons who don't understand English. Cuban children who speak only Spanish have been put back in school until they learn English and then are advanced to their proper grade. Some children who stayed at Saint Joseph's Villa forgot their native language and were unable at first to communicate with their parents.¹⁴ After a while many young people find that they are translating English constructions into Spanish.

¹⁴Interview with Reverend John J. McMahon, July 27, 1966.

If Cuba should be liberated in the near future, many would, of course, return but as time goes on and more Cubans buy homes and establish ties here the desire to return to live in Cuba will greatly decrease. Even now the majority of young people would only want to return to visit. Among other Cubans who express a desire to go back there are qualifications such as how long and what conditions would be like.

A large proportion believe they will become American citizens; and of those who have been here five years, most have acquired United States citizenship. To obtain citizenship, an alien must be a permanent resident of the United States. Most of the Cuban refugees were paroled into this country as temporary residents. In order to obtain status as permanent residents they must apply to the American consulate in Canada and then if granted permission go to Canada and reenter the United States. Some have done this for professional reasons to regularize their status. Physicians, for example, must be permanent residents to practice.¹⁵

The laws governing refugees go back to the Displaced Persons programs after World War II. Hungarian refugees

¹⁵Mr. Owens, Department of Immigration and Naturalization, July 29, 1966.

were also paroled into the country as temporary residents. Later a special law was passed by Congress making them permanent residents. No such legislative action has yet been enacted for Cuban refugees.¹⁶ It is thought that the reason such a law has not come forth is that such action would constitute recognition by Congress that Fidel Castro is in power to stay.

The refugees miss their families more than anything else but they also feel nostalgia for the physical characteristics of Cuba--the sea, the beaches, and the landscape of the island. They communicate with relatives still there through the mails and by telephone. The mail has gone through Mexico since the United States and Cuba broke diplomatic relations. The mail is censored and some have received parts of other people's letters. It is not safe to talk openly over the phone either. The exiles don't want to say anything that might harm those still in Cuba. Supplies ranging from aspirin to tires are sent from the States to relatives in Cuba.

The majority of Cubans are happy here, even if their economic situation is below the standard to which they were accustomed in Cuba. They are happy to be

¹⁶ Mr. Owens, Department of Immigration and Naturalization, July 29, 1966.

able to speak without fear, to be able to look at a policeman without a feeling of panic. After having lost everything and starting all over, material possessions no longer seem so important.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

The Cuban refugees have had little impact on Richmond in so far as needing special programs or services. One year a special class in English was offered to about thirty Cubans by the Richmond Public Schools Adult Education Program. It was a regular tuition course and was not requested again. The Richmond Public Library has not noticed an increase in the demand for Spanish language books sufficient to cause enlarging the Spanish literature section.

The Cubans have found their American neighbors and co-workers both friendly and helpful. Neighbors have shown the women the stores and where to shop and at work fellow employees have helped the refugees in learning the work. There is little of the prejudice that existed towards other immigrant groups in the past. The American people have come of age in a way. Travel, television, movies, and cultural exhibits have made Americans aware of other countries, of different customs and attitudes.¹⁷ For the refugee

¹⁷Interview with Reverend John J. McMahon, July 27, 1966.

moral support has been most appreciated.

The close family life of the Cubans, their industriousness and eagerness to get ahead provide a good example to the community. Their skills and knowledge benefit the city also, for ultimately a nation's greatest wealth is its human resources.

But most important of all, the tragedy of the Cuban people should shock Americans out of a feeling or sense of complacency that it could never happen here.

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- Personal interviews and questionnaires sent to Cuban families in Richmond and Hopewell.

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Welfare, August, 1962.

APPENDIX

CUBAN REFUGEE PROGRAM

Fiscal Year	Funds Available	Obligations
1961	\$5,000,000	\$4,089,000
1962	38,800,000	38,557,000
1963	70,100,000	56,027,000
1964	53,800,000	46,011,000 ¹⁸
1965	42,400,000	

February 1, 1961--June 26, 1966

Number of refugees registered at the Miami Center	172,572
Number resettled	79,230 ¹⁹

¹⁸Grants-In-Aid and Other Financial Assistance Programs 1964-1965, Office of Program Analysis, Government Printing Office, p. 300.

¹⁹Handbook on Programs of the United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1964-1965, United States Printing office, p. IIE288.

The following is a copy of the letter and questionnaire sent out to Cubans living in Richmond and Hopewell. This was in addition to personal interviews.

Estimado Sr:

Yo soy estudiante en la Universidad de Richmond y estoy escribiendo una tesis acerca de la comunidad Cubana en Richmond. Me interesan especialmente los problemas que tienen los Cubanos en adaptarse y sus sentimientos de la sociedad en los Estados Unidos. Necesito las opiniones y las ideas de muchas personas. Me es imposible hablar con todo el mundo personalmente, por eso, le agradecería mucho, si Ud. pudiera hacerme el favor de responder a estas preguntas. Muchas gracias por su cooperación y ayuda.

Dándole las gracias anticipadas por el interés que se tome en este asunto, quedo de Ud.

Atentamente


Merle Tyler

¿Qué tiempo hace que está en los Estados Unidos y en Richmond?

¿Cuándo salió de Cuba, ¿tenía parientes en este país o había hecho un viaje a los Estados Unidos?

¿Vino Ud. a Richmond patrocinado por un grupo o una iglesia?

En Cuba, ¿vivía Ud. en la ciudad o en el campo?

¿Qué problemas ha tenido Ud. en adaptarse?

¿Cree Ud. que hay grandes diferencias en las costumbres y el modo de vida entre Cuba y los Estados Unidos? ¿Cuáles?

¿Piensa Ud. en llegar a ser un ciudadano de los Estados Unidos?

Si Cuba fuera libertada, ¿regresaría Ud.?

¿Cree Ud. que Cuba será libertada?

¿Cree Ud. que la gente en Richmond es amistosa y favorablemente dispuesta hacia los Cubanos?

Son la mayoría de sus amigos Cubanos o Americanos también?

Cuál fue su ocupación en Cuba? Ahora

Cuántos años tiene Ud.? Cuántas personas hay en su familia?

Se encuentra Ud. suscrito a periódicos y revistas en inglés?

Ha estudiado Ud. inglés en escuela en los Estados Unidos?