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Operation Pedro Pan

Cuban Tots, a Raggedy Ann Doll—

Fifty Cuban youngsters, uprooted from their homes and separated from their parents, have come to the Evansville area to live. The account of how five of them arrived here this week is told in the following story by Gene Miller, a former Press reporter. Now a Miami, Fla., newsman, Miller accompanied the youngsters from there.

By GENE MILLER

At 17,000 feet a frightened 11-year-old Cuban girl clings to a Raggedy Ann doll. The boy across the aisle of the airliner glances sheepishly at the ID card tied to his shirt button.

This is the underground railway in the sky — Operation Pedro Pan.

Maybe it should be called Operation Pedro Pan.

The children are refugees of Castro's Red Cuba. Their parents are a thousand miles away.

For 15 months the Catholic Diocese of Miami quietly helped to relocate 7778 children — all

fleeing Cuba without their parents. Nearly 3000 have flown north.

The Communists are certain to call it child smuggling.

No One Is Telling

No one is telling exactly how it is done. No one will. The risk of reprisal is too great.

Faces of the children will be blacked out in newspapers and the names used will not be real.

At 9:05 a.m. Thursday five Cuban children walked up the steel ramp of Delta Airlines' Flight 717 at Miami International Airport.

At 6:42 p.m. Thursday, after delays and bumpy weather, they debarked in Evansville.

"Snow? Snow?" asked an excited 12-year-old boy as he walked into a bitter 38-degree rain.

We'll call the boy Jose I, his brother 10 years old, Jose II. The Joses furiously chewed bubble gum, a commodity rare in Cuba these days.

Hadn't Seen a School

They hadn't seen the inside of a school house since Castro

closed the schools last year.

That was one reason their parents called them aside one day last month and quietly told them they would have to leave. Another reason was they were hungry. And another was they were afraid the Communists might send them to Russia.

"I cried just a little," Jose I confessed. "Mother cried mucho."

Neither boy wore an overcoat. They didn't own any.

As is the fashion of fleeing Cuban children, they wear shirts, lots of shirts. Jose I wore four.

Of the 120 children Delta has flown north this month, the record wore nine shirts. That boy also wore three pair of pants.

Jose II, the 10-year-old, clutched his most valued worldly possessions, a sack of marbles — 103 of them.

Veteran of Group

A third boy, a good-looking kid with curly hair and big flapping ears, was also 10 years old.

He was the veteran of the group. He'd been in Miami since early February at one of Dade County's four "transit camps."

Most children fly north from Miami after only a week or so. Boys outnumber girls two to one. Ages range from 4 to 17.

They all leave with \$5 bills tucked inside their plane tickets. Usually that's it; nothing more.

The kid with the flappy ears carried a comic book entitled "Lorenzo," which means Dagwood.

Across the aisle most of the day sat two little girls, sisters 11 and 13.

Besides four thin dresses, the older wore her first pair of nylons and nobody seemed to mind that they had slipped.

Took Trip Calmly

At a stopover in Atlanta, an airline clerk noticed her plight and bought her her first pair of garters, fancy black ones with red roses. She was delighted.

The 10-year-old clung for dear

life to her little Raggedy Ann doll named Lulu. Lulu took the trip calmly, without a tear.

The girls know only two words in English. They are simple words — "Thank you."

With the five at first were two older children, a boy, 17, and his sister, 13. Only last Monday they slipped into this country.

At Atlanta they transferred to a flight to Newark, N.J. There they were to be met by an aunt and uncle.

Father Charles Schottelkotte, head of Catholic Charities in Evansville, met the delayed flight here.

He bundled up the youngsters and sent them on their way to St. Vincent's Home in Vincennes, where they should find plenty of company. He has 34 Cuban children there.

God willing, they will not stay too long. They pray to be reunited with the parents who sent them to America to escape Communism.