

# MY CUBAN STORY

by Esther Levis Levine

--“You are Jewish?”

--“I thought you were Cuban?”

--“You can’t be Cuban and Jewish!”

--“As a matter of fact, aren’t you a bit too white to be a Cuban?”

--“And your English doesn’t have a Cuban accent...”

And so it goes...I have spent my entire second life trying to explain my identity to myself and to others. In my “first life”, I knew who I was and so did everybody else. Yes, I did indicate I am in another life. I am neither schizophrenic nor did I die on an operating table and was resuscitated. I did have a “first life” but it died the day I left Cuba. For many years, that first life faded away in my memory to the point where I almost began to doubt its existence; with the nostalgia that comes with the passing of time, I have been clearing out the cobwebs trying to catch glimpses that had long been forgotten...

These glimpses only live in my memory. Unlike others who have left their native country, I have not been able to return to Cuba and search for my roots; unlike most adults, I have few photographs to remind me of my youth. As a result, I can only rely on my vague memories of my long lost country and my previous life. Sometimes, I hear stories of people who knew my family or of those who have been able to return to Cuba. These stories usually serve to confirm my previous existence and renew my nostalgia. And so, it is with this nostalgia and this flood of indescribable emotions that I will try to tell my story before it is completely lost.

Before my “first life” ended one day in March 1961, I had a typical happy childhood surrounded by family, friends, and comfort. My country was Cuba and my religion was Judaism. At the time, it never occurred to me that I was “multicultural” or that I was not a typical Cuban girl who loved school, family, friends, and dancing. The few stories I heard of my parents’ past were taken for granted and were never thought about. It is only now that I realize that they, too, had a “first life” and that, they had a chance to perfect their survival instinct as immigrants twice in their lives. Although I know that the immigrant experience made us stronger, I hope that my children, first generation Americans, will never have it.

A first generation Cuban, I grew up feeling that my family had been Cuban for generations. Some years ago, a Cuban friend of mine, upon meeting my mother, asked me about her accent. “What accent?”, I asked in surprise. Sure, I had grown up with stuffed grape leaves alongside “plátanos chatinos” but our soul had never been anything but Cuban. My mother, like my father, was a Sephardic Jew from Turkey. She was so “Cuban” in my eyes that it had never occurred to me she spoke Spanish with an accent.

Of a Sephardic family, she had come to Cuba when she was around ten and had adopted Cuba as her homeland. Likewise, my father had come to Cuba during World War I and had totally become “Cubanized”. Rarely did my parents speak of Turkey, for it didn’t hold fond memories for them. Although Turkey had been home to Sephardic Jews for centuries, it had never been a welcoming place for them. Because the Turks were placing young Jewish men in World War I’s front lines, my father and my uncle left Turkey for the United States. During the ship’s long stopover in La Habana, they fell in love with the friendly people, the beauty, the warmth, and the similarity of Spanish to Ladino that they then decided to make Cuba their home. As my father passed the immigration line, his last name of “Levy” was “Cubanized” to “Levis” because of the immigration officer’s spelling error; this was only the symbolic beginning of my father’s attachment to Cuba. For my mother’s family, it had also been a question of survival. Because there were no work opportunities for Jews, my maternal grandfather had set out for Cuba with dreams of a financially successful life. When he had saved enough money, he had sent for his family. And so, the Cuban roots for both my parents had been planted...

During my childhood, my father told of selling wares on horseback along the Cuban countryside. In his travels, he got to know the Cuban people and loved them as his own. They did not treat him any differently because of his Jewish religion or his Turkish background. As his business grew, he moved to La Habana, the big city with greater opportunity and a large Jewish community, replacing his horse with a car and his traveling wares with a store. His claim to notoriety and patriotic allegiance, and I remember seeing the newspaper clippings and a scar on his arm, was a brush with death during the Machado dictatorship when a bomb exploded under a park bench where he had been sitting. This experience, along with his adoption of Cuban citizenship, only served to reaffirm his love for his new country.

My mother grew up in the countryside of San Cristobal and Artemisa where her family quickly adapted to Cuban life. In Turkey, my mother had gone to the Alliance Francaise schools. However, in Cuba, unfamiliar with the schools there, her parents kept her at home, where she continued to read everything in French, Spanish, and even Hebrew. Again, the family was treated like everyone else by the neighbors; she used to tell me about the woman next door who was an expert in herbal remedies and often took care of the family’s medical needs. Lacking good memories of Turkey or of the Turkish language helped my mother to instantly adopt Cuba as her country. Once the children got older, my grandparents moved to La Habana so that they could be part of the large Jewish community there.

