

Cubans' Memories of the 1960s  
The Ecstasies and the Agonies

By Elizabeth Dore

The 1960s was a tumultuous decade in Cuba. For islanders, the decade began in 1959 with the overthrow of the dictator Fulgencio Batista, the emblematic “triumph of the revolution.” It ended in 1970 with the disastrous sugar harvest, which ushered in the Sovietization of Cuba. In contrast to official history, a one-dimensional story of good versus evil, the three life histories related here portray close-up the ecstasies and the agonies of the revolution’s first ten years. They capture, in miniature, Cubans’ contradictory feelings and memories about those critical times.

March 2005. Wajay, Cuba

I am on the outskirts of Havana, in Olga Betancourt’s living room. From the outside her house looks like the small ranch-style homes I remember seeing on Long Island in the 1950s, but the picture windows are cracked and encased in iron grill-work. Olga carries in two rocking chairs from the yard: one for me and one for Victoria, my Cuban colleague. Olga sits on the edge of a broken metal sofa. I look around for somewhere to rest my tiny digital recorder, and am struck that the large room is nearly empty. But Olga fills it. With a slim, athletic build, she is almost six feet tall. Her white skin is tanned; her cropped grey hair is laced with darker strands, and her eyes remind me of Paul Newman’s. Dressed in baggy Bermuda shorts, a red T-shirt, and sandals, Olga looks like a remnant of the Long Island country-club set, circa 1960.

Victoria explains that we are part of a research team collecting Cubans’ memories of life in the revolution. Olga had agreed over the phone to the interview,

but she looks uneasy, and so do we. Cubans of her generation are unaccustomed, and afraid, of talking openly about their past.

After an uncomfortable silence, she rattles off details of her life, as if filling in a form. “I was born in 1948 in Santiago de Cuba. My mother was a primary school teacher. My father worked in a cafeteria. My grandfather taught English. My grandmother gave piano lessons.” Continuing almost mechanically: Baptist school, most of family left Cuba, Communist Youth, moved to Havana, three marriages and divorces, one son, English teacher for thirty years, recently retired, Olga stops in mid-sentence and looks directly at me.

“Explain what you want me to talk about. You tell me which paths to follow. If not, I will blabber on about things that don’t interest you.”

“Describe whatever you remember about events that were important to you, experiences that stand out in your memory.” After a silence, Olga begins. Her voice is passionate, and she laughs a lot as she crinkles and widens her eyes.

“Well, the triumph of the revolution was a key moment in my life. Everything changed for me. Life changed for everyone, for all Cubans. The focus of life changed. I was raised in capitalism...and although we weren’t large proprietors, my family wasn’t rich or anything, we had a small business. My standard of living was fairly high, you know. Relatively speaking, I was accustomed to having lots of things. The culture in my household was *Life* magazine and *National Geographic*. Then I began to think about life differently, to see the injustices in society. I began to learn, to grow, to study, to look at the world completely differently.” After a pause, she adds quietly, “My relatives emigrated, that affected me very deeply, our family’s separation.”

Speaking slowly, as if watching her life play back in slow motion, “I drifted away from the church. I wasn’t alone, no. My entire generation began to turn away

from religion. It was hard to do. Fidel became the substitute for the God we had believed in. He was a very important leader for every one of us...and we struggled so the revolution would be what it was. Well, we had enormous political commitment. That's how we were."

Recalling her ardor during the early years of the revolution, she reminisces, "I volunteered for every kind of rural work. I picked coffee, slashed weeds, dug turnips and potatoes. We did whatever needed doing. What can I say, everything. We were mobilized a lot of the time. It was a period of great effervescence, the triumph of the revolution."

Erupting into laughter, Olga leans forward and whispers: "We also spent a lot of time dancing. We listened to the Beatles clandestinely, and we danced to the Beatles in secret."

"Why clandestine?" I ask.

