

History of the Descendants of Doña Rosalia Hernandez de la Vega: The Fernandez Labarrere Family

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Introduction and motivation

My name is Jorge Luis Romeu. I am the son of Cristina Raquel Fernandez Labarrere, the daughter of Agustin Fernandez Alvelo and Rosalia Labarrere y Hernandez, and grand daughter of Rosalia Hernandez de la Vega and Dominique Labarrere y Pasteur. Today is March 6, 2024, and I start writing our family history. I write it in English, so future generations in the United States, or elsewhere, who may no longer be conversant in Spanish, may still be able to appreciate his story, and to pass it along to their children. This is a beautiful saga of family love and close ties that will also help understand life in Cuba, before the 1959 (Castro) revolution.

There are in Cuba what I call "old " and "new " Cubans. Old Cubans are, like our family, those who were born in that island for several generations (I have five, and our siblings will have six, seven or more). New Cubans are those that were born from recent immigrants, usually from Spain. They are not better or worse, just different. By having several generations, we Old Cubans have a more extended family, stretched out through Cuban towns and provinces. We also have a larger chance of including some intermixture with African and Taino¹. New Cubans do not have as many relatives in the island, their intermixture is with the moors that come from their Spanish roots, and tend to be concentrated in the big cities they immigrated into, usually Havana.

Our family history was started in Miami, in the mid-1990s, when my sister Raquelita, my cousin Lourdes, and I were having lunch and some drinks in Versailles. We discussed how tia Alicia, the last old matron of our family, was already 90+. And, when she passed away, so would the story of our family. Someone had to elicit it from her. And of course, that somebody was me.

Tia Alicia was a first cousin of my mother, the daughter of our grand aunt Tia Panchita, and lived three blocks away from us, in Cuba. Tia Alicia and I kept a very close relationship, and I always took her out to lunch at Versailles, when I visited Miami. This time, when we returned to her house for Cuban coffee, I asked her to tell me the story of our family. I took a piece of paper and a pen, and started drawing the "Arbol Genealogico", which I passed on to Raquelita, who passed it to our nephew Manuel, who drew a large and professional Tree that we always display on the wall, in every Family Reunion we have had since.

More recently, Raquelita and I found, through DNA contacts of "23&ME", two missing relatives: Marina (Marcelin) Colet and Raquel Carreras Rivery. Marina is the daughter of Arturo Marcelin, and grand daughter of Tia Petronila Mercier. She lives in California, now. Raquel is the grand daughter of Chela del Barrio, my mother's cousin, and great grand daughter of Maria Marcelin, also daughter of tia Petronila. Raquel lives in Miami, now. Both shared with us several stories and documents of their branch of the family, the descendants of the first marriage of our great-grandmother Doña Rosalia Hernandez de la Vega with Pedro Mercier. Petronila Mercier was a half-sister of Chalita and Panchita Labarrere, the daughters of Rosalia's second marriage, with Dominique Labarrere.

Of the older generation only Evita Roa is left, now in her 90s. Of the next generation only Lourdes and I, descendants of Chalita, and Mundi and Ruben, of Panchita Labarrere, are still around, already hitting our 80s. I had the great fortune that my mother told me many times, the history of her family. And she took me to visit most of its members. That's how I got to know

¹ I am 93% European; the rest of my DNA comes from a mixture of moor, sub-Saharan African and Taino.

them, and learned many things about them. I continued visiting our cousins from the Chalita, Panchita and Tia Nene (sister of Abuelo Agustin) branches of the family, after I came to Miami.

So, it is suitable that before I fade away, I put my memories in print for the benefit of those coming after us. This is, therefore, the story of the descendants of doña Rosalia Hernandez de la Vega, with her two husbands: Pedro Mercier and Dominique Labarrere y Pasteur.

Establishing and Identifying the Descendants of Doña Rosalia Hernandez de la Vega

The first known member of our family, doña Rosalia Hernandez de la Vega², was from Union de Reyes, Matanzas³. She seemed to have a penchant for the French, and married two of them: Pedro Mercier and, once widowed, Dominique Labarrere⁴. They were both from Pau, the French Basque country. At the time, Matanzas province was dedicated to the sugar cane industry, and many young French mechanics that immigrated to install and work in the new sugar mills, married Cuban ladies. Both Pedro and Dominique were among them. Without doña Rosalia Hernandez, who started it, and especially without her daughter, tia Petronita, as we will soon find out, there would not exist a *Fernandez Labarrere* family, nor its beautiful story would be known.

Doña Rosalia first married Pedro Mercier, with whom she had four children. They were: Pedro (tio Perico) the oldest, Petrona (tia Petronila or Petronita), Carmen and tio Eugenio. After doña Rosalia became a widow, she married Dominique Labarrere y Pasteur. My mother told me that tio Perico, a teenager when Doña Rosalia married Labarrere, never accepted Dominique as a foster parent. Tio Perico had many disagreements with him, and was finally sent to France, to live with his father's family for several years.

Doña Rosalia and Labarrere had two daughters: Rosalia (my grandmother Chalita), and Francisca (Panchita, tia Alicia's mother), and one son, Chicho (who was ill and I know nothing more). Dominique was restless; he made good money in Union and then went to Brazil, where he invested in a sugar mill. He died there in an accident, when the sugar mill boiler exploded. Doña Rosalia only found out, many years later.

Apparently, Doña Rosalia was economically well off. Grandmother Chalita and grand aunt Panchita lived in Union until they married. There were several years of difference between Doña Rosalia's children from her first and second marriage. Their half-brothers were adults, married. My mother never spoke much of the early years of her mother's life, probably because Chalita and my grandfather Agustin moved to another city, and then to another province, and kept few contacts with Chalita's family. And my mother was very young at the time.

My grand-mother Chalita married Agustin Fernandez, a young farmer, and went to live in the country side. Agustin bought a larger farm in Ciego de Avila, Camaguey, where he died a few years later. Chalita then moved to Havana with her six children, and died five years later, leaving them orphans and penniless.

Tia Petronita saved the day. She organized things so that the children could survive. She sought help from the Mercier Branch and from some of Agustin's siblings. She rented Chalita's small house and requested contributions from her own children. With that money, she placed tia Angelica and my mother in a boarding school; placed tio Miguel and tio Mario with Agustin's siblings (tio Pancho in Madruga and Tia Nene in Cardenas), and send Anibal and Rene to work and live on their own.

Years later, my mother felt ill and went to recover to Union, in the home of her Mercier and Marcelin cousins. There, she met and married my father, and was able to bring to her new home her sister Angelica, and her young brothers Miguel and Mario, thus reuniting her family.

² Doña. Rosalia was born around the 1830s. My grandmother Chalita was born around the 1870s.

³ Read this article with a map of the provinces of Pinar del Rio, Havana, Matanzas and Camaguey, so you can locate the towns of Pinar, Union, Matanzas, Alacranes, Madruga, Aguacate, Ciego de Avila, etc.

⁴ Both doña Rosalia's husbands owned foundries in Union. Thus, she most likely lived there all of her life.

Neither the Traviesos, nor the Roa's, nor the Marcelin and Mercier Branches, and their descendants, are part of the Fernandez Labarrere family. They are collateral and related, and we have always remained very close. Without them, and their intervention after grandmother Chalita passed away leaving the children orphan, it is likely that this family would have desegregated and disappeared. For fairness, gratitude and inclusion, I will call this story the Descendants of Dona Rosalia Hernandez de la Vega and collateral family.

