

Through Our Eyes

Emilio Gutierrez, 1994

My name is Emilio Gutierrez, and I work as a carpenter in Cuba. This land is very beautiful, and I love it here. I know that many people have emigrated from my country to the United States, but I would never want to leave. I am happy here and I want to explain why. For many generations my family was very poor. They were mestizo peasants, living terrible lives, but now my family and I have opportunities we could never have had in all of the history of Cuba.

Before Christopher Columbus came to Cuba, the island was populated with native people that lived off the land. After the conquistadors came and conquered the island, the people were forced into slavery to work in the gold mines and on the sugar and tobacco plantations of the Spanish. When so many natives died from overwork and European diseases, the Spanish then brought slaves from Africa.

Life under Spanish rule was very hard for the people of Cuba. Mestizos like my family were poor and either worked very small farms of their own trying to get by or they worked on other people's farms for little money. The Spanish, though, were wealthy. Americans who came to Cuba to buy plantations or businesses were also wealthy, but most people were poor. Many times they tried to rebel without success.

Independence finally came in 1902 with the help of the United States. The Americans fought what they call the "Spanish-American War" here in Cuba because they claimed that the Spanish blew up the *Maine*, a United States ship sent to protect the American plantation owners. Though no one knew for sure what had caused the explosion on the ship, the war was fought and the Americans won Cuba's independence. The Americans controlled the island for a few years and set up a navy base at Guantanamo Bay that they still use today. Then they helped set up a democratic government, but the condition of the people did not improve.

The elected government was weak and soon fell to one dictator and then another. By the 1950s the country was under the control of Fulgencio Batista, a dictator supported by the United States because he was good to Americans. However, Batista was not good to the Cuban people. He was very cruel and corrupt and many people wanted to rid the country of this terrible man.

In 1953, a very young Fidel Castro led an attack against the government. He and his troops were defeated, but Fidel had made a name for himself. He was imprisoned for a time, but there was such an outcry from the people that he was released and sent to Mexico. While in Mexico, Castro met Cuba's other great revolutionary, Che Guevara. Together the men planned their return to Cuba to rid the country of Batista.

They returned to Cuba in 1956 and began attacking groups of soldiers in the countryside. For three years they fought and gained much support among the Cuban people. Finally, in 1959, Batista fled the country and Fidel Castro took control. This is known as the Cuban Revolution.

Once in power, President Castro began to make changes to improve life for the poor people. He took control of large rental properties where many peasants lived and paid rent to rich landowners. He also took control of some large plantations that were owned by wealthy Americans and Cubans. The lands and housing were divided among the people that needed it. The United States was not pleased

with these changes and began to take action against our country. They stopped buying sugar and other Cuban products, which angered our president so he took over all American-owned businesses.

When the United States threatened to cut off all supplies to Cuba including oil, which was a needed import, President Castro looked to the Soviet Union for oil and other support. This led to the United States cutting all ties with Cuba and an embargo was placed on our country. Americans could not buy any Cuban products and American companies could not sell anything to Cuba. Our beautiful country was caught between the two superpowers in the Cold War. The United States hated the Soviet Union and did not want Cuba to have any ties to that nation, but the Americans also did not want to help Castro.

I personally do not understand why the United States was so concerned about Cuba and our president - or why its government still is. As I have said, my family had always been poor and had always been treated badly under other governments here. Now we are better off. It is true that the government under Fidel Castro is communist. It is also true that we do not have many of the things that people in the United States are used to, such as a large variety of products to buy or big houses and new cars.

I believe many people leave Cuba because they hear about such wealth and want the things that the Americans have. Still, I also think they do not remember the way things used to be before. I was only a child when President Castro took over, but I remember how poor my family was and how my big brother could not go to school because he had to work to help support our family. I also remember how our friends and neighbors could not afford to go to the doctor when they were sick.

Now my children go to school and we can go to the doctor whenever we need to go because all education and health care are free. We are not rich and we do not have fancy, new things, but our needs are met. I believe that President Castro cares about the Cuban people like no Cuban leaders before and that he has helped up in many ways. This is why I would never want to leave my beloved country of Cuba.

Guided Reading Questions - Based on your article, answer the following questions in complete sentences.