"Unbelievable, no? What stupidity. We did it in hiding because we knew it was prohibited...I think that was a political error. I think they didn't want the youth exposed to capitalism, not even to music from a capitalist system, because we were forging a different kind of society. But it didn't damage us, the proof is now. Our generation, that is those who stayed, because eighty percent of my friends left, those of us who stayed listened to the Beatles, we did all of that, and we're still here. We haven't had political problems, we are professionals, and we are the ones moving this country forward." Olga leans back, shakes her head, raises her eyebrows, and sighs.

Not sure if I understood her right, I ask, "You said eighty percent of your friends left?"

"Friends from primary school. Remember, I was in a private school, and it was religious. Yes, yes, eighty percent. My best friend left and I suffered a lot... I lost my,

almost my entire family, and I lost my best friend. That was in 1961 and it still hurts. I'm an old lady now. I'm going to die soon with that pain inside me."

The three of us sit in silence. The void is filled with the barking of dogs and hawkers' sing-songs plying all sorts of wares. Victoria catches my eye and wordlessly we agree to end the interview. Olga gazes out of the broken picture window and beyond, into her past. Suddenly she stands up and offers us an herbal concoction with a dash of rum. The herbs are from her front yard, the rum "because I am a Santiaguera [from Santiago de Cuba, which is known for its rum]." Sipping the wonderful brew, we arrange to meet early tomorrow morning.

Olga is standing outside her front door when we arrive. We kiss warmly, Cuban-style. It's hot, but not yet scorching. "I didn't sleep much last night. I've been thinking over what I said. I didn't tell you about some things that are important to me."

Before I turn on the recorder, Olga begins. She is exhilarated and her words gush out.

"Stop. Wait until I start the machine."

"That tiny thing is fabulous. It's fabulous for the police," Olga says with nervous laughter. "It even catches people's sighs, when they don't like something. Okay, are you ready? Well, yesterday I didn't tell you that my colleagues, the religious ones, were, I'm not sure if the word persecuted is the right one, but they were a bit cornered. My best friend was considered a critic of the revolution...and many of my friends had to leave the country. That hurt me a lot. It upset me. What also upset me was the persecution of young people whose hair was too long or too short, or who didn't dress the right way. I was also upset by the fact that if you

listened to English or American music you were an enemy of the revolution. I never understood those things, and I don't understand them now. Nor can I go along with the fact that today many leaders say that those things never happened. I feel bad when I hear that because I lived through it, and I'm living through it right now. Until the day I die I will tell it like it was. You shouldn't have to tell lies to maintain political control. I believe that you can accomplish more with truth and honesty than with lies. That's the way I am, and I've had plenty of political problems because of it."

Olga's mood is defiant, and her tone has a sharp edge. Then she says, apropos of nothing, "So what are you two going to bring me to eat?" Immediately, she and Victoria burst out laughing.

"It's a very Cuban joke, when someone thinks they might go to jail for what they said," Victoria explains to me. Olga nods, "When we're speaking in confidence."

A short time later I look at my watch; it's noon. Hot, exhausted, and my mind swirling, I suggest we stop. Olga says she's just getting started. Over the same concoction she served yesterday, she ruminates about differences between today's youth and her generation. "I am grateful for my education and political development. I owe it to living through that great stage in the struggle. We know where it's at. We are very experienced, street-wise, you might say. No one can pull one over on us. What we have, we attained by making many sacrifices and we suffered a lot to get where we are, well, to get what we had."

That night Victoria and I sit on the porch of her house in El Cerro, an old working class neighborhood near the Plaza de la Revolución in Havana. Enjoying the breeze, we replay the interviews with Olga and reflect on her life story. "For Olga, the 1960s was a time of ecstasy and agony. She doesn't separate them; she can't. It would be meaningless."