The Children of Doña Rosalia Hernandez de la Vega First Marriage (with Pedro Mercier)

Doña Rosalia's four children with Pedro Mercier became industrial mechanics or married one. After becoming a widow, Rosalia remarried Dominique Labarrere, with whom she had three children. In spite of age and paternal differences the siblings always remained close.

Tio Perico married Matilde Fundora and had four children: Concha, Caridad, Francisco and Biló. Concha married Alejo Anias and moved to Matanzas. They had three children: Lilia, Alejo (Lelo), who became the best tailor in Matanzas. Lelo did well and remained always close to my mother. We stopped by, every time we drove to Cardenas, at his Penas Altas home, staying several times for dinner and overnight. Cuco was a lawyer; and married a well-known Matanzas poet: Carilda Oliver (I never met them). Concha, was my mother's God Mother, and lived very modestly in old Matanzas⁵, with her husband. We visited her, once. The other two, Caridad and Francisco, I never met. Marina passed to me some information about Hugo Anias (possibly Lelo's brother Cuco), to whom his wife Carilda Oliver wrote a love poem, published in this web site.

Tia Petronita, God bless her soul, was a full story in herself. She married another French mechanic, Julian Marcelin, with whom she had three girls (Maria, Amparo and Mercedes), and four boys (Arturo, Julio, Luis and Oscar). Julian Marcelin owned a foundry in Union, and must have been well-off. Widowed later in life, tia Petronita moved to Havana and lived in a pleasant house in Cerro neighborhood, where my mother spent many weekends and parts of her boarding school summer vacations. Tia Petronita's six children created their families, as follows:

Maria Marcelin married Aquilino del Barrio, whose girls were affectionately known, as "las del Barrio" (they were always close to my mother). Amparo married Azcarate, and had two girls: Maria and Nina, who had a physical handicap. Mercedes married Angel Menendez, and had five children: Octavio, Augusto, Argelia, Olga and Aida (who remained also close to my mother). Olga and Argelia visited us from time to time. Olga married Ernesto Beauchamp, a Dominican engineer. He would tell my father stories about his life under Trujillo. They divorced, and Olga married another man with whom we had no interaction. Aida married Carlos Perez, one of the owners of Casa Quintana, a nice jewelry store in Galiano Ave. Carlos was the brother of General Genovevo Perez Damera, Chief of the Army under President Grau. Their son Carlitos, and my brother Manueleu were members of the same anti-Castro conspiracy group (MRP). They were both detained by the Security forces (G-2), tried and condemned to prison in La Cabana. Carlitos got off earlier and married a Nueva Gerona school teacher. Zoila and I visited him during our Isle of Pines "honeymoon" trip, in 1971.

Arturo Marcelin had four children: Arturito (who was close to Ruben Travieso), Marina (who recently contacted Raquelita and me, via email, from California), Mirta, and Dulce (of whom I know very little). Julio had four children, who were close to us. Maria (Nena), visited us frequently, with her Spanish husband Tuñas. We often had dinner, at home or in restaurants. Also Aida, Nereyda, and Ondina, whom I occasionally visited with mother. Luis had three children: Luis, who was close to my mother, and Carlos and Nancy (whom I never met). Oscar had three children: Oscarito, Eva and Elsa, none of whom I ever met, either.

⁵ Matanzas lies in the broad bay of its name. Two rivers, San Juan and Yumuri, flow into said bay. Between them lies *Old Matanzas*. North of Yumuri lies *Versailles*. South of San Juan lies *Pueblo Nuevo*. In *La Playa* broad Malecon my father and mother lived, and my brothers were born. In *Penas Altas*, Lelo Anias lived.

Carmen Marcelin married Fermin Aguirre, and had two sons: Fermin and Gerardo, who married Margarita Fundora and had five children: Gerardito (who was very affectionate to us), Carmelina (who lived with her son Juan Luis near our house, when I was small), Esther, Mario and Fifina, who always kept in contact with my mother, and visited us from time to time.

Finally, Tio Eugenio married Francisca de Hombre. He was a special uncle and, when my mother became ill, she was sent to his home in Union, to get well. In Union, my mother met my father, became engaged, and got married. Tio Eugenio had four children: Carmela (had no issue, became a widow and lived with her sister Esther); Eugenio (Cucho) who emigrated to NYC, married an American, Anita, and had Frances), Carlos (of whom I know nothing) and Esther, who married Tatico and lived close to us in Marianao. Esther was my Piano teacher, and through her I met my wife Zoila, who was also her piano student.

The Children of Doña Rosalia Hernandez de la Vega Second Marriage (with Labarrere)

Doña Rosalia remarried Dominique Labarrere, with whom she had Rosalia (grandmother Chalita), Francisca (Panchita), and Chicho (who died young). Labarrere made good money and went to Brasil, where he invested in a sugar mill and then disappeared. Many years later, through a letter to one of his business partners it was found that Dominique had perished in an accident.

Chalita married my grandfather Agustin Fernandez y Alvelo, who was a small farmer in Aguacate, a town near Madruga, in Havana province. They met in a dance in Madruga, where the girls had been escorted, presumably to meet suitable pursuers, as was the custom at the time. The number of suitable husbands in a small town like Union was small. So, mothers took their girls to neighboring towns to meet young men with whom they could marry and build a family.

Tia Alicia told me that once, doña Rosalia and tia Panchita went to visit my grandmother Chalita at their farm, in the countryside. They weren't thrilled to see how Chalita, a city girl of some means and education, had married Agustin, a small farmer. They lived in a typical Cuban farm in the countryside, without electricity nor other urban comforts.

I surmise that Doña Rosalia may have wanted a *better suitor* for Chalita, perhaps like Travieso, who married tia Panchita and owned a store in San Nicolas. However, Chalita and Agustin were very happy and in love, and had six children: Rene, Anibal, Angelica, Raquel, Miguel and Mario. Agustin sold his farm and bought a general store in Aguacate; but the business did not do well. He eventually found a capitalist partner⁶, who put up the money to buy a big land tract in Camaguey (in Spanish we call this *socio comanditario*). Agustin then moved his family to Ciego de Avila, where he developed a sugar plantation (*colonia de caña*). He died there of a heart attack in 1913. Chalita then moved to Havana with her six children. With the farm proceeds she bought a small house in *Loma del Burro*, where she died of TB, five years later (her doctors had recommended her to live in the mountains, and Loma del Burro was the tallest hill in Havana).

Agustin was born in Aguacate, around 1875. When he was 20, General Antonio Maceo passed through with his troops, during Cuba's 1895 Independence war. Agustin got on a horse and joined him. Several weeks later he was sent home with chicken pox, as the liberation army had no hospitals and sent its sick and wounded home, to get well or die. Agustin's mother made a "Promise" to the Virgin del Cobre, that if Agustin were saved, she would go pilgrim to the Sanctuary. But she also caught *viruela* from Agustin, and died. He survived, but acquired a heart condition that eventually killed him. Agustin later went to El Cobre to "pay" the promise.

Abuelo Agustin worked very hard all of his life; I imagine he was trying to improve his lot, so his family could stand with that of his wife. His real legacy were his six children.

Panchita married Raimundo Travieso and moved to San Nicolas, a town south of Havana. They had three children: Alicia, Raimundo and Ruben. Old Raimundo died young, resulting from an abdominal operation gone wrong, and tia Panchita went to live with tia Alicia in Havana.

⁶ Mr. De la Torriente; possibly a brother of don Cosme de la Torriente, a prominent Cuban politician.

