

Batista faithful cling to old political ideas

Ten years after the death of *El General*, a corps of supporters exists in exile.

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In the streets of Little Havana, "The Man with the Portrait of Batista" is something of a fixture.

Jose Manuel Garcia is small, usually dressed in a thick polyester suit with a wide tie. In his arms he carries a yellowed portrait of Gen. Fulgencio Batista.

It is with him when he makes his Fuller Brush man calls. It is on the counter when he eats at El Pub Calle Ocho sandwich shop. Some people carry Batista in their hearts, he says, "but I carry it in my arms every day."

El General has been dead for 10 years. Although there is no Batista, there still are *batistianos*.

When he died, Fulgencio Batista y Zaldivar left a widow, an ex-wife and eight children (one son died in exile). He also left a group of dedicated followers.

In 1933 Batista, then an army sergeant, took power in a coup. He lost power in 1944 when Ramon Grau San Martin was elected president, but returned in another coup in 1952.

Batista left Cuba the day before Fidel Castro's guerrillas arrived in Havana, then spent his final years in Spain. He died in 1973 without ever visiting the faithful in the United States. The U.S. government never granted him a visa.

Batistiano organizations count as members former prime ministers, colonels, financiers and servants. The *Batistiano* Armed Forces Social Club meets in Little Havana every Sunday.

On the 50th anniversary of Batista's first coup — Sept. 4, 1933 — more than 1,000 *batistianos* packed a Calle Ocho banquet hall for an elaborate tribute.

Here are some of their stories.

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The man who would have been Cuba's president had Batista defeated Castro is Andres Rivero Aguero, now 78. Elected in November 1958, he was supposed to take office Feb. 24, 1959.

"Personally, it did not mean anything to me. I saw my presidency as a duty, a responsibility," he says. "I thought if destiny had assigned me to bring peace among my people, it was a task no honorable man could renounce." These days, Rivero Aguero works at a Little Havana radio station as a political commentator.

Rivero Aguero held a string of high offices in Cuba. He had been senator, agriculture minister, education minister — remarkable for a self-taught country lawyer from Oriente who was still illiterate at 15 — ambassador to Peru and president of the congress.

But his political career ended when Batista left the country. Rivero Aguero accompanied him to Santo Domingo, moved to Mexico for a few months and in August 1959 came to Miami.

During exile Rivero Aguero corresponded regularly with Batista, and had an appointment to speak to him a few days after he died, to set up a visa so the

general could come to Miami.

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There were many secrets to be kept in his job, secrets that he would never repeat, for Carlos Sanchez Diaz was far too devoted to Batista to be a gossip.

"Why should I sling mud on my jefe? Why should I bite the hand that fed me?"

He was Batista's personal valet, the man who helped Batista dress for 22 years, who woke him, ran his bath, set out his clothes. He knew what the president was going to do 12 hours before he did it. If Batista rose early, he would wake him. If Batista went to bed late, engrossed in a classic film or a book, Sanchez Diaz would wait in a presidential palace chair until Batista was ready for bed. Sometimes it would be 3-4 a.m., because Batista was a night-owl.

Batista liked to change clothes three or four times a day, and each time he changed, he'd bathe, Sanchez Diaz says. If Batista went fishing, he would go too.

"Some days he was violent, but mostly he was good to his servants. This is the first thing he'd give to his employes," he said, displaying an 18-karat gold ring with an amethyst embedded in it, a gift received from Batista 47 years ago.

He stuck with Batista through two regimes. When the general went into exile in 1944, he followed him to Daytona Beach and continued to serve him.

"I lived in a wonderful house. My wife had three servants. We had a chauffeur. Who gave me all these things? My jefe."

For his part in the Batista regime, Sanchez Diaz — a small, big-eared man — served 10 years as a Cuban political prisoner. Today, he lives in a cramped Little Havana apartment, working as a gardener for a local hospital.

Sanchez Diaz recalls his time with Batista as "the happiest years of my life."

