

UT students return to Cuba

By GAYLE REAVES
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The moment before the Cubana Airline plane touched down at the Havana airport, Mariano Diaz-Miranda said, there was silence on board.

But as soon as the wheels touched Cuban ground, "people started screaming and crying and cheering. A couple of minutes after that, we started singing the national anthem."

first time we had been in Cuba since 1961. I was six when my family left and my sister was four," Maria Torres-Vigil said. Diaz-Miranda's family left Cuba for the United States in 1957.

Diaz-Miranda's reason for making the trip was even more personal than to see the city where he spent his childhood. His 86-year-old grandmother still lives in Havana.

"They took me in a car to her apartment," he said. "I knocked on the door, and no one answered, and I was in shock. All this way, and no one there. But then I asked around among her neighbors, and someone went to get her. I thought this (reunion) would be critical for my grandmother, I was worried about her. But I saw her coming, and I was the one who started shaking and broke down crying all over her."

"I found out from her what kind of social conscience the people have in Cuba," he said. After two hours with her, he had to return to the group for more meetings. "Her answer was, 'That's okay. You came here to do a task, so go do it.' If I had (neglected other duties to spend more time with her), I think she would have resented it."

The group of exiles hadn't known that Castro himself would meet with them, he said, until they were gathered in a room in the headquarters building of the Cuban Communist Party Friday afternoon "and he walked in."

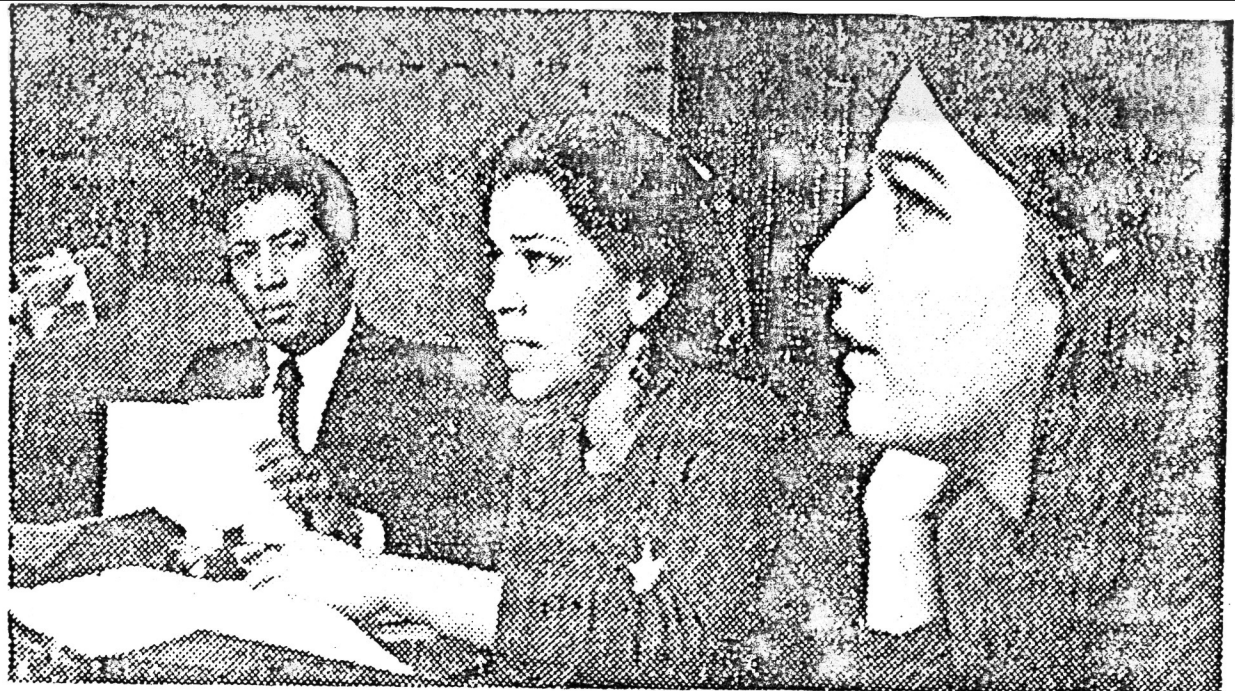
Diaz-Miranda, a University of Texas doctoral student in Latin American history, and two other UT students were part of a group of 140 Cuban exiles who returned there last weekend to conclude negotiations with Cuban president Fidel Castro for the release of 3,600 political prisoners.

Diaz-Miranda and sisters Alicia and Maria Torres-Vigil are mem-

bers of La Brigada Antonio Maceo, an organization of young Cubans in this and other countries who want to be able to travel and study in their homeland.

The three UT students had applied to go along on the latest trip, and received word that they were on the list two days before they left last Thursday. They returned Sunday.

"It was very emotional. It was the



Staff Photo by Kit Brooking

Diaz-Miranda, Maria and Alicia Torres-Vigil at press conference

"He's very magnetic, very charming. He's a large man, and he has a lot of patience. There was openness and honesty in the meeting, and he went over answers to questions again and again."

Diaz-Miranda said Castro stayed and participated throughout the 12-hour meeting, which broke up after 2 a.m.

Post-revolutionary Cuban society appeared to be "not so structured or rigid — not what I expected," Diaz-Miranda said. The UT student said he doesn't want to return to Cuba to live and that his grandmother wasn't interested in coming to the United States, even though she very much wants to see the rest of her

family. It's enough that the doors are going to be open now for visits, he said.

"There has always been a sense (among Cuban exiles) that this (the Castro government) was temporary — why should they go back and support something when it wouldn't be there for long? Very few Cubans here are U.S. citizens, because they planned to return to Cuba."

"But after 20 years, they realize that this is something rather permanent. They have begun to say, we have to make our decisions and establish ourselves here. You find a lot of people now interested in being Cuban-Americans."