Pedro Pan Testimonial

By Sandra Martín

On Friday afternoon, December 15, 1961, a day that forever will be engraved in my brain, I, Sandra Martín, left Cuba accompanied by my older sister Alina and my younger brother Mario. My sister was seventeen, my brother nine, and I was twelve. My parents, Mario Martín and Justa Denis stayed in Cuba.

I was born and raised in Cienfuegos in an upper middle class family. My father owned grocery stores in small towns near Cienfuegos and my mother had her own beauty salon and a beauty supply business. I attended American Dominican Academy better known as Dominicas Americanas. My brother went to Eliza Bowman school and my sister studied at Cienfuegos’ Escuela de Comercio. Growing up in Cienfuegos was delightful aside from the political situation before and after Castro. There were many trips to the beach, bicycle riding at José Martí Park, taking the boat across the bay to go to the Castillo de Jagua and explore the old Spanish fortress standing at the entrance of the bay, Sunday afternoons at the beach club.

Six months after Fidel Castro took power all but one of my father’s stores were confiscated by the government. My mother wanted to leave Cuba at that time but my father refused. He said the United States wouldn’t allow a communist government 90 miles off its shores. Even when my sister was expelled from school for speaking out against the government my dad still refused to leave. Nevertheless, my mother got passports for her and for the three kids threatening my father that she would leave without him because the political situation kept getting worse day by day. More people were getting arrested and executed, basic food items
became scarce, and an umbrella of fear covered the country. An agent from the dreaded secret police, G2, had been assigned to follow my father everywhere he went waiting for anything they would consider a misstep to jail him. Dad became a prisoner in our own home. He only left the house to visit his elderly mother and to walk my mother home from work. Finally in April of 1961, after the debacle of the Bay of Pigs my father agreed to leave Cuba.

We applied for visas to enter the United States as a family unit. When the visa waivers came they were only for the three children. My parents didn’t want to take a chance and wait until they received their own visas so they decided to send us to the United States to live with family we had in Venice, California. My cousin Julio had lived in the United States since 1955 and his mother and his brother had joined him in 1960. At the time, we didn’t know anything about Pedro Pan Flights, even though, we knew that young people from the countryside were brought to Cienfuegos to be educated at government schools.

We arrived in Miami in a Pan Am flight. We were the last persons in our flight to be processed. I thought we had been forgotten but it turned out the social worker assigned to us was late. Our cousin Julio had contacted the Refugee Center and had given them the information about us. We were taken to a private home owned by a Cuban couple who took in unaccompanied Cuban minors who were in transit to reunite with family. We only spent the weekend with this family and on the following Monday after being processed at the Refugee Center we left for California. We lived with our aunt and cousins from December 1961 to April 1962 when our parents were finally able to leave Cuba. I consider ourselves lucky that we were only separated from our parents for a short time.

I didn’t find out my siblings and I were Pedro Pan children until the 1990s when one night searching the Internet about Cuban refugees I found a page about Pedro Pan children. I called my
sister and asked her about this program. She didn’t know anything about it either. I kept searching and discovered we had been part of this exodus of children.

Since 1961, I have lived in Los Angeles, California. I studied at UCLA and became a Spanish teacher of different educational levels. I also obtained an MBA from Pepperdine University. Besides being a teacher I also worked as a writer and textbook editor for books to teach Spanish as a second language. Although teaching and writing are not lucrative careers I consider myself an accomplished person. I’ve written two children’s books and teacher’s editions of textbooks. I’ve translated several books and raised a daughter who is both a scientist and a lawyer. Most importantly, I created a path to college for many high schoolers who would have never thought of a university education.

I’m glad my parents made the decision to send my siblings and me to the United States. It took a lot of courage to take that action. My life in Cuba under the Castro regime would have been dreadful and dangerous. However, there’s nothing romantic about being a Pedro Pan. It made me who I’m today, an independent and strong woman, but it was a wretched and fearful experience that has left emotional scars that although healed are still a reminder of a very painful time in my life.

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