Cuba was now the homeland for both my parents but it went hand in hand with the Jewish religion. Eventually, their paths crossed in the Sephardic circles of La Habana. After a courtship, my parents married in both a civil and Jewish ceremony. And in the next ten years, their finances as well as their family grew, with the birth of four daughters, Reina, Carolina, Rosa, and Esther.

Our childhood always focused on the present and never on the past. Never do I remember any nostalgia on my parents’ part regarding their “first life” or a desire to re-

visit their youth in Turkey. Never do I remember Ladino spoken, except with some older relatives, whom I thought, spoke with a “funny accent”. As the youngest of the four girls, I was not rushed into maturity. Spoiled by my parents and my sisters, I was always the center of attention. I loved to dance, and often did with my sisters’ friends. I also loved to talk, and this often got me into trouble at school in spite of my excellent grades.

Family was the focal point of our lives. We often went in big groups with aunts, uncles, and cousins, on weekend outings and vacations. Judaism was not pushed down our throats, but was just an integral part of our existence. My father went to the synagogue regularly and when we all went, the girls were upstairs with the women where there was often more talking and laughing than praying. Jewish charity events and Israel celebrations often brought the entire Jewish community together. My sisters socialized through “la Macabi”, a Jewish teen organization, while I attended some events held through “la Shomer”, a Zionist youth organization. I don’t remember any serious discussions or speeches, but it was always understood that my sisters and I would marry Jewish men; and of course, these men would be Cuban as well. Never was there a question of our Judaism vs. our Cuban nationality. Both went hand in hand and complemented each other.

In order to be together with my sister Rosa, I was sent to a non-sectarian private school for my first four years. Once she finished there, I went to the Centro Israelita de Cuba, a Hebrew Day School, where there was instruction in secular as well as Jewish subjects. Always a good student, I loved school with all its academic and social opportunities. And I would have graduated from there if it hadn’t been for all the catastrophic events brought on by the reign of Fidel Castro.

Completely sheltered as a child and as the baby of the family, I had never been made aware of much of the political situation in Cuba. A few vague images come to mind, but the child in me never paid attention. As I try to clear out the cobwebs, I do remember some bombings during Batista’s last year, anti-Castro leaflets, crowds cheering Castro’s troops entering La Habana, plaza executions of Batista’s men by Castro’s people. As a child, I did not dwell on these events. I loved my happy and carefree life and I thought it would last forever...

And then our life started to change slowly...In January 1961, my sister Reina married a Jewish Cuban man who was an American citizen. It was a big and happy Jewish wedding! Amidst the dancing and celebrations, I never thought that in less than three months my carefree Cuban life would come to an end... By marrying an American citizen who worked in the United States, my sister had made the choice that she would have to leave our life in Cuba. Of course, the thought of her leaving enveloped us with sadness. However, this heartache turned into turmoil, as it was discovered that no way could be found for Reina to follow her new husband to the United States; since there were no diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States, it was impossible for her to obtain a visa. And so, as my parents began to investigate other ways for her to go to the United States, we knew our family life would be disrupted any second...

Another change in my happy routine occurred slowly. It seemed that every day someone else would be missing from my school...Nobody talked about it, nobody could talk about it – but we all knew. Each disappearance meant another family leaving Cuba. We sensed that the political situation was changing but school continued as usual; children, especially, like to pretend that nothing is different, and like all children, I did the same. I knew my parents loved Cuba and I was sure that my parents' optimism for change would never drive them to leave.

