

IU Latino Alumni News

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'Memories of a Child Refugee' Professor's lecture tells of escape from Cuba

The following are excerpts from a recent lecture given by Antonio de la Cova. Professor de la Cova is in his second year as visiting assistant professor of Latino studies at Indiana University. De la Cova received an MA in Latin American studies from San Diego State University and a PhD in history from West Virginia University.

One of my earliest childhood memories of my native Havana, Cuba, was being awakened before dawn on Jan. 1, 1959, by my mother, who joyfully announced to my two brothers and me: "Batista has fled the country. The war is over." She was referring to the guerrilla war that Fidel Castro had waged in the far-away eastern mountains during the previous two years while his urban underground had detonated more than 300 bombs in the capital during the previous three months. I responded to the news that most Cubans had been anxious to hear by rolling over on my bed and quickly going back to sleep.

Hours later, I was rudely awakened by the clatter of Thompson machine gun fire in our backyard. The urban underground guerrillas were attacking the house of a Batista henchman living behind us who had failed to flee in time. My father quickly huddled my mother and their five children into a corner of the front parlor. He drew all the curtains, turned out the lights, and joined us on the floor. My parents had experienced a similar childhood situation during the Cuban Revolution of 1933. We heard the rebels outside shouting and running along the walkways parallel to our house and feared that they would break in at any moment. My mother led the family in fervent whispered prayers while trying to muffle the wails of my baby sister. After what seemed like an eternity, the shooting stopped and the rebels departed. I later accompanied my brothers, Rene and Jorge, to our backyard to playfully collect scattered bullet casings of various calibers.

Television newscasts announced that Fidel Castro would soon arrive in Havana. My family joined the outpouring masses who lined the streets to welcome the national hero. The revolutionary promises of freedom and democracy were soon supplanted with totalitarian fanati-

cism, propaganda, anti-Americanism, and class hate.

Two months later, my mother, who was a rural school superintendent, was told by government officials that her new curriculum included the promulgation of Communist atheist ideology. When she refused to teach it, because it conflicted with her moral and religious principles, she was immediately fired. Shortly thereafter, the Castro regime announced that it would send the first contingent of 10,000 Cuban children to study in Russia. My mother, fearing for the well-being of her five children, suggested that the family temporarily go abroad. I recall my hesitant father affirming that the American government would never allow a Communist regime 90 miles from its shores.

A chain of events in January 1961 proved decisive for my parent's decision to leave our homeland. On New Year's Day, our friend, Jorge Kauffman, a Cuban reporter with the Associated Press in Havana, was arrested with his wife and jailed for five days by the secret police for undisclosed reasons. Two days later, the United States and Cuba broke diplomatic relations. The underground opposition was detonating bombs nightly in the capital, just like Castro's rebels had done during the Batista regime. The firing squads at La Cabaña fortress were heard nightly discharging their volleys against the enemies of the revolution. After nightfall, militiamen responded with jittery gunfire against unidentified flying objects and real or imagined urban enemies. In the countryside, Fidel Castro mobilized 30,000 troops against the small guerrilla bands operating in the Escambray Mountains. Then, on Jan. 21, he announced that the first contingent of 1,000 Cuban students had just departed for the Soviet Union. My parents, as well as many other Cuban families, feared that their children would be sent to Russia in the next group.

My family was unable to obtain American visas because of the closing of the United States Embassy and instead got 60-day tourist permits for the British colony of Jamaica. The Castro regime confiscated the property of all Cubans leaving the island, who were initially

allowed to depart with only one suitcase and five dollars per person. My parents decided to leave through the Camaguey Airport, 400 miles away on the eastern end of the island, because it was rumored that the illiterate peasant militia guards were more lax in their duties. The Castro regime had prohibited people from leaving with university degrees or transcripts, and those who tried to take them through Havana airport had their documents torn to shreds by the inspectors. At the Camaguey Airport, a militia guard looked through the contents of the blue mailing tube that held my mother's PhD degree in pedagogy. My mother had rolled up the eighteen-inch parchment between posters of Cuba's Patron Saint, Our Lady of Charity. "That is religious material," she told the illiterate inspector, as he quizzically

looked at the tax stamps, seals, and ribbon on the document. My mother fervently prayed in silence until the tube and all its contents was handed back

to her. The male members of my family were then led to a room where we were strip-searched. My father was forced to leave behind with a friend who drove us to the airport an antique gold heirloom pocketwatch. To the unschooled peasant guards, a gold watch was worth more than a PhD degree.

There was an eerie silence as everyone boarded the Pan-American Airlines DC-3 aircraft and took their seats. I could sense the tension among the passengers until the plane lifted off the ground. Suddenly, there was an outburst of applause, emotional wails, tears, and some people began hugging those sitting next to them.

After arriving in Kingston, Jamaica, a taxi left us at a two-story downtown inn where another Cuban family was staying. Their young daughter was expressing my own sentiments when, between sobs and tears in the lobby, she repeated, "I don't like this place. I want to go home." My family soon went to the American Embassy to apply for entry into the United States. We spent hours in a long line before seeing a consular agent who informed us that due to a backlog of thousands of Cubans applying for visas,

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Refugee

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there would be an indefinite delay. My parents filled out the appropriate paperwork, including forms requesting that my two brothers and I be admitted into the United States under the visa waiver program for refugee children. The documents were approved six weeks later, but my parents and younger sister had not yet received their own entry permit.

