OPERATION PEDRO PAN

The Untold Story of a Cold War Conspiracy

By Cathy Areu Jones

Photos courtesy of Operation Pedro Pan Group
Leandro Alvarez does not like to talk about it, not even with his family. He can't. His family, especially his sister Milda Turbay, is curious. They want to know what he went through forty years ago, but they won't ask him about it anymore. Turbay says her brother just breaks down and cries, like a little boy, when she brings it up. No one may ever know what her little brother went through as a child in the middle of a Cold War plan between the Roman Catholic Churches of Miami and Cuba and the U.S. government.

Alvarez was a child of Operation Pedro Pan. He was one of 14,000 children, ages six to 16, who were flown out of Cuba by their parents as part of an underground operation against Castro's government. Operation Pedro Pan (Operation Peter Pan in English), which began in 1960, was the largest child rescue effort in the history of the Western world, according to a New York Times report in 1998. The 21-month exodus ended abruptly after the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, when all flights out of Cuba were canceled. The parents were forced to live on their Caribbean island as their children lived without them in the United States for years. Many thought they would never see each other again. And, in some cases, they never did.

THE UNACCOMPANIED CUBAN MINORS PROGRAM

Under the Unaccompanied Cuban Minors Program, as Operation Pedro Pan was officially called by our government, the U.S. State Department gave a Miami Roman Catholic priest, Monsignor Bryan Walsh, permission to allow entry to unaccompanied Cuban children without visas. Walsh collaborated with James Baker, the headmaster of an American school in Havana, to get the children out of Cuba swiftly and quietly. In a CNN report three years ago, Walsh said the United States and the Church were simply responding to the needs of parents "who were concerned about the religious faith of their children."

Parents were concerned and afraid. Under the communist government of Fidel Castro, who took power in 1959, religion was banned, leading to the closing of religious schools and the confiscation of church property. Rumors, some of which became realities, led parents to fear that Castro would indoctrinate children in special schools and/or send them away to prison or even Russia. So, the Pedro Pan parents, with the help of Catholic leaders, sent their children away to the United States for what they believed was a temporary separation. They believed they would be reunited with their children once they received their own visas, or once Castro was ousted. Both outcomes, they believed, would only take a few months. In the meantime, they would be in good hands—with the Catholic Church.

"My father thought that the kids would be well taken care of," Turbay says. "He didn't know what the kids would go through in Miami. Three years went by and we knew nothing about him. We thought that he was with the priests and his school mates."

It was true. Alvarez was under the care of the Catholic Church. However, no one could imagine the emotional toll it would have on him and the other children.

Half of the 14,000 children who traveled to Miami went directly to stay with relatives or family friends. They were the luckier ones. The other half, the less fortunate, remained under the care of the Catholic Church in camps in the South Florida cities of Matecumbe Key, Kendall, and Florida City. After it became obvious that the children would be without their parents for a while, most of them were sent to live in foster homes, orphanages, or even homes for delinquents throughout the United States. The children, who thought they would only be away from their parents for months, were lonely and confused. Many, including Alvarez, describe it as the darkest period of their lives. After three years in the camp, Alvarez was "rescued," as he calls it, by a distant relative from Miami. He was reunited with his sister when he was 20 years old, five years after he arrived.

"His first words to me when I saw him for the first time in five years were 'Hermana, why didn't you come sooner?'" Turbay says.

Mel Martinez, the U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development and the
only Cuban-American to serve in a White House cabinet, was a Pedro Pan child. Martinez lived in a camp and two foster homes, from 1962 to 1966, until he was reunited with his family. Like Alvarez, his experience was filled with loneliness.

"I was lonely, and I was lost. I mean lost in many ways," says Martinez. "I didn't know my way around. I didn't know the language, I didn't know the culture. I didn't know how to fit in. I didn't understand what the homecoming dance was. Or why I was sitting at home and everybody else was going out. There were times of real, real loneliness."

But he feels his parents did what they had to do in the name of freedom. It was a sacrifice his family had to make. Many Pedro Pans, as they now call themselves, agree, saying that, in the end, the sacrifice was worth it. Of course, some Pedro Pans disagree and say they would never do what their parents had done.

MISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS

Last year marked the 40-year anniversary of the mass exodus of unaccompanied Cuban children to the United States, yet there was no mention of it anywhere—not even in the media. It seemed as if no one noticed. Even the appointment of Mel Martinez, a Pedro Pan child, to a high-ranking position in the new Bush administration caused little stir. Why? Is there a cover-up by the U.S. government? Is the Catholic Church hiding something?

For decades, theories have been floating around about the truth behind Operation Pedro Pan. Some say that government agencies instilled fear in the Cuban parents, driving them to send their children away. Others blame the Catholic Church for scaring the parents into believing that horrible things were going to happen to their children. No documentation has ever been found to support these "misinformation campaigns," as they are called.

In 1998, Maria de los Angeles Torres, a Pedro Pan child, filed suit against the Central Intelligence Agency. Torres, who is now a political science professor at DePaul University, says she wanted to know more about the airlift that brought her to this country 39 years ago. She believes that the CIA has the answers to many of her questions. Torres plans to write a book about her ordeal and the CIA's involvement.

