

# Strife Simmers in N.J. Cuban Community

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By **DONALD KIMMELMAN**  
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UNION CITY, N.J. — By all accounts, Jose Eulalio Negrin was an unlikely candidate for martyrdom.

A demonstrative Cuban exile who was forever loudly espousing conspiracy theories about spy networks and the drug trade, Negrin, 38, was largely dismissed by local reporters as a "pest" — a quixotic political office-seeker and publicity hound who insisted on proclaiming himself a leader in a community that refused to follow his lead.

The police chief in this congested, blue-collar town of 70,000, just across the Hudson River from midtown Manhattan, thought him a "pain in the a--," constantly demanding protection from mysteri-

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*Union City, N.J., is "Little Havana on the Hudson," the capital of a northern Cuban exile community estimated at 200,000. The Cuban National Movement and Omega 7, two terrorist organizations, are active in Miami and New Jersey. Members of the Committee of 75, whose leaders include prominent Miami Cuban exiles, have been singled out as targets. The Committee of 75 favors a peaceful dialogue with Cuban Premier Fidel Castro.*

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ous assassins but offering little proof that his life was in danger.

**EVEN PEOPLE** attuned to the passionate nature of political debate in the sizable U.S. community of Cuban exiles thought that Negrin, a portly figure who wore cheap suits,

smoked fat cigars and toiled around town in a battered Volkswagen, lacked the stature to be targeted for political assassination.

At least they thought that until Nov. 25.

At 9:30 a.m. that Sunday, Negrin was climbing into his car on a quiet

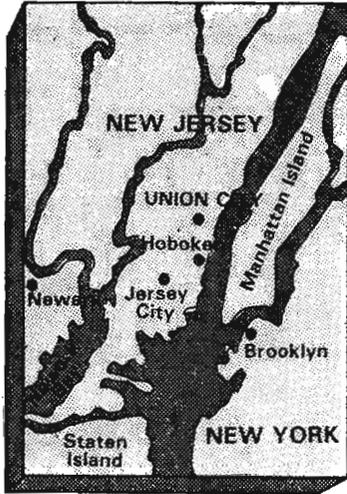
residential street, his 12-year-old son seated on the passenger side, when a second car pulled alongside and a burst of machine-gun fire erupted from it. One of the bullets passed through Negrin's neck and killed him.

That evening, a man with a Hispanic accent called the local offices of the Associated Press and United Press International to claim responsibility for the killing on behalf of Omega 7, a right-wing anti-Castro Cuban terrorist group.

"We will continue with these executions until we have eliminated all of the traitors living in this country," the caller told AP.

**IN THE CUBAN** community, —

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# Castro 'Dialogue' Debate Sparks Anger, Bloodshed



*'Fifteen years ago, we used to be called freedom fighters. Now we're called terrorists. The only difference is that ... we don't have the CIA behind us anymore.'*

— Armando Santana

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there was no doubt where that threat was aimed. Negrin was a member of the Committee of 75, a group of priests, educators, professionals and community activists (actually totaling 140) who visited Cuba last fall to begin a "dialogue" with Fidel Castro.

Castro has encouraged the effort and rewarded committee members by freeing political prisoners and making it easier for exiles in the United States to visit their Cuban relatives.

"The dialogue may not sound that radical to an Anglo-American looking at the situation from a disinterested position," said Robert Menendez, a young, second-generation Cuban who is secretary of the local school board. "But from the position of people who were uprooted by Castro and had to leave their families behind, it is a direct affront."

Although Castro has been in power 20 years, most refugees still steadfastly look to the day when his regime will be toppled and Cuba will be "free," Menendez said.

**THE COMMITTEE** of 75 has been excoriated in the largely conservative exile press as a Castro propaganda tool. In the eyes of the extreme right, this currying favor with the detested Castro regime is more than wrongheaded. It is treason.

In March, Carlos Muniz, a young Cuban travel agent and left-wing activist who arranged tours to Cuba, was gunned down from a passing car while driving to his mother's house in San Juan. A group called Cero (Spanish for zero) took responsibility for the killing.

In the New York-New Jersey area, Omega 7 has claimed responsibility for more than a dozen bombings in recent years, including two blasts this month. On Dec. 8, one of the group's bombs shattered windows at the Cuban Mission to the United Nations. On Dec. 11, another, more powerful bomb rocked the Soviet Union's U.N. mission, injuring two occupants and four city policemen and breaking windows along the entire block.

The Soviets promptly registered a strong protest with U.S. authorities, criticizing the American government for exercising so little control over "reactionary terrorist organizations."

**HERE IN** Union City, the northern capital of the Cuban exile community, bombs set off last winter in Negrin's old office and at a shop that ships medical supplies to Cuba

## Victims of the Right



Orlando Letelier  
... September 1976



Carlos Muniz  
... March 1979



Jose Eulalio Negrin  
... November 1979

were also the professed work of Omega 7.

