

On the 25th Anniversary of the Mariel Boatlift

Jorge Luis Romeu
P.O. Box 6134
Syracuse, NY 13217

April 12, 2004

Twenty-five years ago, the evening of Saturday May 24th, my wife, my three small children and I, arrived to Syracuse on the train from New York City. Waiting for us, at the old East Syracuse station, was my sister Raquel, a Professor at LeMoyne College. She had just returned from three weeks aboard a shrimp trawler in the Bay of Mariel, Cuba, where she had sailed, like hundreds of others, to get her relatives out of the country.

But, what was the Mariel Boatlift? How did it happen? Did it start just the month before, when Castro announced that Cubans in the US wanting to get their families out, could do so by sailing to Mariel? Was it a few days before that, when 10,000 people stormed the Peruvian Embassy in Havana and requested asylum? Was it a year before, when Castro released hundreds of political prisoners and let their families, and tens of thousands of others, apply for an exit permit? Was it two years before, when tens of thousands of members of the “Cuban Community Abroad” (as Castro calls the exiles) were allowed, for the first time in twenty years, to return to visit their relatives? Was it, three years before that when, under President Carter’s policy of improving relations with Castro, Cuban authorities held negotiations with a group of hand-picked “exiles” which agreed to family visits and to Cubans in the island applying for exit permits?. Was it in 1960, when Castro unilaterally decided to transform a liberal and nationalistic revolution, into a marxist and pro-Soviet one?

Yes, it was all of that! For, as with any complex event, the Mariel Exhodus of April-July of 1980, where over 120,000 Cubans were brought to Florida in boats of all sizes, was not a simple issue.

For us, it all started two years before when my brother, a former political prisoner, applied for an exit permit. We were granted American visas through our sister, a US citizen, and we expected to leave shortly after. Then, an unexpected event occurred.

One morning, the secret police searched our home. They found the manuscript of a story book that I had written, about life in the UMAP, which was published in the US under a Pen Name. UMAP, were forced labor camps for dissidents, created by Castro in 1966, where I had spent two years, after being expelled from the university of Havana.

The police also found manuscripts of 33 other short stories, copies of which I had also sent abroad. I was arrested, interrogated and finally “released guilty”, a precarious status. I lost my job; and our passports, visas, etc. were retained by the government. Our prospects of leaving Cuba became quite dim.

Hence, when Mariel occurred, my sister rushed to get us out. The Cuban government, reluctantly, let us go; but not on the boats. They returned our visas and put us on a plane to Mexico. My wife's brothers took our places in the shrimp trawler.

To try to discredit those defecting via Mariel, the Cuban government also included mental patients right out of hospitals, and inmates from jail. Castro had also used this strategy with the UMAP, where he included homosexuals and delinquents with thousands of young students and workers, and then widely advertised these as UMAP's sole composition. Such policies were designed to create a targeted impression about which people sided with Castro's government, and which against it, inside Cuba and abroad.

Those leaving were taken by the police to Mariel, a seaport 20 miles east of Havana. There, intimidated by threats, police dogs and beatings, they awaited their turn to board a boat to Key West. Marielitos with relatives in the US were released under their custody. All others were taken to Eglin or Fort Chaffee, where they were processed by US immigration and later resettled. Syracuse's Catholic Charities received a few of them. Finally, those with hard criminal records ended up spending many years in an Atlanta prison. Castro did not want them back, and the US did not legally admit them in.

Mariel was a milestone in Cuban politics. Up to then, exiles came heavily from the educated, the upper and middle classes and Havana, supporting the myth that only the privileged disagreed with the revolution. Such convenient myth was heavily advertised both inside Cuba and abroad. The heterogeneous socioeconomic, racial and geographical composition of the Mariel cohort finally disproved the above. Castro had a hard time justifying how this had happened.

Moreover, Mariel brought a new and enriching perspective to the exiled community. Outside Cuba, people knew little about the conditions of daily life under Castro. Mariel radically changed this. As a result, a totally new attitude, and even leadership, arose among the exile. And it finally brought a different attitude in the international response to the Cuban revolution.

Note: Jorge Luis Romeu is a Cuban political exile, and a Research Professor with the Department of Mechanical and Aeronautical Engineering, Syracuse University.