I have already talked about tio Perico's children, as well as of tio Eugenio's family. Tia Petronita's children were another good story. Maria and Aquilino had several girls: Gloria, Chela, Titi, Chacha and Hilda. My mother took me to visit the girls several times. Chela, married Oscar Rivery, a prominent naval officer who flew with a navigator around the north and south American continent, in 1941, in a small air force airplane, a feat at its time! Oscar Rivery eventually rose to Rear Admiral of the Cuban navy. Details of this trip are in: www.slideshare.net/slideshow/vuelo-panamericano2003/37160444. His grand daughter Raquel, whose father was also a distinguished military pilot, has shared many memories and documentation.

When I was about fifteen, sitting in the clinic waiting to see the doctor, there was this middle-aged woman who kept smiling, and looking at me. She realized that I was ready to boil over, and gently said: "you look just like your mother". To which I replied: "and who is my mother?" She answered: "Raquel". I said, "there must be at least a thousand Raquels in Havana". And she said: "but there is only one Raquel Fernandez Labarrere". I dropped my jaw. She was one of the Del Barrio girls. I can't remember which one was it.

About that time, I was interviewing high-level business officers of a large company, with a group of High School class mates, for a course project. And the Sales Manager kept smiling and looking at me. I was ready to fly off the handle when he said: "You look like your mother Raquel; tell her I send her a big kiss." It was Gerardito Aguirre. Apparently, I do look like my mother.

The family often gathered at funerals. I can't remember who passed away, but I drove my mother and left her there, to return and pick her up some time later. She was seated next to Adria Fernandez, her cousin on Agustin's side, that I did not know. Adria was a well known "couturier" in Havana. She said: "wait a few minutes; my son Reynaldo is coming to pick me up and you two can meet". When he showed up, I recognized my High School class mate Reynaldo Delgado Fernandez, of Instituto de La Habana. Small world ... large family!

The Saga of Agustin Fernandez and Rosalia Labarrere

Agustin, always worked hard to improve his standing and economy. Fernandez were of Andalusian stock, and Agustin, a fourth-generation Cuban farmer. Once, Agustin told Chalita he didn't do well in business because his mother had made a promise to the Virgin, that she could not keep. So, Agustin decided to make the pilgrimage to *El Cobre* and fulfill his mother's promise. When he returned, things began to improve, economically, for them.

Agustin always liked politics and was a Conservative (he has passed this love to several of us). He and Mr. De la Torriente bought some virgin land near *Central Violeta*, Ciego de Avila. In the 1910s sugar cane production was booming, and new farms were constantly developed.

As Chalita was pregnant, she and the children stayed in Ciego, while Agustin started the farm, clearing up land to plant sugar cane. One day, Chalita's house thatched roof caught fire. She climbed on a ladder, while her oldest sons Anibal and Rene handed her buckets of water, and put out the fire -but lost her child. Rene, aged 12, rode on horseback to the farm, to fetch his father.

After that, they moved to a wooden house that Agustin had built in the farm. It was on stilts, with a thatched roof and a porch all around. In the mornings, after Agustin rode his horse to work, Chalita would pull the front ladder up, so that none of the children could go down. They lived in the middle of the forest, surrounded by wild animals. Mother remembered how, at night, she would hear the bands of wild boars, wild dogs, and deer, run under the house.

One afternoon, one of his workers brought Agustin home with a heart attach (angina). Chalita sent Rene on horseback to town, to fetch the doctor. The only thing left to do, was to give him morphine for pain, and wait until he died. With her share of the farm, Chalita moved, with her six children, first to Matanzas, and then to Havana.

Chalita was sick with TB, and knew she would not last long. She used the farm money to buy a small house in *Loma del Burro*. As there was no money left, she wrote to Cuba's first lady, Mrs. Garcia Menocal (the Conservative party was now in power), asking for help. At the time, the

government had what was called *colecturias*, which were pensions to help the widows and sick. Chalita was granted half a *colecturia*, which allowed her to live four more years; then she died.

I have always wondered what Chalita did during her last months to prepare her exit. In all likelihood she contacted her sister Petronila, to let her know that she was dying, and that her kids would become destitute. My mother never talked about this. But it is a reasonable conjecture

When Chalita died, mother must have been 12 years old (she always reduced her age so tia Angelica, who was a year older than tio Antonio, could reduce hers). It was then, when tia Petronita, God bless her soul, entered the picture in a decisive manner. Without her intervention, the *Fernandez Labarrere* family would not exist. Heavens knows what would have happened to two teenage girls, two minor infants (Mario and Miguel), and two penniless young men.

Tia Petronita organized a "family council" with her own children and Agustin's siblings. She had each of her boys contribute *un centen* (Spanish gold coin equivalent to \$5.00 US dollars) per month. She rented Chalita's house, and used the rent and the monthly contributions to pay for the Avellaneda boarding school, for my mother and tia Angelica. The two older boys, Rene and Anibal, would go on their own (they moved to a roof room in a *solar* or *vecindad* in Old Havana, and started working in the Post Office). Agustin's brothers Pancho and tia Lola, who had a small farm in Madruga, took tio Miguel. Agustin's beloved sister *tia Nene*, who had married Antonio Roa, an Andalusian man, took in the youngest one (tio Mario) into their farm in Cardenas.

Tio Rene, while Chalita was still alive, had lost his right arm while working at his uncle's mechanic shop. He learned to become a telegraph operator (with his left arm) and later worked as stationmaster for the Hershey train, in several towns close to Aguacate. Tio Anibal worked, and studied at night in the *Centro de Dependientes*, a large association that included a clinic and school facilities. There were several such associations, founded by Spanish immigrants, in Cuba. Many Cubans, such as my father, my brother and myself, were members of such clinics.

Tio Anibal became a *Corredor de Aduanas* (officers who handle taxes for import and export goods) in the port of Havana. He, and a friend, built the grave (*panteon*) for Chalita and Agustin in *Cemetery of Havana*. Anibal traveled to Ciego and took his father out of a grave there. The health authorities would not let him carry Agustin's bones in the train. So tio Anibal bought a big hat, put abuelo's bones in the hat box, brought it to Havana in the train, and buried him there.

One Sunday, Anibal went to visit tio Miguel, at tio Pancho and tia Lola's farm. Miguel was not attending school, and was all covered in dirt, playing with the chicken and goats. So, tio Anibal took Miguel back with him, to live in their roof room of their Habana Vieja tenement.

Mother and tia Angelica spent several years in the *Avellaneda school*, alone and lonely. Once a month, tio Antonio would travel from Cardenas to visit them and take them out. When he returned them to school, he left a case of evaporated milk, so they could have something at bed time. Tia Petronila, who now lived in El Cerro neighborhood of Havana, would also take the girls out to her home on some weekends and for the summer. She would send them to visit her uncles' in Union⁷. Mother told me all these stories about her family struggles and hard times, without any grief, but as a of lesson on how to always be able to get ahead, in spite of difficult circumstances.

Several years passed. Tio Anibal married tia Dora, and moved to Chalita's house. As the girls lost the rent income that paid for their schooling, but were now finishing high school, they got jobs in the Avellaneda school to pay for their room, board, and tuition. Tia Angelica worked in accounting, and my mother taught classes. Mother always remembers fondly Doña Isolina, the school principal, Judith, their handicraft teacher, and her friend Flavia. The mother of my closest friend Alberto Serra, was also in that school. For, girls from troubled or sick families were often placed there, and both, Serra's grandmother and Flavia's mother, were ill with TB.

⁷ Union de Reyes is the only town in Cuba, and possibly in the world, where dead people "are buried heads-down " (a word puzzle). This is because the neighboring town, Cabezas, has no cemetery. Thence, we say, in Spanish: *En Union, se entierran los muertos de Cabezas* (Literally: Cabeza's dead are buried in Union).