My father and mother decided to send their three boys ahead in care of a Catholic Relief Services program that sheltered refugee children. Once again, our family was divided and facing an uncertain future. After arriving in Miami, my brothers and I were taken to a home run by nuns that housed more than 20 other Cuban children in our same situation. Being uprooted, disoriented, and frightened by the threats of corporal punishment from a hefty nun who wielded a wooden bolo paddle was an agonizing experience. It was also traumatic to live with disrespectful and unruly children and be forced to eat strange-tasting food. My brother Jorge was threatened by a nun that he could not leave the dinner table until he cleared his plate of creamed corn, a dish that he had never consumed. Amid tears and a jittery stomach, he regurgitated the meal before finishing it. To this day, Jorge has never eaten corn again.

During the weekdays, the children in the boarding school would use bus passes to travel to the Gesu School in downtown Miami. I would spend all day in a classroom crowded with fretful refugee children who comprised part of the first bilingual classes ever taught in the United States.

After more than a month in the boarding residence, one Sunday, my brothers and I were unexpectedly called out to the visitors' patio. At the sight of our parents, we raced with joy toward them, hoping to be immediately whisked away to new family surroundings. Our happiness turned into chagrin and despair when informed that we would have to remain there because my parents and sisters, who were sleeping on the sofa bed of a Cuban family's home, had been unable to rent an apartment. Racial segregation was the law of the land throughout the South. I recall that public places, bathrooms, and water fountains in Miami displayed signs separating "Colored" and "White." Apartment building managers who advocated this racism displayed rental signs indicating

"No Dogs," "No Cubans."

My brothers and I then plotted our escape from the boarding house, vowing to never return there. It was an audacious but simple plan. After taking the public bus to Gesu School on Monday morning, my oldest brother, Rene, hailed a taxi and gave the driver a note with the address to the home of Jorge's godmother. Although we didn't have any money, Jorge asked his godmother to pay the two-dollar fare. After my parents were called, we threatened to run away again if sent back to the boarding home. As a result, Jorge stayed with his godmother, Rene went to live with a relative, and I was sent to the home of my mother's cousin in Coral Gables.

My father frantically searched for employment in this winter-tourist city overflowing with 60,000 Cubans. My father was fortunate to get employment paying 50 cents an hour broom-sweeping the parking lot of the Shell City store on the midnight shift. He would humorously call it "bailando con la flaca," dancing with the skinny woman. To make ends meet, we applied for government assistance. My parents had to fill out countless forms after which we received a medical examination, an American Red Cross kit, and a large cardboard box with federal surplus food that contained packets of powdered milk, powdered eggs, powdered mashed potatoes, a bar of cheese, and a five-pound metal can with peanut butter.

My family moved from Coral Gables to Memphis to St. Louis to Louisville in search of better work and a better life.

Butler High School in Louisville was a segregated institution. That's where I encountered racism for the first time. It had nothing to do with skin color. One day, as I was entering class, a school bully standing in the hallway with his friends gave me a dirty look and called me a Wop. I didn't know that it was a derogatory term for Italians, but his snarl and the expression on his face indicated that he was insulting me. The bully repeated the same offense the following day. I knew that it would be a repetitious pattern unless I put an abrupt end to it. In consequence, the next time that he did so, I punched him in the stomach and ended up in the vice principal's office. This was the era of student corporal punishment, and I got whacked hard on my rear three times with a long wooden paddle with holes drilled on it.

After finishing the ninth grade, my parents decided to move back to Florida. My mother got a job teaching at a Catholic High School in Fort Lauderdale and enrolled my brothers and me there. This was the seventh school that I had attended during the previous six years, and I rebelled against the repression of individualism, the wearing of a school uniform, elitist cliques, and teachers who chided me in front of class. In consequence, after only two months, I was sent to a public junior high school where I had to repeat the ninth grade.

I let my hair grow long and dressed in the new style of hippie clothes that asserted my individualism. When I enrolled in the 10th grade at Stranahan High School, my new identity became an immediate target for harassment by school administrators. I would argue with the dean that if my parents allowed me to have long hair and choose my own clothes, he had no right to override their authority. The dean thought otherwise and gave me a three-day suspension. I never went back to school, and the dean made no effort to help me.

During the next year, I worked while nightly attending adult education classes. My brother Rene, who had joined the army, one day came home wearing his uniform. I saw military enlistment as an

opportunity to uplift myself.

I attended boot camp at Fort Jackson, S.C., and quickly passed my GED exams.

A combination of extreme physical exertion and the local weather prompted a recurrence of my childhood asthma. I was offered and

accepted a medical discharge under honorable conditions three days before the six-month deadline that would have allowed me to receive veteran's benefits. After holding a variety of jobs, I was able to earn my bachelor's and master's degrees and PhD.

As a result of my lifetime experiences, I have learned to sail through the troubled waters of three different cultures, where what you say or do in one culture can be offensive or misunderstood in another culture — for example, the traditional Latino greeting of a kiss on the cheek, the traditional "abrazo" hug between men, and polychronic time. I encourage everyone to learn about other cultures and be truly multicultural in an effort to make this a more understanding and peaceful world.