April, 2005. Central Havana

Pedro and Roberto interview Jorge Alonso and his wife Sylvia Martínez in the couple's slightly bohemian apartment on the first floor of a well-preserved, once fancy, townhouse, a short walk from the Capitol. Jorge is 63, white, balding, and roly-poly. He is from a wealthy Havana family, most of whom left Cuba. Jorge has worked in the Ministry of Culture for 35 years. A wonderful storyteller, he reenacts scenes from his life with self-deprecating humor. Jorge describes the moment he fell in love with the revolution, and describes the debacles, one after another, that shook his faith.

“Fidel was speaking for eight hours on TV, with the doves on his shoulders and all of that. Very pretty. Then and there he said that every family would have a VW. That should go down in history,” Jorge murmurs. “There were so many things, the stuff of dreams.”

I never heard that Fidel Castro had promised every family a Volkswagen car, and wonder whether it is a figment of Jorge's fantasy.

“In March [1959], I think it was, two and a half months into the revolution, and it all seemed to me,” he pauses and lowers his voice, “how should I say, somewhat folkloric, very folkloric,” his voice trails off. “I wasn't in love with the revolution then. Not until that day. I don't remember exactly what it was that Fidel said, but that day I told myself, yes, this is something I have to dedicate my life to, and that's what I did with lots of,” Jorge suddenly stops. When he begins again his voice has lost its ebullience.

“Well, to be truthful, I should say that some *compañeros* worked fantastically hard. But I have led a very comfortable life, really. I was never one to jump at the

chance to cut cane, never. When I had to cut cane I was annoyed because to me the whole rural thing, well I never had anything to do with it. Really, agricultural work and all that stuff was not for me. Well, when I was mobilized I went. I didn't know how to do it and my hands got all raw and blistered. After I cut just a little I felt sick," he adds sardonically. "I tried to do some but I, I never pushed myself to fulfill this or that quota. I, really, I didn't force myself, because I knew that, well, I was just one more poor sod out there. I've always had my own, very particular, ideas about voluntary work. When they ordered everyone to go, I went. But it seemed to me that, it strikes me as, well, for everyone to do voluntary work is madness." Jorge suppresses a laugh, perhaps because he just said the unsayable, perhaps because of the absurdity of a city-slicker like him wrestling with cane.

In the late 1960s, Fidel Castro had proclaimed the "great leap forward." To reduce dependence on the Soviets and reverse economic decline, he set a goal of 10 million tons for the 1970 sugar harvest, more than double the level produced the previous year. Factories, farms and services were retooled for the big push, and Castro exhorted Cubans to do whatever was necessary to meet the target. Jorge recalls his blind faith in success and his despair after the failure.

"For me, as for a great many Cubans, the sugar harvest of 1970 was paradigmatic. It was something that was going to be achieved. At work people were calculating, 'look, we need this much more. We won't make it.' And I said, 'look, we have to make it. What do you mean we're not going to make it. We have to.' On I think it was the 22 of May 1970, Fidel said that it was not possible to complete the harvest. I, really, I couldn't understand it. I must tell you that for me it was a

tremendous blow. It's not that I stopped believing, but by then, no, I didn't know. For me it was incredible, tremendous. I was dumbfounded." He pronounces each word slowly. Continuing in a subdued tone, "for many days, many weeks, I really couldn't believe it. I was still wrapped up in the appeal to the nation about the harvest, that we had to achieve the harvest. If you think about it now, it was something mad, totally crazy. In the weeks before Fidel announced we wouldn't make it, I thought the whole thing was a lunacy, completely barmy. But at the same time I thought that we would make it. It was a big thing to me, a very big thing."

Jorge remained in shock for months. "The failure of the 1970 harvest transformed me physically; I was a changed man." Jorge was depressed, lost 25 pounds, and developed asthma. The failed harvest ended his love affair with the revolution, his dream that anything was possible so long as Cubans, well, other Cubans, worked hard enough. With one adversity after another, Jorge's disenchantment increased over the years. But he is proud that he never even considered following his family to Miami. "I stayed here and continued to dedicate myself to the tasks of the revolution, even when they were stupid, idiotic even. I believe that if you leave your country you become rootless, tremendously rootless." One of Jorge's greatest satisfactions is that his three children remain in Cuba, and are happy. "For me that is the importance of the Cuban revolution."