One summer, mother caught a very bad bronchitis. Since Chalita had died of TB, the family assumed that mom may have also acquired it. So, she was sent to her uncle's house, in Union, to recuperate. Said situation originated the second most important blessing of our family: my mother's marriage to my father, Manuel Eugenio Romeu, which allowed her to re-unite her brothers and sisters that were scattered around.

Finally, some background about my grandfather Agustin. He was the son of Jose Loreto Fernandez, born in 1843, and of Maria Albelo, born in 1856. Jose Loreto was the son of Andres Fernandez and Fabiana Valera; Maria was the daughter of Manuel Albelo. They were all small farmers in the region of Aguacate and Madruga, north-east of Havana province.

Agustin had several brothers and sisters: Loreto, Adolfo, Francisco (Pancho), Maria Lola and *Maria/Tia Nene*, who was his favorite sister. They were all small farmers in the Aguacate and Madruga regions. During *las vacas gordas* (the good economic times) sugar cane was booming, and farmers were borrowing money to plant more sugar cane. After World War I ended, sugar was no longer needed to make explosives, and *las vacas flacas*, the tough times, arrived. Many farmers were unable to repay their loans, and lost their farms. Tia Nene's husband, Antonio Roa, with some money that he could salvage, moved his family to Cardenas and rented *Capote*, the farm where I spent much of my best times during my childhood and youth. In Capote, their children Antoñico and Eva, and tio Mario (after Chalita died) grew up. This farm was a few miles south of Cardenas, close to the town of Lagunillas, and north of the town of Coliseo.

Next, I will discuss the redistribution of the younger children of Chalita and Agustin, and the part that Raquel my mother, and my father Manolo Romeu, played in it.

The Saga of the family of Raquel Fernandez and Manuel Romeu (my parents)

My father was of Cuban and Puerto Rican stock. His father died in San Juan, as District Attorney of the Supreme Court of Puerto Rico. He had married my grandmother Otilia, in Cuba. He transferred back to Puerto Rico, during Cuba's Independence War. My father returned to Cuba as a teenager, with his mother Otilia, after his father passed away. Two of my father's older brothers, born in Puerto Rico, stayed there. But they always remained in close contact.

He became a lawyer and entered the Judicial system in Camaguey, in 1913, as a town judge. He worked his way up and, in 1925, he was Judge in Alacranes, a small town five miles from Union, where, my mother had gone to convalesce from her bronchitis, and where father's friend, the Judge of Union, lived. My father often visited his friend, and met and fell in love with my mother, who was a beautiful 19-year-old young lady. They got married several months later.

When my father took mother to Alacranes, to show her their house, he pointed to a room: this is the bedroom of your sister Angelica. That closed the deal! They did not live in Alacranes long, as father was promoted to Juez de Primera Instancia de Matanzas, the provincial capital. They rented a row house in Carretera de la Playa (el Malecon) a couple of blocks away from the home of Tio Antonio Botet's family. And that was another, unplanned blessing, for tia Angelica.

Little by little, my mother brought to her new home, her younger brothers and cousins. Tia Panchita and tia Alicia spent a short stay there. Father found a scholarship in one of the newly created technical schools, for Ruben. Tio Miguel came from tio Anibal's, and tio Mario, from Tio Antonio and tia Nene's house, to live permanently with them. Tia Angelica and tio Antonio met. And my two older brothers, Raquelita and Manueleu were born.

Seven years they lived in Malecon de Matanzas, an idyllic setting facing the bay. They passed there the difficult *Machadato* political era. When that government fell, my father was promoted to Juez de Primera Instancia in Havana, and they moved to our Almendares house. I was born there in 1945. We lived there until after Dad died and the rest of us left Cuba in 1980.

After the fall of President Machado, many in the family moved to Havana. My father was then promoted to Juez de Instruccion. Father was always ahead of his time⁸. He taught mother to drive a car in Matanzas. When they moved to Havana, he encouraged my mother to register as a pedagogy student at the University. She graduated in 1939 with a doctorate, and was offered a lectureship there. My father encouraged her to take it, and she taught at the University until 1954.

My brothers Raquelita and Manueleu studied primary school at Colegio Aleman, an elite private school in Havana. Raquelita studied high school in the Instituto del Vedado (my brother stayed in the private school, as he needed “stricter discipline”). Raquelita befriended Beba Perera who later became a famous writer, and wrote *Plantado*, a novel based on Manueleu’s experience as a political prisoner. She went on to study at the University of Havana. Beba and her were then selected to study in the US. Raquelita graduated with a Bachelors in Nazareth College, Michigan and was offered a scholarship for a Masters at Marquette. My father asked her to return to Cuba, which she did. This clipped her wings for, at the time, many Cuban men were not very supportive of having a professional and learned wife (they would rather preferred a homemaker).

The rest of my mother’s brothers continued with their life. Tio Anibal made good money as Corredor de Aduana. He was very hard working and entrepreneurial. Mother told me that he once owned two trucks: Anibal drove one himself; Mario and Miguel drove the other truck. They would travel to the swamps to buy *mangle coal*, drove it to Havana, and sold it to wholesalers.

Anibal was very careful with his money and invested it in real estate. At the beginning of the 1959 revolution, he owned several apartment buildings in *Loma del Burro*, where Chalita had lived and died. Anibal built houses for his two children: Kiki, who married Ada, and had Kikito and Carlitos, then divorced and married Mirta, his wife for the rest of his life; and Dorita, who married Ismael Rodriguez and had Nelson, Alex and Sonia. Tio Anibal also built a beautiful summer house in Santa Maria del Mar, a private beach neighborhood close to Havana.

Mirta was a case study. She once told me that she could not speak ill of Batista, because she owed her education to the *Escuelas Civico-Militares*, a Batista project for poor children. They were given scholarships in these government boarding schools, and taught up to the eighth grade. Another Batista project was the *Maestros Sargentos*. Teachers graduating from Normal Schools were made Sargent Majors of the Cuban army, and their schools became Army locations. When a teacher was given an assignment in the countryside, they could not refuse, because they would be court martialed for disobeying an order. Schools *latifundia* neighbors would not burn the school down as they were now Army posts and they would be visited by soldiers the next day. These two programs did a lot for the Cuban *rural education*. It has been said that, if Batista had not effected the *March 1952 Coup d’Etat*, he would have passed on as the Father of the Cuban Education.

Tio Rene became railroad station chief in several small towns north of Havana province, and eventually railroad chief in Hershey Sugar Mill, and lived for a long time. He married tia Angelina, who was the daughter of a neighboring station chief. They had Gaciela and Laura, with whom we were always very close. Tio Rene did all of this with a single arm!

Graciela became an executive secretary and worked for one of the vice-presidents of Godoy-Sayan, a large Cuban bank. She married Raul Montes, the son of a Hershey colleague of tio Rene. Raul took the train to Matanzas every day, graduating from high school. He then went to the US to study engineering. When he returned, he got a job at the new Shell refinery. Laura became a Kindergarten teacher and taught many years. Laura and I were very close, as also were Graciela and Raul, and their children Raulito and Jorge, before and after coming to the US.

Both Miguel and Mario lived at our home until they wed. Tio Miguel married Celeste Sibletz, a music professor at the School of Kindergarten Teachers, and an excellent pianist. They did not have children. Celeste became ill with a heart problem in the mid 1950s, and the doctors recommended her to move to a colder climate. Tio Miguel and Celeste then moved to Miami!