A local Catholic priest who traveled to Cuba with Negrin and preached the virtue of the dialogue to his congregants was hastily transferred to a non-Cuban parish last summer after terrorists made numerous threats on his life and threatened to blow up the parish school.

Reacting to Negrin's murder, other members of the Committee of 75, many of whom claim to have received death threats, have demanded police protection and criticized the FBI for not cracking down on their persecutors.

"This is a pattern of national organized attacks against law-abiding citizens," Manuel Gomez, a committee member, charged in New York the day after Negrin's murder. "The leaders of the Cuban committee are being systematically assassinated."

**THE CUBAN** Group for Family Reunification, a Miami-based organization that Negrin was affiliated with, sent a cable to President Carter demanding an exhaustive investigation and the jailing of the killers.

The FBI has issued a blanket "no comment" on the entire matter.

Investigators are said to believe that Cero and Omega 7 represent just a handful of terrorists who are linked with the most extreme of the right-wing political groups, the Cuban National Movement (CNM).

The CNM blasted its way into national prominence in 1976 when three of its members took part in the assassination of Orlando Letelier,

a once-prominent official in Chile's Marxist Allende regime who was blown up in his car while driving in rush-hour traffic in Washington.

The CNM's "northern zone" has headquarters here in a shabby cinderblock building with blacked-out windows. Reporters' knocks on the locked front door have gone unanswered in the weeks since Negrin's shooting, but Armando Santana, 29, chief of the northern zone, responded by telephone to a message.

"I DON'T agree with violence, but to me they [the Committee of 75] are traitors," said Santana, who served a prison term for a 1975 bombing in New York. "They deserve the same thing that happened to Benedict Arnold. I'd give the killers a medal."

(Arnold, who betrayed the Colonies during the American Revolution, escaped to Britain and Canada, and never was brought to justice.)

The CNM recognizes that Castro is too strong to be overthrown, but holds out hope for an eventual return to Cuba, Santana said. Meanwhile, it is willing to take extreme measures to maintain a solid, anti-Castro front in the exile community.

"Fifteen years ago, we used to be called freedom fighters. Now we're called terrorists," Santana said. "The only difference is that American foreign policy has changed. We don't have the CIA behind us anymore."

They did not close the shops on Bergenline Avenue, the main shopping street of "Little Havana on the Hudson," the day Jose Negrin was quietly buried.

"THIS IS not a community where the Committee of 75 was welcome," said Police Chief Herman Bolte. "Union City is an anti-Castro city."

Cubans searching for economic opportunity and freedom from a different totalitarian regime — the

dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista — first found their way to Union City in the early 1950s. The town was within easy commuting distance of the New York job market, and housing was relatively cheap. Castro even lived here for a while during his exile.

But the real influx did not begin until the early 1960s, when anti-Castro refugees began heading north from overcrowded barrios in Miami. They found a city that was clearly on the skids — its German and Italian immigrant settlers moving out and no one yet moving in to replace them.

"At that time we were in dire straits," said Bolte, a lifelong Union City resident of German ancestry. "Bergenline Avenue was full of empty storefronts. The Cuban people — I give them a lot of credit. They are an industrious, prosperous people. Now you can hardly find a space to rent."

IT IS estimated that 60 per cent of Union City's 70,000 residents are Cuban, forming a nucleus for some 200,000 Cubans spread out among the New Jersey suburbs. (The entire exile community, including some 350,000 Cubans in Miami, has been estimated at more than 700,000.)

While striving for security and prosperity in the United States, the Cubans have maintained an intense interest in their homeland. But because of the anti-Castro consensus, Cuban politics was not considered a divisive issue.

**THAT ALL** changed in September, 1978, at the annual Cuban Mass in Union City's John F. Kennedy Stadium.

The Rev. Andres Reyes, a young priest newly assigned to Holy Family Church, a venerated German parish, stunned the audience during his homily by preaching the need to begin a dialogue with Castro to hasten the release of political prisoners. By the time he left the stadium,

nationalists had gathered with a loudspeaker in the parking lot to denounce his message.

But Reyes persisted in his views and was invited by the Castro government, along with Negrin, to travel to Cuba that November with the Committee of 75. He went with the blessings of the archdiocese.

Negrin, a fringe personality who had run twice for local office and lost overwhelmingly, also was catapulted into the limelight by his trip to Cuba. Through his New Jersey Cuban Program, a sort of one-man service agency, he aided people trying to get their relatives out of prison and arranged return trips for exiles anxious to see their families.

**WHILE FEW** people publicly endorsed his efforts, many apparently worked quietly through him. The "dialogue" had considerable closet support among exile relatives anxious to help the friends and relatives they had left behind.

"The community is really quite divided," said the Rev. Frank Malone, pastor of Holy Family Church. "But the terrorists have put a lot of fear into people. People will not speak out because of fear of reprisals."

"I thought the murder would stir the whole thing up again," Malone said. "But so far it hasn't."

Meanwhile, the police appear to be baffled.

"We're no further now than the day he was shot," Chief Bolte said