1. What was the Cuban Revolution?
2. What impact did Fidel Castro coming to power have on Cuba's government?
3. What impact did Fidel Castro coming to power have on United States/Cuban relations?
4. What impact did Fidel Castro coming to power have on the rights of Cuban citizens?
5. What impact did Fidel Castro coming to power have on Cuba's economy?

Through Our Eyes

Alejandrina Castillo, 1996

I am Alejandrina Castillo, an old woman of ninety-three and a grandmother many times. Thanks be to God I have lived a very long life, but now I am happier than ever since I now live in the United States of America. I came to this wonderful country from Cuba in 1994, and want to share my story of how and why this came to be.

As most people know, Cuba is a communist country ruled by Fidel Castro. Castro came to power after a 3 year fight with Batista and his government in 1959. This is known as the Cuban Revolution. Castro had many supporters and brought many changes. He was a hero to many Cubans back then. My family was what Americans would call lower middle class. My husband worked painting houses and earned enough to feed our family, but little extra. We were not as poor as many, but we well understood why Castro nationalized the apartments, plantations, and businesses at the time. The poor had gone for too long without even having their basic needs met.

We also understood why many people left the country when Castro took over. More than 200,000 fled in the early years. These were business owners and professionals, mostly well educated, or people who worked with the Americans on the island. The early emigrants fled with whatever they could, but most of their belongings were left behind. They feared what Castro would do to them, and they were right since many who did not support him were imprisoned, tortured, or killed.

People that stayed in Cuba and supported Castro had great hope for the future in the early days, but hope soon began to fade. Life was hard. Though the Soviet Union sent some supplies to our country, most things were in short supply. We often could not get enough food, another other products were nearly impossible to find, and things got worse after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. There was little joy in life. Even the Roman Catholic religion that Cubans held so dear was discouraged. It is not that practicing our religion was illegal, but that the nation was officially an atheist state - one that did not accept the existence of God. Some priests were even jailed. This was hard for me.

As time went on, more people wanted to leave the country. In 1980 Castro allowed more than 100,000 people to leave in what became known as the Mariel Boatlift. I believe this was as much to help Castro as the people, because he was able to reduce the number of mouths to feed, educate, and care for. He also used the opportunity to send people away that he did not want in the country such as some criminals and the mentally ill. My husband and I considered leaving at that time, but he was ill and could not easily travel. However, four of our children and their families did leave and they settled in the Little Havana section of Miami where many Cuban emigrants live.

Still, the Mariel Boatlift was unusual since Castro does not often allow people to leave, although they want to. Since he does not allow people to leave legally, many risk their lives to leave illegally. Thousands of people flee the island each year. They go in boats, if they can find them, but mostly in rafts, inner tubes from truck tires, or even sheets of foam rubber. These emigrants that try to float to freedom are called "balseros" or "rafters." The voyage is dangerous and many balseros die trying to reach America's shores.

Most of the people that brave the journey are young men seeking a better life, but women and children also make the crossing. As I have said, I made the trip in 1994, and I am as far as anyone knows the oldest balsero to come to America. After my husband died, I was alone except for my daughter and her family. When they decided to leave Cuba in 1994, I decided to go with them. I knew the trip would be dangerous, but still I believed that it would be worth the risk if I could live the rest of my life days in the beautiful and free United States.

God was watching over us on our journey. The weather was clear and the water was smooth during the voyage, and our raft arrived safely in Key West, Florida. There we were met by members of Brothers to the Rescue, a Cuban-American group that helps Cubans who are fleeing from Castro.

Not all illegal emigrants leave on rafts though. Sometimes people that are out of the country legally, such as airline pilots, athletes, artists, or musicians, simply do not return. In fact, Castro's own daughter, Alina Fernandez Revuelta, fled the country in 1993. Last year I saw her interview on television here and she said "I hate what he (Castro) has done to Cuba."

I must say I, like many of us who have fled our homeland, agree with Alina. Though Castro came to power promising so much to the people of Cuba, he has not kept those promises. Living conditions are poor, and people want freedom they do not have. The fact so many people risk their lives to leave Cuba gives some idea of how miserable life is there. I know that I do not have many years left to live, but I am very thankful that I can live with my family here in this wonderful country of the United States of America.

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