⁸ My father was a mason and a liberal: <https://web.cortland.edu/romeu/HeterodoxoRomeu2023.pdf>

Tio Mario worked in the courts, married tia Bertha, and had Lourdes. Having much older siblings, or none, Julita, Lourdes and I became like brothers and sisters, both in Cuba, and here in the US. Tio Mario was always my preferred uncle. Every time I ran into trouble in Cuba, I called him to get me out of it (like when I crashed on Manueleu's motorcycle, and flew over a car).

My father was promoted several times, until he became, in the 1940s, *Magistrado de la Audiencia de La Habana* (a position akin to Justice of the First Circuit Court, in DC). There are myriads of stories about his work, that illustrates the situation in Cuba, during the 1940s and 1950s. For example, the millionaire Sanchez del Monte⁹ was divorcing his wife in my father's court. Mrs. del Monte's defending lawyers were Messrs. Martinez Sáenz and Valdés Rodríguez. Del Monte paid to murder both these lawyers: Valdés Rodríguez was machine-gunned by a car following him; Martinez Sáenz was tailed by a car to Miramar Yatch Club, where he got off. His 16-year-old son continued travelling in the car and was mistakenly murdered with a shot gun. My father was the main justice in this case. So, Del Monte had a gangster plant a bomb in our house that blew our place apart. My mother had taken Raquelita to college, in the US. I was only four years old, but I remember ...

Tia Angelica married tio Antonio in Matanzas. He was from a well-off family who invested their money wisely. They later moved to Havana and bought several large and elegant houses that they rented to foreign embassies. The Haitian embassy in 7th and 30th avenues, in Miramar, that Batista's Chief of Police, Salas Canizares, assaulted to kill the revolutionaries inside, was one of their houses. Cousin Tony started architecture at the University, but got stuck in his 3rd year, when Batista shut it down because it was a center of student revolutionary activity. Tony started working with his uncle Gustavo Botet, and learned the construction business. He became an accomplished entrepreneur building houses in Cuba, and then in Miami. He married a sophisticated Cuban girl, whose name I don't remember. After divorcing her, Tony married Kay and had Charlene, one of my favorite nieces, with whom I still often fight.

Raquelita became a teacher and a librarian, working for Ruston Academy, an American school in Havana, and as a professor in the Library School, at the *Sociedad Economica* de Amigos del Pais. After the revolution, honest competitions for public school teaching positions were held and she won a place as an English teacher in the Instituto de La Habana (where also I finished my high school). She also wrote the column *Alma de Mujer*, for Havana's newspaper *El Mundo*.

My brother Manueleu became a practicing lawyer and married Regina, a classical Cuban young lady. She was a good housewife, and gave him three fine children: Reginita, Ma. Cristina and Manuel Eugenio. I was a young boy, growing up in Almendares¹⁰, playing tops and marbles.

The Saga of the family of Panchita Labarrere and her descendants (an overview)

Tia Panchita, Chalita's sister, had three children with Raimundo Travieso: Mundo, Alicia and Ruben. When old Travieso died, they also went through their own tough times. You need to ask Rubencito and Mundi for more specific details, as I only know the general story.

Tio Mundo went to work with some business company that sent him to Santiago de Cuba. There, he met and married tia Virginia Cainas, whom I will always remember fondly. Every year, during Holy Week, she organized for us three cousins (myself, Rubencito and Mundi), a week-long sleep-over at their home in Guanabo beach, to solidify our union in the family. Mundo was close to my brother Manueleu, and left him his Mercedes Benz, when he left Cuba.

Mi abuelo, Raimundo Travieso, era pinareño¹¹, lo mismo que mi Papá y Mamá (Virginia Cañas), de la familia de mi mamá hay muchos cuentos pero esos los dejo para otro día. Mi

⁹ He was the owner of a *Latifundio* in Oriente province, and *Edificio America* in Galeano Ave., in Havana.

¹⁰ Description of our Almendares neighborhood: <https://web.cortland.edu/romeu/BarrioNinez.pdf>

¹¹ This addition was contributed by Mundi Travieso, tio Mundo's son.

abuelo quedó huérfano de niño y su padrino, un sastre español, lo embarcó a Barcelona donde se hizo sastre. Regresó a Pinar del Río ya mayor y se casó con mi abuela (Francisca Labarrere), tuvieron tres hijos, Raimundo, Alicia y Rubén, en Pinar del Río. Por razones de salud (aguas termales cercanas creo) la familia se mudó a San Nicolás de Bari, donde pusieron una tienda (en Miami un viejo que conocí de casualidad, me contó que la tienda de mis abuelos era el sitio de reunión de la juventud de San Nicolás). Mi abuelo murió de una operación de vesícula cuando mi papá tenía 12 años, mi abuela siguió con la tienda hasta que un ciclón la destruyó. Mi papá se empleó con una compañía de suministros de vaquerías, que lo puso a cargo de la sucursal de Santiago de Cuba, donde conoció a mi mamá (mi abuelo, Manolo Caíñas, entonces era juez allí), se casaron en La Habana. Mi papá continuó en el sector de la leche, finalmente como Presidente de San Bernardo, compañía de leche y helados, hasta que nos fuimos de Cuba.”

Ruben also got into the Judicial system (I think my father had a hand in this). He was sent to Oriente province (Bayamo region) with the Junta Electoral, to organize the elections. There, he met and married Dinorah, Rubencito's mother, a beautiful young lady. They eventually divorced. However, I will always remember Dinorah fondly, as she organized the best birthday parties I have ever attended, and worked for us cousins, to remain close. Tio Ruben was quiet but nice. He used to call me *caiman*, when I visited him. I wonder if he had forgotten my name ...

“Acerca de mi papá, José Asterio Ruben Travieso y mejor conocido por Ruben Travieso hasta que llegamos a Miami en 1960; entonces todos (no familia) lo llamaban Jose¹². Mi papá se casó con mi mamá, Dinorah Espinosa, en Cuba en 1944, pero el matrimonio no duró mucho creo que a lo máximo fueron dos años juntos y luego se divorciaron. Mi papá en Cuba trabajó como secretario del juez de la junta electoral del Vedado. Mi papá me habló poco de su vida de niño, más bien supe mucho más por los cuentos de mi tío Mundo , yo me pasaba todos los fines de semana y las vacaciones de verano en su casa de Guanabo con mi primo Mundy. Mi papá, además del trabajo en la junta electoral, consiguió un part time en una tienda de alfombras como vendedor. En 1959 con el cambio de gobierno cerraron la junta electoral y lo mandaron al I.N.R.A. donde en realidad no hacía nada.¹³”

Rubencito and I have always loved each other in spite of the distance. I have a photo of both, naked in the same cradle, less than a week old (we were born four days apart). When tia Alicia left, they lived in her Almendares house, four blocks away from ours. We attended the same school, and rode bicycles together around the neighborhood. When he went to the US with Ruben, he left me his three-speed bicycle, which was much better than mine. I will never forget.

Tia Alicia was like another sister to my mother. We lived very close to each other. She married Angelo Angeli, an Italian accountant that came to Cuba during Machado's government, with an opera company that went bankrupt in Havana. Tio Nino, as he was called, met Tia Alicia when they were living in the same boarding house. As a good European, he was, a refined and well-read man. He had an excellent library of biographies, all of whom I read as a teenager. And, of course, he had an excellent discotheque of Italian opera.

In the Fernandez Labarrere family, end-of-year celebrations were organized as follows: Christmas in our house; New Year's Eve, at tia Angelica's, and New Year Day, at tia Alicia's (she cooked the most delicious lasagna I have ever eaten). In these family parties, grown-ups talked, drank and ate, in moderation, and we three (Julita, Lourdes and I), played together (Julita and I always played tricks on Lourdes, who was very formal and well-behaved, even at that age).