And then, one day, my life, as I knew it, completely shattered...Discussions had never been a big part of my family life, but one day, my parents told Rosa and me that they needed to talk to us about something important. We were totally unprepared for what followed. They first explained that Fidel had announced that Cuban school children were going to be sent to either the mountains to eradicate illiteracy or to Russia to be indoctrinated in the Communist way. Because of this government announcement, Rosa and I, the youngest children, were at risk, and although my parents said they did not want to send us away, they felt it was better to send us to the United States than to Fidel's destinations. They had to act with haste, first for our departure, and then for that of our other two sisters. Again, my parents had resorted to their inherent sense of survival. HIAS, the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society, a charity organization I had never heard of, was making all the arrangements for our departure, which unbeknown to us, would be our exile. "What?", Rosa and I said in unison. "Just the two of us?" "Don't worry", my father replied. "Fidel will be gone soon and you'll be back in Cuba in less than six months." The child in me believed my father – never did it occur to me that his prediction might not be correct. Of course, the idea did not quite register in my mind, except that we would be following the footsteps of our disappearing friends...Since I could not grasp the thought of two young girls leaving for the unknown without their parents, I focused on the adventure of it. Although I had been on vacations to the United States as a young child, I did not remember "el norte". From that moment on, our life proceeded on two fronts. On the outside, we continued going to school as if nothing had changed – we were not allowed to tell anyone of our impending trip, except for the English teacher, sworn to secrecy, who would be translating my school transcript into English. On the inside, we were all busy with preparations. As a young child, I tended to focus on these - the purchase of a special suitcase that could hold forty four pounds, new clothes, a special trip to the dressmaker for the creation of a winter coat, photographs for the new passport, choosing my favorite doll and book for the trip, and so on. As the day for our departure drew closer, all we knew was that HIAS had arranged for us, and other Jewish Cuban children, to fly to Curacao first, where we would stay for a while until the American visas would be procured. I certainly had never heard of Curacao, and its mysterious existence added to my fantasized adventure. The infamous day in March came, and truthfully, I remember very little. I am sure we all cried but I don't remember. I am sure my parents and all of us were heartbroken, but I don't remember. I have asked my sister Rosa about that day; she, like me, seems to have also blocked it from her mind. By forgetting the details of that day, we seem to have dulled our senses to feel less pain – I guess that was the moment that my family's instinct for survival was transmitted to the next generation. As I navigate among the cobwebs in my memory, all I remember is boarding a plane with numerous Jewish children and hanging on to my sister Rosa for

dear life. The minute the plane took off, my “first life” came to an end. Since that day in March of 1961, I have only returned to Cuba in my memory.

As we landed in Curacao, we were met by Jewish families who were ready to take care of us. Thinking of this fills me with pride to be part of a caring global Jewish community. When called by HIAS, the Jewish community of Curacao had been more than willing to take in Jewish children for an indefinite period of time. They were kind and generous and treated us like their own. There was no language barrier because they all spoke Spanish and there was no culture barrier because they were Jewish. Rosa and I, together with another pair of siblings, went to a large and beautiful home owned by “Uncle Bill”. Hospitable and caring, Uncle Bill treated us like very special children and spoiled us. He never gave us his last name; he was not interested in recognition or thanks. The community had parties and picnics for us; they took us to the beach, their homes, the synagogue. By treating us in such a special way, we were made to feel as if we were just on a vacation without our parents. And I guess that we tried not to think about our circumstances and just tried to enjoy the days while we waited for our American visas to be ready. After a week of this idyllic interlude, my sister Reina arrived in the island. HIAS had been working on her case as well, and had obtained entry for her in Curacao. Needless to say, Rosa and I were thrilled to see her. Now, there were three of us together; however, it only served to remind us of the family we had left behind. A week later, our papers arrived; Uncle Bill told us we could stay longer in Curacao before going on to Miami, but we were too anxious and wanted to know what was awaiting us in the United States.

As the plane landed in Miami, my “second life” began. Again, HIAS had arranged for Jewish families in Miami to take in Cuban children indefinitely until their parents arrived or until they were able to return to Cuba. Again, I am appreciative of the generosity of the Jewish community as I think of the many sacrifices made by all of these people in order to help other Jews. This first foster family was kind, giving, and very warm; with three children of their own, they were willing to take us in for a time. In the excitement of another new adventure, I suddenly realized that they spoke no Spanish. My solution to this obstacle was to use my sister Rosa as my interpreter – I decided that I did not have to learn English because she would take care of all my needs. To this day, I cannot imagine how my sister Rosa took on this responsibility – after all, she was only five years older than I, and her knowledge of English was minimal. After struggling for two weeks in this role, Rosa gave up and announced that I had to learn to fend for myself. My first response was a sense of betrayal by my own sister; eventually though, the survival instinct in me told me to start learning. As I wrestled with a lack of understanding of the family, the customs, the language, the food, I yearned for my parents and clung to my father’s promise that this would only be for a short time.