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Francisco (Silito) Tabernilla was the model son of Cuban armed forces chief "Pancho" Tabernilla. He served as the general's private secretary, jotting orders, compiling strategies. He was the first to know Batista planned to leave, because the president had dictated four lists of persons to accompany him in exile.

"It still plays in my mind like a movie. Twenty-five years ago, Cuba was free, sovereign, independent," Tabernilla said. "Today, I have a whole new life."

In his first years of exile, Tabernilla maintained a quasi-military life in Palm Beach, where many *batistianos* settled. He operated a military school for eight years, until it failed for lack of students.

Like his military ventures, his relationship with Batista also fizzled. In the first years the Tabernillas — father Pancho; brother Carlos, air force chief; and Silito — began to feud with Batista, who blamed his downfall on his army. The Tabernillas accused Batista of handing Cuba to Castro without a fight.

Today, Tabernilla belongs to countless exile groups and civic organizations. He



MARICE COHN / Miami Herald Staff

Jose Manuel Garcia carries a portrait of Batista throughout Little Havana.

recently joined Palm Beach Cuban exiles in campaigning for a city square named after patriot Jose Marti.

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Batista in 1952 hand-picked labor union leader Mercedes Chirino as a consultant, quite an honor for a humble worker from Pinar del Rio who was de-veining tobacco leaves when she was 14.

Under Batista, she acted as liaison with the national labor union. She moved to Havana, hired a secretary and lived fairly well, she says.

"I still kept my work barrel at the old tobacco house and I would go to work there once a week. The money I earned I would give to my fellow workers," she said.

Driven by her own poverty and difficult life, she had fought for better working conditions for women since she was 22.

Days after Batista's fall, her house was ransacked and her possessions seized. She was jailed for some two years and came to Miami in 1962 where she got a job at a local *tabaqueria* — de-veining tobacco leaves and placing paper rings on cigars.

Now she is 70, and can no longer work because her fingers are stiff with arthritis. Many of her days in exile, she says, have been spent on *batistiano* activities.

She also kept in touch with the mentor who had changed her life years before. She last spoke to Batista on his

birthday about three years before his death.

"He said to me, 'Mercedes, you have the same voice. You haven't changed,'" she says.

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Even in death, Batista has done marvelous things, according to his most visible standardbearer, Jose Manuel Garcia, The Man with the Portrait.

"The other day I got this young woman a job at a store, but it was really Batista who got it for her. I know the owner of the store, he's a *batistiano*. I recommended her — you know, from one *batistiano* to another — and, well, he hired her," says The Man with the Portrait.

Other times, he says, Batista has made it rain.

"Whenever Batista used to speak, it would rain. He had that gift. I don't know why, maybe because he was from Oriente and he was close to the earth.

"Once during a dry spell in Miami, I thought to myself, 'If Batista could only speak.' But he was already dead. So I took my tape recorder and put on a tape of a Batista speech and played it really loud on the roof of my car, so Batista's voice would resound in the street. Sure enough, it rained. Everyone said, 'Batista really did make it rain.'"

Those who witness Garcia's daily Batista show at El Pub Calle Ocho might think he had a job under Batista — a col-

onel, a secretary, a minister, even a valet. But he didn't. Simply, he was a loyal follower.

That is not to say that he did not know the general personally. He says he met Batista before 1933 and kept in touch even after the general went into exile. He says he exchanged cassettes with Batista.

As proof of his correspondence with the general, Garcia keeps a special note in his pocket. It was written by Batista days before he died.

"Dear Garcia:

"Good friends have spoken to me about you with enthusiasm during the past few days. It makes me glad to remember the 'portrait' and the friend there is in you,

"A hug. Fulgencio Batista. June 23, 1973."

The Man with the Portrait missed the Sept. 4 Little Havana banquet commemorating the 50th anniversary of the 1933 coup. Several guests wondered aloud where he was.

He was in his usual hangout, at El Pub Calle Ocho, sipping Cuban coffee at the counter with his portrait. Just he and Batista.

He didn't go to the banquet, he said, "because I don't honor Batista just once a year.

"I am the man who carries Batista in my hand everyday. For me, every day is the 4th of September."