The Saga of the family of Nene Fernandez (my grandfather's sister) and Antonio Roa.

¹² In Cuba's countryside, it was usual to name children with the Saint of the day they were born. My mother was born on Santa Cristina's day; her siblings first names were: Edobio (Anibal), Natividad (Mario) etc.

¹³ This additional information was contributed by Rubencito, tio Ruben's son.

Tia Nene (Maria) was the beloved sister of my grandfather Agustin. She married an Andalusian, Antonio Roa, who immigrated to Aguacate and was also in the farming business. They had two children: Antoñico and Rosa Roa Fernandez. After the First World War ended and the *Vacas Flacas* overwent Cuba's economy, many Cuban farmers lost their investments in sugar cane, which was now worth very little. Mother told me that Tio Antonio was one of them. With what he salvaged, he rented Capote, a *colonia* in Lagunillas, south of Cardenas.

Antoñico and Rosa married two siblings, Eva and Aurelio Hernandez, who lived on a San Juan, a near-by farm. Antoñico and Eva had Evita and Ninio, and Rosa and Aurelio had Tata, Toto, Yola, Neysa, Rosita, and Miriam. When the children were of school age, the two families moved to the near-by city of Cardenas, so kids could attend the *Presbiterian Progresiva* School. Tia Nene and tio Antonio always remained in the old stone house of Capote, which was the main house of the XIX Century colonial hacienda. The house had a huge porch (where Antoñico later stored the farm truck), and a central patio around which there was a gallery with the six sleeping quarters. There was a building that had been the slave barracks, and was now used as storage for the mechanical equipment, such a tractor, chariots, etc. And there was a stable for the horses.

Eventually, their children grew up. All the girls became teachers, and studied via the *estudio por la libre* system in Havana University. They would stay in our home during exams. My mother would tutor them (the system allowed students to come just for the exams, and study on their own at home). Ninio and Toto became accountants, and Tata became a veterinarian.

Ninio (Jose Antonio) married Matty and had Luly and Ochie; Evita married Rafael Torrella, and had Gabriela; Toto (Jose Antonio) married Carmita (sister of Marcelo Fernandez, Castro's Minister of Commerce) and had Tony; Rosita married Pepin Fitzgibbons and had Neysa Elena and Jose; Yola married Rene Suarez and had Yoli and Manoli; Miriam married Baby (Gerardo), Pepin brother, and had Gerardito and Jorge; and Neysa married Eduardo de la Torre, and had Rosa Maria and Jorge.

When Rosita and Pepin got married in the *Arechabala* Catholic Church, Julita and I were sitting in the stairs of the choir, waiting for the ceremony to start. Then, the priest came and asked us to start singing -so we panicked! When Ninio got married in the Presbyterian Church, I entered with Julita and my mother, and kneeled. Julita raised me by the arm and said: No, stand up; this is a protestant church! You don't pray here. Mother said: keep still, God is everywhere.

Yola married Rene Suarez. She was, with Rosita, preferred cousin among the Hernandez Roa. Yola remained in Cuba, and Zoila and I stayed with them often, when we went to Varadero Beach (Varadero is 20 minutes from Cardenas, by bus). Her husband Rene, was a case study.

Rene came from a modest Cardenas family: very intelligent and hard working. He studied for *ingeniero agronomo* at the University of Havana, because in the 1940s there was no chemical engineering yet. Havana University was free, and open to Cubans of all colors and all economic levels, and constituted a big vehicle of social mobility and racial integration. Hundreds of doctors, teachers, lawyers, etc. from all races and social extractions, were formed in its classrooms.

The crux with studying at the university was paying for room and board. Students from *the interior* faced this issue. Engineering, as opposed to teaching, was not available as *long distance*. Rene had to cut his studies after the third year, and work as a technician in sugar mills (in Cuba, in Venezuela, and in New Orleans) during the *zafra*, as these sugar seasons followed one after the other. Rene earned the money to pay for his last two years of college. When he graduated, Rene worked in Havana for a while, and then got a job as Head engineer of the paper factory in Cardenas (paper is made from sugar cane *bagazo*), and stayed in Cuba. I spoke at length with Rene, many times. I found that he was more understanding of social needs than others. My high school chemistry teacher was also from Cardenas. Asela Soler had been Rene's school and college classmate. I took her courses twice; she was one of my best teachers.

Neysa is the only one still living, of the Hernandez Roa. She now lives in Atlanta, GA.

If I close my eyes, I can see Antoñico's old house in Laborde, and the new one he bought in Princesa, across from the Parish church, off main street (la Calle Real). I can see Aurelio and

Rosa's house in Vives street, with its high sidewalks. Aurelio and Tata would drive daily to their *San Jose* farm, in Coliseo, just like Antoñico would drive to *Capote*, in Lagunillas.

Cuban colonial houses, like the ones where my family lived in Matanzas and in Cardenas, yielded directly to the sidewalk. They had a huge front door (a car could go through and parked inside) and one or two windows to the street. There, young, unmarried girls would visit with their pretenders, through the window rails. That first room was *el zaguan*. Then came *la sala*. After that came the rooms, one after the other, with a door between them and another door to the patio. At the end of the rooms, there was a dining room and a kitchen. There was a bathroom between two of the rooms. The roof was of wood and Spanish tile, and the walls were brick. Floors were *mosaico*. We used *mosquiteros* to sleep. Cardenas had the largest fleet of horse carriages (*coches*) in all Cuba. They were used as taxis. A fare was 15 to 25 cents, good money at the time.

During the sugar crop season (*zafra*) the few motor taxis were stored, and their owners would go drive the cane trucks to the mill, which was more profitable. One could work 24 hours a day during those *100-120 zafra days*. But once the *zafra* was over, only skeleton crews had work, both at sugar mills and at farms. The rest of the workers had little to do: *el tiempo Muerto*.

There is something that needs to be said about farming in Cuba, before the revolution, as some of our ancestors were in the farming business, or worked in industries that supported sugar mills. Otherwise, the reader will fail to understand how or why, some important events happened.

Land ownership in Cuba was very inefficient. There were some large farms and a many mid and small size farms. Often, land owners were absentee, and rented the land to *colonos* like my grandfather and my uncles. Colonos operated the farm, but did not own the land they used.

A *colonia* was a contract between *el colono* and the sugar mill (*el ingenio*). It stated how much sugar cane the Colono could mill. Once a Colono had the contract, he would need to rent the land to plant. Landowners refused to sell land, preferring to earn a small but steady rent every year. This relationship would deter *colonos* from improving their farm (building irrigation canals, installing pumps, etc.) to improve sugar cane yield. The *Asociacion de Colonos*, an organization, finally secured that colonos could not be evicted by the owners, as long as they paid their rent.

A *colono* farmer was a businessman, just like the owner of a grocery store. You do not expect the owner of a grocery to cut the meat, sell the produce, or work the cashier counter. You expect him to go around the grocery, verifying everyone is doing what they should, find what is missing and call for it, move the employees around as needed, etc.

In the same vein, a *colono* got on a horse every morning and inspected the farm: who is doing what, where; what needs to be done next, where are you moving the animals, what needs to be bought (fertilizer, grains, etc.). That is what I did, with Antoñico, when I went to Capote. We drove to the farm, rode on a horse, and did the rounds. I also fed the hogs and chicken, went to the *ingenio* to watch Antoñico discuss business with the administrators, etc. I learned a lot about operating a Cuban agricultural business, with him -and later, as a young man, in the UMAP¹⁴.