A few weeks later, I went to sixth grade, the equivalent of my Cuban schooling, with the daughter in the family. I was introduced to her friends and other children but they all looked at me as an attraction. In Curacao, my Cuban identity had not been in question; it had just been accepted and understood in such a way that I never noticed being different. In Miami, however, my difference could not have been more pronounced. Nobody

questioned my Judaism; I don't even know if they knew I was Jewish. What I did know was that I hated being an oddity, the girl with the "cute" accent. Once again, my response was silence. The girl who in the past had been notorious for talking too much at school now resolved not to speak at all. I decided that if I never spoke, nobody would know I was "different" and I could just "blend in". What I didn't realize was that even in silence, my clothes, my pierced ears, and my constant state of confusion would give me away. And confused I was...the only person who understood me at school was a Cuban girl in my classroom. She was my school guide, my interpreter, and my savior. The only subject where I felt any connection was Arithmetic. In the other classes, nobody knew that I had been one of the smartest students in my school in Cuba. I was now probably known as the dumb Cuban girl, who thought a fire drill was a real fire, a lesson on Hungary was about people being hungry, or that a girl's "passing out" in the cafeteria was the same as "passing away and dying".

And dying I was...Every day, I came home and cried. Every day, I thought of our return to Cuba or the arrival of my parents in Miami. Every day, I longed for the days when I had been the center of attention in my family. I remember receiving very hopeful letters from my parents. To this day, I don't know where they found the strength to sound so cheerful. Now I realize what hell they must have gone through – the child in me then, however, never gave it a thought. I don't remember if we were able to receive phone calls from my parents – that is another void in my memory. I do remember hearing that Reina made it to Chicago, where her new husband lived. We also heard that the American consul in Curacao was no longer giving out visas and that the Cuban Jews were now being routed through Jamaica and some Latin American countries. The news came that Carolina's papers had come through and she had left by herself for Jamaica, where again, the Jewish families had come to the rescue. My sister Carolina, whom we always called Lina, had the hope of reaching Providence, Rhode Island, where the family of her fiance had settled. Whenever Rosa and I thought about family, it seemed as if we would never be all together again, a prediction that is true to this day.

Eventually, school ended, and I, with the mercy of my teacher, passed sixth grade. Since our foster family's home had been crowded and there seemed to be no end to our exile, it was decided that we move on to another foster family. I remember very little about this second family, except that it was not a good match. They were forever busy and seemed to have no time or patience for us. Shortly after, we moved to the third and last foster Jewish family. With only one child, this family was anxious to treat us as their own. Caring and very loving, they had the time, energy, and love for two forlorn Cuban girls. It was at this time that I became more confident in my English and regained much of my early gregariousness. One day, we heard that Lina had made it to Providence and would be getting married shortly. It had only been seven months since Reina's big wedding, where we had all been together in Cuba. Now, Lina's wedding would be small, with Reina as the only family representative. I cannot even imagine how my parents must have felt not to have been there; I can only remember Rosa's and my heartbreak at not having the money or resources to be there with our sisters on such a momentous day.

September came and with it, my entrance to junior high school. Although I felt a little smarter, my sense of “difference” was overpowering. More than anything I wanted to forget that I was Cuban; more than anything, I was reminded of it every day by my peers’ or my teachers’ behavior. And then one October day, the news we had been awaiting for over six months finally came! My parents were in Jamaica and would soon be in the United States! Rosa and I danced with joy! Finally, we would be together with our parents! Finally, I could return to being the baby of the family and be loved and cared for by my parents! Finally, I could return to my old life, or so I thought...

Our happiness was indescribable as we met our parents at the Miami Airport! A few days later, we said goodbye to our foster family, and we set out for a new life in Providence where many challenges, heartaches, and successes awaited us. And of course, we never returned to our old carefree and happy life.

Years later, when I first realized that Fidel was there to stay, I had neither the possibility nor the desire of visiting Cuba. Now that I am older I have become very nostalgic. Just the thought of seeing Cuba again brings me to tears. I know that the Cuba I knew no longer exists. I wonder if the Cuba I remember ever existed. As I get older, I feel the need to try to find out. Although my life is now in the United States, I feel that until I return to Cuba once more, I will not feel whole again. Several times, I have talked to my sisters about planning a trip to Cuba together. I believe that some day we will. And that will be my next story.

Esther Levis Levine  
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