"Essentially, there is no denying that the CIA was involved," says Torres. "Why and when are points of contention."

Three years ago, the CIA denied knowing anything about the operation, according to a CNN report. Today, it's a different story. "We identified several documents that made mention of the unaccompanied children leaving Cuba, but it made it very clear that there was no CIA activity with these children," says CIA spokesperson Anya Gulisher. "By the context of those documents, it was clear that there was no CIA activity or involvement in that exodus."

Gulisher says that what is true is that the CIA did seek to generate opposition to the Castro regime in the 60s. But that's not a secret. "But we have uncovered no information to suggest that any unintended or intended purpose of these efforts was to induce parents to send their children unaccompanied to Florida."

The evidence that the CIA has found indicates that parents were afraid of Castro's efforts to separate and indoctrinate young children. It also points to the opposition of the Catholic Church to the Castro regime, leading others to question the intentions of the Catholic
Church. The intention of the Cuban parents has also come under scrutiny. The CIA found that the Pedro Pan parents knew that they would be eligible for visas before other Cubans if their children were already in the United States.

Many of the Pedro Pan children do not believe in the misinformation campaign theories that would incriminate the U.S. government and/or the Catholic Church. Many simply believe that the parents' fears were real and their own. No one had to place them there. The truth is that no one really knows the entire story of Operation Pedro Pan. "It's a very complicated matter," says Elly Chovel, a 53-year-old real estate agent in Miami and founder of the Operation Pedro Pan Group, a charitable organization created in 1991 to help orphans and refugees.

"In the desperation that there was that year, anybody would have sent their kids away," Turbay says. As one of the children left behind in Cuba, she saw how her father suffered without his son. She said he wasn't using her brother for a visa out of the country. He had just done what he thought was best.

Secretary Martinez says his parents sent him away because of their own fears. "In those days, in Cuba, you either went along or you got in trouble, so that prompted my parents to send me out of Cuba."

Chovel also says her parents' fears were real, but she doesn't discount the possibility that the CIA was involved in some way. "I think that most likely, at some point, the CIA had to know what was happening and they might have been involved somehow, but I do not believe that it was a CIA plot that made the parents decide to take the children out," Chovel says. After all, she explains, it was not the CIA who put her cousin in jail. It was not the CIA who confiscated the private schools in Cuba. It was not the CIA who put people in front of the firing squads.

"That's what made the parents afraid," she says. "They were afraid for the children's safety. If the CIA was involved in something with Pedro Pan, I wouldn't doubt it, because the CIA was involved in everything at that time. But my parents didn't send me because of the CIA scare. They sent me because of the physical and real things that were frightening them to death."

After years of research, Cuban-American author of Fleeing Castro: Operation Pedro Pan and the Cuban Children's Program, Victor Andres Triay, reached the same conclusion.

"I think these parents were right on," Triay says. "The parents did lose control of their children."

THE SECRET OF PEDRO PAN

All reports state that Operation Pedro Pan was kept secret from the Cuban government, while the American public was told of the exodus soon after it took place.

As for Chovel, she does not believe that Castro was unaware of the grand exodus of Cuban children. "How can it be that 14,000 children flew out of Cuba alone and no one saw them?" she asks. "They never saw us?"

All of the children left in planes with Cuban passports. According to Chovel, all had to have shots in their arms for the trip. The parents not only had to have a passport made for each child, and a visa, they also had to get a permit from the Department of Interior or the police.

"So don't tell me that 14,000 minors are going to leave the country, through the airport, go through the militia, being searched, and we disappeared without them knowing," Chovel says.

How much does the American public really know about the operation? By now, everyone probably knows about the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis, but it's safe to say that most Americans still don't know about Operation Pedro Pan. It's the largest exodus of child refugees into the United States—sandwiched in between the two biggest Cold War events between the United States and Cuba—yet it remains a mystery. Why?

Some Cuban exiles believe that, forty years later, the parties who were involved in Operation Pedro Pan are still hiding something. They don't want the American people to know what happened.

Triay has another explanation. "In [the Bay of Pigs] you have anywhere between 13 and 1700 people who all went through a process—beginning, middle, and end—as adults; that ended up being a big historical event. I think the thing with Pedro Pan is that there were so many children—14,000 of them—who maybe up until a few years ago had not heard the term Pedro Pan. All they know is that a local priest or teacher or somebody gave their parents a visa waiver, they left Cuba, and they ended up in a camp in Miami and sent to a foster family in Iowa. Most of them didn't know that they were part of this big operation, maybe until way into adulthood."

He's right—many of the Pedro Pan children thought they were alone. Some called themselves children of the Florida camps because "Operation Pedro Pan" was coined by a Miami Herald reporter in 1964. So, even today, many of the children involved do not know about Operation Pedro Pan. "It hasn't really been exposed," says Chovel. "Nobody knows about us."

She wants to change that. She says that this is "a new dawn" and that the public will know about the trials and tribulations of the Pedro Pans so that history won't repeat itself.

"Eventually, whatever was there, will be known. We will know everything at the end. But hopefully it won't be in another forty years," Chovel says.