About the Socioeconomic Life in Cuba

At this time, for the benefit of the younger generation which was born abroad, and for those who left Cuba too early to remember, I will talk about what life was in Cuba, before Castro.

The descendants of Doña Rosalia Hernandez de la Vega, were hard working people, who earned what they had through labor. The first descendants (end of the XIX and beginning of the XX Centuries) were mechanics, business and farming people, from what is called *the provincial middle class*. They lived in small towns in the southern part of Havana and Matanzas provinces.

In the following generation (mid XX Century), several of Labarrere and Mercier family members moved to Havana, the capital, and became (lower, middle or upper) middle-class families, integrated by business, employees, trade, technical or professional people.

¹⁴ UMAP: Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Produccion -military service, labor units.

A middle-class person, during the 1950s Cuba, would have (1) a steady job, (2) income or salary enough to pay for rent or mortgage, of a small but decent house or apartment, (3) own a small car, (4) send their children to private school, (5) belong to a clinic or a medical group. In addition, some could also afford *help* in the house, join a social club and spend vacations in Varadero, or abroad. Cuba had a larger middle-class than most other Latin American countries, and dispersed throughout, instead of concentrated in, the capital and a couple of large cities.

However, many Cubans, especially among the unskilled working classes and the landless peasants, did not have a steady job (after the *Zafra* came the *Tiempo Muerto*, where hundreds of thousand found no jobs). Thence, these had poor housing, did not own a car, did not send their children to private schools, and had poor medical attention (two services supplied by government; however, they were inferior, as government budgets were raided by crooked politicians).

This situation is at the heart of the origin of the 1959 revolution. Many Cubans fathomed these problems and wanted to provide a fix. Many had lost faith in the government capability to correct them and saw a *liberal revolution* as a solution. This fostered the struggle against Batista.

Marxism, however, was not in the original script. Taking property away from those that had labored for it, to be administered by the state, proved to be a big economic and social mistake and brought failure. It also drastically split Cuban society, as well as many Cuban families¹⁵.

Most (but not all) members of the Labarrere and Mercier branches sided against the 1959 revolutionary government. Pushed by a Castro government *centrifugal force*, and attracted by a US government *centripetal force*, many left the country, as other half a million Cubans did¹⁶.

But not all members left. Cubans were divided into three groups. Those who supported the government and stayed. Those who did not support the system, and left. Most, emigrated to the US, but also to Spain and Latin America. A Third group, composed of those Cubans who did not support the government but were not willing or able to emigrate, also stayed. This last group suffered a lot from government pressure to join, and from discrimination.

My father for example, made this choice. He was in his seventies, retired, had laboriously paid off his mortgage, and had earned his pension. He was not willing to re-start life abroad. We stayed in Cuba, but were not considered *revolutionary*. For this, and also for having a brother in prison, I had to work twice as much to be considered half as good. Getting (and keeping) a job was difficult, as pro-government allegiance became a necessary condition for it.

Cuba is an extraordinary laboratory of human behavior. I thank my father for staying in Cuba, as it gave me the opportunity to learn more about human nature and hard life, two crucial topics that have contributed to my own success, later in life.

Leaving Cuba

On January 1st, 1959, president-dictator Batista fled, leaving the country directionless. As there was no central authority, the opposition took over. Several guerrilla groups were fighting Batista, but the two most important ones were Castro's *26 of July* Movement and the university students' *Directorio Revolucionario*. At the time, Cubans experimented a sense of uncertainty, and also one of hope regarding the future. The situation was perhaps similar to what currently is happening in Siria, with the new Al-Sharaa government that overthrew the Al-Assad regime.

By mid-1960, the government turned to socialism and aligned closer to the Soviet Union, and people started leaving Cuba, mostly to the US. Among some, there was the belief that the US 'would never allow a communist country 90 miles from its shores'. For them, the Castro situation would last for a short time, after which things would *normalize*. Events did not work out this way.

¹⁵ This polarization situation may be similar to the current political polarization in the United States.

¹⁶ The revolutionary government encouraged the emigration of its opposition, to take over their property and eliminate them from the local political scene; the American government encouraged said emigration, believing that it would economically debilitate the revolution, and eventually contribute to its downfall.

Tio Nino and tia Alicia left in the summer of 1960, with Julita. Tio Nino, as a young man had done the *1922 March on Rome* in Italy. He told my father he knew what was coming and did not want to see the same, again. More and more Cubans left and, after the defeat of *Bay of Pigs*, it became a stampede. It stopped with the *October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis*, when all flights to the US ended. People then left via Mexico, Spain or another third country.

Tia Angelica and her family left for Miami at the end of 1960. Then, she became the first stop for all others leaving afterward. Tio Anibal's older grandchildren were sent to the US, after the *Peter Pan*¹⁷ panic, as were other tens of thousands of Cuban children, at the time.

The Travieso's left and settled in Puerto Rico. Mundo became a manager in a Caribbean organization based in San Juan. Tia Alicia moved there with tio Nino, who was dying of lung cancer. Ruben settled in Miami and also moved to San Juan. Rubencito describes this epoch, thus:

“El sábado 5 de Noviembre de 1960, salimos de Cuba hacia Miami. Ahí vivimos con tía Alicia y tio Nino por un año. Mi papá consiguió trabajo como buss-boy en un hotel de viejos retirados en Miami Beach y nos pudimos mudar en un efficiency en La Pequeña Habana, pero no por mucho tiempo pues mi mama llevo con su esposo, Dr Ignacio Fiterre que estaban en Holanda como Embajador de Cuba y recién había renunciado, abril 1961. Yo me mude con mi mama y mi padrastro y mi papá decidió irse a vivir a Puerto Rico, ya que tio Mundo estaba allá. En Puerto Rico consiguió trabajar en una tienda Sears recién inaugurada como gerente del departamento de alfombras. Mi mamá estudió para peluquera y mi padrastro consiguió trabajo como profesor de matemáticas en un college de afroamericanos en Jacksonville, y me fui a vivir allí, con ellos.”

“En Jacksonville me gradué del bachillerato e hice mis dos primeros años de universidad, y luego me transferí a la Universidad de la Florida, donde pasé cinco años y me gradué con un Master en Arquitectura. Me mudé a Miami y aquí resido desde entonces. En un viaje que hice a Venezuela conocí a quien fuese mi esposa desde 1980, Ingrid Cisneros. Ingrid y yo tuvimos tres hijos, dos niñas, Siri y Yara, y un varón Chat. Tenemos una nieta, hija de Siri, Sienna y un nieto, hijo de Chat, Tahló. COLORÍN COLORADO ESTE CUENTO SE HA ACABADO.”

Tio Mario left with Lourdes and Armandito via Madrid (tia Bertha had left earlier, and lived in Miami). Lourdes had married Armando in Cuba, and had Armandito, who left with them (Armando became a government sympathizer and stayed in Cuba). Tio Mario lived in Spain for several months, and then they travelled to Miami. There, Lourdes married Dr. Pedro Ramos, a surgeon, and had Paul and Frances. Armandito passed, away during the mid-eighties.

Tio Antonio, like so many Cuban lawyers, was trained by the US government to become a Spanish language teacher. He was sent to Notre Dame, in South Bend, IN, where he worked with Rafael Torrellas, a Spanish diplomat on sabbatical, who was also teaching there. Tia Angelica and Tio Antonio became the transit point for half of our family, as they arrived in the US after leaving Cuba. Julita married Gene Fogarty, in South Bend, who became another family member. They had Christina, Ryan, Lyle and Molly, my God Daughter. Then they moved to Bradenton, FL where they lived for the rest of their lives, and also hosted many family members, especially my nieces and nephew. We visited them, frequently.