September 2004, Vedado, Havana

It is the morning after Hurricane Ivan side-swiped the island, and the streets remain eerily empty. Roberto and I squeeze into Alma Rivera's miniscule apartment in a dilapidated building, a short walk from La Rampa, club-land for Havana's tourists. The three of us perch in the tiny combination kitchen-bedroom. A ladder in

the corner leads to the *barbacoa*: the loft where Alma's three middle-aged sons sleep when they are not with girlfriends. Alma is 68 years old, black, petite and strong. Proudly pointing out the features of her room, she tells us, "I repaired the walls, installed the toilet, and built the *barbacoa* and the porch with my own hands. I had no proper tools." After her initial outburst, Alma becomes extremely solemn. "My life has been full of tears and suffering." Growing up in a poor peasant household in Pinar del Rio was "miserable, truly miserable. From the age of seven I worked in agriculture, mostly in the tobacco zone. I wanted to stay in school but my parents didn't let me. People before [the revolution] were foolish. [If I had studied] now I would be a great doctor." In 1961, Alma left her husband "because he was a womanizer," and moved to Havana with her two young sons.

"How did the triumph of the revolution affect you and your family," Roberto asks. Alma says nothing, and after an uncomfortable silence begins to tell us about the drudgery of her life in the 1960s.

"I worked in one cafeteria after another, cleaning floors and washing dishes." In a rare reference to the emancipatory effects of the revolution, she adds, "I didn't mind so much because I was in an atmosphere of freedom." A few years later Alma was fired from a good job at the Restaurant Cochinito because she refused to have sex with the manager. Echoing Fidel Castro's slogan about turning defeats into victories she says, with a certain smugness, "to quit at the right time is a victory." But adds in a voice that betrays her anger, "I got nailed. When I demanded my right to severance pay they refused. No one defended me. Not the management. Not the trade union. Not the Party. No one. They acted together. Not even the Woman's Federation. No. They were one."

Alma describes life in the 1960s as a string of battles with one bureaucrat after another. She tells a long, convoluted story about how she fought to keep her apartment, the one we are in. “I fought hard, finally they let me stay. They were going to send the police and all. But I am not afraid of anything. The head of the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution [the official “neighborhood watch”] was on my side, and she offered to talk to Fidel Castro about this. But I said no, so we went to the housing authority. The little whites [*blanquitos*] who worked there just looked at us. Then I said listen, we don’t all have fancy foam mattresses to sleep on, now do we? Finally, they let us stay,” she says, referring to her family, “but because of all that we didn’t have a ration book [proof of residence needed to receive food] for three years.”

After we leave, Roberto and I go to Rápido, a fast-food shop, to talk about Alma’s life story. While we don’t always agree, we both find her silence about the revolution striking. Alma seemed to take the opportunities provided by the state for granted. Her narrative thread is that she obtained what was rightfully hers thanks to her own persistence, struggle and intelligence. Not thanks to the revolution, the official slogan.

Recalling the past through the prism of the present, Olga and Jorge remembered the euphoria and the pain of revolutionary upheaval. Alma’s memories are different. Perhaps because of her color and class background, certainly because of her own experiences and personality, she remembered the 1960s as a period when she continued to struggle to put food on the table, secure a place to live, raise her children, and hold down a job, albeit in conditions far better than before.

In the 1960s, Cubans were faced with fundamental choices. Some fled to Miami. Many more stayed and threw themselves into the heady struggle to forge a

just society. But the majority, like Alma, plodded day-by-day to ensure that the government delivered on its promises. Although these are just three of the one-hundred plus islanders we talked to about living the revolution, they rupture the single-threaded narrative of the official story.

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