Raul and Graciela, left via Spain in 1967 with their children and settled in Elkhart. There, Raul got an engineering job. Later his colleague Freddy Estrada found him a better one (Raul was a petroleum engineer), in Houston, and they moved there. We also visited them frequently.

My sister Raquelita left in 1969 and spent several months in South Bend with tio Antonio and tia Angelica, working as a librarian. Regina, my brother's ex-wife, also left Cuba in 1969, via Mexico, with her children Reginita, Maria Cristina, and Manuel, and settled in Irvington, NY.

Antoñico and his family left via Jamaica, and settled in Elkhart, a town near South Bend. Ninio became an accountant for an international firm, and went to work abroad with his family. Evita met Rafael Torrella. They married, went back to Spain, and had Gabriela. Aurelio and Rosa Hernandez left with the Hernandez Roa family (Rosita, Miriam, Neysa), and settled in Tarrytown,

¹⁷ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Peter_Pan

NY. Toto, who had previously left via Spain, settled in Tarrytown, but later moved to Miami. Tata, had previously died of brain cancer, in Cardenas. He left two children.

Raquelita wanted to be closer to Manueleu's children, as he was in a Cuban prison. She took a position as Spanish Professor in LeMoyne College, Syracuse, that was four hours by car from Irvington. She visited them regularly, on weekends. Regina remarried, and left for Naples with her husband. Her two older girls started college in the US, and Manuel went to live with Raquelita in Syracuse. He finished high school, studied at LeMoyne, and settled in that city.

Kiki and Dorita, who had stayed in Cuba without their children, left to reunite with them and settled in Chicago. Kiki left in 1969, and we became very close (he had a son my age, in the US, and I had a brother his age, in prison). Kiki taught me how to drive a truck and a Jeep.

Tio Anibal, who practically lived in Santa Maria's house after his children left, finally decided to leave too, as many elderly also did. The government, that was eager to take over his beautiful beach house, gave him and tia Dora all kinds of facilities to leave the country.

Laura stayed with tio Rene, who died of cancer in 1968. Later, she married an ex-political prisoner, and finally left in 1979. After moving to the US, she lived with tia Angelina in Miami, and remarried Tony. Laura and I were always very close, in Cuba and in Miami.

Tio Miguel lived in Miami since 1955, when he emigrated with tia Celeste for health reasons. After she died, he lived on his own, but was always very close to tio Mario and Lourdes.

I stayed in Cuba until 1980, with my mother (my father died in 1969). Here, I will digress about my experience living under communism, for a better understanding of Cuba's situation.

Before the revolution we were an average middle class professional family. We belonged to *Miramar Yatch Club*, a middle-class, business and professional nautical club, a nice, family oriented, organization, owned by its members. Tia Angelica and Tia Alicia were also members. My father and Tio Antonio loved boats and owned one. Tony and Manueleu (and later, myself) loved to compete in sailboat regattas. The club owned a fleet of such boats, that members used.

I grew up attending private school and participating in nautical sports in Miramar, jointly with other middle-class kids. In our heterogeneous Almendares neighborhood, I alternated with a bunch of other, non-middle-class kids, an experience that later proved to be very positive.

When the revolution came and all my middle-class friends left the country, I remained with friends of lower socioeconomic status, through whom I was exposed to a different way of life. They became my school mates, and work colleagues. I saw, listened, and learned a lot.

We spent many nights telling jokes and stories at the corner. For, during these early days of the Cuban revolution, young people didn't have much money, nor much to do, and the police did not like having groups of young people hanging around (thence, we were often rounded up).

My passion was sailing. It all started in Miramar. When the club was taken over, I joined INDER¹⁸, the government sports organization. I sailed and won regattas in different places, especially in Mariel Bay, where we stayed at the Naval Academy, a new facility built by Batista. Had the revolution not turned communist, maybe I would have become a naval officer.

Manueleu was jailed for conspiring to overthrow Castro's regime. I was well aware of his and of our cousin Carlitos Perez underground endeavors, and frequently ran errands for them. Manueleu has been criticized for prioritizing his political ideals. He had supported the revolution, and was a personal friend of Castro, from their times as University students. He could have easily accepted a position with the government, which was offered. But he preferred to conspire against the system, as communism was not part of the original plan. We all suffered politically for being too close to him; for guilt by association was a widely accepted government policy.

Manueleu spent thirteen years in prison: La Cabana, El Principe, Isla de Pinos, Boniato. I went to visit him in each one of these prisons. He was released in 1975. His legs were paralyzed from the many hunger strikes. I literally carried him on my back, out of La Cabana. It took two full years, under rigorous treatment at the neurological hospital, for him to recover their use.

¹⁸ Instituto Nacional de Deportes, Educacion Fisica y Recreacion

I was always a quiet but rebel individual. My grades were excellent, but my behavior was not. By solidarizing with Manueleu, I created trouble for myself. I was expelled from university, with a mandate to be sent to the UMAP labor units, where I did my military service. I was court marshalled twice, accused of inciting a labor strike. After leaving the UMAP, I wrote a series of short stories and mailed them to Raquelita, in the US. She published them under our father's pen name "Beltran de Quiros"¹⁹. In 1969, the government finally connected these stories to me, and arrested me. I was given 12 years suspended sentence, and was released as a *Liberado Culpable* (Parolee), and told to wait at home until we were given the authorization to leave Cuba.

Between 1970 and 1980, I studied at the University of Havana, married Zoila Barreiro, and had three sons. I had problems retaining a job, because of my political background, and was laid off three times. But I had two plusses: I was very good at what I did (statistics), and I kept several Almendares childhood friends who, in the pre-Castro era, had had it very tough, and were down and out. During their tough times, I had always stuck with them²⁰.

Now, they held good government positions. And without me having to ask anything, they found me jobs in their government agencies, and vouched for me. This taught me that one should never generalize or judge on the grounds of context. It is better to judge people as individuals.

My mother and brother left Cuba in 1979. Manueleu went to Puerto Rico, the land of our paternal grandfather, where we have much family. Zoila, the kids, and I left in 1980, during the *Mariel Boatlift*, when Raquelita went to Cuba on a shrimp trawler to get us out (the government finally put us on an airplane to Mexico). And we have lived in Syracuse NY, ever since.

With respect to the other Branch of our family (the Mercier and Marcelin), we know little about their current whereabouts. If anyone ever hears of them, give us their contact. This is one of the most terrible consequences of the revolution: *the destruction of the Cuban family*.

Nena (Mary) Marcelin and her husband Tuñas, often came to our home for dinner, or we went out to restaurants together, during the 1970s, until they left. Nena, a chain smoker, died in Miami of lung cancer. My mother received a letter from Fifina Aguirre, in the 1970s, saying that they were living in Las Vegas. We didn't hear much about any of the other Marcelins.

I will stop my history here: around the year 1980, when we arrived to the US. Regarding those twenty years (1960-80), I was in Cuba: I provide only outlines. In the future, other younger family members will continue their family histories, as I am a poor chronicler for these sections.

The disaggregation of our family, an event that has inevitably taken place as we moved out of Cuba, is the worst fall-out of the Cuban revolution of 1959..

Keep safe. Best/Jorge Luis.

¹⁹ "Los Unos, Los Otros y El Seibo". 1971. <https://web.cortland.edu/romeu/padillaeng.html>

²⁰ <https://web.cortland.edu/romeu/MultiracialSocieties1992.pdf>